

6 The British Documentary Film Movement

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In many respects the British documentary film movement can be considered a touchstone for debates on the nature and achievement of British cinema. If, as many have argued, one of the central paradigms of British national film culture is realism, then the documentary film movement is one of the principal sources of that tradition. However, despite this apparent record of achievement the movement has often been the subject of criticism, even condemnation, both for the role which it is perceived to have played in the 1930s, and for the influence which it is perceived to have had on contemporary film and broadcasting practices. This essay will attempt to address these criticisms and also try to assess the value of the documentary movement's achievements.

The founder of the documentary movement, John Grierson (1898–1972), believed that film, and documentary film in particular, could play a crucial role within society by providing an effective medium of communication between the State and the public. Grierson's views on the cinema were formed against the background of the economic slump and the slow build-up to war in the 1930s. In this context of mounting national and international instability he felt it was vital for relatively new mass communications media such as film and radio to play a role in helping to stabilise society. He was, therefore, concerned to a considerable extent with questions of the civic and social purposiveness of film. However, this did not mean that he ignored questions relating to the aesthetic qualities of film. On the contrary, part of Grierson's importance for film theory lies in the fact that his ideas on documentary can be traced back to a complex set of systematic aesthetic theories.

In 1927 Grierson joined the Empire Marketing Board, a government organisation whose brief was to publicise trade links between Britain and the countries of the Empire. Grierson's job involved the development of a programme of publicity films for the Board, but his first film, *Drifters* (1929), became a far more ambitious project than the Board had originally envisaged. The film quickly became a critical success, and its combination of naturalistic images and formative editing has influenced traditions of documentary film-making in Britain ever since. *Drifters* also illustrates what was to become the central strategy of the documentary movement during the 1930s: to seek sponsorship from government bodies with limited remits, and then, whenever possible, to make films which went far beyond those remits.

Following the success of *Drifters*, Grierson founded the documentary film movement as such, by establishing the EMB Film Unit and by appointing young directors such as Basil Wright, Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey, Harry Watt and Paul Rotha. Grierson

and the Unit remained at the EMB until it was abolished by Act of Parliament in 1933. After this the Film Unit moved to the Post Office, where they were re-established as the GPO Film Unit. New film-makers were also appointed, the most prominent of whom were Humphrey Jennings and Alberto Cavalcanti.

In 1936, frustrated by the restrictions increasingly imposed on the film unit by the GPO, Grierson left in order to establish other documentary film units and a co-ordinating body called Film Centre. In 1938 he left Britain to become first Film Officer of the National Film Board of Canada. In the meantime, following the outbreak of war, the GPO Film Unit was transferred to the Ministry of Information, and was renamed the Crown Film Unit. After the war the movement's importance diminished, and its personnel and ideas were dispersed into the cinema, and into the burgeoning industries of public relations and television.

In order to fully understand the documentary film movement it is essential to view it within its historical context: that of Britain in the 1930s. The period has frequently been characterised as one in which radical politics were widespread, and several histories have painted a picture of the 'red decade'. However, this is misleading. Although radical political movements and organisations certainly existed in Britain during the 1920s and 1930s (and one of them – the 'Red Clydeside' movement – had a direct influence on Grierson) none of them developed into a genuine mass movement. In fact, throughout the decade conservative ideas dominated social and political discourse, and Conservative-dominated National Governments continued to be elected. Had war not intervened in 1939, the Conservatives would have been re-elected in the coming election.

This conservative hegemony was not absolute, however, and from 1931 to 1939 various strands of opinion gradually converged to form a social democratic consensus which eventually achieved political ascendancy in 1945. It is this strand of political and cultural discourse, described by one of its Conservative proponents, Harold Macmillan, as 'the middle way' between unfettered capitalism and a nationalising socialism, with which the documentary film movement, and Grierson in particular, must be associated.¹ Although radical and Communist figures such as Paul Rotha, Ralph Bond and Ivor Montagu were associated with the movement, its overall political profile was in fact similar to that of other pressure groups of the period, such as The Next Five Years Group and Political and Economic Planning, who were concerned to build up support for a new social democratic corporatist consensus. The documentary movement is best understood, then, as social democratic and reformist in relation to the dominant conservatism of the inter-war period, but not as occupying any explicitly socialist position.

Grierson

John Grierson was concerned with the potential which documentary film had as a medium for communicating social information, but he was also interested in exploring the aesthetic qualities of the medium.² The first formulation of his theory of documentary film, in an official memorandum written for the EMB in 1927, argued for the creation of a new genre: films of 30–40 minutes which through creative editing of actuality footage would enable stories to be 'orchestrated into cinematic sequences of enormous vitality'.³ This first definition of the 'Griersonian documentary' contained both formalist and naturalist elements, but it is the former which have the ascendancy. Grierson believed that these films, the first of which would be *Drifters*, would 'mark a new phase in cinema production'.⁴



A film of considerable aesthetic interest. John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929).

The documentary movement is sometime accused of being too close to the establishment. Grierson was strongly influenced by forms of neo-Hegelian philosophy which placed considerable importance on the value of the State and corporate institutions. He believed that the institutions of State possessed intrinsic merit because they were the culmination of long-drawn-out historical attempts to achieve social integration and harmony. This led him to the view that the proper function of documentary film was to promote an understanding of social and cultural interconnection within the nation.⁵

These views led Grierson to place great emphasis on notions of duty and service, and to argue that documentary film-makers should not merely follow their own individual predispositions and inclinations, but should also devote themselves to the social duty of revealing and describing social interconnection. He also argued that ideologies which promoted social integration were 'good propaganda', whilst ideologies which promoted social division were 'propaganda of the devil'.⁶ Consequently, he believed that documentary film-makers must discipline themselves to work within what he called 'the degree of general sanction': the sphere of consensual discourse generally circulating within society. This 'discipline' of consensual practice inevitably worked against the development of a radical, critical documentary film culture.

Grierson's beliefs about cinema and society can be described as corporatist and consensual, and the theory of documentary film within which they are contained can be characterised in the same terms. However, this is not the whole story. Grierson made a fundamental distinction between what he called the 'institutions of State' and the 'agents of State'. Whilst the institutions of State possessed intrinsic historical value, he believed that circumstances could exist in which the agents of State could subvert those institutions for sectional, class purposes.⁷ In these circumstances it was permis-

sible for documentary film-makers to oppose the State, and to make radical, critical films. Grierson believed that, in the 1930s, rather than working for the benefit of the nation as a whole, the establishment was encouraging processes of unregulated capitalist development which reproduced its own interests and threatened social stability. Consequently, he argued, documentary film had to play a role in promoting social reform and, above all, in providing positive images and stories of working-class individuals and communities: in Grierson's own phrase, the documentary film must 'put the working man on the screen'.⁸ In relation to the historical context of the inter-war period, then, Grierson's ideas on social change and documentary film can be characterised as reformist and progressive.

The films and film-makers

The films made by the documentary movement from 1929 to 1939 fall into a number of categories. On the one hand there were routine films commissioned in order to publicise government services – films such as *Cable Ship* (1933), which dealt with the laying of submarine telephone cables. On the other hand there were more ambitious projects, such as *Night Mail* (1936), which attempted to realise Grierson's objectives for the documentary film more fully. During the EMB period of 1930–34 the most important films made were Grierson's *Drifters*, and *Industrial Britain* (1931), a film shot and partly edited by Robert Flaherty, the Canadian film-maker who had made *Nanook of the North* (1924). When the documentary movement moved to the GPO in 1934 two other major projects begun at the EMB – Arthur Elton's *BBC Voice of Britain* (1934) and Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934) – were continued and completed. The latter film, which won first prize at the 1935 Brussels Film Festival, remains one of the most technically and aesthetically accomplished films made by the documentary movement.

Paul Rotha was one of the most important of the young film-makers employed by Grierson. Rotha was rather semi-detached from the movement, coming and going over the period and occasionally at odds with Grierson. In general, Rotha can be characterised as politically to the left of Grierson, and as an individualist who experienced difficulties in working under Grierson's omnipresent tutelage. He was opposed, in particular, to Grierson's encouragement of 'group' film-making, a practice first employed during the editing of *Industrial Britain*. In addition to his work with the documentary movement, Rotha also made a number of films with the commercial documentary film company British Instructional Films, including *The Face of Britain* (1934), inspired by a reading of J. B. Priestley's *English Journey* (1933). His most important film for the documentary movement was *Today We Live* (1937), about the social hardship caused by unemployment in a Welsh mining community. He was also the author of one of the first major English-language books on cinema history, *The Film Till Now* (1930).

One of the aims of the documentary film movement was to influence the production of socially purposive and aesthetically innovative art across a range of artistic fields. To this end relationships were established with many individuals and organisations during the period, and several artists and film-makers, later to become prominent in their own right, worked on films made by the documentary movement. These included the poet, W. H. Auden, the composer Benjamin Britten, the writer J. B. Priestley, and film-makers such as Robert Flaherty, Carl Dreyer and Ernst Meyer. Others associated with the movement during the period included H. G. Wells, Julian Huxley, Graham Greene and the painter/designer László Moholy-Nagy. This attempt

to connect with other cultural movements of the period was also fostered by the house journals of the documentary movement: *Cinema Quarterly* (1932–36), *World Film News* (1936–38) and *Documentary Newsletter* (1940–47), all of which regularly featured articles written by those mentioned above.⁹

A number of the movement's best known films emerged from this context of association with artists and intellectuals of the period. *Coal Face* (1935), with music composed by Britten, employs modernist techniques such as non-synchronous sound and montage editing, in conjunction with a critical commentary on harsh working conditions within the mines. *Night Mail*, although conventional in terms of its overall narrative structure, contains the well-known sequence in which the poetry of Auden and the music of Britten accompany close-up montage images of racing train wheels, as the postal express journeys to Edinburgh.

Most of the films made by the documentary movement were collaborative projects, sometimes involving as many as six people, each engaged in several activities. This was a practice strongly encouraged by Grierson because it helped to foster and disseminate production skills. Grierson also placed less importance on the emergence of individual 'auteurs' from the ranks of his film-makers than he did on using them to promote the ideals and aspirations of the movement as a whole.

Perhaps because of this, few important film-makers emerged from within the documentary movement, and few managed to sustain a high level of achievement throughout their careers. Grierson himself directed only one film, *Drifters*, after which he became a producer. Paul Rotha's best work was carried out in the 1930s and 1940s, with *Shipyards* (1935), *The Face of Britain*, *Today We Live*, and *World of Plenty* (1943),

Modernist techniques in conjunction with a critical commentary on harsh working conditions within the mines. Cavalcanti's Coal Face (1935).



but he did not produce or direct any important films after the war. Basil Wright's career followed a similar trajectory. His best film is *Song of Ceylon* and he also made a contribution to *Night Mail*. *The Country Comes to Town* (1931) and *The Face of Scotland* (1938) are also interesting, but like Rotha, Wright neither produced nor directed anything of significance after 1946.

Two major film-makers who did emerge from the documentary movement were Alberto Cavalcanti and Humphrey Jennings. Cavalcanti, who was Brazilian, had worked with the French avant-garde of the 1920s, alongside directors such as René Clair and Jean Renoir. He brought much needed technical and aesthetic expertise to the movement, as well as a knowledge of recent developments in the pictorial arts. He was appointed head of the GPO Film Unit in 1936, when Grierson left to form Film Centre, and during the war joined Ealing Studios, where he made *Went the Day Well* (1942), *Champagne Charlie* (1944), *Dead of Night* (1945) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1947). Along with Harry Watt, Cavalcanti can also be credited with helping to develop the documentary-drama form which had such an influence on the British cinema of the Second World War, and which first appeared in Watt's *North Sea* (1938).

Humphrey Jennings began work with the GPO Film Unit in 1934. During the late 30s he became involved with Mass-Observation, and brought the study of popular culture associated with that organisation to bear on his film-making activities. His *Spare Time* (1939) and *Listen to Britain* (1941) remain impressive, marked by a lyrical humanism and a sensitivity to the ordinary which stands out from the often stereotyped representations of working-class people found in some of the films made by the documentary movement. Indeed, Jennings' ability to portray the working class literally and authentically often put him at odds with Grierson, who preferred more idealistic images of working-class people.¹⁰ Jennings went on to make a number of important films in the 1940s, including *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *A Diary for Timothy* (1945). His career was cut short by a fatal accident in 1950.

The critical reputation of the documentary film movement

Over the decades the reputation of the British documentary film movement has fluctuated considerably in debates on its role in and influence on British cinema and society. Initially, the movement was promoted as a heroic struggle by gifted and principled film-makers against both the banality of the commercial industry and the interference of corporate bureaucrats. The early literature on the movement reflects this position, particularly Paul Rotha's *The Film Till Now* (1930) and *Documentary Diary* (1973). Other works in this tradition include Elizabeth Sussex's *The Rise and Fall of the British Documentary Movement* (1975), James Beveridge's *John Grierson: Film Master* (1986), Harry Watt's *Don't Look at the Camera* (1975), and Forsyth Hardy's *John Grierson: A Documentary Biography* (1979). In two edited collections of essays by Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary* (1946) and *Grierson on the Movies* (1981), Grierson's official biographer, Forsyth Hardy, has also attempted to promote a conception of the movement as principled, socially purposive, and successful.

By the 1970s new traditions of film theory were emerging in Britain, influenced by work in the fields of semiotics and structuralism, and by translations of early Russian and German writings on film – writings which advocated an anti-realist and formalist aesthetic. The new film theory was often critical of Grierson's ideas on documentary naturalism and the need to work within 'the system'. Writing in 1983, Alan Lovell argued that the 'basic thing was to break open the prison of Griersonism', and in 1980 Paul Willemen summed up the prevailing attitude:

Official film culture has enshrined the documentary film movement as the high point of the British cinema. . . . Consequently, criticism of the documentary movement and of the Griersonian ideology runs the risk of being regarded, not only as heresy, but as an attack on great artists and film-makers.¹¹

The criticisms levelled at the documentary movement during the 1970s and early 1980s can be divided into three main categories. The first consists of opinions to the effect that the movement's reputation has obscured the achievements of more progressive film-making traditions in the 1930s. Critics holding these opinions gradually turned their attention away from the documentary movement in an attempt to recover these lost traditions. In *Traditions of Independence*, published in 1980, an attempt was made to reassess the work of radical organisations such as the Workers Film and Photo League, Kino, the Progressive Film Institute and the Workers Film Association; and to consider the achievements of radical film-makers such as Ivor Montagu, Norman McLaren and Ralph Bond.¹²

However, this view that the documentary movement was of less consequence than other, supposedly more valuable documentary traditions in the 1930s is problematic. The films made by the organisations and film-makers mentioned above were seen by far smaller audiences than the films made by the documentary movement. The evidence which we have suggests that they were largely consumed by minority audiences already committed to the political views which the films expressed. The documentary movement's films, on the other hand, were seen by a much more extensive and varied audience, and therefore had the potential to alter opinion across a far greater spectrum.¹³ Distinctions made by critics such as Claire Johnstone and Paul Willemen between the documentary movement and leftist documentary organisations during the 1930s are overstated. In fact, there was a great deal of interaction at the time between the movement and leftist film-makers such as Ivor Montagu, Norman McLaren, Ralph Bond and Sydney Cole. These film-makers did not see the documentary movement as the enemy, but on the contrary as an ally, and as a progressive oppositional film practice.¹⁴

A second major criticism of the documentary movement to emerge during this period was that the reputation and ideology of the movement had been used by a conservative media establishment to reinforce consensualist ideas. Stuart Hood, for example, has argued that Grierson's belief in working within the general sanction helped to institutionalise doctrines of 'balance' and 'due impartiality' in British television, and led to the establishment of a politically toothless current affairs media, unable to carry out critical, investigative work.¹⁵ Whilst there is some justification in this criticism, it also needs to be set against an understanding of the historical context from which the documentary film movement emerged. It is necessary to understand the politics of the movement in relation to the 1930s, rather than to judge those politics from the standpoint of political problems and criteria in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The third major criticism of the documentary movement to emerge during the 1970s and early 1980s revolved around questions of aesthetics. In 1976, writing in *Screen*, Bill Nichols associated Grierson's ideas with various forms of naturalistic cinéma-vérité film-making.¹⁶ Two years earlier, Andrew Tudor had argued that Grierson's theories were based on an ideology of social persuasion, and had no implications for an aesthetic of film.¹⁷ In a similar vein, Alan Lovell, writing in 1983, argued that Grierson had subordinated aesthetics to social persuasion.¹⁸

These criticisms are largely unfounded. A close study of Grierson's writings reveals

that his theory of documentary film did not imply the subordination of aesthetics to social and political instrumentality. Grierson himself makes the point well: 'Most people . . . when they think of documentary films think of public reports and social problems. . . . For me it is something more magical. It is a visual art.'¹⁹

The documentary movement's reputation suffered further damage in a body of work which emerged from the history and communication departments of some British universities during the late 1970s and early 80s. This work was primarily (though not exclusively) concerned with the exploration of film as a form of historical record rather than as an aesthetic object. Within this tradition the work carried out on the documentary movement was based on the empirical analysis of archival records held at the Public Records Office and elsewhere, rather than on the application of critical theory to the movement. These archival documents, generally written by middle-ranking civil servants and political figures during the 1930s, furnished an account of the movement as a group of well-meaning but politically naive individuals who frequently frustrated the attempts made by enlightened civil servants to create a permanent State film unit. Historians writing in the 1980s, who accepted this version of events because it was inscribed within archival sources of evidence – conventionally regarded as the most 'objective' form of evidence – then began to rewrite the history of the documentary movement, placing lesser emphasis on the achievements of the film-makers and greater emphasis on the role of largely forgotten government officials.²⁰

There is some truth in this account of the documentary movement. Grierson, for example, was an extremely dogmatic and obsessive individual who often generated friction with the officials for whom he was supposed to be working. Similarly, the film-makers around Grierson had little experience of how to work within bureaucratic government organisations like the EMB and the GPO, and often incurred official displeasure through their naivety. Nevertheless, there is no real evidence to suggest that, even had Grierson and the film-makers been paragons of civil service propriety, a permanent and influential State documentary film unit would have been established in the 1930s. The historical context remained that of an establishment which was hostile to any substantial amount of reform-oriented film-making taking place within government organisations. Given this overriding context, Grierson's tactics at the time seem justified, and the view that he should have let the civil servants just get on with it seems faintly absurd.

The most recent reconstructions of the documentary movement's reputation have taken a number of different directions. In *Film and Reform* (1990), I have argued that it is of primary importance to understand Grierson's ideology, and to relate the documentary movement to the context of Britain in the inter-war period. I have viewed the movement as progressive in relation to the dominant conservatism of the period, and I have argued that Grierson's ideology was related to a sophisticated and liberal branch of continental idealist philosophy. I have also argued that this relationship to a philosophical tradition of real substance distinguishes Grierson – in a positive sense – from any other figure within British film culture.²¹ Some recent commentators, mainly in Canada, have attempted to argue that there was a relationship between Grierson's ideas and various totalitarian philosophies prevalent in Europe during the inter-war period.²² This is a misconception. Grierson was neither a fascist nor any other sort of totalitarian: he was a democratic corporatist, whose ideas can be related to other corporate, centre-progressive political ideologies of the period.

Finally, what is the legacy of the British documentary movement today? The movement is no longer a focus of debate in the way that it was between 1975 and 1990. Few

new publications on the movement have appeared since 1990.²³ With many of the film-makers themselves now dead, the sources of biographical information have been significantly reduced.²⁴

Nevertheless, one can still trace the influence of the movement on contemporary film culture in a number of ways. One result of the work done on Grierson and the movement in the late 1980s has been to emphasise the modernist nature of both Grierson's ideas and the films produced within the movement. Grierson's theory of documentary film is now of more interest to film-makers and film theorists. It is a complex theory, informed by several strands of early modernism, as well as by various philosophical positions. With this in mind, the films themselves can be looked at anew. What emerges from such a reappraisal is a realisation that, despite the difficulties which the movement experienced, the films are of considerable aesthetic interest and quality. *Drifters*, *Song of Ceylon* and *Listen to Britain*, in particular, stand as major achievements of the British cinema.

Notes

1. Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945* (London: Quartet, 1977), p. 29.
2. John Grierson, 'I Derive My Authority From Moses', (Grierson Archive papers, University of Stirling, 1957-72) G7A.9.1. p. 3. Cited in Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the British Documentary Film Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 7.
3. John Grierson, 'Notes for English Producers', Memorandum to the EMB Film Committee (April 1927), PRO BT 64/86 6880, p. 2. Cited in Aitken, *Film and Reform*, pp. 97-9.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 22. Cited in Aitken, *Film and Reform*, p. 98.
5. John Grierson, 'The Challenge of Peace', in Forsyth Hardy (ed.), *Grierson on Documentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946), p. 174.
6. John Grierson, 'Preface', in Paul Rotha, Richard Griffith and Sinclair Road, *Documentary Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 2.
7. John Grierson, 'Byron and his Age' (Grierson Archive papers 1898-1927) G1.2.10.p. 9. Cited in Aitken, *Film and Reform*, p. 190.
8. John Grierson, 'The Course of Realism', in Hardy, *Grierson on Documentary*, p. 77.
9. Forsyth Hardy, *John Grierson: A Documentary Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 84.
10. Aitken, *Film and Reform*, p. 147.
11. Paul Willemen, 'Presentation', in Don Macpherson (ed.), *Traditions of Independence* (London: British Film Institute, 1980).
12. Macpherson (ed.), *Traditions of Independence*.
13. Precise information on the audiences for the documentary films is unobtainable. An EMB Film Committee memorandum of 19 March 1932 suggests an audience of 1.5 million by that date at the Imperial Institute Cinema alone. By October 1932 bookings had been received across the country for 4,380 film screenings. A fairly conservative estimate, based on these figures, would suggest a possible audience of between 10 and 15 million by 1939, although the actual figure could well be higher.
14. Ivor Montagu, *Film World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 281.
15. Stuart Hood, 'A Cool Look at the Legend', in Eva Orbanz (ed.), *Journey to a Legend and Back: The British Realistic Film* (Berlin: Edition Volker Spiess, 1977), p. 150.
16. Bill Nichols, 'Documentary Theory and Practice', *Screen*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Winter 1976-7), p. 35.
17. Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (London: Secker and Warburg/British Film Institute, 1974), p. 75.
18. Alan Lovell, 'The Grierson Influence', *Undercut*, no. 9, Summer 1983, p. 17.
19. John Grierson, 'I Remember, I Remember' (Grierson Archive papers 1957-72), G7.17.2. pp. 10-11. Cited in Aitken, *Film and Reform*, p. 11.
20. See, for example, the work of Paul Swann, including his *The British Documentary Film Movement 1926-1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
21. See Ian Aitken, 'Grierson, Idealism and the Inter-War Period', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1989; and Aitken, *Film and Reform*.
22. See, for example, Peter Morris, 'Re-thinking Grierson: The Ideology of John Grierson', in Pierre Verroneau, Michael Dorland and Seth Feldman (eds.), *Dialogue Canadian and Quebec Cinema* (Montreal: Mediatexte, 1987), pp. 25-56.
23. A collection of writings by members of the documentary movement will appear in *The Documentary Film Movement*, Ian Aitken (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

24. Brian Winston's *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and its Legitimations* (London: British Film Institute, 1995) makes the point - repeatedly - that the documentary movement was not radical enough. It seems odd that this argument should still be thought tenable, following the detailed historical work on the movement carried out in the 1980s. Winston also makes a connection between Grierson's ideas and nineteenth-century French realism, without offering any convincing grounds for such a connection. Grierson was influenced by ideas emanating from the German, not the French, intellectual tradition and made no reference to French nineteenth-century realism in any of his writings or reported conversations.

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