

3. Heyday of the Documentary

By JOHN G. FULLER

SEVERAL years ago I was in the process of directing a documentary film for the CBS program *Twentieth Century* on the problems of air traffic. Titled *The Crowded Air*, it tried to show as graphically as possible the enormous difficulties in keeping modern aircraft safe from collision. Our camera was set up in the radar control room at New York's International Airport to catch in action a few approaches during a particularly soupy morning with practically zero visibility. Suddenly one radar operator yelled for his supervisor and pointed to his radar screen. A plane from a nearby military field had veered off course and was heading directly for the "stack" where a half-dozen commercial airliners were circling awaiting landing instructions from the tower. In a single scene, the entire documentary film could have been summed up.

But we never got it on film. Our camera, known in the trade as a BNC, was a 35mm. monster so heavy that it required at least two men to get it off its tripod. By the time it could be maneuvered to catch the tension in the radar operator's face, the crisis had passed.

In the past forty years, documentary films have come a long way, but they are only now beginning to capture some kind of reality, and it will be at least another forty years before they will become a completely satisfactory form of journalistic art. At the present time the villain is the cumbersome and weighty equipment that any professional documentary crew must drag around in order to capture quality pictures in realistic action. Even cut to the bone, the carrying cases that have to be hauled to des-

ert, mountain, or jungle fill the better part of a station wagon.

For any kind of theater distribution, a documentary should be shot in 35mm. film, 400 feet of which weigh ten pounds in a magazine. The lightest 35mm. camera set up and equipped for sound weighs 225 pounds. A portable battery light known as a "frezzi" weighs, with its battery, twenty-five pounds. The lightest tape recorder suitable for professional sound adds another twenty pounds to the equipment load. A single zoom lens, professional style, weighs thirty pounds. None of this is calculated to leave a film crew refreshed at the end of a day. But the worst part of it is that when a dramatic crisis arises, chances are the camera isn't ready for it.

Cinema verité is a phrase that is coming into frequent use in the trade, indicating the strong trend away from the slick, tidy Hollywood style of filming, in which technical perfection is somehow supposed to compensate for lack of substance. When you mention a hand-held camera, the Hollywood producer invariably shudders. Yet some of the most exciting shots in documentary work are done this way. A tripod often becomes a stifling barrier to the freshness and spontaneity required of a convincing documentary. *Camera verité* frequently calls for great footage rather than good photography. There is a tremendous difference between the two. Great footage can include a lens covered with dirt, a camera knocked out of the cameraman's hands, or a jerky camera movement. Good photography demands nothing more than proper exposure and focus. It is desirable, of course, to have both. But in documentary work, the first should have priority. The present-day

equipment problem makes it hard to get.

Some progress is being made in equipment that helps make a forty-year prognosis heartening. Equipment is slowly developing that will enable the audiences of the future to watch a real-life event develop with all the drama of a Hollywood spectacular. Embarrassing as it may be to domestic camera makers, it is the foreign companies that are taking the lead to provide the camera-artist with the proper tools. The Arriflex 35mm. camera from West Germany has made it possible for a cameraman to hand-hold shots he never could have attempted before. Yet when you try to use it for synchronous sound, it makes as much noise as a riveting machine. The Nagra tape recorder has made it possible to do sync-sound of the highest quality, using only flashlight batteries for power. Wireless mikes (those that no longer need to be connected directly to the recorder) are beginning to become more dependable—although it is not at all unusual for a police call to come in mysteriously in the middle of a critical scene. For many years, it has been necessary to have a direct wire between the camera and the tape recorder in order to keep the two in sync, as they say in film work. A new unit called *Camcon* has been developed by Bob Rubin, a CBS producer, to permit camera and sound man to be hundreds of yards apart. An independent team consisting of Albert and David Maysles has manufactured its own equipment to enable them to shoot sound film as swiftly as if they were doing home movies. The development of Double-X film by Eastman Kodak has made it possible to shed much heavy lighting equipment, and there is hope in the future that 16mm. film can eventually be projected in theaters with as much fidelity as the more cumbersome 35mm. film.

The artistry for better documentaries is already here and waiting. Writers and producers for television have been creating brilliant work in spite of the monstrous equipment they are saddled with. All that is lacking now is the technical means to do the same thing at the scene of spontaneous action.

Documentaries, to be effective, must reflect life—but they must do it artfully, with the most exacting attention to selectivity. The old-fashioned documentaries, in which subjects speak stiffly to the camera, in which people stumble about self-consciously in an abortive attempt to be themselves, in which actors portray certain roles instead of the real people, are on their way out. When the equipment catches up to the artist, not only will truth be more vivid than fiction—but perhaps the fictional drama will be looking toward documentary techniques to make its make-believe world more true and convincing.

Cruger's Island

By Paris Leary

IT'S a tall light shot with cold and it's got the wind behind it, comes with the sun from a winter above us and walks through the lean trees like a pale heron. Down the prospect of the Hudson ice tissues the current and bridges move in shadows over captured launches and marinas. I walk with a kind of care—it is deer and duck season and tipsy City hunters shoot at a movement or a rustle; their sportless murder fills these woods with a spare fear. My baser instincts long for bear traps and pits to hurt and confound them, give return for their awkward slaughter. I am become a regional poet, the hills my weeks and week-ends, and am much given to thoughts of the inexact mortality which hunts us all, all seasons. Across at Saugerties the squat kilns discharge their smoke, and I find I have come away again without my matches.



—From "The Acanthus History of Sculpture: Ancient Egypt." © New York Graphic Society Publishers, Ltd.

Akhenaton and Nefertiti—From out of the sun, a new world of meaning.

THE FUTURE OF GOD

By JOHN LEAR

SCIENCE was essential to the governing of ancient Egypt. The major mass of the people lived in the fertile corridor through which the Nile traverses vast plateaus of lifeless desert. Topsoil washed downstream by annual floods broadened and deepened fields available for cultivation. To parcel this farmland and tax it fairly required mathematics. To predict the times of flood, prophets had to be astronomers. So it is not surprising that relatively early in the 4,000-year rule of the pharaohs, energy from the sun was recognized as the source of earthly being. Ra, the sun god, became the chief divinity of Egypt, and the pharaohs

claimed to be his children, as indeed they and all the other Egyptians were.

The sun god sufficed for the religious observances of the aristocracy. But the peasants who tilled the delta of the Nile saw life differently. Their great recurrent experience was the resurgence of the river, and they deified this in the god Osiris. The return of life from dormant seed planted in the wake of each spring flood was celebrated with death and resurrection ceremonies. A symbolic entombment would be performed, followed, after brief mourning, by removal of the tombstones with the exultant cry, "The god is risen!"

Thus science confronted magic in the valley of the Nile.

Three thousand three hundred thirty

and a few more years ago, the confrontation erupted in violence. Amenhotep IV, a teen-age pharaoh, changed his name to Akhenaton and ordered a new royal seal on which his own likeness and the likeness of his beautiful wife Nefertiti stood together beneath a glowing disc. From the rim of the disc shot rays that ended in the shape of human hands. The hands reaching closest to the heads of Akhenaton and Nefertiti held the hieroglyph of life.

From thence forward, Akhenaton decreed, the sun would be the one and only true god. To honor this absolute and unrivaled divinity he built a temple and around it a new capital city at Akhetaton, far from the old Egyptian capital in Thebes. Worship of the river