**The British Documentary Film Movement (1926-1946)**

The British Documentary Film Movement refers to the film units pioneered by John Grierson. With the benefit of state sponsorship, Grierson and the filmmakers that gathered around him experimented with avant-garde film techniques to develop a socially conscious cinema. Grierson’s film units and the documentary culture they created were also an important part of the debates around aesthetic innovation and political commitment that circulated throughout Britain in the 1930s and 1940s. Grierson’s group disseminated their ideas and theories in publications such as *Sight and Sound, Cinema Quarterly, World Film News,* and *Documentary News Letter.*

Grierson coined the term ‘documentary’ in a review of Robert Flaherty’s film *Moana* in *The New York Sun* in 1926. In this first use, documentary was nearly synonymous with the French *documentaire*, which typically refers to expedition films. In the coming years, Grierson would theorize documentary in more specific terms. His most famous and most lasting definition comes from an essay in a 1933 edition of *Cinema Quarterly*. Documentary, he claimed, was ‘the creative treatment of actuality.’ Grierson believed documentary could borrow formal techniques from the great Russian filmmakers (Eisenstein, Vertov, and Pudovkin) to dramatize scenes and practices from everyday life. Fully aware that documentary cinema would not reap the profits required to fetch private investment, Grierson hitched his new movement to state agencies. Over the next few decades, documentary cinema would grow and flourish under the aegis of the Empire Marketing Board (1926-1933), the General Post Office (1933-1937), and the Crown Film Unit (1940-1952).

Sir Stephen Tallents, a secretary for the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), recognized the potential of using films to publicize state ventures domestically and internationally. With state support and a budget, Grierson assembled a group of filmmakers to launch the documentary film movement. Many of these participants, including Paul Rotha, Stuart Legg, and Basil Wright, would become key figures in documentary film. Over the course of its lifespan, the EMB produced nearly 100 films, but only a few of those demonstrated the full potential of documentary cinema. Grierson’s own film *Drifters* (1929) marshaled Soviet style montage editing to dramatize the life of workers in the herring fisheries. The other notable film was *Industrial Britain* (1931), a collaborative effort between Grierson and Robert Flaherty.

The EMB film unit was soon transferred to the General Post Office (GPO) where Grierson would preside over the growth of documentary until his resignation in June 1937. The GPO provided Grierson’s group with sound technology and expanded their horizons. Two masterpieces of early documentary were produced during Grierson’s tenure at the GPO: *Song of Ceylon* (1934), Basil Wright’s prize winning experiment with sound, and *Night Mail* (1936)*,* Harry Watt’s examination of postal labor which used music by Benjamin Britten and included W.H. Auden reading his poem ‘Night Mail’ in rhythm with the movement of the train on the screen. Len Lye’s highly innovative cinema received financial support and distribution from the GPO as well. For *A Colour Box* (1935) Lye painted directly onto the celluloid, providing an enchanting visual experience at a time when color in film was rare. Grierson’s group agreed to fund and distribute the film on the condition that Lye append an advertisement for the Post Office at the very end. Similarly, another Lye film, *Rainbow Dance* (1936), included footage of a dancer that Lye then colored during the printing of the film. This too garnered GPO support as Lye agreed to include an advertisement for the Savings Bank.

After Grierson’s resignation in 1937, Alberto Cavalcanti took the reins and directed the documentary film movement toward more narrative films, abandoning many of the theoretical principles and experimental techniques Grierson had tried to put to work in his new socially conscious cinema. Harry Watt’s film *North Sea* (1938) adopted more direct storytelling techniques and this proved to be the GPO Film Unit’s most widely distributed and successful film. And while Cavalcanti’s arrival may have altered the priorities of the GPO Film Unit, filmmakers such as Humphrey Jennings continued to experiment with montage and sound. Jennings’ *Spare Time* (1939), which was heralded as a type of cinematic Mass Observation, contains little by way of narrative; instead, Jennings creates a series of snapshots of the working class engaging in various leisure activities. *Spare Time* was an early indication of the way Jennings could skillfully use montage of image and sound for striking poetic effects.

The Ministry of Information absorbed the GPO Film Unit at the onset of the Second World War. Ian Dalrymple succeeded Cavalcanti as Director of Production in 1940 and in 1941 the name was changed to the Crown Film Unit. The emergency conditions of the war in many ways brought the early ideas of documentary to their fulfillment. The conception of film as a tool of mass education, of bridging the gap between the state and its citizens, was now widely shared. To be sure, wartime films largely portrayed the interests of the state, putting on display the heroism of ordinary citizens, the enduring spirit of a bombed but undamaged British people, and, overall, advancing the mythos of the People’s War. The most memorable, and indeed most formally dynamic, films to emerge from this period were those of Humphrey Jennings. *Listen to Britain* (1942) relied entirely on the juxtaposition of images and sounds to portray a British public going about its daily affairs despite the pressures of war. Other Jennings films, such as the feature length *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *A Diary for Timothy* (1945), which includes narration penned by E.M. Forster, remain fundamental for understanding the civilian side of the war. These films also stand as remarkable examples of how avant-garde and modernist techniques were fused with state propaganda during the war.

Although these three film units produced the lion’s share of the canonical and most memorable films from the British Documentary Film Movement, film historian Paul Swann has shown the importance of an independent wing of the movement. Commercial sponsors such as Imperial Airways and Shell Oil also supported films that elevated their reputations and promoted their products. Some who grew under Grierson’s wing also established film units. Paul Rotha became director of production at the Strand Film Company in 1935 and Basil Wright established the Realist Film Unit in 1937. Yet, these organizations produced little that could compete with the signature works of the EMB, GPO, and the Crown Film Unit. The British Documentary Film Movement remains a fascinating example of a concerted effort to wed modernist and avant-garde aesthetics with the interests of the state. Arguably, the best films were those where the tension between aesthetics and politics was at its highest.

References and further reading:

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