

# BRITISH CINEMA, PAST AND PRESENT

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## THIS MODERN AGE AND THE BRITISH NON-FICTION FILM

*Leo Enticknap*

### Short films in the British exhibition marketplace

Why do the cinemagoers of this country have to tolerate such trashy 'second-feature' films? One is attracted to a cinema by quite a good film about which we have read critics' views, and having seen it one has either to walk out or sit through the most amazing rubbish, which, I am sure, no newspaper critic is ever allowed to see. The point is that most of these silly second features are American-made. Does the British film industry really mean to tell us that it cannot replace this muck with good 'shorts'?

(Letter to the *Daily Herald*, 6 August 1946)

One month after this letter was published, the Rank Organisation launched *This Modern Age*, a monthly series of short documentaries. Forty-one films were released between September 1946 and January 1951, each focusing on a specific aspect of politics, international relations or current affairs. Each one was generally around twenty minutes long, a running time that restricted the exhibition opportunities available to the series. In the 1940s, the vast majority of cinemas programmed their films as double features in three-hour slots, which meant that a typical performance consisted of two films, each lasting an hour to ninety minutes. A current newsreel (seven and a half minutes), a selection of advertising films and trailers and a live performance by a band or organist (five to ten minutes in a typical suburban cinema) was usually sufficient to fill the time available. It was only on the rare occasions when both features were unusually short that any additional material could be included in an average performance at a mainstream cinema. It is difficult to know how widely *This Modern Age* was distributed at the time. Writing in 1950, Paul Rotha speculated that 'Mr. Rank controls some 560 theatres in the United Kingdom, in which, presumably, this screen magazine can regularly play'.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, I have been unable to unearth any evidence that might confirm these figures.

*This Modern Age* was an unprecedented venture in the history of the commercial British film industry. Quite apart from the prevailing exhibition practices, the institutional conditions under which producers operated also made short films uneconomic. In fact, the only comparable project was the Central Office of Information's monthly release programme, inherited from a propaganda campaign started by the Ministry of Information during the war and financed entirely by the taxpayer (the programme continued until 1952).

The terms on which cinemas hired films from distributors, which were effectively dictated by the American-owned distribution outlets operating in the UK, ensured that the vast majority of an exhibitor's rental fees paid for a main feature, or 'A' picture. Only a tiny percentage was spent on the rest of the programme. A government report on distribution and exhibition estimated that during the 1947–1948 financial year, £27.5 million was paid in film rental fees, of which only £2.5 million went to the 'supporting programme'.<sup>2</sup> It was for such reasons that the practice of double-feature programming had become firmly established. The 'amazing rubbish' condemned by the *Daily Herald's* correspondent was the second features, or 'B' pictures, supplied by distributors at very low rates as part of a package deal. However unpopular they were among a vocal minority, most cinemas could not replace the 'B' picture with other supporting material even if they wanted to, as this would have meant a considerable increase in their rental outgoings. In 1948, 94 per cent of cinemas programmed double-features, while only 6 per cent 'invariably showed a single feature picture with a supporting programme limited to short films'.<sup>3</sup>

If this was not enough to deter the potential short film producer, it is worth bearing in mind that, despite the complaints from a vocal minority, double-features met with a considerable degree of public approval. When a questionnaire was circulated among customers of the Granada cinema chain in 1946, 46 per cent of respondents (a clear majority) stated that their preferred programme consisted of 'two features, newsreel and organ solo'.<sup>4</sup> Interviewed in 1950, the manager of the Odeon Leicester Square pointed out that cinema customers could not be expected to understand the intricacies of the financial arrangements made between exhibitors and distributors. His conclusion was that single-feature programmes were unpopular:

During the war some cinemas experimented with single-feature programmes but the public thought it an indirect form of profiteering, since other cinemas in the same district offered longer programmes for the same price of admission. The emphasis, therefore, is on quantity rather than on quality.<sup>5</sup>

Why, then, did a giant industrial combine like the Rank Organisation decide to invest considerable resources on a regular series of non-fiction shorts, which could not easily be accommodated into mainstream cinema

programming practice and which stood little chance of ever making a profit? The answer lies in the complex relationship between the commercial film industry, the political establishment and the intellectual film culture of the day.

### *The March of Time* and the British documentary movement

*This Modern Age* probably has its origins in the British series of its better-known American counterpart, *The March of Time* (*MOT*), which was launched in the UK in the autumn of 1935. *MOT* was a spin-off from the current affairs magazine *Time*, and, like the print version, quickly developed a reputation for polemical editorialising, for a journalistic style that was frequently compared with that of the popular press, and for causing political controversy. The quickly-paced visuals, stentorian commentary and strident music score which characterised *MOT* proved a popular formula: in June 1936 its distributor, Radio Pictures, published an advertisement claiming that *MOT* was being shown in 800 British cinemas, approximately one-fifth of the total exhibition market.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its status as a commercial entertainment product, one surprising aspect of *MOT*'s British operation is that when a production facility was opened in London in August 1936, *MOT*'s European director, Richard de Rochement, immediately employed John Grierson as a consultant.<sup>7</sup> Grierson was the leading figure in the British documentary film movement, who believed that the cinema was unable to perform an educational or public service role in the private sector. During the 1930s they had built up a Government-run film production and distribution infrastructure (the GPO Film Unit and its associated non-theatrical distribution activities), analogous to the Reithian BBC in nature if not in scale. Grierson himself repeatedly and vociferously condemned what he called the 'Woolworth intentions' of the commercial film industry, arguing that the need for films to be financially successful was often culturally disadvantageous.<sup>8</sup> At first sight, therefore, it seems surprising that the producers of a film series designed to popularise current affairs should wish to avail themselves of his services.

What is even more surprising is that Grierson not only worked for *MOT*, in which capacity he enabled a number of documentary movement activists to produce items for the series, but also supported it enthusiastically throughout the remainder of his time in the UK (he emigrated to Canada in 1939). In response to growing criticism of what some documentarists regarded as the ideologically polemical stance of a number of *MOT* releases, Grierson argued that 'in the atmosphere of the cinema, where political discussion is only a curtain-raiser to Garbo, complication is the devil'.<sup>9</sup> In other words, if *MOT* was to be commercially successful, it would have to

make compromises in its coverage of political issues. Several revisionist historians have concluded that Grierson's attempts to secure exhibition for the documentary movement's output essentially failed – as Brian Winston elegantly puts it, 'the church refused to fill'.<sup>10</sup> This perhaps explains why Grierson was attracted to a genre of non-fiction film which had the institutional backing of a major Hollywood distributor and which was shown on a significant scale.

In the context of the 1930s, however, Grierson's involvement with, and endorsement of, *MOT* can be seen as an institutional anomaly. *MOT* operated according to a very different agenda from that of the British newsreels, or the producers of commercial 'shorts' or the documentary movement: indeed, Grierson came under fire from some of his colleagues who believed that his work with de Rochement was undermining the movement's ideals. Paul Rotha, for example, believed that *MOT* was 'a very bad influence before the war on a part of British documentary', while an anonymous *World Film News* editorial warned that 'a less sensational atmosphere of presentation must be sought' if *MOT* were to continue to receive the movement's support.<sup>11</sup>

The association between Grierson and *MOT* is important to a full understanding of subsequent developments in that it established the precedent of a company from the private sector seeking to adopt a public service function. The British series of *MOT* established three further precedents that influenced the thinking behind *This Modern Age*. First, Time Inc. and its owner, Henry Luce, conceived *MOT* not in order to make a profit in its own right, but rather as a vehicle for publicising *Time* magazine and their other media interests. Second, the bulk of the rental income generated by *MOT* was from the US. Despite the overheads incurred by the British operation, British exhibitors were thus able to pick up the finished product for a significantly lower price than one that would realistically be needed to recoup production costs ('B' features were distributed on a similar basis). Finally, the material produced by the British operation represented a collaboration between public and private sector film-makers, even if most of the compromising came from Grierson and his associates.

During the course of the Second World War things changed dramatically. The documentary movement had grown in stature and prominence, mainly as a result of their role in the war effort as a key element in the government's propaganda and public information campaigns. Another documentary compromise had achieved commercial success – the 'story documentary' – a formula in which wartime military operations were depicted in fictional narratives but with a cast of non-professional actors and an emphasis on authenticity in the *mise-en-scène*. As Andrew Higson has observed, part of the rationale behind the development of this genre was the need for government propaganda to reach a mass audience.<sup>12</sup> The unprecedented popularity of these films was interpreted in another way by the growing number of press critics and intellectuals who took an interest in film during and immediately

after the war. They argued that the documentary movement had promoted the development of a 'realistic' style of film-making within commercial studios, and expressed a preference for this 'quality' British cinema on the grounds that it was closer to 'reality' than what they perceived as Hollywood escapism.

Although this position is rather more complex than the clear-cut moral elitism of Grierson in the 1930s, it still retained a sense of ideological opposition between the notion of documentary (intellectual and with educationalist connotations) and mainstream cinema as a form of mass-produced popular culture. As John Ellis points out in his definitive analysis of the ideological stance taken by these wartime film critics, their celebration of 'quality' cinema often placed them at odds with distributors and exhibitors.<sup>13</sup> Even so, the wartime period saw an increased degree of mainstream acceptance of the documentary movement's ideas and output.

At the same time, *The March of Time* was, by critical consent, in decline. By the end of the war its journalistic style had come to be regarded as a cultural symbol of the 1930s and as such less suited to the current affairs of the day. In 1949, Edgar Anstey reflected the views of many when he commented that 'today, [MOT] has become a medium for the editor rather than the director. The shooting is rarely imaginative and the characters are eliminated rather than interpreted.'<sup>14</sup>

The final significant wartime change relevant to this discussion is the emergence of Joseph Arthur Rank as the most powerful film industry executive in Britain in the 1940s.<sup>15</sup> By 1944, Rank owned or directly controlled approximately one-third of Britain's cinemas and two-thirds of the production, post-production and distribution infrastructure. This was an unprecedented degree of vertical integration (comparable only to the emergence of Gaumont-British following the 1927 Cinematograph Act) and attracted intense and sustained criticism from Rank's political opponents. They accused him of monopolistic and anti-competitive practices and in 1943 the Board of Trade initiated a public inquiry which resulted in a highly critical report, *Tendencies to Monopoly in the Cinematograph Films Industry* (known as the Palache Report, after the inquiry's chairman). Published the following year, it left no one in doubt as to the committee's main area of interest: one columnist described the report as 'really an account of Mr. Rank's recent business activities'.<sup>16</sup>

### The organisation and production of *This Modern Age*

It was about this time that the idea for *This Modern Age* (TMA) began to take shape. From the evidence available as to who worked on the series, the range of subjects it covered, the ways in which it approached them and the production values it offered, it is possible to see TMA very much as a product of its institutional background. Reflected in the operation and

output of this series are the commercial precedents established by *MOT*, the cultural agenda promoted by the documentary movement and an attempt to address the political issues raised by the establishment of the Rank Organisation as a large industrial conglomerate.

*TMA* was put together by a separate production unit within the Rank Organisation, an arrangement that was very much in line with Rank's policy of operating several autonomous companies, with all the shares deposited in a single holding company.<sup>17</sup> By 1949, the permanent staff of *TMA* numbered forty-four.<sup>18</sup> The producer and director in charge of the unit was Sergei Nolbandov, a Russian lawyer who had emigrated to Britain in the late 1920s and entered the film industry. By the outbreak of the war he was working for Ealing, where he produced and directed a number of propaganda features, before briefly joining the Films Division of the Ministry of Information. At the end of the war he was employed by Rank to begin preparatory work on *TMA*.<sup>19</sup> Nolbandov's work at Ealing offers an important clue as to what his priorities for the series were likely to be. The first feature he directed, *Ships With Wings* (1941), told the story of an aircraft carrier pilot who, having compromised himself as the result of an affair with a married woman, subsequently sacrifices his life in order to ensure the success of a mission. The film was criticised by press commentators and documentary movement writers for being overly melodramatic and not 'realistic' enough and for trivialising the 'why-we-fight' agenda that represented the film's apparent propaganda objective. As Jeffrey Richards' analysis of the Mass Observation study into the reception of this film shows, however, the combination of documentary authenticity and a romantic melodrama was immensely successful with audiences.<sup>20</sup> Nolbandov evidently had the ability to make realism popular, to implement the same sort of ideological compromise which enabled the success of the *March of Time* British series and the wartime story documentaries. It is tempting to speculate that this was what brought him to Rank's attention when *TMA* was in the planning stage.

The other key *TMA* personnel consisted of writers and directors drawn from a literary or journalistic background, and technicians taken from the periphery of the feature film industry. With the exception of assistant music director John Hollingsworth,<sup>21</sup> none of the regular *TMA* production staff had any significant connection with the documentary movement.<sup>22</sup> Immediately below Nolbandov, with the title of 'associate producer and literary editor', was George Ivan Smith, an Australian radio journalist and former head of the BBC Pacific Service. Others who worked on the research and script development for the series included the novelist and playwright James Lansdale Hodson, whose only significant film work before *TMA* was writing the commentary script for *Desert Victory* (Roy Boulting, 1943), and Robert Waithman, former diplomatic correspondent of the *News Chronicle*. The commentators included Bernard Miles and Robert Harris, the technical staff featured cameramen Ted Moore and Clifford Hornby, and the music



director was Muir Mathieson, the internationally known composer and conductor of feature film scores who, in John Huntley's words, 'put British movie music on the map'.<sup>23</sup>

What is striking about this list of personnel is that members of the documentary movement were virtually excluded from the production of *TMA*. Why should this have been the case? There is evidence to suggest that its leading figures believed that the series did not live up to their expectations. Interviewed in 1977, Pat Jackson wrote it off as 'rather a poor imitation' of *MOT*, implying that a magazine film format inherently limited the scope for debate, which was the documentary movement's ideal, and that the popular screen journalism of *MOT* was its only feasible application.<sup>24</sup> Edgar Anstey had expressed similar sentiments in a contemporary article, noting that 'I am likely to be more conscious of aim than of achievement'.<sup>25</sup>

Even if Jackson and his colleagues were simply not interested in *TMA*, another possibility is that Rank's motivation for initiating the project was to appease his critics. Both the documentary movement and left-wing elements within the pre-1945 coalition government had taken an anti-Rank position in the monopoly debate. In particular, the Palache Report noted the limited opportunities available to producers without access to Rank-owned studio space and exhibition outlets. By capitalising on the cultural kudos of the British 'realist' cinema and offering a forum for political and social debates in a mainstream setting, Rank could claim to be practising responsible capitalism by fulfilling a public service obligation. The political film-maker Jill Craigie (whose B-feature documentary *The Way We Live* (1946) was also underwritten by Rank) expressed the situation rather less discreetly when she described *TMA* as 'a sop to the socialists'.<sup>26</sup>

Although *TMA* did not have any institutional connection with the documentary movement, the stated objectives of the series will seem familiar to anyone conversant with Grierson's writings. These objectives stressed that the series offered an impartial account of the issues covered, that it was intended to educate the viewer, and that it offered a deeper understanding of the subjects under discussion than anything available in the newsreels or popular press. A catalogue issued to cinemas in 1950 by General Film Distributors (GFD, the distribution arm of the Rank Organisation) claimed that:

Just as a comparison can be made between a newsreel and the news page of a daily paper, so can *This Modern Age* be regarded as the film equivalent of the feature page, which provides the public with a clear idea of what it is that makes the news. *This Modern Age* is not biased in any way. It tackles the problems of nations and peoples who are playing important parts in the political and economic structures of the post-war world. Their difficulties are boldly explained and all possible solutions are given a hearing. *This Modern*

*Age* can be relied upon to give a complete and clear-sighted picture of every situation with which it deals. It is this quality which has lifted its reputation above that of any other feature and given it first place in the minds of cinema-goers.<sup>27</sup>

Rank's and Nolbandov's aims thus had much in common with those of the documentary movement at the end of the war. *TMA* was to be international in scale, it emphasised impartiality, and, crucially, it linked these attributes to the notion of 'quality'. This was all very similar to the arguments being put forward by their state sector counterparts. Basil Wright, for example, wrote in 1947 that 'it is in the international field that his [the documentarist's] major contribution is to be made', while *TMA*'s emphasis on discursivity is certainly consistent with Grierson's educationalist ethos.<sup>28</sup> But the political function Rank had in mind for *TMA* was to defuse the criticism of his dominant economic position, much of which originated from within the documentary movement. Thus it is hardly surprising that Rank sought to appropriate the movement's ideas but not its members.

### *This Modern Age: style and content*

Stylistically, *TMA* resembled a conventional newsreel, although the production values were notably higher. The bulk of each twenty-minute film consisted of mute actuality footage in black and white, accompanied by a voice-over commentary and incidental music. Sometimes issues were dealt with in a fictionalised narrative format, but documentary exposition or debate were more common organisational models. Interviews with live sound were used more frequently than in most newsreels, and the music was specially composed or arranged, rather than adapted from library material. This was probably due to the higher budgets and longer production schedules available to the series. One aspect that clearly distinguished *TMA* from most other newsreels and documentaries dealing with current affairs was that all footage was originated on studio-quality 35mm stock, even if this meant transporting large quantities of heavy equipment over long distances. As one newsreel cameraman observed, '*TMA* looked beautiful, but it was like cracking a nut with a sledgehammer'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, even today, some of the issues seem remarkable for their aesthetic quality, notably the cinematography in 'Antarctic Whale Hunt' (issue 12, October 1947) and the clarity of the sound recording in a sequence of tribal dancing from 'Challenge in Nigeria' (issue 19, June 1948).

Although there is a certain amount of overlap, the subjects covered by *TMA* can be broadly divided into four categories: those dealing with domestic political issues (ten films); those dealing with domestic social issues (eleven films); those dealing with international affairs (twenty films); and those eight of the films dealing with international affairs which discussed the forthcoming

or putative independence of British Empire colonies and protectorates. Notable stylistic differences can be found between the films in these categories.

Probably the closest to the 'filmed debate' model described by GFD's press release were the issues dealing with the Empire, of which the first, 'Palestine' (issue 6, April 1947) is a representative example. The film examines in turn Jewish and Arab claims to the territory, before covering the more recent events that the narrator argues had precipitated the immediate crisis. Prominent among these were the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem by Jewish terrorists in July 1946, and links between senior Arab officials and the Nazis. The commentary of the film and the text of the press release issued by GFD stress that the Jewish and Arab cases are treated with scrupulously even handedness. Extremists from both sides are condemned 'with equal force', and it is argued that Britain was struggling to maintain order in the territory under a League of Nations mandate with little or no help from the wider international community.<sup>30</sup>

Set against the emphasis on impartiality with which the Jewish and Arab cases are presented, there is a less prominent but equally discernible anti-American undercurrent to the film. Thus in the sequence dealing with the King David Hotel bombing, the commentary states that the Jewish



Plate 18 Filmed debate: a scene from 'Palestine' (1947), the sixth issue of *This Modern Age*.

terrorists justify their actions on the grounds of American demands that Britain should immediately admit 100,000 Holocaust refugees. In the closing section we are told that, 'The USA has conflicting interests, which led to support for anti-British Jews at home and appeasement of Arabs for new American oil concessions in Saudi-Arabia.'<sup>31</sup> These sentiments are certainly consistent with the British Government's claims that the USA was hindering its attempts at reducing political tension in Palestine, which stemmed in part from the British Foreign Secretary's alleged 'pathological bitterness' toward President Truman.<sup>32</sup> All this tends to support the view that *TMA* represented a concession on Rank's part toward the Labour Government of the time, as did the numerous *TMA* issues dealing with domestic politics which broadly supported government policy. In a review of one issue, Joan Lester suspected that 'some of Mr. Rank's Tory friends were shocked at the most telling tributes the Labour Government has ever had'.<sup>33</sup>

Although these political undercurrents were an important element in several *TMA* issues, it was the emphasis on even-handedness that captured the attention of the majority of reviewers and critics. An anonymous *Documentary News Letter* reviewer spoke for many in concluding that 'the balance struck leaves each side equally deserving, each equally blame-worthy'.<sup>34</sup> The same approach and critical reception can be found to some degree with all the *TMA* issues on international affairs and are strongly apparent in those dealing with Empire countries. For example, in 'Sudan Dispute' (issue 8, April 1947), the Sudanese arguments for independence are contrasted with concerns that an independent Sudan would threaten Egyptian security and destabilise international relations within the region. 'Challenge in Nigeria' (issue 19, June 1948) describes the abolition of slavery and the evolution of a democratic system of administration under British rule. It then warns that 'it will not be enough to hand the Government over to an educated minority, or to return the people to the lordship of traditional rulers'.<sup>35</sup>

In the *TMA* films concerned with domestic political and social issues, the structure of each film was less rigid and the producers evidently did not feel the need to be quite as circumspect in their arguments. Overt support for government initiatives can be found in many of the releases in the political category. 'Homes for All' (issue 1, September 1946) strongly advocates town planning and the government's programme for rebuilding the blitzed inner cities. 'Coal Crisis' (issue 7, April 1947) defended the nationalisation of the coal industry to such an extent that it is alleged that Rank was reluctant to release it.<sup>36</sup> 'Development Areas' (issue 9, May 1947) describes Britain's industrial heritage as 'shot through with the tragedy of unemployment' and then explains how the Ministry of Works is attempting to promote industrial regeneration by subsidising development in the worst hit regions.<sup>37</sup> 'Education for Living' (issue 27, April 1948) describes the improvements in primary and secondary schools brought about by the 1948 Education Act.

'Fight for a Fuller Life' (issue 30, September 1949) does the same for further and higher education.

In terms of their filmic style, the most variable category of *TMA* issues was that dealing with social affairs. A greater degree of aesthetic and technical experimentation is evident in this group of films, while the arguments they put forward tended to be less complex. 'Scotland Yard' (issue 2, October 1946) uses the investigation of a petty crime as the basis for a miniature story documentary, into which is slotted some quickly paced action, a tightly constructed but detailed commentary, nuanced cinematography and intricate editing. A tense atmosphere is created by the total absence of diegetic or ambient sound and a bare minimum of music, while the commentary alternates between a third-person narrative and direct address to the spectator ('if you have ever been convicted, you are indexed here, under your name and every one of your aliases').<sup>38</sup> The message of the film is notably unsubtle, arguing that the purchase of illicit goods from black marketeers, or 'spivs', indirectly supports far more serious organised crime (the film was re-released the following year as part of a police campaign against the black market).<sup>39</sup> But the overall impression given by the film is of aesthetic innovation rather than social commentary.

The less formal approach that characterised this component of *TMA*'s output sometimes appears naïve and overly simplistic. Viewed today, the most entertaining issue in the whole series is probably 'The British Are They Artistic?' (issue 16, February 1948). Just as press critics espoused 'quality' cinema, the commentary of this film makes a crude distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture. The film-makers cut between Myra Hess giving a concert in the National Gallery and a dance band in a nightclub, and between bookshop shelves containing monographs on art history and volumes entitled *Virgins from Hell* and *Bed for Beginners: Being a Gentleman's Guide to Scientific Seduction in Eight Easy Lessons*.<sup>40</sup> The film culminates in an interview with Robert Donat, who distinguishes between 'good' and 'bad' films according to the degree to which they reflect a populist or elitist culture. Interestingly, the film also includes a strong condemnation of entertainment tax, which was vehemently opposed by the Rank Organisation at that time.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion

If we accept the argument that *TMA* was regarded by Rank in part as a political bargaining chip in his dealings with the Attlee Government, then the financial crisis within the Rank Organisation which precipitated its end reflected the wider collapse of that relationship. On 6 August 1947 the Board of Trade imposed a 75 per cent *ad valorem* tax on box-office receipts from all imported films as a result of failed trade negotiations with the Americans. In response Hollywood placed a blanket embargo on all exports

to the UK. The Rank Organisation was the only British company with any realistic hope of producing a sufficient volume of films to prevent cinema closures, and Rank agreed to underwrite a huge production drive of mass-produced, low-budget feature films. The tax, and subsequently the American embargo, was lifted the following spring just as the first batch of films was ready for release. These films stood little chance of competing at the box office against a nine-month backlog of Hollywood 'A' features. The extent to which Rank felt aggrieved at the government's U-turn is a matter for debate, but what is a matter of record is that the Rank Organisation sustained pre-tax losses of £16,286,521 between the imposition of the tax and the annual shareholders' meeting in September 1949.<sup>42</sup> At that meeting, Rank stated that 'Even if all our films had been of the quality that we had hoped, the unusually strong competition would have made it difficult to achieve satisfactory results'.<sup>43</sup> During the following year the production side of the Rank Organisation underwent major retrenchment. *This Modern Age*, as a politically motivated loss leader, was one of the first victims. On 15 December 1949 a Rank spokesman told a press conference that the series would be terminated once the twelve issues currently in production were complete.<sup>44</sup>

Although the immediate events leading to the closure of *This Modern Age* were specific to the Rank Organisation, it echoed a general trend of contraction for the British non-fiction film. Another consequence of the Rank restructuring was that the production facilities of the two newsreels it owned, Gaumont-British and Universal, were merged in 1949, after which the only difference between the two was in celebrity commentators. The agreement between the Cinema Exhibitors' Association and the Central Office of Information (COI) allowing for the exhibition of government information films came under pressure towards the end of 1949. The Crown Film Unit was subsequently closed down by the incoming Conservative Government in 1952; with it went the COI monthly releases. Meanwhile television current affairs was beginning to make its presence felt: the BBC Television Newsreel was launched in January 1948, expanded to three editions per week in 1950 and relaunched as a daily programme, *News and Newsreel*, in July 1954.

*This Modern Age* was very much a product of its time. The approaches it used to tackle political and ideological issues had their cinematic precedents in *The March of Time*, the work of the documentary movement before and during the war and in Nolbandov's background in what Grierson might have called 'the commercial treatment of actuality'. There was little commercial justification for *TMA*, as the prevailing distribution and exhibition practices prevented the series from earning any significant revenue. In the absence of such justification, *TMA* was also designed to fulfil a political objective for the Rank Organisation; when it became clear that the series was no longer achieving that objective then the writing was already on the

wall, as it was for a number of other political institutions. The range of themes and subjects covered by *TMA*, and the unique ways in which its producers tried to make documentaries with entertainment value, reflect these factors very closely. It is no coincidence that the dates of the series almost exactly mirror those of the 1945–1951 Labour Governments.

## NOTES

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- 1 *Public Opinion*, 8 December 1950.
- 2 Board of Trade, *Distribution and Exhibition of Cinematograph Films* (Cmd. 7837), 23 November 1949, para. 41, p. 19.
- 3 *Ibid.*, para. 10, p. 7.
- 4 *The Bernstein Film Questionnaire Report, 1947* (copy in BFI library), p. 16.
- 5 'The cinema programme in Great Britain', in R. Manvell (ed.) *The Cinema, 1951*, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1951, p. 186.
- 6 *World Film News*, June 1936, vol. 1, no. 3, inside front cover.
- 7 See J. Beveridge, *John Grierson: Film Master*, New York, Macmillan, 1978, pp. 112–17.
- 8 J. Grierson, 'First principles of documentary', in H.F. Hardy (ed.) *Grierson on Documentary*, London, Collins, 1946, p. 80.
- 9 J. Grierson, 'Pity the journalist', *World Film News*, October 1936, vol. 1, no. 7, pp. 6–7.
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- 11 P. Rotha, 'Afterword (1972)', in Ian Aitken (ed.) *The Documentary Film Movement*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, p. 161; *World Film News*, April 1936, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 3.
- 12 A. Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 203–4.
- 13 J. Ellis, 'The quality film adventure: British critics and the cinema, 1942–48', in A. Higson (ed.) *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, London, Cassell, 1996, p. 67.
- 14 E. Anstey, 'The magazine film', *Penguin Film Review*, May 1949, no. 9, p. 21.
- 15 See A. Wood, *Mr. Rank*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1952; and G. Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry*, London, Routledge, 1993.
- 16 *New Statesman and Nation*, 12 August 1944.
- 17 On the financial structure of the Rank Organisation, see Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 106–202, and Macnab, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–34.
- 18 Press release issued by This Modern Age Ltd. (copy in BFI library microfiche).
- 19 On Nollbandov, see C. Barr, *Ealing Studios*, 2nd edn, London, Studio Vista, 1993, pp. 13–38; and C. Moorehead, *Sidney Bernstein: A Biography*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1984, p. 164.
- 20 J. Richards, 'Wartime British audiences and the class system: The case of *Ships With Wings*', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 1987, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 130–1.
- 21 While with the RAF Symphony Orchestra, he had arranged and conducted the music for several documentaries, including *Target for Tonight* (Harry Watt, 1941).

- 22 TMA, issue 7, 'Coal Crisis' (released in April 1947) was jointly produced by Nolbandov and Edgar Anstey, who had been involved in the documentary movement before the war.
- 23 J. Huntley, *British Film Music*, London, Skelton Robinson, 1947, p. 37.
- 24 E. Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977, p. 166.
- 25 Anstey, op. cit., p. 17.
- 26 Macnab, op. cit., p. 136.
- 27 GFD release catalogue, 1950: copy in 'General Film Distributors' subject file, BFI Library.
- 28 B. Wright, 'Documentary today', *Penguin Film Review*, January 1947, no. 2, p. 43.
- 29 J. Ballantyne (ed.) *Researcher's Guide to British Newsreels, vol. 2*, London, British Universities' Film and Video Council, 1988, p. 33.
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- 31 'Palestine'. Source: NFTVA, print no. 2029715B, reel 2, 868-899ft.
- 32 D. Leitch, 'Explosion at the King David Hotel' in Michael Sissons and Philip French (eds) *Age of Austerity, 1945-51*, 2nd edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 64.
- 33 *Reynolds News*, 19 September 1948 (microfiche in BFI Library).
- 34 *Documentary News Letter*, 1947, vol. 6, no. 56, p. 89.
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- 36 Sussex, op. cit., p. 166.
- 37 'Development Areas'. Source: NFTVA, print no. 43289A, reel 1, 67 91ft.
- 38 'Scotland Yard'. Source: NFTVA, print no. 2030208B, reel 1, 544 570ft.
- 39 *London Evening Standard*, 16 September 1947 (microfiche in BFI Library).
- 40 'The British Are They Artistic?'. Source: NFTVA, print no. 47519A, reel 1, 752 759ft.
- 41 Ibid., reel 2, 63 90ft.
- 42 J. Arthur Rank's statement to shareholders, September 1949 (copy in 'Rank Organisation' subject file, BFI Library).
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1949 (microfiche in BFI Library).