



**THE CAMERA IS OURS**

# From the Sea to the Land Beyond

## Reflections on making 'From the Sea to the Land Beyond'

One of life's guilty pleasures is being safely inside somewhere lovely in the daytime while it's raining outside, watching wonderful old black and white films while the rest of the world is out at work. That is essentially what my editor Alex Fry and I experienced for five weeks in the late spring of 2012. If you were in England at that time you will know that it rained, every single day. Proper biblical downpours too. As the deluge wet up the pavements and soaked passers-by ran by with their collars turned up, Alex and I sat perched up high in a little cutting room overlooking Charlotte Street, watching a treasure trove of wonderful things. We were at work but it didn't feel like it.

A few weeks earlier, Heather Croall, director of the Sheffield Doc/Fest rang asking whether I would like to make a film out of a hundred years of archive. The film could be as lyrical and contemplative as I wished – the only limitation was that it had to be a silent film about the coast of Britain, the material must be wholly owned by the BFI, and the band British Sea Power had already been contracted to provide the music. I think she was a bit surprised at my enthusiasm.

Every rule needs its exception. We couldn't resist sprinkling little pieces of sync across the film, the sounds of the sea, occasional hints of the original narration and intermittent effects to punctuate British Sea Power's wonderful score. We did sometimes drift inland but not for long, and we used a short clip from *Think of England* (Martin Parr, 1999) – not owned by the BFI – near the end of the film. The sea continues to pound our island shores throughout a century of film, reminding us of the power of nature as generations appear, then vanish again.

Our sources were narrow but beautiful. The earliest material came from Mitchell & Kenyon, a firm of Blackpool photographers whose mission it was to make 'local films for local people'. The first shot of people in *From the Sea to the Land Beyond* is of workers leaving the factory gates (*Workforce of Scott & Co, Shipyard, Greenock, 1901*) and includes a little boy who doubles back to get a better look at the camera. It is the start of the loop of 'them looking at us... looking at them... looking at us', which we found so compelling. In time-travel science fiction, there's always a special portal, a pod or an *Alice in Wonderland* rabbit hole that transports you from here to there in the twinkling of an eye. From the past to the present and back again. From one parallel world to another. Here the portal zaps you straight in the eye. Edwardians look straight at you with an open, ingenuous gaze and a hundred years evaporate, bringing you face to face with your own great grandmother. 'I know you,' I found myself thinking. 'I know you.' Sometimes the past is not another country.

We chose to continue with footage of *Blackpool North Pier* (Mitchell & Kenyon, 1903). At this time, when workers were given one week's unpaid holiday a year, Mitchell & Kenyon would film people gadding about and then

show the films to the same people that evening in fairground tents and music halls. These 'topicals' were the most popular part of their output. The last Mitchell & Kenyon film was made in 1913. Perhaps they feared that audiences had become more sophisticated and people were no longer happy to simply watch each other going about their business – but the popularity of various iterations of the *Big Brother* franchise suggests that we find this endlessly fascinating.

The BFI National Archive includes some beautiful individual films and we had access to three of the most significant collections: Topical Budget (1911-1931) produced short silent newsreels shown before the feature at the cinema, like those produced by Pathé and Gaumont: British Transport Films (1949-1982); and the Central Office of Information (1946-2012). These may not sound very inspiring – who, you might ask, would choose to watch government-sponsored films about the fishing industry, transport, shipbuilding or the pre-war boom in aeronautical engineering? But they were beautifully shot on 35mm film by directors including John Grierson and Peter Greenaway, with commentaries written by great writers like Graham Greene, Laurie Lee and W H Auden.

As we watched the footage we realised we had a visual history of filmmaking. If you look carefully at the coastguard sequence in *Topical Budget 167-1: The Wrecked Rohilla* (1914), where a half-drowned man is being resuscitated, you can clearly see the shadow of the cameraman cast across the bodies of curious onlookers as he frantically handcranks his heavy 35mm camera. Lightweight portable cameras, ideal for shooting on location didn't come into use until the 1960s, which makes the achievements of these early filmmakers even more extraordinary. I watch *Drifters* (John Grierson, 1929) and I still can't figure out how they kept the camera steady on the deck of a tiny little boat far out on a choppy sea. The magnificent D-Day footage from *The True Glory* (Carol Reed, 1945) has been copied many times, notably in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

The craft of filmmaking becomes increasingly virtuosic, culminating in the gorgeous Kodachrome of *Holiday* (John Taylor, 1957) and the magnificent crane shots of *Seawards the Great Ships* (Hilary Harris, 1960). And then video erupts on the scene: cheaper, flatter, sharper, and made up of pixels. Along with the new format came an obsession with the zoom lens and frantic crossfading. It was also prone to glitches. It was an ugly jolt. The rain outside our cutting room stopped and the zooms began. Suddenly going for a walk seemed a lot more attractive.

We tried to avoid the temptation to romanticise the past. Backbreaking manual work may have kept us thinner but workers were old by 60 and few had any of their own teeth. Filmmaking has also been dramatically democratised since John Grierson's lofty proclamation, 'The elect have their duty'. For most of the 20th century it was the preserve of a privileged few and almost entirely male. The arrival of BBC1 television in 1936 (suspended during the war, resuming service in 1946) provided few extra opportunities. ITV was launched in 1955 and BBC2 in 1964. There was a long wait until Channel 4 was launched in 1982, finally breaking the stranglehold exercised by a few men – however talented and well intentioned – who decided what was good for us. There are now over 480 channels, many transmitting continuously and requiring content and small high-quality cameras and domestic editing equipment are within reach for those who want them.

It is certainly not a simple story of progress. We are not all better educated and liberated than those who came before us. I had assumed that women, at least those of us living in prosperous western nations, have steadily progressed towards more freedom and equality. As we watched the rushes a more complex picture emerged. The Suffragettes, of course, but we also noticed that in the early part of the 20th century women of all social classes were vividly present, working and playing alongside men. Working-class women were sorting coal, heaving heavy loads, travelling to America, and dancing on Blackpool Pier. Upper-class women were doing calisthenics on beaches in *Topical Budget 525-2: Looks Very Jolly Doesn't It?* (1921); flinging themselves off cliffs to collect rare eggs in *Topical Budget 743-1: Heroines of the Cliffs* (1925); dressing in drag and smoking while climbing mountains in *The Open Road* (Claude Friese-Greene, 1925). In the Second World War women remain at the centre of the frame, even building bombers, as illustrated in *Worker's Weekend* (Ralph Elton, 1943), and drinking in bars with men. Then, all of a sudden, they leave the frame. In *A Day of One's Own* (Kenneth Fairbairn, 1956) harried housewives take a day off from domestic drudgery. There was the occasional female appearance in beauty competitions (*Lancashire Coast*, John Taylor, 1957), until, with the advent of cheap holidays abroad, women vanished from the coastline altogether.

We hope the finished film is as lovely to watch as it was to make, and that it wears its layers of meaning lightly – revealing the coast as a site of both recreation and war, spinning narratives about women, the decline of fishing and heavy industry, the rise of consumer culture and the age of information. And all along the inexorable power of waves crashing against our shores. *The Sea in Their Blood: Beside the Sea* (Peter Greenaway, 1985) leaves us with this thought: 'The sea level is rising at a rate of a sixteenth of an inch a year. In the year 160,000 it will reach half way up Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square and the site of the Battle of Trafalgar will be eight fathoms under the sea.'

One hundred years after the first Edwardians marched up to Mitchell & Kenyon, an older woman is almost blown into traffic by heavy wind and rain. When she's asked what she thinks of the weather she laughs unexpectedly: 'I think it's wonderful!'

**Penny Woolcock, *From the Sea to the Land Beyond* BFI DVD booklet (BFI, 2013)**

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## FROM THE SEA TO THE LAND BEYOND

*Director:* Penny Woolcock

*Executive Producers:* BFI, BBC, Arts Council of England

*Producers:* Mark Atkin, Heather Croall

*Editor:* Alex Fry

*Music:* British Sea Power

UK 2012

73 mins

## THE CAMERA IS OURS:

### BRITAIN'S WOMEN DOCUMENTARY MAKERS

#### Seniors Free Archive Matinee: White Riot + discussion

Mon 7 Mar 14:00

**Cow** Tue 8 Mar 20:40

#### The Hermit of Treig + Q&A with director Lizzie MacKenzie

Fri 11 Mar 18:10

#### From Birth-Day to Something Nice to Eat: Restoration Programme 2 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Mon 14 Mar 18:15

#### Hostile + director Sonita Gale in conversation with journalist Jon Snow

Tue 15 Mar 18:00

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## SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

### Skate Kitchen

Tue 1 Mar 20:40; Sun 13 Mar 20:45

### Divines

Wed 2 Mar 20:50; Tue 15 Mar 20:50

### Jinn

Sat 5 Mar 17:45; Tue 8 Mar 21:00

### 37 Seconds (37 sekanzu)

Sat 5 Mar 20:30; Sat 12 Mar 20:45

### Water Lilies (Naissance des pieuvres)

Sun 6 Mar 18:45; Mon 14 Mar 20:50

### Marie Antoinette

Tue 8 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Hannah Strong, Little White Lies Digital Editor and author of *Sofia Coppola: Forever Young*); Sun 13 Mar 18:00

### Somersault

Fri 11 Mar 20:50; Mon 14 Mar 18:10

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## IN THE EYES OF A SILENT STAR: THE FILMS OF ASTA NIELSEN

### In the Eyes of the Law (Nach dem Gesetz)

Tue 1 Mar 20:50; Mon 7 Mar 18:15

### Hamlet

Wed 2 Mar 18:15; Sat 5 Mar 17:00 (+ Intro by Prof Judith Buchanan)

### Earth Spirit (Erdgeist)

Sat 5 Mar 12:10 (+ intro by Season Curator Pamela Hutchinson); Wed 9 Mar 20:50

### The Decline (AKA Downfall) (Der Absturz)

Sat 5 Mar 14:30 (+ intro by season curator Pamela Hutchinson); Tue 15 Mar 18:20

### The Joyless Street (Die freudlose Gasse)

Sun 6 Mar 17:40 (+ intro by BFI Inclusion Team Coordinator, Miranda Gower-Qian); Wed 16 Mar 18:00

### Impossible Love (Unmögliche Liebe)

Wed 9 Mar 18:20; Tue 15 Mar 20:45

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