

# Class 1 : Art and the Photograph

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## B. Great Britain on the Map

### 1. Class title: films and Union Jack

We have been talking about Art and the Photograph: what makes a painting true to life, and conversely is a photograph automatically realistic? In this second hour, **I want to look at films**—all set in Great Britain or Northern Ireland, as it happens. We will have four pairs: the first two will deal with the country as it is (or was); the second set will be British settings through a Shakespearean lens. Fact and fiction, but in each case will will discuss the film-makers' use of reality, and their departures from it.

### 2. Transition to *Night Mail*

If the still photograph is the *ne plus ultra* in truth to life, then surely the documentary is the most lifelike film equivalent? In the 1930s in Britain, the British General Post Office set up the **GPO Film Unit** to make documentaries that became widely admired for their skill. Let's look at one, ***Night Mail (1936)***, directed by **Harry Watt** (1906–87) and **Basil Wright** (1907–87). It had music by the young **Benjamin Britten** (1913–76) and ended with a poem by **WH Auden** (1907–73). Unfortunately, it is not available on YouTube in its original complete form, but I have put together some footage from the earlier section with different film music by Britten, and then switch to the final sequence with the Auden poem. You might want to scribble some notes as you watch, to answer these two questions: what aspects of the earlier section are non-realistic, and does the nature of the medium change when the poem is added?

### 3. Watts & Wright: *Night Mail*, opening

### 4. — closing sequence from the above, with poem by WH Auden

### 5. — stills from the above

What did you think?

### 6. Transition to *Belfast*

Documentary techniques of the same kind might be used to establish the settings of feature films also, especially in the **new wave of realism** that hit the cinema industry after the war. The first film I saw myself where I recognized the setting as my own was *Odd Man Out* (1947), a *film noir* by **Carol Reed** (1906–76), who would go on to do something similar with postwar Vienna in *The Third Man* (1949). It is about an IRA leader on the run, **set in Belfast** where I was born; these are the docks where I would later take the boat thrice a year to go to boarding school in England. Eighty years later, actor-director **Kenneth Branagh** (b.1960), who was also born in Belfast, directed an autobiographical film simply called *Belfast* (2019). I will show the opening sequence of each. How does each director use realist techniques to set the scene for his story?

7. Reed: *Odd Man Out*, opening
8. Branagh: *Belfast*, opening
9. — stills from the above

## C. Shakespeare's Britain

### 10. Transition to *Ophelia*

I wanted to show you the actual film clip from which I took the photo of **Daisy Ridley as Ophelia** that I used in the first hour. The film *Ophelia* (2018) is by the Australian director **Claire McCarthy** (born I think in the 1970s). As you will see, this Ophelia is not mad, and she takes some kind of potion before throwing herself into the river. Like Juliet's, this enables her to come back to life after being thought dead; I'll take you to the end of the film if there is time. I will precede it, though, by the equivalent sequence in the 1948 *Hamlet* film of **Sir Laurence Olivier** (1907–89). As you know, Ophelia's death takes place offstage in the Shakespeare play, described by Queen Gertrude. Why does Olivier decide to use only the Queen's voice, and how do his techniques of both directors compare with the Millais picture?

11. Olivier: *Hamlet*, death of Ophelia
12. McCarthy: *Ophelia*, closing sequences
13. — stills from the above

What did you think?

### 14. Transition to *Macbeth*

The Polish director **Roman Polanski** (b.1933) has called *Odd Man Out* his favorite film. He is no mean artist himself in using the camera to establish atmosphere, as this **opening sequence from his *Macbeth*** (1971) will show. Immediately after it, I will play the opening of a more recent *Macbeth* (2010) by the English director **Rupert Goold** (b.1972). If there is time afterwards, we can discuss how each director uses the realistic medium of film to address a subject that is not merely fictional but paranormal.

15. Polanski: *Macbeth*, opening
16. Goold: *Macbeth*, opening
17. — stills from the above
18. Class title 3 (repeat of slide 1)