

A use for documentary

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IF you think of documentary films as the occasional travelogue you have to sit through at your local before the main film comes on, or as the film about how sulphuric acid is manufactured which is probably useful to science teachers; if in fact you don't know much about them, and care less, it is largely because the people who make them don't care either. British documentaries are not about the things you and I, or the makers, think about.

There are half a dozen pubs around Soho Square where, any evening of the week, you can meet the writers, directors and technicians who make their living out of film "shorts". Here, they find some comfort in bewailing the timidity of producers, the bureaucracy of Government departments, the wilfulness of commercial sponsors. There are excellent craftsmen among them who work on scientific and training films—they are relatively contented; there are well-paid hacks who never really cared, or if they once did, no longer do; and there are—the most talented among them—those who make colour films with immaculately photographed landscapes, expensive-sounding commentaries and symphonic musical backgrounds. These are the prestige merchants, gifted people who have so long been in the position of the poet making a living in the advertising agency that they have come to discuss their advertiser's copy as poetry.

Why worry about them? Because they control the medium in which Flaherty and Jennings, the Russian revolutionary directors and the Italian post-war realists have done their work. And because we need their films.

Song of the clouds

Before suggesting what the British documentary film could and should be, let us see what it is. Let us get down to cases.

Song of the Clouds (the title is prophetic of the whole movement) is a characteristic documentary of today. It is 30 minutes long, in colour, and technically excellent. Its subject is interesting—"the air in the service of mankind"—and it attempts to touch upon a theme dear to some of the older documentary producers, "internationalism". Its main concern, however, is to demonstrate the efficiency of modern passenger airlines. This it does by being part of travelogue—"Lake Luma in the heart of Ethiopia, where drifting spume and flashing rainbow guard the birthplace of the Nile"; part popular technical exposition—"planes like these are raising commercial speeds- to 500 miles an hour; reducing the Atlantic to a six-hour jaunt"; and part straight advertising—"Who travels? Everybody. It used to be for the first-class few. But now, with tourist fares, the air's for all". The emphasis throughout is on the wonder of our technological age—"a world of flashing propellers, shimmering jet streams, gleaming shapes"—in which everything is neat, punctual, efficient, getting more so every day.

When an emotional note has to be struck, the film does not do it through the images—the stereotyped labelled faces never break the film's clean anonymity—but through the heavily charged voice of the commentator. There is, to

take an instance, a passage in the film which shows a night flight. We are shown a group of passengers aboard, notably an Indian woman and her baby asleep in a cradle, and some shots of radar operators, tense and mysterious, photographed like cultural celebrities in *Vogue*.

Commentator: "Half way out from Bombay, over the Arabian Sea. Time: midnight.

Sleep well, Meera, in your cradle in the sky. Up ahead, there are men on the flight deck listening to unseen sounding beacons of the dark; charting your pathway through the stars.

Beneath you, a continent astern, an ocean ahead, men are watching your progress through the arch of night. Up there, four miles above the turning earth, you're alone."

It is worth analysing a sequence of this kind in some detail because it shows how this kind of prestige selling works. I assume that somewhere the film makers wanted to convey the simple idea that flying is safe. But this is not a subject which air companies like raised: the very act of raising it might seem to imply some doubt about its truth. Hence, if the point is to be made, it must be done "aesthetically": the spectator must get the message without being asked to assess it intellectually. What better to make the spectator feel cosy than an image of a sleeping child in a cradle being looked after by mysterious, scientifically equipped guardian angels? (This is the logic of the advertisement which promises you whiter teeth because the paste contains "a new scientific ingredient".) The haunting images, the dramatic music and prose on the sound track simply add up to blinding the spectator with science.

Now, come to consider it, the basic idea of this sequence has about it a certain legitimate glamour. But the way it is here presented, as a tentative dramatisation which is given substance by the perfumed prose of the commentary, in terms that no one can possibly *feel*, reduces it to a sort of confidence trick. The film tries to hint at the human implications of its subject without being interested in its people. Its impact is like thumbing through a glossy travel brochure.

"Illustrators and technicians "

Song of the Clouds has some distinguished names on its credits and, scientific film apart, represents the norm of our documentary industry. From the 'film-makers point of view this is particularly disturbing because the film represents the almost complete abdication of the creator of the film, the director. A film of this kind is planned in terms of the facts it will have to present; it is conceived in committee; it has a commentary written by another hand, which tries to give the images a weight which they do not have. Under these conditions, the director's function becomes that of a technician. The copy he is given has to be realised on film.

This is the technique of the expositional film. When it comes to be applied to subjects involving people, it leads to a series of passionless, approximately relevant images which *illustrate* instead of telling the story. Faces are more intractable than gear diagrams: to use them as steps in an

abstractly conceived argument leads to the advertiser's half-truth—and boredom.

Song of the Clouds comes from the Shell Film Unit, by far the best documentary establishment operating in this country. The scientific films the unit regularly produces are lucid, sensibly popularised and, at their best, communicate the sort of excitement in scientific truth which can come only from a genuine imaginative response. It is very much in all our interests that scientific knowledge should be widely accessible and the Shell films make a major contribution to enlightenment in this field.

But the older documentary producers have taken cover behind these technical films. They have rationalised this preference into a credos—Sir Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey spoke about it in a recent B.B.C. discussion—suggesting that the social films which they once made are no longer important. Their argument runs something like this. In the 30's there were acute problems—housing conditions, unemployment, malnutrition—which demanded the filmmaker's attention. These have been solved. There's no point in muck-raking for the few injustices that remain. We've never had it so good and if we want to keep it that way, we'd better praise our own achievements, encourage productivity and foster scientific knowledge.

To the extent that these elders of the movement consider their social work to have been accomplished, one can only conclude that they have changed sides. Where in the thirties they made valuable films about life as it was lived in this country, and tried to lead public opinion towards enlightened legislation, today they make at best the (admittedly valuable) scientific film or, at worst, spend their time "projecting Britain". (This means films about the Lake District, Stirling Moss, old trams and the beauties of spring.)

One of the answers to their arguments is, quite simply, that their facts are wrong. Social problems continue to exist; old age, the colour bar, juvenile crime—take your pick. Another answer is that the human films are not only needed in "problem" situations. To say that they are, implies a faith in documentary as propaganda but not as art. It implies, too, that socialism is a sort of good house-keeping system: when people have houses, work and food, all is well.

The socialist humanism which we're all working towards in these pages may not yet be well defined, but it is not *that*. What subjects will it lead us to? What will it make us say?

The fight against boredom

The common man escapes from boredom only by having to struggle. Free him from the need to do that and you fling him back on his own resources which don't exist. The more we free the masses from economic necessity the more we manufacture boredom. But there's no cure for that, only anodynes.

This is the classic Tory view. It is quoted as "the dictum of an intelligent Tory I know" by Laurence Thompson in a prissy little "News Chronicle" article on the horrors of Rock and Roll. But it is an honest statement: there must be many who agree with it but think it impolitic to say so. It is also consistent: if you think that you do people a disservice by freeing them from material pressures then it follows that you think those who manage to gain material security will have to have their lives made tolerable by anodynes. If, on the other hand, you think that people have a right to material security, what will you do about the boredom? It is a question socialists should ask. For though

the above statement is ignorant, wrong-headed and immoral, we have to concede it one truth. The boredom exists. You can nostalgically wish it away (the writer clearly thinks it true that a bit of unemployment would soon put a stop to it), or you can determine its causes and fight it. The question is how.

Richard Hoggart has shown us how the commercial mass media are eroding away our popular culture; how they are corrupting our leisure; how they are ultimately serving to increase the boredom. The mass media started offering their "invitations to candy-floss worlds" and their "sex in shiny packets" when popular education began enlarging people's horizons but times were hard and work monotonous. But life is materially more secure now and working hours, though only slightly less monotonous, are getting shorter. Yet the anodyne merchants are still doing a brisk trade.

It is important to protest against the humiliations of the mass media. But it is even more important to understand and to disprove the assumptions behind the operations of their traders. The muck-entertainer assumes that working life is hard, meaningless and dull: it can only be made tolerable by shiny pain-killers. But suppose you look around and find that the every-day is rich and varied; that material security has produced a vivacious and rebellious younger generation; that the normal, though dull to the missionary or the snob, is interesting to you. Suppose, instead of complaining of the mass media, you use them to communicate these findings. You may find that the bodies you are addressing are beginning to recover from their material ill's: you may find that they no longer have to be fed on slops, they can digest food.

The artist and the mass media

Only if he is going to think with this sort of confidence will the committed artist working in the mass media stand a chance of stealing the muck-entertainer's audience away from him. Only in this way can the closed chain of the argument which holds that morons need moronic entertainments to keep them moronic be broken.

In the fictional cinema the attempts have been made, and successfully. The younger American TV writers and directors have demonstrated that a married couple's tiff, or a courtship, or the friendship between a coloured and white docker can grip the attention if you make the people in them life size and you don't preach. Castellani has resumed making his urban comedies (his exhilarating, affirmative earlier films, *E Primavera* and *Two Pennyworth of Hope*, have always far outstripped the neo-realist films in popularity). Spain, Hungary, Poland, Greece, Mexico, India and Ceylon have shown us some notable humanist films. Everywhere, except here, there are signs of life.

The documentary film can bring some of the confidence in reality back to British film-making. As a medium, it is particularly sensitive to subjects involving the sharing of experience—themes of work, learning and communal activity—themes which are important to us just now. But with what subjects will it deal? The question may seem superfluous but it is the one which is most often asked, since the choosing of subjects seems still to be somehow inextricably linked in people's minds with the search for causes.

Here's an arbitrary list, something to be getting on with. A primary school. An ante-natal clinic. A pub. A new housing estate. A music hall. Blackpool. Brighton. Eastbourne. A youth club. A doss house. The voluntary day release system. Apprentices. A youth hostel. A University. A Darby and Joan club. An amateur football team.

A Whist Drive. A Joint Consultation Council. A new town. A W.E.A. class. A Womens Institute Meeting. A hospital. A point-to-point. A cycling club. A housewife. A Teddy boy. A typing pool. An approved school. A parent-teacher association. A Young Farmer's club. The Sea Scouts. A Y.M.C.A. A Palais. An amusement arcade. And, most important, work—on assembly lines, farms, machine shops, offices and schools.

These subjects cannot be tackled with the conventions of *Song of the Clouds*. The films must be made by individuals, not committees. The humanist film-maker must start with people and by the time he gets down to writing his commentary (*if* he writes one) he must have it all there, on the screen. He must allow the reality in front of him to modify and enrich the conception he started with, without referring the matter to head office. On a more technical level, he must probably think in terms of taking his sound equipment with him and letting his characters speak. It is, after all, thirty years since sound came to the cinema and, despite the fact that the thing is technically difficult, he must no longer be satisfied with the silent close-up. This will certainly not always be possible but the old "sleep-well-in-your-cradle-in-the-sky" stuff over mute images will no longer do and the attempt must be made.

The new documentary must, in short, take its lead from Flaherty and Vigo, Humphrey Jennings and Franju. And, since the films are to be about human beings, let us stop talking about the "fundamental" differences between story and documentary films which have been drummed into us by documentarists protecting their professional pride. The humanist documentary has more to learn from de Sica and Zavattini, the Bunuel of *Los Olvidados* and some of the younger American TV directors than from the factual film-makers.

Television: Feeling for freaks

Our documentary elders, insisting that their work should be exclusively about landscapes and machines, have taken refuge behind another last line of defence. Television, they now say, can cope with the human subjects better than the film.

The television documentary units—B.B.C., Granada and Associated Rediffusion—do indeed regularly send out programmes on social themes. The choice of subjects is adventurous and bold and the topical programmes often have a journalistic drive about them which makes the conventional sponsored documentary seem ten years out of date. Television producers have kicked down the fence of respectability which the documentary film-makers have built around their safe old repertoire and have shown what can be done to interest large audiences in social issues.

All this is highly welcome. The question remains whether reportage, however efficient, is enough. When he presents subjects which demand taking sides the TV producer works under a double handicap. His programmes have to be "impartial"—which usually means that he can present his findings but can not assess them. And he has to work under such pressure of time that he must usually resort to the very limiting technique of the interview. Instead of making a film *about* his theme, the TV producer has to let representative characters give their views on it. Tramps, nudists,

housewives are cross-questioned about their condition and the producer simply selects and arranges their views. Sympathetically handled, the method can be entertaining and valuable. But it is liable to abuses and the temptation to gimmick up the dialogues often proves too strong. The current vogue, particularly evident among the programmes on the commercial channel, is for the interviewer to affect an indiscriminating and meaningless sort of Beaverbrook press toughness which forces the people being interviewed into corners and makes them say the most spectacular, not necessarily the most interesting, things. The effect of this is to make the characters into "fascinating personalities" whose freakishness rather than whose individuality is being brought out and the programmes come over as entertaining but misleading bits of popular sociology. (An interviewer in a recent B.B.C. magazine programme went around asking teenage girls what the names of Eisenhower, Krushchev and Nehru meant to them. The half dozen we saw on the screen had never heard of them. But how many *did* know, and were not asked; how many were asked and ended up on the cutting room floor?)

A grasp of sociology?

A real lead has been given to television documentary by the B.B.C. features units, the best of whose programmes go far beyond the limits of reportage. There is for instance, no facile personality hunting about Denis Mitchell's "Teenagers", "In Prison" and "Night in the City". These programmes use the spontaneous interview method not for the momentary thrill which the unrehearsed word can give. Mitchell uses it poetically, to link the man with his background; to feel out the pressures which have formed the views; to probe the source of the joys and fears his characters express. There is in these programmes that respect for people's individuality without which you can not hope to make universal social statements. Here, in fact, are the beginnings of an eloquent new television style which one very much hopes will develop and from which documentary film-makers have a great deal to learn.

One asks that the TV journalist should give some indication about how typical his samples are because the TV interview is a publicly performed piece of sociological research. The film documentary director is more in control of his material. His relationship with the sociologist is rather different.

Michael Armstrong, writing in the last issue of U.L.R., says that "the artist (in novel, play, film) must have a grasp of sociology". I suppose he must—in the sense that the painter must have a grasp of anatomy. But we are on more difficult ground when Mr. Armstrong adds:

"It is not that artists are asked simply to include a sociological analysis in their work. But an artist who has made no attempt to analyse is, obviously enough, in danger of falsifying the situations he is attempting to dramatise or describe. Either he may be inclined to offer the bogus solutions to the problems posed . . . or he may create a dangerously distorted picture of his society, by trying to see it through the attitudes of the group or individuals with which he is directly concerned."

These terms of reference are altogether too narrow. Let the artist's work be judged by how significant the images are, not by how statistically relevant. Mr. Armstrong

implies that there is a sociological truth which it is the artist's function to interpret, to make the spectator *feel* a scientific fact. This makes the artist a sort of public relations officer for the more serious sociologist. But this is simply not how art works. There is a difference in kind between a sociological fact and a poetic truth, and the artist had better remember it if he wants to keep his audience. The fallacy of assuming that you can give the artist a series of facts and conclusions which he then invests with "feeling" is the fallacy of socialist realism as well as of the British Council film. The artist must not be expected to spread honey on bread which someone else has provided. He must bake his own bread.

Mr. Armstrong's conclusions are, curiously enough, close to those of some of the older documentary film-makers. (The most frequent objection to *Every Day Except Christmas* in documentary circles has been that it is "emotional", "does not give a complete picture".) The fallacy of his argument is worth exposing. To take an instance, *Umberto D.*, which Mr. Armstrong quotes and approves, is about a middle-class man's experience of old age. It does not need much sociology to guess that poorer men of Umberto's age are not only more numerous but also carry a heavier burden, de Sica was, in fact, very much trying to see old age through "the attitude of a group of individuals with which he is directly concerned". Yet this does not make him create a "dangerously distorted picture". Distorted, in this context, means no more than sociologically atypical.

Of course the artist must see things through the individuals with whom he is directly concerned. The strength and relevance of his commitment and depth of his instinctive response will determine how significant his images will be.

I have dwelt on this subject so long because the terrible joylessness of British documentary is directly the result of this sort of mistrust of the artist's insights. Everything has to be labelled and cross-indexed before a lens is allowed near a face. If the documentary director can succeed in working himself free from the memoranda of government departments let him not get trapped among Mr. Armstrong's sociological truths. If we are going to use the cinema—and Mr. Armstrong makes out a good, strong case why socialists should—then let us not make the same mistakes as the Central Office of Information.

Who pays?

There remains the question of finance. The 'thirties documentary producers, many now in position of high influence, could probably find money, but they don't want to. Sir Arthur Elton and Stuart Legg, both principally associated with Shell, have diverted their whole attention to the science film. Edgar Anstey, in charge of the Transport Commission's ambitious film programmes, makes instructional films for his staffs and bloodless picture postcard travelogues for the public. The National Coal Board's film library is respectable in an academic sort of way. And so on.

Now the fact is that most of these sponsors use the cinema primarily to demonstrate their goodwill and responsibility towards the public they serve. They demand, in most cases, that the films have some marginal connection with their own activities but, beyond that, they want large

audiences, publicity and a genuine respect from the public. There is nothing in these conditions which precludes films about people; all that is lacking is the film-makers' desire to make them.

Looking ahead, though, it is clear that other sources will have to be found. And this is where readers of this review had better start thinking. Is it too much to ask for instance, that the National Union of Teachers, always concerned with raising the social status of the teaching profession and with raising the importance of education in the public's consciousness, might enter the field? What about other unions? Are the co-operative societies, with their stake in marketing, not interested in demonstrating their attitude to their customers? Is the Labour Party, just now looking round for a public face with which to go to the election, going to use films? I am writing on a day when large Conservative advertisements have been appearing in the papers ("Keeping Red Blood in the Pound . . . Things are seldom what they seem . . . Conservatives have courage to act".) They are perhaps not worth meeting on their own terms but what about *some* sort of answer? Many commercial companies make films with the single purpose of sending them to their dealers who invite local customers to social gatherings at which the films are shown. You can be sure that these transactions are well worked out in terms of advertising expenditure per head of audience. Is there not a lead here the Labour Party could follow?

Looking at Britain

There is enough evidence now that a programme of films of the kind I am envisaging will find an audience. The Free Cinema films we have made so far have been mostly experimental and technically modest. But they have been about subjects which you can care about and they have been seen. Both commercially and non-commercially, the films have enjoyed an active audience response whenever they have been shown. A single note in this journal brought forth requests for screenings in sufficient numbers (from local Labour Party groups, Trades Councils and other socialist groups) to show that the need and the interest of socialists is there.

If the humanist energy which is animating socialist thought just now is not to peter out in these and similar pages then we must be prepared to communicate its power and relevance. It is an exciting prospect and the cinema can help. But if the film artist is to throw his weight effectively into this movement, he will have to start afresh. He will have to learn to look at faces again, not because they illustrate something or because they are picturesque, but because they are there. He will have to forget about the clean white overalls and "projecting Britain". He will have to trust his own responses to reality and he will need freedom to do that. He will have to learn to see, not as a tripper from a roadside cafe or a parson mugging up tomorrow's sermon, but as an artist. He will have to criticise and affirm, to protest and celebrate. He will have to try (I quote Lindsay Anderson from the last issue) "to make people feel their dignity and importance so that they can act from these principles. Only on such principles can confident and healthy action be based".