

Mass-Observation File Report 215

NEWSREELS (June)

19.6.40

Mention was made in the last report of the horrifying effect that some newsreel sequences had upon members of the audience. This effect is becoming more obvious. An observer in Streatham heard one elderly working-class woman say 'Gertie and I cried all through the newsreel. Those poor boys out there in all that. The pictures were terrible'. In a Watford cinema another observer heard one girl say to her friend 'I don't think they should show you this, do you?' at shots of air raid havoc. In the *Picturegoer* (15.6.40) a letter was published as follows:

There has been much criticism in the past on newsreels showing us the horrors of modern warfare in China, Spain, etc., and although we felt strongly about these presentations they did not strike near enough to make us protest publicly.

But the war newsreel of to-day is horrifying us. This week we went to our local cinema to see *ADVENTURE IN DIAMONDS* and *SPATS TO SPURS*, a light programme calculated to make us forget what might be happening 'over there'. But did we enjoy our programme? No, because we viewed it through a haze of tears and the horrible quickening of nerves as we saw our boys moving up to the Belgian front.

As the war continues in all its fury, are we to be subjected to further horror, are we to watch our husbands bombarded, are we to see the shattered limbs of our brothers lying on the battlefield, the anguished bodies of our sons carried in on stretchers? No, unless the film distributors realise that we cannot sit in a luxury cinema watching these ghastly things, unless they relegate the war newsreel to its proper place, the New[s] Theatre, we will stay outside the cinema for the duration. This is our resolve and there are thousands of mothers and wives who feel the same.

A further letter commented on the same thing:

Some of the recent newsreels have been in very bad taste; an outstanding example being the showing of dead bodies lying outside a bombed Belgian hospital. Cannot the censor prevent the issue of these pictures which can only bring pain and suffering to those loved ones on active service. After all, we go to the cinema to be carried away from our troubles.

The main response to these shots continues to be a very high degree of comment and signs of horror at the most unpleasant shots. There is no indication in this that the shots are popular but they still constitute the bulk of newsreels and are accompanied by such remarks as 'There are other sights too grim to show you'.

To shots other than of air raids the response is increasing. In the *British Movietone News*, 13.6.40, an item called 'The Italian Assassin' began with close-ups of Mussolini. Obs watched this reel twice and on each occasion there was an immediate and widespread outburst of hisses, boos, catcalls and laughs. Obs has never seen this on any

other occasion though twice at least the newsreels have contained shots of Hitler himself. The outcry lasted for nearly a minute on each occasion.

Response to political and military figures has increased; Reynaud, Weygand and Gort have been clapped every time they have appeared though none of the three have been applauded at all before the last two weeks. There has been very prolonged applause for Churchill every time, and at a West End theatre where response is usually very low a man called out 'Well done' when the Prime Minister appeared and clapping followed.

The royal family, however, receive less applause than before. The British Movietone reel mentioned above was observed with two very highly responsive audiences; the last item was a fairly long sequence of the King presenting medals at Buckingham Palace; the Queen was watching from the balcony. At the first showing of this the King was applauded for 2 seconds — Reynaud had received 5 seconds applause a minute before — at the second showing there was no clapping at all. On each occasion the shots of the Queen were greeted in dead silence.

The most important newsreel item in the last few weeks has been the Dunkirk evacuation; shots of this were obtained by cameramen on the spot, and by others lining the train route from the coast home. They could not, however, be released immediately and there was an opportunity by skilful cutting to exploit the dramatic possibilities of the situation. Paramount and Movietone in the main let the shots speak for themselves and did not give them much commentary; GB produced a patriotic commentary which will be mentioned further; and Pathe blended the shots into a sequence that gained a higher response of applause than anything else yet noted by an observer. The sequence began with soldiers marching into Dunkirk; then came a word of congratulation to the Navy and the Air Force for their assistance, this being illustrated with stock shots; the actual embarkation; then compliments to the French army, to the nurses and other women helpers, to the wounded, finally shots of the landing, the train journey, and a few words from the troops. The whole item lasted about four minutes; for nearly a quarter of that time, that is, a full minute, there was applause. Hitherto the loudest applause had been 10 seconds for the survivors of the Altmark.

Mention has been made of newsreel commentaries. Of late these have become more violent and more patriotic. The G.B. commentary mentioned above was to a musical background with the sound of bursting shells interrupting it regularly. Phrases from the commentary are as follows:

A miracle of fighting genius ... most brilliant withdrawal in military history ... the navy has earned our undying gratitude, the army is undefeated, its spirit unbroken, their courage brought them through unconquered ... these shots taken entirely at random all show laughing faces ... this is the epic of Dunkirk ... no ship ever ran into such an inferno of hurtling steel ... the name of Dunkirk will live for ever ... one day the story will be told in full of these men who were saved to fight again ... no man had thought of self.

Compare this with a few extracts from the Paramount commentary:

The BEF were brought from almost certain annihilation ... a surprisingly large number brought rifles with them ... one look at them shows what they have been through ... 900 vessels went to and fro in this amazing evacuation.

For the most part this commentary was simply a description of events, the extracts quoted are the only ones that contain high phrases or superlatives. Compare, for example, Paramount's 'one look at them shows what they have been through' with G.B., 'these shots taken entirely at random all show laughing faces'.

Paramount, however, produces less factual commentary on other matters. On an air raid in France the commentary ran:

This is a page of German history written in blood and dust by the subhuman monster that is Hitler ... hospital trains are his especial delight ... not until Germany has suffered these horrors will she go down to terrible defeat.

Already in a previous report mention has been made of Paramount's anti-German commentary to shots of prisoners; on that occasion there was no sign of similar fury among the audience and it is still very infrequently that there is any hissing at shots of German prisoners.

There has, of course, been no criticism at all by any of the companies. Paramount mentioned 'the tea-party politics of the Chamberlain Government' but even this was in a speech lauding the present Cabinet.

At least two companies, in showing a sequence of Soho Italians leaving this country, laid emphasis on the fact that no anger should be shown against Italians leaving this country. British Movietone said 'for the first time we are at war with Italy. Those windows that have been smashed in Soho are probably the results of merely private grudges' while Paramount mentioned that the war 'was rough on Italians who had been living half their lives in this country'. In short the main points in newsreels in the last few weeks have been these:

1. An increasing indication that the air raid sequences in newsreels are not popular.
2. An increasing degree of audience response to political and military figures though a marked decline in the response to royal figures.
3. More violent commentaries though most of the companies have not given way entirely to these.