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Abstract

This article examines the work of the film-maker and composer Jack Ellitt (1902-2001) who remains something of an enigmatic and marginal figure in historical accounts of British documentary cinema. Research on Ellitt has so far focused on two key aspects of his life and career: firstly, his association with the New Zealand-born film-maker and artist Len Lye; and secondly, his pioneering work as a composer of electroacoustic music. However, little research has been undertaken on the work that Ellitt produced during the three decades he spent working as a documentary director in the British film industry, beginning in the early 1940s, and ending with his retirement in the 1970s. Ellitt was a member of the remarkable generation of film-makers associated with the British Documentary Movement, and a composer whose radical experiments with recorded sound might well have secured him a more prominent place in the history of experimental music than is currently the case. Focusing on films made by Ellitt during the 1940s, the primary aim of this article is to offer a chronological appraisal of his early work as documentary director, while also considering what new perspectives this group of films might offer on his earlier creative collaboration with Lye, and the extent to which his radical experiments in electroacoustic composition may have influenced the use of sound within the films he directed.

Keywords

Jack Ellitt; documentary; sound; electroacoustic composition; Len Lye; animation; GPO Film Unit; DATA (Documentary and Technicians Alliance); Strand Film Company; Spectator Short Films.

Introduction

This article examines the work of the film-maker and composer Jack Ellitt (1902-2001), whose career as a documentary film director has received little critical attention to date, and who remains something of an enigmatic and marginal figure in historical accounts of British documentary cinema. Research on Ellitt has so far focused on two key aspects of his life and career: firstly, his association with the New Zealand-born film-maker and artist Len Lye; and secondly, his pioneering work as a composer of electroacoustic music. However, little has been published on the work that Ellitt produced during the three decades he spent working as a documentary director in the British film industry, beginning in the early 1940s, and ending with his retirement in the 1970s. Ellitt was a member of the remarkable generation of film-makers associated with the British Documentary Movement, and a composer whose radical experiments with recorded sound might well have secured him a more prominent place in the history of experimental music than is currently the case. However, as Roger Horrocks comments, 'he is a striking example of a vanguard artist known and respected by his colleagues but largely ignored by critics and historians' (2000: 20).

Horrocks's evaluation of the lack of scholarly engagement with Ellitt's work, offered some twenty years ago now, remains largely true, and although the intervening period has seen increased interest in Ellitt's ground-breaking experiments in the composition of electroacoustic music, and in the work of his artistic collaborator Len Lye, Ellitt's own work as a film-maker remains critically neglected and largely unknown. Focusing on films made by Ellitt during the 1940s, my primary aim in what follows is to offer a chronological and critical account of his early work as documentary director, while also considering what new perspectives this group of films might offer on his earlier creative collaboration with Lye, and the extent to which his radical experiments in electroacoustic composition may have influenced the use of sound within the films he directed.

Although born in Manchester, England, Ellitt spent his formative years in Australia, and following training at the New South Wales State Conservatorium of Music left for London around 1928 to join his close friend and artistic collaborator Len Lye. Ellitt worked closely with Lye on a number of the New Zealand artist's early film projects, the best known being the animated promotional shorts that Lye produced for the GPO Film Unit in the 1930s: *A Colour Box* (1935), *Rainbow Dance* (1936) and *Trade Tattoo* (1937). While Ellitt received no screen credit for his work on *A Colour Box*, his credits for *Rainbow Dance* and *Trade Tattoo* were for (sound) synchronisation and music editor respectively. Similarly, the GPO Film Unit's records show that during this period Ellitt was employed as a cutter,[1] although he is usually identified on lists of staff hired by the Film Unit as Lye's assistant.[2] Ellitt's partnership with Lye extended beyond their work for the GPO, and included the production of animated advertising shorts for other sponsors, including Churchman's Cigarettes and Shell Motor Oil. Their final documented collaboration was the experimental live action film *N or NW* (1938), produced for the GPO Film Unit, and shortly after which the pair parted company. As Ellitt explained, interviewed in later life by Horrocks, 'I decided to make a change because being Len's sidekick wasn't getting me anywhere really. I wanted to move into film directing' (2000: 25).

In addition to his collaboration with Lye, the other area of activity for which Ellitt is primarily recognised is as a pioneer of electroacoustic composition. In 1935 Ellitt published a radical manifesto on the creative use of sound recording technology in the literary magazine *Life and Letters To-day*. Entitled *On Sound*, Ellitt's proposal for an art of recorded sound predated by some years similar calls raised by modernist composers such as John Cage and

[1]. Film Unit Staff (Unestablished), (1938). London: The Royal Mail Archive. POST 33/5555.

[2]. Unestablished Staff on Post Office Books (1937), London: The Royal Mail Archive. POST 33/5455.

Edgard Varése (Birtwistle 2010; 2016a). However, whereas both Cage and Varése had to wait until the 1950s to hear their electroacoustic ambitions realised fully, it is likely that Ellitt produced electroacoustic compositions using recorded sound sometime in the early 1930s (Horrocks 2001: 129; Green 2011), creating of a form of *musique concréte* a full decade before Pierre Schaeffer first coined the term to describe his own musical articulation of real-world or 'concrete' sounds.[3]

Researching Ellitt

The early part of Ellitt's career and his association with Lye have been documented by Horrocks, both in an article examining Ellitt's pioneering work in sound art (2000), and in his authoritative studies of Len Lye (2001; 2009). Horrocks is one of the few people to have interviewed Ellitt,[4] and his research on Ellitt's early career and collaboration with Lye remain the major contribution to scholarship on Ellitt to date. In addition to Horrock's *Jack Ellitt: The Early Years* (2000), critical writing on Ellitt's musical output includes commentary and musical analysis by Clinton Green (2007; 2011) and Camille Robinson (2010). A brief reference to Ellitt's place within the history of electroacoustic music also appears in Roger

[3]. Ellitt's pioneering work in the field of experimental music has been recognised in the inclusion of the early composition *Journey #1* (c. 1935) on the CD *Artefacts of Australian Experimental Music 1930 – 1973* (Shamefile Music, SHAM 050), while a number of Ellitt's later tape compositions have been made available online, courtesy of Clinton Green's Shame File Music label: http://shamefilemusic.com/jack-ellitt/ (Accessed 30 April 2020).

[4]. Ellitt was also interviewed on his memories of Len Lye in the 1987 documentary *Doodlin'- Impressions of Len Lye*, produced and directed by Keith Griffiths (Koninck Studio and Energy Source International in association with Channel 4 Television).

Manvell and John Huntley's *The Technique of Film Music*, which states that in 1933 Ellitt experimented with the technique of creating sound synthetically by drawing directly onto optical sound film stock (1975: 187).

However, despite the progress that has been made in this area, Paul Doornbusch reiterates the observation made by other writers that Ellitt's musical accomplishments remain critically neglected:

> There are other developments in electronic music from Australia and England that are also largely ignored, such as the film sound experiments of the early 1930s by Jack Ellitt and the electronic music machines of Percy Grainger … Perhaps these people and their work are less known because they did not inspire further developments, or because they occurred in a cultural context where such radical ideas could not take hold. (2017: 305)

While Doornbusch's speculation on the reasons for Ellitt's neglect within histories of electronic music is persuasive, it raises the question of the extent to which Ellitt's radical ideas regarding the creative potential of recorded sound may have influenced the use of sound in his own documentary film work. In this way, critical consideration of his films may have the potential to shed light on the development of Ellitt's musical interests.

Outside the body of scholarship dealing with Ellitt's association with Lye and his work in experimental music, occasional references to Ellitt appear in histories of British documentary filmmaking, identifying him as a potentially important yet under-researched figure in the field. Thus Rachael Low comments in *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s* on the films Ellitt made with Lye:

> although his work went under such names as 'sound editing' or 'musical accompaniment' sound was in fact such an integral part of the films that his contribution was of key importance. Ellitt was an innovator, and as conscious of the experimental nature of what they were doing as Lye was. (1979: 103)

In a similar vein British Film Institute curator Ros Cranston has written, 'Ellitt's pioneering work in synchronising colour and sound has been relatively little recognised in comparison to the admiration bestowed on Lye' (2010: 62). More recently Malcom Cook has gone some way to addressing Ellitt's contribution to the films made by Lye in the 1930s, through a consideration of the importance of music to Lye's filmic aesthetic. As Cook observes:

> Music was central to the film work of Len Lye throughout his career. It served a vital aesthetic role in the formal construction of his films, with the tight synchronisation between image and sound in *A Colour Box* (1935) being its most prominent quality. (2017: 45)

The soundtracks for most of the films Cook refers to were compiled from pre-existing recordings of popular music of the period, with Lye's visuals carefully synchronised by Ellitt to various selections of jazz and Latin music. Thus Cook comments, 'while Lye singlehandedly created the motion in his … films, the music introduces a more complex authorial position, as he relied on collaborators, especially Jack Ellitt, for the musical elements of his work' (2017: 46).

What Cook's research also suggests is that Ellitt was closely involved in the production – rather than simply the post-production – of an experimental stop motion animation project produced by the pair in 1933. Often referred to as *Peanut Vendor*, since its

soundtrack is provided by a recording of the popular 1930s hit of the same name, the film features a puppet monkey animated to move in time to the music track, with interchangeable mouths used to create the effect of lip synch to the song's lyrics. Cook proposes that Ellitt's knowledge of audiovisual synchronisation was essential to this project, and that 'Ellitt selected, edited and charted the music for Lye to work to' (2017: 55). Both Cook's analsyis, and Low's comments before him, echo a brief but highly significant note that appears in a GPO Film Unit staff document from 1937, offering a rationale for Ellitt's employment on the animated short *Trade Tattoo*: 'Ellitt has previously assisted Len Lye on "Colour Box" and "Rainbow Dance", and is essential to him in this type of work'.[5] What this note supports is the idea that Ellitt not only made an important contribution to Lye's films of the 1930s, but may also have been a skilled animator in his own right; and, as I aim to demonstrate, this is indeed borne out by the films that Ellitt directed in the 1940s following his professional association with Lye.

In their ground-breaking study of documentary in postwar Britain, Patrick Russell and James Taylor describe Ellitt as one of the documentary film industry's 'legendary veterans' (2010: 83). However, to date there has been no extended study of Ellitt's work in documentary film production. In part, this is because there is little written documentation on Ellitt to be found in any of the key UK archives relating to the history of British documentary filmmaking. Thus, although Ellitt worked as a film editor for the BBC in the late 1950s, the Corporation's archives hold no records relating to his employment there.[6] Similarly, there are no production materials relating to the films that Ellitt made for the National Coal Board during the 1960s and 1970s held either by the British Film Institute or the UK's National

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[5]. Unestablished Staff on Post Office Books (1937), London: The Royal Mail Archive. POST 33/5455.

[6]. Ratford, H. (2017), Email to Andy Birtwistle. 28 March 2017.

Archives. For this reason, my research on Ellitt focuses on his films as primary sources, along with reviews of his work published in *Documentary News Letter*, *Kinematograph Weekly* and *Monthly Film Bulletin*. According to Horrocks (2000: 26) Ellitt produced hundreds of films during his career, and while the exact number may not be known, his nephew Alan Eggleton confirms that from the 1950s until his retirement in the 1970s Ellitt was always in work.[7] If this is the case, then only a small percentage of Ellitt's creative output has been preserved, and hence my selection of films has been determined largely by the prints that have been archived by institutions such as the British Film Institute and Imperial War Museum - some 50 titles in total. Using these films as the basis of my research, I focus in this article on Ellitt's work as a director in the 1940s, during which he worked for documentary production companies including the Strand Film Company and Spectator Short Films before briefly joining the documentary collective DATA (Documentary and Technicians Alliance).

Although Ellitt worked at various times as a film editor, director, script supervisor, and producer, in what follows I have chosen to focus on his work as director since this activity is well-represented in the selection of films currently available for study. Furthermore, the focus on direction offers an opportunity to give some consideration to issues of authorship: my working assumption being that, in the role of director, Ellitt may have had greater opportunity to determine the thematic and stylistic treatment of the projects on which he worked – including the creative use of sound – than may have been the case in other production roles. If this is so, then the films themselves have the potential to shed light on Ellitt's personal and creative vision. In addition, my analysis aims to consider what these films might be able to tell us retrospectively about Ellitt's earlier creative collaboration with Lye, and also the extent to which his radical experiments in electroacoustic composition, first undertaken in the 1930s, might have influenced the use of sound within the films he directed.

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[7]. Eggleton, A. (2017), Email to Andy Birtwistle. 6 April 2017.

Before examining Ellitt's films of the 1940s, and to provide a context in which his creative and professional development as director during this period might be better understood, I would like first to briefly outline Ellitt's ideas on sound and his early experiments in electroacoustic composition, situating these within the broader context of sonic and musical experimentation taking place in British documentary in the 1930s.

Electroacoustic experimentation and British documentary cinema

Long before finding regular employment within documentary film production, Ellitt had worked as composer on two avant-garde film projects, creating modernist piano scores for Lye's first animated film *Tusalava* (1929), and for the short abstract film *Light Rhythms* (1930), made by the American photographer Francis Brugiére in collaboration with British writer and artist Oswell Blakestone. However, during the early 1930s Ellitt became increasingly interested in the creative potential of sound recording technology, setting down a radical manifesto for a new art of recorded sound in his 1935 article *On Sound*. Here Ellitt proposes the development of a new form of sonic art, stating that with access to recording technology, 'all world sounds of interest now come within a sphere of creative control which may be termed Sound-Construction' (1935: 182). Ellitt's radical move is to suggest that 'worldly' rather than instrumental sound could become the basis of a new form of sonic art: 'Beauty in terms of sound-colours is not necessarily confined to orchestras, pianos, etc., and musical forms are only the chrysales [sic] from which more beautifully conceived forms will eventually burst forth in complete freedom and independence' (1935:184). These ideas are realised in Ellitt's early electroacoustic composition *Journey #1*, made sometime during the early 1930s. Here Ellitt employs techniques of sound editing and transformation that were to become staples of *musique concréte* two decades later, including the use of rapid sound montage, manipulation of playback speed, sound reversal and repetition, and the use of

editing to radically alter the identity of a sound (for example, by removing the attack of a musical sound, or abstracting speech by using only a fragment of a spoken word). Drawing on an eclectic mix of sound materials, including recordings of bird song, bells, hooters, horns, machine sounds, trains, and crowd noises, it is likely that this early experiment in electroacoustic composition employed source recordings made by Ellitt on a portable acetate disc recorder, which would have then been transferred to optical sound film, enabling him to edit and transform the sounds in the various ways described above. The piece also includes electronic tones, which Green (2011) suggests are likely to have been created through Ellitt's experimentation with optical sound synthesis, whereby sound is generated by drawing directly onto optical sound film.

Although *On Sound* locates Ellitt's thinking on 'Sound-Construction' squarely within the field of music, both his radical ideas and his experimentation with sound might nevertheless be usefully understood in relation to developments that were taking place within British documentary filmmaking in the 1930s following the adoption of sound technology. As I and other writers have argued, British documentary cinema has a long history of innovation in sound and music, which includes early examples of electroacoustic experimentation (Sexton 2004; Birtwistle 2016a; Cox 2017). Certainly, as Geoffrey Cox points out, the leader of the British documentary movement John Grierson had been alert to the creative possibilities of sound film years before the technology actually became available to the film-makers with whom he worked. Thus, writing in 1930, Grierson identifies the as yet unexplored creative potential of non-musical or worldly sound: 'There must be a poetry of sound which none of us knows … Meanings in footsteps, voices in trees, and woods of the day and night everywhere. There must be massed choruses of sound in the factory and in the street and among all men alive' (cited in Cox 2017: 175). Reappraising early British sound documentary film in the 1930s, Cox identifies Harry Watt and Edgar Anstey's *6.30*

Collection (1934) and Alberto Cavalcanti's *Coal Face* (1935) as ground-breaking works that employ non-musical sounds in musical ways, exploring what Grierson had described in terms of the 'poetry' of sound. Both films feature what might be considered 'performed' versions of *musique concréte*. In *6.30 Collection* this takes the form of what Cox describes as 'a kind of noise orchestra' (ibid.: 177), in which the sounds of a film rewinder, trumpet, typewriters, beer bottle, projector, conversation, sandpaper, a bell, cymbals and triangle where arranged and conducted by composer Walter Leigh (Grierson 1934: 216). Similarly, in *Coal Face*, music is created by percussion instruments, household objects and various mechanical devices, orchestrated in a score written by Benjamin Britten that also incorporates piano, choir, and poetry by W H Auden. However, although both films articulate non-musical sounds within a musical context, neither uses the technology of film sound as much more than a recording device, with the creative use of sound editing focused on asynchronous relationships between sound and image rather than electracoustic composition. Thus Cox refers to Donald Mitchell's description of Britten's score for *Coal Face* as 'imagining a kind of *musique concrète'* (cited in Cox, 2017: 179), positioning the soundtrack as not being fully realised through electroacoustic means. In contrast, the sophistication and complexity of Ellitt's early experiments in electroacoustic composition clearly derive from the creative potential of film sound technology as a means by which to manipulate, transform and organise recorded sound. In this respect, then, Ellitt's experimental work employs the generative potential of film to realise, rather than imagine, an early form of *musique concréte,* aligning his work more clearly with sections of Walter Ruttmann's radio documentary *Weekend* (1930) – regularly cited as a precursor of *musique concréte* (Birtwistle 2016b) – while also echoing some of electroacoustic techniques employed by Walter Leigh and Alberto Cavalcanti on the soundtrack of Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934) (Birtwistle 2016a).

Experimenting outside the context of film production Ellitt is, of course, allowed a degree of freedom that comes with not working on a commissioned project, or having to consider the relationship between sound and image. However, although there is no conclusive evidence that Ellitt's composition *Journey #1* was developed as part of a film project,[8] the technology of film sound was nevertheless central to its construction. This creative link between Ellitt's experimentation with sound and film technology is corroborated by his comment,

> I would have a lot of spare time while I was waiting for Len to make up his mind, and I would rummage in the bottom of the junk bins for "no good" takes and bits of sound track. I'd make a point of working on these, joining small bits of sound into continuity until I had a fairly decent composition. (Horrocks 2000: 25).

That Ellitt had concrete ideas regarding the application of his ideas within a cinematic context is suggested by Lye's plans to follow his first film *Tusalava* with two new projects, creating a trilogy of animated films. While Ellitt had already created a piano score for the first part of the proposed trilogy, the plans for the second part, described by Oswell Blakestone in a piece for *Architectural Review*, combine percussion with non-musical, 'concrete' or 'worldly' sounds: 'wire brushes, tap drums, rushing water, crackle of high-frequency current' (1932: 25). At the same time, while Ellitt's article *On Sound* makes no reference to cinema – the key points of reference being musical – its publication in *Life and Letters To-day* situates his ideas within the context of discussions regarding the creative use of new technologies, such

[8]. Green (2011) and Wall (2018) suggest that *Journey #1* may be associated with the unrealised film ballet project *Quicksilver,* which Lye and Ellitt worked on between 1930 and 1934.

as film sound, colour, and television, that took place in the journal following its take-over by writer and poet Bryher in 1935 (Townsend, 2019).

As Christopher Townsend (2019) has demonstrated in his recent study of the way in which the project of the film magazine *Close Up* (1927-33) was continued in *Life and Letters To-day*, a number of the debates regarding film sound that had been that had aired in *Close Up* were picked up and further developed in *Life and Letters To-day*. In 1928 *Close Up* had published one of the most influential pieces of writing on the creative use of film sound technology in the early sound era: *The Sound Film: A Statement from USSR,* written by Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevelod Pudovkin and Grigori Alexandrov. Hugely important in shaping debates about the adoption of film sound technology in the early 1930s, the Soviet directors' joint statement proposed a contrapuntal or asynchronous use of sound, in which the relationship between sound and image would be governed by strategies of montage rather than forms of naturalism. However, as Townsend points out, some of the contributors to *Close Up*, while initially championing Soviet cinema, had become increasingly disillusioned with it, in part because of the seeming inflexibility of Soviet montage as a model for creative film practice. After *Close Up* folded, a number of these writers joined the staff of *Life and Letters Today*, including Oswell Blakestone, with whom Ellitt had collaborated on Brugière's *Light Rhythms*, and Robert Herring, who was to become the journal's editor. According to Townsend, the critical stance towards Soviet montage that had developed in *Close Up* continued to inform film criticism in *Life and Letters Today*, including discussions of sound. Thus Townsend describes,

> a growing disillusion with both Soviet cinema and the montage technique that derived from its influence. This dissatisfaction stems, initially, from the failure of Soviet film-makers to develop non-naturalistic uses of sound to accompany the

> non-naturalistic model of temporal and spatial relations established for the image through montage.(ibid.: 249-50).

Townsend proposes that the inability of the Soviet cinema to realise the creative aspirations outlined in the joint statement on sound inspired Anglophone critics, including Blakestone and Herring, to promote other, non-contrapuntal uses of sound, such as those heard in Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey's *Housing Problems* (1935) and Cavalcanti's *Coal Face* (ibid.: 255) – both of which had been reviewed by Herring in the same issue in which Ellitt's article appeared. Thus *On Sound* might be viewed as part of the journal's project to discuss the creative potential of new sound technologies beyond the terms dictated by the influential Soviet joint statement on sound. The fact that Ellitt's early forays into electroacoustic composition were facilitated by optical film sound technology, and that his ideas were of interest to those actively engaged in discussing the creative potential of this technology, then raises the question of the extent to which the soundtracks of his own documentary projects, employing the same technology, may have may have been influenced by his earlier radical ideas on the creative use of sound set out in *Life and Letters To-day*.

Wartime films for Strand and Spectator

Like many of his contemporaries employed in documentary film-making, Ellitt's work during World War II included the production of short films made in support of the war effort. One of the first of these, *Britain's Youth* (1940), was produced by the Strand Film Company, which Ellitt had joined by 1938 at the invitation of the company's head of production, Paul Rotha (Horrocks 2001: 211). Strand had a strong reputation within the documentary film community at this time, as is indicated by the following appraisal, which appears in a GPO report from 1939: 'generally regarded as having the most experience in documentary prestige

and propaganda films, have produced very good films for Imperial Airways, Zoological Society, Travel Association, and a number of Government Departments'.[9] Although Ellitt had started at Strand as Chief Editor, *Britain's Youth* evidences the fact that he quickly realised his ambition of moving into directing his own films.

The film focuses on the role played by sport in the development and maintenance of physical fitness, and had originally been commissioned by the Board of Education. However, the project was subsequently assigned to the Ministry of Information which, during World War II, was responsible for the production of propaganda for both home and international audiences. The poor physical state of many conscripts during World War I was an issue that had been discussed widely in the interwar period, often revolving around the question of whether or not Britain should be considered a so-called 'C3' nation: C3 being the medical categorisation for recruits deemed unfit for military service. The issue was brought into sharper focus in the late 1930s as Britain began to place itself on a war footing in response to growing tensions in Europe. Thus 'The Nation's Physique' was discussed in the House of Lords in November 1936, where reference was made to War Office statistics which revealed that in the previous year almost half of all potential army recruits were deemed unfit for military service. Responding to these statistics in the House, former soldier and Conservative Peer Lord Temple Mount posed the pointed question, 'Can you imagine Germany or Italy or Sweden or France having half their recruits turned down because they were not fit to serve their country?' (HL Deb 10 November 1936).

This debate, and others like it that aired in the press in the interwar period, located the issue of physical fitness squarely within an international context – an issue that Ellitt's film tackles directly in an opening title card featuring a quotation from the sportsman and writer

[9]. Question of continuance of Film Unit beyond July 1939 (1939), London: The Royal Mail Archive. POST 33/5199.

C. B. Fry: ‘When the call to arms came for our men to serve their country in the fighting forces, there was no talk of a C 3 Nation’. Fry acts as the film’s narrator throughout, his informal, engaging commentary celebrating the importance of grassroots participation in sporting activity, and the benefits this brings to the nation both in terms of physical fitness and character development. Ellitt’s choice of Fry to provide the film’s narration evidences the intersection between documentary film-making and celebrity culture, which Martin Stollery has argued, has often been overlooked in scholarship on British documentary of the 1930s and 1940s (Stollery 2013). Stollery proposes that ‘film-makers typically give careful consideration to which specific voice will most effectively support the truth claims advanced by a particular documentary, and whether it will resonate with audiences effectively as well as intellectually’ (ibid: 203). Although primarily known as a cricketer, Fry was an all-round sportsman, having also played football professionally achieving some success in athletics. Retiring from cricket in the early 1920s, he had developed a career as a writer on sport, a newspaper columnist, and a cricket commentator for the BBC, as well as being involved in politics and diplomacy. Thus to British audiences watching Ellitt’s film, Fry would have been recognised not only as an celebrated sportsman, but also as a writer and columnist. Stollery identifies four types of celebrity and personality voices used in classic British documentary: the newsreel commentator, the actor, the intellectual and the broadcaster. Although Fry’s celebrity narration does not map neatly onto these categories of voice, it supports the truth claims of Ellitt’s film through a combination of the authority of the popular intellectual (Fry was later to become a regular panellist on the BBC’s *The Brain’s Trust* programme) and the expertise of a former sports professional. In this way Fry is positioned within Ellitt’s film as someone able to make definitive claims not only about the way in which sport contributes to health and fitness, but also how it evidences what are proposed as British values and the national character. At the same time, the sense of authority Fry brings to the film is mitigated

by the affective resonance of his voice-over, which through its light-hearted tone conveys a sense of personality that stands in stark contrast to the anonymous Voice of God technique that, Stollery argues, is often mistakenly associated with documentary films of this period. This sense of personality, conveyed in both Fry's script and his vocal delivery, and known to audiences from his work on other media, work together to enhance and broaden the appeal of the film.

Celebrity appeal is also brought to the film through brief appearances of a small number elite sportsmen of the day. The tennis professional Dan Maskell, the cricketer Leslie Ames, and the boxers Len Harvey and Eddie Phillips are all featured in the film. Importantly, all but one is shown in uniform, each making a contribution to the war effort not only by serving in the armed forces, but also sharing their knowledge of sport with fellow servicemen. Fry himself makes an appearance towards the end of the film when, dressed in naval Commander's uniform, he joins a group of Sea cadets in a game of cricket, 'showing a sailor boy the genuine cricket strokes'. However, the focus of the film very much falls on amateur sport and popular outdoor recreational activities such as cycling and walking, thereby creating a clear sense of national engagement and democratic participation. Thus the national enthusiasm for sport proposed by the film serves not only to reassure the audience that Britain's youth is in good physical shape, but it also communicates a set of values that are understood to underpin what it means to be British. Hence Fry's commentary proposes, 'we may laugh when we are told to 'play the game' and 'be a sport' yet this is what makes us a nation of sportsmen and moulds our spirit'.

Although Ellitt's film is in part a morale-booster produced for domestic consumption, it is also clearly addressed to Britain's allies abroad. The film was distributed in the United States through RKO-Radio, and formed part of a package of over 30 non-theatrical shorts designed to give American audiences an insight into the British war effort. When these films

were released in the US in January 1941, America had yet to enter the war, and thus the film's celebration of British youth bears a message of reassurance targeted at what Britain hoped would be one of its future allies in the war against the Axis powers. The film received positive reviews in the trade press in the UK, which identify Fry's script and voice-over as key aspects of the film's appeal. Little attention is given, however, to Ellitt's direction, other than one brief, indirect comment in a *Documentary News Letter* film review: 'It is well photographed and cut, but does not merit any more elaborate comment' (Britain's Youth 1940: 13). Nevertheless, Ellitt's direction undoubtedly brings an energy and lightness of touch to the film's treatment of sporting activity: the pace of *Britain's Youth* is brisk, with almost thirty individual sports packed into the film's twelve minute running time. In this sense, then, the film might be seen as the work of a director who is also an experienced film editor, and which owes its dynamism, in part, to its pacing.

The soundtrack of *Britain's Youth* appears to have allowed little room for Ellitt to demonstrate anything other than a workmanlike ability to combine voice-over with music. Like many documentaries made at this time, the actual footage would almost certainly have been shot mute, and a bare-bones combination of voice-over and music would have presented a cost-effective way of adding sound to the film. Ellitt's next directorial effort, *Scotland Speaks* (1941), also made for Strand, varies little from this format, with its soundtrack dominated largely by a mix of voice-over and music. However, there are also brief moments when location sound replaces the film's score. Sequences documenting coal mining, the manufacture of steel, the unloading of ships, and the manufacture of cloth, hint at Ellitt's interest in an art of recorded sound. In these scenes Ellitt loses the musical underscoring to temporarily foreground the sounds of the workplace, focusing in particular on mechanical sounds. His ear for the industrial soundscape is most evident in a sequence dealing with the manufacture of cloth, where the listener is treated to a brief montage of the rhythmic sounds

made by industrial looms. It is tempting when listening to this sequence to recall Ellitt's proposition, made in his manifesto *On Sound* six years earlier, that 'beauty in terms of sound-colours is not necessarily confined to orchestras, pianos, etc.' (1935: 184). However, if sequences such as this do perhaps indicate something of Ellitt's interest in sound aesthetics, then these are very much muted by the film's adherence to the dominant conventions of documentary film-making. That is to say, while foregrounding these sounds at certain moments, Ellitt nevertheless ensures that they are always anchored by a naturalistic function, illustrating the film's images in a very direct manner rather than presenting themselves as abstract and purely 'musical' sound textures. Thus any tendency towards sonic experimentation is effectively contained by Ellitt's adherence to cinematic convention.

Ellitt's sensitivity to sound is also confirmed by the concluding section of the film, in which the audience is invited by the film's narrator to listen to a range of Scottish accents: 'You've seen some of our Scotsmen at work, helping to win the war. Now listen to one or two of them, and I'll hope you'll understand their accent'. What follows is a series of six short pieces to camera given by different speakers. Although the content of each address to camera relates to Scotland's contribution to the war effort, the focus here is very much on the music and rhythm of Scots voices, providing a literal and entertaining illustration of the film's title. However, to suggest that *Scotland Speaks* brings significant evidence of Ellitt's previous experiments in electroacoustic composition to the screen would be inaccurate: the film's soundtrack is dominated by scripted commentary, delivered in a strident manner by the film's narrator Joseph Macleod. However, although the film may have represented a lost opportunity for Ellitt in terms of the further development of his own particular band of sonic experimentalism, what it does demonstrate is the fact that he was establishing himself as an able documentary director at Strand. This is evidenced by a review of the film published in *Kinematograph Weekly*, which advises its readers: 'Scotsmen are seen as members of all the

Services, as factory hands and executives, and on the land, and the many illustrations weave into a pointed and commendable pattern. Treatment smooth, commentary very good, and photography excellent. Outstanding featurette' (Scotland Speaks 1941: 17). *Kinematograph Weekly* was the leading trade journal for the film industry at this time, publishing information on booking patterns, interviews with trade personnel, statistics about the trade, and information regarding film policy and production, as well as carrying reviews of current releases (James, 2006: 230). Thus the review quoted above would have been aimed primarily at exhibitors interested, for commercial reasons, in the potential appeal of a title for their own particular audiences. This contrasts with reviews published in *Documentary News Letter* – a publication that was written primarily by and for members of the documentary film-making community, and edited initially by key figures in the British Documentary Movement, including John Grierson, Paul Rotha, Basil Wright and Arthur Elton. Here reviews placed greater focus was placed on matters and debates specific to the genre, informed by the publication's advocacy of the aesthetic value of documentary, and its role as a driver for social progress.

Ellitt's next two projects, *How to Dig* (1941) and *Sowing and Planting* (1941), see him extend his range as director further, embracing the instructional and educational modes of film-making in which was to specialise later in his career, such as those made for the National Coal Board in the 1960s and 1970s. *How to Dig* and *Sowing and Planting* were commissioned by the Ministry of Information for the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, and produced in cooperation with the Royal Horticultural Society. Both titles feature a pared-back aesthetic, making use of just one or two locations, and employing two anonymous gardeners to demonstrate a range of horticultural techniques. Neither project makes use of location sound or music, the soundtrack consisting only of a spoken commentary written and performed by the horticultural writer and broadcaster Roy Hay, who had previously been

recruited by the Ministry of Agriculture to work on the ‘Dig For Victory’ campaign. Although Ellitt’s films are not identified as part of this campaign, their titles, and the employment of Hay as narrator, nevertheless position them in relation to the war effort, encouraging people to grow their own food by using domestic gardens and playing fields for the cultivation of fruit and vegetables. Hay’s voice would have been well known to radio audiences of the period, having been a regular presenter of the BBC’s weekly gardening programme *In Your Garden* in 1940 and 1941, and perhaps more importantly, from his work on *The Radio Allotment*. In the latter programme, which began broadcasting in February 1941, Hay contributed his horticultural expertise to plotside broadcasts made from an allotment cultivated by the BBC’s Outside Broadcasting Department in a residential square close to Broadcasting House in London (Smith, 2013). Thus what Hay brings to Ellitt’s *How to Dig* and *Sowing and Planting* is not simply knowledge of the subject, but also his profile as a well-known broadcaster. As Stollery points out, during World War II the BBC gained a reputation as a trustworthy source of news, further proposing, ‘The use of BBC voices in wartime British documentaries for the MOI can be seen as a way of incorporating the BBC’s reputation for independence into films that always ran the risk of being dismissed by audiences as government propaganda’ (2013: 211). At the same time, Hay’s association with the BBC adds production value to these low budget films, as well as a certain popular appeal: as Stollery puts it, ‘the inclusion on commentary tracks of voices often familiar from newsreels or other media formed part of the larger process of documentary’s journey from the margins to, for a brief period, a location closer to the centre of British cultural life’ (ibid.: 203).

Despite being produced with minimal resources – each film costing just over £500 to produce[10] – the films nevertheless demonstrate Ellitt's sure command of the medium and his ability to engage and hold the attention of the viewer. This was recognised by a *Documentary News Letter* review of *Sowing and Planting*, which identifies the film as a well-crafted piece of work: 'Within its limits, full marks. It is extremely well made, clearly shot, neatly edited and simply commentated' (Sowing and Planting 1942: 6). The construction of screen space and use of match on action distinguish these instructional films from Ellitt's earlier documentaries, such as *Britain's Youth*, which employ the largely montage-based approach to editing associated with what Bill Nichols has termed 'evidentiary editing' (1991: 17). Nichols argues that the techniques of continuity editing are subject to significant modification in evidentiary editing, in which cutting is motivated by the need 'to bring together the best possible evidence in support of a point' (ibid.) rather than create spatial and temporal continuity. Thus, he proposes, 'Instead of organizing cuts within a scene to present a sense of a single, unified time and space in which we can quickly locate the relative position of central characters, documentary organizes cuts within a scene to present the impression of a single, convincing argument' (ibid.:19). However, Ellitt's aim in these instructional films is to document a process, broken down into specific procedures, rather than make an argument. To do this as clearly and coherently as possible, he draws on a number of film-making strategies closely associated with classical continuity editing, using matches on action to document the techniques being demonstrated on screen by his anonymous gardeners, and creating spatial continuity when cutting together shots from different angles and distances.

The skills associated with this style of editing – and in particular the strategies of cinematography required to generate footage that will later edit together to create a coherent

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[10]. How to Dig 1941, London: The National Archives. INF 6/508; Sowing and Planting 1941, London: The National Archives. INF 6/510.

sense of space, time and action – were not something that Ellitt would have learned while working with Lye, whose use of visual abstraction and preference for experimentation represented a clear departure from established modes of cinematic representation. Thus, while both *How to Dig* and *Sowing and Planting* are in many respects modest pieces of work, they nevertheless demonstrate the way in which Ellitt was developing and extending his craft as a director. At the same time, we see Ellitt beginning to draw on his experience in animation as a means to add visual interest to his treatment of the film's subject matter. Here, the time taken for certain repetitive tasks, such as the removal of turf, is condensed through the use of an additive form of object animation, giving something of the effect of time-lapse photography. As will be seen, this use of animation becomes a recurrent feature of Ellitt's work in the 1940s, and while in some ways it harks back to his former association with Lye, it nevertheless also serves to distinguish his own work from that of his former collaborator.

Although government-financed film projects in support of the war effort appear to have been a mainstay of Ellitt's work as a director during this period, projects could also be secured from other sponsors. *This is Colour* (1942), produced by Strand for Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI), was one such commission. The film deals with the manufacture and uses of dyes and pigments – an area of research and production in which ICI was active – and also explores the meaning and uses of colour in broader terms. *This is Colour* opens with a demonstration of the relationship between light and colour which benefits not only from Jack Cardiff's vivid Technicolor cinematography, but also Ellitt's ability to present technical information in an accessible and understandable manner. The technical aspects of the film, dealing with the history, chemistry and commercial production of dyes and pigments, as well as some basic colour theory, contrast with more playful elements, including the film's closing sequence of colour abstractions. The latter makes use of shots of what appear to be brightly coloured objects manipulated behind patterned glass, producing a form of real-time abstract

imagery. Ellitt also films coloured paint being dribbled Jackson Pollock-style into other paints, clouds of dye dispersed in water, and small heaps of coloured pigment manipulated through stop-frame animation. These elements combine to create a closing sequence that provides a lively response to the instruction issued by the film's narrator, 'now let all the colours dance!' Ellitt's use of visual abstraction received particular praise in *Documentary News Letter*, whose reviewer comments, 'the last sequence is a beautifully conceived movement of colour in abstract shapes. Poetry, movement and colour combine to enchant the eye and ear.' (This Is Colour 1942: 71)

In this use of intensely coloured abstraction Ellitt draws on the visual vocabulary of the work produced with Lye in the 1930s, but creates his imagery through by the manipulation of objects in real-time rather using Lye's cameraless technique of painting directly onto film. What also distinguishes Ellitt's directorial approach here is that while the closing sequence of the film borrows from the visual music tradition of experimental cinema, his pursuit of experimentation is both 'applied' and is employed as an adjunct to other modes of representation. Thus creativity, in Ellitt's documentary film work, always serves a purpose determined by the project's brief. As documentary film curator and writer Patrick Russell puts it in his insightful commentary on *This is Colour*, 'What makes the elusive Ellitt fascinating is precisely that his experimentalism is a little more furtive than Lye's, more subtly assimilated into a more orthodox documentary approach' (Russell 2016).

Russell's comments on *This Is Colour* might equally apply to *ABCD of Heath*, also made in 1942, in which Ellitt turns his attention to the subject of wartime nutrition in an inventive take on the importance of vitamins to a healthy diet. The film was commissioned by The Ministry of Information for the Ministry of Food, and produced by Spectator Short Films. Ellitt has a great deal of complex information to deliver in the film's nine minutes, including the function of vitamins, and the nutritional sources from which these can be

obtained at different times of the year. Tackling vitamins A, B, C and D in turn, Ellitt weaves material from a studio shoot of two young children playing in a nursery setting, animated graphics, and library footage, into a lively and informative short film. The sound palette of *ABCD of Heath* is more varied than Ellitt's previous work, and in addition to voice-over commentary incorporates the use of children's and adult voices, music played on the recorder, and an extract from Eric Coates' *The Merrimakers Overture* (1923).

Like the soundtrack, which weaves together different types of sound from a variety sources, so Ellitt employs a range of visual techniques and approaches. Animation is used throughout the film to convey information and to entertain the audience: loaves of wholewheat bread are animated to move around the screen like the carriages of a train; piles of beans and pulses grow magically from empty saucers; and, to illustrate the detrimental effects of overcooking, Ellitt animates a cloud of superimposed letter 'C's rising from pan of boiling cabbage, signifying the loss of vitamin content. The visual invention that Ellitt undoubtedly brings to the film serves to distinguish his work of the 1940s from that he produced with Lye in the previous decade. The commissions received from the GPO Film Unit and other sponsors in the 1930s could be viewed as the means by which Lye was able to support his creative activities with little sense of compromise. As Phyllis Cain, John Grierson's secretary at the GPO film unit, recalled, 'he [Lye] was given a completely free hand with all his work'.[11] In contrast, in *This is Colour* and elsewhere, Ellitt's appears to harness his creative experience and energies to realise the pedagogical demands of the project rather than treating the brief as a means to further develop his interests in experimental film-making.

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[11]. Cain, P. (c.1985), Personal recollections of the GPO Film Unit by John Grierson's secretary. London: The Royal Mail Archive. POST 108/298, p.8.

Ellitt was to make at least two other shorts for Spectator during the war: *Safety First* (1942) *and Sorting Salvage* (1942). At approximately 90 seconds in length, these newsreel trailers work to convey a clear message with maximum impact and efficiency. In *Safety First*, made for the Ministry of War Transport, Ellitt draws on Soviet-style montage editing to create a dramatic film about children and road safety. In contrast, *Sorting Salvage*, commissioned for the Ministry of Supply, employs light comic verse combined with stop-frame animation to explain best practice with regards to sorting salvage, and how this helps to support the war effort. Each category of salvage – paper, rags, metal, bones and rubber – is introduced by an animated title made from the material itself, followed by a combination of live action and object animation to illustrate the way in which each should be sorted. Thus in the section dealing with the recycling of rubber, Ellitt shows a sole being removed and discarded from worn shoe which, upon landing on the floor, appears to move of its own volition to join other pieces of discarded footwear. Viewed alongside *This is Colour* and *ABCD of Health*, *Sorting Salvage* demonstrates that in addition to his experience as a film editor, animation was an area of expertise which Ellitt was able to draw upon when directing his own films. His knowledge of animation would be exploited to a much fuller extent in the postwar film *Chasing the Blues* (1946), made for the documentary film-makers' collective DATA. This particular film not only shows Ellitt at his most playful, but it also seems to represent something of a turning point in his career, in that it appears to mark the end of Ellitt's professional engagement with overtly experimental approaches to film-making.

The early postwar period and films for DATA

The Documentary and Technicians Alliance (DATA) was established in 1944 by a group of documentary film-makers with the express purpose of producing films on social themes (DATA 1944: 50). This focus on social issues, and the fact that DATA was set up as a

collective, gives an indication of the political orientation of the group, which included a number of Communist Party members (Russell and Taylor 2010: 34). There is little doubt that Ellitt's political views would aligned him closely with other members of the group: according to Horrocks, Ellitt held strong left-wing views,[12] and while there is no evidence in the archives of the Communist Part of Great Britain to indicate he was actually a party member, he was nevertheless a believer in communism. This is confirmed by Ellitt's nephew Alan Eggleton, who states that both Ellitt and his wife Doris held communistic beliefs, evidenced by the fact that one year the couple gifted him a copy of *Das Kapital* as a Christmas present.[13] Although not a founding member of the collective, Ellitt had certainly joined its ranks by January 1946, when his name appears in an advertisement placed by DATA in the pages of *Documentary News Letter* (DATA 1946: 12). However, his professional association with the collective appears to have been quite loose, since a 1947 list of personnel associated with the group no longer contains Ellitt's name (DATA 1947a: 149), despite the fact that he continued to direct films for DATA into the early 1950s. During his time with DATA Ellitt directed at least four films: *Education of the Deaf* (1946); *Triumph Over Deafness* (1946) – a shorter version of *Education of the Deaf* made for general audiences; *Chasing the Blues*, co-directed with Jack Chambers; and *The Price of Happiness* (1952).

Education of the Deaf is perhaps the film which points most clearly to the way in which Ellitt's career as director was to evolve over the next two decades, and which also demonstrates how his technical expertise in sound synchronisation was employed to add production value to low budget documentaries. The film was made in conjunction with the Department for the Education of the Deaf at Manchester University and was commissioned

[12]. Horrocks, R. (2017), Email to Andy Birtwistle. 28 March.

[13]. Eggleton, A. (2017), Email to Andy Birtwistle. 6 April 2017.

by the British Council to showcase the advances in research and deaf education being made in the UK. The film deals with the diagnosis and treatment of deafness in people of all ages, but focuses largely on children, covering the various stages of education from infancy to preparation for employment. The film was praised highly by *Monthly Film Bulletin*, whose reviewer commented, 'the shots are extremely well selected, the photography excellent. Most of the film is a factual record and entirely unrehearsed and there is a complete naturalness on the part of all those who appear in the film' (Education of the Deaf 1946: 107). Unlike trade publications such as *Kinematograph Weekly* or *Documentary News Letter*, the British Film Institute's *Monthly Film Bulletin*, was also read by audiences outside the film industry, since it was issued to all members of the Institute. Much of what this reviewer perceived as the film's naturalness is in fact a product of Ellitt's skilful post-synchronisation of sound, which is remarkable given the conditions under which the film would have been produced. Most of the low budget documentaries of this period were shot mute using a 35mm film camera, such as the clockwork Newman Sinclair, with sound added in post-production. Although this would have been a decision made primarily for financial reasons, the absence of film sound recording equipment at a shoot would have facilitated access to particular locations, as well as reducing the impact of the film-making process on participants in the documentary. The alternative to a completely post-produced soundtrack would be for the film-maker to shoot selected scenes on a sound stage (as is the case with the pieces to camera that close *Scotland Speaks*), and then to combine this studio material with mute footage shot on location. One of the film-making strategies most commonly adopted to address the problem of location sound was to avoid conspicuous speech on camera, since this might necessitate the addition lip synced dialogue in post-production, and instead to use a combination of music, sound effects, and voice-over.

However, since *Education of the Deaf* focuses so much on speech development, Ellitt made the decision to create the effect of lip synch even though shooting on location. That much of the sound in the film was *not* recorded synchronously with the image is suggested by a number of indicators. Firstly, a significant proportion of the speech we hear is recorded in close proximity to the subject, producing the close-miked quality associated with sound recorded in a studio rather than on location, and which, in terms of sound perspective, may not be in keeping with the shot distance of the accompanying image. Secondly, there is no registration of ambient sounds in most of the scenes featuring lip synch, indicating again that the film's dialogue was recorded in a controlled sound environment rather than on location. Thirdly, and perhaps most obviously, there are occasional mismatches between the timing of what we hear on the soundtrack and the movement of the subject's lips as they speak on screen. It is also interesting to note, as one further piece of evidence indicating the post-produced nature of the soundtrack, that Ellitt's own voice is heard dubbing an adult participant in a lip reading class, clearly recognisable from the interviews conducted many years later for Keith Griffiths's documentary *Doodlin'- Impressions of Len Lye* (1987).[14]

The job of recreating adult speech in a studio would have been relatively straightforward, since the participant could have been coached accordingly. However, this approach would have been significantly more challenging with regards to the younger children featured in the film. The solution that Ellitt appears to have adopted is to have staged many of the teaching activities featured in the film twice: once on location, shooting image

[14]. As the sound recordist Ken Cameron recalled in his 1947 book *Sound and the Documentary Film*: 'In the old days, when documentary units were small and struggling and unknown, a few odd voices could generally be gathered from the carpenters or the offices. No one in the unit minded lending a hand, or rather a voice, when there was a day's post-synchronizing to be done' (1947: 76).

without sound, and then repeating the activity a second time in a controlled sound environment to record sound. Sound recordings made in this way could then reasonably be expected to demonstrate some degree of synchronisation if edited carefully to the picture. What results is a lively and, as the *Monthly Film Bulletin* critic suggests, natural soundtrack. While the editing of the soundtrack must have been a painstaking task, Ellitt's construction of an observational dynamic creates a feeling of intimacy and warmth in relation to his subjects that is perhaps rare in documentaries of this period. It is this sense of humanity that characterises a number of Ellitt's later films, such as those made for the National Coal Board in the 1960s and 1970s. Here, even when dealing highly technical topics such as mining ventilation or electrical safety, Ellitt manages to inject a little humour, and to treat the working people he portrays with warmth and respect.

While *Education of the Deaf* employs the expertise in sound synchronisation that Ellitt had developed in the 1930s, *Chasing the Blues* draws on his avant-garde credentials, and in particular his experience of working with Lye. The film was commissioned as one of a series produced by DATA for the Cotton Board, and takes as its subject the welfare of workers employed in cotton mills. The tone of the film is playful, as indicated by DATA's own promotional material: 'Jack Chambers and Jack Ellitt make whoopee with the statistics spent on welfare and improvements in Lancashire cotton mills' (DATA 1947b: 78). Despite the fact that directorially the film was a collaboration with Jack Chambers, it is Ellitt's previous experience of working with Lye that shapes much of the film's imagery and also its audiovisual aesthetic. The soundtrack is provided by the British band leader Jack Parnell, whose jazz score modulates between slow, bluesy cues and a more upbeat, bebop-inspired sound. This use of music is immediately reminiscent of Ellitt's work with Lye in the 1930s, in which Ellitt would typically create a soundtrack from montages of popular jazz and Latin numbers. This montage structure is maintained in *Chasing the Blues*, although as publicity

material written for the film explains, ‘Music was specially recorded to the lengths of the moods into which the story was divided’.[15] At the same time, however, there is less of the very precise synchronisation between sound and image that we witness in the animated films that Ellitt made with Lye, such as *Rainbow Dance* and *Trade Tattoo*. In *Chasing the Blues* close synchronisation of music and image is employed intermittently rather than being used to provide the film’s fundamental audiovisual structure.

The film’s imagery draws on a range of sources and film-making techniques: documentary footage shot in Lancashire cotton mills is combined with animated graphics and text, object animation, drawings by the cartoonist David Langdon, and superimposed live action footage of two Sadlers Wells ballet dancers dressed in white overalls (closely resembling the figures from a well-known Hall’s Distemper advisement of the period). Visual experimentation is more evident here than in Ellitt’s other films, drawing on superimposition, a limited use of slow motion cinematography, and even image inversion, to create a sense of fun and energy. Some of this imagery, and the techniques employed, clearly borrow from Ellitt’s earlier collaborations with Lye. This is most evident in the sequences featuring the dancers going about the business of painting walls, equipping canteens and rest rooms, moving machinery and installing lighting. This footage is superimposed over live action shots and also animated backgrounds, recalling Lye’s use of the dancer Rupert Doone in the GPO film *Rainbow Dance*. The similarity with Lye’s work is picked up in the promotional material for the film, which poses the rhetorical question, ‘what about having a film with no spoken words at all, but only a few words seen on the screen, after the manner of Len Lye’s TRADE

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[15]. Alexander, D. (1947), ‘Chasing the blues’, *Edinburgh Festival Programme ‘Documentary 47’*. London: BFI Reuben Library. Press Cuttings BFI PO84044.

TATTOO?'.[16] The influence of Ellitt's former collaborator is also detected by the reviewer for *Documentary New Letter*, who comments:

> The DATA technicians have avoided ponderous exhortations and wordy argument. Instead they have produced a kind of film ballet which makes its points almost entirely in music and movement. The technique derives, partly at any rate, from Len Lye's abstract film posters of the 1930s, and it fulfils its purpose to admiration. (Chasing the Blues 1947: 104).

In addition to the more obvious ways in which *Chasing the Blues* echoes Lye's films of the 1930s, there is also an intriguing connection between Ellitt's work here and ideas about cinematic realism developed by Lye during the period in which they worked together on their final collaboration, *N or NW*. Lye had filmed a highly experimental sequence for the film, featuring a woman walking on a garden path alongside a brick wall. Although this sequence was not included in the final cut of the film, it was documented by Lye in an article published in *Sight and Sound*, entitled *Television – New axes to grind* (1939). Here Lye argues that one of the problems of the traditional photographic approach to recording images is that every aspect of the image is rendered in the same level of detail, regardless of its relevance to the story. As an alternative, Lye proposes that different levels of realism be employed within the same image, as a means to place focus on the emotional content of the story. He writes:

> If the film is to make any advance as a story-telling medium it must isolate and emphasise the essential elements of a given story instead of copying the story in a one-level rendering that includes all the small, unnecessary, dull details of everyday

[16]. Ibid.

> realism … The technique of using different levels of realism to present a story's emotional realities, in contrast to the technique used in films to-day, requires a studio 'trick' photographic control of almost all natural movements so as to reconstruct them in a specifically film way. (1939: 69)

Lye's proposal for the reconstruction of natural movements, so that they might be rendered in a 'specifically film way', appears to be realised by Ellitt in the opening sequence of *Chasing the Blues*. Cutting from an animated drawing showing the manager of a cotton mill sitting gloomily at his desk, we see a live action point-of-view shot of a sheet of paper on which the character is compiling a list of worries. In keeping with the drawing, the actor playing the manager wears a white work coat, although the hand which grips the pen is now concealed in a thick protective glove. Rather than showing the individual words being written on the page, the gloved hand holding the pen passes over the sheet of paper, moving to the rhythm of the music, while words magically appear in its wake on the blank page below (Figure 1). Rather than rendering the act of writing in realistic detail, the movements of the actor perform a simplified and stylised mime, theoretically, at least, allowing the viewer to focus on what is being written rather than the act of writing itself.

[Figure 1 about here]

In this way the sequence might easily be seen as a realisation of Lye's proposal for a new form of cinematic expression, in which 'different levels of realism established photographically would be valuable aids to easy viewing' (1939: 65). In reality, however, the novelty of this approach draws the conscious attention of the viewer, and rather than isolating the most important part of the image (the manager's list of worries), potentially distracts the viewer's attention from it.

While some elements of *Chasing the Blues* undoubtedly indicate Lye's artistic influence, to suggest that Ellitt's work here is simply derivative or emulative would be inaccurate. When viewed within the context provided by Ellitt's other films of the 1940s, it becomes clear that his own directorial approach is marked by the deployment of a range of film-making techniques within the same project. What *Chasing the Blues* shares with *This Is Colour* and *ABCD of Health* is the sheer multiplicity of creative approaches that Ellitt draws upon within a single film to convey information and maintain audience interest. This approach not only distinguishes his work of the 1940s from that produced with Lye in the 1930s, but also suggests that Ellitt's work is driven by the needs of his sponsors and his audiences, rather than a desire to pursue artistic experimentation for its own sake. Ellitt draws on his creative experience, including an interest in experimental film-making, to meet the requirements of a project brief: in this case, to illustrate and supplement a statistical pamphlet produced by the Recruitment and Training Department of the Cotton Board about money spent on welfare improvements in cotton mills.[17] Thus, according to a promotional statement written for the film, the rationale for using a jazz soundtrack was that it provided 'a musical background likely to appeal to millworkers, whether they took in the visual or not'.[18] This differs from Lye's repeated use of jazz, which stems much more obviously from a personal love of the music (Horrocks 2017). Ellitt's work is thus fundamentally driven by his sponsor's needs, with each project constructed in response to the demands of a particular commission. This contrasts, I would argue, with Lye's authorial approach; as Arthur Elton put it, describing Lye's work for the GPO, 'it was only by an effort that [John] Grierson was able to mould both the inflexibilities of the Savings Bank, and Len Lye's artistic aspirations, so

[17]. Ibid.

[18]. Ibid.

that each side could contribute to the joint effort which culminated in *Colour Box*' (Elton 1948: 113).[19]

Chasing the Blues was well received by the reviewer for *Documentary News Letter* who writes:

> Experiments of this kind are as welcome as they are rare, and it is to be hoped that both sponsors and producers will explore further the land of fantasy. They will find it an invaluable base in their war against the Great Ho-Hum. (Chasing the Blues 1947: 104)

However, despite representing what another reviewer described as 'a pleasant change from objective documentary' (Edinburgh in Review 1947: 152), Ellitt's professional involvement with experimental approaches to film-making appears to have ended here. From this point on, the films directed by Ellitt align more closely with the naturalistic and didactic modes of representation that characterise *Education of the Deaf,* marking a clear break with the experimentalism that characterised his earlier work with Lye.

Conclusion

As a director, Ellitt's use of sound does not seem to have been influenced, in any significant way, by the radical and pioneering experiments in electroacoustic composition that he had first undertaken in the 1930s. This does not mean to say, however, that Ellitt lost interest in experimental sound art, since he continued to work on his own electroacoustic compositions

[19]. Here Elton appears to confuse *Colour Box* with *Rainbow Dance*.

well into the 1980s.[20] However, reviewing Ellitt's output as a director in the 1940s, what does become evident is that if his documentaries do indeed exhibit a particular style, then this relates to the way in which he employs different film-making techniques and modes of representation within the same project, as a means to communicate information and to maintain audience interest in the film's subject matter. In the films of the 1940s, animation stands out as a common feature of a number of Ellitt's documentaries. Given his experience of working with Lye in the 1930s, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ellitt should have turned to this as a means to enliven some of the commissions he worked on as a director. However, what distinguishes Ellitt's work as an animator in his own right is the fact that he works primarily with object animation. This was not a form that Lye had explored during the period in which he worked with Ellitt, and thus the expertise that Ellitt developed in this technique would have been achieved independently of Lye, building on his earlier experience, perhaps, of stop-frame model animation.[21]

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[20]. Ellitt's last documented electroacoustic composition, *Homage to Rachel Carson #2,* was made in 1987 as as a tribute to his friend Len Lye, who died in 1980.

[21]. Lye's first foray into object animation was the 1941 film *When the Pie Was Opened*.

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Ellitt's ability as an animator raises the issue of artistic influence in relation to his former collaboration with Lye. While some of the imagery and techniques used in *Chasing the Blues* would seem to identify Lye as the influencer, and Ellitt as the influenced, the nature of their friendship and collaboration has the potential to problematise this assumption. Sarah Wall, examining the importance of sound within Lye's sculptural work of the 1950s and 1960s writes, 'Ellitt's influence on Lye is evident in Lye's 1936 essay "Notes on a Short Colour Film" in which he writes of "a pure sound construction, perhaps in ranges of sound not yet made use of"' (2018). While Wall's analysis focuses on specifically on sound, this observation raises the question of the extent to which Ellitt may have contributed to Lye's aesthetic development more broadly. Since, in the 1940s, Ellitt revealed himself to be an able animator, it is possible that he may have been more involved in the animation process when working with Lye than his screen credits suggest. Both Low (1979) and Cook (2017) recognise the limitations of attributing authorship wholly to Lye in projects that relied so much on music and sound synchronisation, but it is also possible that Ellitt's influence and contribution extended beyond this. Although it is unlikely that we could ever determine the totality of what Ellitt contributed to Lye's work (or vice versa), what Ellitt's films of the 1940s do point towards is the complexity of collaborative authorship.

Through the 1940s we see Ellitt developing his craft skills as a director, from dealing with the construction of screen space and continuity of action in *How to Dig*, to directing

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both actors and non-actors in his final film for DATA, *The Price of Happiness* (1952). At the same time, the evidence provided by the films he directed during this period show something of a change of direction, moving away from the use of animation and experimental approaches, to more traditional forms of documentary and educational film-making. As Martin Stollery and John Corner point out (2013), the history of British documentary film-making has often been framed by a received narrative of rise and postwar decline. This narrative proposes, amongst other things, that the experimentation which was so central to the films of the British documentary movement became less evident in the postwar era. Certainly, the ecology of British documentary film production changed after the war, including changes to the sources of funding that had the potential to impact on the degree of creative freedom enjoyed by individual film-makers. As Russell and Taylor put it, 'during the post-war period… the balance of influence over form and content shifted somewhat from the 'artist' to the sponsor' (2010: 4). It may be possible that Ellitt's movement towards more conventional and popular forms of documentary film-making was simply a result of the work that was available at this time, and which may not have provided the same opportunities for experimentation that previous commissions had. However, as Ellitt's work of the 1940s demonstrates, the requirements of a project's brief always informed the creative decisions he made as a director. Thus, rather than sketching out a career trajectory that aligns with the received narrative of postwar decline, what Ellitt's films of the 1940s might be seen to represent are developments and new directions in his practice of craft skills, built up over time, and upon which he would build a long and successful career as a documentary director.

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