

Verdun – Visions d’histoire:

A closer look at one of the
first war-documentaries

Analysis

by

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I. Introduction

The film „Verdun, visions d’histoire“ by Léon Poirier is a very fascinating and, for its time, very modern war-documentary. It was filmed in 1927/1928, and utilizes very many different filmic means to re-tell the events during the battle of Verdun in 1916.

When Léon Poirier started planning, he was facing a challenge: There was almost no usable archive-footage depicting the battle. In World War one (WWI), most newsreel-material was filmed from a great distance, and if we see some impressions of a battle, it’s usually just some explosions far away. [2] This was done for two reasons: The risk for the cameramen to be directly in the frontline, exposed to enemy fire, was too high, and, more important, newsreel-makers didn’t want to show the cruel side of war. Most of the filmed material showed soldiers marching, parading or resting before or after a battle, without any actual fighting.

So, instead of using only archive-footage, texts and diagrams, Léon Poirier decided to do a different approach: His documentary uses fictional characters, and lots of re-enacted scenes alongside archive-footage, original documents and diagrams.

The re-enacted scenes were done with the help of many WW1-veterans, and even General Pétain, a French commander of WW1, “plays himself” in a brief scene shot especially for the film.

The three main tasks of this paper:

1. The film as a documentary

Through the fictional characters, who don’t get real names but rather “role-names” like “The Son”, “The Husband” etc., Poirier tells some typical human fates during that battle. In fact, he shows most of these figures throughout the movie and constructs simple story-lines for some of them. Considering this, one might ask if this movie could rather be seen as a “narrative, fictional film against a historic backdrop” instead of a documentary. In this paper, we will discuss this question in detail, and explain why the author considers this movie as a “documentary using some fictional characters and scenes” and not a “fictional, narrative feature-film”

2. Analysis of Léon Poirier’s methods in reference to Bill Nichols documentary modes

The emphasis of this paper will lie on the analysis of the different filmic means Léon Poirier uses to re-tell the historical events, how he mixes emotional/poetic parts with parts explaining and telling the facts. Here we will show how the film switches between the different documentary modes that were defined by Nichols.

3. The portrayal of the German side

The last point I’d like to address is the way this French movie portrays the German side. This is actually a very complex topic, as the film was released 10 years after WW1 had ended, and many French people still saw German soldiers as enemies, fuelled by wartime-propaganda. Poirier, while concentrating on the French point-of-view, chose to portray German soldiers rather realistically, showing soldiers of both sides as victims of the horrors of wars.

II. The director: Léon Poirier



Léon Poirier (1884 -1968)

(Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/8/83/Léon_Poirier.jpg)

Léon Poirier was a theatre-director before WW1. When war started, he was not drafted because of health-reasons. But, as “he was brave” (Robert Darène [2]), he volunteered, and experienced life on the frontline himself. At the end of the war, he was a Lieutenant of the Artillery.

His first-hand experience of a WW1-soldier’s life on the frontline makes this documentary even more interesting: Who would be better suited to direct re-enacted frontline-scenes than a director who was a veteran himself? This fact adds credibility to the film, as Léon Poirier knew all the aspects of a French soldier’s life. Thus, it’s a good assumption that every small action, even in the re-enacted scenes, is done with the greatest possible authenticity.

III. The structure of the film

The film re-tells the battle chronologically, and is structured into three “Visions”, each of them spanning a few months time. In this short overview, we’ll summarize each of the visions briefly. The English translations of the film’s intertitles were taken from the DVD-subtitles. Some were a bit corrected by the author, but generally, they are the translation done by the DVD-authors.

First vision: Might (“La Force”) (ca. 55 min runtime)

This first part of the film starts shortly before the German offensive in Verdun, and ends shortly after “Fort Douaumont”, an important part in the French defense line, has been conquered by the German army. At the end of the “first vision”, the Germans are very optimistic that they will conquer Verdun within ten days. But, at 55:09 min, we see General Pétain, who will from now on lead the French army in Verdun, and he is sure that the French can stop the German offensive: “They shall not pass” (55:26 min)

During the first 20 minutes, we get to know all the fictional main characters of the movie.

Second vision: Hell (“L’enfer”) (ca. 50 min runtime)

This part of the film starts very peacefully in the countryside. We see French soldiers on a leave relax and having fun, before we switch back to the battlefield: The German offensive continues, and we read a quote of the German emperor: He is optimistic that the capture of Verdun will be a major victory that’ll probably end the war. We see in length the dramatic defence of Fort Vaux, which has to surrender to the German troops after it has been cut-off from the French Front line for some time. The film shows many ugly parts of WW1 warfare, including the use of toxic gas. Although the losses are severe on both sides, the Germans are sure that they will be victorious within eight days. Fort Thiaumont, another part of Verdun’s line of defence, is taken. This “vision” ends in a more quiet, almost “peaceful” scene when we see THE FRENCH SOLDIER, a fictional character, lying in Lazaretto, falling asleep after having barely survived.

Third vision: Fate (“Destine”) (ca. 45 min runtime).

This part starts with a French Field-Chaplain who discovers a damaged sun-clock in a ruined church. Its face bears the inscription “Today me, tomorrow you!”: A motto of this vision. On other parts of the frontline, English troops arrive as re-enforcements, and that the Russians are successful on the east front. Still, the defenders of Verdun are very worried as the Germans are closing in. But German resources are exhausted. In a desperate last attempt the Germans reach Fort de Souville, the last defence-line of Verdun on July 12th 1916, but are stopped within viewing-range of the city. Because of the French offensive in the Somme-area, they have to stop their offensive in Verdun and send troops there. The French start taking their terrain back, including Fort Douaumont (02:02:25), which had been the first to fall in the German offensive. The third vision ends 1918, showing peace-celebrations. Its last image is a peasant sowing seeds: Peace as a new chance.

IV. The fictional characters

During the film, we follow the fates of several fictional characters. Léon Poirier calls them “figures symboliques” in the foreword of the movie, and what he means by this becomes clear very quickly: Each of these characters symbolizes a certain kind of human “role”, and they are not given names except their role-names, e.g. “The mother”, “The husband” etc.

On the French side, we basically follow two families very closely:

The peasant family:

We meet this family during the first half of the first vision. They were living in a village near Verdun, and we first see them as they are evacuating their house. Although there are more family-members, only four are introduced to the viewer with their “Role-Names”.

The Old Peasant: The father of either “The Husband” or “The Wife”. He is the only member of this family who stays at their house, which is hit by one of the very first German shells a few days later.

During the film, he then stays near the French troops fighting in Verdun, and e.g. helps the wounded, or sells them newspapers.

The Husband: Probably the son of “The Old Peasant”. (While it is not said explicitly, it seems likely, as “The Old Peasant” is heartbroken to hear of “The Husband’s” death). He’s married to “The wife”. As a soldier, he fights in Verdun, and gets killed during the second half of the “First Vision”

The Wife: She is married to “The Husband”. Together with their daughter, she gets evacuated from the frontline at the beginning of the movie to a village which gets dangerously close to the front as the German offensive progresses.

The Little Girl: She’s the daughter of “The Husband” and “The Wife”. Although introduced as “The Little Girl”, she is probably 18 or 19 years old.

The rich family from Paris:

We meet this family during the beginning of the first vision. We get to know them while their son, on a leave from the frontline, visits them in their expensive apartment in Paris:

The Son: He volunteered for war, and seems quite enthusiastic at first. During the film, he is fighting at Verdun, and becomes more and more battle-worn. Later in the first vision, when he meets “The Little Girl”, he is re-introduced as “The young man”, a role fitting for him in that situation, as he falls in love with her at the beginning of the second vision.

The Mother: His old mother, who is very much worried about THE SON.

The Intellectual: The brother of THE SON, who seems quite sceptical about the war and stays in Paris during the first vision.

Other French characters:

The French Soldier: A soldier, who is also a friend of “The Son”. He survives the war.

The Field Chaplain: Introduced in the end of the second vision, serving in the citadel of Verdun, he is a rather minor character. At the beginning of the third vision, he sees the sun-clock with the bent handle that bears the inscription “Today me, tomorrow you!”.

German characters:

The German Soldier: We see him throughout the movie. While very enthusiastic and orderly in the beginning, he is totally exhausted in the last sequence. He survives.

The German Officer: We follow him throughout the movie, too. He is introduced when he leaves the building where the Kaiser met the “Kronprinz”, carrying a letter for “The Old Marshall”. He is very enthusiastic in the beginning, and cites Nietzsche in 00:15:42: “War and bravery have done more great things than charity.”

The Old Marshall of the Empire: He fought in the war 1870/1871, and wants to win at any cost. He has no respect for individual soldier’s lives, and calls them “Menschenmaterial” (Man-material) (01:56:19). In his review of the film, Kurt Tucholsky called him “the only figure on the German side who is a failure” [2], meaning that he thought this Marshall was more like a caricature instead of an accurate portrayal of a typical German Marshall.



The old German Marshall (left), and “The German Officer” (to the left, standing).

The unnamed, sitting German officer to the right sad by thinking about the suffering the offensive is going to bring to so many people. (00:15:17)

V. A film of much variety: How “Verdun” tells us about the historical events.

With all the fictional characters, one might wonder if this film still qualifies as a documentary. To explain why “Verdun” has to be seen as a documentary and not a fictional film, we will analyze the different means the film uses to re-tell the story, and view them with special regard to the different documentary modes which were suggested by Bill Nichols [3].

1. What does the film call itself?

On the original poster, which is reprinted in the DVD’s supplement booklet, we can see that the film was presented by “Le comptoir Francais du film documentaire” (“The French counter of documentary films”). In the first title-card right in the beginning of the film, it states that “Léon Poirier (...) shot this evocation (orig.: “évocation”) between 1927-1928”. One meaning of the word “evocation” is, according to Langenscheidts dictionary, a “life-like depiction”.

Thus, the film was presented as a documentary film, and called itself “evocation”. Although this is an uncommon term for a film, rather refers to showing things “as they were” rather than inventing them. We’ll come back to this point when we analyze the roles of the fictional characters.

2. What footage did Poirier use?

As mentioned, Léon Poirier had not much usable original WW1-footage to work with. So, as he wanted to portray the battle-scenes and the soldier’s life up-close and as accurately as possible, he had to re-enact almost all the scenes, be it fighting-scenes or others. But he did not have actors play historical figures whose faces we may know: As he mentions in his foreword to the film, “The historical figures in this film are represented through documents”. With this, he means that they are presented by (written) quotes, letters and by original archive-footage from WW1.

This decision not to have actors play historical figures is very interesting, as it doesn’t make any scene “stand-out” as fiction: When we see well-known characters, they are the real persons, not actors! There are only two instances when “real” historical characters make an appearance in re-enacted scenes of the film, and both times, their faces are obscured:

The first one is Lt. Colonel Driant, who meets with Lt. Robin, who is played by an actor. During their meeting, we see only Lt. Robin, while only Driant’s shadow and a small part of his sleeve are visible. (00:32:57). We see Driant again a bit later, after he has been killed in an attack, lying on the ground face-down, so we can identify him only by his uniform with the sleeve-markings, and by the intertitle following. (00:43:11).



Left: Lt Robin (left, greeting) meets Lt. Colonel Driant, who is only seen as a shadow.

Right: Later, we see Lt. Colonel Driant, who died in battle: But we don't get a look at his face.

An other occasion when actors play historical figures without having us see their faces is when officer cadet Buffet and sergeant Fretté, who escaped from the surrounded Fort Vaux, arrive at the front-line. Both soldiers bravely agree to return to the fort with new orders, and both have their faces in the shadow most of the time (01:22:26). We only get a few glimpses of them before and after that while they move their heads, but no recognizable close-up. As these two people are not well-known today, we have to guess that both soldiers gained some fame for their bravery in 1916. That would be the reason why Poirier doesn't show their faces, or, maybe, it was just respect of the fallen. (This is a guess, as their fates aren't shown in the movie. They might have surrendered to the German army along with the rest of the fort's crew, and thus have survived the war. An internet-search led to no results for their names.)

From this decision we can see how Poirier tried to bring great authenticity to his footage: Although most of the scenes are re-enacted, we never see an actor playing someone whose "real" face we may know from the history-books (or, at that time, the newspapers). This preserves the illusion that the scenes are "real". Poirier even went as far as having General Pétain "play himself" ten years after the war had ended [2]: In a quite unspectacular scene, we can see him descending some stairs, and get a close look at his face, after the intertitles introduced him (00:55:00).

3. How does Léon Poirier tell us about history?

As this film is a silent movie, all the information we get is from written words and pictures. The music is also cleverly done, with well-known themes like German marches, French and German Folk-songs etc., which we will describe later when discussing the “poetic” parts of the film.

For the written word, Poirier used a combination of intertitles written by him, original-quotes, original historic documents (newspapers, letters, telegrams), and fictional documents (letters). The documents were put in the movie in a very effective and immersive way: Often, we see some of the fictional protagonists reading or otherwise interacting with a document, followed by a close-up of that document. Examples are a letter by general Nivelle to all the soldiers in Verdun shortly before the German offensive has to stop: **THE OLD PEASANT** shows some soldiers who are worried this letter, which gives them new hope after they read it. (01:52:28).

Another example is **THE GERMAN SOLDIER** who’s reading a German newspaper in vision one, which we see up-close in the following shot. (00:54:33)



Example of a real historical document integrated into the story: a German soldier reading a newspaper, cuts to a close-up of a real newspaper.

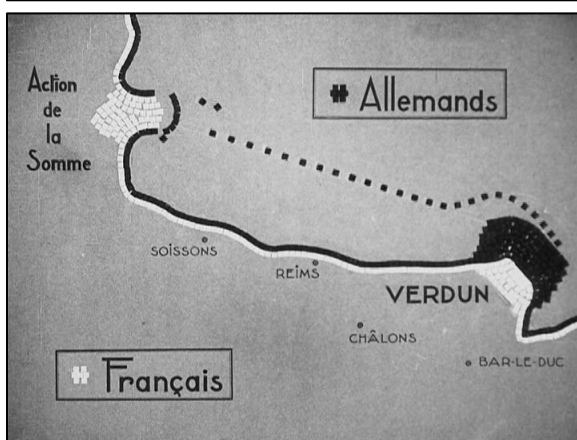
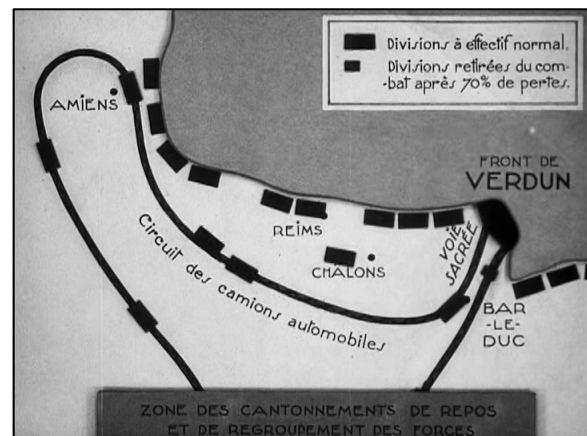
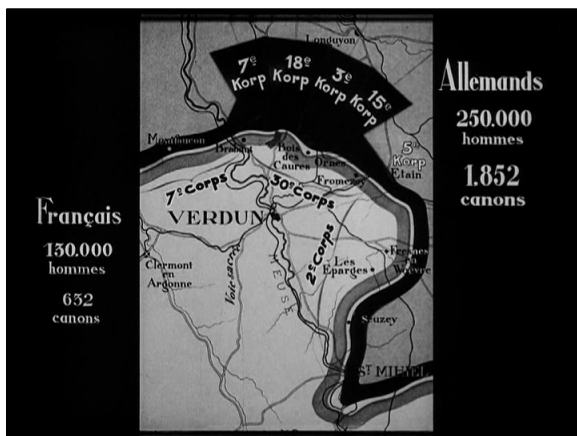
In fact, the historical documents gives the re-enacted scenes more authenticity, as the fictional characters interact with “real” documents from the period, and they link some scenes quite well: **THE YOUNG GIRL** and her mother read a “communiqué officiel” hanging in a village (00:47:08), and two minutes later, we see **THE MOTHER** and **THE INTELLECTUAL** in Paris reading the same communiqué in a newspaper.

4. What kind of documentary modes, as defined by Bill Nichols, are used in “Verdun”?

Some sequences pretty much fit Nichol’s description of the “Expository mode”: They tell “the facts” of what happened, and give us information that we, the viewer, just have to accept as “true”. Or, in Nichols words, they “recount history” ([3], p.105) In this context, the intertitles and maps / diagrams are worth a closer look, especially the style in which they are written.

After we see archive-footage of the English king and the French President inspecting the troops, we read: “(...) but the enemy was waiting nearby (...)”, and cut to a view of a German bunker which is in a position near Verdun. (01:48:47). This is a typical situation that Nichol’s refers to as “the voice of god”: The narrator is all-knowing, and editing is used to stress his arguments, in this case, that “the enemy was near”. Nichols calls this “Evidentiary editing”, which “may sacrifice spatial and temporal continuity to rope-in images from far-flung places if they help advance the argument” ([3], p. 107). An other example of an “explaining” intertitle, which, in its dramatic choice of words, could remind us of a Frank Capra-documentary from WWII would be “(...) the enemies were able to tighten their grips” (46:24).

This reminiscence to WWII Capra-documentaries is very strong in another aspect of the film: The animated diagrams and maps. They are often shown, and there are many different kinds.



The maps we see above are just some examples of the many different kinds presented in this movie. They are typical of the expository mode, as they really “recount history”, and tell us “the facts”. The animations illustrate troop-movements and frontline-locations very vividly.

In fact, diagrams are not only confined to animated maps: When we first hear about Fort Vaux in Vision two, we can see a very effective combination of drawings and maps:

THE OLD MARSHALL draws the next attack-moves on a map using a pencil. We see a close-up of the map (01:07:15), together with his hand which is drawing-in some arrows depicting the attack-strategy. We cut back to the acted scene, and see him talking to some officers: "Erst das Fort Vaux nehmen!" ("First take Fort Vaux"). This cuts to a drawn top-down interior-plan of the Fort, followed by a drawn cross-section through it. (01:07:45 & 01:07:56).

Quite often, the **intertitles** recounting historical events are brought-up within the movie, either through fictional or historical documents: When Fort Douaumont falls, we learn it from a hand-written note, read by a German soldier: "25. Februar / 7 Uhr Abends. Fort Douaumont ist gefallen!" (00:51:47). Or, when we learn in the end that Wilhelm II resigned, we see his signed resignation-document in a close-up. These parts are hard to classify: On the one hand, they "tell us" about historical events, but on the other hand, they not really qualify as a "voice-of-god" commentary: The hand-written note, although surely written by the film-maker for use in the scene and therefore transporting his "voice", it does not address us directly. In the film, it is read by the German soldier, and we, the viewers, just "get a look at it".

The signed resignation-document on the other hand is not explained by someone reading it in the story, but it "just appears" to start the ending of the film. This could be like a "voice-of-god-commentary", would it not be a real document written by the emperor, disqualifying it as the "voice of the filmmaker". In this case, the role of the director lay in the choice which historical document to show in order to tell us about history.

5. Explaining history through documents

Generally, Poirier likes using historical documents and quotes to explain the actions:

Even the decision to start the offensive is told in a real, historical letter by Wilhelm II ("Wir, Wilhelm I.R. etc... sehen das Deutsche Vaterland gezwungen, zur Offensive überzugehen.") read by THE OLD MARSHALL. In a pure expository, "voice-of-god"-way, Poirier could have done this very differently: In the film as it is, we see historical footage of Wilhelm II meeting the Kronprinz, who was the commander of the German army in Verdun, in front of a house near the frontline. Both go inside along with other German soldiers. Then Poirier cuts to a re-enacted scene, filmed on the same location: THE GERMAN OFFICER leaves the house where Wilhelm and the Kronprinz had their meeting, with a letter for THE OLD MARSHALL OF THE EMPIRE. He brings the letter to the old officer, who reads it, when we finally see Wilhelm's words.



Left: Archive-Footage: The emperor and the Kronprinz in front of a villa.

Right: Re-enacted footage: THE GERMAN OFFICER leaving the villa with a letter from the emperor.

This method of combining archive-images with re-enacted scenes is very effective. An other example: 00:53:44: A parade in front of this house, with cuts to re-enacted views from the inside.

In a pure expository mode, Poirier could have just shown the archive-shot of Wilhelm and the Kronprinz, and then put up an intertitle, e.g. "Wilhelm II decided to send out orders for an offensive". But, as this was not the case, we can see that Poirier avoided the distant, detached expository mode in the intertitles in most cases, but rather wanted to have the texts stem more "directly" from the historical events. This can also be seen in a scene near the end with THE OLD MARSHALL, who talks about mobilizing the last forces: We see him putting his fist on a letter lying on his table, followed by a transcription of the letter, which tells purely the facts about the different corps that took part in the final assault on Verdun. (01:56:40).

This tendency can be seen very clearly, as even the "explaining" intertitles, which are not part of the dialogue of the fictional characters, are often written in the present-tense, and are not at all detached. They pose rhetorical questions from the point of view of the soldiers, and often use a very colourful language. One example of a rhetorical question which is combined with a pure "expository mode-like", more detached statement, occurs in 00:39:52: "A counter-attack? With whom? The Driant-chausseurs were left to die."

Other examples of such intertitles, written in the present tense, are numerous, like at 00:29:55: "But, waves of men moving into the annihilated trenches enter into the far end of the Caures woods and take the enemy from the rear", or, near the end of the movie in Vision three, when the German offensive has stopped in viewing-range of Verdun: "The Kronprinz's attack fails at the heroic citadel." (02:13:16). This shows the impact of the choice of words: Put into past tense, this would have a slightly different, slightly more detached sound. But Poirier obviously wanted to have a more "direct" sound of the intertitles.

6. What about the “observational mode”?

One may ask, how can one think of the “observational mode” if most scenes are staged and edited with lots of explaining intertitles? Doesn’t Nichols specifically state that films done in that mode use “no supplementary music, no intertitles, no historical reenactments, no behaviour repeated for the camera”? ([3], p. 110). Didn’t this mode appear in the 60s, and isn’t it all about “Social actors engage with one another, ignoring the filmmakers”? ([3], p. 111).

As the film extensively uses what was pre-scripted, it certainly has no parts which would qualify as being done in “the observational mode”: This would require them to be un-scripted, spontaneous, etc., just like a 60s “direct cinema”-style documentary. But even though we get no “observational” sequences, some shots, seen by themselves, could stem from an observational documentary, making it interesting to look at this aspect a bit.

As WWI was over for ten years, Léon Poirier could not film “real” scenes. So, even if he wanted to simply “observe” soldiers e.g. on a leave from the front, he had to re-enact the scenes with actors (and many veterans of WWI, who participated as extras).

Let’s look at the beginning of vision two: Soldiers are sitting at a table, eating, cheering, others are sleeping in a barn, some are washing their clothes, etc. These scenes are very “profane”, and look very realistic. Re-enacted parts like this certainly have a look as if the soldiers were just “observed” during a leave from the front.

Of course, this can’t be considered really “observational”, as they were still actors receiving orders from the director, but it’s a good example of pseudo-observational authenticity which Poirier tried to achieve in some shots. But even in this scene, we have intertitles explain exactly what we are about to see before each shot: “Dormir...” (sleeping), “Se laver...” (washing) etc. → In its edited form, even this scene does not look like a scene from the “observational mode”, but rather the expository mode, telling us what we see. It could also be seen as the poetic mode, as its aim is clearly to evoke emotions with its idyllic images rather than telling us historical “facts”.

One shot reminds one of direct-cinema techniques of the 60s: When THE YOUNG MAN is carried by some medics, we follow him very closely with a hand-held camera showing his face while lying on a stretcher. (01:39:34). Although staged, this perspective gives us a feeling as if the filmmaker followed him around, filming him spontaneously without setting up a tripod.

So, because of the editing, we can certainly not say that the film uses sequences looking like being done in the observational mode. But it certainly conveys a “feeling” of being observational in many parts which don’t contain obviously staged dialogues by the main characters or are otherwise “feeling” fictional. (A typical scene which looks clearly staged and almost comical e.g. is in the beginning of the second vision, when THE YOUNG MAN jumps over a hedge by accident, landing right next to THE YOUNG GIRL)

7. What about the “poetic mode”?

Remember, the expository mode, as Nichols defines it, relies “heavily on an information logic carried by the spoken word. (...) images serve a supporting role”. This is not the case with many parts of the film, as they fit his definition of the poetic mode much better: They “convey a feeling or impression (...) rather than convey information or an argument.” ([3], p. 104, caption of photo on that page)

Let’s remember: Nichols specifically states that “Poetic documentaries (...) draw on the historical world for their raw material” ([3], p. 103). So, here we have a conflict: How can a film be considered a documentary that, especially in its “poetic” sequences, almost entirely consists of re-enacted or just “acted” footage? Of course, we could try interpreting what Nichols means by “draw on the historical world”: Does this mean the movie has to use “ideas” of the historical world, use historical events as a base to make the film, but not necessarily use “real” footage? Or doesn’t it rather mean that it uses “real” footage which documents actions as they really happened, and re-shapes it through editing into a poetic form? How else could we distinguish between a fictional feature-film with poetic sequences (e.g. “Stalker” by Andreji Tarkovsky), and a poetic documentary, wouldn’t it be for the kind of footage they use as raw material?

But in this case, even though most of the footage is staged, in my opinion we can still consider many “poetic” parts of this movie to fit the category of a “poetic mode”-documentary style.

Let’s look at some examples: Near the end of vision one (00:49:56), after THE MOTHER and THE INTELLECTUAL have read a newspaper, we see a typical poetic sequence, starting with the intertitle “What is the truth??” This sequence shows different newspapers, overlaid with writings showing some headlines, and illustrates how rumours spread: We see close-ups of a mouth whispering something in an ear, see a close-up of a mouth talking into a phone, etc. Through editing, we literally “feel” how the rumours spread, much more effective like e.g. an intertitle telling us that “rumours spread”.

Or, when in the beginning of the film, everybody is waiting for the attack, we see shots of French and German soldiers marching into positions, overlaid with the pendulum of a clock in THE OLD PEASANT’s house. (Starting: 00:21:23). It is followed by shots of a landscape (near Verdun), coupled with intertitles telling how the time passes (“19 Fevrier...”, “20 Fevrier...”). Coupled with the music, which is reduced to a monotone beat in that sequence, it creates tension, as we know that the attack is about to begin. We nervously wait for it to start, just like the soldiers did. When the German cannons start shooting, we are almost relieved that the suspense is finally over. Why this sequence can be considered “documentary”: All the footage is realistic, and could have been filmed back in WW1. (Although everything, including the marching soldiers is staged. But, as it is done so authentically, we can only see that it’s not archive-footage because THE YOUNG MAN is marching with them).

There are many other poetic parts: When the German cannons are shooting, we see a montage that looks like it could be from an Eisenstein-movie: Quickly-cut shots showing the tips of

German cannon barrels shooting, viewed from below, create a feeling that amount of shooting was excessive. (00:23:37. A similar scene, showing French cannons, starts in 02:16:00).

When the German officer phones someone to tell the news that “DOUAUMENT has fallen!” in 00:52:22, there’s a sophisticated sequence showing how news spread: We see waves “flying” through the sky, representing radio-telegraphy, see a motorcycle-messenger, then follow some telegraph-wires, see a morse-station, until we read the news in multiple newspapers. This scene reminds one of a shot in Dziga Vertov’s “The man with the movie-camera”, where we see a loud-speaker with a mouth overlaid, representing the “invisible” sound coming out of it. This idea is similar to overlaying waves on moving shots of landscapes in order to represent the “invisible” radio-telegraphy. Here, it doesn’t make a difference if the footage is “real” or acted: Again, the motorcycle-messenger and the man in the morse-station behave like they were really doing their jobs, without unusual acting that destroys the perceived authenticity. The scene “documents” how news spread at that time.

Even one of the animated maps can be seen as poetic: There are quite often shots of a relief-map with a shadow moving according to the situation at the front, representing the German-occupied areas. While of course it can be primarily seen as informational, teaching us about the frontline, it contains a symbolism, too: The German occupied parts are lying in the shadow (=darkness), and the “darkness” spreads.

8. Music comments and transports emotions

One example, where the music not only illustrates the picture or is expository (like the German anthem when we see the emperor), but rather comments it, and gives footage an emotionality: When we first see THE GERMAN SOLDIER at the beginning of vision one (00:11:11), he is saluting THE GERMAN OFFICER. As the offensive hasn’t started, we haven’t seen the horrors of war yet. But nonetheless, we hear a sad German soldier-funeral-song played by the accompanying piano: “Ich hatt’ einen Kameraden” (“I had a comrade”), already symbolizing that for the German soldiers this battle won’t end well. The song could even be a statement that for the German army, the individual lives didn’t count: THE GERMAN OFFICER, in that scene, is carrying a letter by the emperor containing the order to attack, which therefore seals the fates of lots of soldiers who will die during the offensive, explaining the sad funeral-song we hear when we see one. This view would fit with THE OLD MARSHALL later on referring to soldiers as “man-material”

9. "Verdun" as a documentary film

Why can we say that it is a documentary and not a fictional feature-film portraying fictional characters in front of a historic background?

We don't really get to know the fictional characters very much. Their backgrounds, motivations and lives remain vague and stereotype, and none of them has a role big enough to warrant being a "main character" if we saw this film being a "fictional feature-film". Indeed, although the fictional scenes are used to transport emotion, and show typical fates during the battle, they are secondary to the overall representation of the battle. In the battle-scenes, the fictional characters serve as a means to say things which show typical thoughts of soldiers at the time, but are not real quotes. Theoretically, we could cut out most of the scenes telling us about the fictional story-lines of the fictional characters and their interactions, and still have a comprehensible documentary about the battle of Verdun: We get to know so much about the tactics involved (through maps, etc.), and about the (historical!) main protagonists, that we can say the history of the battle itself must be seen as the main subject of the film.

So, although it uses mostly re-enacted footage, this film clearly qualifies as a documentary, or, to say it in a more complex way, a "documentary using some fictional characters and scenes."

10. The representation of the German side

Uncommon for its time, the film stayed very neutral, and, while concentrating on the French side, showed German soldiers and officers quite differentiated. While THE OLD MARSHALL doesn't care about individual soldier's lives, we see a German soldier being sad thinking about all suffering (00:15:17). During battle, we see Germans behaving very "correctly", and even saluting the surrendering French troops of Fort Vaux. (01:25:30). For that time, an uncommon way to portray them, as anti-German propaganda from WW1 was still not forgotten. One important message of the movie: In death everyone is equal. The starting shot shows the spirits of dead soldiers leaving a monument, and they are mixed German and French: All soldiers are victims, or, like the film says in one of its first title-cards: "To all the martyrs of man's most terrible passion: WAR!"

One of the key-sequences: THE YOUNG MAN lies near a water-hole, heavily wounded, and can't move very much. He sees a German soldier who's fatally wounded lying nearby, and hears his last words: "MAMA". Thinking he'll die too, he whispers his last words: "MAMAN". This is followed by a dream-sequence in which two "ghost-like" figures put both bodies on the same stretch, and carry them into heaven. (01:37:48).

But the film is certainly against the German emperor: When THE GERMAN SOLDIER in the end hears about the emperor's resign, we see a shot of handcuffed hands breaking their chains (02:29:29): Without the emperor, he is free! An optimistic ending for him.

11. Conclusion:

All in all, this documentary is probably one of the most interesting and authentic ones about this important battle of WWI: Done just ten years after the war had ended, with the help of lots of veterans, it gives us a very realistic look at history.

Sources:

1. Verdun, Visions d'histoire: DVD by "Absolut Medien", ISBN: 978-3-89848-864-8.
The film on the DVD was restored by the Cinémathèque de Toulouse.
2. Supplemented booklet to the DVD mentioned above, containing translations of two documentaries about the film which are on the DVD in French.
3. Bill Nichols: Introduction to Documentary.
Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001.

Remarks:

In 1931, Léon Poirier did a sound-version of this film, called "Verdun Souvenirs d'histoire". This paper is about the silent version from 1928.

There is no list telling us which parts of the film are "real" archive-shots from WWI, and which are re-enacted. The author differentiated them by observing the film's grain structure, framing and content.

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