

## **The Avant-garde, the GPO Film Unit, and British Documentary in the 1930s**

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### **1 Introduction**

Although British filmmaking has often been, both literally and metaphorically, on the margins of the European avant-garde, the late 1920s and the 1930s, saw a burst of filmmaking which demonstrated a keen engagement with trends more often associated with Continental Europe. Filmmakers such as the New Zealander Len Lye, Brazilian-born Alberto Cavalcanti, refugees from Nazi Germany, as well as home-grown talent such as Humphrey Jennings and Norman McLaren contributed to a small corpus of films which, although not significantly influential on the course of British film, enriched a period in film history primarily noted for the emergence of the documentary movement. However, it seems questionable if a viable, meaningful avant-garde film movement existed in Britain in the 1930s. As Deke Dusinberre (1980) and Michael O'Pray (2003) have both suggested it was more a case of an avant-garde attitude and there were actually very few purely avant-garde films made.<sup>1</sup>

The (limited) successes and problems encountered by avant-garde filmmakers are of interest not just for the films themselves but also for the complex interactions between these highly idiosyncratic artists and the milieu within which they tried to work, one of private sponsorship, company sponsorship and the semi-governmental remit of bodies such as the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and the main focus of this study – the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit. The history of the GPO Film Unit and its problematic relationship with the avant-garde is instructive in that it illustrates many of the problems associated with the attempts by avant-garde artists to work within broader institutional structures. Although the particular situation in Britain in the 1930s is unique, the problems encountered by the avant-garde in relation to finding a niche and a voice in a wider milieu are certainly not.

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<sup>1</sup> These opinions may need qualification in the light of further research. Christine Gledhill suggests that there are a number of films from the period which tend to be neglected because they occupy a "...space in British filmmaking that is neither formally avant-garde, nor alternative in any politically radical sense." (Gledhill 34)

The GPO Film Unit thrived from 1933 to the outbreak of the Second World War when it became the Crown Film Unit and devoted itself to supporting the war effort by making, primarily, morale boosters and instructional films. Although he did not remain long with the GPO, the Film Unit will always be associated with the 'father' of British documentary, the Scot John Grierson who first made his mark at the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit.<sup>2</sup> Grierson's often contradictory role in encouraging but at the same time limiting the scope of the filmmakers he brought under his wing is of central importance, as are the institutional limitations (and possibilities) of the situation within which Grierson and the GPO Film Unit worked. For readers unfamiliar with the GPO, this was the name for the national, government-owned postal service. At a time when Britain still maintained a huge Empire 'on which the sun [supposedly] never set', it was an important national and international institution – with over 230,000 workers it was the largest single employer in 1930s recession-hit Britain (Swann: 1983, 20), a central element in maintaining Empire, its administrative bureaucracy, trade and finance contacts, and other vital functions such as servicing the British armed forces, particularly the Navy. It is important to stress that the GPO was a non-profit organisation, and it was notoriously tight-fisted when providing finance for the film unit<sup>3</sup> and the Treasury, which had the ultimate say in the allocation of funds, was an arm of the British government bureaucracy, often referred to collectively as 'Whitehall'. The Film Unit therefore was not independent, the final authority was Parliament, via the Postmaster General (See Aitken, 193). This was actually quite a rigid structure and although Grierson found any number of ways to circumvent the bureaucracy, there was, nevertheless, a constant tension between the governmental apparatus (usually referred to as the Civil Service) and the filmmakers.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance this may not seem the most fruitful organisational arena for a group of filmmakers to engage with. Yet, this was not the case and although

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<sup>2</sup> John Grierson (1898-1972). After a period in the USA he joined the Empire Marketing Board as Assistant Film Officer in 1928 and The EMB Film Unit was formed in 1930. Grierson directed only a few films, notably his documentary about the fishing industry, *Drifters* (1928), most of his time was spent managing the unit, commissioning projects, dealing with government bureaucracy and producing. The EMB Film Unit was incorporated into the GPO in 1933. Grierson left the GPO in June 1937 becoming head of the Film Centre, a production and consultation body. In October 1939 he accepted the offer of Film Commissioner of the newly formed Canadian Film Board. Later he worked for UNESCO and from 1957 for Scottish Television.

<sup>3</sup> Although not overly generous towards the Film Unit the GPO spent more money on publicity than any other government department. In 1934 it spent £97,000, of this £11,000 went to the Film Unit and for film distribution.

<sup>4</sup> The governing party was Conservative, many of whom were vociferous opponents of public money being wasted on the 'Bolsheviks' of the GPO Film Unit

Grierson and his successors often had to fight their corner there were factors that worked in their favour. The GPO was regarded as a prestige or flagship organisation, carrying with it a sense of national pride, efficiency and notions of national unity and identity (probably in much the same way as state airlines were viewed in the early days of mass air travel). The GPO may also have benefited from the fact that it was not a commercial enterprise with the onerous capitalistic overtones that this might have had for some of the more radically inclined filmmaker and artists (although it has to be noted that few artists or filmmakers in this period refused commissions from whatever quarter they emerged). The filmmakers also benefited from the vagaries of the British class system. While Whitehall (and the GPO) were no doubt full to the brim with stiff-necked ex-public schoolboys, there were also enough examples of those often quirky products of the system to ensure that the 'film boys' were given enough elbow room in which to work. The main 'fixer' was Stephen Tallents who was instrumental in bringing Grierson to the EMB and, when the EMB closed down, took the film unit with him to the GPO where Tallents became the Head of Public Relations. He was a keen follower of film and an avowed admirer of Alexander Dovchenko and other Soviet directors. (Tallents, 19) A moderniser, Tallents was representative of a certain 'liberal conservatism' which could be found among sections of the British middle and upper class (the British filmmaker Michael Powell is another example). Despite the occasional noises to the contrary this was also Grierson's position. Thus, Tallents' desire "...to bring alive, to the eyes of the public and its own staff, an immense organisation" (quoted in Ellis, 75) coincided quite neatly with Grierson's essentially quite moderate views on education, the widespread dissemination of information, and the role of documentary in forging a modern democracy.

## **2 Finding a home – the possibilities and the problems**

Although government filmmaking did not start with Grierson and the EMB, the British government had sponsored filmmaking during the First World War, if not before (see Winston, 35-6), the 1930s saw a boom in both commercial and government-sponsored filmmaking and film became a 'buzz word'. The GPO, commercial organisations such as Shell, the Imperial Tobacco Company, and governmental (or semi-governmental) departments such as the Milk Marketing Board all turned to film to promote their organisations and their products. This trend was by no means confined to Britain, in Holland, Phillips Radio hired Joris Ivens and the Hungarian George Pal (previously György Pál), in the USA the Roosevelt administration turned to Pare Lorentz for its New Deal films, while in Germany, Hans Richter delighted cinema audiences with his army of marching cigarettes in the famous Muratti advertisements. On a certain level therefore conditions looked promising for aspiring filmmakers and artists even if they had

somewhat unconventional ideas. A number were attracted to the GPO Film Unit. Clearly the desire to reach a mass or larger audience than those in film societies and film clubs created an impulse that avant-garde artists found hard to resist despite the 'Faustian' overtones inherent in such ventures and is a story repeated many times in other parts of the world.<sup>5</sup>

The signs, however, looked good. The opening up of both government and commercial sponsorship, also coincided, roughly, with the establishment of a critical climate in Britain, however marginal to mainstream filmmaking, which helped create an atmosphere in which film was discussed seriously and became part of a generalised cultural agenda. The establishment of the Film Society in 1925 created a community of cinephiles, at least in London (other cities followed suit) and two years later the journal *Close-Up*, which took a keen interest in the avant-garde, gave film enthusiasts news, information, and a platform to debate, discuss and express their views.<sup>6</sup> *Close-Up* was joined by other publications such as the enthusiastically avant-gardist *Film Art* which appeared somewhat erratically from 1933 to 1937. 1932 saw the first issue of *Sight and Sound*, still going strong today and in the following year the British Film Institute was established. In a relatively short time there was a major ground shift. As Jen Samson comments towards the end of her short essay on the Film Society,

In 1925 there were no film institutes, film archives or film festivals. Serious newspaper criticism of film did not exist; nor did specialised cinemas for minority audiences, film libraries, or educational attention to film. By 1939 all these things had been established. Moreover, there was now a national network of film societies and workers' film societies, which meant that to a large extent the work of the Film Society was being successfully continued by many different groups in various parts of the country. (Samson, in Barr [ed.], 313)

The Film Society was committed to presenting a wide range of films which were otherwise difficult to access (as a society with membership requirements it also avoided many of the problems of censorship), thus, most famously, it was the Society which premiered Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in Britain,

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<sup>5</sup> To what extent the avant-gardists in the GPO Film Unit and the Unit itself ever reached a mass audience is a matter of continuing debate and research. Commercial distribution was frequently limited although there were the odd successes, Len Lye's *Colour Box*, for example, was shown in Granada cinemas to much acclaim. The Film Unit frequently distributed its films through non-commercial channels, such as schools, colleges, universities, film clubs, workers' organisations and travelling exhibition facilities were also used. As records are scattered and often incomplete this has made the task of assessing this aspect of the Unit's work very difficult.

<sup>6</sup> A number of the Film Unit personnel, including Grierson, were involved with the Film Society.

significantly paired with Grierson's early documentary about the fishing industry, *Drifters* (1928). The avant-garde films were exhibited alongside Hollywood silent classics and Soviet, German, French, and Japanese films. Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (1926) was shown as were films by Viking Eggeling, Walter Ruttmann, and Man Ray and other doyens of the European avant-garde. (Samson, 308) Len Lye's first film, the animation *Tusalava*, was premiered at the Film Society in 1929 to much acclaim<sup>7</sup>. By the early/mid 1930s there was therefore the potential for the avant-garde to establish a bridgehead, however tiny, within a growing British film culture. This potential was bolstered by the arrival in Britain of refugees, such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, fleeing from the rising threat of Fascism in Europe. There were also visits by artists such as Carl Theodor Dreyer,<sup>8</sup> and most famously, Sergei Eisenstein in 1929. Before considering some of the reasons why this potential, ultimately, wasn't realised it is necessary to look at a number of other developments in Britain.

### 3 The 'infertile bed'

Although artistic and cultural life in Britain in the 1930s lagged behind that of France and Germany, there was nothing for example, that compared with the Bauhaus in Britain, there were a small group of artists who constituted a British avant-garde, mainly painters but also some poets, writers, sculptors and others. Probably the most public manifestation of this loose grouping was their efforts to stage the famous 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London. On the organising committee along with such notables as sculptor Henry Moore, the Surrealist painter Roland Penrose, Herbert Read and Paul Nash was GPO Film Unit director Humphrey Jennings. The exhibition was opened on the 11th June by Andre Breton and was a huge success, daily drawing over 1000 visitors for the 23 days it was open. With over 400 hundreds items on display, including works by Jennings and Lye (not to mention items by the 'galacticos' of European Surrealism; Klee, Duchamp, Picasso, Dali and others) "The exhibition had planted the seeds of the British Surrealist movement, although the nature of the British people proved a harsh and infertile bed for their germination" (Penrose, 74).

In the following year another event occurred that had a bearing on British filmmaking. Humphrey Jennings, along with Charles Madge and Tom Harrison,

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<sup>7</sup> *Tusalava* was an animated mix of traditional Maori and Aboriginal drawings applied with a modernist overlay. The title is Samoan and means 'Just the same'. Apparently the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) were worried that it was about sex (!) and contemplated banning the film. The 1929 screening was private and it was to be almost six years before Lye received his first public screening, with *Colour Box* (1935).

<sup>8</sup> According to Stephen Tallents, Dreyer contributed to the script for the 1938 GPO Film Unit documentary *North Sea*, directed by Harry Watt (Tallents 65).

issued a statement in the centre-left *New Statesman* which called for the formation of the organisation known as Mass Observation “...that ambitious investigation into British life and culture that took place between 1936 and 1947” (Eaton, 80). Observers went out ‘into the field’ as it were like anthropologists, to observe everyday life, then reported back to a central point and the data was collected. The huge statistical reports were then collated and made publicly available. The point of this complex exercise, at one time approximately 1,500 observers were out on the streets, was never clear. It was supposed to aid in some kind of political or cultural transformation but by whom, how, when, why was always vague and as Mick Eaton wittily points out “If this is market research it is closer to James Joyce than J. Walter Thompson...” (Eaton, 81).

It is however indicative of a particular trend that can be observed in British cultural and political life in the 1920s and 1930s – the desire to go ‘out’ into those regions of Britain, primarily the industrial North, Scotland, and the South Wales valleys, which had previously been ignored and report back or expose the conditions under which people lived. Of course, the most famous example is George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, published by the Left Book Club in 1937, but also to be counted is J. B. Priestley’s *English Journey* (1933) Of similar ilk can be included the work of photographers such as Bill Brandt (e.g. his collection *The English at Home*, 1936) and Humphrey Spender and various fictional or semi-fictional accounts of, for example, the experiences of unemployment as in Walter Brierley’s *Means Test Man* (1935), or life in South Wales in the Depression (the poetry of Idris Davies), indeed there is a huge body of this literature too numerous to mention in any detail.

The point is that ordinary life, particularly the lives of the working class, became of interest and concern in the 1930s. There was a desire, primarily among the more liberal/leftist middle class to ‘go out’ and discover this other Britain and if this sounds like some kind of anthropological excursion into the ‘heart of darkness’ then, for some, this was precisely what it was. Even sympathetic observers, like Orwell and Jennings sometimes lapsed into the language of Victorian explorers in Africa to describe the ‘natives’ (i.e. the working class) of Wigan, Sheffield and Newcastle who they encountered on their travels. The GPO Film Unit embarked on a similar quest. For Grierson, heavily influenced by his immersion in philosophical idealism (represented by F. H. Bradley, A. D. Lindsay, Mathew Arnold and others) while at Glasgow University the documentary project, venturing out into the ‘wilds’ of the industrial North and elsewhere, was part of a wider belief system whose ultimate aim was to bring society together and promote social cohesion. Grierson, following Bradley, believed in organic unity, springing primarily from state structures and, influenced by Lindsay, he coupled this with a profound belief in gradualist reform. It is a complex fusion of ideas which Ian Aitken explains,

These ideas amounted to a corporatist conception of the society, in which individual and social phenomena were perceived as being integrated, at different levels, within the social totality. As a consequence of this belief, Grierson argued that ideologies which promoted integration were 'good propaganda', whilst those promoted division were 'propaganda of the devil.' He believed that social conflict occurred because individuals and institutions were unaware of underlying social inter-dependency, and because they were deceived by a superficial perception of conflict and division. He rejected the idea that there were fundamental and irreducible divisions in society, and believed that it was an ignorance of the underlying 'continuing reality' of evolving inter-dependence which led to such perceptions. (Aitken, 189)

What follows from this set of beliefs is that the primary role of documentary film is to explain the world to people, to provide information in order to promote social integration and deflate and ultimately eliminate conflict. This partly accounts for the phenomena (so often pointed out by left-wing critics) that the documentaries actually say nothing about the causes of, for example, accidents and fatalities in the mining industry (*Coal face*) or the causes of slum housing (*Housing Problems*, 1936).<sup>9</sup> It also helps to account for Grierson's antipathy towards the 'aesthetic', while he was not adverse to the odd piece of experimentation with sound or colour, ultimately nothing had to stand in the way of getting over the information, of showing the connections of the social totality. This is possibly why none of the more overtly avant-gardist films deal with major issues – the only exception being *Coal Face* (although this film is probably more accurately described as an experimental documentary). Lye's *Colour Box* for example (where he uses the technique of painting directly onto the film strip) is a gorgeous, indulgent collage of music, colour, shapes and movement which, right at the end, informs the viewer that there is a new cheaper rate for parcels! *Rainbow Dance* concerns the Post Office Savings Bank,<sup>10</sup> while in *Trade Tattoo*, his most ambitious work for the GPO, he employs a complex layering of vibrant colour, animated words and stencilled patterns all

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<sup>9</sup> *Housing problems*, directed by Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, was sponsored by the British Commercial Gas Association and was not a GPO project (although Grierson acted as producer). It is considered by some historians to be a major step forward in documentary techniques due to its pioneering use of interviews. (See, for example, Ellis 99-100. For more qualified accounts see Corner 63-71 and Winston 43-44)

<sup>10</sup> There is an easily available and detailed account of *Rainbow Dance* in Don McPherson's *British Cinema: Traditions of Independence*, 184-185 (originally published in *World Film News*, December, 1936). This includes details of how Lye utilised the Gasparcolour system, popular with European animators in the 1930s and originally developed by the Hungarian Béla Gaspar.

synchronised to a pulsating music track, merely to remind us to post our letters early – to which is tagged on a rather superfluous ‘social message’ – to maintain the rhythm of ‘workaday Britain.’

#### 4 The avant-garde and the 'bloody dreary'

It is necessary to lay out some criteria at this point. As already mentioned the vast majority of the output of the GPO Film Unit was not avant-garde or experimental and although the unit is, today, justly famous, more than anything else, for *Song of Ceylon* (1934), *Coal Face* (1935), and the brilliant *Night Mail* (1936) the standard fare was run of the mill information or instructional films such as *How to Tie a Parcel* and warnings of the dire consequences of incorrectly addressed letters. In the words of Stuart Legg, a Film Unit director, “There were certainly some remarkable films [...] There was this and that. But if you look at the vast body of the films that the GPO Film Unit made, they’re bloody dreary” (Quoted in Sussex, 82).<sup>11</sup> Within this body of worthy but dull films there are, however, some interesting and occasionally startling examples of experimentation (particularly in the use of sound) and avant-gardist influences can be directly seen in a number of films most of them animations, which sometimes escape the attention of historians who have tended to concentrate on the better known films such as *Night Mail*. Yet it is in animation, in the films of Len Lye and Norman McClaren’s *Love on the Wing* (1939) that the avant-garde is most clearly manifested – films which are the least ‘Griersonian’ of any made by the GPO Film Unit. And while Lye and McClaren clearly benefited from Grierson’s occasional openness, it was his philosophical/ideological stance and its legacy when Grierson left the GPO which also, at the same time, severely curtailed the extent to which the leading lights of the Film Unit were willing to engage with the avant-garde.

Counterposed to Grierson there is the influence of Cavalcanti to be reckoned with. Almost all the films of the GPO Film Unit with any inclinations towards experimentation or the avant-garde have Cavalcanti’s involvement in some capacity. He is director on *Coal Face*, producer for all the films of Len Lye, and (with one exception) Norman McClaren’s films and five of Jennings’ films, he also has production credits on both films of Lotte Reiniger. In all, Cavalcanti worked directly on more GPO films than did Grierson and his influence should never be underrated, important as this is it should also not detract from our understanding of Grierson as the ultimate authority at the Film Unit.

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<sup>11</sup> There is some small disagreement about the number of films produced by the GPO Film Unit in its existence. The BFI catalogue lists 129.



Grierson famously defined documentary as the “creative treatment of reality”<sup>12</sup>, confusing as this is as a definition, it also hides the extent to which Grierson and his successors only allowed the avant-garde a peek into the sanctum of 21 Soho Square (the HQ of the Film Unit). Creativity, however vaguely it may have been defined by Grierson, was also controlled by him and although he rightly deserved a reputation for attracting multifarious talents, from numerous fields, any number of accounts by participants testify to his constant desire to assert his authority. It is also worthy of note that J. B. Holmes, the director of productions at the Film Unit, in a contemporary article where he discusses the work of the Unit only refers to *technical* experiments and never uses words such as artistic to describe the films or aspects of them. (Holmes, 159)

If this brief account appears, at first glance, to be confusing and even contradictory, then this surely is a reflection of the way things were. As Elizabeth Sussex suggests in her introduction to *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary* (one of the many accounts of the period), “The attraction of British documentary in its early years was not that it achieved success but that it achieved the freedom to stumble along in a number of interesting directions almost by accident.” (Sussex, x)

This stumbling, advantageous and limiting at the same time, ultimately worked against any influence that the avant-garde might have had. A number of factors were involved:

- 1) The artistic stance of Grierson, particularly his luke-warm and inconsistent attitude to what he frequently dismissed as the ‘aesthetic’
- 2) Censorship. It is easy to forget that British films at this time were heavily censored.
- 3) Cost. The Film Unit was constantly strapped for cash. For example they were forced to purchase the cheapest sound system available.
- 4) I believe there is some lack of clarity in what the ‘mission’ of the Film Unit actually was, or more specifically, how the mission was to be implemented and after Grierson’s departure clear fault lines were to emerge.
- 5) An underlying hostility to abstract and non-representational art among large sections of the British intelligentsia at the time.
- 6) The developing political crisis in the 1930s and the pressure for realism, particularly from the left.

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<sup>12</sup> Strangely, this most famous quote of Grierson’s is not included in *Grierson on Documentary* (edited by Forsyth Hardy, 1979 ed.). Winston has a very interesting discussion of this idea and its possible meanings (and evasions).

- 7) The hostility of the mainstream British film industry to the work of the Film Unit who saw the government support received by the GPO Film Unit as 'unfair competition'. (See Rotha 1973: 115-122)
- 8) Government hostility. Government circles of the time perceived of the GPO Film Unit as a hotbed of Bolshevism despite the obvious apolitical attitudes of many of the staff and the non-incendiary nature of the films.

### 5 Auden, Jennings and others

It is not surprising therefore to find that some of the artists drawn into the Film Unit by Grierson (particularly those from the painting, music or literature) often did not stay very long. The poet W. H. Auden, who is one of the most frequently mentioned in the literature as a Film Unit 'fellow traveller', actually worked for the GPO for only three and a half months. The painter William Coldstream who directed the whacky 1935 instructional film *The Fairy on the Phone*, returned to painting after three years with the Film Unit<sup>13</sup>, and the German silhouette-animation director Lotte Reininger (aided by her husband, former UFA cameraman Carl Koch) made just two films for the Unit, *The Tocher*<sup>14</sup> and *The HPO – Heavenly Post Office* (both 1938) while visiting Britain.<sup>15</sup> The Film Unit, at various times used the talents of an array of musicians, most famously, the young Benjamin Britten (on *Coal Face*, *Night Mail*, and many others) but also Arnold Bax, Vaughan Williams, Brian Easdale and, briefly, the Frenchman Maurice Jaubert.<sup>16</sup> Other artists included the sculptor, John Skeaping, and the dancer Rupert Doone (who had once been the protégé, and lover, of Jean Cocteau). Much of this coming and going is accounted for by the nature of the

<sup>13</sup> From available accounts it appears that after an initial period of enthusiasm neither Auden or Coldstream (who became friends) were very enthusiastic about working for the Film Unit. "In the winter of 1935/6 Auden and Coldstream began slipping out of their Soho office for coffee together grumbling about the ways of the GPO Film Unit." (Laughton 37). Auden's alternative to the Griersonian ideal is perhaps suggested by his collection *Letters From Iceland*, published in 1937 and discussed by Bryant 61-98.

<sup>14</sup> Sottish dialect word for 'dowry'.

<sup>15</sup> Lotte Reininger (1899-1989) specialised in silhouette animation. Born in Germany she worked with Max Reinhardt and then Paul Wegener. Married Karl Koch who became her producer and cameraman. She became famous for *The Adventures of Prince Ahmed* (1923-26) and Walter Ruttmann worked with her for a time. Reininger and Koch both had problems leaving Germany when the Nazis came to power and were not able to get out until 1936 when they moved to Italy. She frequently visited England during this period and eventually settled in London in 1946.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Jaubert (1900-1940) prominent musical composer who acquired a formidable reputation in France, composing the music for Jean Vigo's classic *L'Atalante* (1934), *Hotel du Nord* (1938) and *Quai des Brumes* (1938) to name only a few of his projects. He worked on only one film with the GPO, *We Live in Two Worlds*, directed by Cavalcanti in 1937. He was killed in action during the invasion of France.

work involved – people would be employed for a specific job and then move on. It must also be noted that the two filmmakers who had roots in the avant-garde – Jennings and Cavalcanti – stayed a considerable length of time with the unit but, arguably at the price of shifting their artistic focus, away from their roots and into more mainstream filmmaking. This is particularly noticeable with Cavalcanti who by 1938 is producer on *North Sea* (directed by Harry Watt), what today would be called a drama-documentary and by 1942 (after the demise of the GPO Film Unit) directs (for Ealing Studio) the fiction film *Went the Day Well*. The case of Humphrey Jennings is perhaps even more illuminating.

Jennings came to the GPO Film Unit in 1934<sup>17</sup>. He was involved in four films that year, two of them (*Post Haste* and *Locomotives* as director). In 1936 he worked with Len Lye on his animation *The Birth of the Robot* where Jennings is credited with “Colour decor and production” (Jennings, 73). This was sponsored by Shell-Mex BP and it was to be 1938 before he worked on more GPO productions. In that year he directed three films; *Penny Journey* and *Speaking From America* for the GPO and *Design for Spring* for the fashion designer Norman Hartnell.<sup>18</sup> With war looming, in 1939, he directed *Spare Time* and three other films for the GPO. In 1940 he directed three films dedicated to helping the war effort, the best known being *Britain Can take It*. From then until 1947 all his films were made for the Crown Film Unit (with one being made under the auspices of the Ministry of Information). This unevenness, the gap of four years, when he did no (credited) work for the GPO is perhaps indicative of the problems encountered by an artist such as Jennings in the institutional framework of the GPO. It is reported that Grierson was critical of Jennings, (see for example, Ellis, 78-79) never quite trusted him and always kept him at arms length; it is certainly the case that Jennings’ only film made at the GPO which ever features in historical discussion and accounts is *Spare Time*. Jennings’ most famous and most discussed films were made after his period with the GPO – *Listen to Britain* (1942), *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *A Diary for Timothy* (1945).

*Spare Time* is an 18 minute black and white film, with a voice over narration by novelist Laurie Lee (author of *Cider With Rosie*), and produced by Cavalcanti. As the title suggests the film is concerned with how British working

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<sup>17</sup> Like many of the people associated with the documentary film movement and the avant-garde in Britain, Jennings was a product of the British upper middle class having studied at Cambridge. As well as his interest in film he was also a poet, painter, radio commentator and writer. In fact the whole documentary movement in Britain at this time looks like a boys club for Oxbridge undergraduates and others from similar elite establishments (the major exceptions being the foreigners such as Cavalcanti). Elton, Wright, Davidson and Legg were all from Cambridge. Those from north of the Border (e.g. Harry Watt) also attended similar elite establishments.

<sup>18</sup> Hartnell became a leading British fashion designer and was a friend of Jennings while at Cambridge. Only one reel of *Design for Spring* exists, released as *Making Fashions* in 1939.

people spent their spare time and focuses on three locations connected to three basic industries: Sheffield (steel), Manchester and Bolton (cotton), Pontypridd, South Wales (coalmining). While the film was not without its controversy<sup>19</sup> it was the first major manifestation of Jennings' 'trademark' juxtaposition of sound and image (heavily influenced by Soviet montage);

It is in *Spare Time* that Jennings, for the first time, explores what later became his most accomplished technique: the counterpointing of soundtrack allusions and images that may be only remotely related to each other. He invites viewers to make their own associations among them all. (Hodgkinson and Sheratsky, 42)

Important as this film was and the technique mentioned in the above quote was to reach its peak in some of the brilliant juxtapositions and transitions of *Listen to Britain*, *Spare Time*, nevertheless can't really be classified as avant-garde. It probably falls into the category for which Jennings became best known, the rather loosely defined 'poetic documentary'. Certainly the influence of the avant-garde can be seen, for example in the shared desire of the filmmaker, the British Surrealists and Mass Observation to bring the ordinary into focus, to bring out the extraordinary qualities of daily working life, to make a Sheffield Brass band or a Welsh choir appear worthy of our attention and interest. However, it is an influence and no more and Jennings' most avant-garde work appears in his paintings and drawings and some of his writing.

Norman McLaren joined the GPO Film Unit in 1936 after studying at the Glasgow School of Art between 1932-1936. Like many artists of the time he had been influenced by developments in Germany, Russia, and France – he was particularly interested in the 'tonal handwriting' of the German Rudolph Phehnninger and experimented with synthetic sound. In an early film for the GPO, *Book Bargain* (1937) – a short film depicting how the London Telephone Directory was made (another riveting topic!) – he scratched directly onto the sound track. In his 4 minute animation, *Love on the Wing* (1938), whose theme is the airmail service, McLaren employs a rich use of colour and sound to create beautiful and evocative images of aircraft and flight. Yet, there is a sense that McLaren was under some pressure to produce more 'mainstream' films. In 1937 his film *News for the Navy* is a more-or-less straight forward documentary tale of a badly addressed package sent by a young woman to her lover, a sailor in the British Navy, while in 1938 he directed *Mony a Pickle* (with Cavalcanti as producer) which, like *News for the Navy* is a fairly typical product of the

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<sup>19</sup> One sequence in the film - the Manchester Victorian Carnival Band playing kazoos (a so-called 'Jazz band', though this has nothing to do with jazz as it originated in the USA) was criticised as being insulting or patronising to its working class protagonists (for further discussion see Ellis 41, Winston 53, Aitken [1990] 147 and [2000] 58-59.)

Grierson stable. These variations are, quite possibly, the result of an exploratory urge within the GPO Film Unit that took the filmmakers in various directions but in some cases at least that urge or impulse took them away from their experimental or avant-gardist roots. One can sense everywhere the hand of Grierson, it is reported that when McLaren joined the Film Unit Grierson said to him, "What you will learn here is discipline. You have enough imagination, you need not worry about that. But you are going to get disciplined" (quoted in Dusinberre, 45). Perhaps McLaren satisfied Grierson's demands – he joined him in Canada. Clearly he was not out of favour with the maestro.

The demands of public service (which frequently entailed a relinquishing of individual control, so important for the avant-garde), the Griersonian ethos, the contradictions of aesthetic and formal experimentation in a (Conservative) government department, coupled with the drive to communicate with a mass audience, ultimately meant that the avant-garde was squeezed out. As World War Two approached the voices calling for a decisive shift towards realism became all the more stronger, particularly from an increasingly Stalinist inflected Left, who took their lead from Zhdanov and Moscow not from Bloomsbury or, for that matter, Soho Square. After Grierson's departure these pressures began to show within the unit itself and there is the beginning of a shift towards the blending of narrative and documentary which reached its peak in the war years with film such as *Fires Were Started*. Formal experimentation became much more limited and while British cinema as a whole entered a golden period in the 1940s, it did so, to some extent, at the cost of burying the avant-garde under the weight of its realism.

## 6 Threads

It would be wrong however to finish the story here. The small British avant-garde may have almost expired or moved on to greener pastures towards the end of the 1930s but this was not the last word. The future of British filmmaking is punctuated with personalities, events, connections and links which can be traced back to the avant-garde in and around the GPO Film Unit, some well-known some not. Future British director Lindsey Anderson has frequently acknowledged his debt to Humphrey Jennings. William Coldstream, although never a card-carrying member of the avant-garde, later became chairman of the Arts Council and the British Film Institute. In 1960 he was instrumental in starting up a film department at the Slade art college in London appointing Thoreau Dickinson as Head. Dickinson, in turn, influenced Charles Barr, David Curtis, Lutz Becher and Derek Jarman. Len Lye, who was described in *Time* (12 Dec. 1939) as England's answer to Walt Disney (Horrocks, 6), went on to a long and varied career in the USA. Norman McLaren continued his association with Grierson when he joined him in Canada and worked for the National Film Board

where he was in charge of the animation unit. Others influenced by the avant-garde and the GPO Film Unit were the Poles Stefan and Franciszka Themerson who visited Britain in 1936 and took back a number of films including *Black-Grey-White* by Moholy-Nagy and Lye's *Colour Box*. There were many others, who although not directly within the circle of the GPO Film Unit, formed an amorphous and loose body of artists who were all influenced, in one way or another, by the atmosphere and the milieu for which the Film Unit frequently acted as a fountain head. These include the Hungarian exile art-historian and teacher Frederick Antal who helped Moholy-Nagy (and Vincent Korda) to settle in London (Antal's most famous student was John Berger); the German exile and ex-UFA cameraman Alex Strasser who worked with Lye on *The Birth of the Robot*; László Moholy-Nagy, the former Bauhaus teacher, whose design work on the Korda production *Things to Come* (1936) was sadly marginalised and whose 1936 film *Lobsters* is reminiscent of the Film Unit's work.

Grierson was no doubt guilty of hyperbole when he, reportedly, said that the GPO Film Unit "...is the only experimental centre in Europe – where the artist is not pursuing entertainment..." (quoted in Laughton, 32). Whether or not this is true is not so important as the fact that in its erratic and fleeting embrace of the avant-garde, the GPO Film Unit produced some works of striking innovation. Their lack of any major ongoing impact is a testimony to the cultural climate of the times and the contradictions and problems encountered by avant-garde artists working within larger official or corporate institutions.

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