

## Morton Marcus: 'Deep Water' one of the finest docs of recent years

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I guess I get distracted easily. This became evident other day while I was watching the spellbinding new documentary "Deep Water," and I suddenly thought about John Grierson.

Grierson was the Englishman who literarily invented the British documentary in the late 1920s, the documentary as we know it today. Not only were his early films templates for the socially relevant non-fiction film, but his methods and ideas were spread around the British Empire and universally practiced, since he was the head of several government sponsored film units. There he hired and mentored a number of young filmmakers who would become great documentarists and further spread his ideas. His influence permeated documentary filmmaking in Australia, Canada and the United States and his ideas are still taught and practiced today. He believed documentaries should promote social actions, could educate a nation, and should change men's minds. He saw documentaries as essentially journalistic, but knew they "may rise to poetry and drama."

What made me suddenly think of Grierson as I watched "Deep Water" was the notion of how proud he would be of his spiritual grandchildren, Louise Osmend and Jerry Rothwell, the film's directors, for making one of the finest documentaries of the last two decades, and one that used many of his ideas and methods. Two years ago, Osmend had made another exceptional, Grierson-esque documentary, "Blitz: London's Firestorm." Now, teamed with Rothwell, she has outdone herself and other recently praised documentaries, such as "Sicko" and "The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition."

The film starts as public spectacle with newsreels from 1967 showing England in the midst of the Beatles craze and other popular lifestyle-changing events. It tells of the new freedoms people were experiencing at the end of the '60s and the sense of challenge and change everywhere, all of which were exemplified by the crowds that welcomed Sir Francis Chichester back to England after he sailed alone around the world. However, Chichester had stopped for repairs in Australia. Using that technical point and viewing the public fervor over Chichester's homecoming, the Sunday Times decided to exploit the popularity of a long sea voyage by staging a boat race around the world not only to see who could traverse the globe alone without touching land but who could also register the fastest time.

Nine contestants began the race. All the boats were equipped with daily ship's logs, of course, but two of the participants were supplied with movie cameras and tape recorders, and they become the focus of the film, especially one, "the mystery" entry in the race, David Crowhurst. And so the stage is set for high adventure amid turbulent seas and dreams of glory, with the directors brilliantly juxtaposing the logs, the films, the audio tapes, newsreels of the time, and contemporary in-depth interviews with those closest to the two participants.

But the film takes a sudden turn from public events to private experiences, and it is immediately evident that it is not telling a tale of heroes battling the sea, but of men fighting their inner demons and becoming aware of their essential beings

"Deep Water" is a film of adventure and mystery that sounds the depths of human nature as few films have. It moves from the life and social pressures of the madding crowd to the solitary existence on the open seas for months on end, and it addresses what can happen to the human being who is placed in isolation from everything but himself. It is a great human document that is as much journalistic as it is poetic and dramatic. Grierson would have been proud.

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