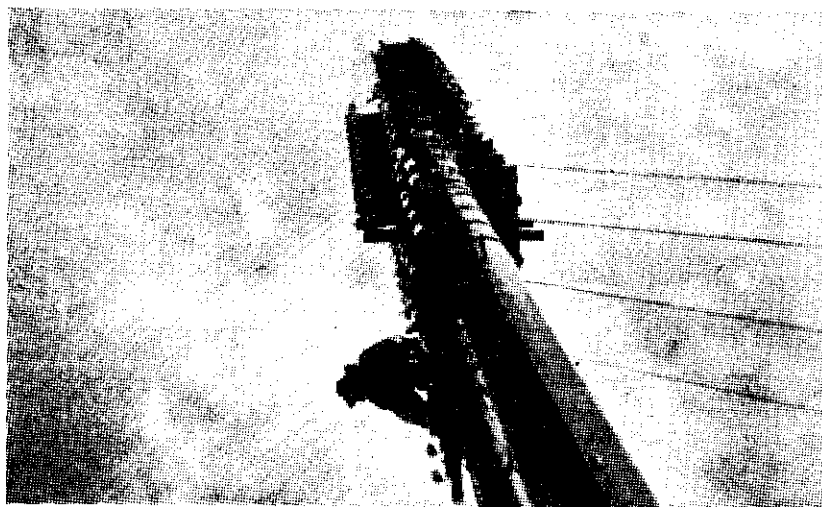


It is to present that material to the public in a form which will appeal to the imagination. "God help the government," Lord Melbourne once said, "that meddles with art." Those who would support his lordship might well call as evidence the classic story of Alfred Stevens and the Wellington Memorial. I could summon up more recent examples from my own experience. Yet here, in the documentary film movement, is an example of government actually generating a new art form. That, however, as every documentary director knows, is not the end of the story. Not many people, I fancy, like portraits of themselves as the true artist sees them. Certainly government departments and—if, I think, less markedly—big industries are often far from appreciating

to make that mistake. They have always been inspired with a lively sense of social purpose and have pioneered their way into fields which the Continent has not yet approached. But if British documentary is to retain its present leadership in the world, it needs one thing more. Casting back over the films—and for the matter of that, the broadcasts—which have touched my imagination and still haunt my memory. I ask myself why it is that I still remember so vividly—so as not to be invidious, let me take two foreign examples—the Cossacks in *Potemkin*, driving the crowd down the harbour steps of Odessa, the poetic script and the beautiful voice of the narrator in *The River*, Pare Lorentz's film of the Mississippi. I always maintain that the answer is to be



"TELEPHONE WORKERS"—one of the documentaries produced by the G.P.O. Film Unit

the portraits of themselves which the journalist, the poster artist, or the film producer paints.

To him who has to provide the raw material I would say: Choose the man, who is to handle your raw material, very carefully. Take any amount of pains, and make him take any amount of pains, to ensure that he has got under the skin of your material. Then give him a pretty free hand and realise from the start that his problem is not easy. You will sometimes have a failure; but, if your interpreter brings it off, you will have a handsome reward in the better understanding of your problems by the public. You may well have, too, a second not less valuable reward in the encouragement that the portrait will give to those whose work it depicts. The importance of this secondary stake was brought home to me vividly when, first in Mr. Attlee's and then in Sir Kingsley Wood's day as Postmaster-General, we were called upon to publicise Post Office activities, and did so by employing, among other media, some of those we are discussing here. I have often felt that the outstanding achievement of films like "Night Mail," "Six-Thirty Collection," "Under the City," and "We Live in Two Worlds" was the sense of appreciation which they gave to many faithful workers in the Post Office.

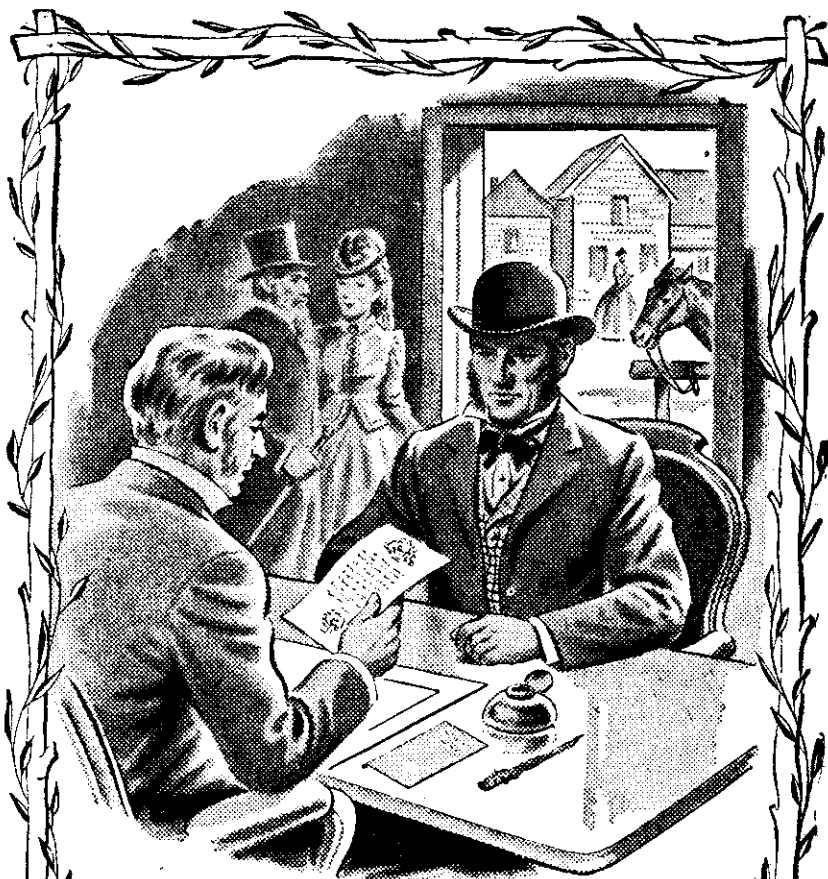
A Touch of Imagination

And now for the interpreter. He is right to demand considerable freedom in the treatment of his material. But the price of his freedom is a real mastery of that material, a real craftsman's sense of it. He must not be content with making a superficial travelogue of his subject. The authentic makers of documentary films at any rate are not likely

found in a sentence which John Stuart Mill once wrote in a letter to Thomas Carlyle: "It is the artist alone in whose hands truth becomes impressive and a living principle of action."

Quoting those words, I am not thinking of anything pompous or highbrow. In fact, as I used them, there slipped into my mind a memory of that gay little film *Colour Box*, which Len Lye made in the 'thirties. In the early days of documentary, Grierson has since reminded us, he was besieged by would-be apprentices who were enthusiastic, as he put it, "for art, for self-expression and the other beautiful what-nots of a youthful or simply vague existence." I sometimes wonder whether that well-justified resistance movement has not lingered on after the early danger was overpast; whether our modern makers of documentary always pay quite enough attention to, for example, the quality of their English and the voices chosen to deliver it.

A week or two ago a White Paper of unusual gravity recorded the "extremely serious economic position" of our country. Among the remedies which it proposed it included the re-equipment of industry. It also stressed the need for "rousing the nation" to appreciate the danger. Both that remedy and that need have a bearing on my present subject. For among the new equipment that we require is a more sensitive, a more powerful, and a wider-ranging national system of communications, that will appeal to the imagination through the eye as broadcasting has learned to appeal to it through the ear. Anyone who wants to think out such a system, or better still, to contribute to it will find in the report under review a good companion.



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