“The planners did their best”: The planning films of John Betjeman

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Fig. 1. Ebenezer Howard, *The Three Magnets. No. 1*, 1902, in *Garden Cities of To-morrow*.
IT'S... THE... 1960'S TOWN PLANNERS!

GENTLEMEN. IF IT LOOKS LIKE A BUNKER, SMELLS LIKE A BUNKER AND ALLOWS SUNLIGHT IN LIKE A BUNKER: LOGIC DICTATES - THEN THAT IT IS A LIBRARY, OR SCHOOL, HOSPITAL, OR TOWN HALL...

GWYN
Arts Programmes on Television

- Features of arts programmes in the 1940s
- Assertion that “Television is certain that art is ‘good for you’” (Lord Reith)
- Difficulty of portraying subject matter in an entertaining and informative way
- Development of the documentary movement through John Grierson, Basil Wright and Arthur Elton
- Influence upon the BBC in the 1950s through Wheldon and others
- Television as part of “the white heat of technology”; introduction of BBC2 in 1964 and colour broadcasting in 1967/1969
JB’s career development

• 1943 appointed to Ministry of Information Films Division

• Had become accustomed to broadcasting, always providing entertaining, sometimes controversial prose, on subjects cherished by audiences: JB adapted to television with ease

• “… he found a new excitement. His passion to get things across came to the fore and he took inordinate trouble with his scripts, reading them through again and again over the images on the screen, He now saw a way of showing the beauty of his surroundings to the public, which might galvanize them into realizing how wonderful England was” (Lycett Green, 1997).
I have a Vision of the Future, chum,
The workers’ flats in fields of soya beans
Tower up like silver pencils, score on score:
And Surging Millions hear the Challenge come
From microphones in communal canteens
“No Right! No Wrong! All’s perfect, evermore.
The Town Clerk’s Views

In a few years time this country will be looking
As uniform and tasty as its cooking
Hamlets which fail to pass the planners test
Will be demolished. We’ll rebuild the rest
To look like Welwyn mixed with Middle West
Inexpensive Progress

• Let no provincial High Street
  Which might be your or my street
  Look as it used to do,
  But let the chain stores place here
  Their miles of black glass facia
  And traffic thunder through

• And if there is some scenery,
  Some unpretentious greenery,
  Surviving anywhere,
  It does not need protecting
  For soon we'll be erecting
  A Power Station there.

• When all our roads are lighted
  By concrete monsters sited
  Like gallows overhead,
  Bathed in the yellow vomit
  Each monster belches from it,
  We'll know that we are dead.
Betjeman as propagandist

• “If I have a mission at all, and I am speaking quite seriously about television, it is to show people things which are beautiful so that they will very soon realize what is ugly. I really do want people to use their eyes as they go through life.” (JB, 1955)

• “…the making of films… is a co-operative effort and demands forebearance on all sides… He must also be humane and humorous and prepared to change his opinions.” (JB, 1973)
Betjeman as film-maker

- 32 films for Shell entitled Discovering Britain
- 26 films for the BBC entitled ABC of Churches
- 3 films for British Transport Film Unit
- Betjeman at Random for BBC
- Betjeman’s London for Rediffusion
- Wales and the West for TWW
- Bird’s Eye View for BBC
- Thank God It’s Sunday for BBC
- Metro-land, and A Passion for Churches for BBC
- Summoned by Bells for BBC
- Betjeman in Australia for BBC
- Time with Betjeman for BBC
Subtlety in persuasion

• A concern for “our readers”
• “He talked, not in carefully honed passages of prose, but as one might chat to a friend, with jerky inconsequences, asides and second thoughts” (Bevis Hillier, 2004)
• Betjeman shaped production rather than only provided commentary or narration
• Developed planning arguments through television: subtle means, using music, prose, and powerful images
Betjeman and film

• Provided entertaining slants on serious and possibly dull subjects, undermining credibility of officials, using television to attract a mass audience to landscape concerns, with widespread use of humour and irony
• Caught the public imagination…
• An alternative planning wizard? Influenced planning and shaped debate about the profession and its influence – unsung hero, or thorn in the side?