

THE HIPPODROME FESTIVAL OF SILENT CINEMA

WHERE MOVIES AND MUSIC COME ALIVE!

Wednesday 12th March - Sunday 16th March 2014

Box office: 01324 506850 | hippfest.co.uk
The Hippodrome, 10 Hope Street, Bo'ness EH51 0AA

Sunday 16 March | 17:00

BEFORE GRIERSON MET CAVALCANTI

RIEN QUE LES HEURES

Dir. John Grierson | UK | 1929 | 49m
Accompanied live by Jason Singh
and members of the
Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra

DRIFTERS

Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti | France | 1929 | 40m
Accompanied live by the
Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra

Released in 1929 *Drifters* established John Grierson as a major British filmmaking talent and cemented his reputation as “the father of documentary filmmaking.” The University of Stirling Archives holds an extensive collection of Grierson’s working papers which document the production, promotion and reception of the film. They include a water-damaged copy of the script, the blue ink running across the page – I like to think it got soaked while Grierson was on board the trawlers in the North Sea shooting the dramatic scenes of the fishermen at work.

Grierson’s dramatic account of the heroic lives of herring fishermen owed a great debt to the style and technique of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*. Grierson first saw the film when working as a film critic in New York in 1926. In an article in *The Clarion* he noted the impact *Potemkin* had on the audience:

“We wrote about tempo, about images, about mass character (crowds as personalities, streets, towns, peoples as corporate personalities) and on all these things which cinema could do that the stage could not do.”

At its London premiere in November 1929 *Drifters* shared the bill with *Potemkin*. Keen to promote his film to maximum effect Grierson insisted that *Drifters* should be shown before Eisenstein’s work and it stole the Russian film’s thunder. Grierson’s film impressed both audience and critics with a style and energy that, while heavily influenced by Eisenstein, had been applied to a particularly British subject. The critics loved *Drifters*, the *Daily News* reporting that it had “more real art that the much-lauded Russian picture.”

Grierson’s attention-to-detail extended to the instructions produced for a



Silent Cinema Festival



@FalkirkCultural #HippFest

recommended musical soundtrack to heighten the film's dramatic impact. The archive includes a printed document distributed to cinemas providing a scene-by-scene musical accompaniment to the film. The recommendations are divided into two sections. The first provides popular tunes to be played by a cinema orchestra, while the second lists gramophone recordings of classical music for cinemas without musicians. These were to be played using "non-synchronous tables" (gramophones set up to play like today's DJ turntables). As the fishermen prepared their nets before casting them into the sea Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave Part 1* was to be played. Later in the film the threat of the gathering storm clouds was accompanied by Wagner's *Flying Dutchman Overture*.

While Grierson was developing his ideas of documentary in Chicago, New York and London the Brazilian-born Alberto Cavalcanti was working for French film studios in Paris as a set designer and, later, a director of short comedies and dramas. During this period he also made more personal films such as the influential 'city symphony' *Rien que les Heures* (1926).

Grierson reflected on the development of documentary film in an article written in the late 1930s. Summarising the achievements of pioneering filmmakers around the world, and their influence of young British directors, he noted that:

"We learned, too, from the many aesthetic experiments in real life photography which had made Ruttmann's *Berlin* and Cavalcanti's *Rien que les Heures* the brilliant innovations of their day. Here was the eye of the artist ranging outside the studio into the streets: observing real people, making the first efforts to swing them into movie form."

Indeed so taken was Grierson with the "brilliant craftsmanship" of Cavalcanti's work that in 1934 he invited him to join the team of artists and filmmakers he had assembled at the GPO Film Unit. Cavalcanti became a key member of the unit and worked on many of its most memorable films including *Night Mail*.

THE FILM WEEKLY

STARTLING BRITISH FILM EVENT

Brilliant New Director's First Work

JOHN GRIERSON'S MAGNIFICENT "DRIFTERS"

A boat of the herring fleet putting to sea. A scene from "Drifters"



which gives this film its effectiveness. He has, by his beautifully chosen angles, the cleverness of his cutting, the beauty of his editing, created a dramatic and thrilling picture which possesses more human appeal and definite entertainment value than a dozen films based on fictitious happenings. The photography, a symphony of light and shade, is the work of an artist.

Film to See and Enjoy

"Drifters" is a film which everyone should see, because I am certain it is one which everyone will enjoy. New Era Films, who are distributing the picture, are trade showing it in London within a few days, and the public should see that the exhibitors, who provide their entertainment for them, should not let another magnificent film rot in the vaults of Wardour Street. John Grierson, by his work in this film, proves definitely that he is just the type of man most required in British studios to-day, and I think that the British producing company which puts him under contract will be doing itself and the film-going public a signal service. H. T.

Tremendous Power

Mr. Grierson has been associated with the film industry for some years, and he assisted with the preparation of "Potemkin" for its showing in America. The Empire Marketing Board some time ago

wanted a film made dealing entirely with herring fishing. This subject might, in the wrong hands, easily have proved a disastrous one, but Mr. Grierson, who shows us in "Drifters" the result of his efforts, has tackled it in such a way as to give it tremendous dramatic power. You see the fishing fleet leaving harbour; the casting of the nets; the dog-fish and conger eel attacking the herring, the catch being taken aboard; the race for port against an oncoming storm; the market where the fish is sold; and the trains leaving for all parts of the country with their cargo of the sea. It is not so much the incidents that Mr. Grierson has chosen, but the manner in which he has treated them,

Karl Magee is University Archivist at the University of Stirling. Find out more about the University of Stirling's John Grierson Archive at: libguides.stir.ac.uk/archives