

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 is helpful for revealing how a film interpreted by different group of people around the time it was released. In this essay, I am going to discuss five different sources regarding the film Tabu: a Story of the South Seas made by F. W. Murnau in 1931.

The five sources will provide different aspects and show different attitudes from consumer and trade publications and also technical journal. My first primary source is an article 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 The World of the Kinema was for articles about movies around the world.

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

When the production of silent films was challenged by the new technology, silent films should find their own value that could not be replaced by sound films. However, the weak point of the author to advocate the art form of silent films was that he only took the famous directors as evidence, but failed to construct more convincing argument with discussion on “cinematography”

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or “ the musical setting”. After all, this review is still helpful in understanding how people viewed silent films under the overwhelming tide of sound films after *The Jazz Singer* released in 1927. As for its discussion on the authenticity of *Tabu*, the author did not struggle much with its documentary outdoor shooting style, and simply mentioned it as a drama.

It seems that the writer did not want to tie much of his argument on the genre of the movie. First, he mentioned the plot as “ fragments of Polynesian folklore”, and the director and native actors successfully gave the audience a glimpse of the fairy-tale romance of the island lovers. In this sense, *Tabu* was more like a reproduction of South Seas folklore, and it was successful with its use of native actors. From his perspective, the authenticity could do nothing to shake the artistic value of *Tabu*. However, the source also has its limitation; as a personal opinion, we do not know if it was a major argument of the time. In other words, the source lacks representation of his time, though he did mention a few evidence to back his argument. To emphasize his point on *Tabu*’s artistic success, he introduced the storyline and used a series of pictures to emphasize that the natives did successfully reproduce the legend of the South Seas, and that Murnau, the famous director, was the core to make this film great. Though not strongly supported by abundant evidences, in the short article, he had made his point clear, and was not distracted by the largely discussed theme of its authenticity as being a documentary film.

The second source is a report on *Tabu* in the magazine: *Paramount Around the World*, published in March, 1931. *Paramount Around the World* was a

periodical trade magazine published by Paramount Pictures, one of the major studios in Hollywood. Like other big movie companies, such as Fox and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Paramount Picture were vertically integrated – controlling the industry from production, distribution, to exhibition (Mediahistoryproject. org, 2018).

The magazine was in circulation from 1927-1931, and was only one of all other trade magazines published by the company. The magazine clearly served as a tool to build the image of Paramount Pictures especially during the worst days of the Great Depression in 1931. Variety wrote, “ The outstanding market lesson of the year...is the exploding of the ancient dictum that low-priced amusements are depression-proof....The current bear market has demonstrated that nothing is depression-proof, including Government bonds.” (Encyclopedia. jrunk. org, 2018) Stepping into the third year of the Great Depression, even movie industry was under serious damage, and Paramount 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. jrunk. org, 2018). When the audience had to choose cautiously which movie to watch with their limited spare money on entertainment, it became more critical to find audiences’ appetite accurately. The article is written to promote that Paramount had “ acquired the distribution right of Tabu”, and that could be the turning point. It mentioned, “ the jaded appetites of a public fed up on the synthetic marvels of the studio”, and what audiences needed was something different to catch their eyes. In addition, “ silent pictures 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 employees and their investors with its prospect.

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

Rather, the article used more terms such as “ real romance of South Seas” and “ obtaining performances of amazing sincerity” to emphasize its authenticity but at the same time admit its dramatically set plot. As a trade magazine published in the interests of Paramounters in every part of the globe, it is understandable of the keen promotion on its newly bought movie, Tabu. The source gives us a sense of how Paramount deemed Murnau’s new film and the taste of audience at that time. They wanted something different to catch their eyes; they needed quality proof with famous names, such as

Murnau and Flaherty. However, as an advertisement, the comments were exaggerated of its merits and lost its credibility. This disadvantage can be complemented by the next source from another prominent trade magazine, Variety.

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

17). It compared the film with a previously made film also in the South Seas settings – "Moana of the South Seas", and claimed that "Moana" brought a lot more in portraying native 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 and relevant evidence, rather than solely discussion on the film itself. As for its aesthetics, he criticized Tabu with its discontinuity, claiming that "it was still doubtful in the middle" (pp. 17). However, the statement is much weaker, for the absence of supporting evidence. Also more like a personal opinion was the author's praise on Hugo Riesenfeld's music score.

To sum up, the article gave a reasonable critique on the authenticity of the film and also reflected that although advertisements back then mostly promoted Tabu as a romantic film, the dispute on its genre have never stopped. However, his view on aesthetics were not as much plausible, and thus should be considered as personal opinion. The fourth source is an April, 1931 publication of *International Photographer*, a technical journal that focused on cinematography in the interest of cameramen and other technical production crew.

The article about Tabu was one of the articles in the column: *Looking In on Just a Few New Ones*, which introduced new films. Without the pressure of advertising like Paramount Pictures nor restricted knowledge by an outsider, this article, though still personal, possesses higher authenticity of professional view. On the discussion on Tabu's authenticity, the author compared it with Flaherty's previous work "Nanook of the North", and said it was more "eloquent in realism than a tale of the South Seas" (pp.

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

Nevertheless, it did not consider other South Seas films, like *Moana*, mentioned in the third source. On the side of Tabu's aesthetical performance,

he complimented its well-organized picture by Murnau and Flaherty by having a cast of native inexperienced actors. Overall, his tone was positive rather than critical. He still gave his praise on Murnau's novelty and his skills. Lastly, he also mentioned the musical setting, and considered it as "what make up for the absence of the sound track" (pp. 38).

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

The last source is a report of the leading Hollywood fan magazine of the 1920s and 1930s – Photoplay. With its large readership and its essence of being a fan magazine, Photoplay played an important promotional role of Hollywood industry at the same time remained independent and critical. Photoplay often reported stories of movie stars, directors into their personal lives, and this source is a page introducing Murnau, who died shockingly in an automobile accident before the premiere of Tabu at the Central Park. Similar to other general publications and ad-oriented articles, it did not refer to its documentary authenticity much. Rather, it laid more emphasis on the effort Murnau and Flaherty spent on the filming in a beautiful but remote island. It

wrote that the director, “satiated with the artificiality of Hollywood”, sailed away for the South Seas (pp. 27). It said the intention of Murnau was for the reality, but did not comment on the film came 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 the popularity of the production team was important for the public, and was widely used to attract audience. As a new genre of films, which the public still not familiar with, famous directors became a kind of quality guarantee. As a fan magazine, the terms it used is distinct from other trade magazine with descriptions such as “genius”, “added immeasurable to the value of their picture”, and “see Tabu, or never again complain about screen clap-trap” (pp. 27). These reflect its essence of a fan magazine, which we should consider the credibility and the proportion of facts. At the same time, Photoplay still give us a window into how the public receive film news.

In conclusion, advertisements and consumer publications have fewer discussions on genre as documentary. The pressure of the box office and the time during the Great Depression led to the result that the information the audience get was more of excitements, such as the exotic dances and the romantic drama of the lovers. In the contrary, sources from trading magazine show the opposite, touching both topics around authenticity and aesthetics. Even when the term “docu-fiction” had not been invented, and the concept of documentary was still new, Tabu still aroused some discussions on its authenticity as being a documentary.

From different aspects, using different evidences, they came into totally different tone. Though mostly the 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 it was an advertisement, a news article, or a film review, they all stressed a lot on Murnau, Flaherty, and Dr. Hugo Reisenfeld. Bibliography Encyclopedia. jrank.

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