

Mass-Observation File Report 141

NEWSREEL REPORT (2)

LE 27.5.40

The following report is a rough one, one of the routine series of interim reports made by the observer in charge of film work, with the help of several other whole-time observers in London, checked by a number of part-time observers in the provinces. General points are made on pp.11-13 [of the original typescript].

In addition we would stress the suggestion that the effect of continuous atrocity newsreel sequences may in the long run tend to have a blunting effect on people's general level of reaction. Photographically, people are being mentally prepared for the worst?

Subject matter

On a previous report covering newsreels from the beginning of war until the end of January some emphasis was laid on the fact that newsreels were tending towards the inclusion of comedies, faked news, and reconstructions to make up for the absence of events in the European war. Yet although the period to the end of January was an arbitrary one, since that date there has been hardly one comedy or reconstruction in any of the fifty-six newsreels observed and no evidence has come to hand of any faking. *Pathe Gazette* continued with their 'Nasti newsreel' until the end of March but what had originally been a weekly feature was issued at irregular intervals, three weeks elapsing between nos. 7 and 8; none of these were observed after January, but an observer was told that they had been a great success. In addition after the news of the invasion of Holland had come through, but before any pictures were available, use was made of old shots to decorate a commentary on the might of our navy, but no attempt was made in these cases to pretend as with earlier reconstructions, that this was the real thing. Finally, a George Formby visit to the troops had obviously been 'touched up' before being shown on the newsreels and additional scenes had been added. Yet, in the period September 1939 to January 1940, out of 40 observed newsreels 15 contained comedies or reconstructions; in the period February to May 1940, out of 56 newsreels observed at most two contained reconstructions or comedies with three additional 'Haw-Haw' items noted by an observer but not actually seen.

This disappearance was not due to an increase in the amount of available news; if anything the position grew worse and on February 29th a typical newsreel was as follows:

Canadian airmen arrive	70 ft
Evacuation of Finnish children	44 ft
'Bandy' match at Stockholm	48 ft
Red Cross boxing championships	62 ft
Cape Town Mayor's Fund	27 ft
Polish airmen inspected	27 ft
Belgians move forest	32 ft
The watch on the Rhine	47 ft
German plane down on east coast	29 ft

German ship seized by French patrol boat	40 ft
In the Maginot Line	107 ft
The Queen in Scotland	102 ft
U.S. Army Manoeuvres	106 ft

This can hardly be called an inspiring collection of items, most of which run for less than half a minute and one of the longest of which consists of those large-scale American manoeuvres which one commentator has already called 'America's gift to the cinema'.

The difficulty in obtaining news was not made easier by the decreasing interest in the war in Finland and, as will be seen later, in the royal family. It was mentioned in the first report that out of eighteen newsreels observed after the start of the Russo-Finnish war, thirteen had contained sequences of the fighting and on six occasions, or nearly 50 per cent, the Finns were applauded. Between February and the end of the war at the beginning of April, out of thirty-two observed newsreels only fifteen contained shots of Finland and not one occasion was there any applause, indeed in the middle of March, an observer noted continual signs of boredom throughout along and graphic sequence of air raid havoc; this, in Obs.'s opinion, was due to a feeling of 'we've seen this all before' as all shots, however well taken, of damaged streets and refugees bear great similarity to one another.

The gap created by the loss of the comedies has been filled by increased emphasis on Home Affairs, Sport, and Dominion Troops. The last of three categories gained a natural prominence as Expeditionary Forces arrived in France and Egypt and it was helped also by a great deal of material that was sent from Australia. The increased importance of the other two are less obvious.

Though the number of observed newsreels increased slightly in the second period, the number of items devoted to sport rose from 2 to 22 and to ARP and Home Affairs from 10 also to 22. It was not merely at the beginning of spring that sport became more popular; ice-skating, tennis (table), and rugby were observed in February and when at the beginning of April the Grand National was run, well over half of an eight-minute reel of *Pathe Gazette* was devoted to it. Such items were popular, table tennis and the Grand National causing a particular amount of comment.

Some of the sequences on Home Affairs were on agriculture, others on the collection of waste materials, one or two on souvenirs from German raids, in the shape of bullets, etc. The only considerable comment caused here was in one item on old iron with a humorous commentary in the style of Jack Warner with references to Blue Pencil and Bedstead-Cutter-Uppers; this caused the loudest laughter noted in all the observed newsreels.

The mainstays of the newsreels, the armed forces, still occupy by far the largest part of the total footage, though both Army and RAF have suffered a little at the expense of the Navy. To the Navy there is an exceptionally high degree of response, 21 out of 39, or 55 per cent, of its appearances being clapped. One reason for this is of course that until the invasion of Norway all the most important events in the war took place at sea. Between February and May the *Exeter* returned home, the *Altmark* was attacked, and later the *Cossack* returned home, the *Starfish* torpedoed a German cruiser, and finally the Navy sunk a great many ships in Narvik Fjord, an event recorded by cameramen on one of the vessels in the engagement; in addition the *Queen Elizabeth* crossed the channel and the *Queen Mary* began a mystic voyage. In the same period — no direct references to the RAF's part in Norway or Belgium have been observed — the Air Force performed a number of feats, in particular the bombing of Sylt, and were applauded on 6 out of 20, or rough[ly] 30 per cent of their appearances.

The Army until the invasion of Norway were forced to sit still and do nothing, and out of the 20 appearances made by it in newsreels not one was applauded; in fact the only response noted was boredom. When at last the Army did go into action, they were applauded loudly and all appearances since the middle of April have been applauded.

Personalities

A very much larger number of famous people have appeared in newsreels in the period from February to May 1940 than in that from the beginning of war to January. The table shows only those who appeared in the first period and takes no notice of those who were first seen in February or after.

	1st period		2nd period	
	No. of appears	Times appld	No. of appears	Times appld
<i>Chamberlain</i>	4	2	1	0
<i>Churchill</i>	5	3	8	4
<i>Eden</i>	2	0	5	0
<i>Hore Belisha</i>	6	3	0	0
<i>Hoare</i>	1	0	0	0
<i>Simon</i>				
<i>The King</i>	11	2	22	3
<i>The Queen</i>	11	3	22	2
<i>Queen Mary</i>	1	1	2	0
<i>Duke Windsor</i>	8	6	0	0
<i>Duke Gloucester</i>	4	1	0	0
<i>Duchess Windsor</i>	1	0	0	0
<i>Gort</i>	3	0	1	0
<i>Gamelin</i>	3	0	1	0
<i>Daladier</i>	3	0	2	0
<i>Hitler</i>	1	0	4	(2 laughs)
<i>Roosevelt</i>	1	0	5	1(1 boo)

In addition to these figures there have been seen in newsreels of the second period:

Lord Halifax	Lord Woolton
Kingsley Wood (2)	Duff Cooper
Stanley (2)	Duke of Kent (2)
Dorman Smith (4)	Duchess of Gloucester (3)
Sir John Reith	Princess Royal
Neville Henderson	Duchess of Kent
Walter Elliott (3)	Queen Wilhelmina

Both these lists exclude a great many 'miscellaneous' people; yet it will be seen at once that although the number of people observed is considerably higher the applause is very much lower. In the first period 65 appearances were made by these people and on 23 occasions were applauded, that is nearly 30 per cent of appearances. In the second period out of 100 appearances only 10, or 10 per cent, were applauded, 4 per cent of which were for Mr Churchill.

The percentage of royal figures seen to political figures is about the same but within those groups there has been much alteration. The Duke of Windsor, the most popular of royal

figures, has not been observed once in the period. The King and Queen, while doubling their appearances, have been applauded only the same number of times, and the King is now slightly more popular than the Queen. The reason for the decline in the popularity of the King and Queen is, in Obs.'s opinion, due to the fact that they are always seen visiting factories, civic centres, or the King on his own awarding medals. Every sequence is similar to the last.

Of politicians Churchill is still easily the most popular figure though even he is applauded slightly less than before, while once in Manchester the only response was laughter at his hat. Mr Chamberlain, even before his resignation, was not seen at all, his only appearance being a brief glimpse in a composite shot of the new cabinet; this was seen in a West End cinema where there was no applause for anybody but Obs. was told that in a suburban cinema on the same day a shot of him at Munich in the film FOR FREEDOM was greeted with very loud applause.

Mr Dorman Smith, the late Minister for Agriculture, broke new ground by twice being interviewed on a farm. The opening shots would show him walking round a farm with the owner, then there would be a close-up of him leaning over a gate with the farmer telling him of his plans for the future of agriculture. This in Obs.'s opinion was highly effective, the usual method of interviewing being of a figure at desk, short and long shots being cut with one another.

The appearance of military leaders become even fewer. Of foreign leaders Roosevelt is now the most often seen, but while in March he was applauded, a speech of his in May was greeted with a shout of 'shut up'. Hitler was three times observed with Mussolini at their Brenner Pass meeting, but on no occasion was there any hissing, though laughs were caused, as usual, by the Heil Hitler salute. On a fourth occasion *British Movietone News* brought out a very short sequence of Hitler making 'funny faces' while speaking, but there was very little laughter; the probable reason is that it was shown just after the invasion of Holland; a time when Charlie Chaplin decided not to show his film THE GREAT DICTATOR until after the war because 'Nobody is in a mood to laugh at Hitler now'.

Other people seen in newsreels range from Madeleine Carroll and Joe E. Brown to Tanner and Koht. Only two of these caused any response; there was applause when Lord Derby told the Canadian troops in England to give the Germans 'a hell of a time' and when Sir Ian Hamilton was seen at a Gallipoli celebration there was very loud spontaneous applause.

Summary of content

In the main the content of the newsreels has not altered greatly, the main change being that comedies and reconstructions have decreased, their place being filled with news of Dominion troops, Sport, and Home Affairs. The navy has slightly increased in number of appearances and heavily increased in popularity; the Army, on the other hand, until 'total warfare' began, was rarely seen and clapped only once.

In dealing with personalities, the newsreels seem to have lost some of their judgement of popular taste. The number of personalities seen has increased, though the applause given to them is very much smaller; the most popular figure of all, the Duke of Windsor, has not been seen at all during the period, while the King and Queen have been seen twice as often as before though the applause given to them remains the same. A very large number of politicians have been seen, but out of them only Mr Churchill has been clapped and even he slightly less often than formerly.

Later developments

Reference has been made before in this report to the change that took place in the content of newsreels when total warfare began. Before that date the reels were not of outstanding quality as was shown in the quotation of a typical reel for February. Mr Sidney Bernstein of Granada Theatres considered them to be so bad that he wrote to the *Kine Weekly* (April 18th) as follows:

Gerald Sanger, producer of *British Movietone News*, blames kinema exhibitors for the fact that newsreels are limited to nine minutes owing to lack of playing time and because exhibitors 'don't want to show them any longer'. This attack is grossly unfair for exhibitors are anxious to run longer newsreels provided the quality of their contents justifies such a policy. In fact it must always be the quality of newsreels that governs their length. If for no other reason longer newsreels would be welcomed because they would rate as a first-class box-office attraction. At the outbreak of war it was generally anticipated that newsreels would be an all-important factor in kinema programmes. That hope has not been fulfilled because of the quality of the newsreels which has not come up to expectations. We play all makes of newsreels and our experience has been that patrons have been disappointed in most of the issues shown since the outbreak of war. Frankly patrons so far regard war time newsreels as dull, and there is no excuse for dullness in any department of the business.

Mass Observation investigation does not support the statement that patrons regard the newsreels as dull, but certainly the decreasing response to such items as fighting in Finland and the visits of the King and Queen indicate less interest. Confidence in newsreels was not re-established by their handling of the Parliamentary crisis that broke at the beginning of May. On Tuesday evening it was known that Mr Chamberlain's cabinet was in a dangerous position, yet in the reels that were released on Thursday and which would not reach a final version until Wednesday evening contained no mention of such events. There could have been no question of the newsreels being full of other material, for the only topical matter in them was the return of British troops from Norway, though on the Friday or Saturday an extra hundred feet were added on a naval engagement in Norway. Nor could there have been any objection to the using of old material, of sequences from the library, as on the Monday over three minutes in most newsreels were devoted to such shots. At that moment Chamberlain had public sympathy — shown in the FOR FREEDOM incident already mentioned — and there seems to be no valid reason why such an opportunity as this was missed.

However, on Friday May 10th, Germany invaded Holland and newsreels assumed a new importance and gained a new interest. Some first-hand material had come through from Norway, including an amateur sequence on the battle of Narvik Fjord, the burning *Graf Spee* had been shown just before Christmas and in November shells had been seen bursting in French villages; this — with the exception of news from Finland — was all the graphic war news that the newsreels had been able to capture in nine months of war. Now the cameramen wasted no time and by Monday May 12th cinemas were showing shots of British troops in Belgium and air raid havoc. Since that date every reel has shown at least one action shot, either of a plane bombing a ship, the splashes of the bombs and the puffs of smoke of shells bursting round the plane clearly visible, or of planes being brought down, their flight to the ground being followed by the camera. As well, many pictures of air raid havoc have been shown, of the wounded and often the dead. A newsreel at the end of May, 1940 with rather more items than usual ran as follows:

Day of intercession in Paris
General Weygand takes over command
Holland evacuated during aerial attack
Dutch cruiser joins allied navy
Refugees arrive by the thousand
Evacuee children re-evacuated
British government swoops on aliens
London increases her defences
Nazis' murderous attacks on Red Cross ambulances
Blockhouses attacked from the Maginot Line
Aerial combat over France

There is now, as a rule, no need to include scrappy items such as these, but it will be seen that even when such a position does arise, the newsreels are still topical and concerned with important events. Out of these eleven items only one ('Blockhouses attacked on the Maginot Line') could have been old stock held over for a dull newsreel, while in two items ('Holland evacuated' and 'Aerial combat over France') shots of actual fighting and of planes being brought down were included, shots that had obviously been taken by professional cameramen with clear well-taken pictures.

Newsreels had now become 'an all-important factor', a point which the *Kine Weekly* acknowledged by devoting their main news page to the subject in an article headed:

BRINGING THE WAR HOME TO THE PUBLIC
Newsreels are Now Top of the Programme

(later in article) From now the newsreel will be of extreme importance and will have to be given a place of honour in the programmes of all classes of Kinemas. That the public will anxiously follow the swaying tide of our destinies on the screen is obvious, and exhibitors would do well to consider special exploitation for today's newsreels are 'top of the bill'.

Newsreels with such content have only been showing for a fortnight and it is too early to draw any general decisions from the audience response noted to them. But though the response has been very high almost invariably it has consisted of cries of 'oh' and other signs of horror. And an observer coming out of a cinema overheard this remark from an elderly middle-class woman:

Oh, I wish we'd missed the news. With the other two pictures I forgot all about the war for an hour or two, but those horrid pictures brought it all back. They showed you ...

A Mass Observation questionnaire has already shown that war pictures are not popular and it may be that as the war becomes more violent the cinema will form one of the best mediums of escape; the news will immediately shatter any such illusions for no reel yet observed has shown any reticence over air raid havoc and has emphasised the dead bodies and the wounded, bleeding and sometimes even without an arm or leg.

If this is not so, if the public does enjoy such action scenes, a different danger will arise. One shattered building looks very much like all others, a long shot of a diving aeroplane is always the same. It has already been mentioned how audiences have tired of Finland shots

and of the King and Queen, probably because of the similarity of all sequences, and the newsreels will now find it not easy to avoid the same apathy towards fighting nearer home.

General tendencies

It was mentioned in the previous report that almost unanimously the newsreels adopted the official attitude to the war, a dissentient voice occasionally coming from Paramount. In the period now under review there has been no major issue such as that roused by the Unity Mitford film and the only time that the Government has interfered was over one Norway sequence. The day that the withdrawal from Norway was announced, the reels were allowed to release shots of troops leaving for that country; this was considered impolitic and the Government succeeded in stopping the showing in some cinemas but not in others. (N.B. this version of the story is that given in some newspapers; others say that it was not Government officials but the cinema managers who thought the sequence unsuitable.)

There have been a few examples of criticism in the newsreels. Paramount introduced Dorman Smith by talking about the Government's 'almost suicidal policy of agriculture', while Pathe in showing lumps of shrapnel that had fallen in the streets of a south-east coast town 'supposed that somebody knew why the sirens hadn't gone off'. But on the whole the newsreels have consistently adopted the official attitude.

On the other hand there have been fewer examples noted of the wild patriotism in which Emmett excelled, though commentaries have become much more vigorously anti-German. The sequence already mentioned which contained various shots of Hitler speaking was headed 'This is the Madman' and finished with Leslie Mitchell of Movietone saying passionately, 'We must destroy him utterly'. But the response to shots of Hitler is not high, very little hissing or booing being heard. On another occasion there was a shot of some German prisoners being brought to this country; though the cinema was full only one woman hissed. Her companion turned to her and said 'It's not their fault'. The woman who had hissed, replied 'I suppose not, but why do they fight then?' These sentiments are very little different from some overheard at the very beginning of the war when two women agreed that German prisoners were 'poor devils'.

General conclusions

Before the invasion of Holland the newsreels, faced with an absence of interesting news, were filling the gap not with comedies and non-news material but with more sport and home affairs, but were failing to attract much interest. They were including more personalities when personalities were less popular, and missed at least one opportunity for topical news. When total warfare began, however, the newsreels reacted well and produced action sequences rapidly; it is still too early to say what effect such pictures will have on audiences, although already they have raised a high degree of comment.

Appendix A

<i>No</i>	<i>Obs</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Cinema</i>	<i>News</i>
1	LE	6.2.40	Pavilion, Brixton	Pathe
2	WL	8.2.40	Odeon, Uxbridge	GB
3	LE	9.2.40	Astoria, Streatham	Paramount
4	LE	14.2.40	Gaumont, Streatham	GB
5	JcA (p)	20.2.40	Gaumont, Watford	GB
6	LE	21.2.40	Paramount, Tottenham Court Road	Paramount
7	GW (p)	21.2.40	Rex, Northwood	Universal
8	ES (p)	21.2.40	Rex, Chelmsford	GB
9	OH (p)	26.2.40	Tatler, Manchester	GB
10	JcA	26.2.40	Tatler, Watford	BMN
11	JcA	27.2.40	Gaumont, Watford	GB
12	BC (p)	1.3.40	Leicester Square Theatre	GB
13	LE	4.3.40	Astoria, Streatham	Paramount
14	OH	4.3.40	Paramount, Manchester	Paramount
15	LE	5.3.40	Rex, Northwood Hills	Universal
16	OH	6.3.40	Ritz, Chelmsford	GB
17	GW	8.3.40	Paramount, Manchester	Paramount
18	ES	12.3.40	Monseigneur, Strand	Paramount
19	OH	13.3.40	Ritz, Chelmsford	GB
20	LE	13.3.40	New Oxford, Manchester	Universal
21	ES	15.3.40	Odeon, Ipswich	GB
22	OH	17.3.40	Rex, Northwood Hills	Universal
23	PM (p)	20.3.40	Grand, Herne Hill	GB
24	GW	20.3.40	Gaumont, Watford	GB
25	LE	21.3.40	Astoria, Streatham	Paramount
26	ES	21.3.40	Regent, Chelmsford	BMN
27	GW	26.3.40	Leicester Square Theatre	GB
28	GW	26.3.40	Tatler, Charing X Road	BMN
29	GW	27.3.40	Rex, Northwood Hills	Universal
30	LE	28.3.40	Odeon, Leicester Square	GB & Paramount
31	PM	28.3.40	Odeon, Ipswich	GB
32	ES	30.3.40	Regent, Chelmsford	BMN
33	GW	1.4.40	New Gallery, Regent Street	BMN
34	GW	2.4.40	Embassy, North Harrow	Pathe
35	ES	5.4.40	Ritz, Chelmsford	GB
36	GW	6.4.40	Empire, Leicester Square	GB
37	GW	6.4.40	Odeon, Leicester Square	GB & Paramount
38	LE	8.4.40	Regal, Walham Green	Pathe
39	LE	9.4.40	Regal, Streatham	Pathe
40	PM	10.4.40	Picture House, Ipswich	GB
41	GW	12.4.40	Gaumont, Watford	GB
42	JcA	15.4.40	Gaumont, Watford	GB
43	ES	17.4.40	Ritz, Chelmsford	GB
44	GW	19.4.40	Odeon, Leicester Square	GB & Paramount
45	JcA	20.4.40	Regal, Watford	Paramount
46	JcA	22.4.40	Odeon, Watford	BMN
47	ES	26.4.40	Regent, Chelmsford	BMN
48	JcA	27.4.40	Odeon, Watford	BMN
49	LE	27.4.40	Regal, Streatham	Pathe

<i>No</i>	<i>Obs</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Cinema</i>	<i>News</i>
50	LE	1.5.40	Regal, Norwood	BMN
51	LE	6.5.40	Academy, Oxford Street	GB
52	LE	8.5.40	Gaumont, Streatham	GB
53	LE	10.5.40	Regal, Streatham	GB
54	LE	13.5.40	Monseigneur, Strand	BMN
55	LE	16.5.40	Embassy, Bristol	Paramount
56	LE	21.5.40	Regal, Streatham	Pathe