

Democratised Media in the Digital Age: John Grierson and Travails of Political Propaganda

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Abstract | The ideals behind creative freedom often come into conflict with the stark realities of financial interest. Commercial image-making is subject to numerous compromises based on the general practicalities of a project and the financial obligations that sponsorship imposes on the autonomy of the content producer. Comparing the studio-based and state-sponsored models of production with the relative accessibility of today's creative environment, this article will argue that whilst visual media production has invariably changed for the better in terms of representation, parallels still exist in how democratised media is subject to different levels of creative control. By examining John Grierson's cinema of social purpose in conjunction with non-specialist digital media, the theory and formal significance of Britain's Documentary Film Movement will be shown to harbour a contemporary resonance for the digital image-maker. In essence, the argument will examine the importance of immediacy and rapid expansion in film practice and intellectual spectatorship, and will further reveal the structural boundaries that explicitly and implicitly limit a creative's medium of communication. The conflicted way in which we consider a concept like freedom within the democratic state is exposed by the means by which we can distribute our images of said state. By broadly examining the formal, philosophical, and political analysis of the idealised state, democratised media will be defined as an imaginative practice inherently stimulated by the misrepresentative forces of idealism.

Keywords | Documentary, Propaganda, Idealism, Democracy, Freedom, Free Will, Digital Media, Neoliberalism, Abstraction, Nationalism, Ethics, John Grierson, Hegel, Chomsky, Steyerl, Cinema Studies

There is of course no limit to the imagery possible to documentary cinema, for the simple reason that it can take-in all sorts of odd references which make the atmosphere more vivid and the setting more lyrical, references which consciously or subconsciously build an attitude to the scene. (Grierson, "Cutting Bench" 3)

The ideals behind creative freedom often come into conflict with the stark realities of financial interest. Any attempt at creating a commercial film is subject to numerous compromises based on the general practicalities of a project and the financial obligations that sponsorship forces onto the autonomy of the individual creative. Comparing studio-based and state-sponsored models of production to today's creative environment, visual media production has invariably changed for the better in terms of representation. Recording technology and editing software are highly accessible and integrated into a range of operating systems that vary dramatically in price. The raw materials of everyday life can be recorded for photo collages or videos posted on social media; short daily vlogs and comprehensive essays can be viewed online at any location with an unblocked signal, and events big and small can be witnessed as they happen across the globe via streaming services. Whilst recording quality differs in these devices, the fact remains that documenting immediate lived experience has never been easier. The structural boundaries of film distribution are challenged by the immediacy and portability of content creation on social media, where the previous reliance on a bureaucratic financial apparatus is liberated by the inherent local production methodology of content defined by individual image-makers. However, as with physical media, the complex economic relationships that characterise the potential profitability of digital image-making are not defined by a simple one-on-one interaction between the digital creative and their own content, but rather a wider web of association, whereby sponsors, parent companies, service providers, and even the audience enact some degree of censorship and stylisation upon the final product. What is seen and where it can be seen is currently a self-regulated decision at the behest of streaming companies. What these businesses can offer an artist in return for adherence to their malleable guidelines is dependent on the suitability and popularity of the artist's work. Furthermore, a content producer is also bound by the demands of their own audience, whose promotion of and access to the artist or production company provide another layer of marketing, whether it is by direct advertising on social media or through their encouragement of further engagement via comments sections or communication servers specifically created for fans. Essentially, the main feature differentiating digital media from physical is the immediacy with which personalised images can be filmed, edited, and transmitted to the world audience, and how those images can be engaged with just as swiftly.

If the British Documentary Movement¹ was chiefly involved in glorifying the importance of democracy, it is interesting to contrast and compare the theoretical grounding of the said movement with today's democratised media and the new freedoms it is afforded. This freedom is defined by concepts of free will, creative freedom, and the social resonance of rational thinking. It is with these concepts in mind that this article will scrutinise the political notions of idealistic phenomena in order to identify the importance of non-fiction cinema and visual record as sources of social engagement. This argument will present the philosophies that motivated Grierson as being essential to the continued development of an ethical approach to documentary. The conversation will study the film theory of Russian Formalism and engage in the analysis of Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, particularly his understanding of the ethical society. The contemporary written works of Hito Steyerl and Noam Chomsky will be introduced in order to include modern issues relevant to democratic freedom, whether creative or political, into the argument. There will also be a consideration on abstraction within Griersonian film. The article will conclude with a discussion on whether or not we can consider Grierson's methodological model of filmmaking as an early outline of the ideals of contemporary neoliberalism, providing space for reviewing Grierson's idealism in a manner which does not pander entirely to the immaterial logic essential to the idealist philosophy. Considerations towards aesthetic representation in documentary will extend to the sociological importance of phenomenology and will conclude with a short discussion on the disparity between Grierson as an artist and Grierson as an individual. By perceiving these ideas in a form that clarifies and abstracts the concepts being discussed, the phenomenal experience of the outside world, image-making, and autobiography will be utilised to consider what the concept of the cinema of social purpose actually means when most individuals have a camera at hand. The responsibilities of a cinema of social purpose are chiefly based on its communicative potential, using the linguistic patterns developed in the experimentation of film rhetoric to argue for beneficial reform within the communities and industries that make up an ideal democratic state. Such experimentation can be expanded upon when the boundaries of formal invention are extended from a physical state to a digital one and where image production is made accessible to the members of a larger cross-section of society who do not specialise specifically in film production. As more individuals are offered the chance to communicate their local reality through film, the more comprehensive and complex our understanding of social purpose becomes.

The portability and simplification of today's recording technologies offer the image-maker a potential to showcase compartmentalised specialism through their creative projects. This is to say that the individual is offered the potential to integrate

¹The British Documentary Movement is the common name associated with numerous propaganda film units which were working in Britain in the 1930s and 40s. The chief aim of this movement was to use non-fiction film as a tool to educate audiences on issues of national and social import through creative visual media. These films would be supplementary tools used to improve the citizenry's understanding of their own society and economy, highlighting the importance of British industry and local ingenuity whilst also promoting Liberal values with regard to the welfare state. These films were screened in and outside cinemas, offering a subjectivity to urban and rural working class communities by dramatising their work and leisure experiences. John Grierson (1898–1972) is the most prominent figure linked with the movement.

their so-called “vision” into creative practice through a fluid form of practical engagement and theoretical thinking, one which is supported by digital appliances rather than the necessary assistance of specialised workers and specific pieces of equipment. The ease and speed with which applications can be downloaded to assist the user with most areas of film production and post-production, ranging from basic editing software to compositional programmes, offer a layered approach to image-making, whereby the impulse towards creativity in content creation can easily be satisfied. As such, a DIY-aesthetic can be granted to films created through a theory of necessity and availability, where the only limitations are that of the creative’s imagination and the digital distribution services and app stores associated with their mobile operating system, such as IOS or Android. Whilst Grierson saw theatres as film consulates (“A Big Movie Idea” 7), today’s mobile phones can be that and so much more. The key distinction between the films of the British Documentary Film Movement and digital media is the innovations in technology. The movement away from haptic sources of editing to distanced synthetic products has developed into an accessible approach to artistic production whereby the individual can record, compose, write, and edit the composite elements of their cinema on a machine that fits into the palm of their hand. What is important to note is that a smartphone that offers these tools provides a workspace that results in creative input and immediate communicative output.

Speed being a vital resource to the digital filmmaker’s production methodology creates an interesting link to how early filmmakers theorised the importance of swiftly communicated sequences and neatly packaged ideas within film editing, presenting a clear sense of satisfaction being inherent to the prompt processing of media as well as the rapid spectacle of montage editing. In his text, “Montage as the Foundation of Cinematography,” Lev Kuleshov describes early cinema’s spectatorship in relation to the attention span of the average audience member, expressing how the pacing of a sequence determines a viewer’s appreciation of the interrelation between the separate materials presented in a scene. He discusses this using the metaphor of a painted fence, and suggests that to recognise the significance of the assembly of the fence’s colours, a painter could not separate the colours by miles but, rather, had to think in yards (129). This was developed further by Sergei Eisenstein through his intellectual approach to montage, demonstrated in such films as *Strike* (1925) and *Battleship Potemkin* (1926). The painted fence is an odd metaphor for Kuleshov to use, especially when considering this piece was written before the medium employed colour and was predominantly without synchronised sound. What it does articulate is the vivid response quick cuts elicit from an audience; his emphasis on the physical reaction elicited through this technique is made all the more obvious when he asks the reader to visualise a scene from an imagined film in which a man shoots himself (130–131). Comparing the uninterrupted theatrical shooting style of early pre-montage Russian cinema to the rapid-cutting of American film, the mental image Kuleshov asks us to create through these two different methodologies reveals the power of shot organisation, all within a sequence which ends with a gunshot to the head. Violent sequencing is revealed to be a potent weapon in the filmmaker’s arsenal.

Grierson argued that the imaginative and suggestive potential of rapid editing is still susceptible to the dangers of an overly aesthetic beauty, one in which “we begin to

feel movement and pattern and rhythm as qualities so lovely in themselves that we can forget altogether about their relation to a story or a theme” (“Sound Lecture” 2). Another Russian Formalist director, Victor Turin, agrees with this sentiment: “Every film must be composed of a series of thought impulses, and action must serve only as a means of expressing these thought. What I might call the prosaic film with its dynamic of action is the very opposite of the film of poetic expression with its dynamic of thought” (7). Hence, sequencing is the foundation of mental engagement within sequential visual media, or at least with regard to the intellectual approach to early silent cinema. Dramatically speaking, the primacy in this structural approach to storytelling is explained by Grierson as the essential factor in his propaganda film technique, whereby the scale of a sequence must be utilised in such an order that the spectacle of mass movement communicates the story of the film being projected (“Propaganda Film” 40). This attempts to ensure that the audience views movement in a way that encourages their mental engagement with the subject onscreen without the need for individual thoughts to be focalised. Physiology substitutes psychology, yet the structural order in which this action is presented creates the potential for movement to represent a thought impulse, and create the internality within an image that, by itself, contains a purely surface level engagement. This act of directly perceiving an idea rather than intuiting it through long sustained thought creates an in-depth reading of the film’s narrative, whereby the mimetic relationship between the audience and image switches physical engagement into mental engagement.

The story is the message in both fictional film and Grierson’s documentary film, as his phenomenological approach to real labour is the dramatic reinterpretation of reality. Yet, whilst Turin separates “action” and “thought” as two different methodologies for filmmaking, essentially suggesting the prosaic quality of pure action is typified by a lack of imagination when compared to the poetic expression of intellectual cutting, Grierson’s understanding of arrangement seems to find its motivation more from Hegel’s sense of unity in opposition. In *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820), Hegel conveys that, “The distinction between thought and will is only that between a theoretical and a practical relation. They are not two separate faculties. The will is a special way of thinking; it is thought translating itself into reality; it is the impulse of thought to give itself reality” (21). One can understand Grierson’s cinema of social purpose as articulating a very similar point, one in which the influence of the rapid editing style of the Russian Formalists can be better associated with the British Documentary Movement. As such, the audience engagement encouraged by filmic action essentially has to be tied to a socially purposive message, whereby the entertainment associated with an exciting sequence must also incite the audience to a process of willing an idealistic society into existence. For Grierson, no matter how memorable a sequence is in terms of its entertainment value, if a film fails to encourage the audience to consider the political relevance of a scenario, and how its resonance is articulated through the distinctive form in which it is presented, then he would constitute it a dramatic failure. Considering the connection between active and reactive approaches to thinking, what can be derived in particular from Hegel’s statement is the groundwork for Grierson’s argument that free will is attainable only through ethical participation in society. Societal duty is to be understood through a set of concentric circles, beginning with the wants of the individual before extending itself outwards towards the plural duty of family, immediate community and, at an even larger scale, the ideal of good society.

As such, the effects of active engagement with the physical world bear a trace of the soul's inner life, leading to a further argument on abstraction and the subjectivity found in the reflective nature of possession and ownership. In this philosophical framework, each has to tie their wants to the groups in which they participate, from their role as a member of a family to their involvement as a citizen of a community. Following this, the personal associations the individual makes with the phenomenal world are influenced by both internal and external forces. Conceiving an object is the act of relating oneself to that object, consequently replacing its oppositional value as something beyond the individual with a new understanding through the perception of it as an extension of the individual. An object described as universal is actually a reflection of a self-conscious mind willing a subjective definition into existence. This process of signification is not to say that any object can be randomly assigned a reflective meaning; Hegel understands free will as a form of rationality, informed by historical change and sensible reality. What it does suggest is that free will is fixed to content constructed by a constantly developing conception of the world rather than purely fictional leaps of the imagination by the individual. This rationale is assembled from both inner and outer sources of rationality, where "a man, who is implicitly rational, must create himself by working through and out of himself and by reconstructing himself within himself, before he can become also explicitly rational" (29). In short, Hegel states that "reality is the realisation of the free will [...] Right, therefore, is, in general, freedom as idea" (40).

In discussing the fundamental work by Russian filmmakers in the development of editorial theory, Grierson describes how the audience engages with the raw materials onscreen by relating to them on a physiological level. He states the excitement encouraged through montage is "the method of attaching detail to detail with appropriate emphasis here and appropriate joggings of the sub-conscious mind there" (*New Worlds* 22). In the words of Eisenstein, "we photograph the bumps, and the movie-goer feels them" ("Mass Movies" 1). Creatives edit the world around them to best express the message they wish to dispense, yet these productions are also subject to a process of synthesis influenced by the societal structures and natural realities of the said world as the creative attempts to order one's ideas into a substantial whole. A way in which this can be understood is in relation to the limitations of spectatorship. The idealism of this methodology is something which is placed into conflict with the practicality of assigning a silent film a single score for every single theatre. Put simply, Grierson made the claim that "I never in public saw the film I made" ("Sound Lecture" 3) due to factors such as musical directors ignoring the instructions he made for the scoring of his film. This statement comes from a 1934 lecture Grierson gave on the uses of sound in cinema, where he introduces his talk by maintaining, "As I have tried to emphasise, you are not in cinema dealing with a single or simple thing. You are dealing with half a hundred different cinemas and your technique (whether of sound or of silence) will vary with every one of them" (1). The statement should be read as a call for an organic approach to filmmaking as well as a warning of the practical issues one might fail to consider if one is too absorbed by the art to see the industry. In the production of commercial entertainment and state-sponsored propaganda, the individual is unable to have complete control over their own work if it is to benefit from the institution that funds their art and distributes their creation. Grierson's comment, therefore, also expresses an awareness of the many ways a film is susceptible to change due to formal innovation and cultural context; it highlights

practicalities of distribution as the screening venues and technology which define cinematic spectatorship and are not monolithic in nature.²

The visual products of democratised media and portable visual technology inherently present the many ways in which reality can be documented by the non-professional with the accessibility and malleability of high fidelity cameras on mobile phones. The commercial boundaries of early documentary cinema are problematised by such a development. This criticism is beyond the world of social media, online streaming, and independent filmmaking, and comes from a moment in time where the economic demands of film limited a visual storyteller's "ordinary freedom" to "spineless compromise" (Grierson, "Films and Industry" 12). The high density of available images online does counteract the distinct advantages a promotional budget has on making sure these films and photographs can actually reach their audience, yet at the same time it is this budget which creates severe expectation on the quality, formality, and shape of the product of filmic experimentation. Whilst the images produced on mobile technologies are still mediated interpretations of reality, they cross a line whereby the proximal qualities of personal experience take priority over the aesthetic obligation towards the financier. What might be considered poor quality in fictional cinema is in fact the signifier of authenticity within direct reportage, with democratised media attaining a degree of tactility closely associated with the aesthetic of sensory ethnography. Meticulous cinematography and artistically-minded aestheticism can abstract the potential for communicating a strong message in socially purposive media by prioritising artificial prettiness over the clarity of a film's argument. In short, the expectations an audience has for a multi-million dollar film production compared to an online vlog present a way in which we critically differentiate media through economic expectations.

Hito Steyerl argues that the faults found in audio-visual content associated with what she terms "the poor image" are, in fact, a means whereby material failure can reveal regressive hegemonies, presenting the capitalistic and cultural restraints created by technological perfectionism. An economy being imposed on perfect imagery marginalises the works of those who cannot achieve the high value assigned to high fidelity imagery. Steyerl explains this tension between finance and clarity by claiming that "poor images are poor because they are not assigned any value within the class society of images—their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria. Their lack of resolution attests to their appropriation and displacement" (Steyerl).

²Grierson's silent documentary debut *Drifters* (1929) highlights the issues that became apparent when screening a film deprived of this control. Without a system of synchronisation between sight and sound, whereby the playback of the recorded sounds as they were arranged could be as reliable as the playback of synthesised images, there was no dependable way of assuring an exact replication of the intended aural elements of a film beyond ownership of the screening venues. Even then, human error and the distancing afforded by separate technologies would still make this a difficult venture. This is not to say that sound-on-film was an entirely infallible development, but that the interlocking process provided by the married optical print meant that certain sounds would ideally be played at certain moments. Basil Wright articulates how unfortunate it was that *Drifters* was released just at the point of departure from silent to synchronised cinema, so that the orchestral score performed in grand theatres and the turntable score arranged in the smaller venues would be lost to posterity (Sussex 7). Fortunately, history has been kinder, with projects such as Jason Singh's live improvisational rescoring of the film (Cornerhouse) revealing the synthetic potential at the heart of Grierson's early attempt at filmmaking, proving how much of an active experience is still resonant in the picture today.

Steyerl's argument mentions the works of Humphrey Jennings, a prominent figure in the creation of the Mass-Observation movement,³ who joined the General Post Office Film Unit (GPO) when it was reorganised and renamed the Crown Film Unit (Steyerl). Jennings' inclusion is not to signal his active participation in "the poor image" but, rather, he is introduced to discuss how the degradation and loss of old film print renders poor quality footage invisible within the economy of high quality imagery. The projection of images is a representation of the sociological boundaries found in the systems of finance in filmmaking, whereby aesthetic aberration becomes unprofitable deviancy. Expression is intrinsically related to capital in this case, auteurism providing a position in which the artist can present their purposive ideals, albeit indirectly through the conventions of populist cinema. Formal practice must reconcile with commercial influence in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. This resolution involves appealing to those mesmerising qualities of populism whilst engaging with the mental stimulation of visual and editorial experimentation. Steyerl notes the agitprop films of Russia as being part of the genealogy of "the poor image," even going as far as to link the audience engagement promoted by poor quality imagery as a development of Vertov's "visual bonds," a concept in which the workers of the world would unite through organisational media (Steyerl). The ease with which a digital image can be transmitted to a global audience presents universal interests in terms of what we film, how we film it, and the extent to which the technological and budgetary limitations of these projects communicate rather humbling notions of personhood. Genres and sub-genres of online content are formed by this expansive process, developing a need for new categories of media, whether it is finding a better descriptor to categorise a type of vlog or adapting our filmic language to achieve a level of inclusivity that will not dismiss minor cinema or outsider art found in this digital network. The unconventional eventually becomes conventional if the arena in which ideas are circulated becomes accessible to a larger cross-section of society. A bond is created by formal poverty, where mistakes, fragmentation, and degradation show a richness in human expression.

Returning the conversation to the earlier discussion on Hegel, this argument relates to the abstract rights of the individual, and how property, family, and social contract relate to the development of modernist principles. In arguing for the potential of a community's ethical life, Hegel expresses the constant development of rationality through the conflicts between personal freedoms and institutional reform (160). The disparity between abstract rights and ethical life arises from the distance between individual desires and the common good. What the development of new societies with new priorities aims to do is to rectify individualism and have free will become more closely associated with the needs of the commonality. A tension arises between subjectivity and objectivity here, or more directly, between the individual and the state. Civil society becomes the environment in which the individual is able to enact one's personal goals by participating in a project larger than oneself. What becomes of interest in this philosophy is that one must think externally in order to actualise one's own inner desires. Considering this relationship, it is also of note to examine how Hegel defines the

³Mass-Observation was an independent research project founded in 1937 which aimed to record the day-to-day lives of the British working class by publishing and archiving diary entries written by a selection of volunteers. It held similar values to that found in Griersonian cinema, most prominently in its attempt to improve social policy by voicing the everyday concerns of the British people.

identity of the family unit by stating, “The family, as person, has its real external existence in property; and it is only when this property takes the form of capital that it becomes the embodiment of the substantial personality of the family” (169). From this quotation, it can be deduced that capital is identity, and that this transcends the personhood of the individuals it defines, consequently presenting free will as only being possible through a participatory relation within ethical society. However, corporate exploitation is a clear danger within the specific relationship between an individual and their labour. If a civil society is to be understood as an industrialised society, then it is imperative that both the individual and the corporations that comprise their community are united in achieving the same moral goals. Of course, in the context of this argument, the objective of the state is the actualisation of an ethical society. Much like the previous paragraph’s discussion on the individual, the motivations of a corporation must become a synthesis of their internal wants and broader external needs, where individualism’s draw towards profit must be re-evaluated in reference to the common good. Hegel directly mentions the necessity of the state monitoring corporate entities due to their tendency to prioritise self-sufficiency over communal goals (228). There are similarities to Hegel’s societal principles and how “the poor image” rallies against individualistic impulses, Steyerl claims, “The imperfect cinema is one that strives to overcome the divisions of labor within class society. It merges art with life and science, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author. It insists upon its own imperfection, is popular but not consumerist, committed without becoming bureaucratic.” Steyerl is aware that the spaces in which “imperfect cinema” can be broadcast are in a crisis of privatisation, with digital communication under constant threat of becoming another space of aesthetic censorship.

When comparing the idea of poor images alongside the financial and technological limitations of the EMB and GPO,⁴ there are numerous ways in which the arguments of Steyerl and Grierson coalesce and contradict. Even in the above quote, the most obvious disparity is found in the clear eschewal of institutional support, whether through the studio system or state sponsorship. The EMB’s principle aims were “scientific research, economic investigation and publicity” (BMJ 268), which Grierson aimed to promote through documentary that glorified what he described as “the new range of technological discovery, the new range of scientific discovery and the implications of scientific discovery” (Sussex 29). The data generated through these critical principles could be repurposed in new forms of media for public consumption, an idea Grierson associated in his last interview, with the positive prospect of health education taught at the most “primitive and primary levels” (25). He noted that a key aspect of sponsorship was the illustrative potential of visualising relationships, rather than the boundaries which might be enacted through the imposition of the loyalties between funding bodies and creative personnel (26). The tension between Steyerl’s theory and state sponsorship is best expressed through Grierson’s statement that “the artist will have to humble himself before the proper demands of the common people as the none-too-believing artists of the Renaissance once humbled themselves in the service of the commercial princes and church” (“The Seven Obstacles” 2322). There is a call for

⁴The Empire Marketing Board Film Unit (EMB) and General Post Office Film Unit (GPO) were the two state-sponsored propaganda departments that Grierson headed during the late 1920s to the mid-30s.

social betterment within Grierson's work, but one that still requires institutional patronage. Furthermore, the criticisms of an economy of images present both figures as being keenly aware of the damaging effect of unjustified aesthetic beauty. Much like Grierson's consideration of film that aims merely to entertain through escapism as being a dramatic failure, Steyerl suggests technological perfectionism can create formal and textural homogeneity within cinema, where images are meaningless within their prettiness. Neither of these creatives intend to create postcard images, and thus must come to terms with the financial compromises they endure as a result of prioritising provocative mediation theory over the content abstraction of meticulous cinematography. Thus, the demonstrable profitability of high-budget cinema inadvertently forms a boundary in which audience expectations are inclined to prefer films that exist to entertain through profitable medium as opposed to the socially purposive models of Grierson and Steyerl. The participatory call for group work as an ideal for both figures is also of interest. Both attempt to transcend the boundaries set up by artistic censorship, whether it is Grierson's search for a financing system which allows for creative freedom in how it communicates an idea, or Steyerl's democratisation of imperfect media.

It must be stressed that the practical ideas of poor imagery would be entirely different for Steyerl and Grierson, with one dealing with the compression, distortion, and defragmentation of digital data and the other prioritising his theoretical ideals rather than the practicalities of actually documenting reality. This is not to say that these ideas do not interrelate, but that their temporal and material distance offer entirely new ways of reviewing their concepts. Considering Steyerl's conception of "the poor image," the use of post-production effects on footage which would be deemed unusable in the economy of perfect imagery relates to both the elitism of high quality visuality as well as the transformative capacity of the poor image. She states:

The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction. The image is liberated from the vaults of cinemas and archives and thrust into digital uncertainty, at the expense of its own substance. The poor image tends towards abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming. (Steyerl)

In attempting to fix footage which, at a production stage, is deemed unfinished in its original state, this idea of a hierarchy in visual quality is within the very data of the final screened product of a film. The cosmetic enhancement of clips is often deemed necessary to the substantive content of a film. Rather than being distracting, it creates a form of perfectionism that, through its characterisation as a synthetic reinterpretation, becomes imperfect. Essentially, a preliminary impulse is altered to a new state of being, restructured so its practical failing becomes a closer representation of the filmmaker's ideal content. This imagined world is part of a process of problem-solving which aims to hide the mistakes made by the filmmaker, yet the visibility of this attempt to fix pre-arranged content is a vital aspect in the presentation of phenomenology on film. A subjective perspective of the world is not unlike the subjectivity of how any form of visual media represents our external reality, cinema being a medium which is chiefly representative as opposed to being a direct record of time and space. An opaque practice of digital editing is a noticeable alteration of natural reality or, to phrase it more

succinctly, a phenomenal perspective. Beyond these insular juxtapositions between practice and product, this idea of the phenomenal response to the outside world can be extended towards the sociological situation of the United States.

In making an argument that refers to digital media as a stage in the development of early documentary practice to a democratised form of self-expression, or at least a development to an imaginative communicative practice that has the potential to offer an equity to outsider perspectives, a sociolinguistic understanding of nationalism's relation to the citizenry and that citizenry's conception of statehood can further ascertain the dangers surrounding propagandistic phenomena. Idealism is a philosophy of ideas and, as such, functions by prioritising an internal truth over the general impossibility of truly crafting an objective understanding of external reality. To applaud the misrepresentations of filmic experimentation as a characteristic of a truly democratic practice one has to contend with the dangers of the false realities proposed by idealising the democratic state. Noam Chomsky's *Necessary Illusions* considers the political ramifications of imagined reality, examining the way in which the moral failings of Western industrial societies are hidden through institutional distraction. Often, Chomsky is questioning the biased reasoning of the US government and how it is motivated by the attempted maintenance of establishment forces and specialised classes (7–8), bringing the reader's attention to the way in which American democracy's moral focus is redirected from locally-defined fronts to democracy in foreign countries (11). The benefit of this criticism by the State on foreign political activity, and the implementation of active and indirect military involvement, is of course chiefly domestic. It is, with a sardonic tone prevalent, that Chomsky follows the democratic state's leaps of logic to their illogical conclusions, where his assessment of different forms of political hypocrisies reveal the rationale behind a ruling power's definition of a "crisis of democracy," (27) before taking this crisis to present a dissolution of language itself. To even call this illogical is questionable, as this illusionary practice can be viewed as less a perversion of constitutional doctrine, and more of American democracy's functioning as it was intended. It is a process in which Chomsky's personal frustrations come to the fore when listing these distortions of the truth. This textual personality does not diminish his analysis, but in fact presents the intrinsic link of abuses of power with abuses of language. Frequently, sentences are packed with layers of quotations that are being analysed in bracketed text that is placed in the middle of a different quotation and its corresponding analysis, often ending said sentences with a blithe or sarcastic commentary, questioning the indifference of this evidence to substantive truth. This style of commentary can be as dense as the above description suggests or as simple as finishing a discussion on the United States' "defence" of freedom in Nicaragua with a statement that questions "if words have meaning" at all (Chomsky 75). There is an element of sensory overload to this writing style that expresses the way in which national pride can entangle the rational senses by hiding the truth behind a necessity for overly elaborate explanation. This textual density is then followed by the revelation that often these sources are intentionally misdirecting the reader. Chomsky is employing the same frustrating tactics found in these political documents to emphasise the main point he is trying to make. Through omission and redirection, public opinion is influenced to adopt a nationalistic perspective thanks to the rescaling of consequence and upholding a "model" conception of democracy (107). Controlling the way a story plays out in the public consciousness is essentially an act of releasing selective evidence and

issuing bad faith arguments. Chomsky expresses this by arguing, “If the media, and the respectable intellectual community generally, are to serve their “societal purpose,” such matters as these must be kept beyond the pale, remote from public awareness, and the massive evidence provided by the documentary record and evolving history must be consigned to dusty archives or marginal publications” (62).

This selectivity is as prevalent in the political bias behind communicative practice in media as it is in the quality of images presented to the public. In fact, this limited perspective is in some ways a development of what Grierson was attempting with his “drama of the doorstep,” or it was at least partially related to the decidedly local productions founded by the GPO compared to the broader scope of the EMB. In an entirely negative development, the moral values assigned emphatically to local labour, and the British public’s general preconception of global support as foreign interference, become factors which distort the influence international forces have on national projects. This entails that the tasks which are glorified through local documentary practice can undermine or render essential global relationships invisible, leading to the exploitation of developing countries’ labour and indirectly encouraging xenophobic reactions to those abroad who provide a net benefit for the locality. The production of raw materials to be used outside the country from which they have been acquired is entirely for the benefit of Western Capitalism (98), and shapes a prevailing national pride through the omission of key components in the overall process. At a functional level, what occurs is similar to a grandfather clock, where the majority of the mechanisms required for the machine to function are hidden from view, but the pendulum and turning hands of the clock remain plainly visible and are conceived as the only truly necessary components in the telling of time. There is no sense of fulfilment beyond the obligation towards service, undermining the potential for a global network to encourage the free-flow of ideas and instead create a paternalist relationship which benefits only one of the parties and runs like clockwork. It is no coincidence here that Grierson’s films are similarly characterised as having social purpose.

That is not to say that Grierson’s ambition was limited to the exclusionary practice of national propaganda: his work promoting the Empire with *Song of Ceylon* (1934), and later influence in film units ranging from Canada to India, present an international scope to the local documentary. Newsreel series such as *Canada Carries On* (1940), *The World in Action* (1942), and his posthumous inclusion in the Indian documentary *Flashback* (1974) are a few examples of this global impact. What can be noted, however, is that the restriction of content to a specific doorstep can encourage an appeal to individualism founded upon a regressive nationalism, and even then, this international production can be subject to the certain beautified exoticisation Grierson criticised, as seen in *Song of Ceylon*. Omission and invisibility are thus ideas that can be conceived in terms of Hegel’s ethical society, Steyerl’s economy of quality, Chomsky’s illusory practice, and Grierson’s local documentary. Artistic and institutional censorship are both founded on class-based ideologies, which present a potential to understand the uses of digital imagery within a fabricated political environment. Chomsky writes on the limitations of what can be expressed or imagined by the general public. Specialism is a problematic concept here, as the ideals of specialisation in the workplace relate to the ethical society rather than reality. Hegel presents the abstraction of labour as a process by which a worker is given

a specific skill within a broad process which only gains meaning when applied to the product that is the end result of all these separate processes coalescing. As such, an interdependent relationship between labourers becomes essential in any production line and concludes with the automation of the skilled worker's very specific mechanised process, achieved by the use of even more machinery (191). As discussed by Walter Lippmann and Chomsky, beyond manual labour the scientific specialists of "The Great Society" control the flow and mediation of ideas by justifying their own perspective by skewing quantitative data and selling it as objective fact. Lippmann claims:

The more enlightened directing minds have called in experts who were trained, or had trained themselves, to make parts of this Great Society intelligible to those who manage it. These men are known by all kinds of names, as statisticians, accountants, auditors, industrial counsellors, engineers of many species, scientific managers, personnel administrators, research men, "scientists," and sometimes just as plain private secretaries. They have brought with them each a jargon of his own, as well as filing cabinets, card catalogues, graphs, loose-leaf contraptions, and above all the perfectly sound ideal of an executive who sits before a flat-top desk, one sheet of typewritten paper before him, and decides on matters of policy presented in a form ready for his rejection or approval. ("Public Opinion" 370)

Making society "intelligible" is not the same as objective fact, much as the glorification of industry in Grierson's cinema was dramatised reality. Considering the limitations of perspective found in specialism, whether it is in the abstraction of labour or the mediation of government specialisation, it is of interest that Grierson is certain in the failure of Hegel's "ethical life." He notes, "We are a rabble of individual particles neither combining in common purposes nor sharing in those larger enjoyments which only common understanding can bring [...] There are specialist organisations of central and local Government, but none can decentralise enough and attach themselves really intimately to the public life" ("Church and Cinema" 10). This assessment is the result of Grierson's attempt at selling the importance of a film unit to the Church of England, so there is a degree of hyperbole in this statement. Yet, what is being asserted here encapsulates the utopian vision Grierson argued for, with films of local reality created by the local film specialists, whereby specialisation in creative media should be used as a means by which to communicate the concerns of a locality rather than solely those of national significance. In the films of the EMB and GPO, industrial processes and manual labour were edited together in order to establish the importance of each worker's abstracted labour, unifying mass movements in a way that would dwell on the dramatic motion and visual patterns of industry, rather than directly portraying the internal life of each individual worker. This objective to bring vitality to the mechanism of work is shown in an odd personal letter Grierson wrote to his mother, where he discusses his trip to the stockyards of Chicago. After an anti-Semitic description of a Rabbi slaughtering sheep for Kosher produce, he writes of what he saw at the slaughterhouses, expressing "the process was dull, - because it's so mechanical and so murderous, but colourful – colourful! I was shown too little of the tinned meat process to have much faith in it" ("December 9th" 6). The relationship between one's faith in a process and how visual materials influence this belief is fascinating for a number of reasons. It harks back to the theological concerns that dominate Grierson's ideas, whereby his philosophical, political,

and sociological influences have all been in aid of his fundamentally Christian outlook on life. Most importantly, it is the direct statement on why he prioritises the visual medium of cinema as a tool by which to communicate the necessity of different industries within Britain. Grierson claims one way to document reality was by being a painter, (*I Remember, I Remember* 01:52–01:54) and the use of the word “colourful” to describe something as mechanised as tinning meat reiterates the meaning of Kuleshov’s fence metaphor as relating to the vibrant possibilities of carefully structured media.

Bill Nichols described the Griersonian cinematic strategy as invoking that same call for social purpose as John F. Kennedy’s “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” (605), claiming that “the modern state had to find ways to enact popular, compelling representations of the state’s policies and programs. Such enactments engage its members in ritual, participatory acts of citizenship. Documentary film practice became one such form of ritual participation” (604). Nichols’ argument is centred on the modernist avant-garde influences of the British Documentary Film Movement, and considers the ways in which the political concerns of Grierson’s state-sponsored propaganda were at odds with the aesthetic influences of his particular form of realist film. Whilst the avant-garde was often highly critical of the ritualistic processes of state participation, Grierson’s documentary aimed to unify the disparate institutions and industries of Britain in order to encourage ethical participation for the common good. This form of documentary was relatively sentimental and sanitised compared with the modernist movement, whose fragmentary style aimed at exposing these very qualities as vacuous at the best of times, and dangerous at the worst. Within that previously mentioned description of the rabbi slaughtering sheep, Grierson reveals the tense divergence between the principal aims of his documentary and that of modernism. His description literally invokes the power of ritual and creates an image charged with a satanic quality, aided by stereotyping and racist caricature. He writes:

The old Jew looked a queer figure in the shambles, with nothing but blood-red niggers dancing around him, like a stray figure in a Fifteenth-century Hell. The sheep were led in, as ought to be in any decent Inferno, by a horrid figure – a goat! It led innocents along in capital style, and had a real way with it every time it came to the threshold of the shambles. A sort of coaxing way like they say the vamps have. (“December 9th” 6)

The difference in the positivity, simplicity, and heroism that supposedly characterised Grierson’s ideal vision of film and this passage presents a stark contrast between how we view him as a creative and as an individual. There is a clear sense here that this is meant to be written as both shocking and humorous, mixing the seriousness found in his highly charged religious fervour and hellish imagery with some colloquial punchlines, and a vampiric goat! It presents the rabbi in a propagandistic fascistic foil, where he is both a figure of comic derision as well as one to be feared. Consequently, if it is to be understood that the documentarian as orator constructs identity by presenting normalised conceptions of citizenship, then regarding Grierson’s clear definition of the Jewish faith as a deviant culture makes this role a worryingly dangerous one.

Understanding how Grierson actually defined abstraction helps to comprehend Nichols’ reading in more depth. In *I Remember, I Remember* (1968), a documentary in

which Grierson introduces a number of films he worked on in some capacity throughout his career, he states:

Don't be frightened by the word abstract, abstract just means order, just means patterns. Everything you put into order is put into pattern and we live by putting things into order and patterns: in the school; the kitchen; the field; the factory; the streets; the highways; the railroad tracks; the car parks; the supermarkets. Everywhere. Why we live in patterns and by patterns. (*I Remember, I Remember* 33:14–33:37)

Whilst Nichols' discussion on the abstract finds that the techniques employed by avant-garde filmmakers often aimed to destabilise the normalised preconceptions of society in order to construct new "representations of a shared secular reality" (594), Grierson's statement suggests his use of montage created a positivist impression for the audience in which violent editing actually offered a counter-intuitive sense of reassurance for the "status quo" (600). Abstraction for Grierson relates to an imaginative means of refocusing the immensity of the world into brief snippets of information. To unravel the complexity of national identity, let alone a globalised economy, the parallelism and juxtaposition afforded by cinema's foundation in editorial practice enabled a filmmaker to represent numerous perspectives, locations, and objects of interest at a speed by which webs of association could be made comprehensible to an average audience. As the above quotation explains, democratic society functions through the interconnection of the personal with the communal, and the abstraction of these separate referents of information can be made whole when made to interact with one another through montage.

To call Grierson's employment of modernist aesthetics merely surface level would be a far too simplistic reading, but Nichols' definition of the role of the Griersonian orator helps to elaborate the importance of this stylistic mimicry. As a guide, the documentarian was there to lead the public to moral and political certainty (599), helping them understand their environment in a way that just so happened to fall in line with the beliefs of those financing that documentary. Abstraction was just another means by which to communicate an ideal, utilising it as part of the visual and structural practice cinema could engage with as a rhetorical medium. Good intentions can only go so far, and the deception inherent within propaganda makes it clear why abstraction became a prominent technique in the fabrication of cinematic reality. As explained by John Cunningham, the impulse to film the local activities of the British working class in the 30s was not free from the prejudices of elitism, claiming, "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" (158). In both Grierson and Lippmann's writings, this labouring public has been presented as ignorant or easily misled, or even both. The sensationalism of film in this context is presented in an outline 1935 talk by John Skeaping, who appeals to the image of hypnotism by opening with claims that cinema has been regularly accused of inciting violence against others and the self. Skeaping's talk presented the case for a Film Unit for Labour propaganda. He states:

Culture, except as a pastime for the wealthy, has no place in Tory philosophy, for a truly cultivated and enlightened community would never tolerate the indignities inherent in the present social system. It is for this very reason that the Cinema is used on a large scale to mislead and befog the minds of the people by the creation of the emotional atmosphere that hides the truth and blinds so many to their true interests.

This idea again draws the conversation back to Hegel's ethical society, and the suggestion that social betterment is a process of constant improvement. Skeaping argues for film to be considered as a progressive art-form here, articulating the strength of Britain's propagandistic practice, and proposing documentary cinema as the means by which the Labour party could garner more support by better communicating with the mass public. This movement gained very little momentum within the party, to the point where it becomes understandable why Grierson's work required his employment within the Conservative government, whose creative use of mass media was an enticing characteristic in forging a home base for the British Documentary Movement (Beveridge 99).

The outline for this particular talk by Skeaping highlights a number of films which he used as part of this visual lecture, including *Housing Problems* (1935), and notes that both Grierson and Robert J. Flaherty⁵ attended the event. Whilst Grierson's political agnosticism is a keen point of debate for scholars, there is a sense of Skeaping simultaneously applauding Grierson's work as a purveyor of documentary whilst also shaming his participation in the Conservative agenda. *Housing Problems* bears the aesthetic imprint of Ruby Grierson rather than that of her brother, so to use this film to open the discussion is in itself a telling choice. Skeaping's talk confirms a trend found in a number of documents surrounding the Labour party's understanding of cinema, quoting the Greek philosopher Heraclitus' maxim, "the eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears" (Skeaping). Whilst Skeaping notes the limitations of this quote as a consequence of the advent of synchronised sound and the approaching developments in colour film, the empiricism at the heart of this statement relates to the universality of film as a communicative medium. The same quote appears again in a 1936 circular on the question of Labour cinema propaganda written by the party secretary James Middleton and the Trades Union Congress general secretary Walter Citrine. In it, they claim that propaganda film "can create bias against which neither reason nor rhetoric can prevail. It can persuade and be understood by the ignorant as well as by the educated, for it works through the combined media of sight and sound, appealing to those senses which are common property of nearly everybody – men, women and children alike." Grierson discusses this in his unpublished typescript *Cinema of Purpose*, claiming this persuasive quality in propaganda is stimulated by the visual properties in cinema. Grierson wrote likewise of

⁵Robert J. Flaherty (1884–1951) was an ethnographic documentarian who was known for his dramatised depictions of native communities which are more accurately described as works of docu-fiction, due in part to his tendency to stage scenarios for his subjects to perform. He filmed groups as diverse as Canadian Inuks, Samoan islanders and Aran fishermen. Both he and Grierson are often given the title 'father of documentary.' Interestingly enough, Flaherty worked with Grierson at the EMB in the early 1930s, a partnership which unceremoniously ended due to Flaherty's highly stylised form of documentary requiring budgets which were impractical and unavailable to the film unit. Footage Flaherty shot during his brief period with the film unit was repurposed and can be found in a number of EMB productions.

film that “the evidence of the eyes appeals very directly to the mind [...] it can exploit increasingly the fool’s regard for the under-side of the earth” (*New Worlds* 7–8). It is useful to consider this allusion to Heraclitus as a possible point of contention in Grierson’s idealism, one that puts up the evidential value of reality against the constructed fictions of cinema. That understanding of fabrication as the main source of content in political propaganda is fundamentally centred on the selective transference of data, both literal and sensorial, and the exploitation of the emotional value of narrative.

Cunningham’s reading of the avant-garde in Griersonian cinema differs slightly to Nichols, as he considers the financial and cultural movements outside film culture that influenced the changing methodologies of British propaganda. Vitaly, both readings are cognisant of the contradictory role Grierson had in both the EMB and GPO film units, where his enthusiasm for artistic experimentation was limited by his obligation to make an acceptable product for a predominantly Conservative government (Cunningham 154). Within this obligation is a form of phenomenal thinking which requires the moulding of reality towards the ideals of the financier. This is not to say that Grierson is not self-conscious of this hypocrisy, as in his own writing he criticises newsreel film of “mistaking the phenomenon for the thing in itself” (“Course of Realism” 201). Grierson wanted the excitement of fictional film to be endowed with the educational qualities of the visual lesson, so that the audience would engage with a relationship to the cinema which was both understanding of its artifice whilst simultaneously indulging in its form. This phenomenal reinterpretation of reality was to carry with it the inciting message of social purpose, one which was emphasised through the formal playfulness found in that casting of cinema as an invention of the phenomenal rather than a noumenal perspective on actuality. For Grierson, representative works of non-fiction film were to deliver a simple message that was explicitly in support of their sponsors whilst also harbouring an implicit call towards national unity by rendering the lives of the working class and the industry of Britain in the engaging formal practices of cinematic phenomena.

Essentially, realist film was presented with a task of salesmanship, casting John Grierson as the “father of the commercial” (Graef as qtd. in Neely 28) rather than that of documentary. In a 1932 memorandum by the TUC and Federation of British Industries, the declaration that “film is a most powerful factor for National publicity and has a direct reaction on industrial and commercial relationships between nations [...] both directly and indirectly goods are advertised in film” (FBI and TUC) expresses a similar ideology to Grierson’s cinema as sales pitch, and the internationalist, if inherently imperialist, outlook that characterised the EMB. It is a lifelong belief in the potential for all film to advertise goods for a nation’s benefit, one that Grierson even mentions in his final interview with Elizabeth Sussex, conducted in February 1972 (26). This puts Grierson in that indeterminate political position, where his methodology and social purpose falls in line with Skeaping’s left-wing leaning ideology, yet his film production is in aid of a predominantly Conservative agenda. Grierson claimed that “documentary is at once a critique of propaganda and a practice of it” (“Documentary Idea” 84). It is no wonder that within the Tory party this political inconsistency had many members opposing the financing of the “‘Bolsheviks’ of the GPO film unit” (Cunningham 154).

Grierson wanted to be both the financier and the authoritarian, interested in the ways that the auteur had the slim potential to escape the limitations of homogenous

cinema through an economic freedom earned via aesthetic popularity. The interrelationship between idealism and escapism in this conception of cinema is juxtaposed by the director's financial obligation towards artistically and politically conservative institutions. There is a sense of that corporate greed found in populist politics as being related to the role of the auteurist, sacrificing the ethical society for the abstract goods of self-fulfilment. Yet, this self-fulfilment can also be in aid of social progress, or at least the supposed progressive ideals of the creative in question.

In considering what Hegel meant by free will as a form of fixed content, it is startling to see Chomsky in 2017 state, "'freedom' means a subordination to the decisions of concentrated, unaccountable, private power" (qtd. in Lydon). For all that argument for the participatory relationship between the individual and society as the ultimate conception of free will in Hegel's work, here we have "freedom" as the passive acceptance of the prioritisation of corporate interests over social betterment. With the collapse of centrist parties due to the sociological stagnation found in neoliberalism, where the free market is more important than free thought, considering Grierson's work as a sales pitch communicated through cinematic experimentation's idealistic interpretation of reality offers the possibility of viewing his films as early indicators of the principles of neoliberalism. In Lippmann's *The Good Society* (1937), the indeterminate nature of philosophical freedom is directly examined when he posits:

The demand that men be subordinated and submerged in the mass is easily mistaken for the ideal of a fellowship of free individuals in which the human personality realizes some of its noblest possibilities. It is not always easy to distinguish between the patriotism of the collectivist who sacrifices the individual and the patriotism of the free men who sacrifice themselves voluntarily. (386)

The conflict between liberty and security creates the diverging understanding of freedom as a social model of active engagement compared to one of passive acceptance. As with Chomsky's criticisms of the democratic state that operates on illusionary practices, the fabricating ideals of Grierson's work find their basis in upholding a conception of democracy that functions through these deceptive intentions.

One also has to go beyond the functionality of film practice and extend the discussion to how Grierson viewed the purpose of the state. Ian Aitken expresses this by claiming that Grierson understood that "the true function of the State was to regulate community life in accordance with the fundamental principle of full free individual development" (27). We can view this as a naively idealist conception of governmental practice, which echoes that plausible deniability intrinsic to an idealist philosophy, but there is also a sense of this characteristically simplistic Griersonian definition as being the seedbed for a certain form of neoliberalism. Plausible deniability is used here to invoke that impossibility of complete definition within idealism found in the Kantian conception of the movement, as well as that open-endedness to the Hegelian quest for the ethical society, but it is also alluding to deregulation in free-market economies. Whilst suggesting Grierson was advocating purely for free enterprise would create a categorically false assessment, especially considering his tendency to view the invasive practices of the state as essential to making society comprehensible for the citizenry (37–38), there is room to argue that Aitken's definition here marks the beginning of a negative

development in this optimistic understanding of the relationship between local and central authorities with the citizen. Aitken claims Grierson's documentary offered a conversation between authority and citizenry that only allowed one member to communicate to the other (194). This hierarchy is fundamental to the process of invasiveness that John Gray portrays as being essential to the neoliberal project (Gray), notably describing the conclusions of this model as making the state "omnipresent." It is also in this one-way discussion that this regulation of community life for individual development can be perversely reformed into regulation by deregulating the free market. Individual development, then, refers to toxic individualism within business. Gray emphasises that defining neoliberalism is a difficult task due to the political and ideological inconsistencies of its supporters. Gray's statement that "neoliberalism and social democracy are not entirely separate political projects; they are dialectically related, the latter being a kind of synthesis of the contradictions of the former" (Gray) offers a strong platform for developing this argument. These contradictory unities propose the necessity for moral guidance within this model of the body politic, a point that is most clearly articulated in the financial crisis of the late noughties. It is within this failure to rectify this ethical dilemma that the conservative extremism of today finds its historical reflection in the Great Depression of the thirties.

By positing Grierson's role in visual media as a key figure in the development of advertising, rather than direct reportage, one has to consider the clear neoliberal parallels drawn here. Whilst his intentions were focused on social justice, and his conception of the state opposed to the principles of free-market economics ("Education" 265), it is undeniable that within the salesmanship of the Griersonian documentary is a financial element that follows the same unifying logic found in neoliberal models of government. Tellingly, he spoke of the "unexploited gold mine" of the audience, the potential to "sell Importance" and documentary as "the business of making the world good-looking enough to live in" ("Atmosphere" 2026; *New Worlds* 3; 16). This form of engagement was supportive of a welfare state, which further complicates this reading, but his interpretation of the relationship between cinema and the audience as being based on a sociological economy represents a trend in Grierson's theory and practice that touches on the origins of neoliberal polity. In an unpublished text titled *Eyes of Democracy*, Grierson defines this contradictory position rather well: "I have had to be a creative worker and a civil servant and a promoter and an organiser and a critic and a teacher of youth; and although I hate finance and know nothing about it, I have had to find the millions, often from people I dared not tell fully what I was after lest it would seem pretentious" (qtd. in Hardy 126). Grierson considers here that national publicity is "the face we present to the world" and the "'personality' factor in Salesmanship" ("Teach the World" 1). How capital is acquired is altogether unimportant in Grierson's eyes, as long as the money is put to the use of producing socially purposive media. Whilst he claims ignorance on the actual subject of finance, the freedom with which he attempts to achieve the budgetary requirements of his propaganda does express aspirations towards free-market ethics within financing.

And yet, Grierson's propaganda was formally constructed to encourage an active engagement with the world order, further problematising whether we can view these documentaries as progressive or regressive in their overall moral objective. Asking such

a question requires a similar expansion of academic scope as presented in Hegel's concentric circles, whereby those individual abstract needs have to relate rationally to the pluralistic goals of community in order to create the prospect of an ethical society. In attempting to distinguish the theory from the individual one is led into further complications, and a subjective maze is created in which phenomenology marks the individual introductions and conclusions of each academic path before revealing that there can be a new route for each new researcher. Perhaps it is appropriate to reconsider Grierson's emphasis on heroism as a key component in successful filmmaking, in order to clarify how his creative methodology relates to his indeterminate political ideology.

Thomas Carlyle, whom Grierson criticised as an antiquated philosopher for the modernist age, wrote of heroes that "all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world" (3). This statement is not so far off Hegel's own opinions on thought and will, but Hegel argues that what he classifies as heroes are essential for the establishment of the state, but are rendered useless during the maintenance of the status quo, arguing that all acts of heroism are related to the reconstruction of normalised models of morality, mentality and law (93). What does this mean with regard to Grierson's propaganda, which aims to uphold the status quo of the government it promotes but endows its subjects with the physiology of heroic figures rather than expressing the psychology of the individual? Therein lies the critical point in which Grierson can be praised and derided: the refusal to be limited by the reality of a situation, even when making his objective goal the dramatisation of reality for *his* interpretation of ethical ends. No matter what the original context or intended meaning was of an aesthetic movement, philosopher or financier, Grierson planned to mould the world around himself in order to achieve his goals. Art, words, and theories were all susceptible to the laws of phenomenon, and the limitations of the ethical documentarian were based on the boundaries of creativity. The capacities for imagination in the documentary movement had to be endless in order to energise the realist film with the physiological and psychological responses needed to push the audience into social engagement.

The nature of conflict as a cohering force in Grierson's practice is reflective of the struggle found in rationalising the numerous opposing factors that define his methodology, philosophy, and worldview. One tends to return to the importance of visualisation in the Documentary Film Movement, as the complexities of such ideas as objective success and moral value lead the researcher into a subjective analysis that is naturally simplified through the understanding of realist film as a positive medium by which to engage visually with society. With all the political, sociological, and theoretical thinking that surrounds Grierson's writing and work, there is an almost unbearable stretch between his interests, one which he recognises as being a strain on the focus of his project ("December 31st" 12). However, the way in which one considers general concepts of freedom and finance, before applying them to the commercial boundaries of popular film, leads the conversation back into questions directly related to theory and practice. It seems pertinent to the argument that in Grierson's final interview (Sussex 26–7) the very nature of freedom within the financial constraints of aesthetic ideals and uncreative funding is discussed for an extended period of time. In this section, Grierson expresses the strength

that could be found in local production, and the inherent need to decentralise institutions in areas of mass production. Within his proposed financial model of small units funded internally by local business, there is a sense of attempting to achieve the democratisation of media that became impossible within the boundaries of governmental propaganda production. This statement appears to be a conscious effort to establish a documentary movement that focuses on public interest by being entirely produced by public institutions, rather than attempting to maintain its sense of social purpose even within the privatised developments of economic liberalism.

Freedom is financial obligation within the seventh art, and it is with these boundaries in mind that Grierson points out how the mentality for rapid expansion in audience numbers and profit tends to produce essential restrictions on creativity. He claims, “I don’t think we’ve arrived at an aesthetic of freedom because there’s no aesthetic of freedom in the sense that you’re always subject to the laws of harmony. You’re always subject to the laws of expression [...]. So the idea of being free of the necessary restraints of art, I mean that’s out of the question” (qtd. in Sussex 28). As a natural element in the development of film media, this realistic attitude towards the cost of filmmaking is a blank spot in that consistently idealistic approach to cinema found in most of Grierson’s theory. The excitement of creativity and the potential to undertake one’s social duty whilst also fulfilling the role of an artist is undoubtedly caught up in the laws of harmony, which within economic liberalism are the laws of commerce. Here, we are to understand these laws as fixed content. This point exemplifies another case in which phenomena comes into the fray, as to be truly representative of the world becomes an impossibility not just out of the practicalities of distanced sensual engagement, but the further reinterpretation of actuality founded on the principles of financial obligation. These philosophical and financial understandings of film are in conflict, with Andrew Blaikie assessing “the specific role of the documentarian was to access the underlying meaning behind superficial appearances, albeit that this would mean using the phenomenal to understand it. Images were thus used in a formalist, symbolic style to convey key themes” (62). As this abstraction is the superficial attempt to render the world through a superficial medium, it is now no wonder that further conflict is borne out of this logical inconsistency. Early narrative cinema exists out of this inconsistency, and as Lippmann points out, “Our popular taste is to have the drama originate in a setting realistic enough to make identification plausible and to have it terminate in a setting romantic enough to be desirable, but not so romantic as to be inconceivable. In between the beginning and the end the canons are liberal, but the true beginning and the happy ending are landmarks” (*Public Opinion* 166). That simplification of actual matter is there in the Griersonian methodology too, where complexity can only arise once a simple and conceivable base has been set up by the film. It is a certain form of clarity within a fabricated environment, one that is identifiably real but not directly representative of proximal reality. While there are clear differences in how intimately fiction film and Grierson’s documentary came to this proximal reality, embracing the phenomenal perspective of the camera meant that even when the raw materials on film were on location, they still obeyed the laws of editorial reconstruction.

Plausibility and authenticity are two different concepts, and this paper has considered the ways in which certain freedoms, whether creative or based on societal

privileges, reflect the social elements on display within non-fiction film. This phenomenal experience of reality is found in the formal practice of montage, the imperfect media of Steyerl, the political postulations of Lippmann and Chomsky, and the local documentary of Grierson. The conflict between liberty and security creates the diverging understanding of freedom as a social model of active engagement compared to one of passive acceptance. As with Chomsky's criticisms of the democratic state that operates on illusionary practices, the fabricating ideals of Grierson's work find their basis in upholding a conception of democracy that functions through these deceptive intentions. By considering this in relation to contemporary visual media, perhaps we can see how Grierson's dream of decentralised film production is somewhat similar to the digital culture of today, yet it is still subsumed by the economic and political boundaries that challenged his entire sociological project. Whether we are discussing material or immaterial media, creative freedoms will always come into conflict with the means of their distribution.



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