

THE CHANGING ROOM

Ben Rivers' new work, *Sack Barrow*, is about transformation and transcendence. The film is set in a twentieth century factory with its roots in altruism and its business in alchemy. The progression of the film takes us through a green tinged portrait of the now vacated environment before we encounter the previous inhabitants.

The environment is tarnished. Tarnished in the way that a limestone cave is both soiled and embellished by its mineral deposits and the merging of solid, liquid and air. The factory's processes have added to this embellishment, they have triggered it. All is in flux and changing form: decaying, revealing, accumulating. Except that time has been standing still and air has become thick and all glass clouded.

For the inhabitants, escapism is found in rest times. In beauty and exoticism. In singing. In listening and moving with the music.

The closed environment of the factory, as it approaches its retiral, is brought to the door of this change by a recounting of a parallel transcendence. It is a dream allegory, itself born of the post WW1 era, which does not help us to place what we see in time and fact but does allow us to accept the inevitability of transformation.

There are some canny and some uncanny connections between Ben Rivers' *Sack Barrow*, filmed in an outdated factory, and John Grierson's life and work. They represent conscious links in relation to the politic for artists working with actuality, but also, and more importantly, there is an affinity evident in both their practices where poeticism is seen within the real world, a real world riddled with symbolism and mythology, quiet iconic figures and close quarters with nature.¹ As has happened several times in the past, Rivers found the *Sack Barrow* site through a friend who understands his attraction to hermetic worlds.

Grierson's first major film, *Drifters* (1929), about North Sea herring fishermen, shares some subject matter with Rivers' *Sack Barrow* in terms of depicting working life, but the circumstances which led Grierson to this subject are also of relevance.

¹ Grierson's somewhat contradictory definition of documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality' relied heavily on a distinction between the 'real' (abstract and general) and the 'phenomenal' (empirical and particular). Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations*, London, British Film Institute, 1995, p11-3.

Grierson's contemporary, Paul Rotha, described the power of *Drifters* saying; 'It "brought alive"... Not just the routine of the catch but the whole drama of emotional values that underlay the task, interpreting in its stride the unconscious beauty of physical labour in the face of work done for a livelihood'.² Rivers also often focuses on this 'livelihood' although it's a different sort of personal economy: an economy of interests, environment, projects and observations, a self-determined livelihood.

The witnessing of modest and surprising actions within these livelihoods and the particular environments created by them form the basis for Rivers' quiet observational approach. Ian Aitken in his book *Film and Reform*³ comments that; 'The camera, by focusing on, and isolating an individual activity or event, could reveal the inherent quality and complexity of that event', and cites Grierson's own words:

'But its (the camera's) magic is even more than this. It also lies in the manner of its observation, in the strange innocence which, in a mind-tangled world, it sees things for what they are... The camera is, in a measure, both the discoverer of an unknown world, and the re-discoverer of a lost one'.⁴

For Rivers there is also a duality in the filmmaking process when using film (rather than a digital process). He articulates the relationship between the filming and the editing: 'With film you can build up an understanding of the film stock and the camera but can't always predict the outcomes, so seeing the film when it has been developed sort of reinvigorates the process of making the film. It's the start of a separate, second phase where there are always some surprises'.⁵

Grierson's family had strong connections to island life and he served throughout WW1 as a wireless operator in the North Sea.⁶ Afterwards he found it difficult to integrate back into normal civilian life: 'I remember how clumsy were some of my own attempts to exchange the systematic and disciplined life for the individual and unprotected free-for-all which civilian life suddenly appeared'.⁷

This experience was clearly mirrored elsewhere in the country and led to the establishment of the metal plating factory where Rivers' *Sack Barrow* was filmed; a business set up in 1931 as a means of gainful employment for maimed ex-servicemen.

² Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1939, p97-98.

³ John Grierson, *Artwork*, 1931, cited within Ian Aitken, *Film & Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*, London, Routledge, 1990, p80.

⁴ John Grierson, *Artwork*, 1931, cited within Ian Aitken, *Film & Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*, London, Routledge, 1990, p80.

⁵ Interview with Ben Rivers, 25 June 2011.

⁶ Jack C. Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2000, p1-5.

⁷ John Grierson, *Background for the Use of Films - or anything else - by Rehabilitation Officers*, Ottawa, National Film Board, 1945, mimeographed. Cited within Jack C. Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.

This old-style industrial setting is far from other 'back to nature' environments depicted in Rivers' previous films and also contrasts to the natural wonder of the sea. However, it has close connections to Grierson's career as a civil servant where he often focused on the industrial life of the UK and Canada.⁸ He commissioned his close collaborator, Robert Flaherty, to film *Industrial Britain: a film about craftsmen: a scenario*, which Grierson himself edited in 1931.⁹

These two early films were forerunners in the structure that Grierson put in place, which allowed government and industrial sponsorship (and confidence) to fund film opportunities under the language of 'information' and 'public service'¹⁰ where in fact the filmmaker was given wide freedom in what they delivered.

Especially when considering Grierson's influence on artists' film, it is important to acknowledge the artistic approach he wished for and admired: 'The early 'Griersonian' documentary was characterised by a phenomenology of the image, formative use of montage editing, and an indeterminate, impressionistic and symbolic style. It was summed up in what Grierson called the 'imagist' documentary.'¹¹

In the review of Robert Flaherty's film *Moana* (1926), where Grierson is credited with the first public use of the word 'documentary', he uses it to recognise this as a value in the work, but a value secondary to the *beauty* he sees in the film.¹²

An eloquent warning from his Calvinist father that he was 'Pursuing the shadow instead of the substance'¹³ when entering a career in film, coincidentally points to the draw of the elusive temporal image which often ties film makers to their endeavour. On hearing this quote Rivers' response was pragmatic: 'It's one of those metaphors that sounds good but I wouldn't really apply that to the way I think about my work. Any shadow needs substance to create it, so I would hope that there are both in my work. Grierson clearly read more Plato than his father'.¹⁴

⁸ 'In his role as head of the film units at the Empire Marketing Board and the General Post Office in the 1930s Grierson nurtured a generation of British filmmaking talent. In 1939 he moved to Canada where he became the first head of the National Film Board of Canada and is credited with playing an important role in the development of Canada's film industry'. <http://www.is.stir.ac.uk/libraries/collections/spcoll/media/grierson.php>

⁹ Jack C. Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2000, p52-4.

¹⁰ Paul Rotha describes the situation with Grierson's civil servant colleagues: 'Background and training engender fear and mistrust of anything to do with 'art' or 'aesthetics'. That is why Grierson so often tried to dissociate the word 'art' from 'documentary', and substituted instead such words as 'information' and 'public service'.' Paul Rotha, *Afterthought, in idem, Documentary Diary*, London & New York, Hill & Wang, 1973 within Ian Aitken (ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement - An Anthology*, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, p155.

¹¹ Ian Aitken (ed.), *The Documentary Film Movement - An Anthology*, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, p61.

¹² The review is quoted in full in Paul Rotha & Basil Wright, "Flaherty: A Biography" (typescript 1959), Museum of Modern Art Library, p. 105-7.

¹³ John Grierson interviewed in 1966 by Jack C. Ellis, *John Grierson: Life, Contributions, Influence*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.

¹⁴ Interview with Ben Rivers, 25 June 2011.

Alongside references to Grierson's social motivations are many to his understanding of documentary as film poems made by artists.¹⁵ In his essay *Drifters*, Grierson calls Flaherty a poet¹⁶ and Brian Winston has described the Documentary Film Movement led by Grierson as 'a painterly tradition that allows for "poetry"'.¹⁷

He aligned himself to the visual approaches of Sergei Eisenstein and to his film *Battleship Potemkin*, citing it as 'this great new experiment in the dialectics of imagery',¹⁸ which he admired in terms of its dramatic tempo and visual orchestration as well as its naturalistic representation.¹⁹ Eisenstein didn't use actors in *Battleship Potemkin* and nor did Grierson in films like *Drifters*, saying 'The men do their own acting, and the sea does its'.²⁰

The idea of the people and the place doing their own acting is evident in Rivers' film works which can function as a portrait of a person, *A World Rattled of Habit* (2008) and *Origin of the Species* (2008), or a place, in the case of *Sack Barrow*. Rivers, in recent years, has worked with the real people in his films, gaining confidence to 'direct': to observe routines and then to discuss with them how the shot can work. He got to know the workers at the Sack Barrow factory, chatting to them and being around, always with his camera in his hand 'so they get to know me as a person with a camera'²¹ which makes the start of filming seem natural. Rivers spends considerable time looking and listening, 'tuning in' to a place before he starts filming. This approach allows the factory in *Sack Barrow* to do its own acting, the encrusted walls and marked floors telling the story of their years of use. A story of ongoing transformation.

Laura Simpson, June 2011.

¹⁵ Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations*, London, British Film Institute, 1995, p24-5.

¹⁶ John Grierson, *Drifters*, 1929, within Ian Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, p79.

¹⁷ Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations*, London, British Film Institute, 1995, p25.

¹⁸ Publication of a spoken tribute following Eisenstein's death given on May 2, 1948, by John Grierson, Paul Rotha, Ivor Montagu, Marie Seton, and Herbert Marshall. *G. Eisenstein, 1892-1948*, London, Film Section of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR, 1948, p28.

¹⁹ Ian Aitken, *Film & Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*, London, Routledge, 1990, p75-6.

²⁰ The Clarion, October 1929 reprinted in H. Forsyth Hardy (ed.) *Grierson on Documentary*, London & Boston, Faber & Faber 1979, within Ian Aitken, *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, p78.

²¹ Interview with Ben Rivers, 25 June 2011.