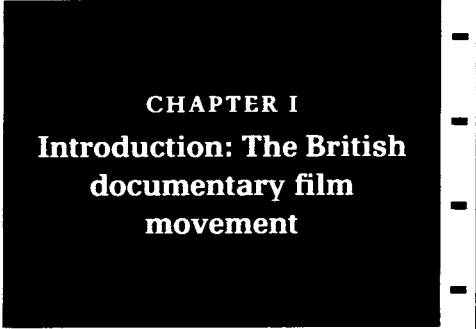


Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-06323-4 - The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1946

Paul Swann

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I
Introduction: The British
documentary film
movement

British filmmaking has been inextricably bound with actuality for almost as long as Hollywood has been associated with the fiction film. "Actuality" and "documentary" are terms as synonymous with Britain as neorealism is with Italy and the New Wave with France. Interestingly, all these trends were attempts to respond to the colonial control of the American film in their respective countries. Each, to coin a phrase that will be used extensively in the course of this book, was an exercise in national projection. The cinematic metaphor is an apt one. Filmmakers in each of these countries rejected the forms and content of American narrative film; yet at the same time they were very indebted to the American example and ensnared by American financial control. All this had to be jettisoned when these filmmakers aspired to build their own national film cultures and national film industries.

Many assessments of the British documentary film have been at great pains to explain the work of John Grierson and his protégés and rivals as a uniquely *British* accomplishment, one that paralleled similar work in journalism, painting, and photography in the 1930s. More recently, some cultural critics have sought to critique work in all of these areas, arguing that this effectively appropriated these forms for a fairly narrow, not to say elite, point of view.¹

My concern in this book, under which I feel all this contemporary criticism can safely be subsumed, is in a series of relationships – administrative, ideological, and intellectual – between the state in Britain and the British documentary film. The United States is perhaps unique in the extent to which its film industry has been and remains controlled by private enterprise. Whatever forms private enterprise has assumed in the last century – and every type has been found in the film industry – it is safe to say that Hollywood is the only major film industry in the world not dependent on public funding. As I have argued elsewhere, the American government and Hollywood – a name that, following common practice, I see to stand for a whole host of technical accomplishments, a worldview, and an approach to narrative film form – have

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invariably worked closely together.² They have never, however, had a relationship akin to that between the British film industry and the British government. This relationship has recently been the basis for an extended study of the British government's film policy, particularly with regards to financial affairs and an examination of the British government's attempts to protect and nurture a domestic film industry.³

The time frame for this study extends from the early 1920s until the conclusion of World War II. A central proposition will be the significance of intellectual links between British documentary theory and practice and American work in the areas not only of filmmaking but also public relations and commercial advertising praxis.

After World War I, the very nature of domestic politics in Britain was permanently changed. The state did not just govern – it also felt an obligation to consult and inform the people it governed. This conception of the work of the state as a two-way street between citizens and authority was very alien to British politics. As R. S. Lambert noted in his 1938 book on propaganda:

The change-over from the strictly limited function of nineteenth century government to the ubiquitous activities of twentieth century government has brought the Administration charged with these services face to face with problems of publicity which are wholly novel to it . . . the old policy of saying as little as possible to the public has proved inapplicable in the case of the newer, wider government and public utility enterprises, which have to make direct contact with the voter.⁴

During the 1920s, as a consequence of the arrival of universal suffrage and the growing extent to which government departments intervened in the lives of the general public, politicians, especially those on the right, were compelled to pay much greater attention to public opinion in Britain than they had previously. During World War I, the British government assumed control over new and wide-ranging areas of social and economic policy. The government's brief was no longer restricted primarily to foreign policy, which was traditionally of little interest to the majority of Britain's population. The vocabulary of democracy itself was new to British politics. Terms such as "general public" and "public opinion" implied a regard for the feelings of the general population very much at odds with the traditionally hierarchic nature of British politics. As Sir Stephen Tallents noted:

Today the state is always being called upon by Parliament to undertake new tasks of organization and to provide new services. At the same time Government has to win consent for its actions, and to secure assistance in carrying them out from a much greater electorate than even twenty years ago.⁵

Some politicians and many civil servants were quick to grasp the importance of modern methods of public relations for official ends. They

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were very impressed by the developments in this field in the United States, and were introduced to these new ideas in Walter Lippmann's influential work on the subject, *Public Opinion*, which went into its first British edition in 1922. This book prepared the way for John Grierson and others who imported American propaganda and public relations expertise into Britain in the 1920s.

John Grierson went to the United States on a Rockefeller scholarship in 1924. There, he was one of a number of Scots who became keenly interested in the methods of mass persuasion that had been developed by big business and the United States government during the war. John Grierson, John Reith, and the advertising magnate, William Crawford, were all Scots of Presbyterian upbringing who noted the manner in which public opinion functioned in the United States. It would be misleading to draw too many parallels between Reith and Grierson. The American influence was by no means as vital for Reith's work in the mass media as it was for Grierson. Reith went to the United States to supervise armaments production in the Remington works. There, he was soon drawn into the extensive public speaking circuit, which, as Charles Stuart has noted, "afforded him opportunities to exercise his powers of moral leadership."⁶

This was an experience curiously similar to Grierson's own background. As a university student pursuing a degree in moral philosophy, Grierson took the opportunity to preach in nearby churches on a regular basis. Some of the lessons he read there are preserved in the Grierson Archive at Stirling University. Reith's visit preceded the massive use of publicity by the American government during the war, however, and he therefore was denied the opportunity to become familiar with these developments. Grierson and Reith were both drawn by missionary zeal to the mass media, which they anticipated employing in an inspirational manner.

Many more comparisons can be made between John Grierson and William Crawford. Crawford headed one of the largest and most progressive advertising agencies in Great Britain. Significantly, during the interwar years, he was frequently called upon to serve on advisory bodies relating to official publicity and public relations in Great Britain. Although they served in different capacities and at very different levels, the paths of Grierson and Crawford crossed fairly often. They were just two of the many Scots and Scots Canadians who exercised an inordinate amount of control over the British mass media in the interwar years.

The religious background of both men affected their experience in the United States. Commentaries on the two men often employed strikingly similar language. It was noted of Crawford, for example:

He allies the zeal of a covenantor with the faith of the prophet, and, with Scottish fanaticism tempered with Glaswegian common sense, he preaches the educational mission of the advertiser and the necessity for modernism in publicity.⁷

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Gervas Huxley commented on Crawford's work as a member of the Empire Marketing Board that "his approach to advertising was inspirational rather than logical."⁸ Similar charges were frequently leveled at Grierson throughout his career. In the field of advertising, Crawford introduced many American publicity and public relations techniques. He strongly believed in market research and in "scientific" advertising, which was based on "the engineering of consent."⁹ He maintained that public education was the basis of good public relations and as he once commented, "advertising is education. It makes people think. And thinking leads to action."¹⁰

Roland Marchand has noted that American advertising men in the 1920s wanted responsibility and respectability and to dissociate their profession's ties from its origins in promoting snake oil and patent medicines. Consequently, American advertising agencies were inclined in one of two philosophical directions: They emphasized either their professionalism and commitment to the client or their public service work and their representation of the interests of the consumer. In many respects, as Marchand notes, these positions were mutually exclusive. Public service became part of the domain of the advertising agencies in the United States, and to a much lesser extent, in Great Britain, during World War I. Then, as Daniel Pope has argued, the advertising profession illustrated that it could be used responsibly and for patriotic goals.¹¹

In the course of World War I, the advertising profession developed a belief that it had a special responsibility to the American public. As Marchand puts it:

Advertising agents constantly spoke of the consuming public as a constituency. They shouldered a dual responsibility: to determine the wants of their constituents, and then to propose new or improved products to the manufacturer who could satisfy those wants.¹²

The American advertising agencies were very prompt in pressing modern art into service. All the modernist art movements of the interwar period were quickly appropriated and incorporated into commercial advertising copy. In this respect, Crawford was no different than his American contemporaries. He also believed that the artist had a key part to play as the translator of advertisers' ideas to the general public.

Crawford was instrumental in spreading thoroughly modern ideas about publicity and public relations within official circles in Great Britain. He was an important member of both the Empire Marketing Board and the Post Office Publicity Committee and acted as publicity advisor to the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Health, and the National Savings Movement. He was also a member of the Art in Industry Council. Everywhere he played a part in obtaining acceptance for the idea of using documentary films as publicity. Crawford's career evidenced the manner

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Figure 1. The young John Grierson.

in which Scots passion for proselytizing found expression through the new techniques of mass persuasion. In the case of John Grierson, it is equally clear that ideas and an outlook forged within the Scottish intellectual and religious tradition were reshaped by first hand experience of developments in publicity and public relations in the United States.

John Grierson believed in the individual fulfilling his or her social obligations. He thought, very much in a nineteenth-century liberal way, that ruling élites had a commitment to inform and educate those over whom they held "stewardship." Yet at the same time, this idea was analogous to the philosophy evolving 3,000 miles away, across the Atlantic. For Grierson, this notion was bedded in his upbringing as deeply as in his own intellectual position. Grierson was an élitist with populist incli-

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nations throughout his life. He was able to articulate his perspective long before any involvement with government departments or film production. As a young university student he was given the opportunity to preach before the congregations of local kirks. In one early sermon delivered in 1920, which addressed some of the themes he would return to again and again during his career – the problems of making large-scale democracy work – he had noted:

Perfecting the world is not an easy thing but it demands all the hardness of hard thinking . . . and it is not the thinking of the few but the thinking of everyone that is needed. And that is because everyone of us have to make decisions and judgments and to get anywhere we have to make them right judgments. When you think of it the whole well-being of the country depends on how each one of us votes.¹³

He recognized the difficulties facing anyone who attempted to undertake the education necessary to enable everyone to take part in decision making. In the United States, Grierson found theorists and practitioners who formulated the same question in political terms. There, as Forsyth Hardy noted:

Men like Walter Lippmann were saying at the time that the older expectations of democratic education were impossible since they appeared to require that the ordinary citizen should know every detail of public affairs as they developed from moment to moment.¹⁴

Grierson and Crawford had both been grounded in an intellectual tradition in which art and cultural production could only be conceived as purposive and functional, not ends in themselves. Grierson's fellow countryman, Thomas Baird, once noted that Scotland had never had the same division between bourgeois "bookish" culture and the popular culture of the masses that existed in England. He noted that there was "less gulf between the culture of the gentleman and the leisure of the worker" in Scotland.¹⁵ Art and culture could therefore be thought of as communication between classes. This was completely outside the English intellectual tradition. In England "culture" was jealously guarded by the intellectuals who anxiously watched the development of mass "Woolworth" culture among the ordinary vulgar people during the 1920s and 1930s. As a prominent representative of this English intellectual tradition, Frank Leavis felt compelled to comment, on the advance of what was, for him, an abhorrent mass culture, that "civilization and culture are coming to be antithetical terms."¹⁶ One of the many contradictions about John Grierson was that although he believed art and culture were potentially a means of universal communication, he remained a devotee of the "high" art that gave rise to Leavis's lament.

Grierson and his biographer gave credit to Walter Lippmann for the

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inspiration that the cinema might prove to be the art form and mass medium capable of undertaking the mass education they both advocated. Before he became familiar with Lippmann, however, Grierson was almost certainly alerted to the political possibilities of the cinema by his study of Lenin. Lenin had been very conscious of the persuasive power of the cinema, so much so that in 1922 he noted that, "of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important."¹⁷ In his early reports for the Empire Marketing Board and the Inter-Departmental Committee on Trade Propaganda and Advertisement, Grierson was prompt to note Lenin's belief in "the power of film for ideological propaganda."¹⁸ Grierson's great innovation was to adapt this revolutionary dictum to the purposes of social democracy.

In America, Grierson was very impressed by the power exercised by two of the mass media, the yellow press and the cinema. He noted that both reached out to precisely those social groups immune to traditional forms of exhortation. Tabloid newspapers and motion pictures were both forms of expression unabashedly aimed at a mass audience. They were anathema to the traditional intellectual aristocracies in both Great Britain and the United States. In Europe they were regarded as primarily American phenomena. Yet Grierson was by no means alone in believing that both could be utilized for serious ends. Cinema, he wrote for an American film trade magazine in 1926, had a unique capacity for uplift:

The modern multitude craves a release from the everyday as all other multitudes before it. It craves participation in a world where dreams come true, where life is more free, more powerful, more pungent, more obviously dramatic . . . In the meanwhile, the old folk worlds, the worlds of established heroes and familiar heroes are so dead and so distant that the multitude have lost touch with them and the imagination of the average people are [*sic*] without a sticking point.¹⁹

Grierson was appalled, however, at the manner in which Hollywood and the fiction feature film met this demand. As he noted elsewhere:

In an age when the faiths, the loyalties and the purposes have been more than usually undermined, mental fatigue – or is it spiritual fatigue – represents a large factor in everyday experience. Our cinema magnate does no more than exploit the occasion. He also, more or less frankly, is a dope pedlar.²⁰

Grierson believed that Hollywood's imperatives were purely commercial, not moral or artistic. He always argued that this had a detrimental effect on the way films were made there:

There are too many cooks and they spoil the broth . . . They don't pull together. A picture has to be a composite effort granted, but the spirit of co-operation is not developed to the point of producing consistently good things. Then again, people are too haphazard in the making of pictures, too scrappy. Above all, they are not

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serious enough. They are energetic enough, but in the real sense of the term they are not serious enough.²¹

Grierson, in common with all those who hoped to appropriate motion pictures for moral and spiritual uplift, was gravely disappointed with the fiction film. He retained his conviction, however, that "it is the destiny of cinema to be the source of imaginative release and everyday inspiration for the common people of the world."²² In this he was joined by many social and cultural critics who believed that the film was untainted by association with highbrow culture. The cinéaste movement and other attempts to intellectualize the motion picture argued that occasionally great artists such as Flaherty, Chaplin, and Von Sternberg were able to produce films that yielded these qualities within the Hollywood system. Generally, however, Grierson believed, the purposive and inspirational film had to come from outside the commercial film industry.

Russian cinema in the 1920s and the early work of Robert Flaherty suggested alternatives to Hollywood for Grierson. Russian cinema was remarkable in many ways in the 1920s. It was a unique fusion of theory and practice in stark contrast to the American commercial cinema, where theory and practice in film almost never mixed. Soviet filmmakers had also dedicated themselves to political education rather than to entertainment. Furthermore, they were civil servants working for the state, not for commercial studios. Lev Kuleshov's unique state film school, Dziga Vertov's experiments with restructuring actuality, Eisenstein's attempts to dramatize actuality, and the nationalization of the film industry in Russia all had a profound influence upon the evolution of the ideology and organization of the British documentary film.

Robert Flaherty's work in ethnographic film was equally important to Grierson, but for very different reasons. Flaherty's romanticization of third-world cultures in films like *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1925) was very different from the Russian attempts to blend modernistic art and contemporary social and political change. Grierson was impressed by Flaherty's use of actuality for his films rather than scripted fiction. He was also intrigued by the manner in which Flaherty financed his first film, *Nanook of the North*, outside the commercial industry. Flaherty had obtained funding from the furriers, Revillon Frères. Furthermore, the film had actually done fairly well in commercial exhibition and in international release. As Grierson noted, *Nanook* "was in the first place an advertisement for furs, though it appeared in theaters all over the world as a straightforward epic of Eskimo life."²³

Subsequently, Grierson often noted how Flaherty's artistry was compromised when he attempted to work with the commercial film industry. He felt Flaherty's *Moana* and *Man of Aran* (1934) were both debased when the film industry attempted to sell them as ordinary commercial feature

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films. As Grierson noted about Flaherty's films and Hollywood: "They have been all too novel for a showmanship built on garish spectacle and a red-hot presentation of the latest curves."²⁴ Ultimately, Grierson found Flaherty's idylls of "the noble savage" as escapist as fiction film make-believe. Initially, however, Flaherty's films served to suggest to Grierson that the creative and dramatic interpretation of actuality was an alternative form of cinematic expression to commercial feature film.

Grierson found actuality wedded to purposive filmmaking in the work of Sergei Eisenstein and some of the other leading Russian filmmakers. In New York, for example, he prepared the subtitles of the English edition of Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). The film had perhaps a greater impact upon Grierson's work than any other film; certainly it is the one upon which his own *Drifters* (1929) was most dependent. He wrote one of the first analyses in English of the use of montage in *Potemkin* for the film trade press in the United States.²⁵ The Russian filmmakers' approach to their material, and in particular, their use of editing to "dramatize" were a profound influence upon the early Griersonian documentary film. Grierson owed a great theoretical and artistic debt to Russian cinema, which he never denied.

Grierson was enthralled by the manner in which the state in Russia controlled the mechanism of film production. Russian filmmaking in the 1920s was an exciting mixture of formal experiment and dedicated political activism. Films were intended to raise the consciousness of their viewers – not to lull them into escapist fantasies. Furthermore, filmmakers worked directly for the state, which, Grierson noted, was radically different from how the film industry operated in the United States. He constantly drew official attention to this instance of how both cinema and the state benefited from government control of the means of film production:

The secret of Russian success in this field is due to the constant governmental drive (in state controlled production units) in favour of propaganda and to a certain freshness of technical approach which this limitation of genre forced on the film artists. By new-found devices of editing and photography they have been able to add dramatic emphasis to what might seem intractable and dull everyday material.²⁶

Drawing upon the Russian example, Grierson always subsequently looked to the state rather than the film industry for support and finance for his work. The early style of the documentary film in Britain also owed much to the Russian example. Many of the first British documentary films, those made in the late 1920s and early 1930s, essentially mimicked the forms and content of Russian montage and heroic worker stereotypes. In many ways Grierson's own *Drifters* did this.

Grierson returned from North America to Britain in January 1927. He

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had gathered together, from his upbringing in Scotland, his experiences in the United States, and his reading of writers as diverse as Lenin and Lippmann, Kant and John Stuart Mill, the intellectual basis for his life's work in communications and public service. He returned to a country already keenly aware of the persuasive possibilities of film. Michael Biddiss has commented of the Europe of the 1920s and 1930s that, "the political relevance of the cinema was most urgently clear to those who supervised cinematic activity in totalitarian settings."²⁷ It is true that the Soviet and Nazi governments were both very prompt to engage the film industry in their countries. In Britain in the 1920s, many groups were as conscious of the political relevance of film as the governments in these totalitarian countries. This awareness sprang from the fact that the British film industry, unlike that of Russia and Germany, was completely dominated by the film industry of another country.

By the mid-1920s the British feature film industry had yielded completely to American domination. The United States achieved ascendancy over the indigenous film industries of virtually every country during World War I. In Britain this became a chronic condition that has persisted until the present day. American film companies had a major stake in British renting interests. Britain was the single biggest source of overseas revenue for the American film industry, accounting for 35 percent of its overseas earnings. In fact, 95 percent of all films shown in Britain at that time were American. Widespread concern about the adverse effects of American films on British and Empire cinema screens produced a prolonged public debate and led ultimately to the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act. The system of quotas that the Act introduced had a slight effect. The British film industry did revive somewhat in the 1930s. Even so, during the supposed revival of the British film industry, attributed to Michael Balcon, Alexander Korda, Max Schach, and others in the 1930s, American films still accounted for over 70 percent of the films shown in British cinemas.²⁸ This figure exaggerates the British recovery. Many of the British films were "quota quickies": films made as cheaply as the law would allow, to be displayed so that renters and exhibitors could fulfill their legal obligations to show British films. These films were often shown when the cinemas were empty; when full, they would be given programs consisting of American feature films.²⁹

The 1927 Cinematograph Films Act was the result of the furor during the previous five years about the American domination of British and Empire cinema screens. In addition to agitation from the British film industry, commercial trade interests feared the effect upon their business of the indirect propaganda carried in these films.³⁰ After its use in a speech by the Prince of Wales in 1923, the phrase "trade follows the film" became a common one in public debate throughout the 1920s. There was also widespread concern over the submergence of national habits and