

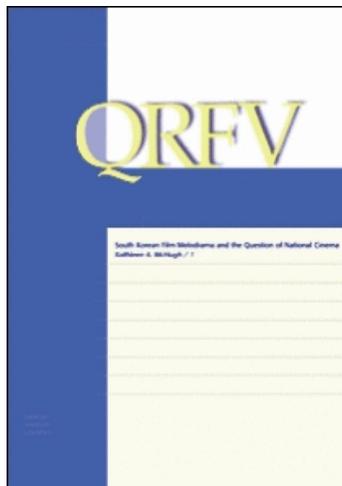
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A Review of "DVD Review: *Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement, 1930-1950*"

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**DVD Review: *Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement, 1930–1950.*
BFI Publishing, 2008**

LEO ENTICKNAP

The cultural legacy of the Documentary Movement is one of the most intensely debated in British cinema history, and the nature of that debate is one of the most starkly polarized. It is a debate that the British Film Institute's (BFI) senior non-fiction curator Patrick Russell seeks to acknowledge in his opening remarks to the book which accompanies this DVD set, noting that "[John] Grierson and his colleagues have been zealously admired by some writers and harshly criticized by others, but they deserve a more balanced final judgment."¹ It is a judgment that the BFI have sought to deliver through the two-pronged package of a twelve-hour selection of the Movement's output and a series of critical essays and screening notes in a 92-page book packaged with the DVDs.

The loosely defined "movement" said to have been founded by Grierson was politically contentious from its outset. Neither Grierson's supporters nor his detractors would dispute that he was initially motivated by the tradition of benevolent socialism that had its roots in the trade union movement, the establishment of the Labour Party and the Workers' Educational Association in the first decade of the twentieth century: in Pat Jackson's words, "the belief that a well-informed public was the assurance of a democracy."² This was really the origin of the long-running controversies surrounding the Documentary Movement and its overall contribution to British film culture.

The emergence of Classical Hollywood and its increasing stranglehold on European exhibition markets as the 1920s progressed cemented his belief that the fiction film was essentially a vehicle for capitalist subvention of the masses ("Hardly were the workmen out of the factory and the apple digested than we were taking a trip to the moon, and, only a year or two later, a trip in full color to the devil"³ sums up his somewhat negative assessment of the then mainstream) and that something had to be done about it.

Added to the mix was a general air of paranoia and hostility to the increasing cultural dominance of American film (another manifestation of which was the intelligentsia's celebration of the European avant garde, hence ambitious young directors such as Hitchcock and Asquith aping the German studio aesthetic in their early work). As a leader writer in the *Daily Express* complained during the public debate, which resulted in the protectionist 1927 Cinematograph Films Act, "We have several million people, mostly women, who, to all intents and purposes, are temporary American citizens."⁴ Informed by these two ideological mantras, therefore, Grierson wanted to take advantage of the cinema's popular appeal, while at the same time ridding it of the fiction film and Hollywood domination.

At this point the consensus ends. Grierson's cheerleaders assert that he succeeded magnificently, and that the "creative treatment of actuality" his films engendered drove British cinema to embrace the everyday and the ordinary in a progressive and popular way, influencing everything in their wake from the British New Wave to investigative journalism on television. One of the principal reasons for this view having been widely accepted among critics and historians is that the movement's leading figures were themselves prolific writers

and self-publicists, notably Paul Rotha, Basil Wright and Harry Watt. Their beliefs were accepted, largely uncritically, by many of the first generation of writers to discuss the Documentary Movement in the past tense, notably Elizabeth Sussex and Ian Aitken.⁵

The Movement's detractors argue that the extent of its cultural importance and influence have been misleadingly exaggerated by a group of writers who were inherently empathetic to their ideals and who thus lacked objectivity. Brian Winston, for example, argues that the Griersonian documentary was rejected by mainstream audiences ("the church refused to fill", as he put it⁶), while others have argued that if there was a realist tradition taking root among British filmmakers, its real origin was in the way cinema drew on other indigenous cultural traditions—the Music Hall influenced performances of Gracie Fields and Will Hay or the regional humor of Mancunian Films, for example—rather than the efforts of a small-scale, elitist group of self-appointed educators of the great unwashed.⁷

While a curatorial output that consists primarily of a selection of the films themselves is limited in the extent to which it can engage with debates around the nature and scale of the reception of the Documentary Movement's work, it can represent and contextualize the scope of that work. A lot of thought has clearly gone into the selection process, and the result succeeds in demolishing a heavily shored-up myth which holds that Griersonian documentary consists essentially of *Night Mail* (1935, dir. Harry Watt et al.), *Ministry of Information* food flashes about how to make a compost heap and the stiff upper lip of Humphrey Jennings. This is both a strength and a weakness.

The strength is that several areas of the movement's activity get an airing that has hitherto been unknown except to political historians of the British media. Most importantly among these is the publication on retail video, for the first time, of a Paul Rotha feature: the polemical *Land of Promise* (1946, Paul Rotha) from which the set takes its name. As the trilogy of films that best represent Rotha at the height of his career (along with *Land of Promise*, *World of Plenty*, 1943 and *The World is Rich*, 1947) were highly political tracts that address specific aspects of the post-war reconstruction, they are not as immediately accessible decades after the event as the iconic "story documentaries" of Watt, Wright and Jennings.

As a result, Rotha tends not to have been given the credit he deserves for many of the techniques he innovated, notably the use of multiple voiceovers to represent opposing viewpoints and animated diagrams to convey factual information. Other bodies of the Documentary Movement's work being published for the first time include a representative selection of the many cinemazine series that emerged in the post-war period, including *Britain Can Make It*, *Mining Review* and *Wealth of the World*. In fact, fully half of the contents of this set are devoted to the post-war period, an acknowledgement that although the concluding phase of the movement's heyday lacked the symbolic and critically canonized resonance of the 1930s and wartime phases (Russell characterizes the films commissioned by the large-scale government publicity infrastructure in the late 1940s as "micro-managing change"⁸), it probably marked their greatest achievements and influence.

The main weaknesses in the curatorial selection are that there are some notable gaps in its coverage, and that it doesn't seek to place the movement's films into the broader context of British film culture during the period under discussion. In the book's chapter on the pre-war opening phase of the Documentary Movement, Ian Aitken identifies the body of films it produced as falling essentially into three categories: political campaigning, instructional or informational, and experimental.⁹ While the former two are extensively covered by the selection of films on offer, the latter is almost entirely absent. Richard Massingham, Len Lye and William Coldstream are nowhere to be found on this set, and although Patrick Russell justifies the omission of any GPO or British Transport titles on

the grounds that they are available on other BFI DVDs, it is simply impossible to provide a representative sample of the Documentary Movement's overall legacy without any (ditto the Colonial Film Unit).

While the emphasis on the post-war period in this package is especially welcome, I can't help wondering if, to a certain extent, the choice of titles for inclusion was informed as much by commercial as by curatorial factors (in particular the omission of *Night Mail*, available on a separate BFI disc complete with remakes, "making ofs" and pontificating expert talking heads ad nauseam). The absence of any of the *March of Time* British series items produced by Grierson, Anstey or Watt (e.g. *England's Tithe War, 1935*¹⁰) is also a notable omission, as is the absence of any mention of the Documentary Movement's involvement with *March of Time* in the book; though copyright issues may have precluded their inclusion. In short, what we have here is the multimedia equivalent of an anthology rather than an encyclopedia.

The overall package is produced to a very high technical quality.¹¹ The film elements used for the transfers appear to be mainly 35mm release prints, and as a result there are some visible and audible imperfections (the scratches and jump cut in the opening titles of *The Balance*, for example). But the timing is impeccable throughout, and the digital cleaning up sufficient to soften serious blemishes in the source elements without being overly aggressive. In particular, the audio tracks do not suffer from the aggressive noise reduction which blights many commercial DVD releases of material from the 1930s and '40s, introducing digital noise and distortion in the process (many of the recent Optimum/Studio Canal releases suffer from this particularly badly).

With an average picture bitrate of between 5 and 6.5mbps the transfers are almost completely free of digital artefacts, except in one or two very high contrast shots. My only criticism of the technical presentation is that some of the soundtracks are encoded as Dolby 1.0 audio streams and others are 2.0 (mono track reproduced on the front left and front right channels). For viewers with 5.1 PC or home cinema active speaker sets this necessitates frequent and distracting adjustments to the volume. Furthermore many of these speaker systems simply cannot reproduce the centre channel by itself with sufficient volume for a mono track to be comfortably audible. Given that the difference in bandwidth is negligible (indeed, when Blu-Ray becomes the consumer standard, there will be no excuse for encoding the principal soundtrack as anything other than uncompressed PCM), I do wish that DVD mastering technicians would avoid the use of 1.0 soundtracks. These discs are PAL and region 2 encoded, meaning that viewers outside Europe will need a multi-region player and PAL-compatible player or display device.

In opting for this combination of DVDs and a book, BFI publishing appears in essence to have followed the highly successful precedent of the US National Film Preservation Foundation's *Treasures From American Archives* series, which has recently completed its third volume. The extensively illustrated book provides an excellent contextual overview and screening notes for the individual titles, though the choice of contributors appears to privilege the Documentary Movement's celebrants and totally excludes its detractors. The absence of any contributions from more skeptical historians of the movement such as Nicholas Pronay, Paul Swann or Brian Winston compromises any overall editorial claim to objectivity. The substantive articles also lack any citations or references, which sadly limit their usefulness as a teaching or research resource. In addition to the films themselves, the set also includes a 40-minute edited compilation of interview footage with surviving filmmakers from the movement, and footage of a short lecture on its origins, given by Grierson at London's National Film Theatre in 1959.

While the comments and recollections therein are entirely unremarkable, they make a useful counterpoint to the essays and program notes. The former is carefully edited to reference the films included elsewhere on the DVDs. Despite some minor shortcomings, the combination of a largely unpublished selection of films, very high quality technical production values and an extremely competitive price makes this set an essential addition to institutional libraries and the private collections of students and researchers of non-fiction cinema.

Leo Enticknap is a lecturer in cinema in the Institute of Communications Studies at the University of Leeds. His research is currently focused on the history, cultural practice and ethics of archival film preservation and restoration. More about his work and research can be found at www.enticknap.net.

Notes

1. Patrick Russell, Introduction, in *Land of Promise* DVD set book (editor uncredited, London, British Film Institute, 2008), p. 4.
2. Interviewed in *Close Up: Recollections of British Documentary* (UK, 2008, dir. Shona Barrett & Caroline Millar), *Land of Promise* disc 4, 09'10"–09'23".
3. John Grierson, 'The Course of Realism' in Charles Davy (ed.), *Footnotes to the Film*, London, Lovat Dickson (1937), p. 138.
4. *Daily Express*, 18 March 1927, p. 6.
5. Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary*, Berkeley, University of California Press (1975); Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Movement*, London, Routledge (1990).
6. Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*, London, British Film Institute (1995), p. 62.
7. See also Nicholas Pronay (ed.), 'John Grierson and the Documentary: 60 Years On', special edition of *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (vol. 9, no. 3, 1999).
8. Russell, 'The Post-War British Documentary Movement', *Land of Promise* book, pp. 50–51.
9. Ian Aitken, 'The British Documentary Movement in the 1930s', *Land of Promise* book, pp. 8–11.
10. Released in *The March of Time* US series, vol. 3, no. 2 (30 September 1936).
11. For the purposes of this review, the discs were viewed using a Samsung DV1080P player, connected by DVI/HDMI to a Proxima DP6100 projector, and viewed progressively in their native resolution (750 × 576), without any upscaling. The screen used was approximately 2 m × 1.5, with a measured 'white light' brightness of 16ft-l.

Hong Kong New Wave Cinema (1978–2000) by Pak Tong Cheuk. Bristol, UK, and Chicago: Intellect Books, 2008

JOELLE COLLIER

This book provides an overview of the influential group of Hong Kong filmmakers who began their cinematic careers at the end of the 70s. Trained abroad (mostly) and then honing their craft and developing their styles in the burgeoning Hong Kong television industry,