

One Man's Voyage: Ideas and Films in the 1930's

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I don't know that I can give anything like a complete picture of the films of the thirties and the forces running through them. I am not a scholar, but a film maker. My experiences with talk and writing on events I have lived through tell me that most reconstructions of even the recent past have a large admixture of fantasy, self-justification, and the distortions of neatness and summary. Nor do they often take into account the simple fact that this past *was* present, and therefore shared the complexities and the search for simple truth that is characteristic of the current present. Much as I would like to take the time and mental wrestling to come up with a full, meaningful picture of the period, I have to forego the role of historian.

What can I do? I am an entity with continuity. I was a struggling film maker then. I am a struggling film maker now. (To make a film is to struggle.) I was moved then by certain key feelings and ideas: That art is fundamentally an extraction from experience, shaping the data of experience into an organic object that has a double life—a life of its own and an active interpenetration with the process of experience. That art/film relates to experience in wide and deep ways—not only in a sensory way but in feeling, in ideas, in meanings—in taking a thrust from the passions of life and sending thrusts into the channels of living, sometimes in crystallizing out prime empathies and life-purposes. That a man, an artist, does not live alone any more than a tree does: he is an integral part of the continuum of nature, the continuum of society, with its satisfactions, distortions, and cruelties, its struggles for human solutions. His life is bound with other men and women, nor can he help reaching for or blocking the solution of social problems. That film as a medium is unique in many ways: its relative newness, which offers the excitement of finding untried ways of expressing things; its capacity to make a *direct* route into the minds and feelings of the audience; its sense of immediacy and contemporaneity. That because of these qualities there exists the danger of what I call film chauvinism: film viewed as an art to displace all others, making poetry, painting, dancing, drama, etc., irrelevant rather than being one of many ways of stating oneself to oneself and to others, of extracting permanences from the flowing evanescence of experience. That art/film can speak truth or falsehood.

These are some of the ideas that moved me then and equally move me now. So perhaps the best thing I can do here is to try to give a feeling of

the time and its work as it filtered through me and my aims as a film maker.

Let us step into 1930—the year I graduated from Harvard. The years before were the years of the post-war and then the Coolidge years of “prosperity.” Prosperity hadn’t touched me personally. I had worked and scholarshiped my way through college. My father, an immigrant of the turn of the century, was of a non-materialistic, idealistic, humanistic bent, and had not hooked into the mobile upwardness of business. My head was full of all kinds of marvellous things. I had heard the sorrowful prophecy of T. S. Eliot that the world was going to end not with a bang but a whimper. I had listened to the more passionate, choiring strings of Hart Crane’s “Bridge,” promising a prophetic meaning to the American experience. I had steeped my eyes in the works of Cezanne, Picasso, El Greco, Van Gogh, Blake, Goya, Rembrandt, the medieval Christs suffering for all of us, of and not of the Christian tradition. I had discovered the photographs of Brady, Atget, Stieglitz, and Strand. Mencken and Lewis had put the empty babbity of the booboisie down, as President Coolidge wore his many different hats, including Indian headdresses. He and Hoover promised an eternal era of American prosperity with more and more cars and electric toasters. The new power of advertising and public relations was still a joke to the literati. One toothpaste covered the landscape with the vital information that it comes out like a ribbon, lies flat on the brush. Another product promised relief from that specifically modern plague, B.O.—and always in parentheses (body odor). In general there was a guerrilla war between the world of art and intellect and the world of politics and business, with the guerrillas winning the war on the battlefields of books, painting, and music, and the establishment so impervious that it did not know it was being attacked. After all, the *Dial*, the *Little Review*, Stravinsky’s and Schoenberg’s music, the books of Hemingway, Mumford, Brooks, Frank, etc., commanded few divisions. But the *Saturday Evening Post* and the Hearst papers commanded legions in the millions. Nobody even thought of “coopting” anything or anybody, yet. The cultural rebels were outside the pale.

True, during these years, there were echoes of the savage repression of political dissent that followed World War I. One had heard of socialist legislators in New York being deprived of their elective offices, of round-ups and deportations of political agitators by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. That happened in the early twenties. But later in the twenties (during the calm era of “prosperity”) the two gentle anarchists, Sacco and Vanzetti, were executed. Tom Mooney was still in jail. These were judicial victims of the hysteria of a previous era. But through this whole period, there were great if remote dangers. The BOLSHEVIKS were lying in wait, characterized in political cartoons across the country as the man with long splayed whiskers carrying a round bomb the size of a balloon. Somehow the country’s prosperity needed to be safeguarded from him.

I had been a student of Alfred North Whitehead at college. He himself was what he called William James, a “darling genius.” His ideas penetrated

all the avenues of sensibility and thought in me: especially the idea that reality is a process, that change is the heart of all experience and all ideas. All the static fixations of previous education were called into question. Somehow I fused together this aspect of the ideas of Marx, Freud, Whitehead, and what I knew of Einstein; they all seemed powerfully relevant to understanding the world about me as I was emerging from adolescence, my first adolescence.

During these years I was in love with the movies. Not many thought of this medium as an art or a potential art. It was entertainment on a mass scale, a thriving business. It was in the process of replacing vaudeville as the less-than-respectable mind-circus for the masses. True, Gilbert Seldes added it to the muses' domain in his *Seven Lively Arts*, but America went to the movies as to a more engrossing juggler or acrobat. And it is quite true that most movies were vapid public dreams, extraordinarily engrossing in their hypnotic hold. Hollywood was perfecting the skills of mass hypnosis. One of the great exceptions to this dreamy wasteland for me was the work of Charlie Chaplin, which I had seen from earliest childhood. Here I found bright humor, beautiful fantasies of power for the powerless, the constant surprise of imaginative pantomime, and somehow a deeply human connection, a relevance to what one lived through day by day. It was a different dimension for the movies. And when one saw some films by Eisenstein, Dovzhenko, Dreyer, Pabst, Lang, Pudovkin, the promise of the film medium became enlarged for me beyond its power for emptying out the head and replacing one's own fantasies with public concoctions of violence, riches, power, speed, and sexual fulfillment.

From all of this it is not hard to see that when the stock market crashed in 1929, when *The New York Times* reported suicides falling into the streets from Wall Street's financial towers, I did not take it personally. My family held no financial paper; prosperity was more of a headline than a reality to me and I was familiar with Marx's predictions of cyclical depressions under capitalism.

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I left Cambridge in June of 1930, graduated into the soon-to-be-felt depression. Late in my sophomore year, I had decided film was for me. The long-held idea of becoming a physician had evaporated. (Though underneath there may have been an emotional connection between the idea of "healer" in the drive to be a doctor and the idea of "healer" in the new commitment to becoming a film maker . . . subtle and deep-lying . . . understandable to me now but not then.) I felt what I was *into* in college was a good preparation for making films: steepage in poetry and literature, the stuff of the Fogg and Boston museums, the mind-stimulation of philosophy and psychology, my inner skepticism of the shibboleths of the social environment, the "withness" of my eyes in all my comings and goings, the free music that was available—and movies at the Harvard Square theater, its screen sometimes pelted with eggs and tomatoes by local students, a criti-

cism frequently justified, if not decorous. Among my fellow students there was no one I knew of who shared my interest. My friends were on their way to being writers, ballet producers, painters, scientists, lawyers, curators, bond salesmen, etc.; to them, working in films did not seem an acceptable way of life.

In the middle of my junior year, I got the notion that I needed some specific and technical training in film. Since I knew of no schools or courses in the field, I wrote—with sublime innocence—to the one man in America I wanted to apprentice myself to: Chaplin. His protectors, as I learned later, did not consider the letter of a student a practical enough matter; and after watching the mail for a few weeks I gave up the idea. I stayed where I was, assuming that the accretions of experience were my best preparations. At about this time, I got hold of Pudovkin's book, *Film Technique*, published in England. I had been struggling with discovering the language of film in the darkness of the movie theaters, extracting what I could of visible techniques from the fast flow of image and story. I got to counting the length of shots in seconds to discover the relation of cutting to rhythm, but mostly to break down the flow of the film into its parts. This was much easier to do in a bad film than in a good or a slick film. So for some films I stayed twice or came back a second time, or purposely came in in the middle so as to avoid the hypnotic pile-up of involvement.

Pudovkin's book came at me like an illumination. Here was something immediately relevant. It made clear what I was trying to get at in the desperate struggles to hold onto the fluid images on the screen, it enabled me to see the world about me as film images and put them together in my head. The germinal idea was that an image, a piece of film, was not a finality in itself, but that it took on its precise meaning and feeling only in a context, in active interaction with the shot or shots that preceded and followed it. Wow! I could now—walking, sitting in class, reading a novel—translate my experiences into imagined sequences of film images. I could work on films without camera, studio, or cutting room. And furthermore I could relate this inner secret of films to much else I had been involved in. For the idea of film strips acting on each other to transmute meaning was not so different from the impact of words on each other in a poem or what brushstrokes of different color do to each other in an impressionist painting. Also I was reading in Gestalt psychology at the time. Its idea that the experiencing of the whole is primary (the perception of the discrete parts secondary) conformed to my own experience and illuminated the Pudovkin-Kuleshov idea. Further, Whitehead's idea of "organism" also related closely: that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, a product of the inter-relatedness.

The four years at Cambridge came to an end, and I headed back to New York to discover how I could join film. There seemed to be two ways of doing it. One was to continue my self-teaching. The other was to get into the film industry. This latter I half-tried. I offered my inexperience to Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, who had made a quite beautiful

documentary called *Grass*, and who were planning another expedition to the hunting wilds of Africa. I tried the shorts and feature industry in New York (Paramount had a working studio in Flushing). But apart from the difficulty of being a novice, there was a major disruption in the industry. The vast expenditure on sound equipment had put most of the large producer-distributors into the hands of the banks who had financed the capitalization. Also there was a depression on; people were staying away from the box office, even though admission to neighborhood theaters was, if memory serves, about a quarter. I say I only half-tried because I felt that the division of production into specialists of the various crafts was the way to mechanize the art of film making, to depersonalize it. I was after a full experience in the related crafts of camera, story, editing, sound, directing, since it appeared to me an organic film could come only from their functional relatedness. I was concerned that if I got slotted into an apprentice job, I might learn that craft well enough over the years, but be blocked from getting experience in other crafts. In any case the option was academic; there were no jobs.

When I say there were no jobs in the film business, you will have to expand the picture to the millions of recently unemployed. Shortly after I graduated there were 10, 12, 14, 16 million people without jobs—suddenly shaken loose from the much publicized “permanent prosperity” of America. The breadlines grew day by day. An army of apple sellers—recently carpenters, garment workers, sailors, storekeepers—appeared on street corners and in front of every subway station. Homeless men (where were the women? crowded into the rooms of relatives?) built shanty towns in Central Park and on the edges of the city. Shelter was pieced together from scraps of wood and tin. Food was gathered from the wastes of butcher and vegetable and bakery shops. In all of New York’s seasons this Hooverville life was in the open air. But there were respectable voices, bureaucratic voices, that said these Hoovervilles were unsightly, they endangered the health of the community. So in the end, without the government undertaking to meet these needs (except by some piddling emergency relief), the Hoovervilles were bulldozed level, the men scattered. These were only some of the visible evidences of socially created misery, socially ignored. You can interpolate the unseen: the problems of food on the table, the monthly rent, shoes and clothes, the daily anxiety about getting a job, or holding one.

Being young and supple, having friends and relatives to share with, my own situation was not as rough. There were meals consisting of peanut butter without bread, eaten on a rooftop watching the New York skyline. And greasy-spoon-restaurant dinners: one hot dog, one danish, one coffee, 15¢. I shared an apartment with a poet friend. He earned an occasional freelance buck by doing posters for stores; I earned an occasional buck by doing photo portraits and other odd activities. Our apartment was open house to friends who needed to flop. The attitudes of sharing were not too different from those of young people today who have dropped into some version of communal living. (Only then we were listening to the records of Fats Wal-

ler, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Bessie Smith, Benny Goodman, Paul Robeson, etc.)

The road I took into film was outside the film industry. It involved, on a practical level, borrowing still camera equipment and making photographs, buying in a pawnshop a Sept motion picture camera capable of shooting a cartridge of 17 (35mm) feet at 16 frames per second (17 seconds' worth of film in one load) and starting to make a film with this camera using short ends. It involved writing: ideas for short films, a feature script based on *Alice in Wonderland*. It involved of course seeing films, seeing more films, and trying to learn the language, to imagine what might be. The world of film, as distinct from the world of job-possibility, seemed very open. It involved reading *Close-Up*, an English avant garde publication which was interested in film more as an art. Writing about films and working as an assistant editor for *Creative Art*. Writing book reviews. All of this was an education in film making.

With it went associations with others who shared my passionate interest. The first of these was Jay Leyda, recently come to New York from Dayton, Ohio. He had a folder of poem-scenarios, and he was making a lyric film called *Bronx Morning*. Paul Strand I met while laying out an article on his work for *Creative Art* magazine. I was bowled over by his photographs; he was good enough to lend me a lens for a newly acquired view camera. Ralph Steiner gave me some concise and valuable lessons in still photography. Competitiveness was not an important aspect of the relationships of people interested in film. We shared what we knew. We felt tied by a kinship of meaning and aim. Underneath was the latent feeling that we and unknown cohorts were preparing to storm the citadel of commercialized, meretricious, and dehumanized art. If "storming the citadel" is too romantic a metaphor, then at least we felt we were preparing to break through the narrow frontiers of the dominant attitudes toward film.

What were these attitudes? As an art whose primary purpose was the production of commodities for massive sale, film was severely limited in (a) its subject matter, (b) the forms and techniques it explored, and (c) the relationships of the makers to their product. Factory production had for the most part substituted mechanical, committee judgment for the organic flow from the artist's experience through his skills and invention to the final shape of the product. The forms utilized were the forms that worked in the market. The occasional invention was tested only against its money-making power. The basic forms were the feature and shorts. The feature was a long short story. The shorts were comedies, newsreels, animated cartoons, travelogues—largely stereotyped. Any experiential stuff not containable in these well-tried forms was excluded, exiled to the other arts. The subject matter was based on the surrogate fulfillment of the simple wish. If workers were crowded into incommensurable cities and towns or coal mines and steel mills, the movies gave them public dreams of the freedom of western plains, mountains, and deserts. If living was tight and massively ordered, what could break through these oppressive barriers better than the bank robber,

the horse-riding gunman, the cool gangster—the man who determined his own fate with the tools of violence. Beautiful clothes, women, and men in palatial sets were the dream inoculations against the daily grinding of life. The formula of boy-wants-girl through the plot's obstructions to boy-gets-girl became the screen metaphor, the dream-wish answer to all problems. Come to the movies and we'll lay out your dream for you.¹ The well-nurtured passivity of the audience—hypnotized, narcotized, tickled, massaged, siren-serenaded—was the desired result. It created the addiction of movie-going, the cycle of box office intake.

3

The depression was going on, deepening day by day. My feelings about the art of the movies were inevitably affected. This social crisis—which began in the headlines with the bottom dropping out of the stock market, with bank failures, with suicides of speculators—became an enveloping phenomenon, seeping into the bones. For a while the words of President Herbert Hoover comforted some: Prosperity is right around the corner. But the happy future was receding. Piled furniture on the streets more frequently met the eye. The skilled tailor-uncle, always jolly and confident, became silent to hide his distress. People used empty storefronts to set up organizations of the unemployed. Demands began to be heard: work relief, unemployment insurance, social security. There was some marching with placards to City Hall. There were "penny sales" of bankrupt farms in which the neighbors kept bankers from taking them over. All of which was unusual and unAmerican. The veterans of World War I marched to Washington and camped in tents and shanties, demanding that their promised bonuses be paid for their war service. General Douglas MacArthur cleared them out with tear gas, setting flames to their temporary city.

What happens when you put your hand in your pocket, and you can count there your total savings—and you don't know how the contents of the pocket are going to be renewed? What happens is that it stirs the mind. Rumbblings in the belly become rumbblings in the head. Moreover, your life is revealed not as the private thing it seemed before. It is connected with others who share your problems. The people-continuum began to be restored. One began to be aware that it was always there, though fractured by daily pressures, by such social shibboleths as individual enterprise, dog-

¹ The dream-wish is still the most frequent manipulative device of commercial advertising on TV. The thing—the purchasable thing—pain killer, deodorant, detergent, savings account, antacid, car, etc.—is the answer to all of life's need. And what we used to call the conversion ending is still the prime determinant of all those little movies whose purpose is to get you to buy all those little things, without which life is impossible. We still go for it; we still suffer it. And as far as the big movies are concerned, with their tendency to reverse the simple dream-wish into the negation of dream-hope—maybe it's really the same thing in a complicated way. So that when you hit the street (the street which, before you the saw the movie, was filled with terror and despair) it is now a welcome place compared to the tortures and terrors you experienced empathically in the movie. As Freud said, the dream holds its complex contradictory secrets.

eat-dog, another day another dollar, new world of opportunity, a man's poverty is his own fault, a man's property is his own doing.

Thousands of people, among them artists, were confronted with a suddenly clear contradiction. This America we were living in—with factories, farms, and technical skills—had the capability of feeding, clothing, sheltering everyone with adequate security. At that very moment people were widely hungry, insecure. Their labor was being wasted. In the early thirties the radical dislocations of the world led people to face the dislocations in the structure of society. There was something wrong—deeply wrong.

A lot of people became radicalized. (Radical: meaning the root of things.) I was one of them. This did not happen in one fell swoop. The daily questionings made one add up what lay unrelated in corners of the mind: a system of society was helpless in respect to the human havoc it created; its prime concern was money and property, not people. The government responded at a snail's pace to human needs, with resistance even to massive and unusual pressures. We were forced to go beyond the daily detail to central forces, to try to grasp something of the whole. At a time when all "isms"—socialism, collectivism, communism—were suspect and unAmerican, one had to ask whether that other "ism," capitalism, was a viable form of social living. And clearly it was not for huge numbers of people. Marx, Engels, Lenin, Debs, DuBois, Frederick Douglass—men whose works were not even of serious interest to scholars in the previous decade—became relevant again. To interpret what one saw and lived through day by day, it became necessary to study again, to study the reality around one and the ideas with which to grasp hold of this reality.²

² While writing, I have been thinking about why people become radical and stay radical, or on the other hand why their thoughts and feelings disappear from their lives. Your life moves along on its own track. Your connections with family and a few others are sufficient. Then out of the pressure of circumstances and ideas, your life becomes more widely connected. You understand you are inextricably threaded into your environment. (The fish suddenly understands that it needs the sea to live and breathe.) The self is connected to others known and unknown. Why does the environment create the conditions of rich and poor? Why wars? Why oppression of less developed peoples? Why are the prisons so brutalized and filled with the poor, the blacks, the Puerto Ricans? Why, when the adequate means of living are socially feasible, are so many people deprived? There seems to be an earthquake fault in social relationships. Then you put your finger on it: as in other historic eras (where it is easier to see) economic and social relationships have been outlived but they are fought for and persisted in by people who have the property, power, and privilege.

Well, now you have "dangerous thoughts" in your head. The FBI, your neighbor, the UnAmerican Activities Committee, your colleagues, the newspaper, radio, TV may label them "red." But the empathy you have discovered, your connection with others, is real, to be denied at the risk of losing much of your humanity. You may find your comrades not exactly as selfless as you thought. You may commit yourself to specific loyalties without adequate information, on the basis of your general push and understanding. But you hold on to what you know.

Now the pressures against nonconformity pile up. Along with success, with a good job, do you break the link of empathy, neutralize your ideas and feelings, because there is privilege to protect or to gain? In my short lifetime, I have seen many who did this,

As one went to the movies there was little that reflected what was happening to people, to their bodies and minds. Occasionally a newsreel shot of an unemployment demonstration or the bonus march, always with a protective commentary to take the meaning out of the event. Once in a while a breadline, an apple seller—so handled to extract its sentimentality, to dissociate it from causation. Mostly the newsreels had the usual “news dictated” events: Babe Ruth hitting a home run, a flooding storm in the Florida keys, the launching of a battleship, a beauty contest, and the like. The feature films ran on as before, though at this time they were wrestling with the static and talky qualities which had come in with sound. Boy was still winning girl, still in rich surroundings; the cattle rustler was still being mean, the steel safe still being fingered by deft gloved hands, the gangster still getting a belly full of lead . . . What I remember of this period that had connection was the early Marx Brothers comedies with their zany put-down of respectability and arbitrary social order.

I had heard of the Film and Photo League, an organization interested in reflecting the content of events which did not show up in the commercial media. Its point of view: the commercial media were basically propagandistic, intended to lull, to stifle articulate need and protest. Ordinary people could use film and photography with more relevance and purpose than the professionals. The League chiefly covered news events, filling in where the newsreel did not go. Because it was not interested in converting news into spectacular entertainment but rather in revealing the reality, with the purpose of arousing people to action, the Film and Photo League began to deal with events in what might be called essay form rather than as dissociated fragments of camera-recording, the conventional form of the newsreel. There was at this time no such thing as documentary studies of current events in America, although we had seen exciting documentary films from the Soviet Union and pre-Hitler Germany. I joined the League and was soon involved in photographing the Hunger March in the spring of 1932, and then, in very few days, editing the footage into a four-reel film called *Hunger 1932*.

The work of the Film and Photo League was crude. But it had energy derived from a real sense of purpose, from doing something needed and new, from a personal identification with subject matter. When homeless men were photographed in doorways or on park benches, feeling guided the viewfinder. The world had to be shown what its eyes were turned away from. When an anti-Nazi demonstration was covered on the Brooklyn docks, the cameraman was daringly close to the mounted cops who were dragging demonstrators by their coat collars and running them down the street. This

including good friends, when the pressure of blacklists, FBI, and committee harassment piled up. For them, the judgment that “I was wrong or misled in my estimate of Stalin or the local political line” became an excuse to erase the feeling of human community, a device to cease the continual search for new answers, as change shifts the facts of living again and again. What is sad in this, as I look back, is the defection from self.

was an image with a felt point of view: the fine efficient brutality of the police-horsemen, an identification with people trying to express their anger at the arrival of the first Nazi envoy to America.

It had happened before and would happen again. People not professionally trained in films would be seized by the potency of the medium, would apply to it a passionate purpose and thereby bring to it something new, something electric. The great mystique of craft was being dissipated. You didn't have to apprentice yourself for years to people with guarded secrets in order to become a cameraman, editor, or director. With desire and zest one could learn the learnable—by practice, by study, by having ideas in one's head, feelings that demanded to be expressed. By working with others.

The Film and Photo League was what was called a "mass organization," made up of a variety of dues-paying members. Film work was assigned on the basis of someone volunteering to do it. By and large this brought out those with the greatest interest and the greatest capacity. But the organization was loose, and over the long run there was insufficient accumulation of skill, insufficient continuity of production, insufficient exploration of the medium. So we organized classes to teach ourselves elements of camera-work, lighting, image-thinking, editing. We were our own teachers, there being among us individuals with different amounts of experience in various areas. The class sessions were improvised and experimental. At the same time, with bits of money donated by such people as Sidney Howard, the playwright, and used for buying film stock and processing, some of us continued to make short films. There was no money to pay the film makers. I made a film on the Scottsboro Case. Nine young blacks had been rounded up on a freight train and falsely prosecuted for rape; it was one of the early and celebrated cases dramatizing racism. I made a film called *Sweet Land of Liberty* on the harassment of dissenters. The commercial film companies barely touched these themes (when they did, it was without insight or with distortion). But there were individuals in the management who made available to us relevant stock footage at little cost. It turned out that the news-reel companies had remarkable footage shot by their cameramen which never saw the light of the silver screen.

After a while it became clear to some that we needed something more focused and more concentrated if this seed of revolutionary film was to grow. The core of talented and vitally interested people needed continuity of study and production—to develop as film makers—to make films of greater impact and depth. This kind of pressure was felt also in the other arts, and it met with sectarian resistance: We're trying to build a people's film, theater, dance; you can't introduce elitism, a professional isolation. We tried to make the point that an art takes deep involvement, continual search, as well as an identification with the living needs of people.

In the end a group of us, unable to convince the executive committee that such a development was feasible within the League, formed a transitional small organization called Nykino; the "Ny" stood for New York. We gathered to us some newcomers—a musician, a poet, a publicity man, a

bookseller, a social worker—all eager to move into the extraordinary medium of film—proceeding again to study and to make films, with new energy and, as we hoped, on a new artistic level. I was the only paid member of the group: \$15 per week, equal to the salary I had been earning as film and managing editor of *New Theatre Magazine*. The others had outside jobs or were on work-relief. We earned money for my salary and for our film work by doing still photographs for *Harpers Bazaar* and other publications. One of the group had a grant from a small foundation to make experimental films. He had shot footage for several of these, was stuck on their structuring. With relish I edited and completed them: *Harbor Scenes*, *Quarry*, *Pie in the Sky*.

4

All this was going on in the years 1931 to 1935: What was going on in the world?

In the U.S., Roosevelt had been elected in a massive rejection of the Hoover do-nothing policy; Roosevelt responded with action to ameliorate economic conditions. Work-relief programs, legislation to stabilize the banks, laws recognizing the right of labor to organize, aid to farmers, pump-priming of the economy. Internationally, fascism was becoming a monumental danger, with Hitler coming to power in Germany—the third, most efficient fascist state. For those who could see it—and many could not—the Nazi solution to the crisis of capitalism threatened cataclysm for the world.

Radical political thinking became international. The events at home and the events of the world were clearly inter-related. My own deep involvement in politics meant that I focused on the development of a film form that would reflect the content of our lives—films that would affect people in their view of themselves, of the world. You can call this propaganda, so long as you don't equate propaganda for this with propaganda for that, so long as you evaluate the "this" and the "that" in terms of human value and experiential content. I had not lost my interest in the fiction film, but I was preoccupied with the documentary. (The term was new, and never satisfactory.)

We had seen films in the documentary/realistic tradition from the Soviet Union—films by Dziga Vertov, Dovzhenko, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Barnet . . . we had seen *Turksib* and others. We also began to see films from England: *North Sea*, *Night Mail*. I found the Russian films eloquent and the British films pale, though well-formed.

The difference had to do with the passion in the interior that spoke through the filmic devices. The Russians were treating climactic human content with deep concern. The English were using their content in the service of creating a new film form, loving the textural values of real places and faces, solving problems of structure and the use of sound. It was the difference between Goya and Gainsborough (maybe Hogarth), between Orozco and Raoul Dufy. Unlike the Russians, whom they learned from, the English were not letting their minds and hearts move into the deeper

layers of their experience. The Russians were turning over a world—inner and outer.

We were moving on our own tack, considering neither as archetype, but more stimulated by the Russians. I was fascinated by the mosaic character of film, by the capacity of documentary film to extract fragments out of the matrix of a visual-sound reality, then to weave these fragments into a form very different from the reality but capable of rendering the meaning and feeling of the real event. From this point of view, the documentary film was anything but a document. It did not “document” reality at all. Its tiny documents in the form of shots and sounds bore the same relation to the film as the small pieces of colored stone and glass to the mosaic mural, the brush-strokes to the painting, the individual words and phrases to the novel. The stuff was document, but the construction was invented, a time-collage. And it was clear that the question of *truth or lie* lay not in the stuff you were using but in the thoughts, responsibility, empathy of the film maker and his capacity to shape a form which could tell . . . how much of the truth? This responsibility and empathy were not different from the truth or lie of the fiction film or any other art.

And so I got to hate the word documentary (though I never devised a better), and later hated with even more vehemence the words *cinéma vérité* to describe films that had little *vérité* to them. In the thirties, documentary was a dirty word for a long while. Distributors looked at you with the expression: Who needs it? That was mild. In some quarters it was equivalent to “red.” After a while it became respectable, even commercial.

Another aspect of the documentary film that interested me was the problem of structure. If you thought of a documentary as a journalistic form, as being about something, a report on something, then you used the structure of the event as the basic form, or you constructed it like a news story or essay with words to swing you along from topic to topic. And you could hop it up with the voice of God like “The March of Time.” You could hop it up with fast cutting and sensational events. You could hop it up by saving your most spectacular sequence to the end. But in any case, the basic connection was the “*and*” connection: this happened “*and*” then that, this idea “*and*” then that.

But if you wanted to create an experience with your film, an experience in itself which could move people or stir them to ideas and action, then the journalistic form with its primary “*and*” connectives was very limited. What was needed was a principle of growth, enabling the film to grow out of its parts into a whole, much as a plot functions in a fiction film. One needed in the documentary film an equivalent of plot, with connectives of “*but*,” “*against*,” “*despite*,” “*growing into*.” The key to this, we found, was that a sequence had not merely to describe or relate but to create a *need* in the audience, as in a fiction film, by identification with the characters, a feeling of want or anxiety is created in the audience. Then one could look at the structure of a film and design it—with image and word and sound—as a chain of interactive needs progressing toward a resolution. If you were

handling ideas, then your ideas would also have to be woven into this progression of needs.

5

During the Nykino period, which was a time of production and study and a preparation for more intensive production, Joris Ivens came from Holland with his films, among them *New Earth*. His point of view about film and about the conditions of our world were similar to our own. A friendship grew. His longer experience, his persistent devotion to holding the line as an independent film maker, was an important stimulation to us in our struggle, a stimulation toward setting up the conditions for full-time production of independent films in America.

During this period, Paul Strand came back from Mexico, having completed *The Wave*. When he heard what we were up to, he joined us with enthusiasm, putting aside for some years his single-minded devotion to still photography. This set the basis for a long and rewarding collaboration between us. Also during this period, Pare Lorentz had made arrangements for a film on the dust bowl with the Resettlement Administration. He approached us to prepare an outline for the film, which we did. In 1935, Strand, Steiner, and I set out for Wyoming, Montana, and Texas to photograph it. This became the first of Lorentz' series of remarkable, independent films: *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. In our script thinking on this film, we had our first full opportunity to put into practice the ideas we had been germinating: the translation of meanings into images, the fusion of images into sequence-wholes, the dramatic structuring of a documentary film on the basis of a chain of needs into a time-growing totality. We wanted our films to possess at the same time a progression of emotion and a close and true relationship to the events and their causes, direct and submerged.

When we returned from the west, we set to moving Nykino into a new stage: an independent production company with day-to-day continuity and with a full-time staff. We had the interest of artists, writers, trade union people, people in the city government, etc. There was a strong interest in the "new film," and a strong community among intellectuals, progressive and "left"—a strong enthusiasm for an emerging culture, opening up stereotyped forms, digging into the content of living experience, pulling up the blinds of isolated art-oriented art, making real connections with people. Artists and writers and others joined our launching—as advisers, supporters—from John Dos Passos to Lillian Hellman, Joseph Freeman, Harold Clurman, Ben Shahn, Archibald Macleish, and others.

We formed Frontier Films. Frontier Films was a non-profit company devoted to making films that touched the realities of American life, and subjects relevant to these realities. We wanted to make films outside the current market, where film was a commodity whose primary intention was to make a profit. We thought of films as a medium of conveying experience and insight. We proposed, in the process, to enlarge and deepen the ex-

pressive values and techniques of the art. We were young and confident. The confidence arose from two things: the existing constriction of the medium which asked for new ideas, and the generating power imbedded in having something important to say, deeply felt and deeply needed. Our underlying belief was that the penetration of real experience and a substratum of real feelings were prime energies for art.

Nevertheless, it would be necessary to have money for rent, for raw stock and processing, for production expenses, cutting rooms, screenings, and a subsistence level for the staff. Thirty-five dollars a week, applied equally regardless of different responsibilities and efforts, was what we paid ourselves, but many weeks went by without salary. We raised money primarily from richer individuals, who felt what we were doing was important and who could take advantage of tax deductions, and also by undertaking to make sponsored films which said what we wanted to say. Our own unpaid work-time—and the minimally paid work of actors, composers, and others who wanted to work with us—was the chief contributor to our financing.

Distribution was something we would have to break through. In the theaters there was block-booking and therefore control by the major production companies. Independent films, especially in a new form and with social content, didn't have a chance in the national circuits. The 16mm market was far more limited than it is today. We counted on an expansion of the 16mm market to the new and vital trade unions, clubs, church groups, progressive organizations, and perhaps some colleges. We hoped also to build up an independent theatrical distribution based on independently owned neighborhood theaters, in areas where a demand for our films could be stimulated. We were aware that we were tackling a vastly difficult job; we were prepared to struggle. We began to open up these fields, but our larger objective was never achieved.

In addition to Paul Strand, Ralph Steiner, and myself, the basic production group included Lionel Berman, Sidney Meyers, Irving Lerner, Willard Van Dyke, Jay Leyda, David Wolff, and later, Arnold Perl. Steiner and Van Dyke dropped away early. Others like Michael Gordon, Elia Kazan, Ricky Leacock, Herbert Kline, Henri Bresson, Marc Blitzstein, Paul Robeson, Hans Eisler, Howard da Sylva, Art Smith, etc., worked with us on specific projects.

Some of our films, the main ones, were: *The World Today* (two episodes, *Sunnyside* and *Black Legion*), *Heart of Spain*, *People of the Cumberland*, *China Strikes Back*, *Return to Life*, *White Flood*, *Native Land*. They were not even in their qualities, but they did pioneer a new film form. They were truly independent, nonconformist. They were bold in subject matter and treatment. They provided a key stimulus to a growing generation of film makers on the fringes of the film industry in the growing "documentary" field and in Hollywood. They were responsive to important aspects of the human experience and the underlying forces of the time.

There isn't space to tell about each of these films. The final production,

Native Land, was the longest one and had the fullest production. It introduced a new feature form weaving together enacted stories and documentary episodes. The function of the technique was to bring together seemingly unrelated events into the real coherence they possessed and so dramatize underlying forces and conflict. It added up in practice the years of study and experiment in film.

There were no computers or electronic memory banks in these years from 1931 to 1941 (when Frontier Films was disbanded because of the war), but this activity did earn for some of us labels of "reds," "fellow-travellers," "premature anti-fascists," and it did earn the watchful eye of Congressional and state committees eager to ferret out the practice of inalienable rights; it did set the hunters of the FBI to compiling dossiers. It put former colleagues in the position where they could scare a film project in their direction by dropping the rumor that so-and-so was a red. It did provide material for blacklists before, during, and after the McCarthy period.

Nevertheless for me this was a great school of struggle and film making. It set important vectors for my life: to enjoy the struggle for worth, to be oneself (at the same time as one is responsive to other people's needs), to shoulder off the pressures to conform, to find one's own sense of truth. It gave me a deep-lying conviction that social and individual predicaments are amenable to solution—that the changes and contradictions we live through can go beyond despair and alienation. And it confirmed my feeling that I belonged in the conspiracy of art (against socially dictated modes of perception, feeling, thinking), which is part of the larger and continuing conspiracy to be human.