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Arthur Dulay and John Grierson: fitting *Drifters* (1929)

Abstract

This article arises from an unexpected discovery among the papers held in John Grierson's Archive at the University of Stirling, which stimulated historical analysis. The document in question makes it possible to locate *Drifters* in the short-lived period of transition from silent to sound films. The moment when Grierson's film was first screened to audiences at the end of 1929 coincided with the technological transition in British cinema from accompaniment by musicians playing live in the auditorium to the introduction of fully synchronized sound on film.

Arthur Dulay's 'Musical Suggestions for *Drifters*' furnish plain evidence of not only how complex the work of projectionists and their assistants could be, but also how, until the transition to recorded sound was complete, a variety of methods was deployed in different cinemas to add music and sound effects to pictures. The transition from silent to sound film occurred comparatively rapidly, when seen against the long timespan of the silent era. For those caught up in it, however, it must have seemed a protracted change, with musicians having to live with deepening anxiety over their future while projectionists, independent cinema-owners and managers had to tackle the day-by-day delays in wiring their picture houses, acquiring, installing and learning how to operate expensive equipment.

Keywords: British cinemas; *Drifters*; Arthur Dulay; John Grierson; live music; New Era; sound-on-disc

Many people employed in British cinemas felt the impact of the transition to sound as a direct consequence of the clash between the old and new film technologies. It brought about the loss of some sorts of work (principally affecting musicians) and the

creation or enhancement of others, though in smaller numbers than those that were lost. To take the key case in point, cinemas had not only to retrain existing projectionists, but all managers other than those in charge of the smallest picture houses found that they needed to recruit additional, technically qualified operators to help run a full programme. All these people had to be skilled workers capable of coping with the suddenly increased technical complexity of the operator's duties, not least because the responsibility for bringing sound to the screen now fell principally on them. It is significant with regard to their enhanced status in the business that the term 'projectionist' came to prominence and replaced 'operator' and 'booth man', a terminological shift coinciding, broadly speaking, with the evolution of a formerly simple function into what soon became a technologically intricate and demanding role.

In large part, then, the increasing burden on these workers was caused by an almost incessant succession of technical developments launched in the early years of sound on screen. These promised to bring exhibitors significant improvements in the reliability and quality of their shows. It was not just that projectors could produce clearer and more stable pictures, but that soundtrack recording and playback systems (not to forget the amplifiers and speakers linked to them) were brought onto the market, rendering better balanced and richer sound. Of course, all this new equipment had to be mastered and maintained by its operators. Nor was this all. To add to projectionists' responsibilities, they became answerable to local authorities for improving the standards of safety for both moviegoers and staff. This was a legal obligation under new regulations on picture houses endorsed by public opinion and trade unions after the catastrophic consequences of fire in a rewinding room at the Glen cinema in Paisley at the end of 1929 when seventy children were crushed to death in the rush to escape.¹

Although changes in the pattern of employment in British cinemas are relevant to the topic on which this paper focuses, it has to be admitted that they were not in my thoughts when I began looking through John Grierson's papers relating to his first venture as a film director rather than a producer.² *Drifters* has of course been used for decades as a convenient starting point for discussion on the nature of documentary, commencing with the way Grierson described and elaborated his concepts of what documentary should be. It and the films that were made subsequently by the Empire

Marketing Board (EMB), the General Post Office (GPO) and the Film Units linked with them have long been analysed through a variety of frames.

In practice, Grierson's instructions to members of his team were detailed, incisive and not to be ignored. For example, in 1932 he sent Edgar Anstey on a year's shoot on board a Royal Naval survey ship charged with surveying the Labrador Coast.³ Grierson kept up a steady flow of instructions to Anstey by means of Naval Signals. One, laden with his characteristically vivid comments on a set of rushes, reads:

Rushes OK. But action too incidental. Beware too many still shots and pretty designs. Get further into and explain pertinent details of each episode. Example man up mast useless without detailed precariousness and what and why of action.⁴

Led by so charismatic a producer, one with a determined will and who pursued a pre-planned strategy, it is hardly surprising that a tight-knit group of filmmakers emerged in the EMB, GPO and associated Film Units. These individuals claimed to provide insight into the lives of working people by documenting them authentically and challenging the demeaning stereotypes found in British feature films of the 1930s. Rolf Bond, making the contrast, said, 'when workers did appear [in such films] they were always the comedy relief, the buffoons, the idiots or the servants'.⁵ In fact, many of the Units' documentaries functioned as public relations instruments supporting British and Empire products. In addition, as Grierson had intended from the start, they were vehicles for social propaganda. By no means incidentally, *Drifters* embraced all three objectives and, given its significance as a standard bearer for the wider documentary project Grierson was about to propose to the EMB, it is no surprise that he took an interest in the music selected to accompany its screenings.

The discovery among papers held in the Grierson Archive at the University of Stirling of a single worn sheet of paper printed in landscape format was not of itself startling. Nor did its title, promising Arthur Dulay's 'Musical Suggestions for *Drifters*', initially convey much. Suggestions for music thought appropriate as accompaniment to a particular film were not unknown by the late 1920s. Ian Christie has noted that Edison and Vitagraph had begun as early as 1910 to issue recommendations for suitable musical accompaniment for their productions as a means of intervening in the chaotic variety of performance practices current in picture

houses.⁶ In Britain, *The Bioscope* occasionally printed suggestions appropriate for films on the circuit.⁷ A case in point is J. Morton Hutcheson's piece in his regular column on 'Music in the Cinema' to coincide with the 1916 release of *The Battle of the Somme* (Geoffrey Malins, 1916). His headline adds the words 'Official Picture' to the film's title, which thanks his editor and the film's 'sole booking director' for permission to publish his recommendations and implicitly recognizes the government's approval for screening live footage of the battle to public audiences. Hutcheson's suggestions feature: marches; music augmenting the turmoil of battle; and other pieces that express the solemnity of death. All are carefully cued to fit each of the film's five parts. To reinforce government approval for screening scenes of warfare in which soldiers were killed,⁸ Hutcheson emphasized that musicians 'must realise the seriousness and awfulness of the scenes depicted,' and added, 'We don't want to hear "Sunshine of Your Smile" played in any part of this film'.⁹ The warning was apposite but on at least one occasion was ignored: one screening in Dublin included Part 5 of *The Battle of the Somme* embedded in the wholly inappropriate context of a variety programme.¹⁰

As Michael Allen shows, during the two years before the release of *Drifters*, a number of specialist companies had been formed in Britain which 'offered to take the effort of musical selection away from the cinema managers'.¹¹ In October 1927 a report in a trade paper drew this innovation to readers' attention:

Handel and Company, a London firm, has been formed with this object. An exhibitor who is playing, let us say, *The Flag Lieutenant* sends along the musical suggestions to Handel & Co., who then attend to the picking of suitable records and supply a complete set for the film.¹²

In July 1929 Butcher's Film Service had done something comparable. They prepared a list of musical suggestions for gramophone accompaniment to coincide with the release of their own production, *Shadowed*. Their proposals relied mainly on three records to underscore the film's three main themes.¹³

Dulay's 'Musical Suggestions' was, however, more than an early instance of a film's production company together with its distributor attempting either to control or at least offer coherent advice on its musical accompaniment. Dulay's document was also breaking new ground in placing *Drifters* at the very cusp of changing patterns of

employment, technology and aesthetic practices in the cinema. His spreadsheet furnishes plain evidence of not only how complex the work of projectionists and their assistants could be in the new era¹⁴ but also how, until the transition to recorded sound was complete, a variety of methods were deployed in different cinemas to add music and sound effects to pictures. Dulay's suggestions address all these soon-to-be-obsolete formats.

The transition from silent to sound film is rightly described as having occurred rapidly when seen against the long time-span of a historical epoch. For those caught up in it, however, it must have seemed a protracted change, with musicians having to live with deepening anxiety over their future while projectionists, independent cinema owners and managers had to tackle the day-by-day delays in wiring their picture-houses, acquiring and installing expensive equipment. As Allen explains, British producers and exhibitors became aware of the advent of sound films as it occurred in America:

However, the immediate chances of British exhibitors getting their hands on relevant equipment was slim, at least in the short term; the resultant gap between first awareness and acquisition being [between] eighteen months and two years. But while in America this time period signalled the gap between first appearance and large-scale installation of theatres with sound equipment, in Britain the time-frame was between first appearance of sound films in America and the appearance of any significant apparatus in Britain ... roughly from early 1927 to the end of 1928. ... a specific kind of audio technology – the electrical reproducer – was developed to 'plug the gap', and by using recorded music on commercially available records, provided British audiences with some semblance of sound and talking picture experience until the appearance of the American equipment.¹⁵

The electrical reproducer (the terminology of the day) became possible thanks to the prior innovation in 1923 of electrical recording, which used a microphone to convert sound waves into an electrical signal to register on a disc clearer, more complete information than the conical horn had done. In 1926 the electrical reproducer was brought to the market by Brunswick as the Panatrope. It could not only make electrical recordings for domestic playback but also amplify the sound far beyond its original level, doing so without distortion and emitting it in picture houses through loudspeakers that could be remote from the source disc.¹⁶

Drifters was first screened to audiences at the end of 1929, and Dulay's document enables us to locate it aurally, so to speak, in that relatively brief time

coinciding with the transition from so-called silent to pre-recorded sound on film in British cinema.¹⁷ This was the short-lived period when, with few exceptions, British exhibitors would either employ live musicians or depend on asynchronous sound recorded on disc and amplified by the electrical reproducer. Soon both practices succumbed to sound on film, when music chosen by film production companies was recorded and edited in the studio before being printed alongside the images on the film.

The significant point about Dulay's 'Musical Suggestions' is that the spreadsheet encompasses several alternative means by which British cinemas in late 1929 could furnish musical accompaniment to *Drifters* [Figure 1]. The film's premiere was arranged for members of the Film Society in London on Sunday, 10 November 1929. At this period in its history, the Society's committee would, according to John Riley, choose one of four approaches to screening silent films: they might be intentionally left silent, or be accompanied by live musicians, or by records, or by a narrator: 'Each performance usually involved some permutation of these, underlining the transitional nature of this period and reflecting the eclecticism of the society's film programming'.¹⁸ The programme notes for *Drifters* reveal that an orchestra was hired to accompany its premiere screening at the Tivoli Palace on the Strand.¹⁹ Dulay (himself a successful accompanist and musical director) must have had the confidence of the film's distributor, New Era, in undertaking the task of writing this set of recommendations, since they appear above that company's name. Plainly, they planned for screenings in smaller, less affluent picture houses than those in London's West End. On the left side of the page, Dulay suggests titles that would guide the performance of live accompanists, be they a lone pianist, a small group of players or an orchestra (Figure 2). I shall leave aside for the moment accounting for the three themes listed at the top left-hand corner of the paper because they are more readily understood when the other entries on the sheet have been discussed. I start instead with the five columns that lie beneath them. Dulay first specifies his title for the scene in question, to which the other columns will refer: reading from top to bottom, the column running down the spreadsheet's left flank numbers the scenes sequentially; but the tags listed here are not identical to the on-screen title cards that help the audience understand what they are looking at. Rather, they act as visual cues to those

who are performing the music and assist them in recognizing when to change from one musical style to another. This is confirmed by the second column.

The third and fourth columns on the left half of the spreadsheet specify the titles and composers of pieces which Dulay suggests could be used to reflect or enhance the mood of particular scenes. Each named item would have been on sale as printed sheet music and available from the publisher listed in the fifth column. Some musicians working as solo accompanists to silent films might have wanted to purchase these items for their own collections of sheet music; however, all this information would probably have been of particular interest to picture houses that still employed an orchestra. If a musical director had been hired to lead its players, it was likely that he or she would want to add to the cinema's music library popular items that might be used to accompany more than one movie.

Unlike the left, the right-hand side of the spreadsheet displays information not intended for live performers, but to help projectionists required to use the system, which had originated a year earlier in the USA (Figure 3). As already mentioned, like many developments in the introduction of recorded sound to cinemas, it had first reached a significant portion of a growing market in the USA before being introduced overseas.

In North America during the summer of 1928, exhibitors in smaller houses were trying out non-synchronous phonograph disc players such as Brunswick's Panatrope to provide a viable safeguard should their musicians take strike action against mechanized sound. The system was initially devised as a means of covering for the absence of pit orchestras. Turntables, as such, were not capable of supporting talkies because the discs could not be aligned precisely with images to achieve lip synchrony.²⁰ Extended speech in films could not be dependably recorded *and* reproduced in cinemas until sound-on-film systems had been brought to market (with the daunting capital investment in equipment entailed). On the other hand, as the British trade paper *The Bioscope* advised, one advantage for a cinema rigged with paired turntables was that the set-up could be used to supply both recorded music and sound effects. In addition to the Panatrope, Brunswick sold an inexpensive and wide range of effects discs direct to exhibitors. Significantly for the latter, their cinemas could use those discs again and again without having to pay rental for copyright as they were

obliged to do for each film accompanied by music on discs.²¹ Thus, despite its limitations, sound recorded on disc, then copied and amplified for playback in cinemas provided a viable alternative to live musicians. This arrangement mattered at the time when, despite the technological constraints, audience demand for sound had been demonstrated by Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927) and then further augmented by his *The Singing Fool* (Lloyd Bacon, 1928).

The American experience with this sound-on-disc system adds to our understanding of the commercial context. In August 1928, *Variety* found thirty neighbourhood houses in Chicago that had replaced musicians with a ‘cue boy’ who worked for \$5 per week changing records to keep music cued as tightly as possible to the picture.²² According to *Variety*, these were stopgap arrangements intended to help exhibitors who had hastened to wire their cinemas and were meeting the large capital outlay in part by dismissing their orchestras prematurely to cut wage bills. Now ‘in the rush to catch the talker fans’ and pending the arrival of synchronized product, they were having to improvise sound effects through non-synched devices, having let go percussionists and other instrumentalists skilled in mimicking noises to augment on-screen action.²³ British exhibitors for their part appear to have been motivated not so much by fears of industrial action as by a need, comparable to that of American exhibitors a year earlier, to provide a stopgap between old and new ways of having dependable sound effects and music. Allen notes that some British picture houses re-employed musicians who assisted the projectionist by operating the reproducer. Their musical intelligence enabled these people to get the best results from the equipment.²⁴ A year later, the American Musicians’ Union tested out a plan to do the same in Baltimore.²⁵

When one looks at Dulay’s complete spreadsheet again (Figure 1), it is plain to see that the left side is more densely populated than the right. On the right side the musical cues amount to fourteen in all. Looking at the entire spread, we see that the cues on the right (but not the left) are distributed across four reels. These reels were edited and printed so that the change-over between each one and the next coincided with the divides in the four-part narrative structure of *Drifters*. Each disc is keyed to the record company’s stock number, and thus indicates that Dulay favours a particular version of the composition. Nevertheless, the guidance offered to the turntable operator is limited: most obviously so in the absence of information about the timing of each extract. Nonetheless, Dulay’s suggestions become clearer when we

understand that some of the film's title cards in the first column of the spreadsheet's right side have a double function. Not only do they give the audience the lead-in to each section as the film runs, the cards (be they listed or in some instances referred to obliquely) also tell the projectionist's assistant where to respond to new cues. This would be the moment when, if the cinema did not employ a designated operator's assistant, the cue boy or 'page boy'²⁶ would lift the needle off the disc currently playing while dropping the needle of the second arm onto the next disc on the other turntable.

Insofar as synchronizing the recorded music with the visuals was concerned, the only information given in Dulay's playlist is limited to which part number or which record from a set should be played. At first sight, it again seems insufficient information to permit an accurate changeover. On reflection, however, it can be seen as a practical way of proceeding. When cueing a spinning 78 rpm shellac disc, it would have been difficult enough for the operator to hit the start of a piece of music accurately, and impossible to land the needle on a specific musical phrase (Figure 4).

Among Grierson's papers I also found a typescript page listing the discs for Part 4 of the film. It appears to have become detached from a complete typescript intended to pass requisite information to the printer of the finished spreadsheet circulated with *Drifters*. Grierson evidently saw it and, in his appalling handwriting, annotated the entry for 'One sea in the hold ...' with his own suggestion, namely Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave* (Grierson Archive ref. no. G.2.1.6). As you can see when you look back at the printed spreadsheet, his amendment to the draft typescript did not prevail, a fact which speaks of his not having a final say in the choice of music on disc by recommending successfully an alternative to Liszt's 'Les Preludes' as the record with which to open Part 4. This is not without interest when read in the context of what Grierson was to write about the process then known as the 'fitting' of non-synchronized music, a topic to which this essay shall return.

Meanwhile, there is more to be said about the left side of the spread-sheet. Dulay's ingenious schema accounts for the needs not only of cinema orchestras working at the top end of the market, but also solo pianists who might have been required to accompany the film without the opportunity for rehearsal. With its total of twenty-three cues, it takes into account the various different *modus operandi* of instrumentalists playing live before a cinema audience. This number of music cues

(more than half as many again as are indicated for where gramophone records were to be used) reminds us that solo accompanists can switch from one piece to another almost at will and without a break. The projectionist's assistant, however, even if fortunate in having a pair of turntables, must, when changing from one piece of music to another, lift the needle off the disc currently playing while dropping the arm of the second turntable onto a disc, which at best might have been marked with chalk to synchronize the change-over as accurately as practical. In that context, Dulay's outline plan seems well adapted to exploiting the ability of a pianist (or indeed a small group of musicians accustomed to playing together) to improvise. Two features of his schedule imply this. The first is the invitation to play in different styles indicated in his second column by verbal phrases that are in effect broad-brush instructions. For example, 'agitated movement', 'flowing movement' and 'chattering movement' are all called for more than once.

The second matter covered in the schedule relates to musical themes. Clearly visible near the top left corner of the New Era print out, Dulay identifies (whether for a solo accompanist or an orchestra's musical director) three titles as themes that might be repeated at more than one cue point. For example, Theme 3 is named as 'Retour du Pardon de Landévennec' by Rhené-Baton. Dulay marks it to accompany three scenes, the first of which is at Cue 15, 'Hauling in the Catch'. For that scene, his generic instruction asks for a 'Triumphant melody'. The implication is therefore that when Theme 3 is called for in later scenes, they too should emphasize the success of the trawler's crew. Sure enough, the triumphant theme is heard on a second occasion when the principal trawler returns to harbour with its catch intact. The same theme is cued for the final time as the film ends with the despatch of the packed fish to the corners of the earth.

What we notice in sum is that the layout of Dulay's recommendations for live musical accompaniment, on the left side of the spread sheet, permitted instrumentalists to find alternative methods by which to interpret the film musically. Those who had access to a library of sheet music for some or all of the nineteen compositions listed could play them all. But for those who did not have such resources at their fingertips, the spreadsheet's second and third columns provided a handy guide. Theme 1, when first called for, appears alongside the instruction 'Flowing'. Since the other scenes for which the same theme (from the overture to

Gade's *Nachklänge von Ossian*) is cued also feature shots of the ship moving through quiet seas, the same music would have suited those scenes too.

Experienced musicians could, in practice, have managed to interpret what they saw by depending largely on their own ingenuity assisted by Dulay's thumb-nail description of each cue. They could have done so whether or not the sheet music was to hand for the three principal themes. For even though Theme 2, Brusselmans' *Bruits d'Usine* ['Factory Noises'], was required only once, it was cued on a cut to the trawler's engine room. Skilled improvisers (even if they could not understand the French title) would have experienced little difficulty in devising something noisy and rhythmic by way of effective approximation to what Dulay had in mind.

The owners of smaller, independent cinemas would, more than managers of theatre chains, have had to depend heavily on instrumentalists' improvisational skills – if for no other reason than to control outgoings on the purchase or hire of sheet music. It is a commonplace observation that ad lib playing functions most effectively when adapting music to fit precise moments as a film unrolls its narrative. Though this is true insofar as it goes, Richard Butsch provides a fascinating gloss on the relationship between pianists, films *and* audiences in America during the first two decades of the twentieth century. He reports that in the nickelodeon era, live musical accompaniment provided a rich source of interaction between soloist and audience, akin to that associated with stage performers:

Piano players, mostly women, took pride in their improvisational skills, through which they responded to the audience, especially in neighbourhood theaters. When movie producers began in about 1910 to distribute cue sheets for musicians to accompany their movies, many musicians rejected these and continued to play according to their own tastes and that of their audiences. Musicians and audiences could thus entirely alter the mood and intent of the scene. A serious drama could be made into a farce.

Managers of small theaters attempted a delicate balance between acquiescing to their audiences' wishes and 'managing' the audience. They were generally supportive of musicians' efforts to please the audience, regardless of the impact on the dramatic effects of the movie, and despite objections of movie producers.²⁷

In a public lecture delivered in 2017, the silent film musician, Jonathan Best described two kinds of improvisation. In the present day, the better-known form is what he termed 'generative improvisation'. This is the creation of music seemingly out of nothing at the very moment of performance in the way that jazz musicians do. Accompanists of silent films, however, did something different. It is a practice which

Best has researched and refers to as ‘adaptive improvisation’. When working in this mode, accompanists practised adapting pre-created music according to widely recognized conventions, extending, shortening or deploying other devices that alter the original text. For example, they may alter the key of the main theme, its tempo, or its dynamics. They may change the style of their accompaniment, shortening or lengthening a motif or shifting between major and minor modes. In addition, they may link together elements in their accompaniment by inserting transitions between one element and another – and learn to do so within established conventions.²⁸

Best’s fascinating account of the conventions within which silent film accompanists worked demonstrates the aesthetic constraints within which they improvised. Interestingly, however, those limitations appear not to have been such as to inhibit reinterpretation of a film text in the way Butsch describes, in order to meet the preferences of an audience whose tastes the musician could anticipate from previous experience of their responses.

The significance of this degree of flexibility comes into focus as we turn to Grierson’s own perspective on what was generally known as the ‘fitting’ of music. That term refers to the fitting to a film of pre-recorded and therefore inflexible music. The issue may or may not have arisen for the premiere of *Drifters*. The programme credits Ernest Grimshaw (The Film Society’s regular conductor when an orchestra was hired) and announces that: ‘The musical accompaniment has been arranged in consonance with [Mr Grierson’s] suggestions’.²⁹

Two months after this premiere (*Drifters* having by this time opened for public screenings at the Stoll in London’s Kingsway and then around Britain) Grierson wrote an article, ‘On the Talkie Horizon’, for *The Clarion*. In this piece, while celebrating the great potential of synchronized sound now being discovered by producers, he also bemoaned the inflexibility of the sound-on-disc method of supplying music, saying that ‘anyone who defends the old system does not know... what he is talking about’:

One short experience of my own will illustrate why. When I had finished *Drifters*, there came the problem of music, and, being no musician, I sat around for the experts to *fit it*. Several experts have at one time or another *fitted it*. There have been slices of Stravinsky, of Wagner, of Mussorgsky, of Mendelssohn and a dozen others. There have been snatches of *Home Sweet Home* and *Caller Herring*, and any number of swishes and tinkles from the starboard side of the orchestra pit.³⁰

It would be fascinating to know more about the suggestions of other music directors who fitted *Drifters*, not least because Stravinsky, Wagner, Mussorgsky, and Mendelssohn are all numbered among Dulay's suggestions for the turntable. On the other hand, *Home Sweet Home* and *Caller Herring* are not. Grierson continued:

I shall not say how good or bad the different scores were, but this I can properly say, that not one of them gave me the film I cut. Here and there a score gets under a sequence and makes it six times bigger, but just as often its pulse-beat is not the pulse-beat of the film. It tortures the rhythm and strangles the march of the film to the point of agony.³¹

Grierson clearly had in mind here the potentially awkward impact and rigidity of recorded music as the inescapable consort of visual imagery for which it was not written. To do him justice, we must note that in the same article he leaves no doubt about his enthusiasm for the potential of creatively synchronized music and effects. He expresses ideas that anticipate the future of the Documentary Movement by three or four years:

There must be a poetry of sound which none of us knows, a country whose satisfactions have been till now the monopoly of the blind. Meanings in footsteps, voices in trees, and words of the day and night everywhere. There must be massed choruses of sound in the factory and the street among all men alive, ready to the builder, ebbing and flowing with life, rising and falling in a commentary and explanation of life.³²

This impassioned text resounds with Grierson's hunger to recruit someone with the skills of Alberto Cavalcanti, the key figure who was to become responsible for innovations in the creative use of sound in the developing British Documentary Movement. Grierson was already an admirer of *Rien que les heures* (1926), Cavalcanti's impressionist city symphony documentary celebrating Paris. However, when he completed *Drifters* he was not in a position at the EMB to hire the Brazilian and had to wait until 1933 before he could recruit him into the GPO Film Unit.

Ninety years after its premiere, *Drifters* is readily accessed. This is so obvious today thanks to the film's availability online that it hardly merits comment. In an earlier era, and in part stimulated by Grierson's recognition that there was an audience for non-theatrical release and his promotion of the EMB and GPO documentaries by circulating their output on 16mm film, *Drifters* found an outlet through film societies and in education, the latter circulation route boosted from the 1970s by the growth of film studies degree programmes. The film's reputation, as one of the earliest

documentary films to prove strikingly innovative in focusing on working people earning a living by serving a global market, has proved enough to secure its place in the historical study of documentary.

In the twenty-first century, musicians have created and recorded fresh soundtracks that complement the film in new ways. Yet, although I doubt whether today's instrumentalists will have had recourse to Dulay's suggestions, the music of all three contemporary versions mentioned below shows a fine respect for the themes, mood and rhythms of *Drifters* while also accommodating musical tastes of various present-day audiences.

Mike Nolan is one of several British instrumentalists specializing in music for silent films and has accompanied *Drifters* on a VHS (video) disc (2003). His piano pays tribute to the responsive improvisation of his predecessors, acknowledging the popularity with festival audiences of restored silent film screenings. His performance draws attention to the poetry inherent in the rhythmic editing of the film's images. It also emphasizes the harmony of people at work: not only the trawler crew hauling laden nets from the sea but also women gutting the silver darlings on the docks, all necessary labour before the fish can be despatched to markets at 'the end of the world'.

The band Field Music (led by David and Peter Brewis) have given live performances of their music for *Drifters* while touring with the film and have released their tracks as an album and MP3 download (2015). This music has been evaluated by Harriet Gibsone in a way that aligns it with the tenor of other recent scores for *Drifters*. She hears the band as 'conveying the clash of tradition and modernity by dextrously applying their gawky time signatures and inquisitive melodies ... the percussive delicacy evocative of the lapping tide, the idiosyncratic shifting of pace signalling the unease of the environment'.³³

Elsewhere, Jason Singh has recorded a soundtrack to *Drifters* using only his voice, electronic distortion and sampling techniques. This is a handsome version of the film, digitally remastered by the British Film Institute (BFI) from an original 35mm tinted print. At 41 minutes, it is shorter than earlier versions on either 16mm or VHS DVD formats. It gains an attractive, crisper pace while actually embellishing a sense of the duration of the fishermen's hard labour, an effect it achieves by means of a pattern of repeating chords that Singh lays down behind his sensuous intervention with sound effects. Singh, who has toured with the film, has also demonstrated on

television his vocal beatbox live-scoring techniques, which feature improvised patterns and rhythms to give each public performance his personal take on the film.³⁴ Rather than think of this as an unfortold innovation it can be set in the context of pre-synchronized sound to which Stephen Bottomore refers. In addition to music, narration and other modes of voice accompaniment, Bottomore specifies as the third form of live audio practice ‘all sorts of sound effects produced by multi-effect machines and individual “noisemakers”’.³⁵ Singh appears wittily to have returned his audience to electronic variations on Grierson’s ‘swishes and tinkles from the starboard side of the orchestra pit’.

All in all, thanks in large measure to the inventiveness of composers and musicians, *Drifters* has recovered a freshness which once again makes it attractive to audiences at home and at film festivals. It seems reasonable to suggest that Dulay, whose energetic commitment to the film is evident in his complex weave of possible modes to accompany it, might have recognised and enjoyed his successors’ inventiveness.

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¹ Griffiths, 'Making a Living at the Cinema', 78.

² *Drifters* is almost invariably described as Grierson's only venture as a director. In fact, he directed and shot *Granton Trawler* (1934) for the Empire Marketing Board with Edgar Anstey as editor and Alberto Cavalcanti creating the soundtrack; it was released by the GPO. See Foxon, 'Granton Trawler'.

³ Foxon, 'John Grierson'.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of the British Documentary*, 110.

⁶ Christie, "'Suitable Music'", 105

⁷ Haggith, 'Reconstructing the Musical Arrangement', 22, n6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ Hutcheson, 'The Battle of the Somme', 627.

¹⁰ Haggith, 'Reconstructing the Musical Arrangement', 12–13.

¹¹ Allen, "'In the Mix'", 73.

¹² 'Mechanized music: the new picture fitting'.

¹³ Allen, "'In the Mix'", 74.

¹⁴ For an operator's step-by-step account of his work see Jonson, 'Fitting gramophone records'.

¹⁵ Allen, "'In the Mix'" 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 64–6.

¹⁷ Griffiths mentions that in Scotland some hundred cinemas had converted to sound or were expected to do so in 1929. See his, 'The Talkies Triumphant', 166.

¹⁸ Riley, 'Sound at the Film Society', 272.

¹⁹ *Drifters* The Film Society Programme.

²⁰ 'Substitutes for Orchestra'.

²¹ 'Mechanized Music'; 'Mechanical Music and Effects'.

²² 'Chicago Musicians' Trouble Expected'.

²³ 'Musicians Demand Man in Booth'.

²⁴ Allen, "'In the Mix'", 73, citing 'Mechanized music: the new picture fitting'.

²⁵ 'Musicians Demand Man in Booth'.

²⁶ The term page boy (in other words an usher) was used in February 1928 by *The Bioscope*, 'Panatropé "Effects" Records'.

²⁷ Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, 148-9.

²⁸ Best, 'The improvisational practices of silent-era piano accompaniments'.

²⁹ *Drifters* The Film Society Programme, 1929.

³⁰ Grierson, 'On the Talkie Horizon'.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Gibsone, 'Field Music: Music for *Drifters*'.

³⁴ Singh and Kermode, 'Kermode Uncut'.

³⁵ Bottomore, 'Eric Williams: Speaking to Pictures', 55.

"DRIFTERS"

Musical

uggestions.

MUSICAL SUGGESTIONS by ARTHUR DULAY.

THEMES.

THEME 1 ... NACHKLANGE VON OSSIAN GADE FELDMAN
 THEME 2 ... BRUITS d'USINE BRUSSELMANNS ... LIBER
 THEME 3 ... RETOUR DU PARDON DE LANDEVENNEC RHENE LAFLEUR

Description.	Style of Music.	Suggestions.	Composer.	Publisher.
1 Overture	Majestic	Manx Scenes No. 1	Tootell	Paxton
2 At Screening	Flowing movement	Melusine	Mendelssohn	Hawkes
3 Ship's engines seen	—	THEME 2	—	—
4 Ships seen (exterior)	Flowing	THEME 1	—	—
5 Segue	Agitated movement	Der Ritt der Walkuren	Wagner	Hawkes
6 Segue (after herring shoal)	—	THEME 1	—	—
7 While down below	Sea Chanty	The Chantyman's Song	Carr	Paxton
8 Men preparing nets	Agitated movement	Les Preludes (Allegro ma non troppo)	Liszt	Hawkes
9 See men in cabin (short scene 2nd time)	Quiet movement	Automne	Faure	Liber
10 With the ship made fast	Sombre movement	Night shadows	Carr	Paxton
11 Dogfish and conger (Note crescendo as movement becomes agitated)	Sinister agitated	L'Ouragan	Bruneau	Piena
12 Dawn breaks	Broad melody	Troisieme Petite Suite (moderate after Lento e Triste)	De-Micheli	Feldman
13 Out in the waste of waters...	—	THEME 1	—	—
14 As they dress (Cabin scene)	Flowing movement	Jocosa	Clemus	Piena
15 Hauling in catch	Triumphant melody	THEME 3	—	—
16 The storm gathers	Stormy agitated	The Flying Dutchman (Tempo 1)	Wagner	Hawkes
17 Segue	Agitated movement	Fingal's Cave	Mendelssohn	Hawkes
18 On the quay side	Chattering movement	A busy thoroughfare	Baron	Lafleur
19 As principal ship enters	—	THEME 3	—	—
20 Crowd on sea front	Chattering movement	The rabble	Herbert	Boosey
21 When birds seen	Chattering movement	Restless Bows	Shrawley	Lafleur
22 When railway seen	Characteristic melody...	The railway	Brusselmanns	Liber
23 Segue	—	THEME 3	—	—

Suggestions for STANDARD RECORDS for use with "DRIFTERS" on non-synchronous tables.

Reel No.	Title or Action.	Record.	Make and No.	Composer or Publisher.
1	Beginning	Britannia Overture Part 2	Columbia 9338	Chappell & Co.
	Funnels fade into old man smoking	Sennen Cove Part 2	Columbia 9688	Billy Mayerl
	Out past the headland	L'Amour Sorcier (Love the Magician)	H.M.V. D1453	De Falla
	While down below	Sennen Cove Part 1	Columbia 9688	Billy Mayerl
2	There are two miles of nets	Fingal's Cave Part 1...	H.M.V. D1299	Mendelssohn
	Dogfish and conger	Scheherazade No. 2 (Sea and Vessel) 2nd record	H.M.V. D1436	Rimsky-Korsakov
	Dawn breaks with heavy swell	Khowantchina (Entr'acte Act 4)	H.M.V. D1427	Moussorgsky
3	Out in the waste of waters	The Fire Bird (L'Oiseau de Feu)	H.M.V. D1510	Stravinsky
	The storm gathers	The Flying Dutchman Overture Part 2.	H.M.V. D1290	Wagner
	A hundred and fifty crans	The Bartered Bride Overture Part 2	H.M.V. E465	Smetana
4	One sea in the hold	Les Preludes (4th record)	H.M.V. D1617	Liszt
	On the quayside	Le Maschere Sinfonia Part 1	Columbia 9472	Mascagni
	And the sound of the sea	A Midsummer Night's Dream Op. 21 Scherzo	H.M.V. D1627	Mendelssohn
	So to the end of the earth	Shepherds Hey	H.M.V. B2641	Grainger



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Musical

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	Description.	Style of Music.	Suggestions.	Composer.	Publisher.
1	Overture	Majestic	Manx Scenes No. 1	Tootell	Paxton
2	At Screening	Flowing movement	Melusine	Mendelssohn	Hawkes
3	Ship's engines seen	—	THEME 2	—	—
4	Ships seen (exterior)	Flowing	THEME 1	—	—
5	Segue	Agitated movement	Der Ritt der Walkuren	Wagner	Hawkes
6	Segue (after herring shoal)	—	THEME 1	—	—
7	While down below	Sea Chanty	The Chantymen's Song	Carr	Paxton
8	Men preparing nets	Agitated movement	Les Preludes (Allegro ma non troppo)	Liszt	Hawkes
9	See men in cabin (short scene 2nd time)	Quiet movement	Automne	Faure	Liber
10	With the ship made fast	Sombre movement	Night shadows	Carr	Paxton
11	Dogfish and conger (Note crescendo as movement becomes agitated)	Sinister agitated	L'Ouragan	Bruneau	Piena
12	Dawn breaks	Broad melody	Troisieme Petite Suite (moderate after Lento e Triste)	De-Micheli	Feldman
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19	As principal ship enters	—	THEME 3	—	—
20	Crowd on sea front	Chattering movement	The rabble	Herbert	Boosey
21	When birds seen	Chattering movement	Restless Bows	Shrawley	Lafleur
22	When railway seen	Characteristic melody...	The railway	Brusselmanns	Liber
23	Segue	—	THEME 3	—	—



NEW
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Reel No.	Title or Action.	Record.	Make and No.	Composer or Publisher.
1	Beginning	Britannia Overture Part 2	Columbia 9338	Chappell & Co.
	Funnels fade into old man smoking	Sennen Cove Part 2	Columbia 9688	Billy Mayerl
	Out past the headland	L'Amour Sorcier (Love the Magician)	H.M.V. D1453	De Falla
	While down below	Sennen Cove Part 1	Columbia 9688	Billy Mayerl
2	There are two miles of nets	Fingal's Cave Part 1... ..	H.M.V. D1299	Mendelssohn
	Dogfish and conger	Scheherazade No. 2 (Sea and Vessel) 2nd record	H.M.V. D1436	Rimsky- Korsakov
	Dawn breaks with heavy swell	Khowantchina (Entr'acte Act 4)	H.M.V. D1427	Moussorgsky
3	Out in the waste of waters	The Fire Bird (L'Oiseau de Feu) ...	H.M.V. D1510	Stravinsky
	The storm gathers	The Flying Dutchman Overture Part 2.	H.M.V. D1290	Wagner
	A hundred and fifty crans	The Bartered Bride Overture Part 2	H.M.V. E465	Smetana
4	One sea in the hold	Les Preludes (4th record)	H.M.V. D1617	Liszt
	On the quayside	Le Maschere Sinfonia Part 1	Columbia 9472	Mascagni
	And the sound of the sea	A Midsummer Night's Dream Op. 21 Scherzo	H.M.V. D1627	Mendelssohn
	So to the end of the earth	Shepherds Hey	H.M.V. B2641	Grainger

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<u>Cye.</u>	<u>Record.</u>	<u>Make & No</u>	<u>Composer or Publisher</u>
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"The Storm gathers...."	The Flying Dutchman Overture. (Part 2.)	H.M.V. D1290	Wagner
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"A hundred and fifty crans....."	The Bartered Bride. Overture. (Part 2.)	H.M.V. E 465.	Smetana.
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Part 4.

"One sea in the hold..."	Les Preludes. (4th record)	H.M.V. D1617.	Liszt.
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"On the quayside..."	Le Maschere - Sinfonia. (Part 1.)	Columbia (BX 294) 9472.	Mascagni.
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"And the sound of the sea...."	A Midsummer Night's Dream Op 21. Scherzo.	H.M.V. (5.0641) D1627.	Mendelssohn
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"So to the ends of the earth..."	Shepherds Hey.	H.M.V. B2641.	Grainger.
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