

Review

E. Anna Claydon

Science on Television: The Narrative of Scientific Documentary

León, Bienvenido

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Films of Fact: A History of Science in Documentary Films and Television

Boon, Timothy

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Originally published in 1999, Pantaneto Press have newly published the English translation of Bienvenido León's *Science on Television* (2007). Like Bordwell and Thompson's well-known maxims for the arrival of cinema (which boil down to money, time, knowledge and a audience with greater leisure), León grounds the popularisation of science in the interest of potential audience to learn more about their world and locates that historically not so much in the 18th century Enlightenment but rather in the latter half of the 1600s, that evocative era when European cultures battles between the rise of Protestantism and the struggle of Catholicism to retain its political powers. The core aim of his study, he notes is "to present some of those key elements necessary in order to effectively broadcast scientific knowledge [, striving] to present the line of work essential in each context" (p2).

The book divides into four chapters, plus the usual topping and tailing with introduction and conclusion: the popularisation of science and approaches to it; the documentary form as a way of achieving that popularisation (and specifically anthropology and naturalist work); techniques for popularisation and grasping the audience through dramatic devices; and lastly, the use of rhetoric in science on television. The first of these situates the communication of science amidst the greatest of theorists and critics across European modern history and establishes some of the dissonances between changing approaches over the centuries. Unsurprisingly, for a book which was composed among Spanish academics, the literature used, once it begins to discuss the sociological approaches to popularising science, is mainly Spanish in origin but the internationalisation of theorists in this first chapter does help to reiterate that the concerns are common to science, philosophers and scientists irrespective of nation.

The second chapter establishes itself with a brisk pace and a rapid introduction to the history of cinema through documentaries and emphasises the medium's importance in the early days of film through a whistle-stop tour of the Lumière brothers, Flaherty and Grierson and their anthropological aims. Following on from this, León, then pursues the parallel rise of the nature film, finding its roots in Muybridge's motion studies before dividing the kinds of films into two traditions, the European and the North American; the former defined by observation and the latter by the kind of anthropomorphisation viewers of 1960s Disney documentaries recall.

Moving to Chapter Three, León identifies facets to the how audience's are engaged by science on the screen: a) the "reaching out" to the audience and gaining their interest by making it relevant to them; b) making it spatially interesting, both the "preference for the exotic" or the proximity to one's own life (citing the example of David Attenborough in *The Private Life of Plants* making the story of pollen relevant through reference to hayfever); and c) the use of the "unusual, strange or unexpected", or the material that can border on the freak show or the exposé in the meeting place between "studiousness" and "curiosity", a zone potentially full of fascination and often truly

informative for new audiences. León then proceeds to discuss the narrative and then dramatic techniques used to tell these scientific stories, with three of the most interesting sections being on, firstly, the tendency to, to equal measures, animalise humans and anthropomorphise animals, secondly, the journalist or traveller as story-teller and, thirdly, the move from documentary subject to character (something we are now quite used to in the term “casting” for reality television shows but which was made explicit in the two versions of *March of the Penguins* (2005) - the other being the animated film *Happy Feet* - 2006).

The last chapter focuses on the didactic and persuasive qualities of documentary; how the filmmaker convinces the spectator that the documentary ‘evidence’ is “true”. Drawing on Aristotle, Todorov, Perelman and Lausberg in particular, Leon, sets out the different modes of address to be found but it is somewhat surprising that he does not acknowledge or use John Corner’s extensive disquisition of just this area and thus the argument lacks the power that the authors appears to think his own rhetoric possesses.

In its entirety, *Science on Television* is an interesting short study of the construction of story and the popularisation of science in documentaries but the hyperbole of the reviews on the book’s reverse is not lived up to by León’s argument or content. The range of authors he covers is not as thorough as Jeffrey Boswall’s quote implies and the frustrating thing for a reader who has read any of the main writers on documentary theory will find little new here. Happily, the same cannot be said for the second book in this review *Films of Fact: A History of Science in Documentary Films and Television* (Wallflower, 2008) by the chief curator of the Science Museum in London, Timothy Boon, a book which really does tell a story which is largely unknown or forgotten.

The structure Boon’s monograph is a combination of historical and conceptual perspectives but interestingly focuses on films up to 1965, with only glimpses of more recent work being discussed in the Coda chapter ‘The Fate of Genres in Television Science Since 1965’, all of which sounds rather pessimistic but is rather a symptom of an absence in documentaries on science that Boon notes: “it is rare to witness science television that exhibits the techno-enthusiasm of a generation ago, except in ironic mode” (p240). There is also a conscious choice being made here to focus on the establishment of a genre which we all recognise but which aspects of, such as that “techno-enthusiasm” from early *Horizons* and *Tomorrow’s World*, have become more commercialised until popularist television science is best epitomised by Channel Five’s *The Gadget Show* rather than the BBC’s *Child of Our Time* (which seems little more than an extended version of *Kids do the Funniest Things* now instead of the updated *7-Up* it aspired to be with the nation’s favourite fertility expert at its helm, Prof. Robert Winston).

The figure of documentarist Paul Rotha casts a long shadow over *Films of Fact*, written to commemorate the centenary of his birth in 2007 and with the title echoing one of Rotha’s companies, but Boon goes beyond these confines to examine documentaries about science more broadly, from the very earliest nature and science actualities to the role of television series in position science within culture. The first chapter opens by situating the earliest documentaries within their socio-scientific context more successfully than León because it returns to the concept Ian Christie framed, of cinema as “the last machine” – a science in itself – and spends time discussing the work of Charles Urban and his ‘unseen world’ series of films. Some of these ideas do recall what León writes about the ways in which audiences should be engaged but Boon writes in a much more entertainingly manner and conjures the world in which Urban made his short films very successfully. Subsequent chapters centre upon the peak of the documentary era, as some histories believe, the 1930s and the British documentary movement from 1930 to the late ‘40s. One of the most interesting refrains throughout the book is the way in which science and social responsibility were consistently matched to repeatedly reassure the public about the technological changes, en masse,

which were overtaking British culture in the mid-century decades; from the wonderful diagrammatic clarity of films like *Housing Problems* and *Enough to Eat* in the mid-1930s to the optimistic didacticism of the *Britain Can Make It* series of the immediate post-war years, Boon brings to the forefront the moralism at the heart of scientific communication in British visual culture – the puritanical virtues of not just making do and mending but of re-shaping society through science for the idealistic future ahead, one which seemed to be epitomised by the very concept of the New Elizabethans in the 1950s.

As the book moves into the 1950s and beyond, however, Boon's focus shifts to the impact of television on science documentaries as audiences abandoned the cinemas, over the next twenty years, in droves. Most adults today have fond memories of science documentaries of the '60s, '70s and '80s, before bite-size knowledge took over and dominated television alongside the attempts to dramatise through insufferably melodramatic soundtracks and, in the final three chapters, Boon not only paints a vivid image of the rise of science on television from the very point when television itself was defining its purpose but also extends it into shows which are the great-grandparents of *Dragon's Den*, at the intersection of invention, science, business and sheer British eccentricities. The social concern continues, as still manifested in *Horizon* or *Cutting Edge* or *Panorama* occasionally but, as he begins to draw his narrative to a close with Paul Rotha's departure from the BBC and points forward to *Horizon* and *Monitor* in the 1960s, Boon recalls some of the precursors to *Tomorrow's World* and the very fact that science was becoming newsworthy, with *Science is News* and *Eye on Research* (the former with David Attenborough as a later presenter, the latter with the inimitable Raymond Baxter establishing the tone and framework for *Tomorrow's World* from 1965).

I would enthusiastically recommend *Films of Fact* to anyone, academic or general readership, with an interest in how science is represented because Boon expertly manages to navigate the informative and the nostalgic in his history of science in documentary films and television. What he needs to do now is write the second volume, a detailed account from 1970 onwards: but perhaps we'll all be wearing silver lamé cat-suits by then and documentaries will be virtual realities where we participate in the histories on and in the screen.