

“NO MATTER HOW LACKING...”: DOCUMENTARY AND THE VALUE FORM



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<https://seattleu.zoom.us/j/6498489179>

When Bazin infamously claimed that, “...no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction,” he unwittingly echoed John Grierson’s description of Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* as possessing “documentary value.” While this pair of pater familias—the seminal figure of state sponsored non-fiction filmmaking and the seminary priest of cinematic realism—leave much to be desired, documentary scholarship has sadly neglected their insight that documentary has something to do with value. Indeed, for all its proclaimed concern for ethics, calls to action, bearing witness, social justice and pretensions to radicality—political or otherwise—documentary theory and criticism consistently ignore or misunderstand the system that structures the very reality the form claims to represent: capitalism. Adopting an unapologetically theoretical orientation to documentary, this talk moves beyond matters of particular content, intention, or discrete economic relations to think documentary through the critique of political economy. Shifting from both the descriptive and evaluative registers that predominate in the discourse around documentary, I argue for documentary images as immanent to the law of value and privileged sites for making visible capital as the moving totality and system of abstract social domination that determines our world.

Benedict Stork is an adjunct lecturer in Film and Media at Seattle University. His research focuses on the intersection of politics and aesthetics in documentary cinema from a heterodox Marxist perspective.