



100 BRITISH DOCUMENTARIES

BFI SCREEN GUIDES

Patrick Russell

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Introduction

The documentary impulse has long stirred in British culture. Documentary is usually associated with realism, widely considered the most characteristically British of artistic stances. Actually, the bond between these concepts is pretty knotty. But it has underpinned claims that documentary is, for good or ill, *the* British film genre. Oddly, this assumption is contradicted by standard write-ups of UK cinema and television history, in which documentary makes brief, monolithic appearances before mysteriously vanishing for years or decades at a time.

British documentary *has* frequently been marginal. But it has a continuous history, comprising many mini-histories. This book is a selective introduction, celebrating it as varied, interesting and – against all expectations – fun.

100 British Documentaries

The films discussed in this book, though very wide-ranging, were selected because each illustrates something specific about the many forms British documentary has taken, and the numerous uses to which it has been put, as it has developed historically. The intended result is an accessible map of a national documentary heritage, using 100 films as coordinates – not an inventory of the best, or of the most historically noteworthy, or of personal favourites (though many entries do fall into at least one of these categories). The absence of (say) *The Death of Yugoslavia* (1995) doesn't mean that it's not outstanding or important. And the presence of *Market Place* (1959) (for instance) doesn't mean that *it* is. However, every film is treated as having intrinsic value: even those included only because they are examples of broader categories are

unique works. Every film is also treated as having positional value: even those considered masterpieces resonate with the others on the list, reflecting its broader patterns. The choices are personal, but not designed to corroborate a grand theory of documentary or to sell any one historical variant ahead of others. Nonetheless, the following comments on concepts and history provide helpful context.

100 British Documentaries

Documentary has been perennially dogged by problems of definition. For instance, John Grierson's famous formulation – 'the creative treatment of actuality' – has been welcomed as insightful summary; rejected as self-contradictory; dismissed as vague obfuscation; and acknowledged as a brilliant statement of the obvious. See the Appendix for further reactions!

At the very least, it's an unusually enduring soundbite, and it does distil a common core from the diverse films included here. They all differ (to varying degrees) from fiction films, which depend less decisively than do documentaries on a claimed relationship with reality. But, just as importantly, these 100 films differ (again, to varying degrees) from non-fiction films that *aren't* documentaries and which depend less crucially on the manner by which they have been constructed, and the interpretation brought to them. Counter-intuitively, questions of style, technique, sensibility and viewpoint are as important to documentary as to any other kind of film – arguably more so. This has caused some writers to question the very integrity of the documentary form. Others have sensibly argued for the intelligence of viewers, appreciative that documentaries seek to (and can only) *represent* reality, not to duplicate it.¹

For Grierson, 'actuality' made documentaries potentially *superior* to fiction films, while 'creative treatment' made them more advanced than 'mere records' and 'illustrated lectures'. What his definition most appreciably lacks is reference to film-makers' intentions and audiences' expectations. Documentaries are *designed* to represent reality, and watched as such by viewers. Two particular areas of film history – early

film with its 'cinema of attractions',² and experimental film-making – clarify the distinction. Many works in both categories contain 'actuality' (the very term adopted in early years to label the large quantities of non-fiction then produced). And many 'creatively treat' it (a given of experimental artistry). But for some of these films, the creativity is its own end, the actuality merely its source material: these are not documentaries, because they lack a documentary function. Conversely, some films make use of fiction, precisely to fulfil a documentary function.

However, 'documentary' needn't be a documentary's sole function. Hybrids are the rule, not the exception. Many films in this book are experimental *and* documentary in nature, or are documentary *and* entertainment, *and* political weapon, promotional tool or educational resource. While these fused functions can be mutually compromising, they can also be mutually enriching. Some readers will object to the presence of political broadcasts or classroom teaching aids in a list of documentaries, but those included were carefully chosen precisely because they bring the language of documentary heavily into play while simultaneously fulfilling other functions. Such 'instrumental' uses of documentary are rarely discussed but merit close attention.

Cutting across functions are a range of approaches. One writer has influentially divided documentary into 'modes': poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, performative.³ But these, too, are more often mixed than served neat. Documentary also works within several different possible narrative structures: some established in its prehistory, others gradually added to its repertoire. Films are based around events, places, journeys, processes, individuals, communities, institutions or marked passages of time. They might approach a general subject by scrutinising a case study (or by contrasting several). Or they might do so via personal report, compilation of existing materials, or indeed illustrated lecture as decried by Grierson (rather hypocritically: he and his protégés made their fair share). Most of these 100 documentaries combine such formats just as they do modes and functions.

Numerous variables, then, may be found interacting in a single documentary. Each possesses its own treasureably unique structural DNA. However, the one thing documentary isn't is abstract. Its variables interact in and with specific places and times: in this case the United Kingdom, during the twentieth century and a few years either side. Its *cultural* DNA is complex stuff.

100 *British Documentaries*

Branches of an intricate professional family tree linking documentary filmmakers within and between generations are glimpsed in these pages. Enabled and constrained by evolving technologies, one generation's preoccupations and problems may find direct or distorted echo in another's. British documentary's story is one of contrasts and continuities. This book broadly traces that story, along the way suggesting certain revisions to received versions, which are sometimes too tidy. Imposing rigid divisions between sectors, phases and movements on British documentary history doesn't really work (given the UK industry's small size, it would be surprising if it did). This applies even at the level of *mise en scène*, where observational and orchestrated styles are rarely mutually exclusive. American 'Direct Cinema' may have exalted 'observation' above all else (French *cinéma vérité* did so to a lesser extent, while also promoting 'interaction'). But this was rarely imported wholesale into Britain. And for decades, films making heavy use of other elements such as directed re-enactment had also incorporated 'observational' material. Their makers were untroubled about mixing methods, leaving transitions between them unlabelled. (Also, they generally referred to the 'observational' bits simply as 'actuality' sequences: note how earlier terminology had persisted, while slightly changing meaning.)

Conventional histories also tend to leave gaps (this book leaves its own gaps, of course). Typically, once lip service has been paid to early actuality films, documentary disappears, resurfacing in 1929. The intervening decades' documentaries and 'proto-documentaries' deserve some attention. *Much* attention has been given to the 1930s'

'documentary movement' associated with Grierson, especially to public information documentaries made, before propaganda became a dirty word, at three state institutions: the film unit at the Empire Marketing Board, which begat its successor at the General Post Office, which in turn became World War II's Crown Film Unit. However, these were not the only settings in which the movement worked, and the range of films and film-makers it encompassed is often underestimated. Also it had a complicated, sometimes overlooked, coexistence both with more radical and with more commercial film-makers.

The period between 1939 and 1945 is rightly recorded as a major documentary moment, but shortly thereafter documentary appears to evaporate rapidly once more, this time reappearing as Free Cinema in the late 1950s. The Free Cinema group professed dislike for the documentary movement (their admiration for Humphrey Jennings being the exception that proved the rule). But a telling similarity is that both made conscious, determined efforts at thrusting themselves, via writings and screenings, into cutting-edge film culture and thence the history books. This is significant in itself. But it doesn't follow that none of the documentaries – and there were many – made in the decade preceding Free Cinema is worth watching.

Nor does the marginal post-war presence of Grierson and certain key colleagues prove that their 'movement' had entirely collapsed. It continued, in much modified form and circumstances, until about 1980. Several examples of its output are included here. This book also takes an interest in the phenomenon of 'sponsored' communications usually identified with the documentary movement but also practised elsewhere, and up to the present day. Frequently thought of as the fatal flaw in Griersonian documentary ('sponsorship meant self-censorship'),⁴ as a foundation for cultural endeavour it has a longer history than unfettered free expression does. This doesn't mean any film-makers represented here are Mozarts or Michelangelos, just that sponsored craftsmanship can yield quality products, as well as interesting tensions.

If documentary film declined after 1945, it was a slower, more complicated, much more interesting decline than generally realised. A related historical problem is the complex relationship between cinema and television documentary: more accurately, projected and broadcast documentary. This book focuses on the documentary 'film'. But television having undeniably become its principal outlet, and source of funding, several television 'films' are included. This portion of the list does not aim at a full account of television documentary in its own right (that would require another book). Rather, it surveys the ways in which television refined then increasingly modified documentary as it had developed beforehand. Significant modifications (most with 'film' antecedents but never so pervasively applied) include: association of documentary with journalism; use of interviews; use of presenters; sustained use of the observational mode; documentaries forming ongoing series; and single documentaries being shown in scheduled 'slots'. All of these interact with patterns of consumption very different from those of film – an interaction now heavily mediated by the processes by which broadcasters commission programmes from producers.

This all said, the distribution histories of many films on this list indicate some continuing relationship between broadcast and non-broadcast spaces, small and large screens – not necessarily in cinemas. Grierson long ago claimed that 'non-theatrical' venues were the ideal destinations for documentaries (probably to rationalise his failure to get them into cinemas). With the emergence of digital screen networks and 'webumentary', new 'non-theatrical' spaces are emerging and their relationships with 'theatrical' and 'broadcast' ones are up for renegotiation.

Documentary is witness to a century of extraordinary change. Certain key events are regularly referenced in these pages: two world wars, for starters, and two massively reforming governments on opposite sides of the political spectrum. They provide settings, subjects or subtexts (sometimes years after the fact) for many of these films. Others register broader trends, from rising affluence to declining deference. And, these

films all reflect Britishness in its contradictory complexity: brave, staid, ugly, inventive, hypocritical, refined, rebellious, haunted. And, of course, fixated with class: witness a long line of documentarists from relatively privileged backgrounds speaking to, for or about the British working class.

Like all cultural artefacts, these 100 films will accumulate different sets of meanings for different generations, outside their makers' control.

100 British Documentaries

Every film in this book has a complicated archival history, influencing the ways in which it is currently available to us: a history whose details are unique to each production. Unlike some documentaries, all of these films at least still exist: all preserved in some form, mostly by the BFI National Archive, BBC Broadcast Archives or the Imperial War Museum, sometimes by their rights-holders or in specialist, regional or overseas collections.

The scope and value of much past writing about documentaries has been severely constrained by their limited availability. However (partly with the aid of digital technologies), access to documentary heritage is widening: necessarily gradually, given the complexity of the technical and legal issues and the huge costs involved in overcoming them. As a companion to this book, most of the 100 films discussed can be viewed as part of the BFI's Mediatheque initiative: <www.bfi.org.uk/mediatheque>.

Watch them, enjoy – and make up your own mind. Then get to work on your own list of *100 British Documentaries*.

Note on the Entries

Where a film is clearly part of a series, the series is listed in brackets after the individual film title. If the film belongs to a looser cycle of films, or was screened within a non-sequential television slot, this is usually referred to in the entry itself rather than in the header.

Many films have no credited director, are entirely uncredited, or were made in production circumstances in which the role of 'director' was not recognised. For this reason, a 'possessive credit' has usually been

included in headers only where a director *is* credited (e.g., *Snow* – Geoffrey Jones), or where a ‘producer’ has been credited and their creative role clearly corresponds to that of director as generally understood (e.g., *The Shadows in the Cave* – Adam Curtis). More thorough listings, sometimes including personnel or organisations not credited on screen, can be found at the bottom of each entry, but these are necessarily selective. Readers seeking detailed credits are directed to <www.bfi.org.uk/filmtvinfo/ftvdb/>.

24 Hours

2000 – 25 mins

By the turn of the century, Channel 4 Television was suspected of straying from its mission (it was set up in 1982 with a remit to transmit non-mainstream material). For some, the *Big Brother* (2000–) franchise typifies its recent preference for ratings-chasing infotainment over documentary and other parts of its founding mission. In an increasingly deregulated environment, though, such successful programming helped subsidise vestiges of the channel's 'alternative' remit. An example is *Alt.TV*, a slot allocated to independent film-makers, albeit reaching comparatively tiny late-night audience shares.

24 Hours was coincidentally screened in the slot on the third night of *Big Brother's* first series. Produced by Brian Hill's company, it consists of '24 cameras, 24 one-minute films' made by young independent film-makers across London at different hours of one day. As a kaleidoscopic portrait of London, the resulting anthology is uneven but very watchable. As a compendium of documentary strategies, it's fascinating:

Canary Wharf Print Room documents production processes
counterpointing sound and actuality images, 'observed' and 're-enacted'

Bond Street Russian Twins depicts a person and his milieu,
interspersing footage and interview

South Bank The Eye's poetic soundtrack accompanies cityscape stills

Blackheath Going to School shows a boy leaving for school, under his
own voiceover

Soho Courier is a montage of subjective travelling shots

Dean Street outside Dave interviews a homeless person

In *Wardour Street Restaurant* kitchen staff explain food preparation
processes as they undertake them

West End Passengers' protagonist recites poetry to camera (split
screen is used)

Lewisham Primary School documents a school break, mainly via a child's camera

Chelsea Beauty Parlour's 'fly-on-the-wall' observes a conversation

Camden Funeral Parlour (the best of the 24 shorts) mixes workplace interviews, observed conversation and documentary footage

Leicester Square Joking consists of 'vox pops'

Wandsworth Tea Time is a home movie compressed into swiftly edited highlights

Soho Birthday Party similarly evokes an office party using quick cuts

University College Hospital Waiting describes an institution, using unhurried montage and counterpointed sound

Clapham Going out borrows stylised imagery from advertising and music video

In *Tower Hamlets Bedtime* footage of a boy's hobby is accompanied by his narration

West End Curtain Down records an event and contextualises it with retrospective interview

The subject's voiceover describes *Clapham Grandma's Cafe*

Smithfield Meat Market portrays a place, using edited observational material

Croydon Prayer Room is another observational record

Epping Podium plays interview sound over documentary material

Islington Insomniac is a character portrait, combining images of the subject and his informative commentary

City of London Dead of Night stylises street scenes by using superimpositions

These short films are products of documentary's multifaceted evolution from the one-minute films made a century earlier. All the formats, styles and techniques described above (and the overall film's 'day-in-a-life' format) are found in unique combinations among the ninety-nine films that follow.

Any Man's Kingdom

1956 – 22 mins

Tony Thompson

The post-war expansion of public ownership generated new clients for documentary's services. In 1949 British Transport Films (BTF) was set up to serve the newly nationalised public transport network. It went on to produce 600 films for the Inland Waterways, London Transport and, principally, British Rail. Producer Edgar Anstey stated:

bodies like the Transport Commission are aware that films on the public services can be made that will play an effective part in creating a new psychological pattern from the public as owner, the public as worker and the public as user.⁵

For the owner, BTF documented improvements in transport technology and services. For workers, it relayed staff information and instruction. For the user, BTF turned out handsome colour portraits of Britain as reachable by rail. These enjoyed cinema release then long shelf-lives in BTF's busy non-theatrical library. *Any Man's Kingdom*, ranging across Northumberland, exemplifies this film cycle's superior and subtle quality: vibrant colours applied to stately compositions; an imaginative score by Elisabeth Lutyens, alternately warm and sinister; and allusive, elegiac commentary – 'now between tide and tide there is only the heraldry of holidays in the horned bays where Geordie comes up from Tyneside'.

Anstey employed both old hands like J. B. Holmes and John Taylor and younger film-makers like Tony Thompson, who directed several evergreen BTF classics. His visual approach recalls much 1940s' documentary, seamlessly blending actuality (rural faces at fairs and dances) with choreographed action. BTF's half-realistic, half-escapist picture of post-war Britain yielded scores of fine films and has won it great nostalgic popular affection. It has attracted little academic notice,

assumed to be of greater interest to train buffery than to documentary studies, perhaps inheriting Paul Rotha's contemporary (envious?) judgment: 'conventionally competent output which lacks real creative inspiration'.⁶

Had such films retreated from artistry and social meaning? The high quality of their craftsmanship is actually far more consistent than that attained by any previous documentary unit, though sometimes too slick. Many exude a certain complacency. In this, however, they advance rather than betray social documentary's long-stated mission of expressing, even forging a national mood. After turbulent years, Britain was meant to look to a future of modernisation and social solidarity, while reconciling itself to its heritage. Underlying *Any Man's Kingdom* is acquaintance between Northumberland's present and its distant, sometimes turbulent pasts ('dusk and dawn are banks of the one river and time is only a bridge'). Potentially trite or twee, this theme is quite creatively handled. A prosaic visual of travellers boarding a rural bus is made ageless by the ghostly music played over it.

Moreover, serving a public monopoly before mass car ownership, BTF didn't have to hard-sell. More pressing was the need to conform to internal policy. There are no trains in *Any Man's Kingdom*. The aforementioned bus sequence was hastily shot and inserted into the film to replace a shot of the equivalent train service when it was realised that the Transport Commission was about to withdraw it. During the 1950s some 2,000 miles of railway line were closed, before the next decade's better-remembered Beeching axe was taken to further chunks of the system.

Prod Co: British Transport Films; **Spons:** British Rail; **Dir:** Tony Thompson; **Prod:** Ian Ferguson;
Phot: Robert Paynter, Reg Hughes.

Artists Must Live

1953 – 30 mins

John Read

'A BBC Television Film': given its early date, it gives some idea how television documentary looked and sounded when confined to a single BBC channel broadcasting for only a few hours a day. The relative paucity of surviving, let alone accessible early television material makes its study as much a blend of archaeology and history as is study of the early films of half a century before. On the evidence of this film, the analogy with early non-fiction film isn't entirely specious. The film-makers appear to be both reinventing documentary for a new medium and borrowing from existing models. Where early actualities might have drawn on photography and other pre-cinematic crafts, here the precedents are film documentary – and BBC radio, from which early television technicians were as likely to have come.

The programme concerns 'the artist's place in Britain today' and in particular the financing of visual art. Director John Read remained associated with BBC arts output for many years. Eyes closed, it's easy to hear his film as a radio broadcast. The pictures often merely illustrate, even during wordless sequences leisurely surveying paintings and sculptures to the strains of the BBC Orchestra. Inherited from radio is the role of the host with specialist expertise, occupied here by art historian Basil Taylor. A cinema antecedent was Jill Craigie's 1944 *Out of Chaos*, a survey of wartime painting by Kenneth Clark, who later personified the technique's refinement in the lavish BBC series *Civilisation* (1969). This film has much lower production values than either.

Taylor is sometimes on screen, wandering around galleries. Other scenes comprise actuality footage of locations or of artists at work. Several artists, both struggling and established, are used to illustrate the theme: some, like John Piper and Patrick Heron, still remembered, others forgotten. Interviews with artists and patrons already have a televisual 'look' (over-the-shoulder shots, cutaways to Taylor, shots in which both

Taylor and the interviewee appear). These mostly upper-middle-class subjects are as stilted as any interviewees of the time.

Post-dating (by four weeks) the Coronation broadcast which expanded the television audience, *Artists* would nonetheless have reached a mere fraction of homes. Unlike many early television documentaries, it continued to be available for non-theatrical hire for many years. The Arts Council, with whom the BBC made the film, became a significant sponsor both of documentaries about art and experimental films *by* artists. Its backing explains this film's sequence promoting it as the 'chief agency of state patronage' of art. Read doesn't make a thematic connection between this and another section on 'enlightened advertisers' who commission posters from artists. *Artists Must Live*, a sponsored television film, falls somewhere between the 'enlightened advertising' that had hitherto brought most documentary to the screen and mature factual television which would come to consider it an unacceptable compromise.

Prod Co: BBC, Arts Council of Great Britain; **Dir:** John Read; **Prod:** John Elliot.

At Work in Manchester and Milan (Neighbours)

1974 – 22 mins

Richard Guinea, Manfred Voss, Enrico Platter

Educational films haven't had armies of scholars invading them. Nonetheless, histories seeking to encompass the full range of cinema practice have found a place for film-makers like Mary Field. The vaster output of television schools programming since the 1950s is comparatively less well documented, much less systematically interpreted, despite its far more thorough integration into curricula.

In the absence of such a critical literature, this programme is included as an arbitrary example: a reminder not to overlook educational television's use of documentary. It should be added that, following its first broadcast, this film was also available for 16mm hire. With widely available video recorders still a decade away, the presence of schools programmes in educational libraries was essential for teachers juggling complex timetables.

Neighbours: Four Families in Europe was a series for ten- to thirteen-year-olds. Anglo-German co-productions, each was a short documentary comparing everyday lives in different countries of the Common Market, recently joined by Britain. This episode thoroughly mixes the 'day-in-the-life' and the 'comparative study' documentary formats. 'Both these workers are employed in large modern industries. Today we'll see some of the differences between a white-collar and a blue-collar worker.'

The subjects are electronics-firm foreman Ted Conway and Domenico Fasoli, a tyre-factory worker. The film's divided into several sequences contrasting their daily schedules: clocking in, working, having lunch, more work, heading home, enjoying an evening out. For example, Conway walks home to a meat-and-veg lunch (cooked by his wife, who also works full time), while Fasoli enjoys pasta, bread and red wine in his staff canteen. Also included are sequences detailing manufacturing processes, and interviews with the men and their wives. The most discursive, socially interesting scene compares gender attitudes.

Mrs Conway holds respectably egalitarian views, shared by her husband – to a point. The Fasolis embrace rigidly traditional roles.

Narration supplies context, relaying facts and figures (for instance, comparative national pension provisions). A difference between this and older schools films is that the producers haven't made archetypes of their characters. They include personal details to flesh out the individuals, though extraneous to international comparison. Still, when the final narration concludes that 'though both men are workers, we've seen some striking differences in their ways of life', it's clear that decades from its black-and-white antecedents, this schools documentary still prizes clarity above all else.

At Work in Manchester and Milan is an unremarkable film put together with a professionalism and honesty easy to respond to. As often with youthful ephemera encountered in adulthood, it's even rather moving, still recent enough to evoke bittersweet nostalgia: the more so, perhaps, given the unlikelihood of any of the thousands who saw this film now remembering doing so. The jolly music and opening jigsaw graphics will momentarily transport any survivor of the 1970s right back into them. Narrator Brian Trueman (a regular children's TV presenter) adds to the strange familiarity. Low-key idealism runs through the project's attempt at getting Europe's children to understand each other better. And the closing sequence, cutting between Mr Fasoli's male social club and the Conways' suburban pub, is warmly executed. Respectful portraiture of ordinary lives lived.

Prod Co: Granada Television, Bayerischer Rundfunk; **Dir:** Richard Guinea, Manfred Voss, Enrico Platter.

Baby's Toilet

1905 – 3 mins

The films of producer Cecil Hepworth, a giant of early British film, encompassed many genres. Their interesting challenge to documentary history arises from their resistance to having sharp distinctions between fiction and non-fiction imposed on them, suggesting instead a spectrum along which the proportions are variably mixed from film to film. Our patchy knowledge of Hepworth's intentions compounds the difficulty of placing them, but scenic 'panoramas', 'phantom rides' and events reportage undoubtedly lie towards one end of the scale whereas, say, his film of scenes from *Alice in Wonderland* (1903) definitely lies at the opposite end.

Nearer the middle, firmly on the fictional side, is *Rescued by Rover* (1905), the story film regularly cited for influential contributions to film grammar, but played by Hepworth family members (and dog). *Baby's Toilet* is just to the other side of the divide. At first sight a home movie of a baby (Hepworth's daughter Elizabeth) handled by a nursemaid, its listing in Hepworth's 1906 catalogue indicates that it was distributed like any other commercial film. It was listed in two categories, 'Comic Films' (under the subheading of 'Babies') and 'Domestic Scenes', seemingly implying fiction and non-fiction respectively. But *Rescued by Rover* was also listed as a Domestic Scene. The fact is that original categorisations made for sales purposes are potentially as misleading as anachronistic attempts to fit films into later genres. What's clear is that this film's 'story' is constructed to quintessentially 'documentary' specifications. By this point, film-makers had added 'processes' to the stock of non-fiction formats, complementing 'events', 'places' and 'journeys'. *Baby's Toilet* transposes the emerging pattern of industrial films, including Hepworth's, from the workplace to the household. Separately photographed sections combine to depict routine procedures: baby being bathed, dried, weighed, dressed and fed. A Hepworth historian notes that