

# Layers of Cheese

## Generic Overlap in Early Non-Fiction Films on Production Processes<sup>1</sup>

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While defining genres and sub-genres may be one of the most difficult tasks of film scholarship in general, it seems an almost hopeless endeavor for those studying non-fiction cinema.<sup>2</sup> Approaching the largely uncharted territory of industrial and business films, authors such as Thomas Elsaesser, Yvonne Zimmermann, Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau have suggested taking into account paratextual discourses as well as the institutional contexts of films in order to establish, or reconstruct, the generic divisions structuring the industrial uses of cinematography.<sup>3</sup> While we agree with the general line of their argument (which one could characterize as a “historical pragmatics” approach<sup>4</sup>), their focus on organizational functionality fails to address the fact that many of the generic markers that they rely on do in fact originate outside the context of industrial organization, and, in some cases, predate the systematic use of film by industry by years, if not decades. Fully accounting for the generic subdivisions of industrial film also requires a look into the past – and more particularly, a consideration of the emergence of what has retrospectively been termed “process films” in early non-fiction film.

In this article we argue that the generic labels of non-fiction cinema always overlap with others in terms of the formal, thematic, structural, institutional, or pragmatic dimensions that constitute genre definitions. In the specific case that we shall analyze – (pre)industrial films depicting the process of cheese making – the rendering of the different production stages closely resembles the way such practices are represented in travelogues and educational films. Genres should therefore be seen as complex and multi-layered configurations demanding to be understood in terms of historically specific, pragmatic contexts. The latter, in turn, offer functional frameworks for textual structures, which both constrain the construction of meaning and are open enough to allow a variety of readings.

## Generic differentiation in non-fiction cinema

One of the best ways to understand how generic subdivisions are established in the vast domain of non-fiction film is to analyze the criteria according to which such labels were discursively constructed over time. Arguably, the most important distinction in the field of factual filmmaking is the one that differentiates the documentary, as a specific type of non-fiction film, from other types, such as the travelogues of early cinema, newsreels, and scientific or instructional films. John Grierson's famous and often quoted definition of documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality" is a case in point here, as Grierson implicitly opposes two types of practice: one that is content to record actuality, and another one – namely that which Grierson associates with the work of Robert Flaherty – that creatively shapes actuality.<sup>5</sup> In his 1935 essay "Some Principles of Documentary," Paul Rotha elaborates on this opposition in the following terms:

It is often suggested that documentary has close similarity to the newsreel. By the trade they are naturally confused because they both, in their respective ways, deal with natural material. But there the likeness ends. Their approach to and interpretation of that material are widely different. The essence of the documentary method lies in its dramatization of actual material. The very act of dramatization causes a film statement to be false to actuality. ... To be truthful within the technical limits of the camera and microphone demands description, which is the aim of the instructional film, and not dramatization, which is the qualification of the documentary method.<sup>6</sup>

What Grierson and Rotha describe as different practices or methods ultimately refers to a difference with regard to *style*: the opposition between recording and creatively treating actuality, between description and dramatization, implies a distinction between downplaying the expressive possibilities of the medium on the one hand, and foregrounding them on the other. One could indeed state that, within the logic of the distinction proposed by Grierson and Rotha, documentary filmmakers, as opposed to those producing other types of non-fiction films, need to make explicit stylistic choices, whereas, in these other cases, style is determined by the obligation "to be truthful within the technical limits of the camera and microphone."

Further differentiation in the field of non-fiction cinema is often based upon the criterion of the *purpose* or *function* a film is supposed to serve. Denominations such as instructional, educational, scientific, ethnographic, etc. films, and also terms like newsreel or propaganda, refer to the uses these films are being put to, or to the institutional domain in which they are employed. Here, the formal characteristics are more or less irrelevant, the basic assumption being generally that form will just have to follow function. Closely related to this per-

spective are categorizations centered on *thematic* issues, that is, the content matter of the films. Examples are generic labels such as travelogues, military scenes, colonial films, sports films, wildlife films, etc. Such a thematic approach is, in fact, often connected to distribution categories, which materialize in the form of subdivisions in catalogues, especially in the early period. And last but not least, there are generic subsets constructed in terms of *production* or *exhibition*: the *Kulturfilm*, for instance, as well as the amateur film, as made by and shown to the members of clubs [men indentation]. It is important to note that the above labels originate from practitioners' discourses. When taken up by film historians or genre theorists they tend to be used as analytical categories and thus must be defined in a relatively strict and stable manner. This tension between the rough-and-ready labeling by film producers or distributors and the scholarly demand for precision is arguably one of the reasons why genre is such a notoriously complex field.

Consequently, as even such a rapid sketch demonstrates, none of these criteria can serve as a basis for clear-cut definitions. Most types of films will fall into several categories, and individual films can be grouped together in various ways. In spite of these difficulties, an analysis of generic categories can be useful in order to understand the complexity of the phenomenon of genre in (early) non-fiction.

## Industrial film as a genre category

When looking at the generic label "industrial film," we may find the complexity of such a category discouraging at first sight, but mapping out its different layers of meaning may eventually be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the broad range of potential meanings that it covers.

The first, and most obvious, criterion here is the depiction of industrial work processes, and thus, directly or indirectly, the presentation of factories. But several possible distinctions come into play here. Does the label only concern so-called "heavy" industries, or other branches of production as well, such as, for instance, the industrial processing of food? And is drawing a line between crafts or manufacturing and industry possible? To what degree must production processes be automated or at least mechanized? In the early 1900s, the Pathé company's distribution catalogues included the category *scènes (d'art et) d'industrie*, which covers a variety of subjects, from the oil industry in Baku to the snake-skin industry of Java, and the wooden-shoe industry in Brittany (in all of these cases, and in many similar ones, the word *industrie* appears in the title of the

films). From this point of view, almost all the various types of what Tom Gunning has called “process films” would fall within the genre.<sup>7</sup>

A somewhat narrower criterion would limit the category to those films produced or commissioned by the industry itself. This, again, leaves open the question as to which types of enterprises qualify as “industrial”. Furthermore, it is possible to distinguish between a number of purposes such films fulfill: they can serve the interests of public relations, aim at attracting clients, help market the product, provide information or training for employees, instruct them about company policies with regard to security, address matters of health and safety related to the production process, etc. The question of the specific purposes of the films is also linked to issues of exhibition, as there can be an enormous difference between images made for public screenings, either in commercial cinema or in other, specialized venues (trade fairs, conventions, but also classrooms), and those that are produced to address a select and predefined group of viewers only (business partners, the workers), which are produced to be screened exclusively within the factory walls.

In 1904, for instance, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company shot more than twenty films for the Westinghouse Corporation, showing aspects of the production process or parts of the company’s facilities. They were projected at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis. This is an example of a company commissioning films for public relations purposes. However, what gets lost when we compare them to “process films” is the intelligibility of the production process. “Instead,” Wiatr argues, “the films offered a panorama of visual instants that unfold across time.”<sup>8</sup> The Westinghouse films, in other words, differ from Pathé’s *scènes (d’art et) d’industrie* in that they provide a much more general view of industrial work. Rather than describing the different stages of a specific production process, they present an overall corporate image – or maybe even an emblematic image of American industry – to visitors of the St. Louis Fair.

Finally, in a much broader conception of the genre, the so-called “factory-gate films,” and in fact any film concerned with aspects of industrial labor, would also be included. Several company archives contain images of workers that are not related to their professional activities, showing instead more leisurely gatherings such as a collective day out or some festivity. The existence of different versions of Lumière’s *SORTIE D’USINE* is an interesting case in point, as they may at one time have served a promotional function when used to demonstrate the origins of the miracle of living pictures, but, over time, also became social and cultural documents as representations of workers in France at the turn of the century. The factory-gate films produced by the English firm Mitchell & Kenyon are also promotional, but more specifically for the traveling showmen who commissioned them to incite the filmed workers to come and see the show in

the hopes of recognizing themselves on the screen.<sup>9</sup> In addition, they are also important social and cultural documents, as visual records of turn-of-the-century industrial Britain.

Whichever approach one chooses, it should be clear that the category of industrial film always and necessarily is a constructed one, functioning in view of implicit or explicit purposes, leading to inclusions and exclusions, drawing boundaries, and establishing discursive fields. In what follows we shall limit the scope of our analyses to one type of process film in order to demonstrate how a given structural pattern can function in different pragmatic contexts.

## **Cheese making as a production process**

Early non-fiction films about the way cheese is made are probably not among the first examples that come to mind when we talk about industrial films. However, as members of the larger category of "process films," they are, at least in a structural sense, hardly any different from films depicting the various stages of an industrial production process. The examples we want to discuss, in spite of their obvious similarities, present interesting variations that point to differences in the way they were intended to address audiences, while at the same time the multiple layers of meaning contained in their structural organization turn them into "open" texts that can fit into a variety of contexts.

The 1909 Pathé film *COMMENT SE FAIT LE FROMAGE DE HOLLANDE* (*How Dutch Cheese Is Made*) depicts the process of cheese making as a pre-industrial one, where traditional wooden tools are used by people wearing traditional costumes, working in a stereotypical Dutch environment of pastures and windmills.<sup>10</sup> The film begins and ends with shots of a girl in traditional dress holding a block of cheese up to the camera; in the final shot, the cheese carries a Pathé frères rooster logo. Because of the strong presence of "typically Dutch" imagery, *COMMENT SE FAIT LE FROMAGE DE HOLLANDE* is in fact not only a "process film," but also a "place film"<sup>11</sup> which creates a picturesque image of the Netherlands. In contrast, the 1920 British film *CHEDDAR*, produced by Ideal, presents the same process as an industrialized one, stressing the efficiency and modernity of British cheese making, while at the same time insisting on its quality, as the opening shot presents a prize-winning cheddar. In this respect, the film can be situated at the other end of the spectrum, almost at the antipode of *COMMENT SE FAIT LE FROMAGE DE HOLLANDE*.

Both films, however, show more or less the same sequence of stages in the cheese making process: the milking of the cows, curdling the milk by adding rennet, stirring the curd, cutting the solid curd, packing it into vats and pressing

it, and weighing the cheese and transporting it to the market (the Pathé film also shows the salting and washing of the cheese, sales on the market, and preparation for export). Following the (sub)generic convention of the “process film,” they depict the transformation of the raw material into a finished product.

The structure of both films – at a syntagmatic level – thus shows important similarities, but at the same time, each approaches its subject matter from a different angle. The Pathé production, by focusing on the traditions of Dutch cheese farmers as much as on the production process itself, and by emphasizing the picturesque aspects of the environment, overlaps in these respects with the travelogue (note that the title already stresses the location, in contrast to that of CHEDDAR). The British film takes more interest in the efficiency of the production chain, and therefore has more in common with films presenting modernization processes in rural areas.

*Figures 1 and 2 KAAS (1943)*



NOF/NIAM collection, Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld en Geluid

These differences, however, are not necessarily very revealing with regard to how either film functioned. Both may have taken on a variety of meanings, depending on the audience they were shown to. While a screening of the film about Dutch cheese making for a general French public quite probably foregrounded its “exotic” or “idyllic” aspects, an audience of schoolchildren may have been encouraged instead to focus on the procedures involved in the production of a type of food they ate on a daily basis. In the UK, the film about cheddar cheese production may have served to demonstrate the advanced level of automation in the countryside to a general public. Yet one can also imagine that it would have been used as a means of instruction with a more restricted audience of factory employees.

That either or even both of the films would have been used in an educational context seems particularly plausible when one considers another title dealing with the same subject, part of a Dutch collection of classroom films. The film *KAAS* (*Cheese*, 1943), produced by the Stichting Nederlandse Onderwijs Film (N.O.F.), also shows how cheese is made, from the milking of the cows onward. Even though *KAAS* was made considerably later, its textual strategies hardly differ from those used in the two earlier films. Like *CHEDDAR*, it focuses on the genesis of a product rather than picturing an average day on a busy family farm. Like the Pathé film, it shows procedures that seem to be based on experience and skill rather than an automated production chain. In its final scene the film briefly assumes the character of an advertising short. A close-up of a label with the cheese’s brand name (reminiscent of the rooster emblem at the end of the Pathé film) is followed by a shot of a family enjoying the featured product at dinner time, thus explicitly reproducing the common structure of early “process films” that usually end with the consumption of the goods produced.

However, as opposed to both *CHEDDAR* and *COMMENT SE FAIT LE FROMAGE DE HOLLANDE*, *KAAS* was made especially – and exclusively – for a school audience. The film was distributed with a set of teachers’ notes advising educators on how it should be used. At the time it was made, the N.O.F. was engaging in the production of a series of films based on what it termed *centres d’intérêt*. This concept was borrowed from the Belgian pedagogue Ovide Decroly, who advocated “global learning,” a teaching method that was considered to value the pupils’ “natural” interest in their immediate surroundings.<sup>12</sup> Each series was a combination of a so-called “foundation film” that documented the geographical characteristics of a particular region, and a few titles dealing with local activities that were supposed to be relevant to the children since they related to their everyday needs – for instance, the production of a particular type of food or a tool.<sup>13</sup> This production strategy not only strengthened the filmmakers in their belief in the purposefulness of their activities, but also allowed them to build on non-fiction traditions that had been developed in previous decades.

In most European countries the institutionalization of teaching films coincided with the expansion of the non-theatrical film circuit during and after the Second World War. Considering the relatively sudden increase in screening opportunities,<sup>14</sup> it is hardly surprising that films shown in 1940s classrooms and earlier non-fictional forms display a remarkable amount of continuity. Not only industrial and other production processes were depicted in great number: films with biological subjects took up the tradition of early scientific experimentation and relied on techniques such as time-lapse photography and microphotography to produce images of flowering plants and growing embryos. Films catalogued as “social geography” tended to focus on the way people in particular children lived elsewhere (doing the same things, but in slightly different ways) – thus continuing a long-standing tradition of (pseudo)ethnographic films.

Throughout the years and decades, teaching films certainly did develop their own particular features – characteristics by which they can be identified more easily as targeting a school audience. Efforts were taken to simplify what was being shown and structure it visually, as an aid to the pupils’ memory. Even KAAS, produced in the early 1940s, is slower in pace and contains more repetition than industrial films on the same topics that were made at the time. In films with similar subjects, live-action images were sometimes alternated with schematic representations of crucial stages in the production process. In addition, written captions were used to introduce relevant terminology. In the film about cheese, for instance, pieces of paper are attached to containers to identify their contents, or the functions of specific ingredients. None of these properties, however, are exclusive to teaching films, nor can they be generalized as “typical” of all.

In addition, not all films used in classrooms were produced with a specific purpose in mind. The N.O.F.’s distribution catalogue, for instance, also contains items that were intended for specialized technical education. Such films were often straightforward training films, made by the companies that manufactured the featured products. Although some of the pupils to whom they were projected in schools may subsequently have been hired by those same enterprises, they were intended primarily for the instruction of current personnel. In addition, the institute also distributed award-winning Dutch documentaries that were valued for their artistic qualities at least as much as for what they might pass on in terms of actual subject knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Yet the question is exactly how much it matters whether or not films shown in classrooms were made with that specific audience in mind. In a school setting, after all, they would have functioned as teaching films, even if they had been “recycled” from very different prior contexts.

The example of the films about cheese making discussed above suggests that similar structures can serve a variety of ends, and, inversely, a variety of textual



structures can function within the same institutional contexts. More precisely, the film texts are organized in ways sufficiently open to make them usable for different purposes.

## Conclusions

In early non-fiction films, generic patterns overlap in many ways, regardless of the definition of genre used. Textual definitions have limited validity due to the fact that no type of patterning is exclusive to one genre; functional or institutional ones because of the migration of films from one context to another. Generic labeling tends to create a problematic illusion of coherence and clarity in an unstable and protean field. Similarly, talking about industrial films as a coherent genre conveniently hides the multiple forms, purposes, user contexts, and audiences that are linked to such a category.

Comprehending the potential complexity of seemingly simple and straightforward non-fiction films is facilitated by taking into account their textual openness, or “strategic weakness of form” (Hediger and Vonderau), with regard to the variety of institutional contexts in which they can be employed. Between entertainment and instruction, between the picturesque and the informative, between demonstration and attraction, between the cliché and the surprising, (early) industrial films, just like all other types of non-fictional views, can serve multiple purposes. In other words, there may be more to cheese making than meets the eye.

## Notes

1. This article was written as part of the Utrecht Media Research Program.
2. For an overview of problems concerning genre definitions see Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999).
3. Thomas Elsaesser, “Die Stadt von morgen: Filme zum Bauen und Wohnen,” in Klaus Kreimeier, Antje Ehmann and Jeanpaul Goergen (eds.), *Geschichte des dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland. Band 2: Weimarer Republik 1918-1933* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005), pp. 381-409. See also Hediger and Vonderau as well as Zimmermann in this volume.
4. See Frank Kessler, “Historische Pragmatik,” *Montage/AV* 11, 2 (2002), pp. 104-112.
5. John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 13. This is, at least, one of the ways to read the phrase. See the critical discussion of it by Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: BFI, 1995), pp. 11-14.

6. Paul Rotha, "Some Principles of Documentary" [1935], in Richard M. Barsam (ed.), *Nonfiction Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Dutton, 1978), p. 53.
7. See Tom Gunning, "Before Documentary: Early nonfiction films and the 'view' aesthetic," in Daan Hertogs, Nico de Klerk (eds.), *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film* (Amsterdam: Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum, 1997), pp. 9-24.
8. Elizabeth Wiatr, "Between Word, Image, and the Machine: visual education and films of industrial process," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 22, 3 (2002), p. 338.
9. On the Mitchell & Kenyon factory-gate films, see Tom Gunning, "Pictures of Crowd Splendor: The Mitchell and Kenyon Factory Gate Films," in Vanessa Toulmin, Patrick Russell, Simon Popple (eds.), *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film* (London: BFI, 2004), pp. 49-58.
10. For a detailed discussion of this film, see Frank Kessler, "Wie der Käse in Holland gemacht wird. Anmerkungen zum frühen *nonfiction*-Film," in Malte Hagener, Johann N. Schmidt, Michael Wedel (eds.), *Die Spur durch den Spiegel. Der Film in der Kultur der Moderne* (Berlin: Bertz Verlag, 2004), pp. 159-166.
11. See Tom Gunning, "Before Documentary," *op. cit.*
12. For more on Decroly's doctrine and its value to his contemporaries, see Marc Depaepe et al., "The Canonization of Ovide Decroly as a 'Saint' of the New Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 43, 2, pp. 224-249.
13. See Bert Hogenkamp, "'De onderwijfsfilm is geen Duitse uitvinding.' A.A. Schoevers, Ph.A. Kohnstamm en de Nederlandse Onderwijs Film, 1941-1949," in *Stichting Film en Wetenschap – Audiovisueel Archief Jaarboek 1996* (Amsterdam: Stichting Film en Wetenschap/Nederlands Audiovisueel Archief, 1997), p. 66.
14. See, for instance, Andrew Buchanan, *The Film in Education* (London: Phoenix House, 1951), p. 80.
15. Cf. N. Crama, "Drie Nederlandse documentaires," *Mededelingen van de Stichting Nederlandse Onderwijs Film* 1, 1 (1958), pp. 4-6.