

THE BRITISH COUNCIL FILM COLLECTION **NEW COMMISSIONS**

The British Council Film Collection is an archive of 120 short documentary films made by the British Council during the 1940s designed to show the world how Britain lived, worked and played. Preserved by the BFI National Film Archive and digitised by means of a generous donation by Google, the films are yours to view, to download and to play with.

See the entire Collection online
www.britishcouncil.org/film

NEW COMMISSIONS

To celebrate the online release of the British Council Film Collection, we commissioned three filmmakers to produce a short film each responding to the Collection. Here they describe their unique responses and the process of mining the Collection for new stories.



Penny Woolcock - Jerusalem

“Before starting this edit I selected and logged about forty-five of the films in the British Council Collection. They present an untroubled narrative of full employment,

of nuclear families drinking tea and eating dinner together, keeping pigeons and standing for the council; a serene monoculture disturbed only by occasional bomb damage from which all body parts have been removed. Schools are inhabited by well-behaved children with shiny faces and clean hair despite the lack of indoor plumbing. I found it hard to resist yearning for these simple, less confusing days when everyone knew their place, loved their neighbours and nobody locked their doors.

What is concealed is the trauma of war, not just at home but abroad. In *Lessons from the Air* (1943) boys and girls are told meticulously researched stories about China, an exotic country far away where people live in cities, the countryside and on boats. “Yes boats.” The children listen to the sounds of lapping water made by a brick dipped in and out of a pail of water in the studio. There is no hint of the bloody Japanese invasion, nor of the horrific civil war in which millions of people were dying at that time. Like family albums in which everyone always smiles, nothing unpleasant is alluded to.

I was born in 1950 and grew up in the British Community in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, in colonies that were not colonies, where we ate off willow pattern plates, learnt about Kings and Queens and adults talked about England as ‘home’ although many of them had never been there. So the films in this collection feel very familiar, I knew all about this Britain in which everyone was law-abiding, people were as honest as the day was long and jolly children enjoyed adventures in which everything turned out right in the end

I attempted to obey my mother’s injunction to only talk about ‘nice’ things but even as a child I found rigid class and gender stratifications and unquestioning conformity utterly stifling so I broke away as soon as I could. I arrived in Southampton in 1968 and was startled to see dirty rows of identical terraced houses, so many obviously poor people and the sounds of different English being spoken.

It was a challenge to disrupt this dominant narrative, to find ways of creating cracks in the wall. It occurred to me that swapping soundtracks, might be one useful technique.

Alex Fry, is a wonderful editor. He and I have cut four films together for television, where we have had to balance our creative impulses with a corporate appetite for narrative and format. This was a chance for us to be playful.

We watched the thirty films I had selected and talked about how they speak of a lost world, a time when towns revolved around a mill, a factory or a mine, a single industry that provided all employment and controlled entertainment, food and housing. This world has not vanished, it has just migrated overseas in the race for ever cheaper labour. There are ‘Apple’ towns in China and Thai slave ships that feed us prawns. We don’t have full gender equality although things have got better and cheap travel and immigration have enlivened and transformed the cultural landscape. But as Aristotle said, the more things change the more they stay the same. Social mobility has stalled and is now reversing at high speed, our top statesmen and scientists again drawn from Oxbridge and we lock up more ‘misfits’ than ever.

Alex suggested we watch two short films by Martin Arnold, an experimental Austrian artist who re-works found footage – *Pièce Touché* and *Passage à L’acte*. It was fascinating to see the unexpected effect of repeating shots. We also looked at Chris Morris’s *Bushwhacked* and *Snow*, a BFI film by Jeffrey Jones. And then we forgot about them and did our own thing.

We put together a forty-minute assembly (first edit) and in the process tried intercutting miners and Cambridge scholars to a Latin soundtrack. We knocked it together as a sort of placeholder but it survived every cut virtually unchanged. Other sequences we laboured over and over. It’s always like that, some things fall into place almost by magic and others you sweat over.

Alex repeated shots and echoed sounds. Repetition as a technique does something surprising, it makes you question the image. It was a dreamy process, respecting the beautiful footage we had without being throttled by its imperial demands. Early ideas about the start and the end survived but we shuffled the middle section over and over until we felt it was what it needed to be.

The title came late. The deaf girls sing the hymn beautifully and the deep meaning of the poem emerged, Jerusalem as an aspiration and not a patriotic invocation. Bring me my arrows of desire!”

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Mark Cousins - *But Then Again, Too Few to Mention: A Life of Bob*

"Go into a film archive or image bank and you feel overwhelmed by voices all speaking at once. Such places are towers of Babel.

Though the British Council Film Collection consists of films made in a relatively short period, and they share certain tones (optimism, the sense of a unified Britain, etc), they are still multi-vocal. At the start of this project I decided to use a single voice – a fictional man called Bob – who would, as it were, pull the images I had chosen into line.

But who would Bob be? As many of the commentaries in the films, and the people who appear in them, are middle class, I decided Bob would be working class – to read against the grain. The concentration of films from the 1940s and 1950s determined Bob's approximate age. As I have never lived in the home counties, I wanted him to be a Northerner, so I settled on Liverpool. I have always liked the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, and have long been interested in happiness contra mundum, so I thought we could have a film narrated, like Capra's, 'from the stars', a film of a man looking back on his life. I definitely wanted it to have a sense of his class, but I wanted him to realise that the everyday – relationships, children, the sense of inventing your life, despite its limitations – is in itself, often, satisfying. This little film doesn't believe in heroes in the Hollywood sense.

Since the imagery in the film collection is quite posh, my reading against the grain of it meant Bob imagining his life to be more glamorous than it actually was, hence him saying that this is what it felt like rather than how it looked. His happiness is rendered visually by lovely tracking shots, autumnal scenes, well dressed women, pretty back gardens.

The title of the film, *But Then Again, Too Few to Mention*, is obviously taken from the song *My Way*, which itself is about a man looking back on his life and finding some satisfaction in the rear view mirror. In the script, I tried to pick up on that lyric theme, but using phrases from other pop songs (by The Smiths, Elbow, etc) That these post-date Bob's 'living years' is good, I think. This short film is about being out of body, so the songs are out of body."



John Akomfrah - *The Silence*

"*The Silence* is a portrait of the deaf in post war Britain. Using the film *Education of The Deaf* (1946) as its narrative spine and adding to that material from over thirty films from the British Council Film Collection, the film – through multiple strands of one central life – explores the implication of lives lived in silence. Exploring the themes of motherhood, of memory and of solitude, it chronicles the experiences of one woman in her quest for a full and rewarding life.