**GRIERSON**, **John (April 26, 1898-February 19, 1972)**

John Grierson, the influential British film theorist, defined documentary practice as the “creative treatment of actuality” and provided it with an institutional base by promoting state support, cultivating a community of practitioners, and championing specific conventions. Grierson helped establish the Empire Marketing Board Film Production Unit (1928-1933) and the General Post Office Film Unit (1933-1940). These government departments practically served as film schools and expanded his influence, thereby initiating the British Documentary Movement, the first clearly defined group of filmmakers working toward common ends with a common leader.

Advocating purposive filmmaking, Grierson insisted films should educate, uplift, and raise political consciousness. Inspired by the Soviet filmmakers and documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty, Grierson established his key tenets of documentary filmmaking in “First Principles of Documentary” (1934-1936). To him, documentaries are creative works drawn from the raw material of life, with stories developed from spontaneous on-location events involving real people. Like Flaherty, Grierson believed the innate drama of such events could reveal insights about the world, but he believed Flaherty’s “Neo-Rousseauism” was inadequate for exploring modern issues. Instead, Grierson wanted to examine the mass, co-operative nature of society by exploring [national industries, resources, and systems](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_CatrGAI2s).

References and further reading:

Hardy, F. (ed.) (1971) *Grierson on Documentary*, New York: Praeger Publishers.

Swann, P. (1989) *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1946*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sarah Childress

Bowdoin College