

## Shadows of Progress: Documentary Film in Post-War Britain

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Dafydd Sills-Jones

It is 1952, and the British documentary movement is in terminal decline. Shorn of the avant-garde credentials it proudly displayed in the 1930s, and the privileged function and position it enjoyed during the Second World War, the tradition that John Grierson built comes to an end in an age of post-war consensus. The sponsored documentary had once been a successful mechanism for managing the funding, production and distribution of high quality documentary films that aspired to the status of art, and often provided radical views of social ills. It was to an extent the victim of its success in previous eras, as 'the movement' looked old-fashioned and inappropriately patrician in a post-war British documentary landscape shaken by the iconoclastic zeal of the Free Cinema movement and the journalistic populism of TV documentary. Documentary was to move away from public information and public relations to independent auteurism as the cinematic New Wave arrived at the shores of British film culture.

According to *Shadows of Progress: Documentary Film in Post-War Britain*, this is the usual narrative given for the history of post-war documentary in Britain, with nods to the world-wide legacy of Grierson, and something of a critical sigh of relief exhaled at the disappearance of the ethical problems of sponsorship and industrial patronage in the documentary film. However, this narrative is largely unsustainable after reading *Shadows of Progress*. The book's editorial mission is quite clearly to re-write this orthodox and misconceived view of post-war film documentary. We find not only that there was no decline in sponsored film documentary after the end of the Second World War, but that the numbers of documentary films produced vastly increased, as did the number of people involved in commissioning and funding them, producing them, and watching them. Indeed, the post-war period seems to have been a boom period for documentary films in Britain, a boom that was only halted by the appearance of video production and

distribution, and by the corporate ethos unleashed by the Thatcher administration. *Shadows of Progress* reveals a cinematic world in microcosm, with its moguls, its star directors and its canon of influential films. It reveals the dynamic tensions between funders, makers and viewers, and it opens the eye to a world of sponsored documentary expression where crafted commentary, mute-shot observational material, painterly landscapes and bespoke orchestral scores still commanded authority well into the 1970s.

Whilst *Shadows of Progress* discusses cinematic production and form, it also attempts to use the vast archival resources it marshals to illuminate the social history of the period. Its portrayal of the post-war consensus – consisting of compromise and shades of grey – reveals a ‘regime of truth’ where the public good and corporate agendas walked hand in hand under the banner of modernisation and industrialisation, quite unlike the atomised and individualistic present. This is of course a generalised review, and these comments are examples of the reviewers’ broad brushstrokes, because the true strength of the book lies in the scope and shape of its examination of what is a considerable, and complex, mass of film culture.

When reflecting on how *Shadows of Progress* works, it is immediately clear that it is a major addition to the literature on the history of the documentary film, and to the history of British cinema. It is over 400 pages long, contains references to hundreds of hitherto unheralded films, and uses extensive archival and oral history techniques and resources to trace the rise and fall of a sector of British cinema production that has, for a number of reasons, been hitherto ignored. The book brings together the combined contribution of 12 authors, and represents an extensive exploitation of the treasures of the British Film Institute (BFI)’s archive of films. It is the partner publication to a four-disc DVD set of the same name that gives the reader unusual access to many of the key films mentioned in the book, and as such takes its place in a larger series of publications which attempt to give an overview of the development of non-fiction film in the UK over the last century.<sup>(1)</sup>

As part of this series, and in its own right, *Shadows of Progress* brings to wider public and academic attention a category of films that would otherwise be hidden from view. No other book of this scale has been published on the specific topic of British film documentary history in the post-war period, and thanks to its publication there now exists an accessible resource that can both define an area of documentary production, and provide the basis for further study. In turn this is something of a display piece for the BFI’s curatorial team, with no less than five of the authors credited as non-fiction curators of the BFI’s collection. If compelling evidence were ever needed of the value provided by the modest funding that pays for the BFI’s curatorial services, this book provides it.

*Shadows of Progress* is structured around two main sections. The first, authored by the editors Patrick Russell and James Piers Taylor, sets out to give an overview of the production of cinematic documentary film after 1945, and the second section builds on this foundation by profiling the careers of the category’s most influential and typical practitioners. The first half is itself subdivided into introductory sections, which first introduce the book’s approach and the field in general, before going on to examine the distribution, production and sponsorship of the films in this category.

The introductory sections ('Whatever happened to the documentary movement?', 'The long tail' and 'Documentary culture: groupings, gatherings and writings') set out the book's conceptual mission; the reclamation of this form of documentary funding, production and distribution from the critical refuse tip. The claim here is that this body of work had been abandoned by numerous writers attracted by the aesthetic blandishments of the Free Cinema Movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the cinematic New Wave that followed. The central argument is that the growth in the volume of films produced, and the growth in their circulation after the end of the Second World War, is evidence against the more simplistic claims made of the death of the Griersonian documentary movement, and of sponsored film documentaries. The welfare consensus that characterised the decades between the end of the second world war and the arrival of Thatcherism meant that sponsored film documentary may have lost some of its avant-garde associations, and shifted its emphasis from the artist to the sponsor, but this was due to changed circumstances, requiring public films that partook in making the hard-fought consensus work, rather than arguing for a new social contract.

The remainder of the book's first section details the three pillars on which this cinematic culture was based: distribution/exhibition, production and sponsorship. These three sections are encyclopaedic in scope and detail. They aim to cover a huge amount of ground, and succeed in doing so. The chapter on distribution and exhibition ('Films nobody sees?: Distribution and exhibition') surveys the various modes of distribution and the various modes of exhibition. In particular the importance of non-theatrical exhibition becomes clear, as we are taken back to a world of cinema clubs and societies, often associated with specific workplaces and work activities. The chapter on production leads us into the heart of the old Soho, where the majority of the industry sat cheek by jowl, from the leftist shadows of 1930s radicalism such as the DATA co-operative, to the gloss and glamour of World Wide Pictures. What emerges here are the varieties of approach – political, aesthetic, technological, organisational – within such a tightly-knit production sector. The chapter on sponsorship outlines the financing of the production of sponsored film documentaries. As in 'production', 'sponsorship' takes us through this industry layer category-by-category, from the remnant of the 1930s documentary movement in the Central Office of Information to the multi-national petro-giants Shell and BP. What emerges here is the peculiarly important and strangely autonomous figure of the 'film officer', the recessive mogul of this most self-effacing of movie making cultures. Such individuals varied in their background, taste, and in the scope of their abilities, but they all worked as proto-television commissioners, judging the aesthetics and audience needs of very specific niches, making decisions that influenced company and individual careers. Together, these three chapters build a portrait of the relationships and deals, many of which had evolved from the earlier deals made during the time of the Griersonian 'movement', that regulated and shaped this sector of the film industry in Britain.

Whilst providing excellent coverage of a field, this picture holds the audience at quite a distance from the day-to-day realities of production. To compliment this, *Shadows of Progress* changes in gear in its second half by profiling 19 documentary filmmakers in 16 chapters written by a variety of authors. While the first half of the book aims for authority and definition, this second half focuses in on the particulars of these prominent and typical filmmakers, and also invites a range of perspectives on the post-war sponsored film documentary. These profiles recount the various career trajectories possible at the time, and cumulatively build an interrelated map of references to films, sponsors, and filmmakers that put flesh on the vast skeleton assembled in the book's first half. What emerges is the documentary auteur as a liminal figure; caught between film and television, drama and documentary, principles and profit. The profiles in the second half of the book are in the main detailed and interesting, particularly so the chapters on Peter Bradford, Jack Howells, John Krish, Peter Pickering and Derek Williams, which use successive sub-sections to view the profiled filmmaker from a number of vantages, therefore making room for useful contextualisations of personalities, and personal lives.

It is perhaps inevitable that such an undertaking as this book would contain some drawbacks. The introductory sections in the first half of the book frame the discussions in an evidence-based and historical framework, but they also frames them within a rhetoric of celebration. The filmmakers are heralded as auteurs, the body of work as an accomplishment, the dismissal of the work as a critical misjudgement.

*Shadow of Progress*

draws attention to this last point on numerous occasions, and at its very beginning it cites the culprits: Barnouw, Barsam, Ellis, Hiller and Lovell, MacLaine and Winston (although Winston's views are also utilised later in the book). This in itself is commendable. The reasons for challenging these views – such as the emergence of new digital archives and the reliance of earlier accounts on 16mm and 35mm prints make them fair game. However the hagiographic and celebratory tone of this re-introduction or 'rescuing' of films and filmmakers for the canon is troubling. For this reader at least, the book's lack of a critical frame of reference – such as the extensive literature around the form and function of the creative industries and their effect on the ideas circulating in society (2) – means that the tone can feel uneven. A tendency towards 'whiggish history' is mentioned as a target for redress, but no other approach is outlined or suggested.

For example, the handling of the question of these films' exclusion from the documentary canon is a little one-sided. These films were not only dismissed merely because of an infatuation with Anderson and Reisz. Neither were they only judged because, as is directly claimed, writers of film history tend to be educated in arts faculties and are therefore unable to appreciate the artistry of an industrial or scientific film (an assertion that also happens to support a celebratory attitude towards these films). The book itself provides the reader with numerous examples (such as the passages on Derek Williams' films for the oil industry) of corporate bad faith, or at least dubious ethics, in such delicate and significant areas as neo-imperialism, globalisation and environmentalism. There is no surprise therefore that such films might have been dismissed by critics as a body of work whose intentions exclude it from an artistic canon. While rescuing these films and filmmakers, this book could have done more to conceptualise the reasons for such failings.

On a similar note, claims are made in the book that what is being presented is an illustration of social history, and not merely a newly-configured procession of favoured texts and authors. If the aim is to contribute to a socio-history of the production of media, then this is also commendable. However, the book does not employ a conceptual framework capable of making social sense of this body of work (and life), and it tends to fall back on the anecdotal and the biographical. What does not help in this matter are the sustained passages of historical and textual description deployed, quite understandably for the purposes of coverage and accessibility. But it would have been, for example, wonderful to have more detail about the environmental circumstances of these films' reception in the chapters on distribution and exhibition. Who went to see them? What sense and use did they make of them? What, if any, kind of influence did they have over the opinions of the times? This detail would have been useful in justifying a major claim made by this book; that this category of film presents us with a treasury of social history.

Perhaps this is unfair, and perhaps this reviewer will in time grow to regret these sentiments, but they are sincerely expressed as reactions that occurred over and over whilst reading this book. Perhaps this reaction is engendered by the great success of the book in reviving a cinematic world, and in a frustration at not being able to penetrate that world more completely. This is a sign of a successful introduction to a given field, which paves the way for further work. Perhaps this reaction comes from wishing for a time when corporate governance was something businesses felt was important enough to be creative about. Whatever the reasons for my reaction, and whatever its merits, this book is most certainly an essential addition to any history of documentary film, as it bravely tackles the area between generally accessible introduction and academic source book, and negotiates the tricky balance of coverage and detail.

## Notes

1. *Shadows Of Progress* is one of a number of BFI publications the British non-fiction cinema heritage, including the book *100 British Documentaries*, ed. Patrick Russell (London, 2007), the DVD box set *Land Of Promise* (London, 2008), and the website <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk> [2]> [accessed 10 November 2011].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Landmarks in the body of literature dealing with the cultural industries may be Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London, 1991), and more recently David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)

The editors will respond in due course.

**Other reviews:**

Socialist Review

<http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php> [3]

Scope

<http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/filmreview.php> [4]

Criterion Forum

<http://www.criterionforum.org/forum/viewtopic.php> [5]

PopMatters

<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/134269-shadows-of-progress-documentary-film-in-post-war-britain-1951-1977> [6]

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/cultural-capital/2010/11/british-documentary-films-john> [7]

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7808>

[2] <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/>

[3] <http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=11465>

[4] <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/filmreview.php?issue=20&amp%3Bid=1301>

[5] <http://www.criterionforum.org/forum/viewtopic.php?f=29&amp%3Bt=10959>

[6] <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/134269-shadows-of-progress-documentary-film-in-post-war-britain-1951-1977>

[7] <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/cultural-capital/2010/11/british-documentary-films-john>