

‘Good-natured as any folk in the world’: The Ministry of Information

Film and British Humour during the Second World War¹

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In July 1940 the GPO (General Post Office) Film Unit of the Ministry of Information released the film *Britain at Bay*. It documents that specific tense and fractious moment in the war as Britain stood alone in Europe having watched much of the continent fall to the Nazi war machine, with real fear that the invasion of British shores was not only likely but imminent. The film looks to the past, for example Britain’s defiance of Napoleon, and the present, for instance the swift formation of the Local Defence Volunteers, to highlight Britain’s fortitude in the face of the enemy. The film was written and narrated by noted author and broadcaster J.B. Priestley whose infamous weekly *Postscripts* talks had commenced the previous month. As part of his narration he declared ‘These people of ours are as easy-going and good-natured as any folk in the world, who’ve asked for nothing belonging to others but only fair dealing among nations’. Leaving aside the glaring tension between such a statement and Britain’s role as an imperial power, Priestley makes clear a central tenet of British self-identity in this period: good humour. Historian Sonya Rose describes a ‘lauded British sense of humour and camaraderie as a national and masculine characteristic, one which was popularized in the wartime song lyrics that advised those having a difficult time to “keep smiling through”.’² Yet, despite the ubiquity of this sentiment the way humour manifested itself in wartime culture has never been directly addressed by historians, a lacuna this chapter will begin to fill by examining wartime propaganda films.

¹ I would like to thank the members of Northumbria University’s Conflict and Society Research Group for their invaluable suggestions on this chapter. Any errors which remain are, of course, my own.

² Sonya O. Rose, *Which People’s War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 154.

Cinema-going was phenomenally popular in Britain during the Second World War. Despite all cinemas being briefly closed early in the war, film-viewing continued to be an enormously popular leisure pursuit throughout the conflict. Cinema attendance grew from 19 million a week in 1940 to 30 million a week by the end of the war.³ A Wartime Social Survey showed that 32% of adults went to the cinema at least once a week and the average adult saw around two feature films a month.⁴ As AJP Taylor famously asserted, cinema was the ‘essential social habit of the age.’⁵ As well as being a widespread leisure activity, film also had fantastic possibilities for propaganda, as historian Michael Spicer notes:

Film interpreted great events, made sense of the world and the past. And because film operates on the emotions it was also an effective medium of mass persuasion. In the darkened auditorium, the audience become part of the unfolding narrative on the screen, identifying with those portrayed on film, sharing their struggles, their fears, and aspirations; and when the audience left the theatre, some small residue of that experience remains, helping to shape their response to similar situations and moulding attitudes to the issues and problems shown on the screen.⁶

Because of this film was a central pillar in the British Ministry of Information’s (MOI) propaganda strategy. Yet, for many, a trip to the cinema was a chance to escape from the war and ‘war pictures’ were not necessarily a box office draw. Indeed, one of the most popular films of the war was *Gone With the Wind* (1939) which played in London’s West End for four

³ Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 24.

⁴ J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences: Sociological Studies* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1978), 253–69.

⁵ A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 392.

⁶ Michael Paris, ‘Introduction: Film, Television, and the Second World War – The First Fifty Years’, in *Repicturing the Second World War: Representations in Film and Television*, ed. Michael Paris (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.2.

years straight during the war.⁷ While a ‘war film’ in some respects, it is likely that British wartime audiences were attracted more by the melodrama, romance and sumptuous costumes than an investment in the outcome of the American Civil War. Therefore, while film may be ideal for propaganda purposes, the British public were far from an unthinkingly receptive audience. Propaganda needed to engage and entertain.

James Chapman notes there were three key themes present in official MOI propaganda. Firstly, what Britain is fighting for, secondly, how Britain fights and finally, the need for sacrifices if the fight is to be won.⁸ As already noted, film was a key method in putting across these messages to wartime audiences. However, in the many texts which have been written about wartime cinema little has been said, in a concerted way at least, about the use of humour. However, wartime humour was a serious undertaking; the British state used it for far more than simple entertainment. This chapter, therefore, examines the extant filmic material produced by the Ministry of Information (and its associated production companies) during the Second World War. Over 250 films held by the Imperial War Museum and the British Film Institute as well as those released commercially on DVD were analysed for the comedic content and effects.⁹ Throughout the war, the MOI produced both longform films and filmic shorts to inform the British public, generally adult home front audiences, and to ensure their behaviour was conducive to eventual victory. As this chapter will show, many of these films were imbued with, as a minimum, comedic elements. In examining this phenomenon, this chapter will show that humour was a key aspect of the British government’s propaganda strategy and comedy

⁷ Mark Glancy, ‘Going to the Pictures: British Cinema and the Second World War’, *Past and Future*, 8 (2010), 8-9.

⁸ James Chapman, ‘Cinema, Propaganda and National Identity: British Film and The Second World War’ in *British Cinema, Past and Present*, eds. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London: Taylor and Francis, 2000), 198.

⁹ Please note this chapter was produced under the strictures of Covid-19 lockdowns. These archives may hold physical copies of films which have not been digitised but were inaccessible during the research and writing of this volume. The films discussed here are a large cross section of the material produced but are, therefore, not exhaustive.

was used to allay fears, brighten up dull wartime instructions as well as forming a cornerstone of the way Britain, and its allies, were portrayed.

Making Films in Wartime

Propaganda and communications were an important and vast undertaking during the Second World War. Planning for what would become the Ministry of Information (MOI) during the Second World War started in the mid-1930s but was only announced to the British public in June 1939. However, as is well documented elsewhere, its early months were turbulent with several high-profile personnel changes in just a very short period.¹⁰ Similarly, early wartime propaganda poster campaigns (most famously ‘Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution, Will Bring Us Victory’) met with public disdain. The MOI was therefore tagged with derogatory nicknames such as the ‘Ministry of Dis-information’ and the ‘Ministry of Muddle’.¹¹ However, as Robert Mackay notes, the initially didactic attempts ‘were gradually replaced by a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of the relationship between what people were told and how they felt and behaved.’¹² The MOI was, however, an amorphous and fluid government department, and this was especially true when it came to films. For example, it helped to create propaganda for other government ministries but also outsourced its own production. Indeed, the line between commercial cinema and government productions, for example, was not always clearly delineated. The MOI worked with companies like Ealing and Gainsborough as they produced wartime feature films. Similarly, many of the MOI’s filmic

¹⁰ David Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion: From World War I to Wikileaks*, (London: IB Tauris, 2013), 80-81.

¹¹ James Chapman, “‘War’ versus ‘Cultural’ Propaganda: Institutional and Ideological Tensions Over the Projection of Britain during the Second World War’ in *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion: From World War I to Wikileaks*, ed. David Welch (London: IB Tauris, 2013), 80-81.

¹² Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain During the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 141.

shorts were not shot 'in-house' but rather outsourced to production companies. Indeed, Verity Films was set up by film producer Sydney Box for that very specific purpose.¹³

The MOI itself made, or commissioned, two key types of film. The first of these was the longform documentary. It has long been said there was a 'wartime wedding' between the previously distinct documentary and commercial filmmaking traditions. As James Chapman notes: 'The war also marked a high watermark for the British documentary movement, whose skills and experience were now much in demand for the provision of "propaganda for democracy".'¹⁴ In 1940 the MOI absorbed the GPO Film Unit which had had a prominent role in the interwar documentary film movement. Renamed the Crown Film Unit they produced some classics of the genre which were remembered and watched long after the war had ended, such as *Target For Tonight* (1941), *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *The Silent Village* (1943). These films enjoyed cinematic releases but were also shown by the non-theatrical film unit of the MOI which took films directly to wartime communities to be shown in, for example, Scout huts, Miners' Institutes and community centres.¹⁵

The other central type of film produced by the MOI was the short film. Over 1800 of these 'inspirational' and 'instructional' films were produced during the course of the war.¹⁶ Initially a five-minute short was produced weekly but in 1942 the running time was increased to 15 minutes and the production rate decreased to monthly.¹⁷ They were distributed free to cinemas to form part of the cinematic programme (feature film, cartoon, newsreels etc.) and, as Murphy argues, 'were a relatively painless way of absorbing government propaganda.'¹⁸ Mass Observation records note, however, that these shorts were not infrequently missed from the

¹³ Andrew Spicer, 'Extending People's Minds for a Brief Time Every Day: the Wartime Propaganda Short', *Journal of Media Practice*, 4 no. 2 (2003), 107.

¹⁴ James Chapman, *A New History of British Documentary* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 90.

¹⁵ Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000), 59.

¹⁶ Andrew Spicer, 'Extending People's Minds for a Brief Time Every Day', 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 106.

¹⁸ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, 59.

cinematic programme altogether or placed in ignominious places in the running order such as directly after the main feature.¹⁹ These films have faded into obscurity far more than their longform counterparts. Equally, as Spicer notes, they have generally been overlooked by historians.²⁰ They were often designed to be responsive to a particular wartime moment and as such left little cultural trace. As Robert Mackay notes no one went to the cinema primarily to see the short films.²¹ Box office receipts reflected the demand for the main picture and tell us nothing of the general popularity of the shorts that happened to be in the programme. Similarly, they left little and sporadic trace, compared to their longer form counterparts, in newspaper archives and other usual repositories such as Mass Observation. Indeed, as with any cultural source, gauging audience reaction to any film is the most difficult part of the analysis. Comedy, as with other media, is highly subjective depending not just on different time periods but viewing experience, class, gender as well as personal experiences. However, where possible, this chapter incorporates the cultural traces of these films. For example, Mass Observation made some efforts, especially early in the war, to trace and track the popularity of MOI short films. Similarly, longer form documentaries and some shorts received reviews and discussions in the newspapers. While these sources are far from representative – MO for example had, unintentionally, a very specific type of respondent and critics very rarely tally with popular opinion – these sources give a small window into understanding how contemporary audiences viewed and understood these filmic sources.²² Moreover, given that the films were generally instructional in some capacity we can analyse the ways the state attempted to influence and change public behaviours, even if it is difficult to know how successful they were.

¹⁹ MOA: TC Films 1937-48 17-8-B.

²⁰ Spicer, 'Extending People's Minds for a Brief Time Every Day', 105.

²¹ Mackay, *Half the Battle*, 180.

²² Mike Savage, "Mass Observation and Social Class." Mass Observation Online. 2013. Accessed July 01, 2021. <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/FurtherResources/Essays/MassObservationAndSocialClass>

Uses of Humour

What is initially striking about the Ministry of Information films is the clear lines drawn between what is and isn't humorous (or at least what is and isn't permissible to laugh at in a government-sanctioned production). As Pierre Purseigle notes:

The very mention of humour as a strategy in war, and especially in the age of total war, may seem to entail an inherent paradox. War in the twentieth century led to mass slaughter, large-scale destruction, economic disturbance, and above all was the greatest source of loss, grief and mourning.²³

Despite the seemingly unfunny source material, commercially-produced feature films about the armed services during the war – for example *The Way Ahead* (1944) and *In Which We Serve* (1942) – often featured comical moments and light-hearted exchanges even in moments of battle and high danger. This was a logical strategy as humour invited the audience to, without heavy handedness, question their morals and certainties. As Kamm et al note:

Comedy temporarily suspends the rigid regimes of normality with performances, behaviour patterns, practices, dialogues and images of surreal absurdity, grotesque exaggeration and drastic vehemence, inviting viewers to interrogate the moral ground of cherished norms and established values.²⁴

Despite the prevalence of this theme, official MOI productions focusing on the military, with perhaps the exception of depictions of training, were generally straightforwardly serious records of various parts of the war effort. For example, 1940's *Kill or Be Killed* detailed the work of Army snipers. Similarly, 1944's *By Sea and Land* depicted the work of British commandos in the reinvasion of Europe. Indeed, most of the filmic productions by the MOI very much live up to its name: they are informational and little else. Many are light in tone but

²³ Pierre Purseigle, 'Mirroring Societies at War: Pictorial Humour in the British and French Popular Press during the First World War', *Journal of European Studies* 31, no. 123 (2001), 289.

²⁴ Juergen Kamm, Birgit Neumann, Ken McGregor and Frank Klepner, *British TV Comedies: Cultural Concepts, Contexts and Controversies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

are far from humorous. Indeed, this was something noted by prolific Mass Observation contributor Len England, who went on to co-direct MO in the 50s and 60s, when summarising his thoughts on the early months of the MOI short:

In very few of the films is there any real attempt at making jokes: those that have contained them have been almost invariably successful. There is no need for elaborate farce, but simply for homely, everyday humour [...] It is not suggested that a message can be put over by means of jokes, but rather humour puts the audience into the right frame.²⁵

What humour there is in MOI films is nearly all found on the home front. Nearly every conceivable home front topic from rationing to air-raid shelters and schooling to evacuation received filmic treatment during the war, often with lightly comic touches. For example, in the 1940 film *Shipbuilders* each man interviewed, with comedic regularity, states that his is ‘the most important job in shipbuilding’. Similarly, in the 1940 film *Bringing it Home*, about evacuation, one boy remarks in astonishment when approaching their new village home ‘Look Bill. Apples. On trees.’ A man from the evacuees’ new village quickly adds wryly ‘And that evening our village was just one big bellyache’, implying that the evacuees had all eaten too many apples. In the 1943 short *Manpower*, centred on a shop whose staff are being called up one by one, each member of staff replies with an overblown and incredulous ‘who, me?’ every time the voiceover announces they are to be deployed to a different wartime role. The Nazis too, consistent with other wartime media, are often figures of fun but only when discussed in relation to home front topics. This is seen, for example in the National Savings short *Get Cracking* (1944) which begins with Goebbels reading the newspaper, presumably over breakfast, before cracking his egg with his spoon, causing it to explode. In response, he throws the egg cup at a portrait of Hitler, smashing the glass and the portrait to flip to a frown. The

²⁵ MOA: TC Films 1937-48 17-8-B

audience is then encouraged to ‘get cracking’ to defeat these ‘bad eggs’ by investing in national savings.

Moreover, format also often dictated the amount of explicitly humorous content. Longform MOI films tended towards the serious, but the shorts were often comical. This is logical. Each of these films only had a brief amount of time to get across an important, often timely message, and a humorous approach was perhaps more likely to grab the audience’s attention. Although their remit was generally home front issues, a vast array of big and small topics were presented to wartime audiences in this way. In winter 1942 audiences were presented with a postal worker having nightmares about catching and sorting an increasing number of letters falling from the sky as a reminder to post in good time for Christmas. The same message was shown in 1944 by cartoonists Halas and Batchelor, most famous for their 1954 version of *Animal Farm*, who depicted a vision of Santa Claus too weighed down with last minute post to be able to fly at all. Indeed, these films could not only be humorous but actively surreal. To promote a message of ‘make do and mend’, British audiences in 1944 were treated to a 13-minute film about the life of a suit, narrated by ‘the suit’ itself. The suit describes its 14-year life from best wear to its eventual fate in being cut up for children’s clothes, a final act which prompts the suit to ask of its assassin – its owner’s wife – ‘will it hurt, Mary?’ Collectively, these examples find the humour in the mundanity of wartime life in an attempt to have their messages remembered by the audience long after they have left the darkness of the cinema.

The MOI, and of course its commercial contributors, were also adept at using well known comedians and actors for their films for similar reasons. Indeed, such ‘star turns’ often relied on the public’s knowledge of the performer for most of the comedy. For example, the 1942 film *Go To Blazes* features comic actor Will Hay, then a highly profitable film actor best known for satirising authority figures’ comic failings. In the film Hay plays a character very

much in line with his wider known oeuvre, the father of the house, whose home is struck by an incendiary bomb. His ineffectual flapping about with a previously half-read pamphlet causes the incendiary to burn through the floor to the basement where it, luckily and coincidentally, falls into a bucket of water. When a second bomb hits the house, his wife and daughter, played by Muriel George and Thora Hird respectively, show both Hay and the cinema audience how to correctly deal with such devices. Similarly, 1942 short film *Save Your Shillings and Smile*, a call to invest in war savings, relies on comedian Tommy Trinder's celebrity much more than the very thin story about him deciding which of his chorus girls he will take out after his variety show, eventually choosing the sensible girl who knows all about war savings and investments. Trinder's status as an unlikely ladies' man was also played upon in the 1941 short *Eating Out With Tommy Trinder* in which he avoided yet another unedifying dinner with his fiancée's parents by taking them to a British Restaurant to extol both the quality of the food and the efficiency of cooking on scale. Collectively, therefore, it is clear that the MOI consciously used humour as a vehicle for driving home important propaganda.

The meanings of humour

Humour had a role beyond the simple transmission of necessary information. As seen elsewhere in this collection, humour played an important part in bonding in various wartime relationships. Indeed, psychologists note that humour can help form group cohesion and a group identity in a variety of interpersonal relationships from workplace to romantic.²⁶ These relationship cues were often translated into filmic depictions. It was even used in serious and dramatic pieces to underline and underscore tragedy and melancholy. For example, in 1940 the Crown Film Unit produced the film *Men of the Lightship*. The film recreated, using real

²⁶ Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (London: Elsevier Science & Technology, 2006), 122.

lightship men rather than actors, the events of 29 January 1940 in which the British East Dudgeon lightship was attacked by the Luftwaffe, violating the long-held neutrality of such vessels in wartime, resulting in the death of all seven men on board. The attack took place when the war had still, for Britain at least, not really begun in earnest and the attack was widely seen as proof of Nazi barbarity and cruelty. The tragic nature of the lightship men's death is underscored on film by their friendship and bond – a point emphasised to the audience through humour. The men joke around and tease each other affectionately. For example, in one scene the character of Lofty is playing the accordion and there is clamour for him to play a different tune to which he retorts 'I don't know any others'. They also hide Lofty's tortoise as a practical joke and fix it so Lofty has to be the one to empty the 'slops', both of which are taken in good grace by Lofty.²⁷ When Lofty does take out the bucket, the contents blow back in his face as he empties them overboard, an action which, according to Mass Observation observers, received a big laugh throughout the country.²⁸ Despite this mild slapstick a review in *The Times* noted 'The effect of the film depends on the skill with which the crew are made to seem real people in a real situation.'²⁹ Indeed, far from being mean-spirited these humorous actions highlight to the audience the realistic bond these men have formed working in close quarters together and neatly juxtaposes their lives together with their collective deaths.

In many ways *Men of the Lightship* bears, sometimes in protean format, the hallmarks of the Crown Film Unit's wartime productions. This is most notably seen in the non-professional cast but also can be seen in the way humour is deployed to emphasise later pathos and tragedy. The best example of this is in Humphrey Jennings' *The Silent Village* (1943). In this film Jennings transposes the events of the Lidice Massacre, where the entire Czech village of Lidice was destroyed with 340 killed as a reprisal for the assassination of Reich's Protector

²⁷ Lofty's tortoise is, unfortunately, left behind on the ship when they abandon ship.

²⁸ MOA: TC Films 1937-48 17-8-A

²⁹ 1940 'Gaumont Cinema,' *Times*, Jul 25, 6.

Reinhard Heydrich, to the Welsh mining village of Cwmgiedd. For the most part the citizens of Cwmgiedd speak only in Welsh or are presented silently under an English language voiceover narration. *The Manchester Guardian* noted of this filmic device: ‘The very restraint of the brilliant camera work and economy of dialogue intensify the sense of brooding tragedy [...] This is a stark, immensely moving, and at times, strangely beautiful record of a crime that shocked civilisation.’³⁰ However, despite this their essential bonds are still made clear through humour. In one scene, two men laugh together as they wash in the pithead showers. In another, a daughter laughs as she pours water over her father’s head as he bathes. Collectively they laugh in the pub or while watching a Daffy Duck cartoon in the cinema. Despite the lack of verbal cues it is made evident that these people love each other, and their deeply human bond is cemented to the audience through laughter. This serves to make the end of the film all the more distressing when the women and children are loaded on to trucks bound for concentration camps and the men, all defiantly singing Welsh national anthem ‘Old land of our fathers’, are lined up against the churchyard wall and shot one by one. As such, the depiction of humour is an integral part of the intent of the film which aimed to humanise and personalise a tragedy which happened far from British shores, in a town of which few British people had heard and even fewer could pronounce, while simultaneously serving as a stark reminder of what they were fighting for and against.

By contrast, humour could also serve to dilute and make palatable some of the more uncomfortable parts of the British war experience. Some of these can now look rather shocking and, sometimes, downright callous. For example, the 1940 film *War and Order* documented, in a light-hearted way, how policing changed in wartime. It includes many wry asides and lighter comical moments. During a scene showing a police uniform fitting, the voiceover actor puts on a comical voice to declare ‘bit tight round the bust sir’. Moreover, during a weapons

³⁰ N, J. N. D. 1943. ‘Picture Theatre’, *The Manchester Guardian*, Jul 20, 3

donation a woman brings in very outdated weapons, including a mace and armour, much to the amusement of the officers who declare, in a now clearly racist aside, that it is a ‘good thing Abyssinia’s with us’. According to Mass Observation contributors this scene was received with laughter in the cinemas, although it is of course impossible to know which exact part of this scenario sparked mirth.³¹ Perhaps more shockingly, over footage of Italians being rounded up for internment and the closure of their café, the voiceover remarks ‘just the weather for ice cream too.’ While to modern eyes these seem culturally insensitive, it is clear that it was intended to reassure the presumed audience of ethnically white ethnically British citizens that these wartime developments were unremarkable.³²

Such a trope is also seen in portraying the social changes which war necessitated. This is clearly seen in the 1942 film *Night Shift* which documented a 10-hour night-time shift in an armaments factory. The majority of the 2000-strong workforce depicted in the film are women, just a tiny fraction of those who were recruited into previously male-dominated industrial spaces.³³ The film approaches this disturbance of the social order with humour. While a girl is working one of her male co-workers approaches her and jokes ‘are you trying to win the war on your own? You need a man about the place.’ She replies tartly ‘no we don’t’. In a later scene another male worker remarks cheekily to a girl banging a hammer on her loaded lathe ‘mind it doesn’t go off.’ She rather incongruously replies ‘I’d rather be firing them than making them any day’. The female voiceover restores gender norms by noting ‘We’re putting all we’ve got in to making them for the men who can.’ Two things are noticeable from these exchanges. Firstly, the men are not given the upper hand in these comic exchanges, neatly reflecting the partially changed gender dynamics in the wartime workplace. Secondly, the film mainly

³¹ MOA: TC Films 1937-48 17-8-A

³² For more on the experience of Italians in Britain in this period see Wendy Ugolini, *Experiencing War as the 'enemy other': Italian Scottish Experience in World War II* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011)

³³ For more on this see Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and subjectivity in oral histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998)

approaches the entrance of women into new types of industrial work with humour, therefore signalling to the viewing audience that these changes are non-threatening and tolerable.

Humour and National Identity

Fundamentally, as noted in the opening of this chapter, humour, and especially good humour in the face of adversity, was presented as a foundational British trait. This is seen very clearly in the 1941 Crown Film Unit production *Ordinary People*. The film opens with the sound of the all-clear from the air raid sirens as the audience watches some of London's citizens, played by non-actors, emerge from the shelters ready to go about their lives. They are in good spirits, unbowed from their night underground. Indeed, the very first words uttered in the film are an exchange between two male friends. A simple question about getting tea is met with the joking response of 'if you're going, there won't be enough for us.' Later in the film a GPO worker, who then maintained the telephone network, enters the remains of a bombed-out house to check its telephone line. As he calls the exchange he declares with mock exasperation 'only another 473 to do.' The film ends back at the shelter as its occupants settle down for the evening with a sing-song. The good humour in this film features as a crucial indicator of the indomitable spirit of London and, as the film states, 'why Hitler cannot win.' As Claire Langhamer notes of the film and the broader period:

In this wartime context, ordinariness was located within the everyday, but was not synonymous with it. The 'Peoples War' provided a space within which ordinariness – as a set of values, social characteristics and emotional styles, as well as specific behaviours in particular places – was asserted and celebrated.

The extreme demands of wartime seemed to colourise the ordinary and draw attention to its texture.³⁴

This sort of good-humoured attitude to the work and hardships of war is a persistent and recurrent motif throughout wartime cinema. For example, in the 1942 film *Builders* the men joke around with the narrator and tease each other playfully. One man, Bob, jokingly complains that ‘I shift more with my boots than I do with my machine.’ Another, Old Charlie, jokes ‘we’d have got a lot more done if we hadn’t brought old George with us’ before adding mock-incredulously ‘Blimey, is he working?’ In the 1941 Ministry of Food short *Mrs T and her Cabbage Patch* about growing food in allotments we see the titular Mrs T and her husband and grown-up daughter, Mary, eating breakfast and preparing packed lunches for their various days of war work. Mrs T encourages Mary to eat some watercress ‘for her skin’ when Dad asks if he should have some too before adding ‘Well my skin has always been my key claim to beauty.’ British wartime films are replete with these small moments of humour which indicate both positivity in the face of adversity and strong bonds between family, friends and fellow citizens. As Sonya Rose notes humour is an integral part of British identity in this period because it contrasted favourably with the stereotypical image of the Nazis and Germans as humourless and brutish.³⁵

Of course, if finding levity in the midst of war was seen as a paragon of British virtue then to be the butt of the joke conveyed the precise opposite. As renowned French philosopher Henri Bergson argued, humour can be an effective measure of social control:

Therefore, society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter.

³⁴ Claire Langhamer, ‘Who the Hell are Ordinary People? Ordinarity as a Category of Historical Analysis’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018), 3.

³⁵ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 154.

Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social ‘ragging.’³⁶

Throughout wartime cinema, and particularly in the informational films created by the MOI, there was persistent use of a comical bumbling fool character to demonstrate the incorrect way to approach a variety of wartime scenarios. This character was nearly always male and always middle-aged or elderly. He was also invariably rather dim-witted. For example, in the 1940 film *Goofy Trouble* two middle-aged men leave their air-raid shelters to watch dogfights, or ‘goofers’ in RAF parlance, thereby preventing the British pilots from using their machine guns in battle. The two unnamed goofers are played by well-known comic actors Fred Emney and Edward Chapman and their dress, demeanour and action clearly mark them out as risible. Indeed, one Mass Observation observer noted this film was well received ‘because of the humour of Emney’s fatness, and the right type of bomb joke.’ The film ends with an RAF pilot, the paragon of British wartime masculinity, reminding the goofers, and therefore the viewing audience, ‘Give us a break, back us up – take shelter and don’t give us any more goofer trouble’.³⁷

Similarly, the 1940 short film *The Backyard Front* (produced for the Ministry of Agriculture) featured actor and comedian Claude Dampier and gardening expert and broadcaster Cecil H. Middleton as ‘neighbours’ to encourage digging for victory. Claude is comically inept; for example, he thinks ‘proteins’ is the name of a local couple. Yet his ineptitude creates the space for Middleton to impart his complex knowledge about proper garden management in a way which is memorable and entertaining. Similarly, the 1942 film *The Owner Goes Aloft* is the story of a bumbling middle-aged man who is arrested trying to enter an RAF fighter station and is presumed a spy. However, he declares he is not trespassing

³⁶ Henri Bergson (translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell), *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Dover Publications, 2005), 65.

³⁷ For more on wartime masculinities see Linsey Robb and Juliette Pattinson (eds), *Men, Masculinities and Male Culture in the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

as he is the ‘owner’ of the site because his National Savings helped to pay for the site and planes. This rather ludicrous conceit leads to him getting a tour of the base and even a turn in a flight trainer. As such, his idiocy, yet again, provides a digestible way for the audience to be informed about, and encouraged to participate in, the National Savings scheme. Collectively, it is clear that this trope creates a straightforwardly enjoyable way to get across necessary information to an audience. However, it also tells us who it is permissible to laugh at in wartime society. Indeed, the middle-aged man, very clearly not of fighting age, is often the butt of the joke throughout wartime media. For example, a whole series of ‘Careless Talk Costs Lives’ posters centred on the gossiping of middle-aged men. Moreover, ‘Dig For Victory’ campaigns often centred on the middle-aged man. Even in static media like posters it was clear these men were figures of fun as they were often comically rotund or laughably puny.³⁸

This phenomenon of the laughable middle-aged man has a class dimension too. The ‘ordinary’ man, the hero of wartime media, was generally portrayed as working class or lower middle-class. Those of obviously higher socio-economic strata became legitimate figures of fun in this ‘people’s war’. Indeed, laughing at ‘betters’ may have provided an element of the humour as inverted the generally accepted social order. This phenomenon is seen, for example, in the 1941 film *Mr Proudfoot Show a Light*. Mr Proudfoot, played by comic actor Sydney Howard, speaks in an affected upper-class accent and his acts of buffoonery, namely showing a light by removing his blackout protections for some fresh air, cause the Luftwaffe to drop a bomb directly on his house. A large part of the humour of the short comes from the ridiculous overblown aristocratic nature of Mr Proudfoot’s demeanour and actions. While, according to a Mass Observation contributor, this film received a lukewarm reception, not least because of the implausibility of the Germans dropping a bomb with such accuracy, Howard’s performance

³⁸ Juliette Pattinson, Arthur McIvor, and Linsey Robb, *Men in Reserve: British Civilian Masculinities in the Second World War*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 10.

as the eponymous Mr Proudfoot was received more favourably, showing that this stereotype of the buffoon resonated with the audience.³⁹ Of course, class in general shaped both the viewing experience and the interpretation of filmic messages. For example, a Mass Observation survey did find that more middle-class than working-class viewers liked MOI shorts (94% to 78%), a fact Len England blames on the ‘middle class attitude of most of the films’.⁴⁰

This discussion of ‘Britishness’ obscures the fact that Britain was not, and is not, a single nation but instead a collection of four separate nations with their own independent identities, although Northern Ireland (controversially partitioned from the rest of Ireland in 1921 and often subject to different wartime regulations) was only infrequently seen or discussed in wartime propaganda.⁴¹ However, national and regional divisions were sometimes brought to the fore, most notably through accent. Before the war, regional accents had had limited exposure in cinema, with some high-profile exceptions such as character actors Gracie Fields and George Formby, and had little box office draw. This changed markedly during the war. The most popular BBC wartime broadcasters were Wilfred Pickles and J.B. Priestley who spoke with soft regional, namely Yorkshire, accents. Film, too, moved to include a wide range of accents to denote ‘authenticity’ in the story being told. Many wartime films, such as *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *The Way Ahead* (1944), included a range of regional and national accents to suggest essential wartime unity. However, any regional or non-English accent were often subject to, generally gentle, mocking. *Squadron 992* was released in mid-1940 and detailed the work of RAF Barrage Balloon crew working in Edinburgh and the surrounding areas (especially around the Forth Bridge). One balloon is due to be located on a farm. The elderly Scots farmer points out that the building the RAF wants to use as storage is the ‘wash hoose’,

³⁹ MOA: TC Films 1937-48 17-8-A

⁴⁰ MOA: TC Films 1937-48 17-8-B

⁴¹ For more on Northern Ireland during the Second World War see, for example, Guy Woodward, *Culture, Northern Ireland, and the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). For discussion of Britishness see Wendy Ugolini and Juliette Pattinson (ed.), *Fighting for Britain? Negotiating Identities in Britain During the Second World War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

a phrase which has to be translated for the superior officer: 'he means a laundry sir'. In this exchange it is unclear who is the butt of the joke and as such it can perhaps be read as an attempt at presenting a united front through mutual mockery.

This, therefore, raises questions not just of who it was appropriate to laugh at but also who was in on the joke. As we have seen, humour and laughter were used to convey fundamental humanity upon the subjects depicted and to suggest that they were 'like us' to the viewing audience. In the context of both a global war and Britain's imperial standing it is revealing to see who is granted the right to laugh. This is shown, for example, in Czech refugee Jiří Weiss's 1945 film Crown Film Unit, *Night and Day*. In the film, the Czechoslovak airmen are represented in a way which would have been familiar to British audiences. Despite being largely silent, for obvious language reasons, they are shown having strong bonds to each other, bonds which are affirmed by comedy and laughter. In one scene, while eating a meal the men laugh and play pranks on each other, for example placing a flower in one man's sandwich while his head is turned. The message to the audience is clear: while these effective pilots are not humourless Nazis but are very like the British men the audience knew and loved.

Humour was also often used to explain the relationships between nations and to smooth over cultural differences. This is most obviously seen in the 1943 film *Welcome to Britain*, produced by the MOI for training the American armed forces. Starring American actor Burgess Meredith the whole film has a wryly comical air. The film begins with Meredith declaring 'I'm the best person to show you around, I've been here for 3 weeks' and ends with him rushing to get out final pieces of information before heading off to 'battle'. Meredith does poke gentle fun at the citizens of the United Kingdom, for example when he gently complains in the pub about having to drink warm beer. However, he too is often equally the butt of the joke, for example when he is caught out not knowing the difference between bitter and mild – 'well one's bitter and one's mild, you'll just have to find out for yourself'. As such, mutual teasing and mockery

is cemented as the basis of a friendly relationship. A similar theme is seen in the 1942 film *Common Cause*. This film centres on two fictionalised conversations between two different pairs of men, one between a British naval man and a Soviet pilot and the other between two Chinese and American soldiers. Through these conversations the film tries to convey the message of both a common cause, as per the title, and common ground between different races and nations. The Brit and Russian trade war stories over their respective national drinks laughing as they do so. The Chinese and American soldiers learn about each other's culture, often gently teasing each other in the process. In one scene the American soldier remarks 'you talk English quite well, learn it at school I suppose.' The Chinese soldier responds by asking the American 'you speak it also quite good [sic], did you learn it in school too?' In doing so, the film is able to gently mock and probe the soldier, and presumably the audience's, preconceived notions about foreign nationals. Again, we see humour is at the heart of this implication of a common bond.

This is even more fascinating in the context of Britain's status as an imperial power. The empire was central to British survival and victory which necessitated a concerted propaganda campaign to promote the empire at home and to encourage imperial subjects to see themselves as part of the British war effort. For example, in 1941 film *India Marches* British audiences were treated to a blended image of specific Indian activities – dance and wrestling for example – as well as activities which cemented their quasi-Britishness – bagpipes and army drill. Mass Observation contributor 'KT' noted of the film:

The film seemed to go down well with the audience and as has been previously pointed out the shots of activity which were different from that of the army ordinarily aroused more interest than those which might be the army anywhere: the Indian Ballet and wrestling which are common only to India received much better response than those shots which showed the Indian Army drilling and

firing machine guns. There was a certain amount of emphasis on the idea that India is proud to be part of the empire and is united to withstand aggression; the audience seemed to swallow this.⁴²

Documentary News Letter, a wartime magazine about documentary film, noted of the film's integral irony that the portrayed Indians were apparently fighting for 'freedom and democracy'; the same government that would have us believe that these Indians 'would immediately start killing each other if they were given the said freedom and democracy'.⁴³ Similarly, efforts were made by the BBC to, as Thomas Hajkowski argues, present the empire as 'egalitarian, and committed to stewarding the dependent colonies towards self-rule.'⁴⁴ However, what is striking about most of these films is that colonial subjects, with the exception of white people from the dominions, are largely mute or relegated to small, often serious, speaking roles. They are never granted the opportunity of being humorous. Instead, the relationship is transactional and paternalistic. The lack of humour underscores their inability to capture a parity of esteem. Imperial subjects were never unequivocally presented as 'like us' to British audiences but rather were denied laughter as a key humanising trait.

Conclusions

This analysis of one strand of the myriad types of wartime culture which abounded in this propaganda war merely scratches the surface in analysing the purposes and uses of comedy in wartime. While highlighting the need for further study in this area, what this chapter has shown is humour was a central part of the Ministry of Information's wartime filmic propaganda strategy. At a basic level it was used to bring interest to propaganda films and to make vital, but often not particularly interesting, information memorable to the viewing audience. It could

⁴² MOA: TC Films 1937-48 17-8-A

⁴³ *Documentary News Letter*, 2 August 1941, 149.

⁴⁴ Thomas Hajkowski, 'The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War, 1939-1945', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 2 no. 2 (2002), 151.

even make palatable the difficult and necessary changes to life and society in wartime. Moreover, this humour had a policing function too. While it was fine to laugh in wartime no one wants to be laughed at and the MOI made continually plain that those who flouted or ignored necessary wartime regulations were legitimate figures of fun.

However, humour and comedy had uses and meanings far beyond the practical. 'Good humour' was a vital part of the British self-image, confirming to themselves that they were the 'good guys' in opposition to the humourless brutish Nazis. Humour underpinned not only the filmic British relationship to the war but also to each other. Humour, whether between individuals or the constituent nations of the United Kingdom, made plain bonds of affection and mutual understanding. This is also seen where humour is used to humanise to a British audience those from different allied nations to emphasise that they were 'like us' not only in common cause against the Axis powers but in temperament too, a technique which was stretched to breaking point when it came to depictions and discussions of the citizens of imperial territories.

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