

Grierson on Documentary

THE LAST INTERVIEW

John Grierson, son of a Scottish minister, was the prophet of an idea which was breath-taking in a day when no one used film for anything except entertainment: he proposed that it should be poetry and that it should address itself to the actual social problems and possibilities of modern industrial society. Armed with guile, determination, and a caustic wit (which can be studied in his book, Grierson on Documentary) he trained a generation of young directors, and produced a host of films—in which ordinary working people appeared on the screen for the first time. He set up the National Film Board of Canada; he traveled about the world thinking and talking about communications problems—to which, as in this interview, he often proposed novel approaches. Crusty, sometimes profane, he was a man with a vision—of how film, and other media, might “serve the people”; his ideas influenced everyone in the film world, and we must come to terms with them as we struggle for new understandings of the media in our world. Grierson died last February; the following text is drawn from a day-long conversation held shortly before his death. It will also appear in Elizabeth Sussex’s book on British documentary, to appear in 1973.

How do you evaluate documentary today?

I would evaluate it in terms of the extension of its explorations. It has explored very, very well, but there is one weakness. It ceased exploring into the poetic use of the documentary approach with us in the thirties. I think we represented the top in Britain—people like Basil Wright, Stuart Legg, Arthur Elton, myself, Cavalcanti, Benjamin Britten (music), Auden (poetry). We worked together and produced a kind of film that gave great promise of very high development of the poetic documentary. But for some reason there has been no great development of that in recent times. I think it’s partly because

we ourselves got caught up in social propaganda. We ourselves got caught up with the problems of housing and health, the question of pollution (we were on to that long ago). We got on to the social problems of the world, and we ourselves deviated from the poetic line. But nobody has encouraged the poetic line, not even the BBC which is the strongest force in the whole documentary field and the one that ought to have carried on the poetic line . . .

Of course the greatest thing of all to me has been the use of the film for simple purposes: that is, not just in teaching, but in the teaching of health, not just the teaching of health and

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medicine but the teaching of health and medicine at the most primitive and primary levels, the use of the film to educate the starveling peoples, the up and coming people. I'd say the great achievement of documentary today is what it has done and is doing in the less privileged countries, not least of course in countries like India . . . There's no question at all that the biggest thing that will happen is when something really serious is done in a country like India. India has got 550 million people. Well, all the mass media together, that's to say radio and the movie, they only arrive at an audience of 100 million people. That is, 450 million people are outside the range of the so-called mass media. Well, there is a whole world for the documentary film to take over . . .

What have you been doing in India?

I was there merely making a survey to give the Canadian Government in the first place, and other countries concerned with aid programs, a realistic view of what could be communicated, what had to be done about communications in India. I think I must be the first person to lay my finger on that point that all these mass media together only arrived at 100 million people and 450 million people were living on word of mouth. And of course there were so many people living grandiosely in India on the illusion that somehow or another they were working with the mass media and therefore were the most important force in the modern world that it needed somebody to come in coldly from the outside and say "You bums, you only arrive at 100 million people. What the hell? You're in the peanut business. You're not in show biz, not in big time. The big time is word of mouth, to get into the word-of-mouth business."

And of course once you get into the word-of-mouth business, you're in very different territory. You're in with all the teachers then, and you suddenly realize the most important force in the world today is the teaching force. That's the biggest change that has happened in our time, that the teaching force has become the greatest political force not just in countries like Canada, but I think in countries like the United States too. And of course if the teaching force begins to arm

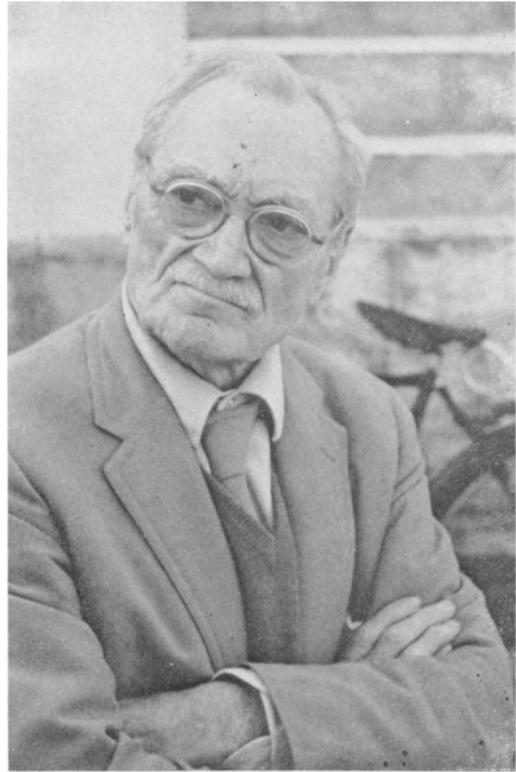


Photo: Len Chatwin, NFBC

itself with the serious use of the film as a power of expression for democratic purposes then you've got yourself a very very big development indeed, which makes all our developments of the thirties in England look like two cents. Oh, I think there are far bigger things happening than anything we dreamt of.

What exactly is the word-of-mouth business?

Let me begin at the beginning. Word of mouth means word of mouth, that is, the people are illiterate; therefore they depend on what is said to them . . . But in a social revolution like the social revolution of India, you've got teachers all over the place, teaching sanitation, teaching health, teaching progressive agriculture of one kind or another, teaching community development in various ways. Now wherever you get a teacher you get somebody using his mouth. In other words there's a conveyance by mouth or by illustration, and what they're doing is working up from the illustration, to the use of the epidiascope, to the use of the magic lantern (which is basic in India anyway; it's about 2500 years old to my knowledge in India), to the use of the

comic strip (which of course again is 2500 years old—the comic strip in India using five or six different illustrations to tell a little story: you get children doing it quite automatically in the villages of India). But you go from there of course to the film strip, and from there to the local film, to the film-making process on the 8mm level or the 16mm level.

What role should documentary play now in Britain?

Oh well, what role it's got to play here wouldn't interest me very much because I think there's such a thing as priorities, and what's happening in England's not half so important as what's happening in China. I mean really, really! I mean this is a fat country, a fat and lucky country. It can afford even to stop working every now and again . . .

You can't generalize from England . . . You can't generalize about documentary from English documentary. English documentary had a very vivid life in film form during the thirties and during the war. It's had a very good life on television in terms of news, news in depth, and in terms of some social observation too. But really I don't think there's been any contribution by Britain to documentary in the last ten years of any new sort. It hasn't given any great leadership in the matter of the use of film by the backward countries . . . I mean, I read yesterday that half the industry people are unemployed. Damn it all, the country should hire them all to go and teach people elsewhere how to use these new instruments. The whole thing's wrong. If this country had any spirit at all, it wouldn't stand for technicians being unemployed. It would send them out to teach. If there's nothing to do here, there's plenty to do elsewhere.

Would you say that a new basis for sponsorship is needed?

No, documentary is concerned in the last resort with the creation of loyalties . . . so the loyalty of sponsorship is always there, an inevitable relationship of documentary. Remember, documentary was developed on the thought that it was not there necessarily for entertainment. Occasionally it has been in the entertainment

business but only incidentally. It's always been related to government sponsorship, and to those sponsors who saw the value of using it to illustrate their interests or to create loyalties of one kind or another. And the great example of course is Shell Oil. Shell Oil was the first and greatest of the sponsors because it saw the full implications of its international operation . . . For example, one of the propositions that were first put to us in the early thirties was that they found in the Gulf of Persia that it took two men to lift a bag of cement. Therefore they were in the nutrition business . . . So they were in the business not only of creating a new nutritional basis but of teaching nutrition, teaching sanitation and so on . . .

Now there is a new basis for sponsorship today, but it will always be of the same logical nature. The sponsorship is not by accident. It is always and has always got to be logical. The trouble with the people today is that they don't know how to sell the relationship, because they are not as tutored as we were in the political and economic relationships of things.

The documentary film in Britain has failed for lack of an intelligentsia. It hasn't got an intelligentsia today that can really go and tell the people in sugar or the people in some other commodity why logically they are concerned in a particular educational or inspirational purpose.

This, however, may be a guide to a new phase of sponsorship. There has been this concern, not only in Canada but certainly in Canada we have it, with the distance between the local community and the central governing body—the distances, the gaps presently appearing in the democratic process. So much so that people are crying out for what they call participatory democracy, and they're crying out for some way of solving the problem represented in the streets by the protest movements of one kind or another. Note they are encouraged to do so by the presence of the mass media, and the fact that they can get plenty of publicity if they make enough noise. So that there's a situation aggravated by the mass media, the fact that people are rather inarticulately seeking to express themselves in this modern democracy.

Now how can we fill this need? Well, we can obviously do it by developing local television: the expression "We've got to have, not local presentation" (that's to say presentation of the local case by some faraway landlord like the BBC) "but local representation" (that is presentation of the local story by local people, which is a very different thing). Presentation is not representation, and that's where the BBC is making the biggest mistake of its life . . . No matter how much noise you make on the BBC you're after all being edited by outsiders—just as for example I'm doing this tape, and I know that this is not me at all because you're going to edit it. I'm going to be edited by an outsider, and I will not be represented. I'll be merely presented.

However, the lead to sponsorship in this situation is that development of the local television thing will immediately raise the question of who is going to give an account of the stewardship in the local community . . . Let's take a small town, for example: there'll be a chamber of commerce; there'll be a Rotary club; there'll be schools; there'll be parent teachers associations; there'll be a university possibly. Well, think of all the people that are there with their organized representational councils or gatherings. They will all want to have a piece of the local expression, won't they? They'll all want to have a say in the making of the films, or at least a film to make. If they don't get on television they'll make a film, which they can circulate through the local halls and the rest. Now who's going to pay for all these things? Well, I should think that one of the almost inevitable sources of finance will be the people who run the local industries. They are the new sponsors . . .

What's been wrong with sponsorship from the beginning is that the film-makers have not been imaginative enough about where the sponsors could be served by the cinema. They've been quite content, the poor bastards—and poor bastards they very often are—to make just a catalogue of events and of products, flattering the sponsor. Well, they've sold their birthright in doing that.

What did you think of the Free Cinema films?
I never knew what they represented. The Free

Cinema was based on the fact that they were going to be free of sponsorship, that is government and other sponsorship, so it was really an economic title, wasn't it? They were going to be free. Well, this was the beginning of the thought that somehow or another you can be free. You can be free from financial constriction in the making of films. Well, I doubt if you can be, and I just don't see it . . .

There has been this cry every now and again. The first *avant-garde* in Paris said they would be free. Well, when their parents' money ran out and their friends' money ran out, they weren't free any more. They were working for Paramount; they were working for somebody. No, you can't be free when you're spending a million dollars. You've got to be loyal to whoever puts up the million dollars, or the terms on which the million dollars is given. And the nearest thing to freedom you can get is to be the boss of the million dollars, which I always was, you see . . .

Then of course by raising the whole question of freedom, you are raising a very very serious matter indeed, and that is the whole anarchy into which film-making has fallen, and it's been possible for it to fall into anarchy because, with the 16mm film and with cheap production, an affluent society and cheap production, it's possible to make a film in America for quite a small sum of money. And therefore you can be as free as you like if you will only limit the cost of your picture and limit the expectation of an audience. But of course the first thing that happens to you is that you get yourself a good audience, and then you want a bigger audience, and then you are no longer as free as you were because you want more money to be more certain of the big audience. And so it goes, and you're back in the same old grind. And that's happening of course to Warhol. Warhol is the victim of his own success, not that his pictures were worth very much anyway at any time except that they were symbolic of a will to impertinence, arrogance, which was fashionable at a time when people wanted really to spit at the law, spit at everything that represented Vietnam, everything that represented the ghettos. It became fashionable to spit at authority in every way so that

those artists who symbolized this impertinence, no matter how vulgar or obscene, they tended to have a vogue. But I don't think we're arrived at an aesthetic of freedom because there's no aesthetic of freedom in the sense that you're always subject to the laws of harmony. You're always subject to the laws of expression . . . So the idea of being free of the necessary restraints of art, I mean that's out of the question . . .

But even the aesthetic of freedom as pronounced by people like Jean-Luc Godard, doesn't seem to be getting along very well just now. I mean Jean-Luc Godard's all right. He can be as idiotic as he likes. He's always a good poet anyway, and you can recognize the style of a poet even when he's in complete disorder. But what's permissible in Jean-Luc Godard—and we know he can be good—is impermissible in the second-rate, people who are basically second-rate and are incapable of the first-rate. And there's always the thought too behind this cry of *auteur*, *auteur* and freedom, first of all it's not very realistic in the sense that if you ever deal with film you depend on so many people, and documentary of course is the great example of how we all worked together and felt the necessity of working together and never for a moment thought that the individual could live without a relationship with the poet and composer or whoever it was . . . Well, there are one or two individuals that do in a way meet the terms of *auteur*. I think Hitchcock does. Hitchcock can do just about everything, and a Hitchcock film is a Hitchcock film, except that Hitchcock himself would probably say that no person ever depended so much on the projection printer and on the trickery that can be done in a lab. In fact when Hitchcock went over to Hollywood and discovered all the tricks that can be done in the lab, I met him again just then and he was a very excited man indeed . . .

But he is, he can be thought of as an *auteur*, and I suppose Chaplin certainly can be thought of as, you know, being very much a personal artist. There are certainly several personal artists in the history of the cinema, but very few. Most are dependent on others, and most of them were associated with schools. The great example

of course is Mack Sennett. Mack Sennett is a much more important name than probably any other in the whole history of the cinema, and yet not because he did this film or the other film but because he represented a whole explosion of film-making. The French have not proved it, I think, have not proved the possibility of *auteurs* because none of them have really been *auteurs*. And in other words I would think that most of their cry about the freedom of the artist, and their cry about the personal right of the person, is in a way a reaction belonging to the French sense of defeat. The French—you'd better look at the French rather carefully—they were really defeated in the last war and in the war before that. You know, they haven't won a victory of any order since Napoleon, and they are a defeated people and the trouble is that they have inflicted their aesthetic of defeat on other people. Other stupid people have been accepting all these agonies of the French mind, which are all I'm sure resident in their defeat. And I think the real villain behind Jean-Luc Godard is General Giap who beat them at Diên Biên Phu. The French haven't got over Diên Biên Phu, and of course the defeat in Algeria. And they're all screaming out loud there for some sort of wild blue yonder, simply because they're a defeated people. Now the Americans have got the same sense of defeat, and they're screaming for personal freedom. They're screaming for a new world in which there's no discipline, no establishment, because they too have been caught with defeat . . .

And so now you get an aesthetic of the underground. You get an aesthetic of the dirty-dirty. Where else have you got to go? If you can't face the light there's always the dark, you know. Oh, it's a very exciting time. I should think we've had a more exciting time watching these infant philosophers take over; and to watch poor old *Sight and Sound* fall for it hook, line and sinker, without knowing what the hell it's doing. At least England has the advantage of being an undefeated people but no, no, not *Sight and Sound*. *Sight and Sound* has been falling hook, line and sinker for every piece of nonsense from the good old *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Petty bourgeois types

all, the *Cahiers du Cinéma*; I know them, nice fellows, nice fellows, but good God Almighty you wouldn't go to sea with them! A test; it's a test.

Did you take much part in actually making the early documentaries?

Och, at the beginning of the thing you see the rushes. You know what's going on. Of course, finally, when you're making hundreds a year, there has to be a good deal of decentralization, but nonetheless in the thirties we were all in together. We could all edit well. We could all write well. There was no part of it we couldn't do, even camerawork. The one credit I was absolutely insistent on was putting my name on as a cameraman on one picture, and it's still there. I'm very pleased with that, having my credit as a cameraman on *Granton Trawler*. I had to put my name on because nobody else was on the picture except me. It was a solo effort.

It's a very nice film, Granton Trawler.

Aye, it's a sweet little film. I've got a funny feeling about it, a weird faraway feeling . . .

If I were going to talk about the thing that gives me the biggest kick looking back on documentary, it was the absolute discipline of the documentary people in the thirties. Nobody stepped out of line, because they knew that divided we would perish but together we could stand. And we were disciplined of course for a purpose. We were *engagé* and the first thing about being *engagé* is discipline. Even the selflessness of some of the documentary people was a very remarkable thing. They didn't put their names on pictures. People finally had to try and discover where the credits lay, and the poor old Film Institute's never quite discovered how the credits of documentary lie, even today, because we kept putting on the names of the young people, not the names of the people who were concerned. There were years when Cavalcanti's name never went on a picture. It was because we weren't concerned with names. We weren't concerned with that aspect of things, with credits. It was only latterly that credits became important to the documentary people.

Can you give me other examples of selflessness, or sacrifices?

I didn't mention sacrifices. I said the discipline meant they didn't concern themselves with personal publicity. I wouldn't regard that as a sacrifice. I think publicity is no great gift. No, I mean that they did take limited salaries and didn't raise salary questions. They were good for sixteen hours a day, most of them. They worked day and night if necessary. For example, there was one case where a film went adrift, and every now and again a film does go adrift. But you'd only to put up the signal and people would come in from all over and make a desperate effort. And we had, on this occasion, people who had left the government unit coming back in and working day and night.

What film was it?

No, I won't tell you that. But it was one film that really was saved by the fact that we put up the sign of distress and in came the people from elsewhere and just started work as if they had never left, which meant that we had three shifts going day and night. We remade that picture in three, four weeks.

How do you explain this kind of dedication?

Do you need to explain dedication? Film is exciting. Using film in a purposive way was exciting. It was exciting new aesthetic territory. People were not only finding the art of the cinema, but they were finding themselves as artists. And not only that but the subject matter itself was very exciting, and in some cases was the new range of technological discovery, new range of scientific discovery and the implications of scientific discovery. They were dealing in some cases with the future of new countries or the future of underdeveloped countries. There were all kinds of intrinsic interests in the pursuit of documentary. No, I don't think the sacrifices were considerable unless you say it was a sacrifice not to go to Hollywood. Well, I suppose some of us could have gone into the big time if we'd wanted, if you call that the big time. But I never thought of that as the big time. I would have thought that was the small time, going into show business. To me the big time was public service, and I think something of that spirit was shared by many people there . . .

I always think of documentary as having cer-

tain fundamental chapters. The first chapter is of course the travelogue, that is, the discovery that the camera can go about: it's peripatetic. The second chapter is the discovery by Flaherty that you can make a film of people on the spot, that is, you can get an insight of a dramatic sort, a dramatic pattern, on the spot with living people. But of course he did that in respect of far-away peoples, and he was romantic in that sense. The third chapter is our chapter, which is the discovery of the working people, that is, the drama on the doorstep, the drama of the ordinary.

But there is a fourth chapter that's very interesting, and that would be the chapter in which people began to talk not about making films *about* people but films *with* people. That was the beginning of *cinéma-vérité*, when people started going down and getting close to people, not as Flaherty did. Flaherty didn't really know what was going on among the Aran Islanders; he was too distant from them. But when the people went down and made *Housing Problems* in Stepney, they knew the people, and you could recognize right away that this was a new relationship entirely between the film-makers and the films, that they were making films with the people and that they were, well, very close to the people indeed. That's of course the real beginning of *cinéma-vérité*, and any effort by anybody else to say that *cinéma-vérité* has any other ori-

gin than in *Housing Problems* and the English documentary school, is just nonsense.

Of course the French are always finding phrases and discovering terms for things, but generally about ten years late, like for example *musique concrète*. When that started appearing and I was one day in Cannes—invited, I think by Jean Cocteau, to hear this amazing new world of *musique concrète*—I laughed if I did not sneer because it's something we'd all been playing with a long time before, maybe twelve years, something like ten years before. We'd Britten and all sorts of people involved.

However, the next chapter, this making films with people—you've still got the problem that you're making films with people and then going away again. Well, I see the next chapter being making films really locally, and there I'm following Zavattini. Zavattini once made a funny speech in which he thought it would be wonderful if all the villages in Italy were armed with cameras so that they could make films by themselves and write film letters to each other, and it was all supposed to be a great joke. I was the person who didn't laugh, because I think that *is* the next stage—not the villagers making film letters and sending them to each other, but the local film people making films to state their case politically or otherwise, to express themselves whether it's in journalistic or other terms.

So there you are. These are the chapters.