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| **Night Mail (1936)** |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| One of the most influential documentary films of the 1930s, Night Mail is the seminal work of Britain’s General Post Office (G.P.O.) Film Unit and the embodiment of the high civic and social purpose ascribed to documentary film by the G.P.O.’s director, John Grierson. |
| One of the most influential documentary films of the 1930s, Night Mail is the seminal work of Britain’s General Post Office (G.P.O.) Film Unit and the embodiment of the high civic and social purpose ascribed to documentary film by the G.P.O.’s director, John Grierson. The Film Unit, founded in 1933 as part of a governmental bureaucracy seeking to make educational films publicising state services and advertising corporate sponsors, paradoxically became a hotbed of British experimental filmmaking. It employed vanguard artists like Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Alberto Cavalcanti, Humphrey Jennings, Lotte Reiniger and the esteemed modernist poet W.H. Auden. While not as stylistically eye-popping as other G.P.O. productions which were rife with surrealist dream sequences, abstract colour animations, modernist technophilia and comic pastiche, Night Mail exemplifies the G.P.O.’s unique merger of formalism and social communication—a blend Grierson learned from the Soviet avant-garde. Co-directed by Harry Watt and Basil Wright, but very much a collaborative work, this twenty-three-minute film analyses the operations of the Royal Mail train from London to Glasgow. For Grierson, the very purpose of documentary film was to document and enact everyday labour—here, of mail train workers—as national citizenship, and to lay bare forms of social and cultural interconnection. Night Mail’s editing patterns join labouring British citizenry to the nation’s expansive transportation and communication networks in a visual poetry of men and modern machines in clockwork efficiency. The effect is bolstered by the film’s moving original score arranged Benjamin Britten and Alberto Calvalcanti, and its famous concluding lines of verse, penned by Auden. The lines, chanted rhythmically over a montage of racing wheels as the train moves through the countryside, turn the act of delivering mail into something extraordinary—a vision of national unity as the infrastructural sublime. |
| Further reading:  (Aitkin)  (Hood)  (Grierson)  (Nichols)  (Stollery)  (Winston) |