

# Reflections on What Makes a Documentary ‘classic’

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**Gillian Leahy**

Associate Professor  
Creative Practices Group  
University of Technology Sydney  
NSW, Australia  
[Gillian.Leahy@uts.edu.au](mailto:Gillian.Leahy@uts.edu.au)

## **Abstract**

This paper examines what it is that makes some documentaries become ‘classics’ over time and argues that the documentaries that become classics are usually those that have brought innovations in form to the documentary genre. The writer’s list of documentary classics is presented and argued for in terms of their innovations in documentary form. There are slightly more in depth studies of the innovations in Michael Rubbo’s *Waiting for Fidel* and Chris Marker’s *Sunless* (aka *Sans Soleil*)

## **Keywords**

Classic, documentary, innovation, form

In Chris Marker's film *Sunless* (1983), Marker's persona, Sandor Krasna, refers to lady-in-waiting to the princess, Sei Shonagan's propensity for making lists of various things, for example 'things not worth doing', and refers to her list of 'things that quicken the heart', which he, Sandor/Marker, thinks is not a bad sort of a list to have, maybe even a way to organise topics for a film. Anyway it seems that that is how Marker's film, *Sunless*, is organised; around things that quicken the heart, or anyway Marker's heart. Could we also say that "classic" documentaries are films 'that quicken the heart?' Maybe we could argue it is one condition they need to fulfil, that the desire to make them quickened the filmmaker's heart

Of course my list of classics is subjective and as such falls into the trap of reinforcing the canonical status of those films listed. As a filmmaker I've always been interested in the question of how documentaries promote social change and how more innovative and 'open' documentaries may propel more engagement by audiences with their material. Other writers and documentarists will have other lists. These films formed and influenced me and they also mark some of the key moments in documentary form, and as such they influenced many current documentary makers. The making of lists or the creation of canons is always fraught. My list is western-centric and regrettably includes few films by women (not that it couldn't.) Many other films could be on my list. This list is of this time, of my generation, of my culture. However lists of films worthy of classic status are still useful in leading film students to documentaries less standardised in structure and style to current television documentary fare and broadening their experience of documentary.<sup>1</sup>

Classic documentaries are films that are seen as having had a great influence. They are not just 'great' docos or quality examples of particular documentary styles. They are not films that by luck or design have found great subjects (people or topics) with which to deal. They reach the canon of 'classics' because reviewers, and later, academics and students view them as original and influential and select them as objects of study, and they thus get shown and re-shown to new audiences over time. This usually happens because they are firstly great exemplars of their style and have great subjects - but above all, they have had an influence in broadening the ground of what is acceptable in the documentary form

What makes a documentary a 'classic' is this idea of being seminal, of being a classic example of what might be a new sub-genre or diversion on the path of documentary. So, could the early works of Drew Associates (Drew, Leacock and Pennebaker) all be classics as they 'heralded a revolutionary step and a breaking point in the recording of the reality in cinema' and were 'landmark film(s) in the aesthetic development of cinema'? (Allen and Gomery pp 223-224). Maybe the answer is 'no' if the films weren't in themselves very interesting or well-structured films

Below is my list of classic documentaries, and their directors. These documentaries that have had a big impact on me, and I will argue, on the documentary form. All of us who teach documentary would make differing lists but I suspect there would be a lot of crossover in our lists

*Night Mail (1936) Harry Watt and Basil Wright*

*The Plow that Broke the Plains (1936) Pare Lorentz*

*Les Maitres Fous aka The Mad Masters (1955) Jean Rouch*

*Chronique d'un Ete (1961) Jean Rouch*

*Don't Look Back (1967) D.A. Pennebaker*

*Gimme Shelter (1970) Albert and David Maysles and Charlotte Zwerin*

*Primate (1974) Frederick Wiseman*

*Waiting for Fidel (1974) Michael Rubbo*

*Grey Gardens (1975) Albert and David Maysles, Ellen Hovde and Muffie Meyer*

*Poto and Cabengo (1980) Jean-Pierre Gorin*

*Sans Soleil aka Sunless (1983) Chris Marker*

*Cunnamulla (2000) Dennis O'Rourke*

*Carcrash (1995) David Caesar*

*The Natural History of the Chicken (2000) Mark Lewis*

What are the innovations in the documentaries that appear on my list?

*Night Mail* uses W.H. Auden's poem for its latter section showing the houses, hills and people who may be waiting, 'perhaps in vain' for letters from the Night Mail train. The use of this poem read in a musical way, mixed with the rhythmic sound and image of the train on its way through the night and dawn, past the fields and houses, is one of the first uses of such a mix to produce poetic effects and is an editing *tour-de-force*. There is also a slight disconnect between the earlier scenes which set up how the mail is sorted in the carriages and how the men work, from the more lyrical scene which is the film's last section, showing the train passing through the countryside and accompanied by the Auden poem

*The Plow that Broke the Plains*, and others in the suite of films sometimes known as the 'New Deal' films, (relating to Franklin Roosevelt's time as President of the United States), uses poetic landscape imagery combined with stirring voice-of-god narration in a way that defined that particular sub-genre of expository films. These black and white images provide still today some of the most stunning photography in any documentary. The film gives a narrative of how farming techniques ruined the land, but, as with many of these films, also posits solutions to the ecological disaster towards the end. Its style is highly polemical. While once that was frowned upon as an aesthetic tactic, it now seems fresh again and holds open to us a technique once regarded as 'biased'.

Rouch was a pioneer of so called lightweight cameras that could be used handheld and actually worked with the Éclair factory on the K.M.T. camera, and later on the single system Aaton camera (Eaton, 1979, 51). He wanted to develop these cameras to make his ethnographic films in Africa. For me, many of Rouch's films are classics because of his pioneering handheld *verité* camerawork, but *Les Maîtres Fous (aka The Mad Masters)* combines this with incredible subject matter. African tribespeople dress up as caricatures of their colonial masters and go into possession ceremonies and into trance. While it shows an exotic (to outsiders) African ritual and is interesting for that reason alone, it also raised interesting questions in the way that those who are possessed parody their 'masters' who are members of the white military and colonial government. In the final scenes we see people who recently were thrashing around in a trance, now walking about, ordinary respected members of the community, with Rouch attempting, not all that successfully at the time, to de-exoticise the ritual trance

Rouch's *Chronique d'un Été* turns his camera on his own society. But here he introduces the reflexivity that was to distinguish the French observational cinema from that of the United States. Here was the 'fly in the soup' as opposed to the 'fly on the wall' of the American observational movement (Winston, 1995, p 163). Rouch has one of his characters wandering around a city square ruminating aloud while recording herself with a Nagra sound-recorder over her shoulder. There is no pretence here that either the filmmaker or the filmmaking apparatus is absent. Rouch spoke of filming 'life as it is provoked' by the camera's presence, rather than as it is. (Eaton, 1979, p 51)

*Don't Look Back* (1967), *Gimme Shelter* (1970) *Primate* (1974) and *Grey Gardens* (1975) are all products of the American observational school and are all standout films from that tendency. Both *Don't Look Back* and *Gimme Shelter* are films about music stars, Bob Dylan and The Rolling Stones respectively, and both films reached large audiences at the time. These were the first films to show these mega-stars as ordinary people with concerns about their art, and about moral responsibility. In *Don't Look Back*, Bob Dylan is constantly shown fending off taking the responsibility to be the protest voice of his generation and resisting providing interpretations of his songs. It's a great character portrait of Dylan at that time and of his times. *Gimme Shelter* shows a concert in Altamont at which The Stones were the final act. Members of the Hell's Angels bikie gang were used to secure the stage from increasingly angry fans. This might have seemed to the Stones to be a good idea at the time, but it resulted in the death of one fan trying to mount the stage, who, high on drugs and, it was found out later, wielding a gun, ended up stabbed to death by a Hell's Angel member. The film forensically shows The Stones post the concert anguishing over what has happened and trying to understand or deny their own role in the tragedy. This is intimate and revealing footage and showed 'stars' more as ordinary mortals with failings and anxieties

*Grey Gardens* starred the eccentric 'Big Edie' and 'Little Edie' Bouvier Beale, aunt and first cousin of US First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Both were living in a large decaying house infested with rats and filth. The Maysles allow the two characters to present themselves with little intervention and working with only a two-person crew. While some thought the film exploitative it nevertheless showed an intimate character study of them that was remarkable then. These three films are some of the standout documentaries of the observational cinema movement in the US

In Wiseman's *Primate* a research laboratory that uses monkeys to learn about primate behaviour is observed over a period of time. Wiseman is also considered a member of the observational school but is less wedded to the extended takes and moving camera of his contemporaries. He used tripod and careful fixed framing more. In *Primate*, as is usual for Wiseman, the institution's routines are well covered. Most of the monkeys are caged. This means a lot of the filming shows the cages and re-inforces the lack of freedom of the apes and monkeys being studied. Curiously, although Wiseman tries to be fair in making his films, the film's audience begins to see the scientists' behaviour as more curious and more needing of study. It begins to look as if the humans should be the ones in the cages being studied. A sequence where a small rhesus monkey, whom the audience has come to know, is brought in for dissection is very affecting. The small monkey's skull is crushed like a nut by a pair of surgical pliers. This is a shocking moment after the empathy that has been built up in the audience for this animal

*Poto and Cabengo* is a classic I argue because it is as far as I know the first documentary to put the filmmaker's inner thoughts as text on the screen. Poto and Cabengo are two twins who have invented their own language that only they understand. Scientists are trying to decode their language and social workers are convincing the family that their language needs to be eradicated to 'normalise' them. Eventually they do lose their language and it is lost to science as well. Gorin's text running along the bottom of the frame asks rhetorical questions or makes comments throughout such as one over a sequence where the twins are talking to each other that reads 'What are they saying?'. This way of bringing in the director's voice in an otherwise largely observational film was novel. The text has the effect of engaging the audience in questioning the surface images and wondering about the issues behind the pictures

*Cunamulla* shows the life of a series of characters living in this small Australian country town. Mainly the focus is on the less privileged residents of this town. But O'Rourke spent a considerable time in the town filming as a one-person crew and insisted in later public talks about the film that he filmed 'conversations' with himself, not 'interviews'. And it is the fact that these 'conversations' are so unedited and rambling at times that gives this film its unusual style.

They are not totally unedited of course, but digressions, 'mmms' and 'ahs' and idle chat about mundane things make up a fair bit of any one conversation, as they do for most of us. The added authenticity this brings to the film is quite remarkable. (I'm editing this in the week O'Rourke died and I'm sad I won't see more outrageous documentary making from him.)

*Carcrash* is a film about Australia's car culture. Caesar famously used both actors and non-actors as interviewees set against road and car scene backdrops, which are clearly projected slides. Here there is no attempt to pretend these are real people in real locations. These interviews are intercut with poetic scenes of, for example, car manufacture and testing, with music and voiceover. While the film is an excellent documentary essay on Australia's car culture it includes deliberate tactics to work against the usual signs of authenticity used in documentaries. Rather than an overarching narrative the film is divided into chapters which cover aspects of car culture. The constant cry of television commissioning editors to 'have a story' is ignored here as it is in *Sans Soleil*

In *The Natural History of the Chicken* director Mark Lewis films a number of stories about chickens, including for example a story about a heroic dog that helps its owner rescue a lost chicken in the night in the snow, and my favourite, a story about a heroic chicken that protects its chicks from hawk attack. Again, this film uses a chapter structure. The innovation in this film is that each story is given the full drama treatment. While there are real interviewees in real locations that tell or read the true stories, the illustrative imagery is often highly art directed and constructed using complex lighting and cinematography.

For example there is quite a lot of use of low to the ground choreographed tracking shots in the 'brave chicken' story that is the final chapter in the film, and this whole story is told using techniques of coverage and editing for suspense like those in used in drama and with a composed music track to match. The 'brave chicken' story for example has moments when it parodies horror, melodrama and comedy films. While many films use dramatic re-enactment, the use of it to dramatise individual animal histories makes its use more obvious and its role more one of parody. But the effect is interestingly mixed. On the one hand the parody is amusing, but on the other the use of dramatic techniques is emotionally affective and engenders empathy for the chickens involved

Below is a bit more detail about two classics that greatly influenced me: *Sunless* and *Waiting for Fidel*

Phillip Lopate claims that Chris Marker is the one great essayist in the film medium and that *Sunless* is the one great masterpiece of the essay film genre. (Lopate, p 250) *Sunless* is presented to the viewer as the autobiographical account of a travelling filmmaker named Sandor Krasna, but narrated by an anonymous woman receiving his letters (Florence Delay, voiced in English by Alexandra Stewart). We understand Sandor Krasna to be the Marxist cinematographer, Chris Marker. A series of letters from the fictional cinematographer are read out often begun by the words 'He wrote me ...'

Here are some lists about what *Sunless* is about:- 'This is a film of quotations, outtakes, retakes, tape delays, failed military coups, dead pilots, and ghostly warriors.' (Howe p 326) And '*Sans Soleil*, ..., is about everything but the proverbial kitchen sink: time, emptiness, Japan, Africa, video games, comic strips, Sei Shonagon's lists, pet burials, relics, political demonstrations, death, images.' (Lopate, p 252)

But enough of lists. One of my favourite sections is a sequence filmed at local neighbourhood celebrations in Japan. Women in kimonos and platform wooden shoes are dancing in formation down the street. Their wooden shoes and the little bells they tinkle make a rhythmic music, filled out by drums coming further down the procession. We see watching bystanders, clowns and acrobats, and people in animal costumes spinning past us. The sequence becomes hypnotic partly because of the soundtrack being so rhythmic and partly because Marker extends this sequence so we can really dwell on it. All the more remarkable then that the location sound for this whole film was recorded on a cassette recorder

I saw *Sunless* soon after its release in 1982 at the Sydney Film Festival where all we local documentary filmmakers were stunned to see such a film; a film which for the first time it seemed, used a very personal and poetic voiceover over images (largely from Japan and Guinea Bissau in Africa) which talked both of everyday things observed by this supposed travelling cinematographer, but also of big philosophical and political questions.

The film takes one on a labyrinthine journey (its structure nothing but a long and varied meditation) through all sorts of things, places and images. Some images shock such as the museum which shows animals in sexual poses or the borrowed footage of *Death of a Giraffe*. Some is just interesting. Some moves the heart. For me the constant loving return to the Japanese peoples' particular little rituals, for example for the death of a cat, or the ritual on the day for injured dolls, who are burnt with prayers on a bonfire of dolls (what an image!) is what gives this film its particular human warmth. It is made by someone who wants to understand and tolerate all humanity, and all its little foibles and rituals, but who cares about history too

For me it allowed me to think that a film could be made like this and it was a major inspiration for my film *My Life Without Steve* (1986). I watched and recorded it over and over again. I wondered how much voiceover a film could have, what proportion - and I tried to follow Marker's formula for amount of voice over to atmosphere and sound effects as I found it in *Sans Soleil*

Lopate comments that he thought a whole school of essay films would result in the seventies and eighties as a result of Marker's work but that it did not happen, partly because the documentary movement went through a period where we were critical of the single authorial voice and all voiceover was derided as didactic and audience unfriendly. Here in Australia however *Sans Soleil* hit a period of generous Australian Film Commission funding for experimentation in documentary and a quite large number of interesting essay films were made: *Eclipse of the Man Made Sun* by Nicolette Freeman and Amanda Stewart, *Love or Money* by Jeni Thornley, Margot Nash, Margot Oliver and Megan McMurchy, *Landslides* by Sarah Gibson and Susan Lambert, *My Life Without Steve* by Gillian Leahy, *Carcrash* by David Caesar, *Wild* by Ross Gibson among many others. Most of these films would not have been possible without *Sunless*. It was a seminal film for many in the documentary movement and still is

The story of *Waiting for Fidel* is well known to many documentary-lovers. It's the Claytons' film. It's the film you make when you are not making a film (or anyway the film you are meant to make). Rubbo was asked by media magnate Geoff Stirling, (a self made media mogul), to accompany him and left wing Newfoundland retired politician and former premier, Joseph (Joey) Smallwood, to go with them to Cuba to make a film, the centrepiece of which would be an interview with Cuban President, Fidel Castro.

Perhaps partly because they and the crew indulge in unorthodox arguments and other slightly strange behaviour in front of their minders, this interview never eventuates, although throughout the one-hour film, we sense that Fidel might come agree to the interview at any moment. This is the suspense in the narrative. Before Michael Moore's film *Roger and Me* adopted the same format, this is the film the director makes about the issue while waiting to interview the head honcho

The three protagonists and their 16mm Film Board of Canada (FBC) crew are housed in a palatial mansion, waited on by servants, and taken out on organised trips to visit various sites that show how successful the socialist revolution has been. While waiting, Rubbo keeps filming events such as visits to worthy Cuban institutions, institutions for the mentally ill, schools, universities and so forth, but also the many dinnertime conversations and arguments that occur between Joey, who is praising Cuba's methods, and Geoff, who is sceptical of what he sees as Cuban propaganda and thinks its heartless to deny children their childhoods and make them work three hours a day after their five hours of schooling. The three cultural actors become the main subject of the film and provide a debate concerning the virtues of capitalism versus those of communism, which makes the main substance of the film, while the story of the film is about the ever more distant interview with Fidel.

One amusing scene (Chapter 8 on the DVD) shows a tape recorder on a white lounge chair outside the film group's mansion delivering Rubbo a message from Stirling about how this film should make money and how film is being wasted. Rubbo narrates 'He's been leaving me messages. This morning I got one on tape.' A filmed argument follows between Rubbo and Stirling about how Stirling believes that films should make money, while Rubbo counters that the Film Board does not have that rationale and believes that there are profits other than money that the film can make such as better relations between Cuba and Canada. Stirling thinks Rubbo is overshooting and is failing to get the interview. This descends into a heated and abusive tirade from Stirling about the high shooting ratio, 20:1, which is actually quite low in documentary. Stirling thinks it should be 3:1 and clearly misunderstands Rubbo's style and that of observational documentary in general.

The film then cuts to the evening dinner meal where ironically in communist Cuba, the filmmaking group are being served by white jacketed staff. Rubbo's innovation in this film and in some of his films that followed, was to insert himself as a character into the film's subject matter.

No longer was there a pretence of the objective observer; the director could express his or her view in person. Not only did this give permission to the many filmmakers who followed to use this technique, but Rubbo managed to make a film which included a riveting debate about communism and capitalism on screen without ever getting his interview with Fidel Castro.

What was so revolutionary about this documentary was the way Rubbo presented himself to the audience – not as an expert, but as a bumbling filmmaker. He used a similar tactic with a journalist as his sidekick in Solzhenitsyn's *Children*.<sup>2</sup> X So this wasn't verité, and it wasn't voice-of-god didactic documentary. The truth of what we were seeing was in doubt. The filmmaker presented himself and his biases to the audience. This is what has come to be called reflexive (calling attention to the construction of the film) or self-reflexive (where the filmmaker calls attention to their role as orchestrator of events and their own biases).

On the heels of direct cinema and before reflexivity became a common device of contemporary filmmakers in both film and television, Rubbo's on screen interventions in his key documentaries visibly acknowledged the filmmaker's inescapable participation in the documentary dynamic. Rubbo showed himself prompting situations and subjects as part of the filming process, and instigating social narratives. This was counter to the expository films then favoured by the FBC.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued for innovation in documentary form as the marker of a 'classic' documentary. All of the films I have discussed enlarged the documentary genre and allowed new forms or styles of documentary to emerge. They were also themselves uniform in style, allowing their style to be examined for the new departure it was. This uniformity of style within the film is also I think a marker of the "classic"

Where are the emerging classics now? Is there yet a classic web documentary, an 'classic' interactive documentary? Will there be? Is it in the world of art that new forms will emerge now?

Personally my latest documentary classic is the animated series of ten minute shorts, *Creature Comforts* (Park and Golezowski, (2003 – 2007). In these short films ordinary interviewees discuss big questions like evolution and intelligent design but are picture-overed (as opposed to voice-overed) as cartoon animals. This is *animalizing interviewees* as documentarist Maree Delofski has dubbed it. Here the realistic accents and talking style of the real British interviewees is completely destabilised by the cartoon images of animals that accompany the voices

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<sup>1</sup> Go to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western\\_canon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_canon) for an account of the arguments for and against creating canons or lists of works of merit in general. In particular see Searle, John. (1990) "The Storm Over the University", *The New York Review of Books*, December 6, 1990

<sup>2</sup> Rubbo used much the same technique in *Solzhenitsyn's Children ... Are Making a Lot of Noise in Paris* (1979) except that there his partner and discussant is 'Canadian journalist and *litterateur* Louis-Bernard Robitaille, and like a comedy team they fearlessly tackle the muddied intellectual waters of the French Left and Right, as well as everything in between, ten years after the streets burned and everything, it seemed, was up for grabs!'

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