

TEMA MONOGRÀFIC

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«Since it permits seeing the past directly, it will eliminate at least at certain important points, the need for investigation and study»: documentary film and history of education  
*«Com que permet veure el passat directament, eliminarà, almenys fins a cert punt, la necessitat d'investigació i l'estudi»: films documentals i història de l'educació*

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Data de recepció de l'original: juny de 2017

Data d'acceptació: setembre de 2017

RESUM

«Com que permet veure el passat directament, eliminarà, almenys fins a cert punt, la necessitat d'investigació i l'estudi», aquestes paraules va escriure Bolesław Matuszewski (1865-1944) al llibre *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire* (París, 1898). L'assaig de Matuszewski va ser un dels primers textos a considerar el valor històric i documental dels films. També va ser un dels primers realitzadors cinematogràfics a valorar la importància històrica dels films i a proposar la creació d'arxius fílmics per tal de recollir i conservar els materials visuals. En aquest article es revisita el text de Matuszewski amb l'objectiu de reflexionar sobre el moviment documental a la Gran

Bretanya i el valor que tenen els documentals pels historiadors de l'educació. En el text també es presenten els principals problemes d'utilitzar els films en la investigació històrica. Finalment, l'article acaba amb algunes reflexions addicionals sobre els documentals en l'era digital.

PARAULES CLAU: documental, moviment documental, arxius, recerca educativa, digital.

## ABSTRACT

«Since it permits seeing the past directly, it will eliminate, at least at certain important points, the need for investigation and study», so wrote Bolesław Matuszewski (1865-1944) in *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire* (Paris, 1898). Matuszewski's essay was one of the first texts to consider the historical and documentary value of film. He was also the first film-maker who appreciated the historical importance of film and proposed the creation of film archives for collecting and safekeeping of visual materials. This paper will re-visit Matuszewski's key text as a way of reflecting on the documentary movement in Britain and the value of documentary film for historians of education. Problems around the use of film in historical research will then be considered. The paper will conclude with some additional reflections on documentary film in the digital age.

KEY WORDS: documentary; documentary movement; archives; educational research; digital.

## RESUMEN

«Puesto que permite ver directamente el pasado, eliminará, al menos hasta ciertos puntos clave, la necesidad de investigación y estudio», escribió Bolesław Matuszewski (1865-1944) en el libro *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire* (París, 1898). El ensayo de Matuszewski fue uno de los primeros textos en considerar el valor histórico y documental de los films. También fue uno de los primeros cineastas que supo apreciar la importancia histórica de los films y en proponer la creación de archivos cinematográficos para la recogida y conservación de los materiales visuales. En este artículo se revisita el texto de Matuszewski como una forma de reflexionar sobre el movimiento documental en Gran Bretaña y el valor que tienen los documentales para

los historiadores de la educación. Asimismo, se presentan los principales problemas relacionados con el uso de films en la investigación histórica. El documento concluirá con algunas reflexiones adicionales sobre los documentales en la era digital.

PALABRAS CLAVE: documental; movimiento documental; archivos; investigación educativa; digital.

## I. «MAKING HISTORY»

In March 1898 in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* the Polish filmmaker and photographer Boleslaw Matuszewski elaborated an authoritative argument for the value to society of film and its conservation. Film offered the present «cinematographic proof» of the nature of the past, «incontestable and ... absolute proof», only film had «the character of authenticity, of exactitude and of precision». It was «the truthful and infallible eyewitness» of history. Given these qualities it also offered «a particularly efficient means of teaching» as «it will give a direct vision of the past, [and] will reduce at least in certain points ... the need for investigation and study». Film «constitutes not only an historical document but a piece of history and of history which has not vanished and which does not need a genius to bring it back», «all it needs to awaken and to relive the hours of the past is a little light crossing a lens in the midst of darkness». Having made the case for the privileging of film over other forms of historical evidence he then proposed «creating in Paris a museum or cinematographic archive». Once the archive was founded he had a clear vision of how it would be organised: «A qualified committee will accept or leave aside the proposed documents [film] after having considered their historical value. The negative reels accepted by the committee will be sealed in containers, labelled and catalogued. These will constitute the types which will not be touched. The same committee will decide under what conditions the positive reels will be disseminated, and will keep aside those which for reasons of particular convenience can only be given to the public after a certain number of years ... One of the curators of the establishment which will have been chosen will be put in charge of this new collection».

Matuszewski recognised that the archive would not be very extensive at first, but it would «become larger and larger», in part because of the nature of the «cinematographic photographer», who being of his time Matuszewski naturally characterised as being a «he», was a man of «instinct» who could

naturally guess where circumstance would lead to «historic causes», he was «inventive and daring» and would «contrive even when unauthorised to edge his way in; he will nearly always be able to find the opportunities and places where the history of tomorrow is elaborated». The archive collection would also enlarge because the cost of filmmaking was «diminishing rapidly» and was «falling within the means of ordinary amateurs of photography», many of whom were «becoming interested in the cinematographic application of the photographic art and are only too willing to contribute to making history».<sup>1</sup>

In sum, Matuszewski's essay was one of the first texts to consider the historical and documentary value of film. He also recognised both centrality of the film-maker in creating a movement and the democratic potential of film-making. As such, his vision of «making history» through film offers a useful lens through which to review the documentary movement in Britain and the value of documentary film for historians of education.

## 2. DOCUMENTARY FORM AND MODE: A PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

Documentary has been dogged by problems of definition and categorisation. John Grierson, the chief architect of the documentary movement in Britain in the 1930s and 1940s coined the formulation in 1933 that documentary was -«the creative treatment of actuality».<sup>2</sup> It has since has been «welcomed as insightful summary; rejected as self-contradictory; dismissed as vague obfuscation; and acknowledged as a brilliant statement of the obvious».<sup>3</sup> There is no reference in Grierson's definition to a film maker's intentions and audience expectations, however, he did write elsewhere that it was important to note «different qualities of observation, different intentions in observation, and, of course, very different powers and ambitions at the stage of organising material».<sup>4</sup> Grierson directed only one film, *Drifters* in

<sup>1</sup> MATUSZEWSKI, Boleslaw. «A New Source of History: Creation of an Archive of Historical Cinematography», BALLANTYNE, James (Ed.). *Researcher's Guide to British Newsreels*, vol. 111. London: British University Film and Video Council, 1993, p. 59-61

<sup>2</sup> The phrase was attributed to Grierson without citation by Forsyth Hardy in 1946, and by Paul Rotha in 1952, but traced by Derek Paget to a 1933 article in *Cinema Journal*, a Scottish publication edited by Grierson himself, see WINSTON, Brian. *Fires Were Started*. London: British Film Institute, 1999, p. 56.

<sup>3</sup> RUSSELL, Patrick. *100 British Documentaries*. London: BFI, 2007, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> GRIERSON, John. «First Principles of Documentary 1932-34», HARDY, Forsyth (ed.). *Grierson on Documentary*. London: Faber and Faber, 1979, p. 35.

1929, after which he became a producer. For Grierson documentary was the «drama of the doorstep»<sup>5</sup> and «actuality» made the documentary film superior to other forms of film, and the «creative treatment» made them more advanced than mere «illustrated lectures».<sup>6</sup> Basil Wright, the English documentary film maker and Grierson's collaborator, argued in 1947 that a definition of documentary film was not necessary: «it becomes quite plain that documentary is not this or that type of film, but simply *a method of approach to public information* [emphasis in the original]». Wright continues: «The documentary method embraces all known media of information, particularly films, film-strips, slides, radio, television, stills and illustrations of all sorts, the press (daily, weekly and periodical in general), diagrams, wall-newspapers, pamphlets, books, lectures and exhibitions)».<sup>7</sup>

Despite identified weaknesses the Grierson influenced definition still persists and in the years since its formulation, the volume of documentary filmmaking produced has been mirrored by the number of critical commentaries on documentary film. Bill Nicols, for example, has argued that documentary is a form of «argument» about the nature of the «historical world» as opposed to the metaphorical or imaginary world of fiction and that the development of documentary film could best be understood chronologically. To this end, Nichols divided documentary into five successive «modes»: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative.<sup>8</sup> Stella Bruzzi has queried the usefulness of Nichols' documentary categories arguing that the modes overlap, co-exist and hybridise and that documentary is «a collision between apparatus and subject», it is neither an objective record nor a failure to capture the real world. For Bruzzi, documentary is a perpetual negotiation between the real event and its representation. Indeed, the usefulness of the category «documentary» itself has been questioned.<sup>9</sup> Carl Plantinga, echoing Basil Wright, has argued that audience expectation is virtually the only way in which distinction can be drawn between fiction and non-fiction films.<sup>10</sup> Beyond the issue of categories or modes documentaries also

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> RUSSELL, Patrick. *100 British Documentaries*. Op. Cit., p. 2

<sup>7</sup> WRIGHT, Basil. «Documentary Today». *Penguin Film Review*, 2/9 (1947), p. 38

<sup>8</sup> NICHOLS, Bill. *Representing Reality*. Bloomington, Indiana : University of Indiana Press, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> BRUZZI, Stella. *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> PLANTINGA, Carl. *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film..* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

work within several different narrative structures, some having their origins in the 1930s, and others being gradually added over time. Documentaries can be based around «events, places, journeys, processes, individuals, communities, institutions or marked passages of time», and narrative approach adopted can range from «a single case study... [to a] personal report, [or] compilation of existing materials».<sup>11</sup> In other words any single documentary can vary according to mode, form and function. A final point to make here is that some commentators have argued we are now entering a «post documentary age».<sup>12</sup> Space does not allow a detailed account of this claim, but as Hughes-Warrington has recently noted, «the movement of new technologies, filmic techniques and situational and textual cues both in and out of documentary making have blurred its boundaries and undermined its status». In short, «documentary is no longer a trusted form of filmmaking».<sup>13</sup>

### 3. «A NEW AND VITAL ART FORM».<sup>14</sup> THE BRITISH DOCUMENTARY MOVEMENT

Documentary is a key visual paradigm within contemporary British culture. It is a paradigm which had its origins in the documentary movement of the 1930s and, as stated above, central to this movement was the figure of John Grierson (1878-1972). Before the 1930s the cinematograph, which had given the world a new means of communication, was promoted in fairgrounds and music halls in England because «its projection on a screen made it a cheap form of theatre» and by the 1920s «things had settled down into a ritual of going to the pictures».<sup>15</sup> Audiences would see a story film, a cartoon, a newsreel and sometimes «short interest or travel films made as cheaply as possible».<sup>16</sup> The First World War had led governments to produce films for the «record, propaganda and training»,<sup>17</sup> but generally

<sup>11</sup> RUSSELL, Patrick. *100 British Documentaries*. Op. Cit., p. 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> See CORNER, John. «Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions», *Television and New Media*, 3/3 (2002), p. 258-265.

<sup>13</sup> HUGHES-WARRINGTON, Marnie. *History Goes to the Movies*. London: Routledge, 2007, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> GRIERSON, John. «Preface», ROTH, Paul. *Documentary Film*. Glasgow: University Press, 1952, p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Low, Rachael. *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s*. London: George Allen and Unwin, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

according to *The Times* newspaper, films that showed contemporary events «were photographed without any intention of ... [being] the record of an historical event». <sup>18</sup> It was in the context of broadly socialist politics of the Popular Front in the 1930s<sup>19</sup> that Grierson envisioned the establishment of a national cinema founded on principles of social purpose and education, a cinema though that was to be international in its recruitment.<sup>20</sup> Looking back from the 1950s Grierson insisted that «Documentary was born and nurtured on the bandwagon of uprising social democracy everywhere' and that it was 'the first and only true art form produced by social democracy». <sup>21</sup> Central to this vision of the cinema was the politics of observation as he wrote: «We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital art form». <sup>22</sup> It was a cinema where the democratic nature of the state could survive through the creation of informed and active citizens. It was education not the aesthetics of film that drove the documentary movement. Not «the old liberal individualist and rational theory [...] of educational planning», but education as a «social instrument», that would through documentary film present not facts but a visual «story» which would bridge the gap between citizen and community and produce active citizens.<sup>23</sup> The documentary films produced and directed by Grierson and his followers reached their «citizen» audiences through supporting feature films in cinemas, through dedicated film lending libraries which supplied films to local societies, educational bodies and trade unions and trade exhibitions. Films were sponsored by government, private and union sources and produced by official public sector film units (eg the Empire Marketing Board), corporate film units (eg Shell Film Unit) and independent units (eg Film and Photo League).<sup>24</sup> The outbreak of the Second

<sup>18</sup> «Historical Film Records: The Life of the Nation: A Heritage for Posterity», *The Times* (Tuesday, March 19, 1929).

<sup>19</sup> See FYRTH, Jim. *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> Grierson persuaded Alberto Cavalcanti and Robert Flaherty to work in Britain.

<sup>21</sup> GRIERSON, John. «Preface». Op. Cit, p. 16-18.

<sup>22</sup> GRIERSON, John. «First Principles of Documentary 1932-34». Op. Cit, p. 36

<sup>23</sup> GRIERSON, John. «Propaganda and Education, 1943» in *Grierson on Documentary*. Op. Cit, p. 150-151; GRIERSON, John. «Education and the New Order, 1941» in *Grierson on Documentary*. Op. Cit. p. 129-30. See TAGG, John. *The Disciplinary Frame*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, Chapter 2 for a more detailed analysis of Grierson's ideas about documentary.

<sup>24</sup> See RUSSELL, Patrick. «Documentary Film Units and Film Sponsorship». <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id964488> [accessed September 2017].

World War saw many who were involved in documentary projects in the 1930s co-opted into government propaganda work. The documentary filmmakers of the post Second World War/post-Grierson generation continued to produce films characterised by documentary realism. However, the coming of television in the 1950s had a significant impact on documentary as projected and broadcast. Russell (2007) argues that in this shift television has fundamentally modified documentary: «significant modifications (most with “film” antecedents but never so pervasively applied) include: association of documentary with journalism; use of interviews; use of presenters; sustained use of the observational mode; documentaries forming ongoing series; and single documentaries being showed in scheduled “slots”».

These modifications all interact with patterns of consumption very different from those of film, an interaction «now heavily mediated by the processes by which broadcasters commission programmes from producers». <sup>25</sup>

#### 4. «A HERITAGE FOR POSTERITY»: THE MAKING OF A FILM ARCHIVE

In March 1929 a passionate plea was made in *The Times* newspaper for the conservation of documentary film as «a heritage for posterity»: «There is today at our service the means of precisely recording the daily life, the actions and even the speech of contemporary men and women [...] the combined skill of the film producer and of the actor, after exhaustive rehearsing, could never give so real an interpretation of character as is revealed in the natural facial expression of that British soldier recorded by the cinema operator at the front. It has the value of truth itself [...]. Works of art and other national treasures have been selected and housed in the public museums and galleries by persons qualified for the task. The selection of films should be carried out with equal care and vision. It should not be left to private societies, but should be undertaken as a national work at the public expense. Future generations will probably be just as interested in seeing how we lived our everyday lives and enjoyed our sports as they will be to see how we fought our battles and heroically met death». <sup>26</sup>

A few months later an unofficial conference of individuals drawn from government departments, scientific, educational and social organisations

<sup>25</sup> RUSSELL, Patrick. *100 British Documentaries*. Op. Cit., p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> See MACKENZIE, John M. *Propaganda and Empire*. Manchester: MUP, 1984, p.76-77

met to consider the service which could be rendered to education and social progress by the cinematograph. Discussion focused on the production, selection, distribution and use of films. A Commission on Educational and Cultural Films was set up and a grant from the Carnegie Trust was obtained to support a survey. In 1932 a report, *The Film in National Life* was published and it recommended the establishment of a public body to encourage the production of better quality British films, to «exercise a constructive critical influence over the whole field of photography» and «to educate an informed public». The following year British Film Institute was established to «encourage the development of the art of the film, to promote its use as a record of contemporary life and manners, and to foster public appreciation and study of it from these points of view». To deliver some of these objectives a National Film Library [NFL] was established in 1935. It was not the first film archive in Britain as the official war films of 1914-18 had been deposited in the Imperial War Museum in 1919 and in 1926 the British Empire Film Institute to represent empire life had been set up. The remit of the NFL was: «To preserve for posterity copies of all films, fictional and non-fictional, outstanding either for their technical excellence or for their importance in the history of the cinema, and copies of all films valuable as documents of scientific or historical importance».<sup>27</sup>

In the next section two films held by the NFL will be the focus of attention. Neither of them directly involved Grierson.

##### 5. «NOTES FROM A PROJECT»: THE POSSIBILITIES AND PROBLEMS OF USING DOCUMENTARY FILMS IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH.

Between 2009 and 2010 I was a participant in a transnational research project *Documentary Film in Educational Research*.<sup>28</sup> For this present study I re-visited my project files. The following two extracts are taken from my viewing notes for the films *Children at School* (1937) and *Thursday's Child* (1954):

<sup>27</sup> This section draws heavily on Rachael Low's detailed account of the birth of the BFI and BFL in Low, Rachel. *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s*. Op. Cit. p. 182-198.

<sup>28</sup> The project *Documentary Film in Educational Research* involved researchers from England, Scotland, Portugal and Belgium and it resulted in a special issue of *Paedagogica Historica* «Education in Motion: Producing Methodologies for Researching Documentary» in 2011.

*Thursday's Child*: UK 1954. 21 minutes

Directors: Lindsay Anderson and Guy Brenton

Production Company: World Wide Pictures

Script: Guy Brenton and Lindsay Anderson

*Thursday's Child* won an Academy Award for the Best Documentary Short. It depicts children at The Royal School for the Deaf in Margate, England painstakingly learning what words are through exercises and games, practicing lip-reading and finally speech. For most of the film's twenty minutes sound is essentially limited to that of the voice of the narrator, the actor Richard Burton, as the camera tracks children's experience of the soundless world of the classroom. Central to the film's narrative is the sense of touch as children interact with a series of objects as they explore what sound looks like so as to, as the narrator states, 'pass through the door of silence'. By the end of the film as a viewer I have a sense of privilege, being an intimate witness of small children learning to 'overcome their exile from the hearing world' and to see school as it was experienced.

*Children at School*: UK 1937. 23 minutes.

Director Bail Wright

Production Company: Realist Film Unit

Sponsor British Commercial Association

Producer John Grierson

Narrator: H. Wilson Harris

1. *Viewing the film*: Four viewings of the film: on the first occasion I had very little *knowledge* about it; the second time I watched it with the sound turn off so as to concentrate on the visual text and the third occasion after I had done some contextual research. On my first and second viewings I was struck by three sets of opposites: 1. the «realist» text –children as social actors and the «performance» text of the adults–the narrator, the teacher actors; 2. the tension between reportage and the aesthetic; and the two halves of the film and in particular how reportage/aesthetics acted as the bridge between the two halves: 3. the girl walking down the cracked corridor of a dirty school while from behind a closed classroom door comes the magical words from «The Golden Road to Samarkand».

2. *Structure*: In brief we are presented with a critical analysis of the English state education system –opening images of English schoolchildren playing games are connected with the democracy

of ancient Greece, before cutting to footage of European fascists educating their children through drill and marches. This is followed by images of smiling children, new buildings, wide open spaces, light classrooms until this democratic idyll is shattered by images of old, decrepit, under-funded and overcrowded English schools where pupils and teachers suffer. The message is clear the nation's children are its most valuable asset but democracy will fail them unless there is reform and the provision of airy modernist classrooms to replace forbidding gothic towers. It also suggests that Europe's fascists were getting head in their approach to education and consequently democracy may be at risk, because the future of any nation is its children.

3. *Locating the film*: The film was one of two sponsored by British Commercial Gas Association and made by the Realist Film Unit in 1937. The first produced by Wright and Grierson was *The Smoke Menace* and dealt directly with issues relating to the sponsor. *Children at School* received little attention from the sponsor. The script was un-credited, but was written by the left wing, anti-fascist journalist and later socialist MP Tom Driberg. The film was made the same year that Realist co-produced with Victor Saville Productions the anti-fascist film *Modern Orphans of the Storm* for the National Committee for Spanish Relief which Wright directed. The film sits solidly in a documentary film movement in England which was to the left of the dominant conservative political consensus of the 1930s and is clearly concerned with issues of social reform. «Visuals in motion», as Wright termed documentary film, was an educational tool to meet 'the need of ordinary people for information and explanation. The film came out a few months after *Zero de Conduite*, the Jean Vigo film which was a model for *If* and an assault on the regimented nature of schooling –the film was only passed for public viewing by adults.

4. *Responses*: *The Times* newspaper film critic –the novelist–Graham Greene thought the contrast between modern and old schools shattered any complacency the viewer might have. Thomas Baird, of the GPO Film Unit reviewed the film and concluded that what was shown was «a tragedy» and «if it condemns anybody it is democracy». The Tyneside Film Club undertook a survey of the likes/dislikes of its 1200 members in 1938 and *Children at School* was the fourth most popular documentary film –10 films were nominated.

5. *Observations and questions:* 1) The film pointedly draws attention to the materiality of schooling, to the world which many children inhabited; and yet the material world of the school child is still an area not fully explored or even engaged with in much research on the history of education. So why does this remain the case? 2) The film presents the failure of schooling in England, and yet at the same time presents aspiration even in squalor –«The Golden Road to Samarkand» being recited in a dirty condemned school. There is an implicit tribute to teachers– they do make a difference. 3) By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>/beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the child was, as Caroline Steedman observed, «watched, written about and wanted» –the child as object. Documentary film added another dimension to the relationship between adults and the child– there was an encounter between «visuals in motion»/ the cinema and the school; this new technology presented to the viewer the image to the schooled child. But what was the nature of this representation? And how did it shape/alter subsequent social and cultural responses to the child? 4) Finally, the film makes a direct link between democracy and education. This link put me in mind of Benedict Anderson’s idea of the nation state as an «imagined community» and the extent to which schools and the educational sector as a whole constitute an imagined community; schools embodying the essence and values of the nation; indeed schooling as the enactment of nation-ness.

I have included these two sets of notes because I believe they capture many of the issues associated with both the value of documentary films for the purpose of educational research and the issues we should consider when adding the use of the visual to our historical practice. The account of *Thursday’s Child* is just that, a short description and a comment about my reaction to the film. There is a lack of detail about the film’s structure, no comment about the context in which it was produced, no indication of contemporary responses to the film and no issues are raised regarding how it might fit within a research agenda or the connections that could be explored with what followed in subsequent decades (in relation to children’s disabilities) or its significance for understanding present educational practice. All of these elements and more can be found in the commentary on *Children at School*. How to account for the difference? Both notes were produced as part of a process to develop understanding of the «status» of documentary artefacts as

data sources? The note on *Thursday's Child* was written early in the research project and before a series of workshops which considered «which analytical frameworks might best further our understandings of the relationship between documentary makers' intentions, their historical contexts, the forms and technologies of their work, contemporaneous audience receptions and trans-historical readings». Re-viewing *Thursday's Child* when preparing the current text, what particularly stood out is a problem associated with the film's content for today's audiences. The interventionist pedagogical practice we see and hear in 1954 is framed around the use of a Victorian children's book *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, written and illustrated by Helen Bannerman. The teacher and the filmmakers, all products of Empire, saw no problem in using this text but in a 1970s study of racism and sexism in children's books it evoked this comment: «As a black Briton, born and educated in this country, I detest *Little Black Sambo* as much as I did other textbooks which presented non-white people as living entirely in primitive conditions and having no culture».<sup>29</sup> Literature is not independent of the politics of race and empire, and is deeply implicated on an ideological level in the production and circulation of racialised stereotypes. Documentary films, are predicated upon assumptions about the public and this enables film-makers to construct and seek to exert «definitional power» over the construction of social reality. It is self evident with *Thursday's Child* that what was seen as acceptable in the past is a problem in the present. Nevertheless, both *Thursday's Child* and *Children at School* demonstrate the unique nature of documentary film as a data source: we can both see and hear the past as it was experienced.

Implicit in the above discussion is a warning about the problematic that can be the documentary film and the final sentence should perhaps have more accurately read: «we can both see and hear the *edited* past as it was experienced». Documentary film does «open a direct window onto the past», but as the film historian Robert Rosenstone succinctly warned: «[...] the documentary is never a direct reflection of an outside reality, but a work consciously shaped into a narrative which –whether dealing with past or present– creates the meaning of the material being conveyed [...] on screen we see not the events themselves, and not the events as experienced or even as witnessed by participants, but selected images of those events carefully

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in HILL, Joe. «Oh! Please Mr Tiger», STINTON, Judith (ed.) *Racism and sexism in children's books*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1979, p. 37.

arranged into sequences to tell a particular story or to make a particular argument».<sup>30</sup>

Rosenstone has been particularly critical of the willingness of historians to readily accept that «somehow the images appear on the screen unmediated».<sup>31</sup> It is not just historians who fall into this trap. The anonymous author of *The Times* article cited earlier was convinced that documentary film had «the value of truth itself», while D. Charles Ottley, writing a few years later could claim: «The Cinematograph is free from bias; it neither condemns nor condones. It makes no statement, neither does it think; its function is to record. The record maybe twofold, comprising picture and sound, or it may be only one picture. The record is a record of truth, since neither lens nor microphone can invent. Because the Cinematograph is unconscious of its scholars it favours neither genius nor dunce; because it is wrought of steel it suffers no human ailment; because it is mechanical it more nearly attains to the perfect in teaching than any other medium known to man».<sup>32</sup>

Film-makers who adopt the observational documentary style are still involved with telling a story, as Winston writes: «they still make un-filmed arrangements to gain access to their material. They still decide when to turn the camera on and off and what framing to use. They still edit».<sup>33</sup> The maker of the renowned documentary film *High School* (1968) Frederick Wiseman was very explicit about his practice and the process of cultural production: «The film is finished when, after editing, I have found its 'script.' If a film of mine works, it does so because the verbal and the pictorial have been fused into a dramatic structure [...]. During shooting [...] my goal is to accumulate material that interests me in the moment. I have no idea at the time which sequences, shots, and transitions will make it into the final film or what the themes or point of view will be. I generally use three percent of the material shot. My work as editor, like that of the writer of a fiction film, is to try to figure out what is going on in the sequence I am watching [...] the relationship of the sequences to each other must make it appear as if no other order were possible [...]. The structure must create the illusion, even if it is temporary, that the events seen in the film occurred in the order in which they appear

<sup>30</sup> ROSENSTONE, Robert. *Visions of the Past*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 32-34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>32</sup> OTTLEY, Charles, D. *The Cinema in Education*. London: Routledge, 1935, p. 23-24.

<sup>33</sup> WINSTON, Brian. *Fires Were Started*. Op. Cit., p. 68

on screen. In this way, the form of my documentaries can be called fictional because their structure is imagined [...]».<sup>34</sup>

Reading a film involves not only developing questioning strategies that respond to the «truth» of the documentary images, but also identifying the provenance of thinking that informed that particular documentary practice. Finally Robert Rosenstone (1995) has long been perplexed by the difficulties of writing about film: «Exposition to the medium of film, especially in its narrative forms, can have a subversive effect upon the historian. So many techniques of film (like those of modernist and postmodernist writing) seem to cry out for use by the scholar. Montage, intercutting, collage, the mixing of genres, the creative interaction of fact and fiction, history, memory and autobiography – why are these not part of the (re)presentational modes of the historian as narrator or essayist».<sup>35</sup>

His solution was to «admit all the problems involved» and accept that what we produce should «not be a written document but a visual one. That one should write about film in film».<sup>36</sup> This remains an aspiration, but one which new technologies can surely accommodate.

## 6. FROM «LIGHT CROSSING A LENS IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS» TO THE DIGITAL AGE

This article has offered a trajectory through time beginning in late nineteenth century France and an argument for the indexicality of film and the archiving of documentary film to the emergence in the 1930s of the British Documentary movement and the establishment of a national archive. En route it has touched on the meaning of documentary, the importance of visionary film-maker, the democratic potential of documentary film-making, and documentary as an educational tool. The content and multidimensional value of two English films and problems with both their production and contemporary use has been discussed. The text has also drawn on the findings of an earlier transnational documentary research project: *Education in Motion*. The project drew on film archives in Belgium, Portugal, Scotland

<sup>34</sup> GRANT, Barry Keith (ed.). *Five Films by Frederick Wiseman*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006, p. XI-XII.

<sup>35</sup> ROSENSTONE, Robert. *Visions of the Past*. Op. Cit., p. 226

<sup>36</sup> ROSENSTONE, Robert. *Visions of the Past*. Op. Cit., p. 226-227

and England and it became very clear just from studying their catalogues that the historian of twentieth century schooling has access to one of the richest sources for educational history, the documentary film. Today, an educational researcher interested in film can find over 160 archives and organisations as members or associates of the International Federation of Film Archives.<sup>37</sup> Recently, *Sight and Sound* reported that Netflix US currently hosts 5,389 films, Amazon Prime 18,405 and Hulu 6,656 films and that was equivalent to approximately «60,900 hours of viewing or seven entirely sleepless years of 24/7 film viewing».<sup>38</sup> It concluded that in the digital age «abundance has replaced scarcity for viewers». Yet it is still the case that documentary films on schooling and education remain largely underused by historians. Is there a way forward? Giving the availability of digital versions of films historians could work with film archives and take on the role of curators and organise documentary programmes for contemporary audiences. Such programmes could focus on locally produced documentaries or be mixed with national and international content. They could be showcased in non-commercial and non-theatrical spaces where there can be discussion and debate, but also could be curated online. Matuszewski's short essay ends with an exhortation to his audience and his words also offer an appropriate ending here: «Will you be so kind as to encourage this very simple but novel idea, and to suggest others which may complete it, and also will you please give it broad publicity which it needs in order to be alive and fruitful».<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.fiafnet.org/pages/Community/Members.html?PHPSESSID=2cuss0f29kfj|j4n-292hkp2lr3> [accessed September 2017].

<sup>38</sup> «Rethinking the Past», *Sight and Sound*, v. 27, n. 7 (July 2017), p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> MATUSZEWSKI, Boleslaw. «A New Source of History: Creation of an Archive of Historical Cinematography». Op. Cit., p. 61.