

# LOOK AT BRITAIN!

by JOHN BERGER

I've just seen a marvellous programme of documentaries", I enthused to a young sculptor friend who has no particular interest in cinema.

"Oh! Documentaries", he replied, "You mean those films that are like driving along in a car with the radio on!"

Fair enough. Such a description evokes very well the uneventful, sedentary, official chauffeur-driven quality of the average documentary of the last ten years. Since the war most documentaries have been entirely boring because their content has been censored by those who have made them according to the dictates of the most static, uncreative concern possible: a concern with Prestige – either national or commercial. But the four films in the programme I was discussing, Free Cinema Three, have triumphantly broken through this propriety barrier. (That is not to say that they are "shocking"; the need for self-conscious shockers is the natural complement to the handing out of "inoffensive" platitudes.) When one sees this programme one thinks again about Documentary as an art form. On the one hand one realises that a great documentary requires a director of great imaginative talent. (We must go on repeating it until it is understood that in all the arts imagination means the ability to disclose that which exists.) On the other hand one realises that, even with inexperienced or immature direction, a documentary that has been sincerely made and is uncensored in the way I have mentioned, can still remain interesting. It may lack impact, but it will still reveal. A bad novel is usually unreadable; but an honest journal kept by a clumsy writer and thinker often nevertheless supplies material for thought.

*The Singing Street*, a film in this programme made by the Norton Park Group about children's skipping games and songs in Edinburgh, is too much a scrap book, and lacks any focal centre. But it still contains shots of beauty and meaning The wind that comes over the Castle and wraps an overcoat gawkily round an 11-plus girl's legs, shifts another one's hair and spreads it out on an invisible pillow. To roller-skate down the centre of the street-suddenly one remembers that just to do that was to be a child. The furious feet of the girl double-skipping between two ropes will remind others of how their mothers forbade skipping in shoes because it wore them out too quickly. The weather, the unconscious liberty of childhood, the social environment-such things are part of the natural raw material of documentary. I do not mean that they are preserved on the final reels automatically, that a documentary director can't go wrong; I mean that, given the compulsion to make a film, the documentary director is already in the midst of life, while the feature director, with the sky as a limit to his budget, may quite likely never even touch earth.

And this fact gives us a clue, I think, to the kind of situation in which a documentary school is likely to flourish. If people want to leave the earth because neither desperate

necessity nor clear hopes are there to keep them on it, then to be in the midst of life (and here one must point out that Mrs. Dale is one of the most fabulous discoveries of outer space) will be considered boring, un-entertaining, old-fashioned and grim. For various historical reasons far too complicated to go into here, this has been the predominant mood of this country for about a decade. Thus there has been little impulse to make imaginative documentaries. There are now signs that different circumstances are in the process of changing this mood. And so the imperative title of this programme *Look at Britain!* is not only timely, but also possibly prophetic. Yet if it is prophetic we shall not in a few years' time be back in the thirties. And this is where the programme is most interesting. It reveals a new kind of vision. Every time an art needs to revitalise itself after a period of formalism and prestige art is always formalist-artists will turn back to reality: but their attitude to reality, and the way they interpret it, will depend upon the particular needs of their time. That is why realism can never be defined as a style, and can never mean an acquiescent return to a previous tradition. To some extent the kind of vision revealed by this programme is the result of the artistic personality of the man who justly dominates it-Lindsay Anderson. (*Every Day Except Christmas*, sponsored by the Ford Motor Company, is his new film; *Wakefield Express*, about the news in a local paper, is one of his earlier films; while *Nice Time*, a film about Piccadilly night life, is certainly, but healthily, influenced by Anderson's *O Dreamland*.) However, Anderson was not found as a film director under a gooseberry bush. He has been formed by the contemporary world from which he now creates. And consequently it is as important to try to define Anderson's vision in relation to our time, as it is to pay tribute to him as an original artist of rare imagination.

## 2

There is an indication of Anderson's attitude right at the beginning of *Every Day Except Christmas*; it is affectionately dedicated to several of the Covent Garden porters whose twelve hours of work from mid-night to mid-day are the subject of the film. The key word is affectionately. Personally I would never have used such a word; for me it has too many avuncular, dutiful associations. But Anderson gives it new associations and justifies his use of it by the film that follows. He approaches his heroes (there are no villains) and so also makes us approach them, on a basis of natural equality. He neither idealises them – nor does he “study” them, as Lionel Rogosin studied his unfortunates in *On the Bowery*. What he does is to muck in with them. In itself this would not of course be enough. At the most it means that he can put his characters at their ease, and so eliminate their self-consciousness when the camera is only a few feet from their faces. It is from here, however, that the poet in Anderson takes over. Having dissolved the problem of his relationship to his subject, and having decided to leave in abeyance the question of what the single purpose, the concluding argument of the film is going to be, he is intensely open-minded, open-eared, open-eyed to the ironies, the contrasts, the undertones, the warm, momentary, human revelations in the scenes through which he takes his cameraman – Walter Lassally.

Let me try to give a few examples of what I mean. The film begins just before midnight on a mushroom farm in Sussex. At midnight one hears "God Save the Queen" being played on the radio as the BBC closes down. While it is being played one sees a lorry from the farm driving towards the market along the deserted arterial road, beneath the fluorescent lights, past the suburban shops and the un-glittering,

silent, repetitive bijou houses. Verbally, that may sound unremarkable. But in fact the imaginative connecting power of this sequence is remarkable. It connects numerous ideas. It suggests the middle class nature of the monarchy, the present "safeness" of English life, and in contrast to that, somewhere, a memory of what a London broadcast could mean to clandestine listeners during the war, the way those who work at night begin working rather silently, the apparent vulnerability of a sleeping city that leaves its lights on as a kind of bluff. Anderson does not of course expound these points. He simply acknowledges them as associations, as ingredients on different levels of the total meaning of the scene.

At the same time his attitude is never precious because he never allows himself to be led away from the popular basis of his theme—in this case the work and life of the porters. In the middle of the film, after a sequence in an all-night café where the porters go for a cup of tea, and in which a close-up of an unknown night-walker comes forward with all the starkness of a dossier thrown down on a police-station table, there is a cut back to the flowers now stacked in twelve-foot-high displays ready for the first buyers. To a slow movement of music the camera tracks slowly over Red Square crowds of daffodils, tulips, dahlias. The poetic value of this half-minute or so is firm enough to include, if you want to accept it, the metaphor of a mass meeting, or a reminder of Elizabethan pastoral imagery, but its basis is simple and broad: the fact that the English, so visually blind in most ways, are mad about flowers.

So far, both the examples I have given suggest a slow tempo. In fact the rhythm of the film is active. It begins slowly: cups of tea before getting down to the job. Then gradually the echoing glass-roofed market building, which earlier was like a station just after the last train has gone, becomes full of express action, wisecracks, sentimental songs, lumbering while 99 out of 100 still steep. Several hours later, as the activity abates, the outside city wakes and takes over; a brass band marches its way between the loaded out-going lorries, and the porters, whose personalities we are now at home with, gratefully knock off for home.

In the film's treatment of this central theme, the strength and limits of Anderson's approach are most clearly revealed. (Is it necessary to add that no strength in art is possible without limitation?) We are never told what the average wage of a porter is; we see none of the rackets that probably exist higher up the commercial scale of the trade, the important town-planning argument for moving the market out of the centre of the city is not touched upon. In the 'thirties all this would have been the Stuff of documentary. But despite this I believe that Anderson is renewing the tradition he has inherited. I have listed what he does not give us. What he does give us are images, in the literal and poetic sense of the word. There is the image of Bill unloading and stacking boxes, the camera moving with each box across the necessary two yards, this is not the hardest work but we are given the measure of it. There is the image showing the experienced way of getting a sack of potatoes up on to the shoulder. There are the old women flower sellers searching for the cheapest blossoms that with their blarney must earn them their livelihood. There is the boy with thoughts in his head heaving boxes of flowers piled high on top of it. There is the quickest way of polishing an apple. There are the big buyers, busy, shrewd and utterly practical; the earth and what grows thereon is a commodity. There is the moment when the night ends; a new city day, accorded, not cuckooed in. Above all there is the work, the crooning, clowning, smoking, and again work, of the young porters who have restless hopes on the far side of their knowledge. Or, to take one example from *Wakefield Express*,

there is the unveiling of the local war memorial and the pain in the bereaved woman's eyes as dry as the lime between the bricks of the wall she leans upon for support. Such images have a culminating effect. They spring from and provoke, a sustained sense of sympathy. Finally, one salutes the night porters, and one is made to feel indivisible from the daily life-gay, impressive, tragic and silly-around Wakefield. Whilst it is true that our problems today are not Just simply the result of a world shortage of friendliness, it is becoming increasingly clear that in an age of official genocide humanism is a positive, even a subversive force – Schweitzer must have been called many names in Whitehall. But apart from this there are two other more specific reasons why Anderson's attitude is particularly relevant to our time. First. The squalor of our society today – as distinct from the 'thirties – is revealed more sharply in the values it breeds than in plain economic facts. And this demands a far more subtle approach from the social commentator. A man's hopes become more significant than his wage packet. Second. This is a period of scepticism. And in face of this an artist like Anderson demonstrates his commitment, not to a preconceived generalisation, but to the complicated reality of his subject matter. He produces images that are so vibrant that they persuade us to remember and create explanations fin. Ourselves – and so to begin to abandon our scepticism. His films are like daylight after formalised dreams. They are full of people who are noisier than private thoughts, more intractable than all categories.

3

The possibility of protest within such an attitude is demonstrated by *Nice Time*, the first, very promising and on the whole already successful film of Claude Goretta and Alain Tanner. The point is that the protest is not an aloof, administrative or high-minded one. It is made on behalf of the people to be seen pursuing their pleasure or their livelihood any night within 400 yards of the Eros statue. There are the patient queues waiting for the shot in the arm to be supplied by the dive-bombing war film, and there is the newspaper seller, half his face shot away in a war. The drunks trundle past two by two. The American airforce-man, lost as a dog, eyes the passing women like the dog looking for its master. Coca-Cola advertises itself, and the lovers, holding hands, gaze up at the city lights. The freckled youth and the old apoplectic stare at the nude photograph as at a patriotic flag. The police make an arrest in the street whilst on the screen the hero-criminal entertains thousands. In the Amusement Arcade young men feel for their luck within the pin-table microcosms of the city outside. The last tube takes the satisfied and the disappointed home, the Circus empties, and one tart makes her last walk to the tune she cannot hear of an Irish love song. Look indeed at Britain, for the Battle of the River Plate and the Escape of the *Amethyst* have not very much to do with us today – or with Christmas Island.

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