



In many ways one could say that British cinema in the 1930's went back to its music hall roots. The most predominant genre was the comedy film which accounted for over thirty per cent of films made.

Music hall veteran *Will Hay* with *Moore Marriott* and *Graham Moffatt* produced one of the greatest comedy teams ever to work in cinema, in films such as *Oh Mister Porter* and *Boys Will Be Boys*. The Lancashire-born comedy performers *George Formby* and *Gracie Fields* became the biggest British box office attractions of the decade. Hailed as the king and queen of comedy, they were also musical royalty. Variety films, beginning with *Elstree Calling*, squeezed in as many musical performers as possible and were produced throughout the decade,

Alfred Hitchcock made a return to form with films such as the *39 Steps* and *Sabotage*. Lavish costume dramas such as the *Private Life of Henry the eighth* and *Victoria the Great* developed a worldwide audience for British films.

Alexander Korda became a dominant force in the UK film industry with big budget productions such as the ambitious science fiction spectacle *Things to Come*, spy drama *Knight Without* teaming *Robert Donat* with Hollywood import *Marlene Dietrich*; and his series of patriotic films of Empire, including *Sanders of the River* (d. Zoltan Korda, 1935) and *The Four Feathers* (d. Zoltan Korda, 1939).

The depiction of the lives of ordinary British people was generally left to the documentary movement, whose films, emerging from such bodies as the *Empire Marketing Board Film Unit*, the *GPO Film Unit* both overseen by the movement's figurehead, John Grierson. Certainly, documentary blossomed in the 1930s.

John Grierson's 'Drifters' made in 1929 was the first film in British cinema history to have working-class protagonists in a non-fictional setting. The film was influenced by Walther Ruttmann's 1926 German classic, 'Berlin: Symphony of a City. This film portrayed the modern city in a poetic manner and it was this poetic approach that appealed to Grierson. 'Drifters' tells of Britain's North Sea herring fishery utilizing constructive editing emphasizing the rhythmic juxtaposition of images.

It was the popularity of this film that led Grierson to gain funding from the Government to create the film units of the Empire Marketing Board

Established in 1933, the GPO Film Unit was a subdivision of the General Post Office. This highly innovative team led by Grierson, who was often credited as the father of British documentary film, was set up to produce sponsored documentary films informing the public on the activities of the GPO. Grierson believed that it was possible to change the country with films about real life which investigated contemporary social issues.

Grierson's film units and the documentary culture they created were also an important part of the debates around aesthetic innovation and political commitment that circulated throughout Britain through the decade.

Grierson believed documentary could borrow formal techniques from the great Russian filmmakers Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and Pudovkin to dramatise scenes and practices from everyday life. Vertov's 1929 groundbreaking 'Man with a Movie Camera' presented urban life in Soviet cities – people at work, at play, and interacting with the machinery of modern life. The film used techniques such as: multiple exposure, slow motion, jump cuts, tracking shots, Dutch angles and extreme close-ups.

It was these techniques that influenced Grierson greatly when describing dramatic fiction as "bourgeois excess" and documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality."

Innovative propaganda film 'Housing Problems', made in 1935 by directors Arthur Elton and E.H. Anstey explored how local councils tackled the problem of slum clearance by having ordinary people talking straight to the camera about their lives.

Perhaps the most famous of these 1930's documentaries are "Night Mail" Made in 1936 featuring the poem by W. H. Auden (read by Grierson) and a score by Benjamin Britten, 'Night Mail' focuses on the work of Travelling Post Offices. These were specially equipped trains tasked with the speedy movement and sorting of mail to all corners of Britain. The train we see in Night Mail travels from London to Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen.

The film begins with a voiceover commentary describing how the mail is collected for transit. Then, as the train proceeds along the course of its journey, we are shown the various regional railway stations at which it collects and deposits mail. Inside the train the process of sorting takes place. As the train nears its destination there is a sequence in which Auden's spoken verse and Britten's music are combined over montage images of racing train wheels.

Auden's poetry purposely reflected the rhythm of the train's wheels, picking up speed to a breathless pace before slowing:

"This is the Night Mail crossing the border,

Bringing the cheque and the postal order,

Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,

The shop at the corner and the girl next door.”

Throughout Night Mail the film makers experiment with the use of sound, visual style, narrative and editing technique.

The film is much more than a snapshot of life of postal workers on Travelling Post Offices. It illustrates how Britain is socially, economically and technologically bound together and gives an insight into the people that spent their working lives making it all possible. It focuses not on London but gives a snapshot of the regions and the dynamic power of modern technology.

The experiences of the film makers in the GPO unit and their ability to use propaganda techniques would prove to be incredibly useful in the years following the outbreak of war in 1939. Persuasion would help bind the nation together for the next six years.