

Alison J. Murray Levine

# Framing the Nation

Documentary Film in Interwar France

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NEW YORK • LONDON

**The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc**  
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

**The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd**  
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

[www.continuumbooks.com](http://www.continuumbooks.com)

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-0-8264-3187-5

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the United States of America

*For Bernard Mayes*

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# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>  | ix  |
| <i>List of Illustrations</i>  | xi  |
| Chapter 1: Introduction   | 1   |
| Chapter 2: Truth Peddling: Documentary Film in Interwar France                                      | 12  |
| Chapter 3: The Revolt of the Beets: Educational Film in Rural France                                | 36  |
| Chapter 4: “Making the Fiction of the Empire a Reality”:<br>Educational Film in the French Colonies | 56  |
| Chapter 5: “Mysterious and Subtle Cheesemaking”:<br>Filming the French Regions                      | 89  |
| Chapter 6: “Carcasses of Manioc-Eaters”: Filming Colonial France                                    | 115 |
| Chapter 7: Recycling Rural Images: The Vichy Propaganda Machine                                     | 150 |
| <i>Notes</i>  | 165 |
| <i>Bibliography</i>   | 203 |
| <i>Index</i>  | 215 |
| <i>Film Index</i>   | 221 |



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# Acknowledgments

Many people have helped with this project at various stages. All of them deserve my thanks. Bernard Mayes, to whom this book is dedicated, sparked my interest in documentary film, thus beginning a long journey. He continues to be a source of inspiration.

Paul Forrest, Hugues LeChevrel, Mary Kay Sizemore and Tim Ivy taught me everything I know about scripting, shooting, and editing. Abderrahmane Sissako liked the result.

Many archivists in France facilitated access to documents and films: Michelle Aubert, Eric Le Roy, and Daniel Courbet at the Archives françaises du film, Christiane Husson and Eric Perrot at the Ministère de l'Agriculture, Yves Gaulupeau at the Musée National de l'Éducation, Jean-Denys Devauges at the Musée national de la voiture et du tourisme, Monsieur le Capitaine de Vaisseau Jannot at the Établissement cinématographique et photographique des armées, the staff at the Centre des archives d'outremer, the Musée des arts africains et océaniens, the Gaumont-Pathé Archives, and the Centre national de documentation pédagogique. Véronique Mourlan and Lilliane Jolivet kindly gave permission to reproduce images from their ancestors' films. The Mary Isabel Sibley foundation funded my postdoctoral research.

Alice Conklin, Herman Lebovics, Deborah Hurtt, Harry Gamble, David Rubin, Marva Barnett, A. James Arnold, Claire Lyu, and John Lyons have provided careful reading and advice. In France, Christophe Prochasson and Christian Baudelot have been true mentors. Other scholars at the École Normale Supérieure and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences sociales have been very helpful, including Benoît de l'Estoile, Gérard Noiriel, Gilles Pécout, Pierre Laborie, Jacques Revel, François Weil, Marc Ferro, Marc Piault, André Burguière, Eric Fassin, and Hervé Le Bras. Thanks, also, to Raymond Borde and Henri Bousquet.

Through a Professors as Writers grant, University of Virginia's Teaching Resource Center put me in touch with my wonderful editor, Jane Barnes. She not only "got it," but got through every page with sharp eyes and good humor. Thanks to David Barker and the whole team at Continuum. Janet Horne and Roland Simon have provided more support and encouragement than they will ever know.

My team—Jim and Bess Murray, Alexandra Duckworth, Celia Belton, Wendy Caldwell, Paulette Morhange, and Guy Bastidon—created space for this to happen. Sophia kept me laughing. Without Stephen, none of this would have been possible.

## List of Illustrations

- Figure 2.1** Sun-drenched images of Burgundian rural life permeate the Ministry of Education’s “film to the glory of the school,” *Jeannette Bourgogne* (Jean Gourget, 1938). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 25
- Figure 3.1** A map in *La bonne méthode* (*The Correct Method*, Jean Benoit-Lévy, 1926) shows France, “a great agricultural country,” with small harvests per acre as compared to those of Belgium and Germany. Courtesy Archives françaises du film. Reproduced with permission from Liliane Jolivet. 43
- Figure 3.2** In Jean Benoit-Lévy’s *La bonne méthode* (*The Correct Method*, 1926) the goddess Ceres appears to Magloire in a dream and takes him for a ride in her “chariot of agricultural progress.” Courtesy Archives françaises du film. Reproduced with permission from Liliane Jolivet. 44
- Figure 3.3** In *La révolte des betteraves* (*The Revolt of the Beets*, Albert Mourlan, 1925), the hungry beets revolt and march on the farmer’s house, demanding fertilizer. Courtesy Archives françaises du film. Reproduced with permission from Véronique Mourlan. 45
- Figure 3.4** In *La tuberculose menace tout le monde* (*Tuberculosis Threatens Everyone*, Robert Lortac, 1917), Death, a walking skeleton, knocks down unhealthy city dwellers (Coupeau the drunkard, Jenny who works too hard, Fernand the partier) in the “Massacre Game” at the fair. Courtesy Gaumont-Pathé archives. 47
- Figure 3.5** “If I had only known!” A distraught mother who has not followed the proper rules for infant care, shown in *La future maman* (*The Future Mommy*, Jean Benoit-Lévy, 1925). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. Reproduced with permission from Liliane Jolivet. 48
- Figure 4.1** A street scene in Hanoi, shown in *Un coup d’œil sur l’Indochine française* (*French Indochina at a Glance*, Pathé Revue, 1930). Courtesy Gaumont-Pathé archives. 67

- Figure 4.2** “From the center of France, rays spread out in all directions. [. . .] a visible magnetic current pulses from the center out towards the edges. Suddenly, one of the rays touches the dark circle (North Africa): it blows apart, pierced from the North, expands and fades to a shot of real life in North Africa.” Scene from the treatment for a film on French colonization of North Africa, one of the private proposals sent to the Haut comité méditerranéen. (J. de Shelley, 1937). AN, F60 711. 80
- Figure 4.3** A French doctor indicates the prescribed treatment for sleeping sickness by painting symbols in white letters on the patient’s chest. This image appears in *La maladie du sommeil* (*Sleeping Sickness*, 1929) and *Le réveil d’une race* (*The Awakening of a Race*, Alfred Chaumel, 1930). Courtesy Gaumont-Pathé archives. 84
- Figure 4.4** Mohamed, the protagonist of *Conte de la mille et deuxième nuit* (*Tale of the One-Thousand and Second Night*, Jean Benoit-Lévy, 1929), before he gets sick. Courtesy Archives françaises du film. Reproduced with permission from Liliane Jolivet and Véronique Murlan. 85
- Figure 5.1** “Driving this machine is a sport,” boasts the narrator of *Au service de la terre* (*In the Service of the Earth*, J.C. Bernard, 1933). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 100
- Figure 5.2** A fleet of tractors—“The Army of Peace”—appears on the horizon in J.C. Bernard’s *Au service de la terre* (*In the Service of the Earth*, 1933). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 101
- Figure 5.3** “The city of Carcassonne [. . .] does not have, and does not want to have, the beauty of a dead thing” in *Aude, belle inconnue* (*Aude, Beautiful Stranger*, J.K. Raymond-Millet, 1937). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 109
- Figure 5.4** “Age-old tradition” mixes with “industrial progress” in J.C. Bernard’s *Le Rouergue* (1937). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 110
- Figure 5.5** In Roquefort, workers engage in “mysterious and subtle cheesemaking,” a practice that blends nature, tradition, and mechanization. *Le Rouergue* (J.C. Bernard, 1937). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 112

- Figure 6.1** A poster advertising the *Cinéma colonial du Petit Journal* in French (Summer 1923). CAOM, AGEFOM 845/2262. 116
- Figure 6.2** Close-ups of human details in René Bugniet's *Cameroun: Bamouns et Bamilekés* (Cameroon: Bamuns and Bamilekes, ca. 1930). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 130
- Figure 6.3** The trope of *rayonnement* was often depicted as rays of light emanating from France across the world, as it is here in *La France est un empire* (France is an Empire, Jean d'Agraves, 1939). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 138
- Figure 6.4** A French teacher instructs an African student on how to make an African mask in *La France est un empire* (France is an Empire, Jean d'Agraves, 1939). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 139
- Figure 6.5** "France is our fatherland"—the last image of *La France est un empire* (France is an Empire, Jean d'Agraves, 1939). Courtesy Archives françaises du film. 140

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction

In 1901, Charles Pathé wrote prophetically that cinema would be “the theater, the newspaper, and the school of tomorrow.”<sup>1</sup> By the 1920s, the theater, the newspaper, and the school each had its reflection in one of three major cinematic forms: the entertainment film, the newsreel, and the documentary. It was during the interwar years that film would undergo a revolutionary transformation; no longer a novelty entertainment, it would become the powerful force of mass culture and communication that we know it to be today. With the huge increase in film audiences during this period, cinema would come to play an extraordinary role in shaping public taste and opinion.<sup>2</sup> If film has, as Antoine De Baecque has written, shaped “the mental universe of the twentieth century,” it was during the interwar years that the shaping process began.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, cinema was part of a culture that increasingly demanded representations of the real.<sup>4</sup> But as film grew more and more popular, its very realism attracted a certain suspicion. Its appeal to mass audiences was at once powerful and dangerous. Conversations about its potential to encourage violence, delinquency, or immoral sexual behavior are strikingly reminiscent of twenty-first century discussions of the effects of video games on young people. In the 1920s, some observers thought that the only antidote to the nefarious effects of commercial cinema was film itself—a different kind of film that would tell the truth. In a matter of years, this truth-telling cinema already had its own name: documentary film. Its advocates saw it as a potentially revolutionary medium because it could reach mass audiences with true stories. With the right people behind the camera, these true stories could serve as agents of popular education, moral regeneration, and the correction of social evils.

After the First World War, enthusiasm for the social applications of documentary film captivated filmmakers from the Soviet Union to the United States. In the Soviet Union, Dziga Vertov used his background in



newsreel compilation to create the documentary magazine entitled *Kino-Pravda (Film Truth)*.<sup>5</sup> He exploited the medium's visionary power to portray the birth of a new society. His work inspired other Soviet filmmakers such as Esfir Shub, Victor Turin, and Alexander Medvedkin.<sup>6</sup> Their careers and contributions to the development of the medium are well documented, as are the experiments in the use of documentary film to promote fascist values in 1930s Germany and Italy. The work of Leni Riefenstahl stands out here as legendary.<sup>7</sup> So, also, is the rise in Great Britain of John Grierson, who is often credited as the inventor of the term "documentary" in English, and who also put its truth telling at the service of social advocacy, beginning with the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit.<sup>8</sup>

Most film historians would have us believe that despite Auguste and Louis Lumière's invention of the *cinématographe*, the overall contribution of France to the development of documentary film was negligible prior to the Second World War. With a few exceptions, French documentaries of the interwar period are dismissed as not "good" enough esthetically, not polemical enough to merit the label "Griersonian," and not politically sophisticated enough to interest a modern viewer.<sup>9</sup> In his book on Vichy documentaries, *Screening Reality*, Steve Wharton manages to dismiss interwar documentaries in one sentence, summing up their role as that of a "lyrical chronicler."<sup>10</sup> Guy Gauthier finds the documentaries of the period facile, boring, and full of platitudes; they merit no substantive coverage in his 2002 survey book, *Un siècle de documentaires français*.<sup>11</sup> He criticizes their conformism, as does Thomas August, who briefly mentions the "healthy conservatism" of colonial documentaries prior to 1939 in his book, *The Selling of the Empire*.<sup>12</sup> After acknowledging France as one of the countries in which "documentary proper" originated, Jack Ellis and Betsy McLane exclude it from their 2005 survey, *A New History of Documentary Film*, presumably because it is not *social* enough in the Griersonian sense.<sup>13</sup>

One of the arguments of this book is that the ordinary educational documentaries produced in France during the interwar years are in fact of great interest. To an astonishing degree, these interwar films, scattered around in diverse locations, are virtually ignored.<sup>14</sup> Within the cool walls of the French national film archives, a military fortress west of Paris, canister upon canister of documentaries line the shelves. These reels might not provide the palpitations an audience might have felt in the steamy presence of *L'Atlantide*, but they have a stirring effect all their own. As the first few words of the self-assured "voice of God" narration

ring out—that very declamatory style that avant-garde documentarists after the war despised—the viewer experiences the strange sensation of being directly addressed by the voice of the 1920s or 1930s French state. Jean-Michel Frodon’s characterization of cinema as a “national projection” can be taken almost literally.<sup>15</sup> Suddenly, what might have appeared to be a dreary litany of the progress of electrification of the French countryside snaps into focus as an early example of the mobilization of film in the service of shaping public opinion.

And that is precisely what French documentary filmmakers were trying to do in the interwar years. It was a watershed moment for France. The First World War had ravaged the nation, destroyed nearly five million acres of farmland, killed 1.4 million Frenchmen and wounded three million more. A series of unstable and ineffectual governments failed to respond effectively to a depression that arrived later but lasted longer in France than elsewhere. A brief flowering of left-wing optimism accompanied the election of the Popular Front government in 1936 that was short-lived and left most of its promises unfulfilled. After a short war, 1940 would herald a voluntary plunge into right-wing dictatorship, collaboration with Germany, and four years of German occupation.

Alongside these political and economic events, France experienced an important social transformation as well. It was no longer the rural nation it had once been; a decades-long rural exodus led to the tipping point in 1931, when the urban population surpassed the rural population.<sup>16</sup> The year 1931 would also see an International Colonial Exhibition in Paris, a symbolic marker of the apogee of French colonial domination, where the “greater France” of 100 million people that stretched from French Polynesia through the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia was on display. Herman Lebovics characterizes the social transformations of the early twentieth century as a cultural “rite of passage” for a young republic, newly consolidated politically, that struggled to define its social and cultural dimensions.<sup>17</sup> The endeavor to define True France, which for Lebovics was primarily a conservative one, had two principal strands: first, debates about perceived tensions between modernization and tradition; and second, the question of social and cultural diversity, or, more simply put, who was and who should be considered French.

These debates will seem familiar to contemporary readers with an interest in France. In the 2007 French presidential election, the age-worn concept of national identity was dusted off, burnished to a warm luster, and brought out as a fresh new theme in the campaigns of all the leading candidates. To some, it seemed vaguely quaint and anachronistic in this

post-national age of European unification to hear candidates reach into the archive of myths about France and Frenchness to dress up their platforms. For left-wing observers, it was a nightmare to see an issue associated with Jean-Marie Le Pen's extreme right National Front party slide surreptitiously into the center. This was an ironic triumph for a politician who had defeated the Socialist candidate in the first round of the 2002 election, sending an electric shock of fear through the nation. Although he fared miserably in 2007, Le Pen's central issue—defining the Frenchness of France—had become coveted terrain for which all the candidates, even the Socialist Ségolène Royal, had to scramble.<sup>18</sup> After his victory, Nicolas Sarkozy enshrined the concept in his administration, which included a new Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development.

Although it would be unwise, as Herrick Chapman reminds us, to apply contemporary concepts of identity politics to historical investigation, it is nonetheless intriguing to observe that in times of crisis, the identity of France continues to resurface as a topic of debate across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.<sup>19</sup> But have attempts to define national identity always been conservatively inflected? Has the idea of a single, centralized Frenchness to which others must assimilate been the dominant cultural model from the early Third Republic, as Eugen Weber would suggest? If so, how can one explain the origins of such laws as the *Appellation d'origine contrôlée* that value local specificity and bolster much of the late twentieth-century French tourist industry? How did the French provinces and the colonies figure into the equation of who was more or less French? Can we learn anything about contemporary responses to questions of integration and assimilation, about French concepts of alterity and difference, from cultural projects, whether successful or not, earlier in the century? These are some of the questions that started me on this investigation of "true" stories told in early film.

Documentary film is a particularly useful historical source because of its "claim to the real"—the assertion of the filmmaker that he is making a good-faith attempt to create true statements about the real world. As Bill Nichols has argued, documentary film is a kind of "rhetorical fiction," in which "the world as we see it through a documentary window is heightened, telescoped, dramatized, reconstructed, fetishized, miniaturized, or otherwise modified"<sup>20</sup> in the service of a rhetorical structure, usually an argument.<sup>21</sup> However, as a genre, documentary film continues to command respect as a vehicle of information and education, because of a cultural code that defines it as the opposite of fiction.<sup>22</sup> Documentaries,

as both Nichols and Alan Renov have pointed out, claim to speak about *the* world outside the frame (the one in which we live, past or present), whereas fiction alludes to *a* world (one in which we may imagine living).<sup>23</sup> They peddle truths, winning the trust of their audiences through a relationship with other nonfictional systems Nichols calls “discourses of sobriety” (science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion).<sup>24</sup> Because of this relationship, documentary film can provide the historian with crucial insights into the kinds of “true” stories being told in the guise of “education” at a particular historical moment, as well as into the kinds of audiences who were expected to believe them. Stated even more simply, in the words of Marc Ferro, “the film is History.”<sup>25</sup>

This book brings to light documentary films and film outreach programs developed in France during the interwar years that provide a valuable window onto crucial national debates of the period. In the years following the First World War and throughout the period, many governmental agencies and private organizations in France viewed documentary film as a socially “useful” art form and invested in film projects they thought would help deliver their messages to the public. At the core of this study are films and programs that sought to shore up the image of a faltering nation by pulling the French regions and the colonies into a broader national narrative. No longer dismissed as cultural backwaters in need of reform, these rural areas of metropolitan and overseas France were now seen as important sources of national regeneration. Both public and private organizations sought to use film to educate rural peoples about the French nation and to educate city dwellers about the importance of the regions and the colonies to that nation. They firmly believed that film could bridge the cultural divide between urban and rural France, as well as between *métropole* and colony. They believed that images could shape perceptions of group belonging, and that they could help the diverse peoples of France to recognize themselves and each other—whether Breton, Senegalese, or “Indochinese”—as uniquely French.<sup>26</sup> The films they made tell a story about the role film played in the negotiation of a new symbolic relationship between center and periphery within the framework of the French nation. In short, it is a story of reframing the nation.

In telling this story, I have attempted to bridge several traditional methodological divides. The first is one of divergent models of national identity. Some scholars, following the lead of Eugen Weber, favor a model of a centralized “modern” national identity gradually moving outward to replace “traditional” regional cultures over the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries. Others argue for more autonomy on the periphery in negotiating and responding to the modern republican state.<sup>27</sup> While many of my film sources attempt to portray a unified and centralized view of the nation, this book parses the complex negotiations with colony and region that were integral to such a portrayal. Rather than suggesting that these categories should be seen in opposition to one another, I will argue that there was an effort in the interwar period to dissolve dichotomies between *nation* and *region*, *nation* and *colony*, *traditional* and *modern*, *authentic* and *progressive*. A portrait emerges of these categories as “fluid ideological construction[s],” constantly in process and given different meanings in different contexts.<sup>28</sup> These labels were used, as Herrick Chapman writes, “as much for their rhetorical charge as for their descriptive accuracy.”<sup>29</sup>

The second divide I attempt to break down is that between rural and colonial studies, which have typically been quite separate fields of inquiry for contemporary scholars. Historians of colonial France have made considerable efforts in recent years to study colonial history not as a separate field, but within the broader context of French history, research that has helped to situate colonial ideology within French republicanism as well as to broaden our understanding of the “culture of colonialism.”<sup>30</sup> This scholarship has not, by and large, led to much comparative work on the regions and the colonies, despite the natural link between the two in the early twentieth century as “traditional societies” became objects of study by the developing sciences of ethnology and folklore.<sup>31</sup> Nor have these links been reflected in the field of visual culture, which has attracted considerable attention from historians of empire, and, to a lesser extent, historians of rural and regional France.<sup>32</sup> This book attends to ideological and representational links between visual artifacts circulating in the “center” (Paris or urban France) and those specifically designed for distribution in rural regions or the colonies.<sup>33</sup> Reading the rural and colonial stories in parallel reveals the extent to which understandings of rural and colonial France informed and shaped one another.

A final methodological divide I have attempted to bridge is that between film history and social/cultural history. Social and cultural historians, as Robert Sklar has argued, treat moviegoing as primarily “the social interaction of persons within a theater space” and neglect the esthetic, ideological, and psychological dimensions of the movies themselves.<sup>34</sup> Film historians, on the other hand, have tended to pay little attention to the lived experiences of the viewing public.<sup>35</sup> In working with a broad range of film and non-film sources, I have attempted to take a more comprehensive approach, integrating close film analysis with

a broader narrative of social and cultural history as well of production goals and audience reception.<sup>36</sup> This is, I believe, what Marc Ferro meant when he described an approach to film history in which “criticism is not limited to the film, but integrates it into the world that surrounds it, with which it necessarily communicates.”<sup>37</sup> The producers of documentary films, like the state officials involved in financing or approving them, were keenly interested in their audiences.<sup>38</sup> Films produced for French farmers were very different from the ones that put those farmers on display for urban audiences. The same is true of the colonies. I treat films not only as vehicles for discourse, but also as material objects that are subject to “consumption” in specific settings, mining them for information about their ideological content and their cultural context.<sup>39</sup>

The films in this book are distinctly unremarkable. They are not the works of well-known artists who had relationships with modernists working in other media, such as Jean Epstein, Jean Painlevé, Jean Vigo, or Fernand Léger.<sup>40</sup> Rather, they are the ordinary films that occupied the place for the documentary on cinema programs of the time.<sup>41</sup> They are the lackluster films that one journalist praised ecstatically because if you arrived late to the movies, you would only have missed the documentary.<sup>42</sup> People rarely remembered them by title. And yet, they were ubiquitous. They circulated widely in cinemas, but also far beyond traditional movie houses, to village squares, cafés, town halls, and schoolhouses in parts of the country that had no other access to cinema. Like Romy Golan, who looks beyond the narrative of high modernism towards more “average,” “middle-of-the-road” sources for her study of interwar art and politics, I find these standard, uncontroversial films to be good indicators of the safe waters of consensus.<sup>43</sup> Most of them were either funded by various organisms of the French state or at least subject to state censorship, and they therefore represented attempts to inform and influence a broad general audience without raising eyebrows. Their rhetoric did not change significantly as governments shifted from Left to Right. They fell into categories and repeated common tropes, arguments, and themes. In this uncontroversial center, Golan finds “the ideological context of the times.” Jack Ellis has advanced a similar explanation for the success of Grierson in Britain, arguing that Grierson’s work “stay[ed] within what the two major political parties, Conservative and Labour, might agree on.”<sup>44</sup> This conformism may explain why scholars have tended to dismiss them. I argue that from “conformist” films, recurring patterns of representation emerge, and that these patterns

show ideas that were broadly shared among commissioning agencies, filmmakers, and audiences.

Two central stories emerge from the “average” documentaries produced for consumption in interwar France. The first is one of an ongoing debate over the importance of tradition and progress in the postwar nation. The second is one of a struggle to define the place of diverse cultures within that nation. These issues were intertwined, and both played a key role in refiguring the national imagination after the cataclysm. These questions often center on the figures of the provinces or the colonies, both potential reserves of “traditional” values. Unlike Herman Lebovics, I do not propose that images of rural and colonial France were drawn upon primarily by conservatives to shore up a reactionary vision of True France. Rather, the argument in this book is closer to that of Shanny Peer’s in *France on Display* or Romy Golan’s in *Art and Politics in France between the Wars*, articulating a vision of the French nation in documentary film that drew heavily on images of tradition in harmony with modernization and progress. This France, which was promoted by governments on both the Left and the Right, relies for its strength on a broad collection of diverse regional and colonial cultures living together under the same flag. Rural and colonial France emerge as vital elements of the postwar nation. Rather than threatening progress, tradition emerges as its necessary ally, and France enhances its national image by portraying itself as a nation that values tradition.

Documentary cinema was the ideal handmaiden to this project in the interwar years, as it was both preservationist and progressivist. Born into a world of tension between the study of traditional societies and their transformation by the external forces of “progress,” it could both collect and disseminate information. It could just as well bring notions of “civilization” to “primitive” peoples who had never left their valleys as bring back from those valleys precious archives of societies on the brink of disappearance. Its preservationist role was foremost, for example, when Marcel Griaule made his pathbreaking ethnographic films of the Dogon people in the Bandiagara cliffs (*Au pays des Dogon/In the Land of the Dogon* and *Sous les masques noirs/Under the Black Masks*, 1931/1935). Its progressive role was more evident, for example, in an agricultural training film aimed at encouraging modern methods of raising silkworms in France. These roles blur as the films circulate in different places, however. The Griaule films, financed by the Ministry of Colonies, were later distributed in France to rally the metropolitan masses to the colonial cause.<sup>45</sup> The silkworm film showed up in the collection of the

Compagnie marocaine cinématographique et commerciale in Dakar, which lent films to schools all along the West African coast, to teach colonized subjects about France. Both a recorder of tradition and a vector of change, the cinema embodied in its very nature the blended vision of France its practitioners set out to convey.

To provide background for the chapters that follow, this book opens with a chapter on “truth peddling” that provides a historical overview of the French contribution to the development of documentary film during the interwar years. Its particular focus is to fill in previous gaps in the scholarly record and to demonstrate the widespread distribution of documentary throughout France and the empire.

Following this general overview, four sections analyze documentary film initiatives funded by the state to represent rural or colonial France for a particular audience. These sections examine four elements of a multidirectional flow of images: from Paris to the provinces and back, and from Paris to the colonies and back. Although the goals of each film program were distinct, taken together, they reveal the contours of a new national narrative in which France is a rational, inclusive republic that values regional specificity while remaining committed to universal values and a modernist economic and social vision.

The first of these four sections, “The Revolt of the Beets,” centers on films that were sent out into provincial France by the Ministry of Agriculture. This program was designed to combat rural outmigration by teaching farmers modernized agricultural practices; by persuading them that rural life was preferable to urban life; and by providing a form of entertainment in the villages that would reduce the boredom of long winter evenings. The beets revolt, in one film, because they see the happy beets in the next field, fertilized with potash, and they rise up against their ignorant owner to demand the same treatment. The next-door neighbor exemplifies the potential of the French countryside to integrate modern inventiveness while remaining committed to country life. Begun in the early 1920s, this program taught farmers that their individual choices gave them an important role in the national story of France. An extensive survey of audience responses provides invaluable information on the overall effectiveness of the program.

Chapter 4, “Making the Fiction of the Empire a Reality,” examines film outreach to the French colonies in the light of the earlier chapter on the French provinces. This chapter demonstrates the extent to which officials in colonial France shared concerns of the film advocates in the French countryside. They imagined their audiences in similar