

Mass-Observation File Report 394

MASS OBSERVATION FILM WORK

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Since the beginning of the war, the following film work has been done by Mass Observation.

1. Observation of newsreels

At least two reels a week are observed in London by full time investigators, one or more by part timers, situated as far apart as Manchester, Ipswich, and Orpington. Incidents in each reel, the length of the incident, and the audience response (interest, boredom, applause) is noted. By these means a barometer is provided of week-by-week interest in events and people. Newsreels are generally liked (Questionnaire results indicate that they are popular with roughly 75% of cinema-goers) but lose their popularity when, in the long periods of waiting for news of action, space is filled in with short and boring snippets. On the other hand, when some first class news is provided, such as the fighting in France, many of the audience objects on the ground that they go to the cinema to get away from the war, not to see horrors.

The most consistently popular figures in public life, are, according to newsreel reactions, the Duke of Windsor and Mr Winston Churchill. The King and Queen have steadily become less popular, probably because of the inevitable sameness about all their actions as reported in the newsreels. The Navy and the Air Force are both very well received, but the audiences were enthusiastic about the Army only after the withdrawal from Norway and Belgium. Since the collapse of France, when England has been fighting alone, all shots of our allies, the Dominions or refugee troops, are applauded.

2. Observation of feature films

All topical films, and some others, are observed, and audience response to each sequence is noted; while box office figures can only show whether a film as a whole was popular or not, Mass Observation methods indicate what parts were liked or disliked. A film is divided into anything from twenty to fifty response points.

In brief, results from this survey show that topical films are well received, provided that they are not excessively realistic or particularly unpleasant. Comedies about this war are much more popular than dramas.

3. Special surveys on particular films

Two special surveys have been made, one on THE LION HAS WINGS, and one on LET GEORGE DO IT. Arrangements are being made for a third on PASTOR HALL and shorter studies have been carried out on FOR FREEDOM and LA MARSEILLAISE. Briefly these special studies consist in detailed observation of the film in various West end, local, and provincial theatres, analysis of advertisement and criticism of the film, and a questionnaire to people who have seen it.

With THE LION HAS WINGS it was found that the film was not given a good reception mainly because the propaganda was so obvious and people did not like it being 'shoved down their throats'. In addition the story was not satisfactory and the introduction of Ralph Richardson and Merle Oberon in five minute parts was not at all popular.

LET GEORGE DO IT has had much greater popularity, but the topical references with one exception have not added much to its success; the one exception is the end of a dream sequence in which, after George has knocked out Hitler, the Storm Troopers go wild with delight. The response to 50 jokes in LET GEORGE DO IT were analysed in detail and their results compared with other joke material (see below).

4. Observation of Ministry films

All films produced by the Ministry of Information have been observed at least once, most of the important ones two or three times; in addition a Questionnaire has been asked. The general impression is that the films are liked, and have come to be regarded as a pleasant weekly feature similar to the newsreel. Unpopular are those with little action and much propaganda (e.g. FOOD FOR THOUGHT, which was simply a list of various foods and their nutritive qualities) but very popular indeed are those that contain a strong story (e.g. MISS GRANT GOES TO THE DOOR). The following overheard seems to sum up the general opinion very well:

I like the Ministry shorts a lot but they're going off a lot. They're pure propaganda. That one last week all about your dustbins, that was obvious propaganda from beginning to end. Not like that one about the invasion. That sticks, you remember that when you forget the others. (F25)

5. Analysis of competitions

Two competitions in the *Sunday Dispatch*, one asking readers for what they thought the funniest situation in any film, the other for the best fade-out, were analysed in detail, the entries being divided into sex and regional groups. In both cases it was found that men and women's tastes differ very little. In the joke competition the necessity of the humour being domestic was emphasised, and an interesting fact appeared in that many of the most popular situations the humour was provided not by accepted comedians but by light straight actors. In a large number of cases the joke lay in a very pompous person being brought very suddenly to earth.

In the fade-out competition, it was found that an overwhelming majority of entries were concerned with death, particularly death in uplifting circumstances, where the hero or heroine dies for another or dies unafraid. A large number of these entries mentioned the very few films where the characters, parted in this life, meet again in the next and live happily ever afterwards.

6. Effect of air raids on cinemas

Work is just being started on the effect that air raids and air raid warnings will have on the cinemagoing public. Preliminary reports indicate that the people have little fear of being caught in the cinema in an air raid, provided that there is a reasonable chance that the all clear will sound before they leave. Consequently there is a strong tendency for people to go in the afternoons, and stay at home in the evenings.

Various miscellaneous work has been done e.g.

- (a) continuous study of the trade, the effect of the war upon it, its reactions to air raids and so on.
- (b) weekly analysis of letters sent to the *Picturegoer*.
- (c) preliminary investigation on the subject of why people go to the pictures, whether it is to escape reality or not, whether they go for story or star, and so on.

Similar work, though on a smaller scale, is done at music halls, mainly on jokes and their reception. A background study on jokes, and the people who make them up, has been made. The findings here show a very close similarity in all fields in the type of joke which

is made and the response to jokes. The main exception here is to war jokes which in some fields (e.g. comic papers) still constitute 90% of the total, and in others have almost disappeared.

Seasonal work is done on pantomimes, and occasional study on amateur shows and concert parties. Work on the theatre is covered by another observer.