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 and 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
A new financing strategy – private sponsorship

Private industry – new source of funding – oil, gas companies

Key films: *Housing Problems* 1935
*Enough to Eat?* 1936

Grierson sets up a model for documentary financing production distribution
influential in many countries – chiefly Canada, National Film Board
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