

John Grierson & the British documentary movement

“I look on cinema as a pulpit, and use it as a propagandist”

John Grierson (1898-1972)

John Grierson 1898-1972



John Grierson

Founder of the British documentary film movement

Its leader for 40 years

One of the first 1) to see the potential of motion pictures to
shape people's attitudes

2) to urge the use of films for educational purposes

Educated at the University of Glasgow and University of Chicago

1924 - Rockefeller fellowship to study public opinion & mass media

1928 - Founded film unit at Empire Marketing Board *Drifters* 1929

1936- Unit moved to General Post Office

1939 – Formation of National Film Board of Canada

WWII – Supervisor of information films for Canadian government

1946-1948 - UNESCO

Grierson – Key figure

Point of departure – how to involve citizens in their government?

Response – cinema can provide a basic education about issues important to the functioning of a democracy

Challenge – how to harness cinema to the citizens' education

Cinema of the 1920s - sources of inspiration for his project

1. Eisenstein - dramatization of revolutionary events to indoctrinate & educate Soviet people - montage
2. Flaherty - celebration of traditional cultures
3. Hollywood westerns – epic poems for a new nation
4. City symphonies – an impressionist approach to the modern city

Grierson & the Empire Marketing Board

EMB - unique government public relations agency - founded 1926
to promote the marketing of products from British Empire
“to bring the Empire alive”

Film Unit organized by Grierson in 1930
collective filmmaking enterprise
involved dozens of educated professionals
made more than 100 films

Aim – put art to social use
to make the state & society function better

Key films– *Drifters* 1929 - herring fishermen in North Sea
produced, directed, written by Grierson
Industrial Britain 1933 – Flaherty

DRIFTERS 1929



Grierson & the General Post Office

EMB disbanded 1933 – Film Unit moves to GPO

GPO – vast organization – mail, telephone, wireless broadcasting

Film strategy – showcase the GPO as modern means of
communications

More than 100 films made

Key films - *Song of Ceylon* 1934

Coal Face 1935

The Films

1929-1939 60+ filmmakers 300+ films

3 main directions in subject, purpose & style

1. docs showing parts/activities / aspects of the British Empire
2. docs calling attention to pressing problems in need of solution
3. narrative docs

1. Documentaries about the British Empire

Drifters 1929

Influenced by *Battleship Potemkin* & Flaherty

Industrial Britain 1933

Collaboration between Grierson & Flaherty

Song of Ceylon 1934

Basil Wright – does little to sell the sponsor's product, tea

Coal Face 1935

Alberto Cavalcanti - Experiments with sound

2. Documentaries about social problems

Housing Problems 1935 - slum dwellings

Enough to Eat? 1936 - malnutrition

The Smoke Menace 1937 - air pollution

Children at School 1937 - shortcomings of public education

Journalistic pieces - incorporated formal and technical
experiments
- direct interviews

3. Narrative documentaries

Night Mail 1936

Basil Wright & Harry Watt

Blends social purpose & formal properties

North Sea 1938

Harry Watt

This narrative line led directly to the wartime British semi documentary feature – fusion of fact & fiction

Grierson & Flaherty

Friends & antagonists

Flaherty - to make the unfamiliar familiar

- to discover & reveal what is distant & past
- film may lead to social change, but it is not created for that purpose.

Grierson - to find new meanings & excitement in the familiar through the 'creative treatment of actuality'

- his goals were always social, economic, and political
- "art is a by-product of a job of work done"

Two different approaches to documentary

Flaherty & Grierson :

two poles in the documentary tradition

A documentary filmmaker still has to find a place
between these two poles

Grierson's Contribution

Articulated a basis for documentary cinema
- form & function, aesthetics & ethics

First to use the term 'documentary'

Multifaceted & innovative leadership

Teacher, writer, speaker

Responsible for the development of documentary in English-speaking countries

Responsible for 300+ documentaries and the system that made them possible