

Mass-Observation File Report no. 314

MEMO ON NEWSREELS

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As at the beginning of the war, the newsreels are faced with the difficulty of producing a thousand or 1,500 feet of film a week, when in the course of that week very little of interest happens. During the short period of actual fighting the problem must have been to decide what to cut out, and nine-tenths of the material used was 'action' shots, ships bombed, aeroplanes shot down and so on. Now, perhaps once in every two weeks, an action shot is obtained of a battleship or a convoy being attacked by air. For the rest of the time the reels have to do the best they can with inspections, armament making, and all the various other stopgaps that were used in the first few months. Much of the news shown now comes from other countries; one Paramount reel, for instance, devoted four out of seven items to news from America with two long sequences, one in the comeback of Jack Dempsey, and another on Election Riots in Mexico.

Even with such out of the way news as this, the necessary footage cannot always be made up. At the beginning of the war the companies introduced comedies that had little or no relation to the war. This time their supplementary items have more direct bearing on the situation. Often, they take the form of direct appeals to the public to become nurses, save their scrap iron, join a National Savings Group, take cover in air raids, and so on. On a few occasions these appeals have been worked out to link with an item of news: for example, a scrap ironheap in London leads to an appeal. Sometimes they have been made up in the studio with a speaker and direct appeal. Occasionally they have consisted entirely of words flashed on the screen (e.g. 'JOIN THE W.V.S' — Go to your local centre' etc.) with a sound commentary consisting of a man reading the words as they appear.

On occasions news has had to be held up a day or two before being shown to the public. This was the case with the Dunkirk evacuation and Pathe took the opportunity to cut the shots they had and mould them into a unity. This technique was carried farther until finally newsreels came to include occasional items that were very similar, though shorter, to the Ministry of Information's propaganda films. G.B., for instance, showed a long sequence of England at play before the war, went on to point out how all our simple desires had been crushed by the will of Hitler and rounded it off by pointing out how necessary it was to use all the qualities that we possessed for games in the harder battle of war: from this the shots cut to a sequence of the King presenting medals to the RAF heroes, and so was brought up to date. This was called THE LAND WE DEFEND. Pathe, a week later produced an item OUR ISLAND FORTRESS. It is not a new development in newsreels — compare Movietone's treatment of Armistice Day 1939, but it is being more than usually exploited.

There is still practically no criticism of any feature of the war. Paramount, always the most anti-Government newsreel, said that the postponement of the Overseas Evacuation scheme has disappointed thousands of mothers, but this is the only example of criticism noted.

To uninspired newsreels, audience response has naturally not been considerable. The last time there was any big demonstration in a newsreel was at Italy's declaration of war. Applause is still heard frequently but it is very half-hearted. At the moment there is

no outstanding personality or Service. Churchill has not been seen recently but probably he would get an exceptionally good reception. It seems that the audience now applauds anybody who is doing 'their bit'. For example a recent list of applause points were for these people:

- A man awarded the VC
- Dominion troops (particularly the Indians)
- Polish troops
- Czech troops
- Dr Rewcastle, first Navywoman doctor
- The woman who captured a German airman
- General de Gaulle
- The RAF

On no occasion was the applause very loud — the longest was for a brief shot of Indian troops — but other figures seen, the Royal family, Cabinet Ministers, and so on, have received no applause at all. All those applauded are doing, not merely saying, or watching.

Very recently however there seems to be a trend away from this opinion. Both the King and Queen have been applauded this week, though each time the applause was very faint. There had been no other clapping at all for them for them for nearly a month. Also a sequence of the Democratic convention gained slight applause.

Footnote. It seems certain that an audience unless very deeply moved, will applaud only at 'applause points', that is to say, unless the commentator makes such a remark as 'Well done the RAF' or 'she is a very gallant woman', or if the sequence showing an airman or a Pole or a heroine, the audience will not respond. This had already been noted over the Dunkirk evacuation and reappeared very clearly in the handling of an air battle off the coast. This was observed in three reels (Pathe, G.B. and Paramount.) In two of them there was little or no applause: these two had Charles Gardner's BBC commentary, and showed the film just as it had been taken. Pathe cut the action shots with stock of RAF planes and the like, and the commentary, instead of stopping short, was worked out to a conclusion. This resulted in considerably more applause.