The coordination of all programs of course, will remain at the Bureau office, where we shall continue to seek the advice of our associates in other Bureaus and of our non-Government consultants in the identification of educational goals and development of policy to reach them.

THE WARY EYE: THE BRITISH FILM AS A MEANS OF CULTURAL CRITICISM

Arthur F. McClure II

"The film is a machine for seeing more than meets the eye."[1]

In the nineteen-thirties the British film industry awakened from a long and deep sleep. Up to that time, the statement that "England has never produced a truly English Film"[2] was painfully true. Throughout the era of the silent film and the early days of sound, the British film lacked "honest conception."[3] It was little more than a poor imitation of films from other parts of the world. Moreover, Britain was a fertile, and at the same time uncultivated source for some type of filmic material. The railroads, industries, towns and countrysides comprised an immense wealth of material waiting for incorporation into some kind of cinematic expression.

But there was no tradition of British films, such as the French tradition of ironic drama on the screen, or the tradition of light comedy and the cowboy-hero of the American film. There was no concept of infusing the national characteristics of the British people into a continuity of development in film production. There was.

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it could be said, no school of British film as there was in Germany or France. Then, in the form of the documentary film movement, this lack of character in British film-making was replaced by a striking vitality. The documentary became the distinctive British contribution to the film. The documentary stood for essentially the social use of the film. Those men who launched and sustained the movement were interested primarily in the film as a means of social education and cultural criticism.

With its beginnings in the late nineteen-twenties, this independent documentary movement developed into a potent force, one that was to prove of inestimable value not only during the war years but also in shaping the stark realism of the postwar feature film. Led by a young Scot named John Grierson, a governmental department, the Empire marketing Board, added the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit. Grierson was convinced that the motion picture could play a vital cultural role.[4] The Board thus added film to its use of books, pamphlets, and posters in its work. In 1933, when the Board came to an end, its film unit was taken over by another government department, the General Post Office. After the outbreak of World War II this General Post Office Film Unit became the Crown Film Unit, under the direction of the Films Division of the Ministry of Information. During the formative years of the nineteen-thirties, the documentary movement gained a regular audience for fact films in the universities, film societies, labor organizations, and clubs of every kind and gradually an established demand grew for documentary films.

Grierson's first film DRIFTERS in 1929 was the story of the North Sea herring fishermen enacted by themselves. The film which came in the midst of the stilted early talking films, was a presentation of real people and was, truly "workaday Britain on the screen."[5] The

film's use of reality was revolutionary and had the impact of novelty to its audience. DRIFTERS demonstrated an important new principle in film making; it examined the life of one section of the British community and showed the results of the examination to the rest of the community. It did not merely record the fishermen's lives as a short interest film might have done or chronologically string together short film glimpses of daily events, as most of the early newsreels had done. It set out to re-create the whole pattern of work of the "drifters," and to point to the significance of the fisherman's service to the community and their dealings with it when they came home to sell their fish.[6] The film "humbly brought to the screen the labour of the North Sea herring catch from such an approach that the ordinary person was made to realize, probably for the first time, that a herring on his plate was no mere accepted thing but the result of other men's physical toil and possibly courage."[7]

Grierson felt that the documentary was the use of film as a medium of expressing the possibilities of using motion photography for what he termed "the creative treatment of actuality."[8] This phrase indicated an interest in the equal stress placed upon artistry and subject matter. The documentary's purpose was to project the facts of life under a democracy and its method was to show man in relation to his institutions. It was this combination of social purpose and artistic experimentation that gave the British documentary tradition its strength and direction. Reality was its theme and the documentary maker was concerned with the methods of capturing a sense of reality upon the screen. No matter what his techniques were, his purpose always remained that of informing and enlightening rather than simply entertaining.

The government-sponsored documentary producers

were not the only group of documentary film makers, however, some documentary films had been produced under the sponsorship of private companies and public utilities. For instance, the major gas companies and the Petroleum Films Bureau made films on such subjects as housing, nutrition, education, and the control of insect pests. Many of the documentaries were often political expressions of discontent and were aimed at opening people's eyes to the conditions of the under-privileged, while many were purely scientific, in that they recorded and examined and nothing more.

The British Commercial Gas Association sponsored a group of films that made up an important branch of the prewar documentary. These films covered a wide range of social problems that were examined in films such as HOUSING PROBLEMS, CHILDREN AT SCHOOL, THE SMOKE MENACE, and ENOUGH TO EAT. HOUSING PROBLEMS recorded the views of the slum-dwellers of Stepney on the slums. The use of the unrehearsed spot interview and revealing shots of the slums gave a stark effect to the film. CHILDREN AT SCHOOL was very blunt in its look at the appalling conditions of some of Britain's schools. THE SMOKE MENACE looked at the problems of industrial smoke in the cities, and ENOUGH TO EAT analyzed the diet of the nation which revealed the lack of public knowledge on elementary facts of food values and the dangers of malnutrition.[9]

The work of the documentarians in the nineteen-thirties was alive and recorded and expressed contemporary thoughts on social problems in British society. A type of film peculiar to Britain gradually evolved, and by the beginning of World War II, the documentary film had developed a tradition, and with it an unrivalled way of presenting a social argument.

Grierson described the first principles of the documentary when he said:

> the realist documentary, with its streets and cities and slums and markets, and exchanges and factories, has given itself the job of making poetry where no poet has gone before it, and where no ends, sufficient for the purposes of art, are easily observed. It requires not only taste but also inspiration, which is to say a very laborious, a deep-seeing, deep-sympathizing creative effort indeed.[10]

In 1941, Carol Reed's feature production THE STARS LOOK DOWN was released. This was a look at a purely English situation with a fictionalized story. The film was based on the popular novel of the same name by A. J. Cronin. This film pioneered the use of the realistic view of social problems in the entertainment film. Michael Redgrave was cast as David Fenwick, a young man from a Welsh mining family, eager to educate himself in order to be the instrument in improving the coal miners' lot. The film was quite grim, but it reflected the British film maker's desire for artistry as well as social criticism. The film undoubtedly was influenced by the documentary trend of John Grierson and his film messages.

Cronin's deeply sympathetic stress on a socio-economic problem was expressed in the title of the novel which refers to the stars that looked down on the mining communities, but their light did not penetrate into the coal mines, whose farthest corners were illuminated only by electric lights or torches. The real subject of the film however, was not the miner's sacrifice of working in the open air, but the worst hazard that he had to face. This dreaded part of his work was the risk of working in a faulty seam. David Fenwick's father knew that the seam was risky to work in and that at any time the mine might flood. He persuaded the miners to go out on strike against the orders of the union leader who backed down in

the face of the mineowners. After months of striking the miners were forced back to work in the seam in order that their families could live. The collapse of the seam was the climax of the film. David Fenwick in the meantime had his ambitions to strengthen the labor union wrecked by his marriage to a vain girl who married him on the "rebound." When the collapse came, the mineowner died of a heart attack induced by guilt feelings and David's father was trapped and killed in the mine. An ironic twist to the story was that the mineowner died before he could produce the map that would locate the collapse. In the meantime David's wife deserted him for her former lover.[11]

The thread that was woven throughout the film was that whatever happens to the human element in this life, the stars continued to look down. The film has been described as Britain's greatest film by several writers. It set a standard for realism in the feature film that sharply defined the stolid spirit of the British miner. It was direct and forceful in expressing the "raw", unrelieved quiver of its maltreated, maltreating humanity . ...in behalf of man against the faults of economic systems as well as mining seams."[12]

The roots of a new British film movement were also found in the filming of THE STARS LOOK DOWN. This was the movement toward a concentration on the native subject in the entertainment film. The emphasis on the actuality of real people and real danger continued on into the war years. It was the function of the British wartime documentaries to keep the nation informed of the progress of the war, and to provide a strengthened morale and unity of purpose for the British people. The emphasis of the documentary throughout the war, as might be expected, shifted from social criticism to the effects of the war on both the home front and the direct encounters with the enemy.[13]

After the war ended, the tradition of looking at the "actuality" of everyday living in Britain began to emerge on a greater scale in the entertainment film. The examination of the streets, factories, towns, and houses of grim, industrialized England in the entertainment film became an important means of social criticism. Young British authors and film makers struck at social problems of all kinds. Their work centered on the even larger theme of reality by showing the ugliness, fatalism, and regimentation of daily life. In the nineteen-thirties, many socially conscious gangster and depression films were made in the United States which showed the frustrations, poverty, and injustices of the times. They had made a tremendous impact on audiences. The British film of the nineteen-fifties also criticised the culture around it in much the same way by looking at the way people lived.

Young film directors such as Tony Richardson and Karl Riesz generally did not write their own screenplays, but they used the stories of some of the new literary figures such as John Braine, John Osborne, and Alan Sillitoe. Films based on such works as ROOM AT THE TOP, SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING, LOOK BACK IN ANGER, THE ENTERTAINER, THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER, and D. H. Lawrence's SONS AND LOVERS gave the British film industry the position of being the most socially conscious of the world's film industries. There was a semidocumentary finish to these films which had a background and environment of modern British social problems.

In the writings of these "Angry Young Men" a new type of "hero" emerged. This hero was the man who questioned everything accepted by his own society around him. He was not "an esthete floating off to his ivory tower of pure expression... nor the marxist type of... warrior... he was a man bred by existence in the twentieth century

to suspect everyone and everything."[14] This "new hero" was defined as being shaped by the depression of the nineteen-thirties, the horrors of the war, and the uncertainties of the cold war. He was a man alone caught in a dilemma which hardened him toward any abstract values. An interesting evaluation of these critics was formulated when it was said:

> The crucial difference between the Angry Young Men and the Beat Generation is that the former still care, the latter are beyond caring. The former seek some connection with the world of Insiders, for within that world of false appearances is a truth of social reality. The latter completely adjure the Square's world and seek to create a new reality, one in which vivid experience is everything.[15]

As a source of cultural criticism, ROOM AT THE TOP was called "not just a film; it is an event."[16] Joe Lampton, an orphan, who had received a cynical education in a German prison camp, came from a small Yorkshire industrial town, Dufton, to a larger one, Warnely, to work as an accountant and to work his way up in the civil service. He seduced the daughter of a wealthy self-made businessman. At the same time he carried on an ardent affair with Alice, an older married woman. The younger woman became pregnant, and by marrying her, Joe socially found "room at the top." Alice killed herself, and when the young bride noticed Joe crying in the Rolls-Royce after the wedding exclaimed, "Darling, I believe you're sentimental after all!"

The film centered around class, money and power and about how sex, if used to get them, trapped the used. It told a story about people who were blatantly class-ridden in an absorbing manner. Joe Lampton was depicted as a simple man with a goal, and in the end he became a

sort of sympathetic hero, but one who had sacrificed his only satisfactory love affair for position. He was a man both more mature and at the same time more lost.

Another type of hero was created in the British comedy films of the nineteen-fifties. This was an entirely different working-class hero. Richard Hoggart said that he was the man that could still make people laugh in a generation that laughed very little. He commented that this hero was a

> man with a pint of ale in the cruder cartoons and picture postcards. He is the real working-class hero, the cheerful, not the romantic, hero. He is a man somewhere above forty, who has had a few knocks and knows how to take them, not a handsome young man.[17]

On the British screen this man was, of course, Alec Guinness and later in the decade, Peter Sellers. The film THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT was "multifariously, breathingly national."[18] Guinness was portrayed as a young Englishman who had invented an ever-wearing and unsoilable white cloth. As the film's hero he was caught in the clutches of the economic system of Capital and Labor. Against this established system he ran up against the textile mill owners and the union leaders whose prosperity depended on white suits that wore out. In a wonderful bit of symbolism at the down fall of the hero, Guinness leaned against a bas-relief of the figures of Labor and Capital clasping hands under the figure of Progress. It fell and the hero also fell and was knocked cold. The end of the film however, saw the survival not of the white suit, "but the indestructible amiability of the man in it."[19]

But perhaps SATURDAY NIGHT AND SUNDAY MORNING was the best example of the aggressive social criticism

of the contemporary British film. The movie depicted Arthur Seaton's coming of age and accepting adult responsibility. The film was set entirely in working-class locations, and the hero was a Nottingham factory worker. The film was shown entirely from his point of view. The reality of working-class life was depicted as the dehumanization of industrialization. The idea of satisfaction or creativity in factory work was nonexistent and featherbedding was considered a part of the system.[20] The workers were well paid and complacent, but Arthur didn't want to accept the value that his parents and fellow workers accepted. His spirit and vitality took the form of rebellion and he tried to tell himself that somehow his acceptance of contemporary conventions was somehow different. Arthur had an affair with a married woman, Brenda, but in the end picked Doreen, the young and proper girl. The film ended on a high note of intensity: as Doreen and Arthur stood in front of the new buildings of a housing project, and as Arthur threw a rock at one of them, Doreen asked "Why are you always throwing things?" Although Arthur was to be married there was the rebelliousness that remained within him. But

> what future can the hero have... but to fall into the stinking stupor of his parents, get drunk, quarrell with his wife, and resign himself to bringing up little working-class brats?[21]

For Doreen the rows and rows of new houses they stood in front of represented the "good life" that she sought, but for Arthur they seemed like "an octopus waiting to suck them in."[22]

In the nineteen-sixties, many British films continued the argument that the entire ethos of their society was becoming purely materialistic and that in a society in

which only wealth gave satisfaction, no man could ever feel secure in his status or content with his lot in life. The heroes in several of these films apparently were in despair because their generation had been deprived of the opportunity to participate in a grand cause.

Such films as A TASTE OF HONEY, THE LEATHER BOYS, LIFE AT THE TOP (a sequel to ROOM AT THE TOP), DARLING MORGAN and GEORGY GIRL all have brilliant moments and continued to show the British fondness for the social cameo in the comments that they made on several levels.

The hero in MORGAN was a failure on both the personal and social level, with a complete lack of social consciousness, but in this he becomes a man of his times when judged by contemporary values in British society.

This rootlessness and humanness was also apparent in ALFIE, the story of a lovable London cockney cad who believes that "it don't do to get dependent on anyone in this life." The title role was perfectly played by Michael Caine, whose performance conveyed quite effectively Alfie's resigned awareness of his rootlessness. Alfie knew enough about himself to admit that "I wish for once I could do something good in my dreams. It wouldn't cost me anything and it would give me a great deal of satisfaction."

The British film thus has been an important source from which cultural criticism has been launched, but it is still partly an unknown quantity today because there continues to be uncertainty and disagreement as to the "hows" and "whys" of the value of the film and mass communication as a whole, especially as it effects attitudes and behavior. Louis Wirth, in a particularly penetrating analysis of mass communication and especially the visualizing effect of the film wrote:

> Modern society exhibits two major aspects. On

> the one hand, it consists of organized groups, ranging from informally constituted intimate groups of highly formalized organizations, such as the modern corporation, the union, the church, and the state. On the other hand, there are the the detached masses that are held together, if at all, by the mass media of communication....
> It is upon these mass media, however, that to an ever increasing degree the human race depends to hold it together. Mass communication is rapidly becoming, if it is not already, the main framework of the web of social life....
> In mass communication we have unlocked a new social force as of yet incalculable magnitude. In comparison with all previous social means for building or destroying the world this new force looms as a gigantic instrument of infinite possibilities for good or evil. It has the power to build loyalties and to undermine them, and thus by furthering or hindering consensus to affect all other sources of power. By giving people access to alternative views mass communication does of course open the door to the disintegration of all existing social solidarities, while it creates new ones.[23]

The British film appears to have accomplished this much.

NOTES

[1]Richard Griffith, THE WORLD OF ROBERT FLAHERTY, Little, Brown and Company, 1953, p. v.

[2]Quoted in Paul Rotha, THE FILM TILL NOW, New York, Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1949, p. 544.

[3]IBID., p. 313.

[4]John Grierson, GRIERSON ON DOCUMENTARY, London, Collins, 1946, pp. 100-101.

[5]Forsyth Hardy, TWENTY YEARS OF BRITISH FILM, 1925-1945, London, Falcon Press, 1947, p. 46.

[6]Roger Manvell, FILM, London, Penguin Books, 1944, pp. 94-95.

[7]IBID., p. 98.

[8]Quoted in Arthur Knight, THE LIVELIEST ART, New York, Mentor Books, 1959, p. 211.

[9]Hardy, OP. CIT., pp. 47-53.

[10]Grierson, OP. CIT., p. 101.

[11]Parker Taylor, CLASSICS OF THE FOREIGN FILM, New York, Citadel Press, 1962, pp. 136-137.

[12]IBID., p. 137.

[13]Knight, OP. CIT., pp. 214-215.

[14]Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg, edits., THE BEAT GENERATION AND THE ANGRY YOUNG MEN, New York, 1958, Citadel Press, p. 16.

[15]IBID., p. 17.

[16]John Rosselli, "The Queve in Lower Regent Street," THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, Vol. 165, No. 985, March, 1959, p. 272.

[17]Richard Hoggart, THE USES OF LITERACY, Boston, Beacon Press, 1961, p. 113.

[18]Tyler, OP. CIT., p. 196.

[19]IBID., p. 197.

[20]Rod Prince, "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning," NEW LEFT REVIEW, No. 6, November-December, 1960 pp. 15-17.

[21]Pauline Kael, "Britain: Commitment and the Strait-Jacket," FILM QUARTERLY, Vol. XV, No. 1, Fall, 1960 p. 11.

[22]Alan Lovell, "Film Chronicle," NEW LEFT REVIEW, No. 7, January-February, 1961, p. 53.

[23]Louis Wirth, "Consensus and Mass Communication," AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW, Vol. 13, No. 5, February, 1948, pp. 10, 12.

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