

Bevægelsesdramatik: The Railway Film and the Danish and British Documentary Movements

C. Claire Thomson

In August 1948, a group of four young Danish filmmakers piled into a Ford Anglia and set off from Copenhagen. Festooned with a yellow pennant reading ‘DANISH DOCUMENTARY’, the car’s destination was Edinburgh, where the International Festival of Documentary Films¹ was about to take place for the second time. Their road trip took them across the Netherlands and through London, where they stopped for a few days to visit Film Centre on Soho Square. There, they met with two of the leading lights of the British Documentary Movement, Arthur Elton (later Sir Arthur) and Alberto Cavalcanti.² Waiting for the Danes in Edinburgh were their more senior compatriots Ebbe Neergaard, head of the national film distribution centre Statens Filmcentral, and two leading documentarists, Theodor Christensen and Søren Melson, not to mention international grandees such as Robert Flaherty. In the guestbook of the film

1. The festival was established under this title in 1947, later changing its name and remit to the Edinburgh International Film Festival for its fourth iteration in 1950. A year-by-year record of opening galas, programmes, and memories can be found at the EIFF Memories web resource: <http://www.edfilmfestmemories.org.uk/timeline/home.html>.

2. Sevel 2006: 46–47.

festival that August, the signatures of all seven of the Danish contingent can be seen.³

At the festival, they would have seen the world premiere of Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* (1948) and Roberto Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* ('*Germany Year Zero*', 1948). They would have been able to 'meet and mingle with their colleagues and discuss their common problems', and listen to lectures and discussions that aimed to 'create an opportunity for the reconsideration and reassessment of the principles and methods of the documentary movement'.⁴ The festival was explicitly designed as an event that would showcase international documentary productions and provide a milieu where filmmakers could exchange ideas and push the field forward.

The Edinburgh International Festival of Documentary Films was Britain's first film festival, and it seemed natural to the organisers that it would specialise in 'the factual film', the sphere in which 'Scotland can claim to have made a distinctively national contribution to the cinema'.⁵ From the festival's first iterations, the organisers recognised Denmark as a nation whose 'documentary film movement is quite out of proportion to the size of the country'⁶; as 'a spirited documentary movement, serving its country's needs with resource and imagination' and whose principles and practice were very much in line with 'the British example'.⁷ The admiration was mutual, and inspiration flowed in both directions. Evidence for the bilateral influence of Danish and British documentary movements is more than circumstantial and is predicated on movement: the travels of filmmakers, film reels, equipment, books, papers, sounds, and images.

3. EFDF guestbook 1948, Edinburgh Film Guild Archive.

4. Hardy 1950: 35.

5. *Ibid.*: 34.

6. Hardy 1948: 18.

7. Hardy 1949: 18.

This essay considers a sub-genre of the mid-century documentary or informational film in which the cross-currents of influence across the North Sea are easy to discern: the railway film. This enables us to consider how the representation of movement, in a medium predicated on movement, was indeed dependent on the movements of films and filmmakers between festivals, screening rooms, and cities – in a range of vehicles.

Planes, trains, and automobiles

These cross-currents between the Danish and British documentary scenes were nothing new. The director and theorist Theodor Christensen (1914–67), often referred to as the ‘grand old man’ of Danish documentary, had travelled to London with colleagues in 1939. He was to screen his new documentary for Minerva Film about the trans-Iranian railway, built by the Danish firm Kampsax. Christensen had been able to gather Cavalcanti, Basil Wright, Harry Watt, Paul Rotha, and the legendary Scottish film pioneer John Grierson to watch *Iran – Det nye Persien* (*Iran – The New Persia*, 1939).⁸

This forty-six-minute film documents the feat of Danish engineering in great detail, as well as the changing culture of Iran and its varied terrain, which had necessitated the building of 250 bridges and 250 tunnels. But the final two minutes of the film descend into a fast-paced choreography of steam, pistons, wheels, and criss-crossing rails, overlaid with a Danish-language voiceover reciting a poetic text about the thrill of train travel and the marvels of Scandinavian engineering. The flagrant borrowings from Watt and Wright’s 1936 classic documentary about the postal train from London to Edinburgh, *Night Mail*,

8. *Iran – Det nye Persien*.

were impossible to miss, even if the British filmmakers in the room could not understand the film's Danish voiceover. As the credits rolled, Grierson drily remarked: 'In Scotland we kill people for less than that.'⁹

Nonetheless, it was probably on this trip that another filmmaker from the Minerva stable and a co-director of the Iran film, Ingolf Boisen (1904–90), bought a camera from the London documentarists. It was a Newman-Sinclair, a lightweight workhorse of a camera, and had been used to film *Night Mail*. Boisen would later use it on the set of his film about the new transatlantic aviation route from Scandinavia to New York pioneered by SAS, *They Guide You Across* (1949).

In April 1948, cameraman Nic Lichtenberg was positioned towards the end of the runway at Copenhagen Kastrup airport, primed to film the take-off of a transatlantic DC4. The plane's captain, 'Yankee' Hedall-Hansen, had been asked to try to lift wheels as close to the camera as possible. In the event, he overshot, hitting the Newman-Sinclair with the front wheel of the aircraft. Lichtenberg jumped clear, and lived to make the road trip to Edinburgh with Ove Sevel a few months later. But the camera was smashed to smithereens; sixty metres of precious footage and hundreds of shards of glass and metal lay strewn across the runway. From Prestwick in Scotland, where the plane had to stop to refuel, came a telegram: 'SORRY OLD BOY COULD NOT SEE THE BOX – HEDALL'.¹⁰

These anecdotes illustrate not only the professional and personal links between Danish and British documentarists before and after the Second World War but also the extent to which modes of transportation served as subject matter for documentary and informational filmmaking at the time. There is nothing

9. Roos 1968: 150; Boisen 1977: 151.

10. Boisen 1977: 227–228; Thomson 2018: 88–89.

mysterious about this: such films tend to be commissioned to document or explain novelties and achievements, to reassure the public about safety, or to inculcate particular behaviours, and to enlighten domestic and international audiences about national heritage, landscape, culture, or infrastructure. Films about railways can fulfil all these criteria. But filming rail travel also affords many exciting possibilities for the filmmaker: fast and slow sonic and visual rhythms; the geometry of the tracks and the machinery; the motion of the train against static landscape, cityscape, or sky; the intersecting stories and paths of passengers and railway workers; the connective tissue of rail routes across nations and national borders. We might even say that such films enact a kind of *landvinding*, to use the term that Bjarne Thorup Thomsen adopts in his monograph on Selma Lagerlöf's literary 'land acquisition'. But they do so in ways that are medium-specific and peculiar to the political, cultural, and technological context of mid-twentieth-century informational filmmaking.

The Danish and British documentary scenes

The road trip with which this essay opened is recounted in a biography by Ove Sevel (1922–2006), who later rose to be CEO of Nordisk Film, the Danish film company founded in 1906 and still dominant to this day. With him in the little car were Jørgen Roos (1922–98), later a renowned director of documentaries, talented film editor, and Academy Award nominee for his short *A City Called Copenhagen* (1960). Two men from the smaller company Minerva Film came along too: Erik Witte (1919—), who had worked at Ministeriernes Filmudvalg, the Danish Government Film Committee, and Nicolai (Nic) Lichtenberg (1915–78), at that point a cinematographer, who

would go on to be a prolific writer and director of documentary and educational films.¹¹ In the car, then, was a microcosm of the Danish documentary scene at the time.

In 1947, the Scottish film pioneer Forsyth Hardy had written that Denmark's documentary production 'would not shame a country six times its size'¹²; indeed, the inaugural Edinburgh festival had featured no fewer than half a dozen Danish shorts that had been produced in the immediate post-war period.¹³

This new 'golden age' for Danish documentary had its roots during the German occupation of Denmark (April 1940–May 1945). The invasion had triggered counter-measures on the part of the Danish government to bolster the somewhat anaemic state-sponsored film institutions: In 1941, *Beskæftigelsesfilmudvalget* (the Committee for Employment Films) was established to coordinate funding and production of short informational films designed to promote the Danish war effort and wartime industries – as well as to keep German National Socialist films out of the cinemas. This committee soon acquired a remit to coordinate filmmaking across government, morphing into *Ministeriernes Filmudvalg*, which would grace the opening titles of many an informational film across the world in the decades to come as The Danish Government Film Committee.¹⁴ This committee worked in tandem with *Dansk Kulturfilm*, a semi-governmental agency established in 1932 and tasked with making films for '*uddannelse, oplysning og almen propaganda*' ('education, enlightenment and general propaganda') in support of Denmark's many civil associations, tourist boards, charities, and so on.¹⁵ Taking charge of the

11. 'Filmdatabasen'.

12. Hardy 1947: n.p.

13. Thomson 2018: 64.

14. Nørrested and Alsted 1987: 175–187; Sørensen 2014: 105–108, 340–356.

15. Thomson 2018: 48–49.

distribution of the film output of these organisations was Statens Filmcentral, the State Film Centre, established in 1938, and later a production house in its own right.

These agencies provided funding and infrastructure for a generation of Danish filmmakers to consolidate their skills in the service of the war effort, making films that informed the public about the needs of the wartime economy – encouraging the collection of scrap metal, documenting housing improvement projects, promoting Danish agricultural produce, directing unmarried mothers to sources of aid. But they also indirectly facilitated an environment in which the Danish documentary scene forged links with the emerging Resistance movements.

The manoeuvres and actions of the latter were often captured on film; it was possible, by 1944, for Major Ole Lippmann (pseudonym Lund) to travel to London to be groomed for leadership of the SOE (Special Operations Executive). With him he carried a batch of illegal footage of Resistance activities provided by Theodor Christensen that made its way to the US; the footage was edited into the English-language film *Denmark Fights for Freedom* and distributed to twenty-four countries by the US Office of War Information while the war was still raging.¹⁶

Ministeriernes Filmudvalg was acutely aware of the potential of film to promote Denmark as a small, modern, peaceful, progressive nation on the side of the Allies, and even before the Liberation in May 1945 had laid plans for after the expected defeat of Hitler: they would invite English documentarist Arthur Elton (1906–73) to oversee the production of one or more short films about Denmark to be distributed in the UK. The resulting series of five films, under the rubric *Social Denmark*, was completed by 1947 – and several of them

16. 'Denmark Fights for Freedom'.

were screened at the first Edinburgh International Festival of Documentary Film.¹⁷

That the British Documentary Movement was such an inspiration for the Danes was not just because of the historical and cultural ties between the two countries. As we have seen, Danish filmmakers were excited, both before and after the war, to visit London and Edinburgh as centres of documentary film culture. The aforementioned John Grierson (1898–1972) was a dour and canny Scot who had tested out his wealth of ideas about the purpose of filmmaking with the documentary *Drifters* (1929), before pouring his energies into creating an infrastructure to support informational filmmaking in Britain and worldwide. Recognised as a ‘producer, organiser, facilitator, recruiter and propagandist’¹⁸ for his movement, he was a key figure in British film organisations including the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit, the GPO (General Post Office) Film Unit, the Central Office of Information, Film Centre, and the Films of Scotland Committee.

The influence of Grierson and the British Documentary Movement was felt worldwide – Grierson moved to Canada in 1938 to establish the National Film Board there, and the British Colonial Office established film units and training in Malaya, Ghana, India, and elsewhere with a ‘missionary zeal’.¹⁹ Denmark, too, played a leading role in the worldwide dissemination of the documentary idea and its necessary infrastructure: the head of Ministeriernes Filmudvalg, Mogens Skot-Hansen (1908–84), moved to Paris as early as 1947 to work at the United Nations Film Board, and Theodor Christensen was instrumental in developing filmmaker training in Cuba at the pioneering Instituto Cubano del Arte

17. Thomson 2018: 64–85.

18. Richards 2011: 1.

19. Grierson 1979: 206–207.

e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC, Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry).²⁰

Grierson had defined the term ‘documentary’ in a review of Robert Flaherty’s *Moana* (US, 1926), and his turn of phrase, ‘the creative treatment of actuality’, is well known as encapsulating the central power and paradox of documentary. As an instinctive social democrat, he regarded the task of documentary to be a ‘socially purposive cinema which would bestow recognition and dignity on the working man [...] and would at the same time inform and educate the newly enfranchised mass electorate to function in a participatory democracy’.²¹ To achieve this, films did not need to be dull and didactic, but could adopt a number of aesthetic strategies:

The documentary idea demands no more than that the affairs of our time shall be brought to the screen in a fashion which strikes the imagination and makes observation a little richer than it was. At one level, the vision may be journalistic, at another, it may rise to poetry and drama. At another level again, its aesthetic quality may lie in the mere lucidity of its expression.²²

The Danish documentarists found such ideas *simpatico*, engaged as they were in mediating the burgeoning welfare state to their fellow citizens and to admiring international audiences. But their practice was also directly informed to an extent by the advice received from Arthur Elton in his post-Liberation report commissioned by Ministeriernes Filmudvalg. For Elton, the Danes were a little too good at poetry and drama: in his 1945 report, he described the qualities of the Danish films he had been shown as including ‘fresh, lively and human direction’; ‘a gay and

20. Roos 1968: 151.

21. Richards 2011: 2.

22. Cited in Hardy 1979: 13.

imaginative touch in a number of propaganda films'; 'imaginative and clever editing'; and 'fine and luminous photography' but warned that 'any preoccupation with film technique for its own sake' would hinder their ability to communicate their message.²³ These, then, are the sometimes conflicting priorities that we can glimpse in the films at which we now turn to look more closely.

Choreographies of the tracks

Night Mail (1936) needs no introduction, such is its place in the British film canon. But for the same reason, it is easy to forget that for much of its twenty-four minutes, the film is essentially a process film, detailing how the mail is sorted and distributed on the route from London to Edinburgh Waverley. Much attention is paid to the laborious sorting of mail into pigeonholes, and especially to the correct techniques for securing postal sacks so that they are caught by spring-loaded hooks beside the track as the train whistles past.

Equally, the film is concerned with mapping the geography of mainland Britain; as the train forges northwards, letters destined for east and west are discussed, and workers' accents evolve as new staff are taken on board. Not until the last five minutes does the famous poem by W.H. Auden emerge in the voiceover (partly in Grierson's voice), intoning over the clickety-clack of the train: 'This is the night mail crossing the border, bringing the cheque and the postal order...' For many viewers today, the preceding twenty minutes with muddy sound and interminable sorting processes are something of a trial, though contemporary audiences were enthusiastic.²⁴

23. Elton 1945: 2.

24. Sargeant 2011: 56.

For the Danish filmmakers of the time, however, *Night Mail* seems to have functioned as a cultural lodestone. In his memoir, Ingolf Boisen relates how he and his colleagues at Minerva Film ordered copies of GPO Film Unit productions: Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934), Paul Rotha's *Shipyard* (1935) – and of course, a copy of *Night Mail*:

*Gang på gang sad vi i Minervas lille biograf og fulgte natposttogets ekspresfart fra London til Aberdeen i Skotland, betaget af filmens intense billedvirkning og fascinerende lydside – den perfekte balance mellem de hårde realløde fra toget, arbejdet med postsækkene, de korte replikker og mod slutningen af filmen Benjamin Brittens musik og W.H. Audens digt [...] strofer, der som en syntese af billed og lyd blev hængende i erindringen.*²⁵

Again and again we sat in Minerva's little screening room and followed the journey of the night mail express from London to Aberdeen [sic] in Scotland, enchanted by the film's intense visual effects and fascinating soundtrack – the perfect balance between the harsh recorded sounds from the train, the hard work with the postal sacks, the short lines of dialogue and towards the end of the film, Benjamin Britten's music and W.H. Auden's poem [...] stanzas that lingered in the memory as a synthesis of image and sound.

These viewings took place before Boisen, Christensen, and their colleagues Axel Lerche and Tove Hebo set off to film Kampsax's work in Iran. Thus, the influence of *Night Mail* on *Iran – Det nye Persien*, to which Grierson responded with teasing Scots menace, is more than circumstantial. More interesting is Boisen's emphasis on how *Night Mail* inspired the Danes to

25. Boisen 1977: 148.

develop their mastery of sound. This was no more than a decade after the advent of sound films, and for documentarists shooting out in the open, the challenges of sound were enormous. As Boisen explains, there was no such thing as a tape recorder in the 1930s, nor was it possible to record satisfactory sound on the narrow-gauge film that documentarists typically used. A soundtrack had to be recorded in the studio or in the field on 35 mm film, developed, and then scaled down to 16 mm and printed onto the 16 mm image track. However, Minerva Film decided to set an engineer by the name of P.F. Beer at the Copenhagen company Fonofilm the challenge of developing a portable 16 mm camera that could also record high-quality sound – which he did, in 1938. The Danish company Minerva was thus the first in the world to boast such a camera, and the creative possibilities that it opened up for capturing and mediating the sounds of the railway in Iran were considerable.²⁶

In practice, however, much of the film's soundtrack relies on the original musical score, composed by the renowned Kai Rosenberg²⁷, and a dramatic voiceover whose echoing, booming tone emphasises the diktat to perform the impossible and build the railway in just six years. There are, though, sequences in the film when environmental sound features. The baa-ing of a flock of sheep, for example, is captured on a mountain road, and contrasts with the hum of the crew's car engines. One sequence records the clack of typewriter keys and the Morse code of telegram signals, as instructions are transmitted from Kampsax in Copenhagen to its engineers in Iran. But the new sound technology is primarily employed to capture the sound of the trains: the steam, whistles, pistons, the rhythm of wheels

26. Boisen 1977: 148–150.

27. Rosenberg's contribution to Danish documentary was immense. Over a quarter of a century from the late 1930s, he composed the scores for some eighty films. 'Kai Rosenberg'.

on tracks. The final few minutes descend into a whirlwind of fast cutting between tracks, wheels, pistons, viaducts, tunnels, and scenery – and then, suddenly, there is a whistle, the train enters a tunnel, and the film fades to black.

Boisen claims that the impact of *Iran – Det nye Persien* was considerable. It was a popular choice for the film evenings with lectures (and often snacks) that were a popular pastime in mid-century Denmark, and the film also played in theatres, including a dozen sold-out screenings at the large Copenhagen cinema Odd Fellow Palæet. It was also instrumental in persuading other Danish companies that commissioning informational films about their business could be a good investment.²⁸ Certainly, if one compares the Iran film to the first handful of films produced for the government agency Dansk Kulturfilm in the mid-1930s – silent, plodding process films with muddy images that expound the process of brick-making and meat-processing²⁹ – *Iran – Det nye Persien* throws down the gauntlet for Danish documentary. As an industrial film, showcasing Danish know-how against the exotic backdrop of the Middle East, it was also able to experiment with sound and images while escaping the fate of another outstanding documentary of the mid-1930s: Poul Henningsen's *Danmark* (1935). This was an experimental documentary mapping the nation and its traditions against a jazz soundtrack, and deemed far too modern and cultural-radical for a state-sponsored film by contemporary critics.³⁰ The railways, on the other hand, were a safe space for audio-visual experimentation.

28. Boisen 1977: 152.

29. Thomson 2018: 49–50.

30. Ibid.: 51–52.

‘Don’t you make proper films?’

Of course, sound was not the only dimension of filmmaking whose influence echoed back and forth across the North Sea. Christensen returned to the Iran film a few years later, when writing a speech about the nature of documentary in particular and film in general. The precise date and purpose of the speech are uncertain, but his handwritten notes and typescript are filed amongst papers from 1945–46 in his archive, and in it he refers to projects from 1941 and 1942; he is thus looking back at *Iran – det nye Persien* (and by extension *Night Mail*) at around seven or eight years’ remove, yet he still draws on the film as the quintessential example of his practice. In these papers, the potential of the railway to express filmic movement in its purest form is laid out.

The typescript starts with a question that Christensen is sometimes asked: *‘Laver De ikke rigtige Film?’* (‘Don’t you make proper films?’) This gives him occasion to start by outlining the nature of documentary. Documentary film, he writes, has its own ways of handling reality:

Den nøjes ikke med at give et Billedreportage af et eller andet Stof eller Miliø – den forsøger at faa det Drama frem, som findes overalt i Virkeligheden – men det skal være et virkeligt Drama med virkelige Mennesker. Dets Konflikt skal springes ud af Hverdagen, maa ikke være en eller anden opfundet Hændelse.³¹

It is not satisfied with giving a pictorial report of some or other material or milieu – it tries to draw out the drama which is everywhere to be found in reality – but it must be a

31. ‘Laver De ikke rigtige Film?’: 1.

real drama with real people. Its conflict must arise from the everyday, must not be some invented incident or other.

Christensen goes on to explain to his audience that the fundamental quality of the documentary drama is movement. Film, he writes, is a mechanically produced illusion of movement, through the projection of twenty-four frames per second. That films are referred to in Danish as *levende billeder* ('living pictures') stems from the movement of the film strip itself, the movement of the camera, and the movement of things on screen.³² The rhythms, directions, and tempo of these movements creates the film's drama: '*Kombinationen af forskellige Bevægelser, Montagen giver Udtryksmuligheder og giver Grunden for Filmens Opbygning, Drama*' ('The combination of different movements, the montage, provides expressive possibilities and is the basis of the construction of the film, its drama').³³ The closing sequence of the Iran film, discussed above, is the example he plans to use in his talk to illustrate the maxim that we as viewers become one with the movement of the camera.

It can be seen, then, that Christensen had developed – and articulated in public – a fully formed philosophy of documentary, rooted in his practice as screenwriter, cinematographer, editor, and director. He also uses examples from his many industrial films in the speech to illustrate how the elements of film create movement and rhythm from the machinery and are thus suggestive of more abstract ideas such as threat, triumph, freedom, slavery, riches.³⁴ But he returns again to the train to insist that '*det er hele Tiden Bevægelse, der er Bærer af disse Betydninger*' ('at all times, it is movement that carries these meanings').³⁵

32. 'Laver De ikke rigtige Film?': 2.

33. Handwritten notes on film as movement, n.d.: E.

34. Handwritten notes on film as movement: D.

35. Handwritten notes on film as movement: E., emphasis original.

Around the time he was writing the speech, Christensen briefly returned to the trope of the railway again, for a three-minute public health film to be shown in cinemas encouraging Danes to take part in the national mass screening programme for tuberculosis.

Produced for Ministeriernes Filmudvalg and the health authorities of the Copenhagen region, *1337 Mennesker* ('1337 People', 1946) opens and closes with trackside shots of a passing train. Indeed, the opening shot is of a train bearing down on a camera that had obviously been left on the rails to capture the dramatic image – and the cinemagoers' attention. One thousand three hundred and thirty-seven, the voiceover claims, is the number of passengers on the train, and also the number of people in Copenhagen who had died of tuberculosis the previous year.

The film injects some theatrical urgency into the standard-issue elements of the many public information films used in the post-war campaigns against tuberculosis,³⁶ but can hardly be said to push Christensen's art further. It is, however, an elegant example of how the movement of the train can, in a small number of shots, serve as a vehicle for a range of implications in the way that Christensen suggests in his writing: the threat of disease bearing down, the community of Copenhageners in transit, the white heat of modern medicine carrying them into the future.

'Speed through the landscape of duty'

Christensen would soon have the opportunity to apply these ideas to another film about railway travel. The centenary of the

36. Thomson 2019.

Danish railways was looming, and the national rail company, Danske Statsbaner (DSB), commissioned a film with Dansk Kulturfilm to celebrate not the past but the future of the network.³⁷ Christensen was appointed to start work on a film that was initially conceived as lasting ten to fifteen minutes (the upper limit for a film to be screened pre-feature in cinemas) and entitled *Vi er Banerne* ('We are the Railways'). What became a much longer and thus more expensive film at twenty-six minutes – the expansion attesting to Christensen's influence at the time – would have the title *Her er Banerne* ('Here are the Railways')³⁸ and had its first public screening together with three other informational shorts in February 1948.³⁹

For this film, Christensen decided to tone down what he referred to as the *bevægelsesdramatik* (drama of movement) that concluded *Iran – Det nye Persien*, and make this new film more psychologically and narratively satisfying.⁴⁰ But *Her er Banerne* is still obviously influenced by *Night Mail*, to the extent that filmmaker Jon Bang Carlsen, when viewing the latter for the first time in film school, was struck by the notion that [*l*]ighed-erne mellem de to film var så markante, at det var som delte de to instruktører hjerne og øjne' ('the similarities between the two films were so marked, it was as though the two directors shared minds and eyes').⁴¹

The underlying conceit of *Her er Banerne* is that Fredericia station – located at the western end of the bridge over Lillebæltet (the Little Belt) between the island of Funen and Jutland – is a nodal point in the national network, with trains, as the voice-over intones, running in all directions from the town. While

37. For a more extensive discussion of this film, see Thomson 2018: 120–123.

38. Christensen 1947a.

39. Dansk Kulturfilm & Ministeriernes Filmudvalg. 1948.

40. Christensen 1947b.

41. Carlsen 2014.

narratively, there is emphasis on the directions of travel and origins and destinations of the trains, the film is shaped by the clock – or rather, the railway timetable. The confluence of time and space is visualised in cutting-edge style on a control panel in the signal room which lights up to indicate trains' progress in and out of the station. Down on the ground, Christensen had allegedly memorised the station timetable so that he and the crew could maximise time filming on the tracks.⁴² As Forsyth Hardy commented when the film screened at the Edinburgh Festival in 1949, Christensen was 'working from the inside' to reveal Fredericia as 'the nerve-centre of the country's railway system'.⁴³

Structuring the film around the railway timetable, however, enables another quality of time to emerge. An echo of the film's working title – *We are the Railways* – is to be heard in the cacophony produced by passengers and workers as they flow through and around the station. Repeated aerial shots show the station concourse filling and emptying as commuters ebb and flow throughout the day.

After the last of the mid-afternoon express trains leave, there is a sudden lull in footfall. A different rhythm of movement is sustained by the station workers. The early morning and mid-afternoon witness an intensification of activity, with cleaning teams jumping on and off trains, tray tables being set with tea cups, and, most exhilaratingly, railwaymen (and the cameraman!) in the sidings throwing brake blocks at the rails and jumping nimbly between tracks as wagons screech and lumber all around.

It is in the choreography of these workers that Christensen's principles of cinema as movement come into their own: from his synthesis of the things and people moving in the frame, the

42. Roos 1968: 150.

43. Hardy 1949: 18.

camera movement (often hand-held, by Jørgen Roos amongst others), and the montage, emerges a palpable sense of the lived spacetime of labour. *Arbejdet kan aldrig gøres færdigt* ('the work can never be finished') declares the voiceover towards the end of the film, a truth rendered all the more convincing by the speaker's personification as the station tannoy from the opening credits. But can a locomotive get tired? he also ponders, hinting at the incompatibility of industrial and biological temporalities and capacities. As Carlsen puts it, what connects *Night Mail* and *Her er Banerne* most poignantly is '*denne fælles historie om fart gennem pligtens landskab*' ('this common story of speed through the landscape of duty').⁴⁴

A similar attention to the working classes in and on the railways characterises a Scottish film from the same year, *Waverley Steps*. Directed by John Eldridge for the Central Office of Information and the Scottish Home Department, the film's inspiration from the Swede Arne Sucksdorff's Academy Award-winning *Människor i Stad* ('*Rhythm of a City*', 1947) was openly acknowledged.⁴⁵ *Waverley Steps* thus belongs to the 'city symphony' genre. Like Sucksdorff's short, the film weaves the paths of city dwellers together: romances, students at lectures and in pubs, tourists, within a specified timeframe of around twenty-four hours. As a contemporary commentary had it, the film is 'a study of people against the background of the streets and the bridges, the wynds and the closes of the city, done with real feeling'.⁴⁶

But in contrast to Sucksdorff's lyrical opening shots of seagulls soaring over a sun-baked Stockholm, *Waverley Steps* opens with the scream of a locomotive whistle as the camera tracks a speeding train through the Scottish countryside. As

44. Carlsen 2014.

45. 'Waverley Steps: Full record.'

46. Hardy 1950: 37.

the number twenty-seven approaches Edinburgh, three cross-cut perspectives ensure that the city is introduced as a complex, dynamic entity: a young woman surveys criss-crossing railway tracks from a high window, presumably a railwayman's house; the driver in the train cab teases his junior for gazing back at the woman; and schoolboys tumble and clamber up onto the fence of a bridge across the rail line through Princes Street Gardens, thrilled to be able to spot this particular locomotive. A Big Band rendition of the folk song 'Comin' through the Rye' sets the aural tone and atmosphere of late-1940s Edinburgh.

While Edinburgh is sketched as a tangle of students, tourists, solicitors, and shoppers, two trajectories through the city stand out and eventually merge at – where else? – a pub. One is a coalman whose path through the city with his horse and cart – the port of Leith, the cobbled back streets, the forgotten smithy – opens up the rhythms of working-class life. The other is a Danish sailor on shore leave, whose struggles in broken English to ask for directions draw a small crowd of helpers. As a fictional character, the Dane's presence in *Waverley Steps* gestures to the city's role as an international port but also, self-consciously, as a tourist mecca.

As Forsyth Hardy observed, when the film was screened at that year's film festival, 'the visitors who thronged Edinburgh found it fascinating to compare their impressions with those of the director'.⁴⁷ But the amateur actor himself, N.K. Strøyberg, also embodied the links between Scotland and Denmark across the North Sea at the time: he was actually a businessman's son, in the city preparing himself for a business career.⁴⁸ With his fee for his unexpected film appearance, he bought a motorbike to travel Europe.⁴⁹ Perhaps he set off around the same time as

47. Hardy 1950: 37–38.

48. *Slægten Obel*: 72–73.

49. 'Waverley Steps: Full record.'

the Danish documentarists arrived in Edinburgh in their little car in August 1948; certainly, they must have enjoyed the sight of their fellow Dane on screen.

The trains run in all directions

In a wistful essay for *Kosmorama*, marking Theodor Christensen's centenary in 2014, the director Jon Bang Carlsen remembers watching *Her er Banerne* in the classroom as a schoolboy, in the flickering light of a 16 mm projector – essential school equipment in the golden age of the informational film. Carlsen reminisces that he and his friends couldn't have cared less about the facts of Fredericia's nodal status in the transport network but that the film evoked something else for them:

'Togene ruller i alle retninger bort fra Fredericia', siger speakerstemmen, og det bliver et digt for os drenge i 6C, en metafor for vores egen udlængsel. Drømmen om at komme væk hakker igennem 16 mm filmfremviseren, og ingen af os lærer det, som speakerstemmen forsøger at indprente os, at Fredericia er et af Danmarks vigtigste trafikale knudepunkter. Vi er fuldstændig ligeglade med Fredericia og knudepunkter. Vi dagdrømmer kun om, om farten i de store, sorte lokomotiver deroppe på lærredet over lærerens blege ansigt kan rive os fri af de kedelige kulisser, der omgiver os dag efter dag og lukker os ude fra den virkelige verden, som det hvide ansigt under lærredet påstår filmen viser, før han trykker på knappen, og billederne starter.⁵⁰

'The trains run in all directions from Fredericia', says the voiceover, and it becomes a poem for us boys in class 6C,

50. Carlsen 2014.

a metaphor for our own longing for escape. The dream of getting away cuts through the 16 mm projector, and none of us learn what the narrator's voice is trying to impress on us, that Fredericia is one of Denmark's most important transport nodes. We couldn't care less about Fredericia and transport nodes. We just daydream about whether the speed of the big, black locomotives up there on the screen above the teacher's pale face could rip us away from the boring scenery that surrounds us day after day, shutting us out from the real world, which the white face under the screen claims the film shows, before he presses the button, and the images begin.

Carlsen's is one of the most evocative accounts I have ever found of how post-war informational films were consumed by their intended audience. The intentions of the commissioning organisations, the pedagogical ambitions of the teacher, even the aesthetic efforts of the filmmakers – none of these could guarantee the successful communication of facts, nor the strategic shaping of citizens.

Tracing and evaluating the social impact of the films is nigh impossible, and was rarely attempted by the organisations which commissioned and funded them.⁵¹ But what is more interesting is their fleeting affects, or even their more lingering influence, on a viewer's life – a crystallisation of the dream of escape, the sensation of movement, a jolt of aesthetic inspiration. Motion in a time of stasis. As we have seen, such films not only travelled the world to inform audiences about other cultures and new technological advances; they were also carriers of inspiration for other filmmakers, caught up in an ecology of aesthetic influence, professional development, exchange of equipment, and international friendships. And it was in the

51. Thomson 2021: 537–538, 552–553.

screening rooms – in schools, film festivals, or production companies – that encounters between viewers and films took place, eliciting boredom, learning, fascination, ambition. Every film a *landvinding*.

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