Film historians and theorists have typically adopted one of two approaches when discussing voiceover in GPO films. Some tend to use overly generalised terms in their discussions. Ian Aitken, for example, refers in his otherwise ground-breaking book on John Grierson to the 'usual voice-of-God narration' in 1930s GPO Film Unit productions.[1] Other historians and theorists have identified a few exceptional and distinctive uses of commentary in individual GPO films. The most often-cited example is Lionel Wendt's voiceover commentary in *The Song of Ceylon* (1934), which I discuss elsewhere.[2] Neither approach is satisfactory. The former tends to conflate GPO with other types of non-fiction film commentary. The latter lacks a sufficiently detailed analysis of the stylistic norms against which to evaluate apparently exceptional and distinctive examples such as *The Song of Ceylon*.

In order to progress our understanding of this issue we need to pitch discussion somewhere between broad generalisations and individual case studies. What follows is an initial survey of some of the norms of commentary in GPO films, primarily those produced during Grierson's tenure as head of the Film Unit, compared to other non-fiction film practices within the British context in the 1930s. Further analysis, beyond the limited scope of this chapter, could assess the extent to which independent British documentary films of the 1930s adhered to the norms outlined here, and the extent to which the norms changed in the transition from the GPO to the Crown Film Unit.

## 'Cutting to the commentary' and the 'Voice of God'

British documentary theorists and polemicists were keen from the outset to distinguish their use of commentary from its uses in other types of non-fiction film. In 1932, Grierson, in the opening section of his manifesto, 'First Principles of Documentary', separated documentaries from 'lower categories' of non-fiction such as interest films and travelogues. For Grierson, one characteristic of these 'lower categories' was that they were 'cut to the commentary, and shots are arranged arbitrarily to point the gags or conclusions'.[3]

We should not necessarily accept the accuracy of this description of the 'lower categories', nor the value judgment implicit in Grierson's use of this term. The British documentary movement eventually dominated the field in terms of cultural prestige during the 1930s, but other British non-fiction film-makers were often just as thoughtful in their approach to commentary during this period. Mary Field and Percy Smith, for example, similarly argued in a book on their film series *Secrets of Nature* (1922–33) that non-fiction films should not be 'a lecture illustrated by moving pictures'.[4] Field and Smith outlined a sophisticated approach to commentary, albeit one that differed in certain respects from Grierson's. Specifying what is distinctive about GPO films during the 1930s should not necessarily equate to judging them superior to different uses of voiceover in other types of non-fiction film.

The most influential non-fiction film series of the period to be 'cut to the commentary' was *The March of Time* (1935–51). The series' producers developed this approach into a fine art which deserves further analysis in its own right. After *The March of Time* began in 1935, it provided a powerful model for non-fiction commentary. However, Paul Rotha in particular remained keen to emphasise differences between *The March of Time* and British documentary ideals. In his 1936 book *Documentary Film*, Rotha recommended more intimate, informal and spontaneous alternatives to 'the detached "Voice of God" which seems so dear to some producers of documentary'.[5] In the 1939 edition of his book, Rotha specifically criticised *The March of Time*'s 'familiar method of presentation ... the strident voice', and concluded that it 'has already lost its novelty'.[6]

Grierson had a different relationship to *The March of Time* and the 'Voice of God' because he was employed as a British consultant to the series from 1936 onwards. Several of his 'documentary boys' from the GPO Film Unit worked on British editions of *The March of Time*. Nonetheless, we should be wary of subsuming British documentary, or even just GPO voiceovers, under a generic 'Voice of God' category. Harry Watt recalled with some bemusement having to adjust to the distinctive *The March of Time* approach where, 'having found, or been given a subject, you wrote the commentary ... in your version of Timese ... [and then] ... went out and shot to illustrate the commentary, word for word'.[7] Edgar Anstey recalled that *The March of Time*'s producers rejected his proposals to break up the commentary in the editions he worked on. Anstey wanted less commentary and longer passages of synch dialogue between ordinary working people.[8] Both of these recollections suggest differences between British documentary commentary and *The March of Time*'s 'Voice of God'.

A crude but useful measure of these differences is the average percentage of screen time that commentary is present in different types of non-fiction film. Table 1 sets out the percentage of screen time that commentary is present in a small, random sample of GPO films.[9] Benchmarking is provided by a random sample of an equivalent number of American *The March of Time* editions from 1935 to 1939, and Gaumont-British newsreels from 1934 to 1939. The comparison shows the GPO films tend to laconicism, with an average of 38 per cent, notably lower than the other two groups at 70 per cent and 48 per cent, respectively. The range of results for the GPO films is the widest of the three groups, from 22 per cent to 56 per cent, which suggests, compared to their counterparts, the greater flexibility British documentary film-makers enjoyed in constructing their soundtracks. The highest result, 56 per cent, in the sample of GPO films, does not reach the lowest, 63 per cent, for *The March of Time*. Statistical analysis therefore provides

| GPO film | Commentary % |
|---|---|
| *The Coming of the Dial* (1933) | 55 |
| *Six Thirty Collection* (1934) | 27 |
| *Weather Forecast* (1934) | 22 |
| *Coal Face* (1935) | 33 |
| *Calendar of the Year* (1936) | 49 |
| *Night Mail* (1936) | 24 |
| *Big Money* (1937) | 53 |
| *Roadways* (1937) | 28 |
| *What's on Today?* (1938) | 35 |
| *The Islanders* (1939) | 56 |
| Average | 38 |

Table 1
Predominance of commentary in GPO films

some evidence that Grierson's stricture against 'cut[ting] to the commentary' was followed within GPO films, if only on the basis that they contained less commentary to which images could be cut.

Further analysis could consider whether there are characteristic patterns of correlation and divergence between commentary and visual images in GPO and other non-fiction films from the 1930s. Relevant issues would include, as Watt pointed out, the way in which editing from shot to shot in *The March of Time* is often motivated by a verbal cue in the commentary. GPO films, with their less prevalent commentary, sometimes include notable shots to which no verbal reference is made. One example would be the shots of people relaxing, camping and playing an accordion by the roadside in *Roadways* (1937). Commentary in GPO films also sometimes triggers montage sequences that amplify a point without further verbal elaboration. An example is *Big Money*, where the statement, 'the money markets of the world ... they're waiting for news of the British budget', is followed by a montage of printing presses, headlines on posters and the distribution of newspapers, accompanied solely by the urgent rhythms of Brian Easdale's score.

## Celebrity voices

Another way GPO film-makers sought to distinguish their commentaries from other media voices during the 1930s was by avoiding professional commentators. Grierson wrote in 1934 that:

> It costs five pounds, I believe, to have a professional commentator, but we have never thought of spending so much on so little. We do the job ourselves if we cut a commentary, and save both the five pounds and the quite unendurable detachment of the professional accent.[10]

Two years later, in his book *Documentary Film*, Rotha advised against using voices with 'broadcasting or theatrical associations'.[11] To a certain extent, as Grierson makes clear, this approach made a virtue out of low-budget necessity. Professional commentators were relatively costly. This approach was also consistent with British documentary's celebration of the supposedly ordinary and typical. Identifiable voices such as Westbrook Van Voorhis' 'Voice of Time' in *The March of Time*, or E. V. H. Emmet's commentary for Gaumont-British news, employed dramatically portentous or light-hearted styles of

delivery. These vocal styles differed from the calmly moderate yet committed sobriety, occasionally extending to rhetorical flourishes or gentle whimsicality, favoured in GPO films. Van Voorhis' and Emmet's voices also connoted entertainment value and a particular type of celebrity that Grierson generally sought to avoid during the 1930s.[12] Grierson's attitude on the issue of celebrity commentators during the 1930s may also have been hardened by his irritation at the terms imposed by the theatrical distributor of *Industrial Britain* and the other 'Imperial Six' films in 1933. One of the conditions of distribution was that the commentary had to be spoken by the well-known British character actor Donald Calthrop.[13]

## Accents

A more vexed question is raised by the next two sentences in Grierson's essay. He continued:

> Better still, if we are showing workmen at work, we get the workmen on the job to do their own commentary, with idiom and accent complete. It makes for intimacy and authenticity and nothing we could do would be half as good.[14]

Grierson's polemical assertion does not tally with the subsequent dominant practice in GPO film commentaries. Table 2 shows that the typical accent heard in the random sample of GPO films is unmarked received pronunciation (RP), sometimes with traces of what linguists call marked RP, or hyperlect, which connotes a very high level of social privilege. The accent of the typical GPO film commentary is broadly consistent with the style of voice heard making announcements or reading the news on BBC radio during the 1930s. *BBC – The Voice of Britain* (1935), which profiled a range of mid-1930s BBC personnel, is an aural testament to the closeness between the two.

There are two main reasons for the divergence between Grierson's statement about workmen doing their own commentary and the standard practice in GPO films. The first relates to the organisation of production within the GPO film unit. Film-makers within the Unit sometimes provided commentaries for their own and others' films to save money, to foster collaboration and as part of an ethos of gaining experience in every aspect of film-making. Grierson preferred to recruit Oxbridge graduates whose accents tended towards

Table 2
Commentary accent

| GPO film | Accent |
|---|---|
| *The Coming of the Dial* (1933) | RP |
| *Six Thirty Collection* (1934) | RP |
| *Weather Forecast* (1934) | RP |
| *Coal Face* (1935) | Paralect |
| *Calendar of the Year* (1936) | RP |
| *Night Mail* (1936) | RP (several)<br>Paralect (John Grierson) |
| *Big Money* (1937) | RP |
| *Roadways* (1937) | RP |
| *What's on Today?* (1938) | RP |
| *The Islanders* (1939) | RP |

marked or unmarked RP. The second is that using workers to speak commentaries in documentaries met with resistance. Rotha used a Barrow shipbuilder to voice the commentary in *Shipyard* (1935), but Gaumont-British Instructional cut the film down to one reel and imposed E. V .H. Emmett's voice upon the version of the film shown in newsreel theatres.[15]

*Shipyard's* fate highlighted the limits of the commercial sector of the film industry's tolerance in the 1930s. Nevertheless, by the time the GPO Film Unit acquired sound technology there was some debate about the standardisation of broadcast language. The *People* newspaper, for example, ran a campaign in the early 1930s against the BBC's Advisory Committee on Spoken English and its promotion of a single standard.[16] Consequently, there was some cultural precedent for a minority of GPO films to cautiously push the boundaries in this area. *Coal Face* (1935) was produced by GPO Film Unit personnel through a production company, EMPO, that placed it at arm's length from their more mainstream productions. The commentary was written and spoken by Montagu Slater in a paralect (close to RP but retaining some traces of his Cumbrian accent). Slater's commentary is featured in a film that deals with miners, traditionally the most radical section of the British working class. Slater was also a long-serving member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Like most GPO film commentators, he was not identified in the onscreen credits, but his voice would have added an extra resonance for anyone who recognised it and knew his personal history.

Grierson himself contributed to another experiment in this area. He spoke the unscripted commentary for the unreleased *On the Fishing Banks of Skye* (1935). The commentary seems to be describing events as they occur, from the perspective of someone on a fishing boat, caught up in the excitement of the catch. Grierson's speech in *On the Fishing Banks of Skye* contains more broad Scottish elements than we hear in filmed records of him speaking in other more formal contexts. This emphasis, combined with the unscripted immediacy of the delivery, contributes to an overall impression of 'intimacy and authenticity', the qualities Grierson advocated as the ideal aim of a good commentary.

By the mid-1930s, some progressive BBC producers were advocating a wider range of accents on the airwaves. Hilda Matheson, for example, wrote in 1933 that 'one would not ... choose a reader with Cockney vowels or a Northumbrian burr to read English lyrics. A voice of this kind might, however ... talk on new careers in engineering, or on fifty years of memories in shipbuilding.'[17] Matheson's comments highlight a similar pattern in GPO films. Slater's paralect is used in *Coal Face* partly because mining was strongly associated with regional identities. GPO films about more universal, abstract processes, such as *The Coming of the Dial* (1933, science and technology) and *Big Money* (1937, economics), link these 'higher' forms of knowledge to RP commentary. *Night Mail* (1936) incorporates a similar distinction between 'universal' and 'local' accents. Although Scott Anthony has argued that there may be a deliberate attempt in the film to represent national unity by mismatching the accents of the workers heard in the film and the locales in which they are seen, this does not apply to the commentary.[18] RP commentators are heard, irrespective of regional differences, as the overnight postal train passes through different parts of England, whereas Grierson's voice is only heard at the end of the film, after it has crossed the border into Scotland.

## Politics, poetry and terminology

Grierson's comment on getting 'workmen on the job to do their own commentary' can also be understood in the looser sense of incorporating workers' 'idioms and accents' into the soundtrack by recording, as he put it, 'conversational scraps from a street, a factory, from any scene or situation'.[19] Wildtrack, non-sychronised snippets of dialogue or brief passages of synchronised speech were recorded, ideally on location, and subsequently woven into the soundtrack of GPO films alongside the commentary. As Table 3 shows, non-sychronised dialogue was more common in GPO films of the first part of the 1930s.

The use of non-synchronised dialogue clearly distinguished GPO documentaries from many other types of non-fiction film. This was particularly important during the earlier and middle part of the 1930s when theorists and polemicists such as Grierson and Rotha were establishing British documentary's identity and asserting its superiority to other types of non-fiction film. Synch dialogue predominated in GPO films later in the decade, particularly during Alberto Cavalcanti's tenure as head of the Unit.

One factor that cuts across the entire period of GPO film production is that workers' voices are almost always embodied or semi-embodied. Even if their voices are heard in wildtrack and are not linked to particular individuals, they are still closely associated with the atmosphere of a particular workplace. A typical example would be the extensive use of non-synch dialogue in *Six Thirty Collection* (1934). An intermediate technique is used in films such as *Cable Ship* (1933) and *The Horsey Mail* (1938). In the former, a foreman and a jointer speak on the commentary track about their areas of expertise, while also appearing onscreen (below). In the latter, postman Bob O'Brian is a protagonist within the film as well as one of the commentators. The repeated emphasis upon workers as embodied participants in the films, even when they also contribute to commentary,

| GPO film | Non-synch speech | Synch speech |
|---|---|---|
| *The Coming of the Dial* (1933) | ✘ | ✔ |
| *Six Thirty Collection* (1934) | ✔ | ✘ |
| *Weather Forecast* (1934) | ✔ | ✘ |
| *Coal Face* (1935) | ✔ | ✔ |
| *Calendar of the Year* (1936) | ✔ | ✔ |
| *Night Mail* (1936) | ✔ | ✔ predominates |
| *Big Money* (1937) | ✘ | ✔ |
| *Roadways* (1937) | ✔ | ✔ predominates |
| *What's on Today?* (1938) | ✘ | ✔ |
| *The Islanders* (1939) | ✘ | ✔ some Gaelic |

Table 3 Non-synch and synch speech

sets boundaries to their expertise: they primarily explain technical processes relating to the workplace, rather than speaking about wider social or political issues or contexts that extend beyond it.

The recourse to embodiment also relates to a metaphor Ian Aitken uses when he argues that workers' voices and images are typically employed to add 'flesh' to the social and political values promoted by GPO films' RP voiceovers. According to Aitken, workers' voices and images lend a patina of authenticity to voiceover articulations of reformist values which could otherwise 'only be delivered at an abstract, didactic level'.[20] Andrew Higson, arguing along similar lines, describes British documentary movement films as addressing 'the spectator as a citizen of the nation, not as a subject of one or another antagonistic class'.[21] Voiceover, carefully integrated with synch and non-synch workers' dialogue, plays an important role in this argument.[22] There are no GPO films where class-inflected voices are set against each other as fundamentally antagonistic. Nevertheless, Aitken's and Higson's retrospective ideological analyses need to be qualified by disentangling the two keywords, 'voiceover' and 'commentary', that provide the title of this chapter.

The term 'voiceover' carries hierarchical connotations through a spatial metaphor that also implies an external imposition onto a film.[23] The term reinforces the assumption that information conveyed by unseen commentators speaks over the images, thereby subordinating visual to verbal elements, and fixing the meanings of documentary films. Yet 'voiceover' is a retrospective description when it is used to discuss GPO films. A keyword search of the digitised versions of British journals of record *Sight &*

*Sound*, *Monthly Film Bulletin* and *The Times*, revealed no instances of the term being used in relation to documentaries before the 1970s. From a historical perspective, the application of the term 'voiceover' to GPO documentaries is relatively recent, arising partly from suspicions about the supposedly unrealistic, didactic, or authoritarian nature of this technique in the wake of 1960s direct cinema, and partly from post-1970s theoretical concepts of reflexive documentary. The term is not invalid, and neither are Aitken's and Higson's arguments, but its historical provenance needs to be factored into discussions of the technique to which it refers.

British documentary and other non-fiction film-makers in the 1930s used the term 'commentary' to describe the speech of unseen commentators. 'Commentary' is a more neutral, open-ended term that does not carry the same hierarchical connotations as 'voiceover'. British theoreticians and non-fiction film-makers of the 1930s expressed a correspondingly flexible range of attitudes towards it. Rotha, in his influential book *The Film Till Now*, articulated a purist rejection of synchronised dialogue in feature films, but left open the question of whether commentary had a role to play in 'the great sound and visual cinema of the future'.[24] Andrew Buchanan, producer of *Ideal Cinemagazine* (1926–33), shared some of Rotha's reservations about synchronised dialogue in feature films but was confident that post-synchronised commentary, sound effects and music in documentary was entirely consistent with 'the fundamental basis of film construction ... movement', defined in terms of 'free' shooting and 'unhampered' editing.[25]

The primary focus of public discussions by British documentary theorists and practitioners of non-fiction commentary in the early 1930s, shortly after the coming of sound, was aesthetic rather than ideological.[26] Grierson and his colleagues wanted, for the sake of cultural prestige, to identify British documentary films with the most sophisticated uses of this technique. Grierson evaluated different types of documentary film speech in a 1934 *Sight & Sound* essay, 'Introduction to a New Art'. He was particularly interested in how different types of speech could be orchestrated within documentary soundtracks to create choral effects. A 'thousand and one vernacular elements' recorded on location could 'all be used to give atmosphere, to give drama, to give poetic reference'.[27] The 'very crudest form' of recorded speech was 'the commentary ... ordinarily attached to interest films'.[28] This highlights the historical shift in discussion of commentary and voiceover. In Aitken's and Higson's ideological analyses of GPO films, voiceover subordinates other vernacular elements such as workers' synch and non-synch dialogue. In Grierson's aesthetic schema this order of priority is reversed.

Discussing the GPO film *Six Thirty Collection*, where the commentary is mostly prosaic, Grierson ruminated on how easy it would have been to make letters on a sorting belt 'read themselves out in snatches, or for that matter we could have hired a poet to make *vers libre* of their contents'. He concluded that in this instance, however, such techniques 'would probably have overloaded the occasion'.[29] This is a tacit admission that, although this issue did not feature prominently in Grierson's theorising on sound, commentary in GPO films was designed with sponsors' requirements and multiple audiences in mind. For example, in a school a GPO film commentary might be reiterated and elaborated upon by a teacher after the screening. In this context commentary comes to the fore in its role as an effective technique for conveying certain kinds of technical and process-related information.[30] Simultaneously, at the burgeoning film societies of the 1930s, the same film might be screened before audiences inclined to look and listen for

film art. Such audiences might be familiar with documentary theorists' ideas on sound published in *Cinema Quarterly*, *Sight & Sound*, or in Rotha's book *Documentary Film*. Consequently, a different reception context might prevail in these circumstances.

For Grierson, Rotha and other British documentary theorists and polemicists, the soundtrack should be constructed and listened to, by model audiences, as an integrated whole. Within this approach, commentary would be one of a range of elements within the sound design, alongside synch and non-synch dialogue, sound effects and music.[31] This may partly explain why there is a lower proportion of commentary in GPO films compared to some other types of non-fiction film in the 1930s. It is also one of the reasons why it is sometimes difficult to isolate commentary in GPO films for analytical purposes. In *Coal Face*, for example, the chorus that runs alongside Slater's commentary could be considered either as additional commentary or as part of the music.[32]

Grierson and Rotha argued in favour of the use of poetry in voiceover commentary. This tendency can be heard not only in canonised GPO films such as *The Song of Ceylon*, *Coal Face* and *Night Mail*, but also to some extent in less famous ones such as *Air Post* (1934) and *Six Thirty Collection*.[33] Compared to some other styles of non-fiction commentary, the forms of poetry used in GPO films could be more easily integrated with choral and musical effects. The use of poetry also further supported the claims made by Grierson, Rotha and others about documentary's aesthetic distinction, compared to other types of non-fiction and feature film.[34] Contemporary documentary theorists such as Stella Bruzzi validate ironic and reflexive uses of voiceover, mainly on ideological grounds. In the 1930s Grierson and Rotha, on the other hand, emphasised the aesthetic significance and the affective dimensions of the soundtrack, within which commentary would not necessarily predominate.

## Notes

1. Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 145.
2. Martin Stollery, *Alternative Empires* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), pp. 192–3.
3. John Grierson, 'First Principles of Documentary', in Forsyth Hardy (ed.), *Grierson on Documentary* (London: Faber, 1979), p. 36.
4. Mary Field and Percy Smith, *Secrets of Nature* (London: Faber, 1934), p. 213. I am grateful to Tim Boon for drawing this reference to my attention.
5. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London: Faber, 1936), p. 209.
6. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* [rev. and enlarged edn] (London: Faber, 1939), p. 248.
7. Harry Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera* (London: Elek, 1974), p. 75.
8. Edgar Anstey, 'Some Origins of Cinéma Vérité and the Soundtrack in British Documentary', paper for the UNESCO Round Table Meeting on the Soundtrack in Cinema and Television, 1966, p. 9.
9. The only deliberate exclusions from the sample of GPO films discussed here are narrative documentaries such as *North Sea* (Harry Watt, 1938) which predominantly employ synch dialogue and would therefore skew the results.
10. John Grierson, 'The GPO Gets Sound', *Cinema Quarterly* vol. 2 (1934), p. 216.
11. Rotha, *Documentary Film*, p. 208.

12. My discussion here focuses solely on celebrity voiceover commentaries. A particular strand of 1930s British documentary film, which could be described as the illustrated celebrity lecture, emerged during the latter part of the 1930s. In these films, rather than providing commentary, the source of which is never seen, an intellectual celebrity addresses the camera directly. *We Live in Two Worlds* (1937), featuring J. B. Priestley, was the first GPO film of this type, following the independent British documentary *Enough to Eat?* (1936), featuring Julian Huxley. The celebrities featured in these films connote expertise and cultural prestige rather than entertainment value. This development anticipates the increased use of celebrity commentators and lecturers in British wartime documentaries.
13. Forsyth Hardy, *John Grierson: A Documentary Biography* (London: Faber, 1979), p. 65.
14. Grierson, 'The GPO Gets Sound', p. 216.
15. Paul Rotha, *Documentary Diary* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1973), p. 105.
16. Mark Pegg, *Broadcasting and Society 1918–1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 160–1.
17. Hilda Matheson, *Broadcasting* (London: Butterworth, 1933), p. 68.
18. Scott Anthony, *Night Mail* (London: BFI, 2007), p. 27.
19. John Grierson, 'Introduction to a New Art', *Sight & Sound* vol. 3 (1934), p. 103.
20. Ian Aitken, 'The Documentary Film Movement: The Post Office Touches all Branches of Life', in John Hassard an Ruth Holliday (eds), *Organization-Representation: Work and Organization in Popular Culture* (London: Sage, 1998), p. 31.
21. Andrew Higson, '"Britain's Outstanding Contribution to the Film": The Documentary-Realist Tradition', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays* (London: BFI, 1986), p. 77.
22. Higson (ibid., p. 79), for example, discusses how 'poetic ambiguity' is 'often contained by the imposition of a voice-over' in *Industrial Britain* (1931), and attributes considerable power to the 'voice of authority' in *Housing Problems* (1935).
23. Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 47, discusses some of the metaphors involved, as does Charles Wolfe, 'Historicising the "Voice of God": The Place of Vocal Narration in Classical Documentary', *Film History* vol. 9 (1997), p. 150.
24. Paul Rotha (with an additional section by Richard Griffith), *The Film Till Now* (London: Spring Books, 1967), p. 412. Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, pp. 47–8, selectively quotes Rotha from the same source as part of her general argument that a deep-rooted antipathy to sound, among theorists who assume film is an essentially visual medium, was the basis for long-standing negative attitudes to voiceover. However, Rotha's primary concern in *The Film Till Now* was that a specific use of sound, synchronised dialogue, would have a negative impact upon film-making. Rotha positively encouraged other 'creative' uses of sound in film.
25. Andrew Buchanan, 'Making the Documentary Film', *Sight & Sound* vol. 1 (1932), p. 48. *Ideal Cinemagazine* became *Ideal Sound Cinemagazine* in the early 1930s.
26. There has been extensive debate among cultural theorists about the relationship between ideology and aesthetics. My intention here is not to suggest a categorical separation between the two, but simply to consider GPO film commentary in relation to historical reception contexts in the 1930s, in some of which the particular aesthetic elements valued by Grierson would have been emphasised. In sketching these reception contexts, I am not proposing the more overtly 'aesthetic' ones have greater value. As Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 156, puts it in his discussion of 'aesthetic and other situations': 'Any concentration on language or form, in sustained or temporary priority over other elements and other ways of realizing meaning or value, is specific: at times an intense and irreplaceable experience, in which these fundamental elements of human process

are directly stimulated, reinforced, or extended; at times, at a different extreme, an evasion of other immediate connections, an evacuation of immediate situation, or a privileged indifference to the human process as a whole.'

27. Grierson, 'Introduction to a New Art', pp. 101 and 102.
28. Ibid., p. 103.
29. Ibid.
30. The schools context is reflected in the occasional use of children as commentators in Empire Marketing Board and GPO films, for example in *Spring on the Farm* (1933), and briefly in *The Song of Ceylon*.
31. Other documentary theorists and polemicists apart from Grierson and Rotha advocated this approach. The British documentary director Geoffrey Clark, 'Films to Music', *Cinema Quarterly* vol. 2 (1934), for example, similarly argued in favour of an integrated approach to the documentary soundtrack, where different elements become interchangeable.
32. I am grateful to Amy Sargeant for highlighting this issue. When calculating the percentage of voiceover commentary for *Coal Face* in Table 1, I only took Slater's commentary and not the chorus into account.
33. I discuss poetic elements in *Air Post*'s commentary on the *Screenonline* website: <www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1342214/> (accessed 2 April 2010). *Six Thirty Collection* uses some memorable lines of pseudo-surrealist vernacular poetry to describe a piece of machinery used by sorting office workers: 'Stockings and pants/Spectacles and circulars/Photographs and samples/They all pour up this conveyor belt/Which is known as the alligator'.
34. Grierson expressed his enthusiasm for *The March of Time*, and at the same time bracketed it as an archaic contrast to the modernism of British documentary films, by comparing elements of its style to ancient Greek drama. John Grierson, 'The Documentary Idea' (1943), quoted in Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935–51* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 240.