

# [Tabu: must not and cannot be permitted to](https://assignbuster.com/tabu-must-not-and-cannot-be-permitted-to/)

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Tabu: a Story of the South Seas (F.

W. Murnau, 1931)The use of primary sources ishelpful for revealing how a film interpreted by different group of peoplearound the time it was released. In this essay, I am going to discuss fivedifferent sources regarding the film Tabu: a Story of the South Seas made byF. W. Murnau in 1931.

The five sources will provide different aspects and showdifferent attitudes from consumer and trade publications and also technicaljournal. My first primary source is anarticle from a movie section in The Illustrated London News released on Sep. 26, 1931, a couple of months after the premiere of Tabu. The section, named TheWorld of the Kinema was for articles about movies around the world.

The articleserved as a review in a popular publication, and was more like personal opinionby the column writer. The writer, Michael Orme stated that he “ cannot believethat after seeing Tabu the public will allow the silent picture to be sent oncemore into limbo”. The article was positive about the artistic contribution ofTabu to silent films. He suggested that “ It has come as a timely reminder of aform of Kinematic art which must not and cannot be permitted to die.” In orderto support his point, he mentioned the director, F. W. Murnau and Flaherty, whowere both famous in the movie industry.

When the production of silent films waschallenged by the new technology, silent films should find their own value thatcould not be replaced by sound films. However, the weak point of the author toadvocate the art form of silent films was that he only took the famousdirectors as evidence, but failed to construct more convincing argument withdiscussion on “ cinematography” or “ the musical setting”. After all, this reviewis still helpful in understanding how people viewed silent films under theoverwhelming tide of sound films after The Jazz Singer released in 1927. As for its discussion on theauthenticity of Tabu, the author did not struggled much with its documentaryoutdoor shooting style, and simply mentioned it as a drama.

It seems that thewriter did not want to lie much of his argument on the genre of the movie. First, he mentioned the plot as “ fragments of Polynesian folklore”, and the directorand native actors successfully gave the audience a glimpse of the fairy-taleromance of the island lovers. In this sense, Tabu was more like a reproduce ofSouth Seas folklore, and it was successful with its use of native actors. Fromhis perspective, the authenticity could do nothing to shake the artistic valueof Tabu. However, the source also has its limitation; as a personal opinion, we do not know if itwas a major argument of the time. In other words, the source lacksrepresentation of his time, though he did mention a few evidence to back hisargument. To emphasize his point on Tabu’s artistic success, he introduced thestoryline and used a series of pictures to emphasize that the natives didsuccessfully reproduced the legend of the South Seas, and that Murnau, thefamous director, was the core to make this film great. Though not stronglysupported by abundant evidences, in the short article, he had made his pointclear, and was not distracted by the largely discussed theme of itsauthenticity as being a documentary film.

The second source is a report on Tabu inthe magazine: Paramount Around the World, published in March, 1931. ParamountAround the World was a periodical trade magazine published by ParamountPictures, one of the major studios in Hollywood. Like other big movie companies, such as Fox and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Paramount Picture were verticallyintegrated – controlling the industry from production, distribution, toexhibition (Mediahistoryproject. org, 2018).

The magazine was in circulationfrom 1927-1931, and was only one of all other trade magazines published by thecompany. The magazine clearly served as a tool to build the image of Paramount Pictureespecially during the worst days of the Great Depression in 1931. Varietywrote, “ The outstanding market lesson of the year…is the exploding of theancient dictum that low-priced amusements are depression-proof.…The currentbear market has demonstrated that nothing is depression-proof, includingGovernment bonds.” (Encyclopedia. jrank. org, 2018) Stepping into the third yearof the Great Depression, even movie industry was under serious damage, andParamount was no exception, with its earnings fell from $18. 4 million to $6.

3million and then, in 1932, to a record loss of $21 million (Encyclopedia. jrank. org, 2018). When the audience had to choose cautiously which movie to watch withtheir limited spare money on entertainment, it became more critical to findaudiences’ appetite accurately. The article is written to promote thatParamount had “ acquired the distribution right of Tabu”, and that could be theturning point. It mentioned, “ the jaded appetitesof a public fed up on the synthetic marvels of the studio”, and what audiencesneeded was something different to catch their eyes. In addition, “ silentpictures with synchronized music score” could be salable in the foreign market, which is an important point during the time when overseas sales shrunk incredibly. The two reasons explained why Paramount bought the distribution right of Tabu, and this article promoted the effort exaggeratingly to convince their employeesand their investors with its prospect.

The article could be seen as anadvertisement without critical comments. The investment on the film waspromising because not only it was “ something different”, but also thedifference was made by famous directors, Murnau and Flaherty, whose names hadbeen associated with “ artistic box office success”. Moreover, it boasted thefilm with the South Seas setting, using native actors, accompanied with manyflowery descriptions not relevant to adequate analysis. Next page, even moresensational, was an advertisement surrounded by several different press’recommendations, including nine pieces of news. All of these press highlightedthe film’s fine photography and its music score by Hugo Riesenfeld with littlediscussion on its authenticity as a documentary.

Rather, the article used more termssuch as “ real romance of South Seas” and “ obtaining performances of amazingsincerity” to emphasize its authenticity but at the same time admit itsdramatically set plot. As a trade magazine published inthe interests of Paramounteers in every part of the globe, it is understandableof the keen promotion on its newly bought movie, Tabu. The source gives us asense of how Paramount deemed Murnau’s new film and the taste of audience atthat time. They wanted something different to catch their eyes; they neededquality proof with famous names, such as Murnau and Flaherty. However, as anadvertisement, the comments was exaggerated of its merits and lost itscredibility. This disadvantage can be complemented by the next source fromanother prominent trade magazine, Variety.

The third source is a short filmreview on Tabu from Mar. 25 Variety. In the contrary to Paramount around theWorld, Variety was not founded by movie production company, and did not have asmuch commercial pressure to sell certain films as Paramount Around the World. Under such circumstance, Variety is often used as credible references in filmstudies. Stripped off the advertising elements, the reviews werestraightforward to show one’s opinion, and its film reviews were more objectiveand critical. Unlike the previous two sources, thisfilm review focused more on its authenticity in a negative tone: “ more like aHollywood made love story than a South Seas romance” (pp.

17). It compared thefilm with a previously made film also in the South Seas settings – “ Moana ofthe South Seas”, and claimed that “ Moana” brought a lot more in portraitingnative life than Tabu, which used about 90% of footage on the “ romantic leads”(pp. 17).

What makes his argument more reasonable is the use of comparison andrelevant evidence, rather than solely discussion on the film itself. As for itsaesthetics, he criticized Tabu with its discontinuity, claiming that “ it wasstill doubtful in the middle”(pp. 17). However, the statement is much weaker, for the absence of supporting evidence. Also more like an personal opinion wasthe author’s praise on Hugo Riesenfeld’s music score.

To sum up, the article gavea reasonable critique on the authenticity of the film and also reflected thatthough advertisements back then mostly promoted Tabu as a romantic film, thedispute on its genre have never stopped. However, his view on aesthetics werenot as much plausible, and thus should be considered as personal opinion. The fourth source is an April, 1931publication of International Photographer, a technical journal that focused oncinematography in the interest of cameramen and other technical productioncrew.

The article about Tabu was one of the articles in the column: Looking Inon Just a Few New Ones, which introduced new films. Without the pressure ofadvertising like Paramount Pictures nor restricted knowledge by an outsider, this article, though still personal, possesses higher authenticity ofprofessional view. On the discussion on Tabu’sauthenticity, the author compared it with Flaherty’s previous work “ Nanook ofthe North”, and said it was more “ eloquent in realism than a tale of the SouthSeas” (pp.

38). The reason why it looked not that “ documentary” as “ Nanook” waspartly because its setting in tropic island rather than in the arctic north. Comparedto the last source in Variety, they both used past films as examples to supporttheir views. What was different was that in International Photographer, itseems to stand on a more empathetic aspect, saying the reason why Tabu could notbe filmed realistic enough was partly due to the story setting.

Nevertheless, it did not consider other South Seas films, like Moana, mentioned in the thirdsource. On the side of Tabu’s aesthetical performance, he complimented itswell-organized picture by Murnau and Flaherty by having a cast of nativeinexperienced actors. Overall, his tone was positive rather than critical. Hestill gave his praise on Murnau’s novelty and his skills. Lastly, he alsomentioned the musical setting, and considered it as “ what make up for theabsence of the sound truck” (pp. 38).

As a technical magazine, we can infer thatthe industry was no longer in the age of silent films with the term “ make upfor”, indicating if it were not for the musical score, Tabu would not be asuccess only beautifully photographed. This article and the last one of Varietyare great sources to explore the discussion on documentary. Back in 1930s, itwas still a new genre with too few productions to construct its definition, soit is important to utilize primary resources to understand the divergence ofthe time. Yet, these short columns could only provide limited credibility dueto its length and the lack of evidence they used to support their points.

The last source is a report of theleading Hollywood fan magazine of the 1920s and 1930s – Photoplay. With itslarge readership and its essence of being a fan magazine, Photoplay played animportant promotional role of Hollywood industry at the same time remainedindependent and critical. Photoplay often reported stories of movie stars, directors into their personal lives, and this source is a page introducingMurnau, who died shockingly in an automobile accident before the premiere ofTabu at the Central Park. Similar to other general publications and ad-orientedarticles, it did not refer to its documentary authenticity much. Rather, itlaid more emphasis on the effort Murnau and Flaherty spent on the filming in abeautiful but remote island. It wrote that the director, “ satiated with theartificiality of Hollywood”, sailed away for the South Seas (pp. 27). It saidthe intention of Murnau was for the reality, but did not comment on the filmcame out as a result of their hard work on the remote island of Bora Bora.

Theme focused more was Murnau, Flaherty, and Dr. Hugo Reisenfeld, which was the highlight of all these primary sources. We can infer that thepopularity of the production team was important for the public, and was widelyused to attract audience. As a new genre of films, which the public still notfamiliar with, famous directors became a kind of quality guarantee. As a fanmagazine, the terms it used is distinct from other trade magazine with descriptionssuch as “ genius”, “ added immeasurable to the value of their picture”, and “ seeTabu, or never again complain about screen clap-trap” (pp. 27). These reflectsits essence of a fan magazine, which we should consider the credibility and theproportion of facts. At the same time, Photoplay still give us a window intohow the public receive film news.

In conclusion, advertisements andconsumer publications have fewer discussions on genre as documentary. Thepressure of the box office and the time during the Great Depression led to theresult that the information the audience get was more of excitements, such asthe exotic dances and the romantic drama of the lovers. In the contrary, sourcesfrom trading magazine show the opposite, touching both topics aroundauthenticity and aesthetics. Even when the term “ docu-fiction” had not beeninvented, and the concept of documentary was still new, Tabu still aroused somediscussions on its authenticity as being a documentary.

From different aspects, using different evidences, they came into totally different tone. Though mostlythe public receive it as a romantic drama filmed outdoor using native actors, basically what audience know : it’s a drama Their themes and their aesthetics. What in common of all five sources selected in this essay is that no matter itwas an advertisement, a news article, or a film review, they all stressed a loton Murnau, Flaherty, and Dr. Hugo Reisenfeld. BibliographyEncyclopedia. jrank.

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