

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

‘The Mild Revolution’: The Politics of Ealing Studios

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by

Lee Paul Freeman (Ba) (Ma)

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Introduction

Filmmaking has taken place at Ealing from 1902 - originally under the ownership of the film pioneer Will G. Barker - until the present day. Film production at Ealing can be broken down into five separate operational phases:

- a) Films made at Will Barker's studio at Ealing Green from 1902 through 1929;
- b) Films made at the refurbished Ealing studios (expanding out from Barker's site), between 1930 and 1938, under the ownership of Associated Talking Pictures;
- c) Films made between 1938 and 1959 by a production company headed up by Michael Balcon (eventually titled 'Ealing Studios Limited') while at location (b);
- d) Films and television programmes made at location (b) from 1955 on, by the BBC and other production companies;
- e) Films produced by a modern company called Ealing Studios, many produced at a modernised location (b) since 2002.¹

This thesis, like most critical examinations of Ealing, will concentrate on the studio's output between 1938 and 1959 when, under the management of Michael Balcon, Ealing gained its reputation as one of the leading studios in British cinema history, reflecting in its operating structure and formal and thematic

¹ Mark Duguid, Lee Freeman, Keith M. Johnston and Melanie Williams (eds), *Ealing Revisited* (London: BFI Palgrave, 2012), p. 3.

output, characteristics which have come to be associated with British social and cultural values.² For Stephanie Muir:

Many of the 96 films made at Ealing [...] appear as examples in studies of British national cinema. It has become a brand name representing a certain kind of practice, a community of film-makers working together in a defined location, producing a particular kind of film. Within the context of a nation having to adjust to a devastating conflict, the consequences of its aftermath and the social upheavals that followed, Ealing films can be considered as reflecting some common characteristics which can be identified as 'national', conjuring up images of Britain and Britishness for a home as well as an international audience. In many ways the values of Ealing in the 1940s and the early 1950s have become identified with the values of Britain. Seen from its own particular perspective [...] it can be studied as constructing an image of an entire nation at a particular moment in its history.³

It is for the reasons that Muir suggests that Ealing remains one of the most affectionately remembered and iconic of all British film institutions. The films produced by the studio have so emphatically entered the national consciousness that any mention of the word Ealing brings to mind recognizable images of genial eccentricity, mild rebellion and an intimate community spirit which have come to be regarded as quintessentially British. The fact that Ealing has become a byword for a certain trope of British national identity is primarily accountable to the role played by

² For an assessment of Basil Dean's Associated Talking Pictures era, see Steve Chibnall 'A Lad, a Lass and the Loch Ness Monster: The Prehistory of Ealing', *Ealing Revisited*, pp. 15-25.

³ Stephanie Muir, *Studying Ealing Studios* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur, 2010), p. 7.

Ealing comedy, although this association fails to do justice to the wide variety of genres made at the studio. Anthony Algate and Jeffrey Richards's description of Ealing as being 'essentially quaint, cosy, whimsical and backward-looking'⁴ remains the critical orthodoxy, especially in relation to the studio's comedic output. However, Mark Duguid counters this argument, suggesting that Ealing offered a more progressive outlook, as 'Ealing and its films stood for decency, democracy, community, pluck and fair play: the best of British values'⁵ a claim which remains a typical assessment of the social values of the studio and how these were explicitly connected to British national characteristics.

A critical consensus has emerged in relation to any analysis of Ealing's politics which acknowledges the progressive aspects of Ealing's political ideology, typified by its promotion of democracy and its community values, whilst simultaneously arguing that there were limits to the studio's social democratic impulse. John Ellis described Ealing's politics as being 'liberal rather than radical, progressive rather than revolutionary'⁶ and, similarly, Adrienne Mancina noted how the films produced at the

⁴ Anthony Algate and Jeffrey Richards, *Best of British: Cinema and Society from 1930 to the Present* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 150.

⁵ Mark Duguid, 'Ealing Studios', *Screenonline*, [URL: http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/456030](http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/456030) (accessed 21 July 2015)

⁶ John Ellis, 'Made in Ealing', *Screen*, Volume 16, Number 1, Spring 1975, p. 105.

studio would consistently reflect ‘working/middle class, liberal, traditional, comfy, and parochial’⁷ values. These are both reasonable assessments of the politics of Ealing, however, there are a number of films made by the studio which contradict this viewpoint and are far more radical in content than this critical orthodoxy suggests.

Summarising Ealing’s outlook, Duguid encapsulates the dichotomy which is central to any analysis of the studio’s politics, hinting at a slight divergence from the critical orthodoxy, and arguing for a slightly more dynamic reading of the studio’s output:

‘Ealing’ as an adjective [...] embraces both modestly progressive values and a respect for tradition; both a decent, cheery public-spiritedness and a resistance to stern authority and bureaucracy; both an embodiment of community and an endearing eccentricity; and, above all a profoundly British sensibility.⁸

By examining a number of films which acknowledge Ealing’s rhetoric of consensus, community and democracy and those which diverge from this discourse, this thesis shall explore the tension between the liberal, consensual values of the studio, to

⁷ Adrienne Mancina, ‘Introduction’, Geoff Brown and Laurence Kardish, *Michael Balcon, The Pursuit of British Cinema* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), p. 14.

⁸ Mark Duguid, ‘The Dark Side of Ealing’, *Sight and Sound*, Volume 22, Issue 11 November 2012, p. 54.

suggest that Ealing presented a much more radical agenda than the critical orthodoxy has acknowledged.

Ealing's progressive outlook was melded during wartime and the studio has tended to be associated with the postwar transformation of British society that contributed to the Labour Party's historic electoral victory in 1945, where the shared experience of war helped to shape a new social and political consensus, increasingly democratic and egalitarian in nature. The wartime shift in social attitudes led the historian A.J.P. Taylor to describe the war years as 'the brief period when the English people felt they were a truly democratic country'⁹ and Ealing's politics were shaped initially by the official construction of the people's war which led to the new postwar democratic consensus. It was this period where Ealing came to be associated, as Charles Barr's explains, with 'notions of social responsibility and community which the British cinema, in the war years and after, so assiduously reflects and promotes'.¹⁰

Michael Balcon described the studio's political outlook and class background during the 1940s as follows:

If you think about Ealing [...] we were middle-class people brought up with middle-class backgrounds and rather conventional educations. Though we were radical in our points

⁹ A.J.P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 550.

¹⁰ Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London: Cameron and Hollis, 1998), p. 17.

of view, we did not want to tear down institutions [...]. We were people of the immediate post-war generation, and we voted Labour for the first time after the war; this was our mild revolution.¹¹

Balcon's characterisation of Ealing's personnel and their politics as constituting a 'mild revolution' is instructive as it appears to reinforce the critical orthodoxy which highlighted the studio's progressive credentials while simultaneously admitting that there were limits to the studio's radicalism. Balcon's Ealing epitomised those sections of the middle class that were radicalised during the war and declared their support for Labour's New Jerusalem. He described his own political upbringing as belonging to the 'Gladstonian school of Liberalism', but admitted that he 'began to feel, in the years that immediately preceded' World War II 'that there was no longer a place in this world for us old-fashioned Liberals, and that something more progressive must replace it', and that all individuals 'should contribute in our own capacity towards solving the problems which were menacing the world with another war'.¹²

For Aldgate and Richards, Ealing presented 'a limited radicalism, constrained by Balcon's strict moral attitude and national pride'¹³ and Balcon summarized his progressive

¹¹ Quoted in Ellis, 'Made in Ealing', p. 119.

¹² Michael Balcon, *Realism or Tinsel* (London: BFI Pamphlet, 1943)

¹³ Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, p. 155.

patriotism in an article entitled 'Let British Films be Ambassadors for the World' for *Kine Weekly* in 1945:

[T]he need is great for a projection of the true Briton to the rest of the world [...] The world, in short, must be presented with a complete picture of Britain [...] Britain as a leader in social reform in the defeat of social injustices and a champion of civil liberties; Britain as a patron and parent of great writing, painting and music, Britain as a questing explorer, adventurer and trader; Britain as the home of great industry and craftsmanship; Britain as a mighty military power standing alone and undaunted against terrifying aggression.¹⁴

Balcon's political journey from liberalism to a more radical social reformism was allied to his belief in a progressive patriotism and this instinctively led him to support the Labour government's reforms. Balcon's sympathies for the Labour movement were underlined when he attended a meeting on November 5th 1947 organised by the Secretary of the Labour Party, Morgan Phillips, to discuss Labour's anniversary celebrations. At the meeting, the possibility was raised of making a biographical film on Keir Hardie. However, Balcon's initial enthusiasm for the film was to wane and in a letter to Labour's George H. Elvin he announced that after undertaking some initial research he no longer was of the belief that the biographical subject was of sufficient cinematic interest.¹⁵ Balcon then

¹⁴ *Kine Weekly*, 11 January 1945, p. 163.

¹⁵ Letter from Michael Balcon to George H. Elvin, 17 February 1948 (BFI: Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box G38)

expressed a desire to make a film focusing on the struggles of the Tolpuddle Martyrs which he believed would be ‘a first-class subject’¹⁶ for the cinema. However, like the Hardie film, the project was abandoned after Balcon expressed the opinion in a letter to Michael Young from Labour’s research department that ‘the script material ... was not satisfactory’.¹⁷

Jerry Palmer highlighted how the studio was intrinsically linked to Labour politics, suggesting that ‘conventionally Ealing has tended to be aligned with the Labour government of 1945. The social dramas have been interpreted as proposing – in some form or other – the ideal of a national community, in which the traditional divisiveness of class would be palliated by some higher commitment’.¹⁸ Therefore, Ealing films as a product of the people’s war tended to highlight the class hierarchical structure but this was usually obscured by the wartime requirement of national unity and consensus which meant that, in Vincent Porter’s words, ‘class problems’ had a tendency to ‘vanish in a paean of collective communal endeavour’.¹⁹

¹⁶ Letter from Michael Balcon to Morgan Phillips, 28 July 1948 (BFI: Michael Balcon Special Collection, G38)

¹⁷ Letter from Michael Balcon to Michael Young, 1 February 1949 (BFI: Michael Balcon Special Collection, G38) A film was eventually made on the Tolpuddle Martyrs titled *Comrades*, directed by Bill Douglas in 1986.

¹⁸ Jerry Palmer, ‘Enunciation and Comedy: *Kind Hearts and Coronets*’, *Screen*, Volume 30, Number 2, Winter/Spring 1989, p. 157.

¹⁹ Vincent Porter, ‘The Context of Creativity: Ealing Studios and Hammer Films’, James Curran, Vincent Porter (eds.), *British Cinema History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1983), p. 189.

Ealing's contribution to the promotion of the people's war which advocated principles of national unity and consensus, manifested itself in a prioritisation of a realist aesthetic, heavily influenced by the documentary film movement of the 1930s. In addition to its analysis of Ealing's political discourse, this thesis will also examine the studio's preference for a realist form, by both acknowledging Ealing's debt to documentary-style realism but also highlighting the texts which abandoned this aesthetic. Ealing's fictional output evolved from a number of wartime documentary shorts, aided by the studio's recruitment of key personnel from the GPO and Crown Film Unit, particularly the directors Harry Watt, Alberto Cavalcanti and the photographer Douglas Slocombe. Balcon had become convinced of the need for increased realism in the cinema, declaring his preference for 'realism' over 'tinsel' in a paper he delivered to the Workers' Film Association at Brighton in 1943, the year that the studio's quest for realism reached fruition with the release of *San Demetrio, London* (Charles Frend, 1943). Arriving at a mid-point in the war, Ealing's naval drama exemplifies the studio's preference for a documentary-influenced realistic treatment of its war subject which promoted vital themes of national consensus and solidarity and secured the studio's association with perceived British values of democracy and equality. For Balcon, 'the

function of the film industry' during the war 'became clear-cut. First, there was propaganda, the projection of our own ideas, our strength and our resources. Second, instruction – both for the Services and for the civilians. Third, entertainment'.²⁰

Ealing's promotion of British characteristics and values was highlighted in a plaque which was erected at the studio after it was sold to the BBC in 1955 and Ealing was temporarily relocated to MGM's studios at Borehamwood. The inscription on the plaque, written by Balcon, reads: 'Here during a quarter of a century many films were made projecting Britain and the British character.' As the projection of British characteristics became a conscious commitment of Ealing, this manifested itself in an engagement with a distinct view of British values which prioritised a social democratic ethic that emphasised community values over individualism and the needs of society over material self interest. This resulted in films which promoted the ethos of small-scale enterprises where a group of people would unite together to expel a larger outside threat. This theme was first adopted in the comedy *Cheer Boys Cheer* (Walter Forde, 1939) where a large brewing company is thwarted in its attempt to take over a small, family-run competitor. *Cheer Boys Cheer* set the template for the later Ealing productions which placed an emphasis upon a community ethic and prioritised national

²⁰ Balcon, *Realism or Tinsel*.

consensus over conflict and promoted a democratic and egalitarian national “community” which would necessitate a reduction in class hierarchy and division.

The emphasis Ealing placed upon democratic consensus and the preference for the small-scale was mirrored in the modus operandi of the studio itself. Prospective projects were debated at the famous Round Table at the studio where ‘every week, producers, writers and directors consulted freely together’.²¹ This democratic spirit occasionally resulted in Balcon being overruled to which the head of Ealing would accept the majority decision with a standing joke: ‘Well, if you fellows feel so strongly in favour, on my head be it’.²² The studio also sought to achieve a degree of continuity in its production, aiming to keep projects as far as possible ‘in-house’ and preferring to utilise artistic resources and promote from within rather than looking to bring in outside personnel to work on their films. These factors combined to create stability at Ealing, emphasised by the slogan ‘The Studio with the Team Spirit’ which was posted on the studio wall during the ATP years, a legacy which was maintained throughout Balcon’s tenure until the studio’s demise in 1959. Philip Kemp described the atmosphere as Ealing, with its ‘roster of personnel – directors, writers, producers and technicians – on permanent

²¹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 6.

²² Quoted in David Puttnam’s ‘Preface’, Brown and Kardish, *Michael Balcon: The Pursuit of British Cinema*, p. 7.

salary; its pool of actors who reappeared in movie after movie; its recurrent thematic and social preoccupations' as contributing towards the studio's 'recognisable house-style of film-making' which helped to create 'a supportive and co-operative ethos among its personnel'.²³

Ealing is almost unique in British cinema insofar as its cooperative style of production led to its films being associated with a studio, rather than an individual creative ethos. Individuals brought their own range of styles and influences upon the films, but these were contained within the overall studio framework as the films are recognized as being Ealing products rather than as the authorial creation of a particular individual. As filmmaking is an industrial and collaborative process, the question of authorship of a cinematic text remains problematic. This thesis will not neglect the contribution made by individual filmmakers but will examine those contributions in relation to the overall studio concept and offer an analysis of how these distinctive styles operated within the formal and thematic ideology of the studio.

Considering the important role played by Balcon, one line of enquiry in a study of Ealing would suggest the possibility of producer as *auteur*. Vincent Porter has questioned the neglected role of the producer in the filmmaking process:

²³ Philip Kemp, *Lethal Innocence: The Cinema of Alexander Mackendrick* (London: Methuen, 1991), p. 15.

The creative role played by a film producer has conventionally been ignored by film critics and theorists, who have tended to assign a more creative role to the film's director or on occasion to the screen-writer. [...] But, in fact, the producer brings together his or her unique control on assessment of public taste, the task of raising adequate production finance, the decision as to which individuals should be employed in the key creative roles in the film and on what terms, and the overall supervision and management of the production process. It is precisely through the way in which these four factors are interrelated that the producer imposes his or her creative mark upon the film.²⁴

Acknowledging Balcon's contribution as chief producer to the identity of Ealing studios, Stephanie Muir argues that:

Balcon can be considered one of British cinema's *auteurs*, not in the creative sense because he had no direct input into either script or direction, but he was an impresario who was able to raise the finance, supervise the production, assemble the team and provide the environment that motivated creativity.²⁵

Ealing's 'communal decision-making process'²⁶ lends itself to a more nuanced approach towards the question of authorship of the studio's films which extends beyond the usual director as *auteur* textual analysis, acknowledging other creative influences to contribute towards the construction of the Ealing aesthetic. However, those instances where a single director imprinted a text with their own individual aesthetic must also be recognized and this is examined within the thesis' exploration of

²⁴ Porter, 'The Context of Creativity', pp. 179-80.

²⁵ Muir, *Studying Ealing Studios*, p. 20.

²⁶ Duguid, Freeman, Johnston and Williams, *Ealing Revisited*, p. 6.

the contributions of Robert Hamer and Alexander Mackendrick, who are both regarded as offering a more distinctive individual auteurist approach which would often go against the grain of the Ealing norm. Although the collaborative process of filmmaking at Ealing helped the studio to produce a distinctly recognisable product which prioritised certain political and social values, this prioritization did not necessarily occur uniformly over the entire range of the studio's films. The collaborative creative process adopted by Ealing often militated against a single controlling authorship and even Balcon's overall control of the productions did not always necessarily confirm his influence over the text, as Porter suggests:

Although Ealing's output was essentially representative of Balcon's ideas and wishes, there is also some evidence that the Ealing films which were successful at the box-office were successful because of a story, directorial or other qualities which reflected the inputs of the various writers or directors involved rather than because of Balcon's grand design.²⁷

Ealing operated within a particular British idiom through a promotion of a realist aesthetic to celebrate community togetherness and national unity which coincided with a particular moment in the nation's history to project a certain British national identity that respected traditional institutions whilst simultaneously championing reform. Through an engagement

²⁷ Porter, 'The Context of Creativity', p. 190.

with a number of key texts and an examination of key personnel, including producers, directors, scriptwriters and actors, this thesis traces the history of Ealing studios, examining how the studio's 'mild revolution' helped contribute to a period of major social and political reconstruction.

The studio's contribution has been widely acknowledged within general studies of the nation's cinema, especially in relation to the golden age of British cinema of the 1940s. There have been a number of books on individual filmmakers at the studio, notably Alan Burton and Tim O'Sullivan's edited collection: *Liberal Directions: Basil Dearden and Postwar British Film Culture* (1997) and their monograph: *The Cinema of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph* (2009). In addition, the films Alexander Mackendrick directed for Ealing have been considered in Philip Kemp's *Lethal Innocence: The Cinema of Alexander Mackendrick* (1991). However, for a studio with such a renowned history and rich reputation within the study of British cinema there is a distinct lack of monographs on Ealing. Stephanie Muir's *Studying Ealing Studios* (2010) is worth noting, as its major achievement is to contextualise Ealing's contribution towards the cinematic construction of national identity, acknowledging the studio's social and historical relevance. Although less scholarly than Muir, George Perry's *Forever Ealing* (1977) is also

incredibly astute and contains much worthy of consideration.

However, the key seminal text on Ealing is undoubtedly Charles Barr's *Ealing Studios* which was first published in 1977 and updated in 1993 and 1998.

Barr's monograph on Ealing considers the politics of the studio in some depth, highlighting the key themes of community and the importance of realist aesthetics and linking Ealing to a social democratic ethos. However, this thesis will employ a wider methodology than Barr's, utilising a more extensive range of source materials such as film scripts, pamphlets, letters etc to develop a broader understanding of the social, political and contexts in which the films were produced. By including a more extensive range of historical and political literature than Barr, our analysis will provide a greater focus on Ealing's politics than previous studies have attempted. Although, like Barr, this study's emphasis will remain upon the cinematic texts themselves, the utilisation of a wider range of literature and acknowledgement of social contexts will allow for a clearer understanding of Ealing's political ideology. In addition, an extensive analysis of the historical role and influence of the documentary movement and appraisal of the contexts of institutional production will help to locate Ealing's position within British cinema in general. Therefore, this thesis is the first full-length study to prioritise the

politics of the studio by highlighting the extent of Ealing's support for the leftward shift of the 1930s and to acknowledge the studio's contribution towards the post war political consensus which produced the radical zeitgeist of 1945.

In order to locate the politics of Ealing within the spectrum of left-wing politics and to argue the case for a more radical Ealing, a brief explanation of the terminology employed is required. Ealing adopted a social-democratic, reformist position, supporting the ideals of the Labour Party to achieve its aims through the parliamentary process. However, at its farthest left, the studio also suggested a much more radical and, occasionally, revolutionary agenda. The difference between radical and revolutionary political thought requires some further explanation in relation to how these terms are employed throughout the thesis. When it is suggested that Ealing displayed a 'radical' political agenda it should be seen as placing the politics of the studio within the reformist tradition of the Labour Party. When it is suggested that Ealing's political discourse embraced a more revolutionary outlook, we are suggesting that the studio was supporting the notion of a transformation of society along socialist lines. The question of whether a text adopts a reformist, radical or revolutionary perspective is not merely a semantic issue, however, as these two terms are not fixed but subject

themselves to an ideological struggle depending on various historical and social factors. For example, the Labour election victory in 1945 was the direct result of a shift to the left of the centre ground within British politics with many supporters regarding the coming to power of a Labour government as an opportunity to create a socialist society. Therefore, initially at least, reformism was regarded as an agent of revolutionary change. This thesis will trace the vicissitudes of the Labour project in relation to the films made by Ealing during the immediate post war period, examining how the studio adapted its outlook as the initial optimism at the election of a Labour administration began to wane and the government began to backtrack from its initial promise of creating a socialist New Jerusalem.

In terms of its overall structure, this thesis will closely examine a number of key texts which are indicative of Ealing's left-of-centre political orientation. The films selected are representative of Ealing's political outlook but we shall also examine a wide range of films made at the studio in order to give an overview of Ealing's ideological perspective. We shall begin by looking at those films produced during the 1930s, a period marked by depression and the advance towards war. Pen Tennyson was the architect of Ealing's subsequent cinematic

engagement with a working-class milieu and *The Proud Valley* (1940) is the key pre-war text in this regard as it deals directly with issues of poverty and the approaching conflict, engaging with archetypal Ealing themes of class, community and consensus.

Ealing continued to develop these thematic tropes throughout their wartime output. As the studio cemented its pre-war realist credentials - an aesthetic demanded of the cinema by the Ministry of Information - the thesis moves on to consider how Ealing's wartime productions endorsed the government's stipulation that filmmakers projected the propagandist ideology of the people's war. *San Demetrio, London* has been chosen as the primary text to illustrate how Ealing reflected the political transformation of the war years, as it is the film which most successfully communicates the people's war narrative, and confirms the democratic impetus which was occurring in the nation at the time. It is also notable for developing the theme of national solidarity which would involve an engagement with a socialist ethos previously as demonstrated in *The Proud Valley*.

The Proud Valley and *San Demetrio, London* are selected as fundamental texts for study primarily because they illustrate Ealing's attitude towards consensus and are significant examples of the studio's depiction of a nation of all classes pulling together

which was a prerequisite for the cinema's promotion of the people's war. Towards the end of the war, Ealing's concern shifted to the nature of post-war society and, hereinafter, the thesis addresses how the studio's discourse reflected the postwar political consensus. *They Came to a City* (Basil Dearden, 1944) is an exceptional text as it eschews the preference for a realist aesthetic by transplanting its polemic onto a fantasy terrain. *They Came to a City* is also crucial in any analytical study of Ealing's as is the most radical film made by the studio to advance the ideals of socialism and to problematise Ealing's consensual outlook.

In addition to Dearden, another major architect of the Ealing image is the scriptwriter T.B. Clarke, renowned chiefly for his contribution to the comedies made by the studio. This thesis will provide a detailed assessment of Ealing's comedic output, challenging the assumption that the films represented a cosy, whimsical portrayal of British national identity by locating them within the studio's political discourse. In this analysis, the Clarke scripted *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949) is given prominence as it remains one of the most popular of the canonical comedies produced by Ealing and, more importantly, the only comedy to deal directly with the postwar Labour government by

explicitly drawing upon the spirit of wartime unity to support the Labour administration's reforms.

Passport to Pimlico undoubtedly displays certain comedic whimsical elements but it manages to combine its generic origins with a conscious political commitment to Labour's programme, exhibiting a renewed emphasis on the wartime national consensus. Following on from *Passport to Pimlico*, the work of Robert Hamer is examined. Hamer, alongside the director Alexander Mackendrick, represented the 'dark side of Ealing', his films consistently exposing tensions within the consensus mentality of the studio. We shall consider Hamer's often problematic relationship towards the Ealing structure, paying particular attention to *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (1945) and *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947), which, alongside the comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), are notable for offering much bleaker visions of the Ealing ethos. In many ways Hamer's concerns appear to correspond with those of the studio as his films also realistically engage with working-class milieu. However, in stark contrast to the sanguine Ealing mainstream norm, Hamer's bleak narratives, permeated with despair, social discord and division, offer little in the way of resolution to solving the social problems his films illustrate. *It Always Rains on Sunday* is the primary text considered in this thesis' discussion of

Hamer as it stands comparison to Pen Tennyson's pre-war films, *There Ain't No Justice* (1939) and *The Proud Valley* which engage with a working-class social landscape. It also noteworthy as a comparison to *Passport to Pimlico* as both films engage with the contemporary issue of postwar austerity, although the channeling of Hamer's pessimistic sensibility makes *It Always Rains on Sunday* a much bleaker text than Henry Cornelius' amiable comedy.

In addition to Hamer, Alexander Mackendrick can also be regarded as representing a diversion from the Ealing norm. Like Hamer, there is a malevolent vein to the films Mackendrick directed for the studio and we shall consider his output in relation to Ealing's socially consensual disposition in detail. *The Man in the White Suit* - the most politically intricate and intelligent of all the canonical Ealing comedies - is singled out for consideration in order to challenge the assumption that the film represents an attack upon trade unionism within its satirical assault on the nature of industrial relations and capitalist production. In addition to *The Man in the White Suit*, we conclude by briefly examining Mackendrick's *The Ladykillers* (1955) which is considered in juxtaposition to the studio's later 'decline'. As Ealing's 1950s output vainly attempted to re-assert the wartime and immediate postwar progressive values within a changing political climate,

The Ladykillers was the last of the classic comedies to successfully engage with Ealing's consensus mentality, its subtext ironically suggesting the termination of the studio's progressive mild revolution.

By concentrating upon a number of key films in correlation with Ealing's overall output during Balcon's tenure at the studio, this thesis shall locate Ealing's political discourse in relation to the historical moment of production. In order to trace Ealing's political development, consideration is given to contemporary social, political and institutional contexts, however, the main emphasis is placed upon the cinematic texts themselves. The primary objective of the thesis is to focus upon the studio's ideological perspective and to question the critical orthodoxy which claims Ealing represented a moderate progressivism by highlighting elements of the studio's 'mild revolution' which engaged much more enthusiastically with social democratic and socialist ideology than has previously been acknowledged.

1. Socialism, Class and Consensus in *The Proud Valley*

Introduction: Contemporary Issues and Reception

The first major film made at Ealing to both confirm the studio's ideological link with the politics of the Labour movement and its inclination towards realism is Pen Tennyson's *The Proud Valley*. Set in the mining village of Blaendy in South Wales, *The Proud Valley* depicts the struggles of that particular section of the working class whose stoicism and diligence under mounting hardship and adversity was so lucidly captured by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Writing just three years before the film's release, Orwell stated:

The machines that keep us alive, and the machines that make the machines are all directly or indirectly dependent upon coal. In the metabolism of the Western world the coal miner is second in importance only to the man that ploughs the soil [...] all of us *really* owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel.²⁸

Orwell, alongside the playwright J.B. Priestley, were two of the cultural establishment's proponents of the increasing tendency towards socialist ideas which was melded during wartime and which culminated in the election of the first majority Labour government in 1945. Orwell even went as far to declare

²⁸ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 18-31.

that ‘we know very well with its present social structure England cannot survive, and we have to make other people see that fact and act upon it. We cannot win the war without introducing socialism, nor establish socialism without winning the war’.²⁹ Similarly, Priestley consistently argued for a postwar transformation of society along socialist lines, and the popularity of his wartime radio broadcasts were deemed such a threat to the social order that they were eventually taken off the air.³⁰

In order to maintain the official ideology of the people’s war, a prioritisation of the values of community as opposed to individualism occurred which became a cornerstone of Britain’s cinema during the war years. In a variety of genres, from documentary and newsreels to fictional drama including war and comedy features, the nation’s cinema began to assert the national values of consensus that would survive more or less intact until the latter half of the 1970s. One of the chief characteristics of the cinema of the period was a tendency to increasingly engage with working-class characters within a realist setting and such an aesthetic became Ealing’s forte. When examined within this context *The Proud Valley* represents an early example of what

²⁹ George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Peter Davison (ed.), *The Complete Works of George Orwell Twelve: A Patriot After All* (London: Secker and Walburg, 1998), p.421.

³⁰ See Chapter 3 of this thesis for a more detailed examination of Priestley’s contribution to Ealing and the nation’s wartime political ideology.

Peter Stead described as the wartime British cinema's fascination with depicting 'the people as stars'.³¹

The Proud Valley opened to largely favourable reviews with *The South Wales Echo* describing the 'real-life picture of the Welsh coalfield' as 'the most sincere film of mining life ever screened'.³² Similarly, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* remarked on the realist setting by praising the film's 'authentic and convincing atmosphere' and declaring the picture to be 'an outstanding achievement for all concerned'.³³ However, the sentiment that the film evokes is perhaps best summed up by Aubrey Flanagan's review in the *Motion Picture Herald*:

There is nothing fanciful about this vivid story of the mining towns of South Wales. It is a realistic, dramatic and human slice of life, photographically re-creating the struggles and the idealism, the tragedies and the pride, of the men and women who live by the coal, or die by the decay of the mines. The production has not only an impassioned human sympathy but a conviction of detail unparalleled in British films devised around the subject. Though Negro Paul Robeson is the ostensible star, the real stars are the miners themselves, and the wives who wait.³⁴

Despite its favourable contemporary reception, some modern critics have suggested that the passing of the years has not

³¹ See Peter Stead, 'The People as Stars: Feature Films as National Expression', Philip M. Taylor (ed.) *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 62-83.

³² *South Wales Echo*, 15 December 1939.

³³ *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 31 January 1940, *The Proud Valley Press Book* (London: BFI Library)

³⁴ *Motion Picture Herald*, Volume 138, Number 4, 27 January 1940, *The Proud Valley Press Book*.

been terribly kind to *The Proud Valley*. When viewed today, what was originally conceived as Ealing's tribute to the working miners of South Wales can occasionally appear dated and riddled with cliché and caricature. The image of the workers as depicted in the film is of the honest and simple cloth-capped variety, much repeated and parodied on-screen in everything from *Monty Python's Flying Circus* to the *Hovis* adverts. In his study of the early British sound cinema, David Quinlan argues that despite the fact that Ealing's pit drama was 'considered an outstanding achievement in its time [*The Proud Valley*] looks a little naïve today'.³⁵ However, despite undeniably having had its radical edge blunted through the twin forces of time and political expedience, Tennyson's melodrama still maintains its power to move. The scenes of disaster depicted convey a degree of raw power which still possesses the capacity to shock. Similarly, the moment at the eisteddfod when David Goliath (Paul Robeson) sings 'Deep River' in honour of his dead friend, the choirmaster Dick Parry (Edward Chapman), remains one of the period's most touching cinematic moments.

The film is set just before the outbreak of the war. Goliath, an itinerant Afro-American, arrives in Blaendy seeking employment. On account of his tremendous singing voice, he

³⁵ David Quinlan, *British Sound Films: The Studio Years 1928-1959* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1984), p. 133.

finds work at the local colliery and lodges with the choirmaster Dick Parry. However, tragedy soon arrives at the pit when Dick dies in a mining accident. Things then become progressively worse for the miners as the pit is closed down and unemployment and poverty begins to take its toll upon the community. Stirred on by Goliath, the miners decide to fight back and march to London, eventually convincing the mine owners to re-open the pit to aid the nation's war effort. Disaster then strikes once more at the film's climax when Goliath sacrifices his own life in order to save the lives of a group of his fellow miners. Therefore, the death of the film's leading character becomes a symbolic representation of the sacrifice made by the men who go down the pit to earn a living and a forewarning of the ultimate sacrifice to be made by millions in the ensuing conflict. The theme of sacrifice is a recurring motif throughout the film and one which we shall return to later as, not surprisingly, issues of self-sacrifice and restraint became a crucial theme throughout much of Ealing's wartime output. In fact, such attributes are a common feature of much British cinema of the period and the tragedy in *The Proud Valley* foreshadows a similar event in Humphrey Jennings' documentary *Fires Where Started* (1943), where the death of a fire-fighter was stipulated by the Ministry of Information (MOI) for the purpose

of emphasising the nature of the nation's collective sacrifice during wartime.³⁶

The Documentary Influence: Aesthetics, Realism and Class

British cinema's increasing engagement with the landscape of the working and lower-middle classes and its prioritisation of a realist form can be traced back to the influence exerted on mainstream cinema by the documentary movement of the inter-war period. This tendency first emerged with the formation of the Empire Marketing Board in 1928 which brought together the documentary pioneers John Grierson, Basil Wright and Paul Rotha. After the EMB was abolished by an act of Parliament in 1933, the General Post Office Film Unit and, later, the Crown Film Unit which fell under the jurisdiction of the MOI during the war, continued the trend. The documentary movement's increasing engagement with a working-class subject matter and its fascination with the world of work can be seen in films such as *Drifters* (John Grierson, 1929) which concentrates upon the North Sea fishing industry and *Night Mail* (Harry Watt and Basil Wright, 1936) which examines the work of the postal service.

Grierson was to become the documentary film's chief pioneer who, according to Roy Armes, developed the ideas begun by John Reith in the 1920s who advocated a 'sense of social

³⁶ See Brian Winston, *Fires were Started* (British Film Institute, 1999), p. 21.

responsibility³⁷ at the BBC. Furthermore, Armes argues, Grierson ‘is significant, not for his specific aesthetic concerns [...] but for the way that he theorized and put into practice a distinctive view of the social function of the cinema’.³⁸ The perceived social didacticism of the cinema was one of the major ideological influences that the documentary movement exerted over mainstream fictional cinema and one of Grierson’s overriding concerns within the documentary aesthetic. Charles Barr traced the progression of the notion of this social responsibility from Reith and Grierson through to Balcon in the 1940s as Balcon adapted the approach of Grierson and the documentary movement, applying its moral and socially didactic approach to Ealing’s fictional narrative cinema’.³⁹ However, whereas Grierson, and Balcon’s attitude to filmmaking was utilised as a method to stabilise and help democratic society to flourish, other documentary filmmakers were intent to utilise the documentary form for more radical purposes. One such filmmaker was Paul Rotha who, according to Rachael Low, ‘consciously sought to humanise documentary and, whereas Grierson wanted to make democracy work, Rotha was committed to social change’.⁴⁰

³⁷ Roy Armes, *A Critical History of the British Cinema* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1978), p. 128.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Charles Barr, ‘Projecting Britain and the British Character: Ealing Studios’, *Screen*, Volume 15, Number. 1, Spring 1974, p. 88.

⁴⁰ Rachael Low, *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), p. 61.

Rotha's concern with issues surrounding the labouring classes is evident in films such as *Night Shift* (1942), *Face of Britain* and *Shipyard* (both 1935). Moreover, Rotha's production of *Today We Live* (Ruby Grierson and Ralph Bond, 1937), although ostensibly concerned with promoting the work of the National Council of Social Service in alleviating poverty, is actually a call for a radical re-evaluation of how society treats the mass of unemployed. Sarah Easen highlights the film's radical treatment of its subject matter, pointing out that '*Today We Live* was praised for its human and sympathetic treatment of the working-classes, free from sentimentality and without patronising its subjects' whilst arguing that ultimately 'the film makes no claims that the work of the NCSS is a solution to the problems of an increasingly depressed rural and industrial Britain'.⁴¹

In 1937 Alberto Cavalcanti made the documentary *Coal Face*, which dealt with similar issues surrounding the coal mining industry as *The Proud Valley* and *Today We Live*. Cavalcanti, a hugely influential figure on the documentary film, would join Ealing three years after making *Coal Face* and in a discussion on the influence of documentary 'on the popular or commercial film', Balcon stated that 'there is no finer representative living of the documentary film than Cavalcanti, who has done more than

⁴¹ Sarah Easen, '*Today We Live*', *Screenonline*, [URL: http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/558995/index.html](http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/558995/index.html) (accessed 22 June 2012)

anyone else to make the documentary become [...] the truest expression of British cinema'.⁴² *Coal Face* became important to the documentary film for its avant-garde approach, with Ian Aitken drawing attention to the film's creative 'non-naturalistic deployment of sound, language and music, so that natural sounds, dialogue, speech, music and choral singing are integrated in a dramatic, often strident manner' and claiming that '*Coal Face* was an important film for both its innovative aesthetic style and for its ability to express critical social comment (noting, for example, the accident rate in the mines) in a film which was, in effect, made for a government department and sponsored by a commercial industry'.⁴³ As we shall see, there are immediate parallels to be drawn with *Coal Face*'s dramatic employment of music and choral singing with *The Proud Valley*'s similar treatment of the colliery choir at Blaendy. Similarly, *Coal Face*'s concern for issues of industrial safety is echoed within *The Proud Valley*'s narrative.

Similar questions of poverty and safety within the mines as exhibited within *Coal Face* are consistently referred to within *The Proud Valley*. However, once we are introduced to the

⁴² Michael Balcon, 'Address to the Oxford University Union Experimental Theatre Club and Film Society', March 14 1945, (Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box F/51)

⁴³ Ian Aitken, '*Coal Face*', *Screenonline*, URL: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/461606/index.html> (accessed 22 June 2012)

village's close-knit community and we get a sense of the solidarity amongst the workers, the tone of the film shifts constantly between the positive and negative aspects of coal mining. Initially there are arguments amongst the men concerning the inclusion of Goliath in the choir which results in a fight involving Emlyn Parry (Simon Lack) and a fellow miner. However, the matter is uneasily resolved when a miner commenting on Goliath's racial origins poses the question 'damn and blast it man aren't we all black down the pit?' This statement outlines the theme of working-class solidarity and the 'we are all in this together' sentiment which is a crucial aspect of the film and one which would also play such a fundamental role during the coming war as we shall see in the forthcoming chapters. The statement also confirms the arduous nature of manual labour in a brief line of dialogue which neatly re-enforces the harsh images we have previously seen of the reality of mining employment.

The centrality of the mining industry to village and family life is also skilfully revealed through the device of cross-cutting employed within the film. Just prior to the explosion at the pit, the film cuts from the pit face to the Parry household as they get ready for the eisteddfod and the filth, grime and the arduous nature of the labour involved in digging coal is contrasted with the domestic scene. Emlyn is wearing his shirt and tie and his

fiancé and Emlyn's brothers and sisters are all in their best clothes. This cross-cut manages to subtly suggest that any domestic essentials the villagers can afford such as food, clothing and shelter are, as Orwell suggested, inextricably linked to the work of the miners and the entire village existence depends upon the industry of the men underground. However, once the domestic idyll is punctuated by the alarm horn which sounds over the village, the film reverts to a more sombre tone. However, even at the point of impending tragedy, the text is keen to emphasise the solidarity amongst the villagers which is further established as we see the wives and families of the workers all rushing to the pit as the siren sounds, emphasising the close-knit nature of the mining community.

After the explosion and the death of Parry results in the pit's closure, the choir turn up for the postponed eisteddfod only to say that in respect for the dead choirmaster they feel unable to compete. Nevertheless, Goliath sings 'Deep River' and the sombre mood is re-emphasised. This tone continues when the film cuts forward to a close-up of a sign over the pit stating 'No Hands Wanted' and we see the pit as it lays idle. Another cut to the sign of the Labour Exchange and the miners, now cast in shadow, emphasises their decline as we see them in medium close-up shuffling along the queue, filing into the Exchange.

Although one might struggle to claim a definite comparison between *The Proud Valley* and Italian neo-realism there are certain similarities between these scenes and those in *Ladri di Biciclette* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948). Both films attempt to convey the poverty of their respective periods and, one could argue, that the scenes in *The Proud Valley* are as powerful as anything in the Italian neo-realist canon for their raw emotion and power. Like De Sica's film, the workers' individuality is eroded and the importance of work to the status of the miners and their sense of self-respect is clearly evident. At this juncture, the miners' dehumanisation in the face of mass unemployment is complete, as the film cuts from the Labour Exchange to the slag heaps. In one poignant extreme long-shot, which is comparable to a similar sequence in *Today We Live*, these 'men of steel', to paraphrase Orwell's description of mineworkers, are reduced to tiny figures as if literally shrunk by unemployment and poverty as they scramble over the slag heaps in a desperate search for coal. As one miner puts it, these strong, proud men are now 'no more than numbers on a labour exchange' and Goliath, now a giant no longer, has returned to the poverty he attempted to flee. Thus, *The Proud Valley* manages to successfully combine two opposing aspects of working-class existence with the positive nature of the

villagers' solidarity constantly juxtaposed with the negative reality of hardship, unemployment and poverty.

The Proud Valley's engagement with the working-class milieu of the Welsh coal industry marks the film as an early example of cinema's promotion of the people's war. As Clive Coultass explains:

If British cinema had any collective purpose during the Second World War it was that of putting forward- in features and documentaries alike- the image of people working together with a kind of unity which Winston Churchill had asked from them. A few film-makers, mostly from the documentary movement, also saw social improvement as being one of the nation's goals [...] What mattered was stoicism, resolution, togetherness. It had become possible, though not very common, to put working-class characters on the screen without seeing them as comic caricatures.⁴⁴

British cinema's increased engagement with a working-class landscape foreshadowed the class-levelling tendencies which would occur during the war. As a prerequisite for national unity and political consensus, the Conservative government's invitation to Labour's leaders to enter the war cabinet acted as a catalyst for the promotion of social democratic ideals which would eventually help secure Labour's victory in 1945.

⁴⁴ Clive Coultass, 'British Cinema and the Reality of War', *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, p. 99.

Ealing, Labour and Politics

The introduction to this thesis suggested how Ealing have been linked to the politics of the Labour Party with Porter and Palmer claiming that the studio's radical edge was blunted by a promotion of community values which tended to alleviate class division in favour of national cohesion. There is an example of the 'higher commitment' alluded to by Palmer within *The Proud Valley*, exemplified by the film's conclusion. The final scene shows the miners successfully re-opening the pit as once more the coal is seen running along the coal chutes from the pit head to the surface. Accompanied by the sound of brass bands, choral singing and cheering villagers, the scene is celebratory. This climax is revelatory. The film was initially made to advocate a form of workers control of the mining industry but war was declared during the film's shooting and the original ending was shelved for a more conciliatory conclusion. Balcon described the thinking behind the alteration as follows:

In the original script the mines were shown defying the mine owners and opening up a dis-used pit on a co-operative basis to make a livelihood, but this was obviously neither tactful nor helpful propaganda when the country was at war [...] so after the outbreak of war we amended the ending of the script to fit in with the national mood.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Michael Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents ... A Lifetime of Films*, (London: Hutchinson and Co.), p. 126.

In the final montage sequence the mine is decorated with Union flags and we hear Robeson's voice singing the patriotic 'Wales, Wales, Home Sweet Home' as the issue of class division is finally and emphatically superseded in favour of promoting national unity. As Robert Murphy suggests, *The Proud Valley* 'like a number of the films made during the late 1930s such as *The South Riding* and *The Stars Look Down* offered a moderate critique of society', however, its 'ending which was to have pointed to the iniquities of the coal owners was changed to accommodate the "everybody pulling together" ethos of wartime'.⁴⁶ Once more parallels can be made between *The Proud Valley* and the documentary movement as Humphrey Jennings' later *Fires Were Started* (1943) borrows a similarly patriotic climax which has been criticised by Peter Stead for its 'rather crude, upbeat ending'.⁴⁷

The emasculated ending of *The Proud Valley* foreshadows Labour's retreat from advocating a radical revolutionary transformation of society into a more conciliatory agency for reforming capitalism. According to Paul Addison, 'the inter-war years are often thought of as a period of strong working class

⁴⁶ Robert Murphy, 'The British Film Industry: Audiences and Producers', *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, p. 35.

⁴⁷ Stead, 'The People as Stars', p. 71.

consciousness'.⁴⁸ Addison goes on to suggest that this attitude is an exaggeration but nevertheless points to such events as the great slump, mass unemployment, the Jarrow march, the general strike, *Love on the Dole* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* and the British volunteers who went to fight fascism in Spain as examples that helped to produce this sentiment.⁴⁹ What happened when Labour and Conservatives came together in government is that the Labour bureaucracy, according to Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, 'made its usual response to crisis- rushing to the defence of the capitalist status quo'.⁵⁰ What emerged from the wartime national government was a new consensus between capital and labour which was carried forward to the first majority Labour government. For Charles Barr, the utilisation of the Labour leadership within the war cabinet can be viewed in contrasting ways. The class 'rapprochement', as Barr puts it was 'symbolised and fostered by the power given to Ernest Bevin in the war cabinet'.⁵¹ However, Barr concludes by questioning the development and asking whether the incorporation truly represented a class victory or class compromise suggesting that: '[T]he major shift in power that followed in 1945, can be

⁴⁸ Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1994), p. 24.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, *The Labour Party: A Marxist History* (London: Bookmarks, 1996), p. 187.

⁵¹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 59.

interpreted in two broad ways: as radical change or as incorporation. The working class triumphant or the working class tamed brought within the traditional structures and values of government'.⁵²

Labour's 'incorporation' within the capitalist hegemony can be traced back to the late 1920s creed of Mondism. When the TUC general council held talks with leading industrialists it 'marked the acceptance by the majority of trade union leaders of the need to collaborate with the employers in the pursuit of productivity'.⁵³ We see this consensus preserved right up into 1950s with the notion of "Butskellism" which emphasised the similarities in policy between the Labour chancellor Hugh Gaitskell and his Tory successor R.A. Butler. Despite the 1945 Labour government's successful reforms, the monarchy, the House of Lords and the basis of class society remained intact. Eventually the "socialist" government imposed a wage freeze and sent in the troops to cross picket lines a total of 18 times.⁵⁴ The abdication of class struggle in favour of the promotion of a national consensus in reforming capitalism is what ultimately we see at the end of *The Proud Valley* as the text withdraws from its radicalism in order to become a representation of class

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p. 45.

⁵⁴ See Cliff and Gluckstein, 'The Atlee Government: Zenith of Reformism' in *The Labour Party*, pp. 218-55.

compromise. It is the epitome of Balcon's claim of a 'mild revolution' in dramatic form.

However, despite its muted conclusion, its ultimate acceptance of the dominant ideology, and its encapsulation of Mondism in its depiction of class co-operation rather than class conflict, *The Proud Valley* still ought to be considered as a radical film, emphasised by the fact that in 2006 it was screened as part of the Socialist Film Club's programme of films, introduced by the statesman of parliamentary socialism, the late Tony Benn. Moreover, David Berry claims that *The Proud Valley* was 'perhaps the nearest Ealing Studios, in their palmy days under Balcon, came to producing a genuine radical film, at least in content'.⁵⁵ This confirms the argument of Roland Barthes as described in his essay 'From Work to Text' which claims the 'paradoxical' and 'plural' nature of a text.⁵⁶ In Barthes 'The Death of the Author' the theorist explains that 'we know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning [...] but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash'.⁵⁷ This clash of meaning of which Barthes speaks occurs within *The Proud Valley* which operates on two opposing ideological levels,

⁵⁵ David Berry, *Wales and Cinema: The First Hundred Years* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1994), p. 166.

⁵⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text: Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 158-9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

simultaneously emphasising often conflicting ideological issues of class and nation.

Asserting the Radical Nature of the Text (1): Practitioners

For those seeking to assert its radical ideology, *The Proud Valley* has a promising pedigree. It was based on a story by the communist Herbert Marshall and his wife Alfreda Brilliant who were both linked to the left-wing Unity theatre. Marshall, who had previously worked in Russia under the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, wrote the initial script, but his treatment, which included a song concerning the revolutionary Joe Hill, was rejected and he was later removed as associate producer.⁵⁸ Marshall claims that his dismissal was at the request of the producer Sergei Nolbandov who ‘was instrumental in denying him a direct role in developing the story’s ideas’.⁵⁹ Nolbandov was a Russian émigré who had fought for the whites during the civil war and who perhaps was suspicious of Marshall’s communist sympathies. The screenplay was an eventual collaboration between Tennyson and two further writers with left-wing allegiances: the novelist Louis Golding and ex-miner and communist Jack Jones.

⁵⁸ See Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, p. 167.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

The director Pen Tennyson remains something of an enigma. Born the great-grandson of Alfred Lord Tennyson into a privileged class and educated at Eton and Oxford, Tennyson was the most unlikely of left-wing radicals. John Cunningham cites Tennyson's class background as an impediment to his radical socialism, claiming Tennyson's direction in *The Proud Valley* does not altogether escape the sentimentality often linked towards depiction of the lower classes in much of British cinema prior to the war. Cunningham argues that 'the miners' cottages in the film are just a bit too coy, the singing just a little too tear-jerking', suggesting that Tennyson's upper-class background is a major factor in the film's lack of acknowledgement of the mining trade unions, whilst arguing that 'the ex-Etonian and future naval officer apparently thought his deep (and no doubt genuine) sympathy for the Welsh miners could bridge the enormous social, political, and cultural gulf between them'.⁶⁰ Cunningham then proceeds to outline the director's confused attitude towards the working classes, recounting how Tennyson's brother claimed that Tennyson believed during the abdication crisis that the 'overwhelmingly socialist South Wales miners would march on London in support of King Edward'.⁶¹ This anecdote highlights how the more radical elements of the ruling class failed to grasp

⁶⁰ John Cunningham, 'A Second Look', *Cineaste*, Volume 22, Number 2, 1 July 1986, p. 40.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

the precise nature of the collective consciousness of the working class and perhaps outlines further how Ealing's outlook was fashioned by issues of national unity rather than class based socialism. However, to make a case for Tennyson's defence, the director's involvement in trade union politics must be acknowledged. During his time at Gaumont-British, Tennyson was active in the promotion of the Association of Cine-Technicians union and his radicalism is emphasised by a letter he wrote in 1941 and published in the *Cine-Technician* after his death. In the letter, Tennyson suggests that private enterprise and the film industry were incompatible whilst arguing for a democratically accountable production council of the Associate of Filmmakers and forcibly stating the case for the nationalisation of the film industry. Tennyson also addresses the issue of the documentary film where 'the GPO unit and various private firms compete on an equal footing [...] I think it would have been better to have expanded the GPO's field and nationalized shorts production in this country from the start of the war', before proceeding to ask, 'why tinker with the retention of the profit system in our particular industry? Nationalization of theatres and distribution must be followed by a complete nationalization of production as well'.⁶² Therefore, Tennyson's support for the

⁶² Penrose Tennyson, 'Pen Tennyson Writes a Letter', *Cine-Technician*, July/August 1941, pp. 82-4.

principles of trade unionism and socialism is without question, as his activism makes clear. The director's sympathy with the mineworkers is further underlined by his desire to call *The Proud Valley* 'One in Five' as a gesture to highlight the accident rate in the pits.⁶³

Tennyson was to die tragically young in 1941, making only three films - all for Ealing - in his lifetime. His first film for the studio was the melodrama *There Ain't No Justice* (1939) which focuses on the tribulations of a small-time boxer and engages with its working-class setting with warmth and honesty in a realistic manner to such an extent that, according to Tim Palleine, its 'moral scheme (Community life good/commercial machinations bad)' would 'presage Ealing films to come'.⁶⁴ Based upon a novel by James Curtis, the publicity material for the film highlights Ealing's realistic approach to its working-class subject matter, suggesting that *There Ain't No Justice* deals with 'real people' and 'real problems' and that it is a 'film that begs to differ'.⁶⁵ However, despite the studio's assertion, *There Ain't No Justice* 'had to sanitise much of the book's sex, violence and bad language'⁶⁶ in order to avoid confrontation with the censors, a

⁶³ Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, p. 167.

⁶⁴ Tim Palleine, 'A Song and Dance at the Local: Thoughts on Ealing', Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book 3rd Edition* (London: BFI Palgrave, 2009), p. 259.

⁶⁵ *There Ain't No Justice Exhibitors Campaign Book* (London: BFI Library)

⁶⁶ Martin Carter, 'Pen Tennyson: Balcon's Golden Boy', *Ealing Revisited*, p. 41.

fact which was alluded to by Graham Greene who complained that though it ‘is intended to be an English tough film [...] somebody’s nerve failed’ and although ‘the etceteras – settings of bar rooms and coffee stalls – are admirable’, overall ‘the whole picture breathes timidity and refinement’.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Roy Armes argues that the film depicts its working-class community ‘with a much sharper bite than the later Ealing comedies’ and that it highlights ‘the problems of violence, poverty and exploitation with a genuine realism and an unsentimental sympathy’.⁶⁸

There Ain’t No Justice can be seen to set the template for much of Ealing’s subsequent output. It was the first of the studio’s films which sought to present a London locality with authenticity and Tennyson’s contribution to the studio’s ethos is crucial. For Barr, ‘Tennyson is involved in the beginning of the Ealing tradition, the most influential director in laying the foundation for what it became’ as *There Ain’t No Justice* implies:

[T]he rejection of a whole “commercial” world in favour of [...] community values; and the tension thus created with the film’s overt aim is characteristic of early Ealing. Broadly: as a committed patriotic enterprise, it believes in individual integrity and community loyalty and would like not only to create a studio, but to show a society, which can run by these values.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *The Spectator*, 18 August 1939, *There Ain’t No Justice Press Book* (London: BFI Library)

⁶⁸ Armes, *A Critical History of British Cinema*, p. 180.

⁶⁹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, pp. 18-19.

The final individual contribution worthy of note in *The Proud Valley* relates to the participation of Paul Robeson; however, his performance in the film provokes a varied critical response. John Cunningham argues that *The Proud Valley*'s power 'stems mainly from Robeson himself- his presence, his voice, his reputation'⁷⁰, whereas other critics have been less kind with Kemp describing Robeson's performance as 'stilted' and Robeson himself as 'awkwardly cast'.⁷¹ However, the most vehement attack on Robeson's performance in the film came from Graham Greene who, in his review for *The Spectator*, described the character of David Goliath as 'a big black Pollyanna, keeping everybody cheerful and dying at the end'.⁷² Whatever the shortfalls in Robeson's performance, his off-screen star-persona cannot be denied. Robeson was another lifelong communist and left-wing activist 'whose voice and authoritative performances made him an international figure'.⁷³ After completing *The Proud Valley*, Robeson was interviewed in America for the magazine *New Masses* where he remarked upon the imperialism of the allies. His pro-Soviet union and anti-Allies remarks meant that the

⁷⁰ Cunningham, 'A Second Look', p. 41.

⁷¹ Philip Kemp, 'Tennyson, Pen', Robert Murphy (ed.), *Directors in British and Irish Cinema: A Reference Companion* (London: BFI, 2006), p. 581.

⁷² Graham Greene, *Mornings in the Dark: The Graham Greene Film Reader* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), p. 380.

⁷³ Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, p. 168.

Beaverbrook press, instigated by Lord Beaverbrook himself, refused to mention the film in its pages.⁷⁴ Robeson's communist sympathies and outspoken views led to various confrontations with authorities throughout his career and he was eventually stripped of his US passport in the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s. However, as Berry indicates, Robeson had formed such an enduring relationship with the miners of South Wales in the 1930s when he had performed in the valleys to raise funds for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War.⁷⁵ Similarly, Stephen Bourne points out that the mutual respect and admiration between the actor and the miners meant that during his struggles with the American authorities 'the Welsh people were one of the most vocal and active groups who came to his support'.⁷⁶

Asserting the Radical Nature of the Text (2): Music and Solidarity

The combined radicalism of the team contributing to *The Proud Valley* and its subsequent censorship at the hands of the Beaverbrook press suggest that, despite the issue regarding its altered conclusion, the text still represents a powerful statement on the nature of class society and industrial relations. In many ways the film provides a link between the pre-Balcon films made

⁷⁴ See Balcon, *A Lifetime in Films*, p. 127.

⁷⁵ Berry, *Wales and Cinema*, p. 168.

⁷⁶ Stephen Bourne, *Black in the British Frame: The Black Experience in British Film and Television* (London: Continuum, 2001), p. 28.

at the studio under the stewardship of Basil Dean and those that emerged during Balcon's reign. Although less realistic than their latter counterparts, it was the earlier films such as *Sing As We Go* (Basil Dean, 1934) that began to introduce the community ethic which would provide such an enduring theme for the studio until its demise. As Marcia Landy has pointed out, 'the later Ealing comedies did not introduce the preoccupation with community; it was already amply displayed in the films of Gracie Fields'⁷⁷, suggesting that Ealing's concern with community originated in the politics of the depression era and emerged in the pre-Balcon days of the studio; the war merely focused this attention more acutely.

One of the features which make *The Proud Valley* comparable to the earlier music-hall inspired Ealing trope is through its use of music as a narrative device. The utilisation of Robeson's singing voice throughout the film enables us to sympathise with his character's mood and emotions. Similarly, meaning is conveyed throughout the film via the various examples of choral music as textual connotation is achieved through the film's narrative which is frequently emphasised by the use of both diegetic and non-diegetic music. For instance, even though Peter Stead claims the pit village is 'essentially

⁷⁷ Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Oxford and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 334.

depicted as a caricature’ he does go on to suggest that, through the use of choral music in particular, the film manages ‘to suggest and condone working-class solidarity’.⁷⁸ John Cunningham partially agrees with Stead stating that ‘the singing, always in groups except for two Robeson solos, does an effective job of conveying the notion of class and “togetherness” (though it may be too much to describe this as solidarity)’.⁷⁹

The disagreement concerning the text’s depiction of solidarity aside, both Cunningham and Stead realise the importance of music as both narrative structuring device and as a signifying practice within *The Proud Valley*. However, when he politically compares the film unfavourably to *The Stars Look Down* (Carol Reed, 1939), Cunningham argues that *The Proud Valley*’s ‘central motif is song [which] acts as a substitute for class struggle’.⁸⁰ Unlike the earlier music-hall influenced Ealing films of Gracie Fields which, although ostensibly realist in nature, used narrative realism merely as a device in which to introduce a number of musical set-pieces and as a promotion vehicle for its star performer, *The Proud Valley* is primarily a classic-realist text which prioritises narrative above all else. However, even within the confines of a classically realist narrative structure, textual meaning can be conveyed via a variety of means as the process of

⁷⁸ Stead, ‘The People as Stars’, p. 66.

⁷⁹ Cunningham, ‘A Second Look’, p. 41.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

enunciation is complex and multi-faceted. The use of music throughout the text, its depiction of the choir as a functioning social unit symbolises the democratic and socialist ethic that the film is attempting to convey.

The best example of the use of music to convey the theme of solidarity can be seen in the song ‘You Can’t Stop Us Singing’ which is introduced to the audience over the film’s opening credits and periodically re-occurs non-diegetically throughout. The use of choral singing is not merely a ‘substitute’ for class struggle but operates rather as a narrative signifier of the need for class unity and solidarity. As Cunningham himself states earlier in his piece: ‘[*The Proud Valley* suffered as much as any other film of the period from the heavy-handed practices of the “maiden aunts and retired colonels” of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), to whom any manifestation of working-class politics was anathema’.⁸¹ Similarly, Stead explains how ‘the British film industry was carefully guided away from the streets and in through the studio gates. The cabinet papers, Home Office and Metropolitan Police files all indicate the concern of various governments that political dissent should not be filmed’.⁸² Taking both Stead and Cunningham into consideration, one could

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 40-1.

⁸² Peter Stead, ‘The People and the Pictures: The British Working Class and Film in the 1930s’, Nicholas Pronay and D.W. Spring (eds.), *Propaganda, Politics and Film 1918-45* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 89.

conceive the possibility that, rather than a realistic depiction of class conflict, the use of choral singing as a signifier of the struggle was a tactical manoeuvre by a group of left-wing filmmakers to overcome the censorship restrictions of the ruling class. Therefore, the solidarity and unity that is conveyed through the utilisation of the choral singing as signifying device can be read as a symbolic reassertion of the film's socialist principles, overcoming what Cunningham referred to as its 'almost total effacement of any political dimension' in its 'failure to even once mention the reality of trade unionism'.⁸³ Despite the lack of a distinctive political message which makes no direct reference to either organised labour or socialist ideology, *The Proud Valley* again confirms Barthes view of the plural nature of the text, with a radical subtext consistently operating below its narrative surface. Therefore, a far more radical reading of the film is made possible through the use of both the choir as a social emblem and the utilisation of music as a symbol for the ethics of community, and working-class solidarity.

Despite Cunningham's assertion, *The Proud Valley* consistently engages with political, social and economic issues, representing a serious attempt to portray the lives of one section of the working class with both honesty and sympathy. The hardship the miners have to endure, both at the pit-face and

⁸³Cunningham, 'A Second Look', p. 40.

during periods of unemployment and poverty, are reconstructed with integrity; the two disasters are shockingly conveyed and the film is filled with moments of genuine pathos. Accompanying the scenes of hardship are the musical components which emphasise the feeling of “togetherness” and communal solidarity, issues which lie at the heart of the film. Admittedly, at times the struggle depicted takes on a humanistic, rather than politically radical socialist perspective, and the question of working-class struggle and conflict with the mine owners is hinted at rather than emphatically conveyed. Nevertheless, the need for class solidarity and the ever present issue of class antagonism is never far from the textual surface of the film.

The issue of working-class solidarity is most convincingly conveyed in the scene when the miners decide to march to London in order to attempt to convince the mine owners to re-open the pit. Although it must be acknowledged here that the eventual idealised portrayal of the mine owners is too sympathetic to the miners’ cause for a radical reading of the text, the march to London itself is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, as the marchers begin their trek, we see the solidarity of the mining community who gather to see the deputation off with banners exclaiming ‘*Good Luck to our Deportation*’ and ‘*We Want Work*’ in what Barr describes as ‘a moving expression of community

feeling, directed solidly against the owners'.⁸⁴ With the class consciousness exhibited by the mining community re-emphasising *The Proud Valley*'s socialist theme, the march becomes a symbol of the struggle of the working class as a whole, representing a cinematic reconstruction of the hunger marches of the 1930s and the formation of the National Unemployed Workers Movement. The NUWM was led by the Communist Wal Hannington and was largely the work of the British Communist Party as 'the TUC largely disassociated itself from these actions'.⁸⁵ Once again this highlights how the leadership of the Labour movement in times of crisis often turned away from class struggle thereby reinforcing its reformist credentials. The Labour movement's leaders abandoned any pretence towards working towards a socialist transformation in favour of a national consensus which allowed for a degree of social democracy within the framework of a capitalist economy. This retreat towards class compromise is mirrored within the altered ending of *The Proud Valley* as the reworked narrative neglects the notion of workers' control of the mining industry in favour of the dominant bourgeois one nation ideology.

The miners begin the march in good spirits but soon they begin to falter in the heat. As one older member stops needing to

⁸⁴ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 20.

⁸⁵ Bert Hogenkamp, 'Film and the Workers Movement in Britain, 1929-39', *Sight and Sound*, Volume 45, Number 2, Spring 1976, p. 69.

take a rest, another gives him his last sandwich in order to aid his recovery. This simple, kindly gesture reinforces the sense of solidarity inherent within the film. Also, at this point, Goliath suggests ‘what’s wrong with singing our way to London?’, re-emphasising the importance of song to the film’s socialist subtext. However, this point in the film also marks a shift in the nature of its political discourse. As the miners trek from their localised social space to the nation’s capital, the film begins to promote the national issue at the expense of the issue of class. At the very moment when *The Proud Valley* is about to assert the strength of the organised working class and advocate the primacy of the class-struggle, there occurs an ideological shift. This is the moment when the discourse on class is finally denigrated to the issue of national unity. The reintegration of the dominant ideology of national consensus aside, the march on London is an important element in a radical reading of *The Proud Valley* highlighting the ideological dichotomy inherent within the film. As we follow the marchers on their journey, the issue of class solidarity and brotherhood is re-emphasised and the text is functioning on two different and opposing ideological levels. Thus, the film emphasises Ealing’s struggle to represent a non-hegemonic discourse, a perspective of the studio’s political

ideology which will become a recurrent argument throughout this thesis.

The Dominant Ideology and Hegemony

The radical nature of *The Proud Valley* begins to unravel the moment when the marchers approach London, opening up the text to various alternative perspectives. As the marchers make the arduous journey to the nation's capital, we see the threat of war looming over the country. This threat is conveyed via a montage sequence which adopts the semi-documentary utilisation of images of newspaper headlines warning of the coming war, superimposed over the deputation as they collect money and with Emlyn making a reference to the Nazi leader when he defiantly states: 'We've marched into London which is more than he'll ever do'. It is interesting to note that the original shooting script contains no reference to the approaching war at this point in the film, with the first mention of the war occurring later when the miners finally arrive at the mine-owners offices in London⁸⁶, emphasising how the impending conflict brought about a change of attitude at Ealing during the film's production.

The shift from a class-based discourse to an engagement with the national issue is asserted when the delegation argue with the mine-owners to re-open the pit. At this point in the diegesis

⁸⁶ *The Proud Valley: Shooting Script*, number 14892 (London: BFI Library)

any pretence towards class struggle is abandoned for a purely national argument, when the miners plead:

We heard you say that tomorrow we may be at war. In that case you know the risks that will have to be taken in the trenches, in the sky, on the sea and by our wives and children in their houses. Coal in wartime is as much a part of our national defence as guns or anything else. So why not let us take our chance down the pit.

It is at this precise moment when the radical socialist nature of *The Proud Valley*, apparent in its originally conceived ending, begins to be emasculated and the dominant national ideology is reasserted. As Cunningham explains:

It is possible that the film's original ending, an underground occupation by the still laid off workers, might have created a very different atmosphere throughout. But we can only speculate, since the start of the war prompted a new ending- which certainly suited the government and perhaps the filmmakers. The culminating unity of the miners and the mine-owners was one of the earliest (and perhaps one of the most ludicrous) examples of the "national unity" which was central to British films of the war.⁸⁷

It is difficult not to largely concur with Cunningham on this point. In his description of the film's production, Balcon asserts that the advent of war initiated a change in tone. However, he also hints that the director was not too happy with the alteration when he states that the finished product 'was not, perhaps, quite the film Pen wanted to make in the first

⁸⁷ Cunningham, 'A Second Look', p. 42.

instance'.⁸⁸This is a most illuminating remark by Balcon perhaps for what it fails to say rather than what it does. The disappointment of Tennyson at how the film eventually turned out highlights how the radical intent of the filmmakers was compromised in order to reassert the one-nation ideology. This would be even more difficult to understand if not for the fact that in 1943 the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, vetoed the nationalisation of the mines, which Labour ministers were advocating.⁸⁹ It appears that even within the consensus between the leaders of capital and labour, tensions were apparent. It is conceivable that a genuinely radical text could have dramatised these socio-political arguments but at the moment when the radical nature of *The Proud Valley* should emerge, the film suffers from a fatal loss of nerve. Under the guise of national unity, the political establishment's hegemony is asserted and the film loses its radical impetus. One can only speculate how different things might have been if Herbert Marshall had been allowed to continue working on the script. However, taking this possibility for a radical conclusion aside, it is difficult not to conclude that *The Proud Valley* represents an opportunity lost for radical socialist filmmaking within the country. As Marcia Landy argues 'in a social problem film like *The Proud Valley* [...] there

⁸⁸ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 126.

⁸⁹ See Addison *The Road to 1945*, p. 20.

is a sustained emphasis on the tribulations of miners, as there is in *The Stars Look Down* with an effort to portray the harshness of that life, but the films utilize a pattern of self-sacrifice and martyrdom to blunt the edges of the conflict'.⁹⁰ This class conflict is further diluted by the fact that Goliath's sacrifice is preceded by the death of a member of the mine's management who escorts the miners underground during the exercise to re-open the pit, thus once again reasserting the dominant ideology of national consensus by emphasising shared-sacrifice at the expense of class division and promoting the 'we're all in this together' ethos of wartime.

Karl Marx explained the concept of a dominant ideology as follows:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, ie the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.⁹¹

In the case of *The Proud Valley*, the ruling ideas - or dominant ideology - necessitate a demotion of the issue of class inherent within the text and a foregrounding of the national question. If we

⁹⁰ Landy, *British Genres*, pp. 45-6.

⁹¹ *Karl Marx: Selected Writings, Second Edition*, (ed.) Davis McLellan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 192.

are to take a Marxist approach to the text, the bourgeois dominant ideology of a homogeneous nation represents a false consciousness which is internalised by the working-class miners in the film. This is emphasised by the film's altered conclusion and the reassertion of the national issue which is the argument the miners themselves use to convince the owners to re-open the pit. However, it could also be counter-argued that *The Proud Valley* was simply mirroring the political mood of the nation at the time. According to AJP Taylor, the approach of war meant that 'consciences which had been already stirred by the unemployed grew even more insistent at the tyrannies of Nazi rule. The two emotions merged into one. Social questions, although still important, slipped into second place'.⁹²

Barr's earlier assessment of the co-opting of the Labour leadership is comparable to Antonio Gramsci's notion of 'transformism' which involves the incorporation of often disparate political elements which come together to produce:

[T]he formation of an ever more extensive ruling class [...] The formation of this class involve[s] the gradual but continuous absorption [...] of the active elements produced by allied groups- and even those which come from antagonistic groups and seemed irreconcilably hostile.⁹³

⁹² Taylor, *British History 1914-1945*, p. 350.

⁹³ Antonio Gramsci, *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, (ed.) David Forgacs (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), p. 250.

This notion of ‘transformism’ is allied within Gramscian thought to the concept of ‘passive revolution’.⁹⁴ This theory entails a change of political power without any real fundamental economic or social change. Again this can be paralleled to the Labour leadership’s role in parliament as Gramsci argued that ‘the parliamentary system has also provided a mechanism for such [class] compromise solutions’.⁹⁵ The question of the perceived radicalism of the leadership of the Labour movement is an issue that is mirrored within *The Proud Valley*. Despite the text’s radical undercurrent, the film also foreshadows the eventual retreat of the Labour bureaucracy. The radical aspect of the text, its sympathetic portrayal of the working class much like the political development of the Labour Party itself, is finally denigrated to a more bourgeois, consensual conclusion. This retreat is confirmed within the production of the film and typified by its altered ending which forewarns of the Labour Party’s ultimate rejection of revolutionary class struggle in favour of an acceptance of its role as an agency for reforming capitalism.

Any radical reading of *The Proud Valley* is constantly undermined by the reintegration of the dominant ideology which insists upon the illusion of national consensus which necessarily disavows the class struggle and the possibility of a socialist

⁹⁴ See Gramsci, *A Gramsci Reader*, pp. 263-7.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

transformation of society. *The Proud Valley* therefore operates throughout as a cinematic example of the dialectical historical method. Throughout the text there is a struggle between two opposing discourses. On one side of the ideological divide we have the dominant hegemony of the ruling class which emphasises the national issue and on the opposing side we see its historical, political and social nemesis: the working class. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the dominant ideology is re-asserted at the film's conclusion and the revolutionary call for workers' control is abandoned, the text still manages to convey the existence of class-struggle. This existence is sometimes asserted realistically through the narrative, as for example in the march to London or the scenes of hardship in the village, otherwise through the signifying practice of the use of music allied to narrative.

The portrayal of the working class in a sympathetic light without the usual recourse to caricature or comedy was a feature of pre-war British cinema. This trope was to be reinforced by the experience of wartime and in British films which sought to instil the notion of national solidarity and community. In what remains an insightful class-based analysis of Ealing's production processes in relation to the dominant ideology, John Ellis argued that:

Ealing's creative elite [...] had a privileged access to knowledge and culture, a cultural capital which threw them onto the intellectual side of the division between mental and manual labour, onto the side of capital rather than that of labour. So although they were objectively members of the petty bourgeoisie (ie neither proletarian nor owners of the physical means of production), the position in which they found themselves was a middle-class one, a contradictory position on the edges of the bourgeoisie itself. This contradictory role led them to want to make films 'about the people', but they were so caught within the middle class (so isolated from the proletariat) that, for a number of reasons, they could only conceive of 'the people' as those groups at the lowest level of their own class: the petty-bourgeois stratum of small shopkeepers and clerks [...] This is Ealing's situation: a group of conventionally educated intellectuals, through a certain liberal-radicalism, come to make films about, and for, 'the people', whom they think of as the lower levels of the petty bourgeoisie.⁹⁶

If we examine *The Proud Valley* in the light of Ellis's class-based analysis then we ought to admire its radical intent. As we have seen, here is a text that delves beyond the level of the petty-bourgeois and engages with the working-class. *The Proud Valley* also appears to go against the grain of much of Ealing's output in its critical depiction of a member of the lower middle class. In the film we see Emlyn's future mother-in-law, Mrs Owen (Dilys Davies), who runs the local post-office. Rather than the mine workers or owners, it is Mrs Owen who emerges the least sympathetic character within the film. She provides an example of class snobbery within the text as she looks down on the miners as being beneath her and encourages Emlyn to

⁹⁶ Ellis, 'Made in Ealing', pp. 79-81.

improve himself by taking mine-management courses in order that her daughter does not have to marry a miner saying ‘what a difference there is between Mrs Bowen, the manager’s wife, with her nice little car, and the wife of a collier like your Mother with a house full of children.’ When the community is suffering from the pit’s closure and the harsh effects of poverty begins to take hold of the village, Mrs Owen’s petty-bourgeois attitude is contrasted with the locals who come to visit her shop and try to receive credit because they have no money. Similarly, during an argument with Mrs Parry (Rachel Thomas), Mrs Owen declares her contempt for the mining community and rather than ally herself with the village and stand in solidarity with the miners, she declares her intent to escape the mining town and to convince her daughter to abandon Emlyn:

Well from now on my Gwen will have nothing more to do with that boy of yours [...] No girl of mine is going grey waiting for a boy on the dole, without a penny to his name, a lot of good for nothing [...] Listen to me Emlyn Parry, my girl is a qualified postal clerk and I had to pay for her training at technical college. Me, a widow, on my feet in that little shop from early morning till late every night. Well now the place is my own property and money in the bank I’ve got, too. If you think I’m fool enough to let you drag us down till she’s a pauper like the rest of you then you’re very much mistaken [...] Let me tell you this: before very long me and my girl will have cleared right out of this poverty stricken hole.

When Emlyn suggests that the miners are capable of saving the pit, Mrs Owen belittles him and the rest of the miners' strength in front of Goliath and Mrs Parry until she is eventually shown the door. Her dishonesty is also highlighted when we see her steam open a private letter from the mine owners to Emlyn, a response from the owners to his request to re-open the mine.

The depiction of a shop owner in such an unfavourable light appears to contradict Ellis's view that Ealing sought to identify with "the people" whom they considered to be the petty-bourgeoisie. Rather than writing out the working class, *The Proud Valley* appears to contradict the studio's class origins and its usual engagement with the lower-middle classes. By attempting to portray the workers' sympathetically and the middle classes, in the shape of Mrs Owen, so unfavourably, Ealing appears to subvert Ellis' reading of the studio's class orientation. In addition, the character of Mrs Owen could also be viewed as a warning of the dangers of individualism at a time of war, a recurrent Ealing theme which would gather momentum during the studio's promotion of the people's war.

In fact, it was a common Ealing trait to subvert the essentialist class attitudes of which Ellis speaks. We will see later in the thesis how *Passport to Pimlico*, for example, perceives the enemy of the nation's economic and social well-being as the

small entrepreneurial individualism of a section of the middle class. An even more striking example of Ealing's subversion of the class hierarchical structure is evident in *Went the Day Well* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942) which confronted the issue of national loyalty by revealing a Nazi agent in the midst of the fictional Bramley End village community in the shape of the local squire, Oliver Wilsford (Leslie Banks). By suggesting that a quisling could come from the ranks of the upper classes, the film's narrative helped to maintain the wartime ethos of classlessness by implying that class hierarchy was no guarantee of national loyalty. Moreover, the unfavourable representation of a member of the upper-class could be seen to represent Ealing's comment upon the ruling-classes' culpability in appeasing Nazi Germany which contributed in taking the country into war. Read in this manner, the film is a further contribution made by the studio to British society's continuing critique of those elements of the ruling elites that have variously and pejoratively been described as the "Men of Munich", "the old gang" and "Colonel Blimp".⁹⁷ The fact that *Went the Day Well?* has two working-class characters, the local poacher Bill Purvis (Edward Rigby), and a cockney youth George Truscott (Harry Fowler), discover the Nazi invasion further demonstrates how Ealing, British cinema and society in general, was increasingly questioning the accepted

⁹⁷ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p. 163.

hegemony of class distinction and hierarchy.⁹⁸ Despite *The Proud Valley*'s altered conclusion and its emphasis upon national unity, the film is an early example of Ealing's subversion of common attitudes towards the class hierarchical structure which ideologically sought to democratise social relations. This progressive attitude would increasingly come to the fore during the studio's wartime output.

Conclusion

Through its engagement with the workers of a South-Wales mining community and depiction of economic and social hardship, *The Proud Valley* sets out to confirm Raymond Durnat's assertion that 'class fragments Britain into an island within an island'.⁹⁹ The film begins by addressing this class fragmentation, before retreating into false-consciousness in an attempt to unite the nation into a single unified social entity. Therefore, the text operates on two distinctly opposing ideological levels. *The Proud Valley* prioritises the dominant bourgeois ideology of the nation state but also through its depiction of economic hardship, poverty and unemployment, combined with the physical suffering of the miners themselves,

⁹⁸ For a detailed assessment of the film see Penelope Houston, *Went the Day Well?* (London: British Film Institute, 1992)

⁹⁹ Raymond Durnat, *A Mirror For England: British Movies From Austerity to Affluence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 6.

hints at another altogether different discourse. The second discourse engages with issues of workers unity and solidarity which come together to create the more radical socialist vision of a workers' state. The rigours of wartime necessitated class-cooperation rather than conflict which therefore emasculates the radical intention of the text. Throughout the text's ideological dialectical struggle, the national issue is prioritised over the issue of class and ultimately the dominant ideology is preserved, although there remains a constant tension between the hegemonic and non-hegemonic discourses inherent in the film. This tension will be emphasised further in a discussion of Ealing's war output and the studio's promotion of the people's war which is the subject of the following chapter.

2. Ealing and the People's War: *San Demetrio, London*

Introduction: Reception and Themes

The depiction of national unity conveyed during the closing moments of *The Proud Valley* was maintained throughout Ealing's war output in films such as *San Demetrio London*, *Convoy* (Pen Tennyson, 1940), *Ships with Wings* (Sergei Nolbandov, 1941) and *Nine Men* (Harry Watt, 1943). However, the critical and public reaction to these films often differed widely. James Chapman states that 'whereas the critics' preference was for the sober realism of *Nine Men* and *San Demetrio London*, the public's choice was the unabashed patriotism of *Convoy* and *Ships With Wings*'.¹⁰⁰ Despite this dislocation between the critical community and the wider public, most critics are united in arguing that the highpoint of Ealing's wartime output is *San Demetrio, London* which is 'widely regarded as the studios' most mature and realistic war narrative' despite the fact that 'it was only a modest success at the box-office at a time when audience tastes were turning increasingly in favour of costume melodrama'.¹⁰¹

The issue of audience tastes was a question that had considerably concerned the industry press during the middle part of the war. In a debate between Michael Balcon and Reginald

¹⁰⁰ James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-1945* (London: IB Tauris, 1998), p. 180.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-9.

Baker in the *Kinematograph Weekly*, Baker had suggested that ‘I keep hearing [...] that film audiences don’t want to be reminded of the war when they go to the [c]inema’.¹⁰² Similarly, P.L. Mannoock in June 1942 argued that ‘the alleged demand for war subjects is largely fictitious’, and making a ‘plea for more escapism’ and arguing for less war features, Mannoock argued:

Entertainment considered as a relief from the strains and stresses of life is surely much more important today than at any time in human history; it is hardly surprising that it should be regarded as a means of temporary escape from the trials and toils of civilisation’s fight for existence, which affect every one of us in different degrees.¹⁰³

Mannoock’s statement was supported on June 25th 1942, when the President of the British Film Producers Association, C.M. Woolf, in an address to the association’s AGM called for a reduction in the war films.¹⁰⁴ Eventually the Ministry of Information became involved in the debate and a *Kinematograph Weekly* headline on July 30th 1942 explicitly declared that ‘Fewer War Films is MOI policy’.¹⁰⁵

We shall examine the MOI’s fluctuating policy regarding the cinema industry later in the chapter, but the fact that the British cinema-goers tastes were seemingly moving away from

¹⁰² *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 January 1942, p. 87

¹⁰³ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 25 June 1942, p. 22

¹⁰⁴ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 2 July 1942, p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 30 July 1942, p. 1

war themes during the latter stages of the conflict was finally confirmed at a BFI conference in 1944 when W.J. Speakman compared the success of the earlier British war films to the supposed “failures” of the latter period. In his address, Speakman explained that the ‘public are war-weary, and in reaction from the war itself infinitely prefer to see something escapist’.¹⁰⁶

Therefore, as Chapman explains, ‘*San Demetrio London*, for all its sober realism, was less successful with audiences than some of the earlier, more flamboyantly heroic war films had been’.¹⁰⁷

San Demetrio, London is based on the actual events that occurred during the Autumn of 1940 when the merchant tanker the *San Demetrio*, escorted by the *Jervis Bay*, was returning to Britain from the United States with its cargo of petrol. The convoy was attacked on the 5th November 1940 by the German pocket battleship the *Admiral Von Scheer* and the *Jervis Bay* was sunk. However, the *San Demetrio* remained miraculously afloat, initially abandoned by its crew, only to be re-boarded in life-threatening circumstances so the men could gallantly bring the ship home. Unsurprisingly in a time of war, contemporary critics were keen to promote the patriotic aspect of the film’s narrative whilst also praising its realism. *Today’s Cinema* outlined the film’s ‘gripping drama, emotional suspense and unvarnished

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Chapman, *The British at War*, p. 189.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-9.

elemental spectacle’ and its ‘finely comprehensive direction, sympathetically simple portrayal, realistic production qualities’ whilst also highlighting the national aspect of the drama, claiming that *San Demetrio, London* was ‘superb entertainment for every English-speaking cinemagoer’.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, in a re-review of the film in 1948 and despite the ending of wartime hostilities, *Today’s Cinema* again chose to re-emphasise the text’s heroic national qualities, describing the film’s ‘starkly dramatic recital of merchant Navy courage and tenacity in 1940’ and noting its ‘pronounced patriotic appeal’.¹⁰⁹ The undeniable adventure characteristics of *San Demetrio, London* are constantly referred to within contemporary critical appraisal of the film, with the *Exhibitors’ Campaign Book* boldly claiming that ‘seldom has history or legend recorded a more thrilling episode than the story of human gallantry and sacrifice told on the screen for the first time in the exciting *San Demetrio, London*’.¹¹⁰ Therefore, *San Demetrio* represents the highpoint of Ealing’s wartime output and its stated aim of ‘projecting Britain and the British character’ to the cinema audience.

The sincerity of the film to its historical source material has also been consistently emphasised. As the narrative was based upon a real event that had emphatically forged itself into the

¹⁰⁸ *Today’s Cinema*, Volume 61, Number 4967, 10 December 1943, p 23.

¹⁰⁹ *Today’s Cinema*, Volume 70, Number 5608, 11 February 1948, p. 16.

¹¹⁰ *San Demetrio, London Exhibitors’ Campaign Book* (London: BFI Library)

public's consciousness, the filmmakers opted to remain loyal to the original story. As the director Charles Frend commented whilst filming on the set, 'when you're dealing with a story that is known to a great mass of your audience, you can't take any liberties with the plot or the action'.¹¹¹ However, the public's familiarity with the factual events of the *San Demetrio* may have posed a dilemma for the filmmakers as to how to combine the two seemingly opposing characteristics of melodramatic adventure and realism, especially when considering the obvious box office preference for the more fervent patriotic treatment of war. Nevertheless, despite its obvious *Boys Own* characteristics, it is the realistic and social didactic elements of *San Demetrio, London* that has seen the text enter the canon of British wartime films, as Chapman has suggested:

Celebrated films such as *In Which We Serve*, *Millions Like Us*, *Fires Were Started*, *San Demetrio, London*, *The Way Ahead* and *The Way to the Stars* [...] exemplified the qualities of which the dominant critical discourse approved: realistic treatment, sober narratives and characterisations based on stoicism and emotional restraint. So dominant was this documentary-realist discourse that it became the accepted orthodoxy for a whole generation of writers. Its long-term significance was to establish a critical pantheon of classic wartime films which has only recently started to be challenged.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Chapman, *The British at War*, p. 6.

This chapter will examine such issues as *San Demetrio, London*'s contribution to the wartime democratic ethos and Ealing's contribution to the war effort in general whilst further considering Ealing's preference for realist aesthetics. The promotion of working-class consciousness in *The Proud Valley* would facilitate class-levelling tendencies which, in *San Demetrio, London*, would prove to be a vital factor in radicalising the studio in preparation for its 'mild revolution'. Like *The Proud Valley* in the previous chapter, we will consider issues such as democracy, socialism and representations of class whilst examining the ideology of the people's war in relation to wartime British propaganda. In order to locate the film within its historical and cultural context it is necessary to address Ealing's response to the war as a whole and look at how the studio both responded to the constraints of the period through an overview of their war productions.

Ealing and the War

The fact that the 1940s is widely regarded as the golden period of British filmmaking can be largely credited to the role the war played in the re-vitalisation of the nation's cinema. According to Robert Murphy:

During the six years of the war, British film production transformed itself from a slump-ridden industry which inspired little loyalty from audiences or critics into a popular and vital element of national culture. The war seemed to provide a theme, a subject, a common cause which could meld the conflicting influences of Continental and Hollywood cinema and the British theatrical tradition into a national style. If this manifested itself most obviously in a documentary influenced realism in films about active service or about war on the Home Front, the war seeped into everything.¹¹³

Despite the fact that critical orthodoxy maintains that Ealing predominantly favoured a documentary realist approach during the war years, the reality is that the studio initially experimented with a variety of cinematic styles before settling for this strategy. This would appear to suggest that Ealing studio's eventually settled for a realist discourse rather than the "tinsel" of escapism more by accident than design. We shall examine the issue of Ealing's wartime documentary realist approach later, after first considering how the studio, and cinema in general, contributed to the war effort.

When A.J.P. Taylor described the war years as a period characterised by an increasing sense of burgeoning democratic values, he cited events and organisations such as 'the Brains Trust, lunchtime concerts at the National Gallery, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts (CEMA) and The Army Bureau for Current Affairs (ABCA)', all of which highlighted 'the

¹¹³ Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 5.

increased intellectual and cultural activity which went on during the war'.¹¹⁴ However, according to Roy Armes, 'the new mood of the times was captured less in the older forms of literature and theatre than in the mass media', and that:

Above all the cinema – the most deprived of the media in the 1920s and 1930s – rose to the occasion. If the documentary films of Humphrey Jennings are the supreme expression of the national mood of the 1940s, there is much else of interest and significance: in the work of the Crown and Army Film Units, Cavalcanti and Watt, the fusion of documentary and fiction at Ealing Studios and in the films of feature directors as diverse as Anthony Asquith, Carol Reed and David Lean.¹¹⁵

As a consequence of its complete involvement in the war, British cinema became a cornerstone of the war effort, disseminating propaganda in the public sphere and maintaining an ideology of war aims that encouraged the patriotic belief that sought to constantly link democracy with British values. Therefore, in effect the cinema and the war produced a symbiosis, with both mutually feeding and renewing each other, as Murphy suggests:

It is debateable whether the British film industry would have acquired the sort of critical and commercial success which it did between 1939 and 1945 without the Second World War. Though severely limited by wartime restrictions, the upsurge of

¹¹⁴ Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, p.550.

¹¹⁵ Armes, *A Critical History of the British Cinema*, p. 147.

patriotism and of interest in Britain's heritage meant that audiences wanted to see British films about British subjects.¹¹⁶

Murphy highlights how the prospects for the British cinema at the outset of the war appeared bleak as 'the initial response of the government to the film industry on the outbreak of war was to kill off feature film production in the expectation that Hollywood would satisfy any demand that remained for entertainment, and advertising and newsreel companies would provide propaganda and information films'.¹¹⁷ However, as Murphy points out, the official line towards British cinema production softened and 'the task of keeping alive the British film industry fell upon three modest companies: Associated Talking Pictures at Ealing, British National at the Joe Rock Studios, Elstree, and Gainsborough at Shepherd's Bush'.¹¹⁸

Confirming Murphy's assertion that at the outset of war the government was content to see the eradication of the nation's commercial cinema, preferring to explore the propaganda possibilities of non-fictional forms of filmmaking, Balcon claims that 'in 1939 I put my thoughts on paper in the form of a memorandum which might have been called "How to put films to work in the national interest in wartime"' and sent it to the proper quarter. Its impact on Whitehall was nil. I received a formal

¹¹⁶ Murphy, 'The British Film Industry: Audiences and Producers', p. 41.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

acknowledgement, and heard no more'.¹¹⁹ It was not until the studio had contributed to the war effort via the number of short films it had made for the MoI that Ealing's productions began to fall in line with official requirements. In 1940 Ealing had produced four documentaries: *Sea Fort* (Ian Dalrymple) and three short films for the MoI's *Careless Talk Costs Lives* series: *Now You're Talking*, *All Hands* and *Dangerous Comment* all directed by John Paddy Carstairs.¹²⁰ The following year Ealing had four important war films in production which, according to Balcon, were Ealing's 'proof that feature films could be made to work for the war effort.'¹²¹ These were *Ships with Wings*, *The Big Blockade* (Charles Frend, 1942), *The Foreman Went France* (Charles Frend, 1942) and *The Next of Kin* (Thorold Dickinson, 1942).

Eventually there was a convergence between Ealing and the government and, according to Balcon:

As the war developed it was established beyond doubt that films were playing an important part in the national effort. We were allowed to apply for actors and others to be returned to us temporarily for a particular film, and if the exigencies of the situation permitted our applications were rarely refused. On such cases, of course, we had to be engaged on a project which had the approval of the Ministry of Information or an appropriate service department.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 123.

¹²⁰ For an analysis of Ealing's wartime shorts see Mark Duguid and Katy McGahan, 'From Tinsel to Realism and Back Again: Balcon, Ealing and Documentary' in *Ealing Revisited*, pp. 58-70.

¹²¹ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 132.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

One such occasion when war officials assisted the studio was during the production of *Convoy*, when the director Pen Tennyson was allowed to finish directing the film before he was called up for service. *Convoy* was Ealing's 'first full wartime film' and was produced 'after consultation with [Sir Kenneth Clark]', the director of the MoI Films Division.¹²³ It becomes apparent at this point that the official line towards the nation's cinema was shifting and both developed in conjunction with each other. This shift appears to occur around the time that *Convoy* was released in 1940, the year Ealing began to work much more closely with the MoI. However, this change of approach did not fully occur until later in the conflict when, films such as *The Foreman went to France*, *Nine Men* and *San Demetrio, London* came into production. According to Barr:

[T]hese mid-war films mark a decisive point in a process of change at many levels: in the official conduct of the war, in the place found for commercial cinema within this, in the whole war experience of the nation - as well as in the workings of Ealing itself. Nor does change at Ealing merely happen to coincide with these national developments: it is closely bound up with them and is part of them. The broad congruency between the Ealing community and the 'national community' is already operating: both come together in time of war.¹²⁴

¹²³ See Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, pp. 128-9.

¹²⁴ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 13.

As the official conduct of the war belatedly began to accept the role played by feature film production, the influence of the government became, according to Philip M. Taylor, ‘all-pervasive’, as

The simple fact of the matter was that any film which appeared on British cinema screens during the war could only do so if it had secured the approval of the British government, and in so far as the specific official body responsible was concerned, this meant the Ministry of Information. [...] Itself the producer of 1887 ‘official’ films, the MoI was also responsible for approving (or otherwise) over 3000 newsreel issues and nearly 400 feature films [...] Its influence was invariably more real than apparent. This was largely due to the highly effective system of censorship which the MoI was able to implement [...] In effect no newspaper article, radio broadcast or clip of film was allowed to reach the public unless the British Government, operating through the MoI, allowed it to do so. This is not to say that mistakes did not happen [...] examples of official displeasure at what was believed to be adverse publicity, or attempts to censor the media, did occur.¹²⁵

James Chapman noted a distinction in official policy between propaganda and censorship during the war, arguing that the MoI favoured the latter over the former. According to Chapman, the ministry’s ‘blundering bureaucracy and amateurish incompetence’ during the early stages of the war, meant that ‘very little attention was given to the organisation of the film propaganda machinery, as the planners were preoccupied with other matters which pushed film propaganda down their list of

¹²⁵ Philip M. Taylor, *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 7.

priorities. In particular, they devoted much of their time to the question of film censorship rather than propaganda'.¹²⁶ Perhaps the most famous occasion of governmental disquiet was the case of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1943) which the authorities tried to ban. The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, became involved in the controversy, as he would on other occasions during the conflict, convinced that the film was detrimental to the war effort. However, the film was eventually released and Powell and Pressburger continued to work closely with the MoI throughout the war.¹²⁷

Despite their close attachment to the MoI, Ealing were not spared their own conflicts with the government. Following *Convoy*, the studio's next war feature *Ships with Wings* instigated a period of close cooperation, combined with often intense dispute, between Ealing and the MoI. *Ships with Wings*, according to Balcon, 'was of sufficient interest to receive the approval of and some modest support from the Royal Navy'.¹²⁸ However, Balcon also relates how at the film's launch party he was informed that the film had met with official disapproval and that the Prime Minister 'had seen the film over the weekend and was insisting that release

¹²⁶ Chapman, *The British at War*, pp. 13-16.

¹²⁷ For an assessment of *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and the official political reaction to the film see Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, pp. 79-94.

¹²⁸ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 133.

should be held up, if not cancelled altogether, on the grounds that it would cause “alarm and despondency”, as the climax of the film was something of a disaster for the Fleet Air Arm’.¹²⁹ Eventually Churchill left the final decision as to whether the film should be screened to the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, who allowed the release to go ahead.

A similar situation occurred with the studio’s next war release, *Next of Kin*. Initially, according to Balcon, Ealing were approached by the director of military training, General Hawkesworth, who explained that the war office required ‘an important film of feature length dealing with [military] security’ and Balcon believed that such a film would provide a benefit for the country as a whole as ‘the public were just as responsible for bad security- or “careless talk”- which could endanger lives and operations’.¹³⁰ At first, the war authorities assisted the studio, allowing Ealing to use official records and granting servicemen leave from duties during filming, notably the director, Thorold Dickinson, and script writer, Basil Bartlett, who became the Liaison Officer for the film. However, problems arose in relation to the film’s finance, which Balcon suggests were ‘utterly inadequate despite the fact that that much expense would be saved by the

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid. pp. 34.

facilities that were granted'.¹³¹ Despite this concern, the studio decided to go ahead with the production and, feeling that the venture contained too important a message for the country at war to be shelved, opted for a general release. The next issue of official anxiety surrounded the director, Thorold Dickinson, as he had access to public records he was routinely checked by military security. When the investigation unearthed the fact that Dickinson had volunteered to fight for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, he was regarded as a "premature" anti-Fascist and therefore considered a security threat. Balcon hints at the ludicrousness of the government position in his biography but eventually this problem was surmounted and Dickinson was allowed to continue to work on the film.¹³² The final controversy involved the Prime Minister who once again had seen the film and taken a dislike to it. According to Balcon, 'Churchill was again of the opinion that it would cause unnecessary alarm and sorrow to a great number of people, so he felt its release should be at least delayed for some time'.¹³³ As with *Ships with Wings*, Churchill passed authority on the final decision to a third party, this time a military jury. Again the decision as to whether the film should be screened fell in favour of the film studio and *Next of Kin* was released in 1942 to critical and commercial success.

¹³¹ Ibid. pp. 134-5.

¹³² See Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 134.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 135.

The following year saw the release of *San Demetrio, London*. Balcon described the intention of the studio at this period of the war as follows:

The aim in making films during the war was easy enough to state but more difficult to achieve. It was, first and foremost, to make a good film, a film that people would want to see, and at the same time to make it honest and truthful and to carry a message, or an example, which would be good propaganda for morale and the war effort. [...] *San Demetrio, London* was an outstanding example of a film that amply fulfilled all those requirements.¹³⁴

This chapter has examined a selection of Ealing's war films in relation to issues of production from *Convoy* in 1940 to *The Next of Kin* in 1942. From this historical perspective we can now consider how *San Demetrio, London* represents the apotheosis of Ealing's journey towards realism to become, in Charles Barr's words, 'the culmination of Ealing's war programme, the ideal fulfilment of Balcon's policy'.¹³⁵

San Demetrio, London and Realism

With *Convoy*, we begin to discern Ealing's desire to depict the war realistically as the film 'treats the hazards of the convoy system with a degree of fidelity'.¹³⁶ Despite some criticism of the film's stereotyped depiction of the Nazi enemy, its love-triangle

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 148.

¹³⁵ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 35.

¹³⁶ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 16.

plotline, and its depiction of the working-class characters on the lower-decks which led William Whitebait to claim that the film ‘swarms with caricatures which might have come out of *Punch*’¹³⁷, its documentary aesthetic resulted in the picture being declared the *Documentary News Letter* film of the month in August 1940. The following year Ealing tried to repeat the success with *Ships With Wings*, the first of only two features to be directed for the studio by Sergei Nolbandov. Robert Murphy found less to be commended in *Ships with Wings* than its predecessor as ‘*Ships with Wings*, despite its extensive documentary footage of HMS *Ark Royal*, is essentially a romantic melodrama [...] the action of the war is subordinated to the demands of romance’, and despite its popularity with cinema audiences, ‘it attracted considerable hostility from the press for its unrealistic and melodramatic tone’.¹³⁸

It was only after the release of *Ships with Wings* that Balcon became finally committed to the need for an increased realistic treatment of the war. Responding to some criticism of the film from the press, he concluded:

Ships with Wings – a fictionalised story of the Fleet Air Arm – had its defects but considering the difficulties of production it was a considerable achievement Although I was personally

¹³⁷ *New Statesman*, 13 July 1940, *San Demetrio*, *London Press Book* (London: BFI Library)

¹³⁸ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 24.

convinced that the approach must be realistic, I am afraid in this instance there was some departure from that principle, and the story was too heavily fictionalised [...] *Ships with Wings* had reasonably good reviews except from Noel Monks in the *Daily Mail*, who did not review the film in the ordinary way, because he was not a film critic but a war correspondent and had just returned from the Middle East. He wrote a pretty tough piece, the gist of which was that Ealing's idea of war was not his. He had seen a good deal of war at first-hand. [...] *Ships with Wings* was our last film that could attract this particular type of criticism, because from then on we learned to snatch our stories from the headlines and they had the ring of truth.¹³⁹

After the release of *Ships with Wings*, Ealing were anxious to use official records wherever possible, utilising military personnel such as Richard Hillary and John Wooldridge who were lent to the studio as advisers to increase a sense of verisimilitude to the studio's output. Also around this time, Ealing were brought into increased contact with political figures such as Hugh Dalton, the minister in control of the Ministry of Economic Warfare, and Hugh Gaitskell which helped maintain the studio's official relationship with the government.

The assertion of a realist aesthetic was confirmed in 1943 with the release of *Nine Men*, *The Bells Go Down* (Basil Dearden) and especially *San Demetrio London*. According to James Chapman, the release of *San Demetrio, London*:

[S]hows that by the middle of the war Ealing had come full circle from the melodramatic heroics of *Convoy* and *Ships with Wings*. It was based on a real event; there were no star names in

¹³⁹ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 133.

the cast; it focused on a group of working-class merchant seamen who did not depend on officers for inspiration; and their heroism is so understated as to be almost matter of fact, as if the events in the film were part of a routine voyage rather than an extraordinary adventure. It was [...] yet another example of the convergence between studio narrative and documentary realism.¹⁴⁰

It was not until 1943 and the release of *San Demetrio*, that Ealing finally secured its realist credentials and the convergence between Ealing and official policy is confirmed. James Chapman argues that as the film ‘was based upon an official pamphlet and was very much in line with the MoI’s requirements that war films should be treated realistically and without sensationalism, [Ealing’s] production policy marked a belated acceptance of the ministry’s requirements’.¹⁴¹

If we consider Ealing war films from *Convoy* up to *San Demetrio, London* then Chapman’s view would appear well founded. However, this argument fails to appreciate pre-war Ealing texts such as *The Proud Valley* which was identified in the previous chapter to fall within the classical realist trope of filmmaking. It would seem more correct to regard Ealing’s move towards a realist aesthetic as a natural, yet irregular, progression rather than a straightforward ‘belated acceptance’ of official policy. Nevertheless, Chapman’s argument does appear to seem more conclusive if we consider the studio’s war output in isolation

¹⁴⁰ Chapman, *The British at War*, p. 188.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

from other Ealing genres and consider it purely in juxtaposition with the policy of the MoI. It is apparent that from *The Proud Valley* onwards Ealing were gradually developing a cinematic strategy for wartime. This strategy's often uneven evolution can be traced from *Convoy*, through the studios war films to finally emerge in *San Demetrio*, the pinnacle of Ealing's realism.

In *San Demetrio, London*, Ealing chose to add little embellishment to the true-life events that occurred in the Atlantic in 1940. The plot is based on F. Tennyson Jesse's official account of the event, earning her a screenwriting credit alongside Robert Hamer and Charles Friend. In addition, the *San Demetrio*'s Chief Engineer, Charles Pollard OBE, was drafted on to the production as a technical adviser. Pollard's character, played by Walter Fitzgerald, performs a vital role in the film's narrative, his knowledge proving indispensable to the crew as he makes a huge contribution towards getting the tanker home. Furthermore, the opening titles declare: 'The producers thank the Board of Admiralty and the Eagle Oil and Shipping Company Limited, owners of the "San Demetrio", without whose help this picture could not have been made.' This credit is further acknowledged in the *Exhibitors Campaign Book* which states that, 'blueprints and plans were loaned by the owner of the *San Demetrio* the Eagle Oil and Shipping Company, Ltd, which belongs to Mr Nelson.

William Lynn Nelson [...] is portrayed in the picture and his advice and help given to the producers was invaluable’, emphasising how the studio were ‘determined to get the tiniest detail right’¹⁴² in the making of the film. This is confirmed in a *Kinematograph Weekly* comment regarding the film’s final script approval by Chief Officer Pollard which stated that ‘*San Demetrio, London* has been planned on a basis of minute accuracy and will obviously enhance the considerable sea-film reputation gained by Ealing during the war’.¹⁴³

The utilisation of the official pamphlet and company blueprints, combined with the knowledge and expertise of the *San Demetrio*’s Chief Engineer all contribute to Ealing’s drive for authenticity in the making of the film. In addition to this, great efforts were made by the special effects team of Roy Kellino, Syd Howell (credited) and Cliff Richardson, Lionel Baines and Wally Dolbear (uncredited) to achieve cinematic authenticity. The sequences at sea were shot in the studio and the *Campaign Book* explains how this effect was achieved as ‘waterproofing lined the Studio floors; a system of miniature dykes and gutters were erected round the set and water was pumped into the arena until a veritable seascape was achieved’.¹⁴⁴ Despite the obvious technical difficulties in recreating such scenes of naval warfare, and

¹⁴² *San Demetrio, London Exhibitors’ Campaign Book*

¹⁴³ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 24 December 1942, p. 23.

¹⁴⁴ *San Demetrio, London Exhibitors’ Campaign Book*

disregarding the inevitable flawed moment where the authenticity of the image is lost and the occasional shot appears obviously recreated, the effects team deserve praise for their efforts. As James Chapman has suggested, ‘except for the back-projection in the lifeboat scenes, the style is doggedly realistic. The model work and tanker set itself are impressive’.¹⁴⁵ The fact that Ealing had problems with filming the back-projection scenes in *San Demetrio, London* was alluded to by the film’s Associate Producer, Robert Hamer, who also directed part of the film when Charles Frennd became ill. Hamer described the technical problems that beset the film’s production in a letter to Balcon in which he complained that ‘at their best, BP [back-projection] scenes are bound to be monotonous and trying for director and cast. When [...] there is added to the monotony inherent in the process an endless series of interruptions due to technical defects, it becomes impossible for anyone to give anything approaching his best work’.¹⁴⁶ In addition to the problem of the back-projection scenes, the reconstruction of the naval battle between the Jervis Bay and the Admiral von Scheer also tested the technical effects team to the limit as the problem of introducing fire to the scene at sea had to be overcome. However, despite the occasional technical difficulty, *San Demetrio, London*’s effects were generally praised

¹⁴⁵ Chapman, *The British at War*, p. 189.

¹⁴⁶ Letter dated 17 June 1943 from Robert Hamer to Michael Balcon (Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box F/24)

and the appreciation of the film's production qualities is owed mainly to Ealing's attention to detail in its making of the film. As the *Campaign Book* points out, throughout the production the materials provided by the shipping company were indispensable to the film's effort at verité as 'the sets themselves from drawings and photographs supplied by the owners were thoroughly copied'.¹⁴⁷

The search for fidelity even stretched as far as ensuring that the costumes worn by the actors were as near to the real thing as possible. The publicity material points out that during the making of the film it was realised that the costumes of the seamen were not authentic. Rather than overlook such a minor detail, Ealing contacted the Navy League Seafarers Comforts Supply who provided the wool which was knitted to recreate the 'standard items in the wardrobe of every merchant seaman'.¹⁴⁸ This is a further example of the lengths the production at Ealing went to ensure that *San Demetrio, London* was not lacking in realistic detail, as the campaign material for the film was at pains to point out:

Resisting the temptation to make *San Demetrio, London* [...] a super spectacle that would lose its humanity by its very size, the producers strove constantly to keep it real, to keep it believable, to run parallel in every case to the true story. In this they have

¹⁴⁷ *San Demetrio, London Exhibitors' Campaign Book*

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

succeeded for the crew of the ship, on seeing the picture, could hardly believe their eyes. There on the screen they saw relived thrills they never thought to see again, scenes they had felt sure were gone forever.¹⁴⁹

Despite *San Demetrio, London* being regarded as the highpoint of Ealing's wartime output, some contemporary criticism of the film was expressed. Paul Rotha, commenting on the 'fiction-documentary marriage' typical of many films of the period, described David Lean and Noel Coward's naval drama *In Which We Serve*, Powell and Pressburger's *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (both 1942) and *San Demetrio, London* as 'much overpraised,' arguing that these films 'reveal a crude and even amateur approach to the observation of reality. The bulk in each was, in any case, studio-shot'.¹⁵⁰ *Amateur Cine World* made a similar point to Rotha. Despite comparing *San Demetrio, London* favourably to *Convoy* as 'quite an exciting and moving film - although not quite as good as its supporters claim', the journal complained:

With so much being written about the 'documentary tradition' of British films produced during the war, both *Convoy* and *San Demetrio, London* seem to indicate that this tradition couldn't get through the studio doors. While the cameras of the Crown Film Unit were out recording the activities of a country at war, the cameras of Ealing Studios remained firmly at Ealing Studios, with the war being re-enacted in a studio tank. There are a few shots in each film which were actually shot at sea and,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Paul Rotha, *The Film Till Now* (London: Spring Books, 1967), pp. 53-4.

presumably, in the minds of the producers, were sufficient to justify the acknowledgements to the Navy, but at least 98 per cent of the footage of each film was shot in the studio.¹⁵¹

These criticisms of Ealing's approach to filmmaking reflect the intense theoretical debates that surround cinematic realism which focus upon the apparent dichotomy between fictional re-enactment and the factual recording of reality. Some documentary practitioners and theorists have attempted to argue the case for a documentary purity, suggesting that such filmmaking can somehow capture the "truth". John Grierson was among the first to contribute a theoretical perspective to the art of documentary filmmaking and to lay down a number of principles for the discipline:

(1) We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital art form. The studio films largely ignore this possibility of opening up the screen on the real world. They photograph acted stories against artificial backgrounds. Documentary would photograph the living scene and the living story. (2) We believe that the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to a screen interpretation of the modern world. They give cinema a greater fund of material. They give it power over a million and one images. They give it power of interpretation over more complex and astonishing happenings in the real world than the studio mind can conjure up or the studio mechanic recreate. (3) We believe that the materials and the stories thus taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophical sense) than the acted article. Spontaneous gesture has a special value on the screen [...]. Add to this that documentary can achieve an intimacy of knowledge and effect impossible to the shim-sham mechanics of

¹⁵¹ *Amateur Cine World*, Volume 4, Number 20, 15 November 1962, p.740.

the studio, and the lily-fingered interpretations of the metropolitan actor.¹⁵²

It must be noted here that, in declaring his documentary realist manifesto, Grierson's also stated that in criticising studio production he did not wish 'to suggest that the studios cannot in their own manner produce works of art to astonish the world'.¹⁵³ Despite this acceptance, however, it that Grierson consistently prioritised the documentary form over fictional methods of filmmaking throughout his career.

Grierson's essentialist argument that documentary can somehow capture the "real world" more effectively than the fictional mode of cinema has largely been discredited. However, the dispute about documentary purity still informs much of the debate about realism in both non-fictional and commercial narrative forms of cinema. Bill Nichols is one critic who has attempted to demolish such objectivism. In a discussion of the theoretical aspects of documentary, Nichols argued, 'It is only by examining *how* a series of sounds and images signify that we can begin to rescue documentary from the anti-theoretical,

¹⁵² John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, (ed.), Forysth Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1966) pp. 146-7.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

ideologically complicit argument that documentary equals reality, and that the screen is a window rather than a reflecting surface'.¹⁵⁴

In order to understand how Ealing's narrative fictional films attempted to reflect reality and how these compared to the documentaries of the period, it is worth comparing the studio's relationship with other contemporary texts. In the previous chapter comparisons were made between *The Proud Valley* and a number of documentaries in order to establish the influence exerted upon Ealing's narrative cinema by the documentary movement. Similar comparisons can be made between *San Demetrio, London* and other contemporary documentary films to gauge how the studio absorbed the wartime British cinema's convergence between documentary and mainstream cinema and instilled this aesthetic into its fictional output.

Roy Armes argues that the British cinema's

achievements [of the 1940s] grew largely out of a fusion of the two impulses – towards fictional narrative and towards documentary – still separate in 1939. The interchange occurred on all levels. On the one hand, film makers trained in documentary were allowed to work at feature length or, in some cases, moved to commercial companies to shoot fictional semi-documentaries; on the other, Ministry of Information shorts were shot by the commercial companies and some young feature directors moved over into documentary, either with the Crown or Army film units [....] Curiously enough, while directors trained in fictional film making were working with newsreel images of real violence and death, the Crown group

¹⁵⁴ Bill Nichols, 'Documentary Theory and Practice', *Screen*, Volume 17, Number 4, Winter 1976-77, p. 35.

was moving towards dramatized documentaries, simple stories which, for propaganda purposes had almost make-believe happy endings.¹⁵⁵

The fusion of fictional cinema and documentary becomes apparent when comparing *San Demetrio, London* with two documentaries made by Crown. *Target for Tonight* (1941), directed by Harry Watt before he arrived at Ealing, concerns a Bomber Command bombing raid over the town of Kiel. Before the operation, one squadron is informed that it is to be diverted to a German oil installation on the river Rhine. After bombing their target, the plane comes under attack from the ground and is hit. The return home is hampered by fog and, despite damage to one of the bomber's engines and injury to the wireless operator, the crew vote as to whether to attempt a dangerous landing or to bail out. Eventually the crew land the plane safely, and as the overall intention of the film is to favourably portray the British fighter pilot and to show Bomber Command 'as a tightly run, efficient operation',¹⁵⁶ there are obvious parallels to be drawn with *San Demetrio, London*. In terms of their respective narratives, both films show British servicemen in a heroic light, professionally overcoming difficult circumstances. *Target for Tonight* concerns the landing of a bomber that has been hit whereas the story of *San*

¹⁵⁵ Armes, *A Critical History of the British Cinema*, p. 148.

¹⁵⁶ Jez Stewart, 'Target for Tonight', Screenonline, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/577991/> (accessed 14 April 2009)

Demetrio, London deals in similar circumstances with the bringing home of a stricken oil-tanker.

Another comparison between the two texts is that both scripts made extensive use of official or semi-official source materials. However, it is interesting to note that *Target for Tonight*, despite its documentary status, has the more fictional narrative of the two films. Nevertheless, *Target for Tonight*, like *San Demetrio, London*, still relied upon exhaustive research with Watt describing how he wrote the script after consulting two thousand bomber pilots' official air raid reports to ensure authenticity.¹⁵⁷ The fact that so many documentaries, as Paul Swann has pointed out, were 'initially [...] constructed around re-enactments of events' links the films made at the Crown Film Unit with their fictional counterparts at Ealing, however, 'eventually, the Crown Film Unit abandoned even this tenuous manner of linking story-documentary films and actual events'.¹⁵⁸ Swann cites the Crown's *Western Approaches* (Pat Jackson, 1944) as a text with a narrative that was based upon 'complete fabrication, not real-life events'¹⁵⁹ and again there are distinct parallels between Jackson's wholly fictitious documentary and *San Demetrio, London*'s factual narrative. Both films deal with the subject of

¹⁵⁷ Harry Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera* (London: Elek, 1974), p. 146.

¹⁵⁸ Paul Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement, 1926-1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 163.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

merchant seamen and *Western Approaches*, like *San Demetrio, London*, involves sailors who are forced to abandon ship.

However, there is also a distinction to be made between the two texts which highlight the difference in strategy between the documentary films made by Crown and the fictional narrative approach of Ealing.

According to Swann, ‘the Crown Film Unit’s feature length films had many of the production values of the commercial feature film’, whereby, in addition to factual re-enactment:

The other vital element, [...] and one that survived through the war, was the use of real people, or social actors, instead of professional actors to portray characters. It had become something of a gospel at the unit that social actors provided a necessary link between actuality and the story form. Great importance was attached by all [...] directors to the careful selection of social actors. They became convinced that these people were capable of performances that were unattainable for professional actors. For example, Cavalcanti once cabled David MacDonald, a commercial director who had been brought in to direct *Men of the Lightship* (1940), to tell him to reshoot all the ‘totally unconvincing’ footage where he had used professional actors, while the footage he had shot with real people was ‘splendid’.¹⁶⁰

Both *Western Approaches* and *Target for Tonight* utilised non-actors to perform their narratives. In the case of *Target for Tonight*, each role was ‘played by the actual man or woman who does the job – from Commander-in-Chief to Aircrafthand’.¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Stewart, ‘*Target for Tonight*’.

Similarly, *Western Approaches* used real merchant seaman within its own particular drama. The use of non-actors is one way of distinguishing between the documentary approach of the film unit at Crown and the films produced at Ealing studios. However, this distinction becomes slightly problematic as Ealing also regularly used non-actors in their productions as Swann has pointed out, the use of non-professional actors, 'was not a quality unique to Crown Film Unit films' as *Next of Kin* 'which received widespread popular acclaim, made equally successful use of non-professional actors and a similar realist approach to narrative'.¹⁶²

The fact that *Next of Kin* attempted to adopt the use of non-actors confirms the view that the studio was constantly adapting its policy towards realism. For the most part, however, Ealing chose to rely on professional actors, preferring to utilise social-actors mainly in small roles or as extras to increase the individual film's verisimilitude. In the case of *San Demetrio, London*, Ealing chose to use unfamiliar, non-stars in order to augment its authenticity. In a letter to Maurice Cowan, referring to Robert Hamer's attempt to enlist the American director William Wyler's assistance in finding a suitable actor to play the role of Preston, 'the Yank' (Robert Beatty), Balcon stated that 'a star is

¹⁶² Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement*, pp. 163-4.

undesirable'¹⁶³, confirming the attitude of Ealing's studio chief towards the preference for relatively unknown performers. The arguments surrounding the issues of whether non-actors add to the reality effect and whether the use of narrative and fictional re-enactment distorts reality has remained a contested topic of debate within the discipline of documentary, and its problematic sub-genre the drama documentary. Roger Manvell considers the issue of whoever is assigned the role of actor of little importance, arguing that owing to the historical moment of production:

It made comparatively little difference if the films were re-enactments of events using professional actors speaking consciously developed forms of dialogue with carefully planned characterization [...] or whether non-professional actors were called upon to re-create real events within their own experiences [...] or alongside a number of professionals [...]. Actors, many of them seconded from the services to perform parts reflecting their service lives, were in many cases as close to what they were interpreting as the non-professional servicemen who appeared along with them.¹⁶⁴

What emerges from a comparative study of *San Demetrio*, *London* and the documentary output of the Crown Film Unit is the fluidity between the two distinct cinematic forms of documentary and narrative fiction. However, despite *San Demetrio*, *London* being one of the films made at Ealing which most conforms to the

¹⁶³ Letter dated 20 November 1942 from Michael Balcon to Maurice Cowan (Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box F/24)

¹⁶⁴ Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1974), p. 144.

studio's aesthetic of documentary style realism, it must be recognised that the films made at Ealing fall within the confines of classic, or seamless, narrative realism. As John Ellis states, 'the realism needed by Ealing was not that of the nouvelle vague or even of Italian neo-realism, it was much closer to the traditional studio filming of pre-war British and American studio films'.¹⁶⁵ Ellis is referring to Ealing's preference for studio shooting, as opposed to location work of the French new wave and Italian Neo-realism, but we ought to include Ealing's predominant use of actors rather than the non-actors of the neo-realists here, too. The use of naturalistic acting captured the zeitgeist perfectly and what emerges from a critical assessment of Ealing's war output is how Ealing developed a realist aesthetic that adapted methods utilised by the documentary movement for its own classic narrative form. It is this combination which enabled *San Demetrio, London* to enter what Chapman described as 'the pantheon of classic wartime films'. This canon of British Second World War films includes both fictional narrative and documentaries, highlighting the symbiotic relationship that occurred during the period between the two distinct tropes of film form. The interesting point here is that, not unsurprisingly, these films all promoted the official line in the conduct of the war. *San Demetrio, London* through the dominant realist discourse promoted by the MoI, was not alone in presenting

¹⁶⁵ Ellis, 'Made in Ealing', p. 87.

the wartime ideology of a nation that had cast class hierarchy aside. The San Demetrio tanker symbolically represented a nation that was united, thus adding to the cinema's propaganda of the people's war.

The Ship of State: Class and Wartime Propaganda

The change which saw the official embrace of the cinema's contribution to the war effort was finally established by the middle period of the conflict as the MoI, rather than concentrate wholly on censorship, became increasingly keen to utilise film for propaganda purposes. Furthermore, it is evident that the official change of direction would encompass all cinematic narratives, not just those concerned with the war. The policy adjustment was confirmed in a letter from the MoI to the British Film Producers Association which stated that 'a balance between war and non-war propaganda is desirable; emphasis should be given to the positive virtues of British national characters and the democratic way of life'.¹⁶⁶

The promotion of the perceived British value of democracy, a vital component of the people's war ethos, was imperative to the nation's war effort. We have seen how *The Proud Valley*, despite its radical intentions, ultimately rejected the ideology of class conflict in favour of a consensual approach. *San*

¹⁶⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 30 July 1942, p. 31.

Demetrio, London continues with this theme. Moreover, the theme of self-sacrifice typified by Goliath's sacrificial act in *The Proud Valley's* conclusion is again extended in *San Demetrio, London*. Therefore, the themes of classlessness, the rejection of self interest and the promotion of shared sacrifice and commitment are combined within the text and equated throughout with British national characteristics.

The question of the historical accuracy of the notion of national unity during wartime is thrown into doubt, however, as there is substantial evidence that the narrative of *San Demetrio, London* was altered during its production. There are considerable accounts in pre-production notes and various items of correspondence regarding the plot development which make reference to a number of sub-plots that failed to materialise in the final script and which point to Ealing's manipulation of *San Demetrio, London's* source material. In these notes, Balcon refers to the fact that initially the narrative included two deserters aboard the *San Demetrio* and as the film's exhibition material made such a huge point of emphasising the film's strict adherence to the factual events that occurred in the Atlantic, this omission is instructive. Balcon hinted his concern at the inclusion of the two characters when he wrote that 'another detail that might be considered is scene 28: two of the crew have apparently deserted.

This may be true, but does not give a very good impression and is symptomatic of the rather simple and unselective story telling'.¹⁶⁷

Another example of how the story was altered can be found in the reference to another character whose initial inclusion was abandoned in the final script. In his notes, Balcon refers to scene 273 which was to depict a character named Brown who had committed the crime of theft whilst aboard the tanker and is severely punished. Balcon initially suggests that

The episode of Brown [...] the thief, is good natural rough sea justice, though coming just where it does it tends to spoil the feeling of harmony and satisfaction proper to this part of the story. I think it might be looked at again, with a view to giving Brown more courage, or perhaps to reducing the odds against him.¹⁶⁸

One can only surmise the definitive reasoning behind the exclusion of these two sub-plots in the final film; however, Balcon seems to suggest that having a thief and two deserters in the story would go against the overall impression of unity the film was attempting to convey. Moreover, correspondence between Ealing's chief and the MoI in relation to this issue confirms the fact that there was official disquiet at the inclusion of the Brown character. In a letter from R. Nunn May, Assistant Director of the MoI, Nunn stated his objection to Brown as 'supernumary' to the

¹⁶⁷ *M/V San Demetrio Production Notes*, (Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box F/24)

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

plot and suggesting that as the ‘incidents in which Brown is concerned have been somewhat altered [in the script’s second draft] it would be preferable for Brown to be omitted altogether’.¹⁶⁹ The fact that the MoI had misread the Brown character as fictitious is confirmed in Balcon’s reply to Nunn May which stated that Brown’s name was changed purely in to prevent libel. In his correspondence, Balcon wrote:

There was never [...] any belief on our part that the real story could be improved by conventional cinematic embroidery [...] In the absence of the character Brown, there was a danger of the crew appearing a little too perfect, and that the presence of a bad character might give a light and shade which even enhanced the heroism of the others.¹⁷⁰

Despite his reservations about the character, Balcon had previously confirmed that Brown ‘was fictitious only in name and that the actions attributed to him were in fact performed by one of the crew’¹⁷¹ in a letter to Nunn May dated 20 October 1942.

Despite the arguments for and against the inclusion of Brown, the MoI’s objection towards his character in the film was confirmed by Nunn May who argued, ‘I see the force of the arguments for his retention in the story [...] Although he is founded on fact, he

¹⁶⁹ Letter dated 14 October 1942, R. Nunn May to Michael Balcon (Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box F/24)

¹⁷⁰ Letter dated 23 October 1942 Balcon to Nunn May (Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box F/24)

¹⁷¹ Letter dated 20 October 1942, Balcon to Nunn May (Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box F/24)

has in this setting so much the appearance of “conventional cinematic embroidery” that I am afraid he may be very easily mistaken for that’.¹⁷²

The correspondence between Balcon and Nunn May may only hint at the differences of opinion regarding the inclusion of the character of Brown in the film, but it does raise some interesting questions regarding the involvement of the MoI in its production. It is impossible to conclude whether the MoI’s objection was based purely on the issue of the film’s realism or whether the government was reluctant to allow the film to problematise the official promotion of the people’s war which sought to maintain the image of national unity. Regardless of the reasoning behind the difference of opinion, it appears correct to assume a conflict between depicting reality on the one hand and depicting a reality which questioned the official line that the MoI and Ealing were attempting to convey. As the final detailed cast list dated 25 October 1943 does not include Brown, it appears that Ealing had finally opted to fall in line with the MoI’s recommendations towards *San Demetrio, London*.¹⁷³ What this research confirms is that, despite an insistence on factual accuracy, by excluding a petty thief and two deserters from *San*

¹⁷² Letter dated 23 October 1942, Nunn May to Balcon (Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box F/24)

¹⁷³ *San Demetrio, London Detailed Cast List*, (Michael Balcon Special Collection, Box F/24)

Demetrio, London's plot, Ealing were very selective in what events they chose to portray. Thus *San Demetrio, London* confirms the image of unity which was an integral part of the official propaganda of wartime.

The issue of national cooperation which mitigates against class antagonism is introduced in *San Demetrio, London* immediately after the film's opening credits. After initial establishing documentary-style, long shots of the shipyard and the *San Demetrio* tanker, the first characters we see are working men on the deck of the ship. Both in overalls, with one wearing a flat-cap, they wipe grease from their grubby hands onto their work clothes and discuss the gun they are cleaning in a working-class vernacular surrounding 'last night's wallop' and 'goodbye booze-ups.' It has been suggested that the colloquial dialogue does stray into what Peter Stead critically described as the film's 'failure to breathe life into sustained bouts of working-class conversation', however, Stead at least acknowledges that, in *San Demetrio, London*, 'we are given merchant seamen who are the quintessence of ordinariness: they are droll, stocky, sexless and feisty'¹⁷⁴, whilst maintaining that the dialogue remains, for the most part, clichéd. However, this criticism aside, the film does at least attempt to portray working-class characters in a realistic manner and its emphasis on naturalism in its dialogue constitutes a marked

¹⁷⁴ Stead, 'The People as Stars', p. 76.

improvement from the more rigid class-bound tradition of *Convoy*. For Robert Murphy, although restricted by the ‘conventions of middle-class cinema’, *Convoy* still manages to occasionally engage with its working-class subjects with a degree of ‘vitality which contrasts favourably with all the stiff formalities of the upper deck’.¹⁷⁵ Therefore, in a similar, though more successful manner to *Convoy*, *San Demetrio, London* conveys the differences in status between life above and below decks, with Ealing’s latter film more successfully managing to smooth over these class differences in the interest of national cohesion.

As the two men continue to work on the deck, the issue of naval hierarchy is introduced as Captain George Waite (Arthur Young) approaches. The difference in status between the two workers and the Captain is emphasised by the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. The captain stands on the deck above the pair, establishing his superiority which is further emphasised by the contrast in uniform with the grubby overalls of the two workers. There is one further distinction, as Waite chats to the two in an almost paternalistic fashion, his high-class accent contrasting to their earlier earthy banter. The class distinction is further maintained through the scene’s shot composition. As the Captain addresses the workers there is a high-angled shot of the workmen looking up which is followed by a cut to a close-up of the captain,

¹⁷⁵ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, pp .23-4.

again establishing his authority and the working-class characters' inferiority in status. However, the dialogue at this moment in the film appears to contradict the idea of class difference and attempts to highlight cooperation rather than conflict. Despite the Captain's superiority, Waite stresses how the ship relies on the work of people like the two workers and asks, 'Are you the two men who've been to gun school? Well I hope you remember what they taught you. If we run into any trouble it'll be up to you to save the ship and crew - and me.' Thus from the very outset, *San Demetrio, London* seeks to disseminate the one nation ethos of wartime Britain by establishing class cooperation as a prerequisite for the war effort.

As the Captain continues on his rounds to check that the ship is fit to sail, the text has introduced one of its major themes. Throughout the film, the *San Demetrio* comes increasingly to represent the State of Great Britain. These opening moments highlight the dichotomy of class and nation, simultaneously showing both the division of labour inherent within Britain's class-based society whilst maintaining the necessity of a nation of all classes working together and smoothing over any conflict through a promotion of the ideology of national identity. Like *The Proud Valley*'s denouement, the national issue and the promotion of the people's war is prioritised within *San Demetrio, London*.

The process of class harmonisation within the ship of state of the *San Demetrio* is achieved in a number of different ways and through the utilisation of a number of narrative strategies. One example comes early on in the film just before the *San Demetrio* is about to sail. The film introduces us to the workingmen's quarters below deck. The sailors amuse themselves by playing darts or gambling and one character has even resorted to looking after a pigeon aboard ship. The quarters are therefore a replication of the working-class domestic milieu and the space is defined by features of working-class leisure activities with the jocular, down-to-earth dialogue again prominent. This is contrasted with both the home-counties accents of the BBC World Service, which the crew listen to whilst relaxing, and the plush, more formal, surroundings of the officer quarters shown moments before, depicting the officers with their much more formal behaviour and correct manners of speech. However, at the same time as *San Demetrio*, *London* draws attention to the Naval hierarchy, the film continues its process of class harmonisation introduced in its opening moments. Just before the tanker is set to sail, Greaser John Boyle (Mervyn Johns) is seen writing a letter home to his wife, hurriedly moving onto deck to hand the letter to the Shipping Manager to post. At the same moment, Captain Waite hands over his own personal letter to be posted, highlighting the fact that despite their

difference in status the two characters' circumstances are interminably bound together. Therefore, the San Demetrio becomes a microcosm of British society during the war, with its emphasis on cooperation rather than conflict and with a stress on shared sacrifice. These twin themes become increasingly apparent as the narrative progresses and the oncoming crisis and hardship necessitates further cooperation between all sections of the crew.

The emphasis on teamwork comes to the fore once the San Demetrio has been shelled and the crew are forced to abandon ship and take to the water in the tanker's three lifeboats.

Eventually two of the three lifeboats are picked up at sea with the third continuing to flounder. Once inside the lifeboat together, the division of labour and the hierarchy of status we saw in the opening moments of the film begin to breakdown. The crew are no longer confined to separate quarters according to rank, as the deck hands, officers and Chief Engineer are thrown together by the necessity of the situation, resulting in the beginnings of a degree of class-cooperation. This loosening of the hierarchy is initially suggested by the Chief Engineer Pollard who remarks to the 2nd Officer Hawkins (Ralph Michael) that he is in charge of the crew. 'If you want advice about anything you're welcome but don't think you have to ask me. I can take orders as well as give 'em,' says the Engineer to Hawkins. As the crisis intensifies, the

need for teamwork and unity of action becomes increasingly necessary. Although the division of labour is never abandoned altogether in the film and there always remains a hierarchy of rank, the situation necessitates a loosening of such a hierarchy and the imposition of a meritocracy where each individual's skills and abilities are prioritised rather than their status.

In addition to themes of shared sacrifice and equality, the need for a more equitable distribution of resources in wartime is also conveyed in the film. When the lifeboat flounders on the sea and the crew are running out of emergency supplies, the crew share cigarettes and water even though provisions are in short supply and we see 2nd Officer Hawkins cutting up biscuits to share amongst the crew. It is interesting to note here that it is still the Officer who is in command and, as the crew take turns to row, it is Hawkins who maintains his leadership as he orders the sailors to change over rowing duties. Nevertheless, the simple act of sharing resources and the loosening of the Naval hierarchy demonstrate a form of emergency socialism in action where class division is replaced by unity of endeavour and equality of sacrifice, vital components of the propaganda of the people's war which, as we have already established, was a major ideological component of *The Proud Valley*.

Another example of the manner in which *San Demetrio, London* manages to portray a united Britain is demonstrated in its depiction of characters from various regions within the United Kingdom. On board the *San Demetrio* - in addition to various English regional characters- we have representations of Scotland and Wales in the characters of Messboy John Jamieson (Gordon Jackson), the Greaser John Boyle and Welshman 'Taff' Davies. The involvement of all nations within the Union is emphasised in the narrative when the *San Demetrio* approaches land and the call alternates between 'First stop England! First stop Wales!' and 'First stop Scotland!' In response the 'Yank' Preston says 'you're all getting mighty particular, there's a hell of a lump of land ahead of us there somewhere.' Thus, Preston - an outsider - confirms the positive British national characteristics that the film is attempting to portray. Therefore, by emphasising the 'we're all in it together' aspect of the national character that at times of crisis can suppress social difference, the film manages to subdue regional, national and class, boundaries within its narrative.

The American's transformation from the drunken, outspoken and indolent individual seen at the beginning of the film is remarkable. Initially signing on to the *San Demetrio* as a convenient way of securing his passage to England, Preston becomes a vital member of the team, eventually willing to make a

contribution to the crew's survival. When Boyle is dying aboard the ship, it is Preston who becomes his main comforter, getting the rest of the crew to sing 'Glasgow Belongs to Me' to soothe the stricken sailor and at the end of the film the American is presented with the Red Ensign, finally establishing his acceptance by the crew. At the time the film is set, the United States was still embracing isolationism and had yet to enter the war, so Preston's acceptance of the group ethic becomes a symbolic representation of Britain and the United States' future shared commitment to defeating Nazism. The *Exhibitors' Campaign Book* describes Preston as being 'the greatest individualist of them all' amongst the crew who eventually 'sacrifices his egoism to the common good'.¹⁷⁶ For George Perry, the common Ealing trait of demonstrating how an outsider becomes transformed within a team environment can be traced from the studio's war output up to the later comedies, exemplified by Preston in *San Demetrio, London*, David Farrar's Murray in *For Those in Peril* (Charles Crichton, 1944) and Tommy Trinder's Turk in *The Bells Go Down* all of which attempt 'to portray the maverick not as a lone rebel but as someone who finds himself when he becomes part of the team'.¹⁷⁷ Both Turk and Farrar die gallantly in their respective films and the death of Boyle in *San Demetrio, London* is utilised

¹⁷⁶ *San Demetrio, London Exhibitors' Campaign Book*

¹⁷⁷ George Perry, *Forever Ealing: A Celebration of the Great British Film Studio* (London: Pavilion Books, 1981), p. 111.

in a similar manner Like Goliath's sacrificial act in *The Proud Valley*, Boyle's death serves to emphasise the stoical nature of the nation's collective sacrifice through the depiction of one individual tragedy. Boyle's funeral at sea is conveyed via a moving scene which is utilised to maintain the film's patriotic intent. As Hawkins reads 'The Lord is My Shepherd' from Preston's bible, Boyle's coffin, which is draped in the Red Ensign of the Merchant Navy and with the Union flag prominent, is dispatched into the sea.

Boyle's ultimate sacrifice is also a means by which the text can confirm the ethos of shared responsibility during the war and maintain its people's war narrative. Before he dies, Boyle's refusal to shirk work despite his physical deterioration is commented on by Pollard, who states 'I never knew a little scruff of a man like that could have so much guts.' This remark outlines the sacrifice and strength of the lower classes and the film seeks to emphasise how this is appreciated by the middle class. The bravery and fortitude of Boyle influences Pollard's actions later on in the narrative when he sacrifices his own life by lighting the gas in order to make tea for the crew. The importance of tea to the British national character is incontrovertible, yet rarely in British cinema has the simple act of putting the kettle on been expressed with such drama and suggestive of meaning as the moment

Pollard sneaks off alone to secretly make a drink aboard the San Demetrio. Firstly, he closes the doors in order to make help any explosion remain contained within the kitchen. Then he sniffs around for gas, before slowly and deliberately, and in extreme close up in order to crank up the tension, he turns on the gas and strikes a match. In a dramatic utilisation of editing technique, there is a cut to the decks above as the crew continue to put out the fires only to take a break as a crew member shouts that the 'Chief Engineer sends his compliments, all hands to tea' and we discover that Pollards risk has paid off. When he returns on the deck, Pollard downplays the significance of the sacrifice of his own personal safety for the common good when he states that 'I thought I'd chance my arm for once.'

Pollard becomes an increasingly important character in relation to the crew's survival and success in getting the San Demetrio sailing again as it is his idea to arrange the makeshift light-bulb signals to ensure safe passage home, another propaganda exercise in demonstrating the ingenuity and intelligence inherent in the British national character. Increasingly willing to involve himself in manual labour to ensure their survival, Pollard has previously shown his resourcefulness by using the steam from an engine handle to cook vegetables for the crew, prompting the Messboy Jamieson's joke about the division

of labour when he says that he ‘never knew a Chief engineer turned Chief Cook before.’ Once the engines begin to work, we have a reversal of class hierarchy emphasised as Pollard gets his hands dirty, the crew, shot from a low angle so they are above Pollard, give the chief engineer the thumbs up. At this point, the narrative of *San Demetrio, London* has suggested that circumstance has led to a fracture in the accepted social order and the rigours of war have established a more equal and democratic hierarchical structure. Throughout the text, there is an increasing emphasis on the depiction of an emerging democratic order at work which foreshadows the postwar political and social changes in Britain.

Democracy at Work: Class and Collective Responsibility

British cinema’s promotion of the people’s war which contributed to the emergent spirit of democratisation is emphasised in *San Demetrio*’s narrative as the crew come to embody what Barr termed as representing a form of ‘democracy in action’.¹⁷⁸ In the film’s lifeboat sequences the breakdown of the naval chain of command leads to the crew beginning to democratically discuss their actions as an engagement with a form of political discussion and collective decision making emerges. Once the *San Demetrio* has been spotted, 2nd officer Hawkins stops ordering the crew as

¹⁷⁸ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 37.

they democratically discuss whether to re-board the vessel or to stay on the lifeboat. A majority decision is eventually taken to re-board. As the crew clamber aboard the ship and set about putting out the fires on the tanker, Hawkins is still issuing orders but the strict division of labour has loosened to such an extent that all the men are forced to work together to ensure their survival. This is repeated moments later when the crew share in the work of ridding the vessel of water that the *San Demetrio* has taken on board. Once the tanker is fit to sail, Hawkins again relinquishes his command as the crew once more come to a collective democratic decision to sail home rather than return to the United States.

In a similar way that *San Demetrio, London* is regarded as indicative of changes in British society, with the tanker becoming a metaphor for the British state during wartime, the film can also be read as a discourse on the nature of democracy. According to Philip M. Taylor, 'the second world war became the object of what may be described as a cinematic historiography that often said more about the post-war period than it did about the war itself'.¹⁷⁹ In the case of *San Demetrio, London*, the engagement with democratic processes, combined with the breakdown of the hierarchy and loosening of class divisions, can be regarded as a comment on the wartime political consensus which helped sweep

¹⁷⁹ Taylor, *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, p. 1.

Labour to power in 1945. As George Perry explains, in *San Demetrio, London*:

The earlier common assumption of leadership and superiority that distinguishes the officers from the lower decks in *Convoy* and *Ships with Wings* has been replaced by a democratic consensus – the big decisions [...] are reached collectively. It is almost as if Ealing is saying that the officer class has let Britain down, and it is among them that the spies (*The Foreman Went to France*) the quislings (*Went the Day Well?*) and the pompous stuffed shirts (*Ships with Wings*) can be found.¹⁸⁰

Such a class-based realisation inevitably led to decrease in the hierarchical structure which combined with the ‘we’re all in it together’ attitude of wartime exemplified the official stance of the people’s war. In *San Demetrio, London*, the themes of shared responsibility and the spirit of democracy is conveyed in the crew’s actions as the text reconstructs what Orwell described as ‘equality of sacrifice’ and ‘war communism’.¹⁸¹

Conclusion

Commenting on how British cinema during the war had sought to break the class monopoly, Stead concludes that, ‘ordinary people had thus made their début in British films. However, they had not done so on their own terms, but as part of controlled images of the

¹⁸⁰ Perry, *Forever Ealing*, p. 74.

¹⁸¹ Orwell, ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’, p 415.

war.¹⁸² *San Demetrio*, confirms Stead's analysis as it promotes the MoI's official requirements of representations of classlessness and continuing Ealing's refutation of class division by prioritising the ethic of the people's war as established in *The Proud Valley*.

Despite its democratic theme which allows elements of war socialism to emerge through its narrative, *San Demetrio*, *London* ultimately naturalises the class structure of British society and it achieves this by prioritising the national issue at the expense of class division and conflict. This naturalisation of hegemonical features concedes to the emergent social-democracy which mirrored the consensus of mainstream British politics at the time, foreshadowing the coming to power of the Labour Party. From this point, the thesis will begin to examine Ealing texts that critique the notion of a united Britain and that manage to address issues and themes of class-conflict and social division. As the political consensus begins to unravel after the war, the films we shall look at begin to increasingly position themselves from a much more oppositional perspective, textually demonstrating a variance to the official hegemony which sought to promote the socio-political national consensus at the expense of class-based ideologies.

¹⁸² Stead, 'The People as Stars', p. 72.

3. Towards the Socialist Utopia: *They Came to a City*

Introduction: Ealing's Formal Re-evaluation

The opening two chapters of this thesis has located Ealing's wartime 'mild revolution' within the ideology of the people's war which led to an advancement of radical social-democratic ideals without unduly threatening the capitalist class hegemony.

Whereas previously Ealing had been mainly content, in Balcon's words, 'to put films to work in the national interest in wartime'¹⁸³, the coming of peace marked a shift of outlook and a change in attitude. Now the studio began to turn its attention towards issues of readjustment and *They Came to a City* is the major film made at Ealing that deals explicitly with the issue of post-war reconstruction. In addition, Ealing began to engage with different forms of cinema, previously neglected during wartime. As the nation's mood turned more optimistic and forward-looking, Ealing found a new confidence to engage in different genres and from this would ultimately emerge the particular comedic trope attributed to the studio today.

The fact that Ealing is particularly renowned for its war films and comedies fails to acknowledge the wide variety of features made at the studio. Moreover, the period between 1943 and 1949 is considered as the time in which Ealing embarked on a greater degree of formal experimentation. According to Barr,

¹⁸³ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 123.

‘until *San Demetrio*, one can say that Ealing was broadly identified with the war film, and after *Passport to Pimlico* with a distinctive form of comedy. In the five years between, there was no such easy identity, and the 21 features of this period cover a greater range than before or since’.¹⁸⁴ Two notable films produced by the studio at this time, both directed by Basil Dearden, are *The Halfway House* (1944) and *They Came to a City*. Even when examined in isolation, these two films would suggest a considerable departure from the realist orthodoxy commonly associated with Ealing. However, when surveyed alongside the wide variety of Ealing titles produced during the period, a picture emerges that would appear to suggest a rigorous re-evaluation of the studio’s formal strategy was beginning to take place towards the latter stages of the war.

In the intervening years between the end of the war and the release of *Passport to Pimlico* – the subject of the following chapter- Ealing’s varied output included such non-typical genres as the costume melodrama, *Saraband for Dead Lovers* (Basil Dearden, 1948); the Victorian period drama, *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (Robert Hamer, 1945); two Harry Watt Australian “westerns”, *The Overlanders* (1946) and *Eureka Stockade* (1949); a Dickens adaptation, *Nicholas Nickleby* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1947); and the claustrophobic *film-noir*, *It Always Rains on*

¹⁸⁴ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 50.

Sunday (Robert Hamer, 1947). Ealing's variety of features would appear to suggest that, with the ending of hostilities, the studio was beginning to re-consider its previous commitment to a realist aesthetic and to experiment with new forms, genres and themes. This is not to suggest that Ealing dispensed with realism entirely - nor to claim that the studio had eschewed 'tinsel' completely during the war period - as George Formby's dream sequence in *Let George Do It* (Marcel Varnel, 1940), which depicts Formby passing over a Nuremberg rally in a hot air balloon before descending to punch Hitler in the face, the musical-fantasy *Fiddlers Three* (Harry Watt, 1944), and the Will Hay comedies all testify. However, Ealing's immediate postwar films with a war theme appear to suggest a shift in tone and outlook, occasionally dealing with aspects of the conflict previously overlooked, such as the prisoner of war drama *The Captive Heart* (Basil Dearden, 1946).¹⁸⁵ If *The Captive Heart* finds Ealing looking back at the recent conflict then Dearden's next feature is much more advanced. *Frieda* (1947) deals explicitly with the nation's peacetime readjustment by focusing on the problems caused by the arrival of a German girl who is brought to the country after

¹⁸⁵ For an analysis of *The Captive Heart* see Alan Burton, 'Love in a Cold Climate: Critics, Filmmakers and the British Cinema of Quality – The Case of *The Captive Heart*', Alan Burton, Tim O'Sullivan and Paul Wells (eds.), *Liberal Directions: Basil Dearden and Postwar British Film Culture* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997), pp. 116-128.

marrying a British soldier.¹⁸⁶ The film's bold treatment of 'issues of [anti-German] prejudice and reconciliation'¹⁸⁷ appear remarkable when considered in relation to the close proximity of the war, further establishing Ealing's progressive values. It is for this reason that John Caughie described *Frieda* as 'one of the most interesting, and least discussed, Ealing films, and a brilliant dissection of postwar society'.¹⁸⁸

The immediate postwar period also saw the emergence of the first distinctively Ealing form of comedy with the release of *Hue and Cry* (Charles Crichton, 1947), however, the studio's forthcoming connection to a specific form of comedy would have been difficult to envisage at the time. Ealing made only three comedies during the period 1944-1948, the other two being the aforementioned *Fiddlers Three* and *Another Shore* (Charles Crichton, 1948). Moreover, neither of these two comedies are particularly noteworthy, nor are they as distinctly 'Ealingesque' as *Hue and Cry* which set the template for the later comedies. The following chapter will address the comedies in closer detail as, rather than establishing an inclination towards comedy production, the most remarkable aspect of the studio's output

¹⁸⁶ See Charlotte Brunsten and Rachel Moseley "'She's a Foreigner Who's Become a British Subject': *Frieda*" in *Liberal Directions*, pp. 129-136.

¹⁸⁷ Tim O'Sullivan, 'Dearden, Basil', *Screenonline*, URL: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/456049> (accessed 14 September 2010).

¹⁸⁸ John Caughie and Kevin Rockett, *The Companion to British and Irish Cinema* (London: Cassell/British Film Institute, 1996), p. 55.

during the period leading to the release of *Passport to Pimlico* is its embrace of a much darker subject matter. This is typified by *It Always Rains on Sunday* which we shall look at in chapter 5, but there also emerged a newly discovered penchant to dabble in supernatural fantasy, which was a far remove from Ealing's wartime realist aesthetic. In particular this can be seen in *The Halfway House* and the portmanteau horror *Dead of Night* (Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Dearden, Robert Hamer, 1945), two films that establish the emerging inclination towards expressionism at the studio.

The Halfway House finds Ealing at a cultural and social crossroad between maintaining its wartime ethos of promoting a nation united behind the concept of the people's war whilst formally striving to branch out from the realist aesthetic that had served both the studio's and the nation's purposes so successfully during the conflict. *Halfway House's* significance is found in its formal readjustment for the studio. This readjustment was continued in *Dead of Night* and finally radically politicised in *They Came to a City*. Central to this readjustment at Ealing would be the work of the director Basil Dearden. It was Dearden, in partnership with the producer Michael Relph who, according to Alan Burton and Tim O'Sullivan:

[B]rought a healthy dose of expressionism to the filmmaking at wartime Ealing, and while never wholly subversive in the manner of Robert Hamer's and Alexander Mackendrick's later comedies [...] did somewhat destabilise the predictable world of naturalism and counter the easy acceptance of myths typical at the studio.¹⁸⁹

Basil Dearden and Ealing

The work of Basil Dearden was at the forefront of Ealing's re-evaluation of its former commitment to realist cinema in the immediate post-war period. A cursory glance at the features produced at the studio at this time that marked, in various ways, a departure from the Ealing norm, sees Basil Dearden's name turn up as director on a regular basis. Jeffrey Richards confirms Dearden's central importance to Ealing's formal aesthetic and thematic ethos when he states that Basil Dearden is particularly associated with two strands of Ealing's cinema, 'the ethical dilemma films – *The Secret People* (1951), *The Divided Heart* (1954) and *Lease of Life* (1954) – on which Ealing invariably took a liberal viewpoint, and the community/institutional/social problem films emerging from its commitment to "The People's War" and documentary realism'.¹⁹⁰ The three social problem films Dearden made at Ealing are *The Blue Lamp* (1950), *Cage of*

¹⁸⁹ Alan Burton and Tim O'Sullivan, *The Cinema of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 51.

¹⁹⁰ Jeffrey Richards, 'Basil Dearden at Ealing', *Liberal Directions*, p. 16.

Gold (1950) and *Pool of London* (1951).¹⁹¹ In fact, as Raymond Durnat has suggested, Dearden is so closely linked to the ‘social problem’ film that it could be argued that most of his films have a tendency to fall into this particular category.¹⁹² However, a distinction between the two thematic tropes ought to be maintained; the ‘ethical dilemma films differs from their ‘social problem’ counterparts in their concern with a moral question such as the issue of anti-German prejudice in *Frieda*, whereas the social problem text focuses upon a particular public issue such as juvenile crime in *The Blue Lamp*.

Dearden formed an enduring partnership with Relph which continued after the studio’s collapse right up until Dearden’s death in 1971. Confirming how the director became an integral part of the studio’s make-up, Richards points to the fact that ‘Dearden seems to have conformed absolutely to both the structure and the ethos of Ealing. He was a team player, contributing happily to those “portmanteau” pictures on which several Ealing directors collaborated – *Dead of Night* (1945); *Train of Events* (1949)’.¹⁹³ In addition, Dearden and Relph can also both be linked with the documentary ethic of Ealing and its

¹⁹¹ For a discussion of these social problem films see Steve Chibnall, ‘The Teenage Trilogy: *The Blue Lamp*, *I Believe in You* and *Violent Playground*’, pp. 137-53; Robert Murphy, ‘*Cage of Gold*’, pp. 154-61 and Andrew Higson, ‘*Pool of London*’ pp. 162-71 in *Liberal Directions*.

¹⁹² Raymond Durnat, ‘Two “Social Problem” films: *Sapphire* and *Victim*’, *Liberal Directions*, p. 60.

¹⁹³ Richards, ‘Basil Dearden at Ealing’, p. 16.

association with the themes of community and social responsibility. Outlining the pair's socially instructive approach to filmmaking, Relph stated that 'we felt it wasn't worthwhile unless the film had something to say other than just tell an entertaining story. We were always looking for themes that had some social significance, and a lot of our films have that element'.¹⁹⁴ However, the perceived didacticism inherent in Dearden's cinema, acknowledged in Relph's remark, has come in for some criticism. Despite the director's strong links with the studio, his connection to its ethos and formal strategy, and his extensive body of work at Ealing and beyond, Dearden is not widely esteemed as a filmmaker. David Thomson's entry for the director in *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* is typical of much of the response Dearden, until recently, has elicited in the critical community. Commenting upon the Dearden obituaries that appeared in *The Guardian* and *The Times*, Thomson remarked:

Dearden's versatility was with essentially inert subjects and his proficiency was at the expense of inventiveness or artistic personality. Filmmaking is not a matter of telling a good story well when the end product is [...] spurious social alertness [...] Dearden's coming in on time is replete with the obedient, leaden dullness of British studios. His films are decent, empty and plodding and his association with Michael Relph is a fair

¹⁹⁴ Brian McFarlane (ed.), *Sixty Voices: Celebrities Recall the Golden Age of British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 191.

representative of the British preference for bureaucratic cinema.¹⁹⁵

Contrary to Thomson's criticism, Dearden's oeuvre is an impressive and varied one and this realisation has led to Dearden receiving some re-appraisal in recent times.¹⁹⁶ However, recent revisionism aside, the critical inclination towards Dearden and Relph's contribution remains one of indifference, and a criticism for their undistinguished treatment of usually significant themes and issues still persists. Analysing the pair's contribution to British cinema, John Caughie argues that:

Critical commentary has tended to treat them as decent but dull, and certainly the cautious narrative form of their films often cocoons the problems they are addressing. But it also throws up difficulties in the way of resolution, and the social (and sexual) tensions in their films are often more interesting than the Big Moral Statement they are trying to make.¹⁹⁷

In general, Caughie's mixed assessment remains typical of much of the reaction towards Dearden and Relph's partnership.

Dearden's first solo-credited feature for the studio was the fire-fighting drama *The Bells Go Down* (1943), which combined

¹⁹⁵ David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (London: André Deutsch Ltd, 1998), p. 177.

¹⁹⁶ For a critical re-evaluation that seeks to reinstate Basil Dearden and Michael Relph into the canon of British cinema see Burton, O'Sullivan and Wells (eds.) *Liberal Directions* (1997) and Burton and O'Sullivan *The Cinema of Basil Dearden* (2009)

¹⁹⁷ Caughie and Rockett, *The Companion to British and Irish Cinema*, p. 55.

documentary-realist aesthetics with fictional elements within its overall narrative structure, incorporating the familiar Ealing themes of public service and the promotion of public institutions. The film -a tribute to the Auxiliary Fire Service – is another example of the convergence between Ealing and the documentary mode as it was released the same year as Humphrey Jennings’ *Fires Were Started*. Although compared unfavourably to Jennings’ documentary by critics at the time, *The Bells Go Down* was praised by *The Daily Mail* as ‘a picture of the people and for the people’¹⁹⁸ and described more recently by Richards as a ‘successful example of Ealing’s new commitment to the “docudrama” and the People’s War.’¹⁹⁹

Richards outlined how Dearden’s work corresponded with the overall ethos at Ealing as follows:

Through Dearden’s films, as through Ealing’s output, run two intertwined and structuring themes. The first is the idea that there *is* such a thing as society. It is made up of communities – organic, cohesive and rooted in shared values, traditions and experiences. It is tolerant, restrained, decent, civilised – a society that needs defending and is worth protecting from enemies within and without. The second theme is the concept of public service, a shared activity in defence of the community and its values, a concept celebrated in *The Bells Go Down* (the fire service), *The Blue Lamp* (1950; the police service), *I Believe in You* (1952; the probation service), in which the collective heroes are the embodiments of that ethic.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ *The Daily Mail*, 15 April 1943.

¹⁹⁹ Richards, ‘Basil Dearden at Ealing’, p. 18.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

The theme of shared responsibility towards the defence of the community is foregrounded in Dearden's *The Halfway House*, a film comparable in a number of ways with *They Came to a City*. Initially *Halfway House* problematises the issue by introducing characters in personal conflict with the nation's war effort before finally resolving the matter and reaffirming the notion of the people's war. Furthermore, as has already been noted, *Halfway House* represents a departure from Ealing studio's preference for realism by introducing a supernatural element within its storyline.

The narrative of *Halfway House* concerns a number of diverse and troubled characters who all converge at a Welsh inn - the Halfway House of the title. Unknown to the characters, the inn has burnt down a year before, a fact that is made apparent to the audience watching the film. During the course of their stay at the inn, the characters are introduced to the ghostly figure of the innkeeper Rhys (Mervyn Johns) and his daughter Gwyneth (Glynis Johns). After confronting their various personal problems and misgivings toward the war effort and aims, the nine characters realise the uncanny situation they find themselves in. The result of their shared experience sees the characters emerge from their supernatural encounter with a rediscovered faith in the aims and principles of the nation, combined with a renewed

vigour to unite to aid in the war effort. As Burton and O'Sullivan explain:

The Halfway House was part of that tendency, emerging mid-war at Ealing, to reveal fissures in the edifice of national solidarity and unity. *Next of Kin* and *Went the Day Well?* had featured traitors in league with the enemy who had to be ruthlessly suppressed; *The Halfway House* a broader cross-section of characters who were actively against the national interest (criminals), were unwittingly harming the social fabric (warring families), or were simply absenting themselves from the fight (neutrals, ailing artists, bereaved parents).²⁰¹

The Halfway House suggests a crack in the mythology of the people's war, which the wartime consensus of both Ealing and the nation were required to rectify. It is the first film made at Ealing to confront the issue head on by explicitly presenting numerous characters from a variety of backgrounds that were not solidly united behind the war effort. Previously, as we have discovered, Ealing had warned wartime audiences of the dangers of lax security in *Next of Kin* and *Went the Day Well?* but *The Halfway House* substantially develops the themes of the people's war and national unity as the dissentients are taken from a much broader variety of social backgrounds and occupations and with far wider ranging life experiences. There is a classical musician, a Squadron Leader and his wife, two Captains, a black market criminal, a married couple with a daughter, and a betrothed

²⁰¹ Burton and O'Sullivan, *The Cinema of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph*, pp. 63-65.

couple. Despite the fact that initially *The Halfway House* problematically addresses issues of national unity, by finally reintegrating the dissenters back into the war effort it manages to re-emphasise the ethos of consensus and community, managing to re-establish the prevailing orthodoxy of Ealing studios.

Despite the fact that *The Halfway House* ultimately restates Ealing's wartime ethos of promoting the concept of the people's war, it does so in a manner which is a far remove from the studio's customary preference for realism. The fantasy and supernatural elements within the film's narrative anticipate Ealing's later attempts at engaging with similar subject matter in *They Came to a City* and, especially, *Dead of Night*. However, *Dead of Night* can be seen as Ealing's only genuine foray into the horror genre. Despite its ghostly narrative, *The Halfway House* resists such a classification by differing from the generic construct of the horror film in one notable way. Whilst it is accepted that the horror genre can often engage with social issues within its textual structure, it does so in a manner that is often seen as threatening and disturbing. *The Halfway House*, on the other hand, ultimately attempts to reassure the viewer of the necessity of the war effort. Commenting upon the film's 'redemptive' treatment of the Welsh countryside and natural environment, Burton and O'Sullivan suggest, 'what is crucial [...]

is that *The Halfway House* does not abandon Ealing's wartime patriotic project through an invocation of the uncanny as a threatening Otherness' but 'presents its landscapes picturesquely, configuring them as soothing and regenerative spaces'.²⁰² In this manner, the film departs from the horror norm by attempting to assuage the viewer rather than to disturb, a feature common to most horror or supernatural texts. This differentiation is posited by Burton and O'Sullivan as the reason that *The Halfway House* 'had confused commentators while the film was in production', citing the differing descriptions of the film by the *Kinematographic Weekly* and *The Cinema* to explain its 'generic and dramatic uncertainty' which 'stems from the renouncement of the studio's established and venerated realism for an excursion into the uncanny'.²⁰³

Despite its generic uncertainty, it is apparent that *The Halfway House* corresponds with a number of other British films made during the war with similar metaphysical themes. In order to 'debate the state of the nation', Richards explains that:

The war led the cinema to turn away from the gothic horrors of the 1930s to gentler examinations of the supernatural. The screen became flooded with ghosts and angels. With the violent deaths of loved ones becoming an inescapable fact of wartime life, the cinema did its bit to lessen the pain of bereavement by presenting death as something benign, and affirming the fact of

²⁰² Ibid., p. 62.

²⁰³ Ibid.

life after death. The tone of these films was gentle, often whimsical, and the effect was to reassure rather than frighten.²⁰⁴

In addition to *The Halfway House*, Richards suggests *Thunder Rock* (Roy Boulting, 1942) and Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945) and *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) as examples of the state-of-the-nation supernatural films. All of these films share with *The Halfway House* and *They Came to a City* certain concerns with contemporary British society and offer, in varying degrees, a convergence of themes around sentiments of shared responsibility and action, in an attempt to give a spiritual dimension to the nation's collective sacrifice.

Dearden's next feature made at Ealing, the cinematic treatment of a J.B. Priestley play *They Came to a City*, also incorporates elements of the uncanny into its narrative and is a continuation of the abdication of the studio's formal preference for realism that was initiated by *The Halfway House*. However, despite having much in common with *The Halfway House* in terms of both its form and narrative, *They Came to a City* looks ahead beyond the war to radically address issues of reconstruction and critique the notion of national unity. As *They Came to a City* has suffered from being relegated to the margins of any serious analysis of Ealing studios, widely regarded as an oddity and

²⁰⁴ Richards, 'Basil Dearden at Ealing', p. 23.

meriting little scrutiny, the remainder of this chapter will emphasise the film's importance in relation to its formal shift away from Ealing's realist filmmaking norm whilst acknowledging its historical and political relevance to Ealing and its radical re-imagining of a socialist postwar British society.

They Came to a City: Production, Distribution and Reception

They Came to a City has been largely neglected in any critical appraisal of Ealing studios, being 'usually passed over as a worthy if dull production, compromised by an over-theatrical treatment'.²⁰⁵ In Perry's *Forever Ealing*, the film receives little attention with the text's analysis reduced to a mere paragraph. Perry begins by describing both *The Halfway House* and *They Came to a City* as 'curiosities' with 'neither quite achieving what it set out to do, although the ideas were intriguing'²⁰⁶, before condemning *They Came to A City* as 'one of Ealing's most unsatisfactory films, a venture into an area that would be fairly difficult for any filmmaker, but one which for this studio, with its tradition of realism and a view of ordinary lives, was a disaster'.²⁰⁷ Similarly, Ernest Betts felt that, whereas, *The Halfway House* 'was at least clear in its story and contained some

²⁰⁵ Burton and O'Sullivan, *The Cinema of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph*, p.66.

²⁰⁶ Perry, p. 76.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

admirable melodrama. Dearden does not mystify or sermonise, but he usually entertains. J.B. Priestley's *They Came to a City*, a kind of morality, had little more than good intentions to recommend it'.²⁰⁸ Moreover, when Barr's *Ealing Studios* was first published in 1977, *They Came to a City* fared little better, with Barr describing the film, together with *The Halfway House*, as 'the two worst films out of the seventeen Dearden made at Ealing'.²⁰⁹ However, the publishing of the second edition of *Ealing Studios* in 1993 initiated a volte-face in Barr's assessment of the two Dearden pictures. Redeeming himself for his initial dismissal of these two fascinating and intelligent films, Barr concluded that they 'are certainly schematic, and do not conceal their theatrical origins, but I now find this no obstacle: they are bold, eloquent and powerful'.²¹⁰

They Came to a City premiered in J.B Priestley's home town of Bradford at the Theatre Royal in July 1944 and it received its first trade screening in August of the same year. Thereafter, it was denied a London release until February 1945 as it was ignored by the three main circuits: the Odeon and Gaumont which were owned by Rank, and the ABC circuit which was owned by the Associated British Picture Corporation. It was

²⁰⁸ Ernest Betts, *The Film Business: A History of British Cinema 1896- 1972* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1973), pp. 205-6.

²⁰⁹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 185.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

becoming apparent that Ealing's independent status was making it increasingly difficult for the studio to compete with the major distribution companies, making Balcon realise that Ealing must come to some sort of arrangement with a major production company. Eventually a deal was struck with Rank and, despite Balcon's previous misgivings and 'atavistic dislike of anything which faintly smells of monopoly'²¹¹, Ealing was eventually assimilated into the Rank organisation.

Balcon had previously been hugely critical of Rank's domination of the film industry. When, during the early stages of the war, the government set up the Films Council to advise Parliament and the Board of Trade on matters concerning the film industry, Balcon was appointed a representative. Balcon explains that in this capacity he and Reg Baker - a former President of the Kinematograph Renters' Society and subsequent President of the British Film Producers' Association - together with other representatives on the Films Council, 'conducted a campaign against Rank's activities which resulted in a committee being set up [...] to report on "tendencies to monopoly in the film industry," and that 'the resulting document was the most effective criticism of Rank's policies ever written'.²¹²

²¹¹ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 152.

²¹² *Ibid.*

The main motive for the head of Ealing's subsequent change of heart was commercial pragmatism rather than any shift in political conviction, the reasoning behind his involvement with the Films Council and attack on the Rank corporation sincerely acknowledged by Balcon in his biography:

Of course our activities were not entirely altruistic, as we were convinced that Ealing's vital interests were at stake and believed, rightly or wrongly, that our films were suffering as a result the over-large theatre groupings bringing about an unfair buyers' market. It seemed beyond doubt [...] that barriers now existed against the exhibition of our films and that, as independents, we were at a grave disadvantage compared with the wide production interests under the Rank and Associated British umbrellas. It was essential for us to maintain a proper outlet for our films and, obsessed as we were with the general anti-monopoly principle, we knew in our hearts that for our long-term survival we would have to find some formula of co-operation with one or other of the big groups.²¹³

Philip Kemp described the contract as a 'Faustian pact', arguing that 'Ealing's freedom of operation was increasingly constricted by the tie-up with Rank'.²¹⁴ However, Balcon has always insisted that the deal was beneficial for Ealing, claiming that the agreement was on 'the generous side on the part of the Rank organisation' and pointing out that Rank contributed 50 per cent of production costs giving 'Ealing complete production

²¹³ Ibid., p. 153.

²¹⁴ Philip Kemp, 'Paradise Postponed: Ealing, Rank and *They Came to a City*', *Cinéaste*, Volume 23, Number 4, July 1998, p. 45.

autonomy and independence' whilst insisting that Ealing's politics were not compromised by the deal and that his later disagreements with the Rank organisation were a result of 'an entirely different set of circumstances which beset all independent film producers'.²¹⁵ Whatever the veracity of the arguments over the subsequent commercial ramifications of the arrangement, the motivation for the deal seems much simpler to corroborate. Kemp maintains that the impetus for Ealing approaching Rank was the distribution problems the studio suffered with *They Came to a City* which culminated in the film's delayed release and limited distribution.

The reason for *They Came to a City*'s delayed release in the nation's capital is the subject of considerable debate. Until the deal was made between Ealing and Rank, the film had to be content with a limited distribution, screened on the Granada circuit of the Socialist Sidney Bernstein. Kemp argues that it was denied a London release due to its 'socialist propaganda'.²¹⁶ However, any suggestion of censorship was denied by Priestley who suggested the motive behind the limited screening was commercial rather than political.²¹⁷ Nevertheless, even if Priestley is correct when he advocates the commercial basis of the decision, there is still a degree of validation to Kemp's argument

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 154-5.

²¹⁶ Kemp, 'Paradise Postponed', p. 47.

²¹⁷ Richards, 'Basil Dearden at Ealing', p. 24.

which appears to suggest that there was something about the film's political perspective that made the distributors uneasy. Kemp cites the fact that even after the deal between Rank and Ealing, the dominant partner still refused to allow it to be screened in the West End, thus 'cutting it off from its prime audience'²¹⁸, implying that the decision cannot be wholly attributed to commercial logic. In addition to its limited distribution, consideration must also be given that, in order to secure a Universal certification, the British Board of Film Censors required a number of cuts to be made to the film. Burton has stated that 'the current Board reports that details are not available regarding the censorship action taken'²¹⁹ and, therefore, we can only surmise as to the political reasoning behind the censorship. However, the fact that cuts were required would appear to reinforce Kemp's argument that there was an ideological basis behind the authorities' distrust, although the lack of archival evidence means such an argument remains inconclusive.

The contemporary critical reception received by *They Came to a City* concentrated largely upon what was perceived as its non-cinematic formal features. Despite tempering its criticism by praising its 'direction, photography, and acting' and

²¹⁸ Kemp, 'Paradise Postponed', p. 47.

²¹⁹ Alan Burton, 'Ealing Studio's Wartime "Mild Revolution": The Filming of J.B. Priestley's *They Came to a City* (1944)', *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies*, Volume 20, Issue 2, September 2009, p. 157.

‘worthwhile motive’, *The Monthly Film Bulletin* claimed that, ‘the film is not true cinema as it is practically all talk and no action’.²²⁰ Other contemporary reviews are equally mixed, moderating their considerable praise for the film’s performances, direction and bold social standpoint whilst remaining critical of its theatrical disposition and over-reliance on dialogue. *The Cinema*’s review of the film’s re-release in 1948 encapsulated the critical mood by stating that ‘the sustained conversations are at once challenging, provocative and stimulating’ and ‘the characters are themselves well drawn and their discussions are for the most part provocative, so that even though talk completely swamps action, it is invariably worth listening to’.²²¹ Similarly the *Motion Picture Herald* felt that ‘the defect of the film’ lay in the fact that ‘it’s so very talkie-talkie; action is at its ultimate minimum. But the exhibit challenges you’, before proceeding to praise the film’s production and congratulating Balcon for ‘turning his screen into a forum of violent debate’ and praising Dearden ‘for his immensely tactful direction’.²²² *The Kinematograph Weekly* described *They Came to a City* as a ‘safety-first sociological fantasy’ commenting upon its ‘artful and engrossing discussion’ and praising the film’s technique whilst

²²⁰ *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1944, p. 100.

²²¹ *The Cinema*, 11 February 1948, p. 13.

²²² *Motion Picture Herald*, 9 September 1944, p. 27.

also stressing the ‘obvious political bias’ and emphasising the film’s ‘lack of movement’,²²³ as negative features.

Despite not securing a release in London’s West End, *They Came to a City* did manage to acquire a limited showing in a small cinema in New York in 1945. However, the critical reception received by the film in the States fared little better than in Britain as the New York critics made similar assessments to their British counterparts. The *New York Herald Tribune* criticised the film’s ‘lack of cinematic excitement’, stressing that even though the film displayed ‘quality’ in the final analysis it held ‘little entertainment’.²²⁴ *The New York Times* review was even more scathing. Declaring the film to be ‘immobile’ and a ‘noble and tiresome harangue’ whilst complaining that its worthiness was ‘buried beneath a Niagara of words and theatrical postures’, the paper concluded:

They Came to a City indicates that the British are ahead of us in groping cinematically for the postwar world. But the Hollywood moguls are here proven correct in their assumption that the subject is not very entertaining. John Clements, Googie Withers, Ada Reeve, Raymond Huntley, A.E. Matthews and J.B. Priestley himself are not successful in bringing much life to this foggy and elongated conversation piece.²²⁵

²²³ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 24 August 1944, p. 26.

²²⁴ *New York Herald Tribune*, 19 February 1945.

²²⁵ *New York Times*, 19 February 1945.

Similarly, the *New York Journal-American* declared *They Came to a City* to be ‘entirely conversational [...] literate and interesting in the manner of a forum rather than as film drama’.²²⁶

The fact that the critics regularly commented upon the film’s overtly theatrical nature is hardly surprising considering *They Came to a City*’s origins as a stage drama. Apart from a few alterations in the dialogue, the film differs from the stage version in only two minor ways. Firstly, there is a prologue featuring Priestley on a hillside overlooking an unnamed town, discussing the possible shape of postwar Britain with a young couple, played by Ralph Michael and Brenda Bruce. As the couple argue about the possibilities of postwar improvements to society, Priestley introduces his story as a means of settling the argument. The dramatic action then shifts to show us Priestley’s narrative. Once this narrative has developed to the point when the characters enter the city there is a brief return to the scene with the couple and Priestley before continuing with the characters returning from the city. Finally the film returns to the scene upon the hillside with an epilogue.

The second alteration from the play concerns the various characters’ arrival at the city walls. In the staged play the characters’ arrival is explained to the audience via dialogue, whereas the screened version utilises more cinematic means to

²²⁶ *New York Journal-American*, 19 February 1945.

explain the uncanny event with each character being individually presented to the audience before losing themselves in a blackout. Dearden manages to present the various characters by method of short individual introductions which are skilfully edited together. In these introductory scenes, Dearden's direction displays a masterful command of cinematic narrative technique to economically convey to the audience the various backgrounds and attitudes of the disparate characters. In the first brief scene we encounter the working-class waitress, Alice Foster (Googie Withers). Alice is followed by the businessman, Cudworth (Norman Shelley), who is discussing business with an associate and the following scene shows Lady Loxfield (Mabel Terry) and Phillipa Loxfield (Frances Rowe), a Mother and Daughter of the gentry class. We see the Aristocrat, Sir George Gedney (A.E. Matthews), at his Gentlemen's Club followed by the charwoman, Mrs Batley (Ada Reeve). Next, travelling together on a train, are the bank employee, Malcolm Stritton (Raymond Huntley), with his wife, Dorothy Stritton (Renée Gadd). Finally the pivotal character of the ship's hand, Joe Dinmore (John Clements), is introduced.

The minor deviations from the original play suggest an awareness by the scriptwriters that the film was too reliant upon its stage source material. However, the fact that the critics were

subsequently unanimous in singling out the theatrical aspects of *They Came to a City* as one of the film's major faults suggests that the filmmakers were not entirely successful in their attempt to rescue the film from criticism regarding its perceived over-theatricality. Nevertheless, this attempt to produce a cinematic experience by departing, albeit slightly, from the staged production has been overlooked and the ingenious treatment of the arrival at the City has not really been given the consideration it deserves. Similarly, despite criticising the film's un-cinematic nature, critics were mostly in agreement in praising Relph's set design and there are moments when the stylistic depiction of the city walls and its futuristic and expressionistic presentation rescue *They Came to a City* from being merely a filmed stage drama.²²⁷

Considering the film's critical reception and its limited distribution, it is hardly surprising that *They Came to a City* was not a box-office success, although Burton suggests that Balcon would not have been too disappointed at the film's commercial performance 'as the production was comparatively experimental and potentially controversial' therefore 'the film was shrewdly produced on a modest budget of around £24, 000 and so was not a disaster for the small studio'.²²⁸ However, despite its poor

²²⁷ For an analysis of the film's fantasy and futuristic elements see Josephine Botting "Who'll Pay For Reality": Ealing Dreams and Fantasy', *Ealing Revisited*, pp. 175-84.

²²⁸ Burton, 'Ealing Studio's Wartime "Mild Revolution"', p. 159.

contemporary commercial showing and its subsequent critical neglect, the film remains an important historical document which engages with the immediate postwar political climate. Pivotal to the film's relevance is the manner in which it contextualises contemporary debates that were occurring in Britain regarding reconstructing a nation that had been torn apart during the war and, as Burton and O'Sullivan point out, 'it is the film's radical theme and historicity that mark its lasting interest'.²²⁹ A similar admiration for the film is expressed by Kemp. Although remaining appreciative of the negative reaction by many critics, arguing that 'considered purely as cinema, *They Came to City* is no great shakes [...] a didactic filmed play that makes no pretence to be anything else', Kemp confirms the film's contemporary historical and political significance when he states that: 'As a revelation of its time, it's riveting' and that 'anyone who finds the film dull misses the fervor behind the writing, behind the acting, behind the whole clash of thought [...] this is a film where ideas matter - both to the characters in the film, and to those who made it'.²³⁰ The ideological passion and political commitment that marks the film is the result of the historical environment in which it was produced and the initial source of such commitment is the playwright, commentator and activist, J.B. Priestley.

²²⁹ Burton and O'Sullivan, *The Cinema of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph*, p. 72.

²³⁰ Kemp, 'Paradise Postponed', p. 46.

J.B Priestley: Radical Reconstruction and the New Jerusalem

According to Burton, Priestley ‘was the one individual most associated with the wartime mood of social reconstruction and transformation’²³¹ as the playwright’s popularity during the war, emerging as a result of his BBC *Postscripts* broadcasts, contributed to the nation’s desire for political and social change and providing the impetus for the election of the first majority Labour government. In his *Postscript* of 21st July 1940, Priestley expressed a view that victory in the war would lead to a radical transformation of British society:

Now, the war, because it demands a huge collective effort, is compelling us to change not only our ordinary, social and economic habits, but also our habits of thought. We’re actually changing over from the property view to the sense of community, which simply means that we realise that we’re all in the same boat. But, and this is the point, that boat can serve not only as our defence against Nazi aggression, but as an ark in which we can all finally land in a better world.²³²

Thus Priestley, like George Orwell, looked beyond the defeat of Nazism, asserting that victory would necessitate the transformation of society along socialist lines and promoted this concept as a motivation for the war effort.

²³¹ Burton, ‘Ealing Studio’s Wartime “Mild Revolution”’, p. 149.

²³² Quoted in Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p. 118.

The attempt to portray Priestley's left-of-centre politics as restrained and to assert his non-revolutionary outlook has resulted in the playwrights more radical statements and the overtly left-wing sentiments which materialised within his work being overlooked. As the war progressed, according to Judith Cook, 'gradually a subtext began to creep into the *Postscripts*' as Priestley began to move further away from the property view of the world, reflected in a passage from *Postscripts* where Priestley claimed that property is

that old-fashioned way of thinking of a country as a thing, and a collection of things on that thing, all owned by certain people and constituting property, instead of thinking of a country as a living society, and considering the welfare of that society, the community itself, as the first test [...] I tell you, there is stirring in us now, a desire which could become a controlled but passionate determination to remodel and re-create this life of ours, to make it the glorious beginning of a new world order [...] We're even now the hope of free men everywhere but soon we could be the hope and lovely dawn of the whole new wide world.²³³

Priestley's viewpoint mirrors the ideology inherent in *They Came to a City*, articulated most expressively by Joe Dinmore's dream of creating the New Jerusalem. At the outset of the film, Dinmore represents the world-weary and cynical section of the working class who see the need for change but doubt its possibility. Soon after arriving at the ramparts, Joe and Alice gaze down towards

²³³ Judith Cook, *Priestley*, (London: Bloomsburt, 1997), p. 183.

the city and Alice asks 'what if there is something wonderful down there, something different?' At this moment, Joe recites part of a Walt Whitman poem, which is reprised by Priestley at the films finale: 'I dreamt in a dream I saw a city/ Invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest of the Earth/ I dreamt that was the new city of friends.' Despite the optimism of the poem, Joe remains doubtful of what the city may reveal: 'I've seen places before', he says, but rather than offer hope he describes the poverty he has witnessed with 'poor devils sitting about in rags' and 'kids crawling around the gutters with their faces covered in sores.' Dinmore's initial cynicism is constantly opposed by Alice's optimism and in this manner they are presented as an ideological mirror of the couple whom are talking to Priestley on the hill, both gazing down upon two different modern industrial landscapes whilst arguing about the ideological prospects that the two societies represent.

Despite his pessimism, Dinmore expresses intuitive views on the nature of society's ills. For example, he articulates an appreciation of gender politics by countering Cudworth's insistence that 'a woman's place is in the home' by stating that 'if women packed up everything would pack up.' He constantly criticises the system, recognising the hegemony of the ruling class and realising the urgent need for change, yet he is unable to

foresee the prospect of society's advancement. In this manner, Dinmore represents the embodiment of the defeated radicalism of the 1930s. Although there is no suggestion that he fought in Spain, as has been suggested by Kemp,²³⁴ Dinmore does appear to articulate the left's sense of defeat nevertheless. 1930s Europe had witnessed revolutions in Spain and Germany that had degenerated into reaction and fascism leaving Dinmore as 'a revolutionary who can't believe in the revolution.' Thus, Dinmore simultaneously rejects the dominant ideology of the ruling class whilst remaining doubtful of the prospect of changing society which is reflected in his description of his ideological position as being 'nowhere.'

Before the gates are opened to the city, Dinmore advances his own personal views on the prospect of radical change and the history of revolutionary struggle when he explains:

I can't believe in the revolution because I've gone sour. I don't see people making anything good together, they've always got to make something bad [...] If the revolution's to be any use they've got to make something good together [...] The conditions are stinking, the system's bad but that still don't convince me that people can make anything good together, it just doesn't seem to happen that way.

It is this conversation that finally opens up the door to the city and although he still has his doubts, Dinmore cries 'up the revolution'

²³⁴ See Kemp, 'Paradise Postponed', p. 46.

nevertheless. Encouraged by Alice, it is the visit to the city and the New Jerusalem inherent within its walls that finally rejuvenates the radical revolutionary fervour within Dinmore.

Dinmore's attitude reflects Priestley's radicalism, articulated in a rejection of the economic orthodoxy that prioritised private property before community values. Angus Calder traced Priestley's political development back to his Bradford upbringing where his father's membership of the Independent Labour Party 'meant that Priestley was exposed to a brand of socialism motivated by intense ethical concerns and indifferent to Marxist analysis'.²³⁵ Therefore, his ideological perspective and impatience with theoretical socialism and his inbred egalitarianism places him closer to the Christian socialist, rather than the Marxist tradition, an ideological perspective which has always represented the dominant outlook within the Labour Party and one which is moralist rather than theoretical in outlook. Nevertheless, Priestley's insistence during the war of a move towards a more communal, rather than property dominated socio-political position, shows that he was at least aware of left-wing debates around issues of common-ownership. Within both the play and the filmed version of *They Came to a City*, the economic system of public ownership of the means of production becomes the city's fundamental political objective.

²³⁵ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 198.

Priestley's radical outlook led him to the position where he was forced to defend himself from those positioned on the right of the political spectrum. When commenting upon his involvement in *Postscripts*, Priestley stated:

And the most I've asked for in these talks is that we should mean what we say; be really democratic while fighting for democracy; and that we should make some attempt to discover the deeper causes of this war and try and find a remedy for them [...] if all this together with certain obvious elements of social justice and decency seems to you Socialism, Communism or Anarchy, then you are at liberty to call me a Socialist, a Communist or an Anarchist, though I would implore you to stop pasting on labels and instead try to think a little.²³⁶

The fact that Priestley had to defend himself from being labelled as a radical in such a manner suggests that, although he was clearly no Marxist, his radical lineage places himself within the traditions of the left of the Labour Party and the more radical fringe of Social-Democracy. This tradition, though never completely endorsing Marxist perspectives, engaged with aspects of Marxist political philosophy often seeking to assimilate aspects of Marxism within a Social Democratic framework. As far as Priestley is concerned, the playwright himself rejected the barriers placed between the various ideological traditions of the left. For instance, his Social Democratic ideology did not prevent Priestley from joining the protest against fellow Social Democrats within

²³⁶ Cook, *Priestley*, p. 186.

the coalition government following their decision to ban the British Communist Party's *Daily Worker* and Communist journal, *The Week* in 1940.²³⁷ In addition to the defence of communist opinion, there were other instances when the author displayed an affinity with sections of the far-left, as Burton has detailed:

Commentators on Priestley have failed to pick up his flirtation with the radical Workers' Film Movement. In 1940, he agreed to prepare a script and commentary for a proposed film, *Britain Reborn*, for the film unit of the Political Committee of the London Co-operative Society, but the production never seems to have materialized. Later in the war, at a time when the leadership was becoming suspicious of overt Russian propaganda, Priestley spoke the commentary to a feature-length documentary, *The Partisans* (1944), produced by the Soviet Film Agency and recounting the heroic resistance of the Soviet guerrillas operating behind the German lines.²³⁸

Priestley's involvement with the Workers' Film

Movement begun with his work on the stage production of *They Came to a City*. When the play was first staged in 1943 it was 'performed as the inaugural production of the Peoples Entertainment Society (PES). This radical theatrical organisation, with links to the Workers' Film Movement, had been established by the Co-operative Movement to provide the public with "a voice in ownership and control" in the commercial theatre'.²³⁹ Considering the extent of Priestley's contribution to the

²³⁷ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 88.

²³⁸ Burton, 'Ealing Studio's Wartime "Mild Revolution"', pp. 150-1.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-2.

filmed version of his play, *They Came to a City* represents both the culmination of the playwright's involvement in cinema and the apotheosis of Priestley's and Ealing's radical vision.

Priestley's influence upon British cinema goes back to the origins of the documentary movement in the 1930s. In 1935, John Grierson began editing his *World Film News* journal which included contributions from Priestley and Priestley's non-fictional work *English Journey* (1933) - a statement on the state of the nation during the 1930s - also had a deep influence on the documentary movement, especially Paul Rotha. During the filming of *Shipyard* (1934), Rotha was travelling to and from Barrow-in-Furness whilst reading Priestley's account of the poverty in the north of England. According to Ian Aitken, *English Journey* provided Rotha with the opportunity to 'compare his own experiences of the depressed areas with those of Priestley', thus making 'a considerable impact' on the documentary maker and consequently becoming 'influential in placing him to the left of many other filmmakers within the documentary movement'.²⁴⁰ Aitken points out that in the 1930s 'a number of [literary] works appeared which used a documentary format to represent contemporary social problems' which included, amongst others, Priestley's *English Journey* and Orwell's *The Road to Wigan*

²⁴⁰ Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Movement* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 136.

Pier, and that ‘in these works, the boundaries between reportage and fiction became obscured, as was the case with some of the films of the period’.²⁴¹ Chronicler of the British documentary film movement, Paul Swann, termed *English Journey* a ‘print documentary’²⁴², thus further confirming Priestley’s influence upon the documentary movement in British cinema.

As Burton has pointed out, recent appraisals of Priestley have tended to neglect his work in the cinema. In addition to contributing towards *World Film News*, Priestley also appeared in the General Post Office Film Unit’s *BBC: The Voice of Britain* (Stuart Legg, 1935) and wrote and narrated two documentaries made by two directors who would later join the team at Ealing: *We Live in Two Worlds* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1937) and *Britain at Bay* (Harry Watt, 1940). The latter of these documentaries became ‘one of the most popular of the early wartime documentary films, and with its construction of a citizen army stoically defending liberal freedoms [...] was an obvious companion piece to the initial *Postscripts* on the radio’.²⁴³ Priestley also contributed to the ongoing Griersonian debate outlined previously in this thesis surrounding the superiority of the documentary over the fiction film in depicting reality. Becoming unconvinced by the documentary-makers’ argument

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 174.

²⁴² Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement*, p. 66.

²⁴³ Burton, ‘Ealing Studio’s Wartime “Mild Revolution”’, p. 150.

pertaining to the supposed superiority of their own particular form of filmmaking and alleging that the documentaries often romanticised working-class existence, Priestley argued:

They seem to imagine that in these elaborately designed moving pictures based on real life they have come nearer the truth than people working in any other medium, such as the printed word or the stage. But nearly all documentary films seem to me a very romantic heightening of ordinary life comparable not to work of a realistic novelist or dramatist, but to the picturesque and highly coloured fictions of the romancer [...] the film cannot help dropping out the dull passages, beautifying and heightening the rest, and then giving the whole thing a sort of glitter and excitement. What the documentary film producer is really saying is not, as he pretends, 'I'll show you the truth about our ordinary life as nobody else has shown it,' but something quite different, namely, 'Oh, you think the steel industry or life in a fishing village dull, do you, well now you'll see!' And you do: you see something exciting and romantic. But go and enter the steel industry, live yourself in a fishing village, and your final and exactly truthful impression would bear no resemblance to the film. In short, their very medium compels these young men to be romantic in practice, no matter how realistic they may be in theory.²⁴⁴

In addition to his work in documentary film, Priestley also worked at Ealing prior to *They Came to a City*. In the pre-Balcon era at the studio he scripted *Sing as We Go* (Basil Dean, 1934) and later wrote the story for *The Foreman Went to France* (Charles Frend, 1942), a film that instigated the studio's adoption of the ideology of the people's war. *The Foreman Went to France* is also noteworthy for introducing Ealing's sceptical viewpoint of the culpability of the ruling class in the origins of World War 2 by

²⁴⁴ Priestley quoted in Swann, *The British Documentary Film Movement*, p. 67.

having a British officer as a Nazi fifth columnist and with a pub landlord complaining that ‘the problem is the people at the top think they’re fighting the last war all over again.’ Also the film expresses an extraordinarily anti-People’s War sentiment, described by Mark Duguid as ‘an unusually categorical elision of capitalism and fascism’²⁴⁵ in the shape of an American secretary Anne Stanford (Constance Cummings) who exclaims, ‘They’re all the same the capitalist bunch; scared to death of communism and just waiting to sell their country to the highest bidder.’

When *The Foreman Went to France* was released, Priestley was engaged in a national speaking tour, conducted between 1940 and 1943, where he became acutely aware of the British public’s priorities in waging the war against Nazism. Summarising his experiences on the road, Priestley wrote:

In hotels, camps, factory canteens, hostels, railway trains, bars, restaurants, I listened and talked and argued. Topic Number One was probably the state of the war at the particular time; but Topic Number two, running Number One very close, was always the New World after the war. What could we do to bring our economic and social system nearer to justice and security and decency? That was the great question.²⁴⁶

The fact that the public’s consciousness was becoming increasingly concerned with debates around postwar planning and

²⁴⁵ Duguid, ‘The Dark Side of Ealing’, p. 57.

²⁴⁶ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p. 162.

the form a postwar society should take has been well documented by historians.²⁴⁷ These arguments are the major thematic concern of *They Came to a City*. Moreover, the increasing public clamour for fundamental social and political change would eventually reach the higher echelons of government, culminating in the government's adoption of the Beveridge Report as a white paper in December 1942.

Ealing would become entangled within the evident leftward-drift of elements of the lower and middle-classes, which would ultimately lead to Beveridge. This radicalisation culminated in the call for increased governmental planning to help alleviate society's ills during the latter stages of the war. When Max Nicholson wrote the article 'A National Plan for Britain' in the *Weekend Review* in February 1931, it initiated a debate which led to the founding of the Political and Economic Planning research organisation. This group, alongside G.D.H. Cole's Oxford Reconstruction Committee, was to wield great influence during the war years as the pressing need for planning during wartime was taken up by progressive of varying shades who called for a similar approach during peace to rebuild the country. In 1942 the Ministry of Works and Planning was set up, becoming The Ministry of Town and Country Planning in

²⁴⁷ For an analysis of the changing political and social attitudes of the period see Addison, *The Road to 1945* (1994) and Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992)

February of the next year. The public call for increased planning was outlined by a MoI report commissioned by William Jovitt, the Minister for Reconstruction, in June 1942 which concentrated on the public's attitudes to postwar issues. Concluding that 'there was a "thinking minority" of between 5 per cent and 20 per cent of the population who had definite views [on the nature of postwar society]', the report highlighted the following prevalent attitudes:

- i There must be work at a living wage for everyone who is capable of doing it.
- ii Private profit must cease to be the major incentive to work; everyone must work primarily for the good of the community.
- iii There must be financial security for everyone who is unable to work.
- iv There must be decent homes for everyone at a cost which will not reduce people to poverty.
- v The same education must be available to everyone so that all will have an equal chance.²⁴⁸

Although Paul Addison found no evidence that Beveridge was aware of the MoI report, its findings make it clear that public opinion would later get behind his social security reform.²⁴⁹ The final point regarding the education system would follow in the Education act of 1944 which introduced free secondary education

²⁴⁸ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, pp. 215-6.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

‘of three types –grammar, technical and modern- [...] without means test or restriction’.²⁵⁰

British cinema was at the forefront of projecting the mood of the British public towards the postwar society. Moreover, it is the British documentary movement that initiated the debate by allowing the British cinema to operate within a working-class milieu. Commenting upon similar sentiments towards the task of rebuilding a more egalitarian postwar society expressed in various films of the documentary movement, especially *The Machine is Mastered* (Terence Egan, 1942), Burton suggests that:

[F]ollowing the worst of the Blitz in 1940-41, the progressive section within society was putting its mind to rebuilding the country in peacetime. Capitalism was felt to have failed the people during the Depression, and faith was being put in planning. [*The Machine is Mastered*] is an early film contribution to the debate, whereby a planned system of Co-operative production was hailed as the future saviour of the workers and capable of humanising the regime of the machine. This film and similar progressive documentaries were distributed by organisations such as the Ministry of Information and the Workers’ Film Association and, it has been argued, contributed to the Labour Party’s stunning victory in the 1945 General Election.²⁵¹

Other documentaries of the period that express similar sentiments to the postwar British society and the need for planning to develop a more egalitarian society include *Men of Rochdale*

²⁵⁰ Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, p. 568.

²⁵¹ Alan Burton, *The British Co-operative Movement Film Catalogue* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997), p. 57.

(Compton Bennett, 1944) and *Song of the People* (Max Munden, 1945). Interestingly, there is a link between *Men of Rochdale* and Ealing studios as the music was composed for the documentary by John Greenwood who had also worked at Ealing.

There are obvious parallels to be drawn between the themes of *The Machine is Mastered* and *They Came to a City*. As Priestley explains to the couple on the hill, the characters who converge at the city walls ‘have the opportunity of seeing a city entirely owned and run by the people who live in it, a place where men and women don’t work for machines and money but machines and money work for men and women.’ Therefore, the machine *is* mastered in Priestley’s fictional depiction of a socialist utopia in *They Came to a City*. Furthermore, technology and industry has been utilised by the city for the benefit of the whole society. Even though we do not actually see the city, we learn enough to suggest that the society contained within its ramparts has democratised industry to such an extent that there now operates a form of classless society ‘where everybody has a reasonable chance but nobody has special privileges.’ At one point in the film Priestley suggests that ‘we are not town planning now,’ suggesting that rather than simply being a statement supporting the need for State planning in the postwar society, *They Came to a City* outlines how a radical and democratic

transformation could revolutionise the means of production and social relations to create a socialist egalitarian society. Therefore, *They Came to a City*'s ideology extends radically much farther than most social-democratic reformers at the time - Beveridge included - would ever have contemplated.

A Critique of the People's War: Class Conflict and Socialism.

The National Film Archive records' note for *They Came to a City* describes the text 'as an unusual film which represented the first attempt to carry out socialist propaganda in the British feature film'.²⁵² In a similar vein, Burton claims that 'as a play and a film, *They Came to a City*, offered Priestley and Balcon a platform for their established (Priestley) and emergent (Balcon) radicalism', and that for Balcon and Ealing, the film represented 'the most explicit expression of Ealing Studios' wartime "mild revolution"'.²⁵³ However, the true extent of the revolutionary nature of the film is not fully appreciated until the text's position towards class and how the film attacks the wartime orthodoxy of national consensus is realised. In its rejection of social consensus and the ideology of the people's war, *They Came to a City* radicalises Ealing's political impulse evidenced in *The Proud Valley* and *San Demetrio, London* to such an extent that it

²⁵² Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 195.

²⁵³ Burton, 'Ealing Studio's Wartime "Mild Revolution"', p. 159.

becomes the most en-equivocally socialist film made at the studio.

In his introduction to the play, Priestley wrote:

I have read and heard many wildly different accounts of what this play is about [...] a study of the Integration of the Personality [...], a drama of life after death, a slab of Left Wing propaganda, a plea for town planning. My best reply perhaps is to describe how I came to write it. During the War, I was impressed by the very different attitudes of mind that people had to any post-war changes, which were then being widely discussed. It seemed to me there was a play in this, so long as I could keep away from the mere play of debate, which I dislike, and discover an appropriate “symbolic Action”. (I use the quotation marks because this is my own term and not generally known. Actually this play offers a good though perhaps rather crude example of the “symbolic action” on which so many of my plays are built.) The unknown city gave me exactly what I wanted but it should be remembered that what is important in the play is not the city but the respective attitudes of the characters toward it.²⁵⁴

The ‘symbolic action’ suggested by Priestley is represented in both the film and play by the characters’ various reactions and attitudes toward the city. In this respect Priestley’s remark, expressing his intention to avoid a ‘mere play of debate’ anticipates much later criticism of the film. Contemporary commentators used the fact that the city is never seen by the audience as confirmation of the text’s obvious left-wing bias, claiming that Priestley and Ealing refuse to allow the audience a chance to make up its own mind about the advantages and

²⁵⁴ J.B. Priestley, *The Plays of J.B. Priestley*: Volume III (London: Heinemann, 1950), p. xi.

disadvantages of the socialist political system the city represents. However, as Priestley suggests, the drama is focused upon the characters' reactions and if the mechanics of the socialist city were depicted much of this ideological tension would be lost. The fact that the audience witnesses the 'city of friends' second-hand is sufficient to make the drama of the characters' attitudes towards such a society resonate. This argument is also articulated within the text itself when the young couple discuss the merits of such a society with Priestley. During the narrative's interlude when the action returns to the couple and Priestley on the hillside, the young man states his desire to see inside the city, but his partner, the shrewder of the two, realises that the make-up of the city is not important. Priestley agrees with the young woman stating that 'it's a question of how people would react to something that represented a new way of life.' Therefore, it is the various ideological attitudes towards socialism of a cross section of the public, rather than the political make up of the New Jerusalem itself, that is the major theme of the film.

Initially Ealing did consider the notion of showing the audience the mechanics of the socialist utopia contained within the city walls. The Shooting Script dated 22 December 1943 contains a Sequence D omitted from the final film which follows the characters around the city. This sequence begins with 'lyrical

exteriors [...] of waving trees, flowers in bloom, heads of corn’ which dissolve to show ‘clean, powerful, impressive detail of machinery’ and industrial shots of the city’s ‘powerhouse’ which one worker explains to Dinmore ‘belongs to all of us who live and work in the city.’²⁵⁵ Common ownership is one of the major features of the utopian society, as Alice discovers when she is informed that ‘the city is for the people – it belongs to them – they made it so it is theirs.’²⁵⁶ However, the political system is not to everyone’s liking. Mrs Stritton dislikes the egalitarianism inherent within the society claiming that ‘it makes everyone think they’re as good as everyone else’ and similarly Cudworth’s ‘ordinary business proposition’ is vetoed, resulting in him being called ‘a swindler’ and ‘a cheat.’²⁵⁷

Despite the eventual omission of Sequence D, some of the characters’ reactions to the city contained within the script are related via their various conversations towards the end of the film as *They Came to a City* rejects the national consensus of the people’s war by emphasising the class basis of various ideologically held positions. Tony Williams identifies *They Came to a City*’s class-based ideology as one which ‘ruthlessly exposes negative features in the British national character contributing to

²⁵⁵ *They Came to a City Shooting Script*, 22 December 1943 (London: BFI Library)

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

hegemonic exploitation'²⁵⁸ and it is this dramatic reconstruction of class-consciousness and the promotion of class relations as a basis for ideology that makes *They Came to a City* the most radical of all Ealing enterprises, elevating the text beyond a reformist position into a revolutionary critique of capitalist society.

From the opening introductory sequence of the film the audience is presented with the nine individuals' various political, social and economic attitudes. Through brief action and dialogue the various character traits are conveyed all of which will be developed as the narrative progresses and are vital to understanding the film's ideological perspective. Joe Dinmore is seen losing a fight aboard a ship when he criticises the owners, outlining his rebellious though defeated nature. Similarly, we learn of Alice's restless and spirited disposition and her unhappiness with her job as she chats to a bartender. Mrs Batley, struggling to keep up with her chores and suffering from old age and rheumatism, complains about her unending work. The first time we see Mrs Batley, she is centrally framed in a striking long and high shot, a tiny figure on her knees in a gigantic hotel foyer which she cleans alone as though, similar to the diminished miners' figures on the slag heap in *The Proud Valley*, shrunken by

²⁵⁸ Tony Williams, *Structures of Desire, 1939-1953* (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), p. 87.

the demands of her environment and the labour intensive role she must endure. The rushing figures that busily pass her on the way home from work increase the sense of Mrs Batley's isolation and, in contrast to their energy, when she finally lifts herself to her feet she moves slowly and painfully across the floor.

Despite the fact that all nine characters are united together in the narrative by the uncanny darkness which envelops them as they are eerily transported from their natural environment, the opening sequence serves to sub-divide the characters according to their background and status. Mrs Batley, Dinmore and Alice are all presented as struggling to overcome their material circumstances and their shared experience is one of hardship. They are de-personalised by their environment, suffering from alienation owing to their lack of ownership of their labour. This alienation is expressed when the characters approach the city by Mrs Batley who summarises the human condition by explaining people 'are all strung up inside 'cos they're not getting their little bit of happiness.' These three individuals are contrasted with the remaining characters from the middle and upper-classes, all of whom are seen to lead, in varying degrees, a more comfortable existence. Immediately the narrative has set up a division of labour between the characters and this class division will inform

each of the individuals' reaction to the society that the city represents.

The working-class characters of Alice, Joe and Mrs Batley are immediately recognised as the more sympathetic within the group. Cudworth and Gedney talk about banking and the economic system and are to varying degrees represented as being greedy and selfish stereotypes. Gedney is a depiction of the leisured aristocracy, increasingly seen as being out of touch with the social realities of those not from his class background. His conceited attitude is expressed at the end of the film when he finally admits his misanthropic nature which is a direct consequence of his privileged background. When he leaves the city at the end of the film, Gedney admits he 'can't stand people. I don't mind a few old pals, decent fellows, and one or two reliable servants [...] but not sort of mobs of people.' His lack of empathy with humanity and his indolence is contrasted throughout with Mrs Batley's perceptive views of those around her.

Cudworth regards the city as a business opportunity and hopes to take a look around trying to seek out the prospect of making some money. His naked self-interest is established when he is first introduced in the film and further exposed when Joe asks what he needs money for and the businessman responds 'to make more money.' It is not only Cudworth's greed that is

established at this point as the text is using the personal attitude of Cudworth to establish a broader perspective on the nature of big business and capitalism. This is one example of when *They Came to a City* allows the micro-story of Cudworth's character to comment upon the macro-issue of capitalist production. The idea of money being simply a device to create more money could be read as a simple evocation of capitalism's need for economic growth and expansion. Here the text implies that the economic system is utilised to create increasing profits rather than provide for the needs of people, in contrast to the society which the unseen city represents. Dinmore immediately recognises Gedney and Cudworth as 'typical specimens of the boss class' whose desire to 'grab, grab, grab' is their main motivation in life.

The dialogue, which expresses the class differentiation between Dinmore and Cudworth/Gedney is also expressed in the film's *mise en scène*. As the disagreement develops, a variety of shots are utilised to reinforce the characters' class hierarchical divide and their opposing ideologies. Initially there is a three shot, filmed from over the shoulder of Gedney and Cudworth. Dinmore is in the background standing below some steps as Cudworth and Gedney look down on him from an elevated position. The reverse point of view shot from over Dinmore's shoulder, further emphasises that the aristocrat and the businessman are united in a

common political cause. When Dinmore states that the aristocracy's big mistake was in 'ganging up with the money boys' this is emphasised by the characters positions on the screen, with Dinmore always shot in isolation against Gedney and Cudworth.

Throughout the film the various characters group together loosely according to their class backgrounds. When Lady Loxfield first emerges from the dark at the city ramparts she stresses that 'we must all stick together.' This remark by the heiress emphasises the nature of classlessness and promotes the ethos of the people's war, which the remainder of the film will dismantle. The disparate individuals and their differing class backgrounds make sticking together impossible as immediately they are brought together a sub division of the group and various alliances and tensions occur along class lines. The working-class characters of Alice, Dinmore and Mrs Batley all share common interests and experiences which sees them grouping together. Similarly, Cudworth, Gedney and Lady Loxfield are also united according to their higher class status.

These loose group hierarchies that the film initially suggests are finally reinforced by the characters' various reactions to the city. The first to emerge from within the walls, Dorothy Stritton, Gedney and Cudworth, are all united in their hostility to

the society they have witnessed. Lady Loxfield rejects the city because she would lose her aristocratic privileges whereas Cudworth dislikes the society because it has called him a criminal. Later Cudworth tries to explain that he is an individualist to which Dunmore responds 'you're a little pirate and you know it', confirming Ealing's promotion of community values which in films such as *Passport to Pimlico*, *The Blue Lamp* and *Cage of Gold* (Basil Dearden, 1950) would often equate material self-interest with criminality. Similarly, Gedney has been likened to a savage for his enjoyment of shooting and fishing. They are immediately joined by Alice who has fallen in love with the city and its inhabitants and cannot understand why the others do not like it. Alice reinforces the new society's argument against Gedney by comparing him, and by inference, the entire aristocratic class he represents, as 'something stuffed in a glass case.' When Dorothy expresses a desire to burn the city down, Alice responds vehemently: 'I could kill you for saying that. I was having the best day of my life. I was among people who were happy and I was happy. I was in a wonderful place and all you can do is spit on it.' The visit to the city exposes Alice's latent revolutionary nature when she states:

I'd always hoped, in a silly sort of way, to come across something wonderful just around the corner but I never thought

there could be a place as good as this. I didn't think that people could work together and play together like these people can. I'd do anything for these people. I'd die for these people.

There are two notable exceptions to a class-based analysis of the characters' opinions and reactions towards the city. Phillipa Loxfield, torn between wanting to stay and her loyalty to her overbearing Mother, finally opts to remain in the socialist city. Although Phillipa's motives and character are not explored in as great a depth as the other characters within the text, her reasoning for wanting to stay seem to be more personal rather than political. Nevertheless, the fact that the city has managed to exert some influence on this member of the privileged aristocratic class must be acknowledged in a political reading of the text. Similarly, the bank employee, Malcolm Stritton, is finally convinced to return home by his wife after initially deciding to stay. After standing up to his dominant wife for the first time in their relationship, Stritton states: 'I like that place and I like those people. It's a much better place than we've ever known before and they're much better people. They're *alive*. They're doing the thing I've always wanted people to do. I'm going to help them.' Burton argues that Stritton represents the lower section of the middle classes who were 'radicalised in wartime Britain [and] like Balcon and his colleagues voted Labour for the first time in

1945'.²⁵⁹ Before entering the city we see an example of Stritton's latent radicalism when he suggests that he regards the West Midland Bank as 'an obstacle to true economic progress.' Eventually he is urged on by Dinmore to shout down to the city below that 'I consider the chairman of the bank a mean and contemptible old toad', an example of Stritton's own personal mild revolution and representation of the lower middle classes beginning to vent their frustration at society. When the Stritton's finally leave, Dinmore and Stritton shake hands and wish each other 'all the best' with Dinmore suggesting that Stritton ought to remember the ideals of society that he has just witnessed and to 'keep it warm and alive inside', recognising Stritton, and by inference the lower middle classes which he represents, as potential comrades in the forthcoming struggle to build the 'New Jerusalem'.

The most startling transformation of the entire ensemble occurs with the character of Joe Dinmore for whom the reality of the city has renewed his political faith in the prospect of radical change, freeing him from his previous alienated and cynical state. Dinmore enthuses that he has witnessed 'a city full of happy people, healthy people and busy people. A real civilised city, a real city at last.' He eventually convinces Alice that, rather than stay in the city, they must return to inform others of what they

²⁵⁹ Burton, 'Ealing Studio's Wartime "Mild Revolution"', p. 161.

have witnessed in order to change society and fight for social justice and equality back home. The film concludes with one of the most stirring and passionate call to arms that the British cinema has ever dared to exhibit. Alice describes the society that they must return to as ‘a dogfight around a dustbin’ and that the city has taught her that ‘it needn’t be like that’, before Joe makes his politically committed speech. Dinmore begins by explaining the difficulties they will face as people will remain sceptical of the cause before proceeding to argue optimistically that another world is possible:

It’ll be a hard road. Some of them will laugh and jeer just ‘cos they don’t wanna understand. They’re frightened of losing some miserable advantage they’ve schemed and worked for. They don’t wanna lose the whip-hand they’ve got over somebody. They’d rather have their little privilege and prestige and an ashpit than take a chance and share alike in a new world [...] We’ll keep on hoping and every time we see a spark of vision or hope in anybody we’ll blow it into a blaze. They’ll say we can’t change human nature, that’s the oldest excuse in the world for doing nothing and it isn’t true. We’ve been changing human nature for thousands of years and what you can’t change [...] is man’s eternal desire and vision and hope of making the world a better place to live in [...] Not every man or woman wants to [...] cry out for it, to work for it, to live for it, if necessary to die for it. But there’s one here and one there [...] until you see there are millions of us - armies and armies of us - enough to build ten thousand new cities.

The revolutionary nature of the unseen society that *They Came to a City* depicts was not fully appreciated by the majority

of contemporary critics. Ignoring Dinmore's impassioned speech at the film's finale and the emotive response of Alice, The *Monthly Film Bulletin* praises the text's 'worthwhile motive' but claims the film 'gives little help as to how Utopia is to be achieved'.²⁶⁰ A considerable number of critical reviews downplayed the socialist polemical nature of the text and those that did refer to it did so mainly to accuse the film of bias and lack of balance, preferring to refer to the obvious socialist society depicted as advocating 'universal friendship'²⁶¹ as a blueprint for the future advancement of society. In a disparaging review in the *New York Sun*, Eileen Creelman states that 'the [city's political] system is never made clear', whilst condemning the film as 'simply a piece of propaganda'.²⁶² By failing to reach even a rudimentary understanding of the nature of the society depicted in the film, which Creelman describes simply as 'some new-fangled political system'²⁶³, her review fails to acknowledge the socialist principles of democracy and equality which the film is attempting to convey.

Unsurprisingly, the greatest champion of the film was the *The Daily Worker*, the paper of the British Communist Party. This fact would suggest that the perceived confusion surrounding the

²⁶⁰ *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1944, p. 100.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² *New York Sun*, 19 February 1945.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

film's political perspective, typified by the *New York Herald Tribune*'s claim that it was 'more confusing than communicative'²⁶⁴ owes more to the text's radical left-wing ideology rather than any definite flaws in the film's form. *The Daily Worker* found the film neither confusing nor lacking in communication, describing the film as 'one of the most enterprising efforts ever made in the British cinema [...] a very definite reminder that the new Britain must be fought for and won despite all obstacles and discouragement'.²⁶⁵ The fact that *They Came to a City* received such lavish praise from arguably the furthest left-wing paper in the country is a remarkable indication of both the text's revolutionary socialist perspective and an indication of how far the nation and Ealing had politically travelled during the war years. Jeffrey Richards described *They Came to a City*'s political stance as a 'defiantly non-commercial act, a declaration of faith in the zeitgeist' and 'a film that encapsulates the shift to the left, both at Ealing and Britain at large'.²⁶⁶ Similarly Burton, commenting upon the increased sense of radicalisation, wrote, 'that a film from that most traditional and English of studios, situated serenely on the village green at Ealing, should come, however briefly, into alignment with the organ of the Communist Party of Great Britain is perhaps an

²⁶⁴ *New York Herald Tribune*, 19 February 1945.

²⁶⁵ Quoted in Richards, 'Basil Dearden at Ealing', pp. 24-5.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

unexpected case of wartime ideological adjustment'.²⁶⁷ However, Philip Kemp makes the most strident case for the film's radicalism by claiming that 'as much as any Twenties agitprop production from Medvedkin or Dziga Vertov, [*They Came to a City*] is an unabashed, outspoken piece of socialist polemic – more so than any other feature ever produced in Britain or, quite possibly, anywhere outside the Communist bloc'.²⁶⁸

The major reason for *They Came to a City*'s radical stature lies in its left-wing debunking of wartime myths of the peoples war and national consensus, which are dismissed by the text in favour of a class-based approach to contemporary British society. As Burton identified, Ealing's previous tendency was to promote the ethos of the people's war whereby 'through the mythic promotion of consensus, solidarity, and shared endeavour, class and regional boundaries are dissolved and national unity achieved. *They Came to a City* resolutely refused to perform this act of harmonisation'.²⁶⁹ Prior to *They Came to a City*, Ealing was content to smooth over social difference, negate class conflict in order to promote the notion of classlessness during the war. In contrast to the rest of British cinema, *They Came to a City* regards the notion of a united national interest as a form of false-consciousness that fails to address real divisions within society.

²⁶⁷ Burton, 'Ealing Studio's Wartime "Mild Revolution"', p. 161.

²⁶⁸ Kemp, 'Paradise Postponed', p. 45.

²⁶⁹ Burton, 'Ealing Studio's Wartime "Mild Revolution"', p. 160.

From its rejection of national consensus, Robert Murphy has discerned within the text a pessimistic outlook towards the possibilities of constructing the New Jerusalem. Murphy claims that ‘*They Came to a City* is achingly idealistic but [...] it is more cautious about the new society [...] which no longer seemed guaranteed by victory in the war’.²⁷⁰ A more optimistic and radical reading of *They Came to a City* would suggest that the text appears to advocate that socialism will only be brought into being when an intensified struggle against class privilege is fought, as suggested by Dinmore’s final speech. Social justice cannot be guaranteed by a reformist centre-left government which leaves the hierarchical class structure in place. Measures such as the Beveridge plan are steps towards creating a more equal society but are limited in scope. Such criticisms of left-reformism, typified by measures such as the Beveridge plan, are indicative of the ideological division within British society at the time. This polarisation of opinion between left and right was indicated in a MoI report conducted on those who were critical of Beveridge. Such disapproval ranged from the political right, ‘who think there is too much “Soviet flavour” about it’, Scottish farmers who claimed that ‘this daft socialism will lead to the nationalization of the land,’ and criticism from big business who thought that Beveridge would negatively affect trade and small shareholders;

²⁷⁰ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, pp. 76-7.

whilst from the left, the report referred to “the more extreme elements” who feel that “the plan is a palliative and that what is really wanted is the socialization of industry”.²⁷¹ It is the “extreme” ideological standpoint which the report rather disparagingly refers to that *They Came to a City* ultimately champions as, even though it is not made explicit, it is undoubtedly implied that the city represents a form of ‘socialised industry.’ Furthermore, all the different political attitudes to the Beveridge plan indicated by the MoI report can be seen in the various characters’ reactions to the city.

The report did recognise that there was a majority in support of Beveridge but these people were doubtful that the plan would come to fruition. These doubts were a result of the opinion that, among other reasons, ‘vested interests’ would scupper the programme and these groups included the fundamental components of the capitalist economy such as Insurance Companies and big business, and all of these vested interest groups were politically aligned in peoples’ minds to the Conservative Party.²⁷² Again, this pessimistic outlook towards the prospect of Beveridge being implemented and a more equal and fair society being created is dramatically represented in *They Came to a City*, epitomised by Dinmore’s initial scepticism and

²⁷¹ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, pp. 218-9.

²⁷² Ibid.

emphasised by his suggestion at the end of the film that the struggle would meet opposition from those sections of the community hostile to change.

The film uses its fantasy narrative to dramatically reconstruct the very real social division that was a feature of Britain during the war. Despite enduring myths of a nation united in a common cause, recent historiography has suggested that class conflict, increased crime, and curtailments of civil liberties and freedoms were features of the war period that have only reluctantly been acknowledged. *They Came to a City*'s small group of individuals and their personal experiences and micro-stories act as a representation of the macro-story of a Britain ideologically and socially divided by class antagonism and mutual distrust. As Burton suggests, '*They Came to a City* conforms to the later viewpoint of the revisionist historians who perceive a more divided wartime Britain, wherein self-interest and privilege are not swept aside for the duration and class relations remain antagonistic and unbending'.²⁷³ Angus Calder described the tensions of the immediate impact of the war on the British public which contributed to 'a perturbing phase of anticlimax, during which class divisions in British society were demonstrated and exacerbated as at no time since the 1926 strike'.²⁷⁴ A survey of

²⁷³ Burton, 'Ealing Studio's Wartime "Mild Revolution"', p. 160.

²⁷⁴ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 59.

the number of industrial disputes that occurred during the war period in the war munitions industry highlights the increasing class divisions. According to Calder's figures, the number of strikes increased throughout the war so that 'in 1940 only 941,000 man-days were lost through strikes, as compared with 1,354,000 in 1939. But in 1941 the figure rose again to over a million, and in 1942 the pre-war total was actually exceeded'.²⁷⁵ From these figures Calder drew the conclusion that 'Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain did not destroy the mutual antipathy of workers and management characteristic of large sectors of the industry'.²⁷⁶ Similarly, AJP Taylor claims that 'between mid-1943 and the landing in France on 6 June 1944 there were as many strikes as in the worst period of the first war. The communist shop stewards could not stop them. Prosecutions of so-called Trotskyites by the ministry of labour were equally ineffective'.²⁷⁷ Another indication of the government's suspicion aimed at the left within society is the fact that at the time of the ban on *The Daily Worker*, Ernest Bevin at the Committee on Communist Activities office had even briefly considered 'imprisoning [Communist Party] intellectuals'.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 101

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Taylor, *English History 1914-1945*, p. 566.

²⁷⁸ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p. 88.

Tom Henthorn's analysis of the war years, summarising the contemporary political reality, paints a vivid portrait of division, resentment, reaction and coercion:

In addition to suspending certain freedoms, the government conscripted unmarried working-class women as forced labour, interned 27,000 'enemy aliens', and took thousands of political prisoners. It also devoted considerable resources to the so-called 'home front' in an effort to curtail espionage, sabotage, absenteeism, non-compliance, and sedition. The widespread use of the term 'home front' is very telling; the government was, in a very real sense, at war with its own people, or at least a significant portion of them. [...] The Ministry of Information saturated the nation with patriotic posters, pamphlets, and programs. It also censored news releases, entertainment, letters and telegrams, cancelled programs, and blacklisted performers.²⁷⁹

One of the results of this increasing coercion employed by the government was to polarise opinion within the country and it was not only the working class which sought to change post-war society. Gary McCulloch has pointed out how ideas surrounding the transformation of society spread to certain sections of the middle class who became radicalised during the period, thereby contributing to the creation of a reforming progressive

²⁷⁹ Tom Henthorne, 'Priestley's War: Social Change and the British Novel, 1939-1945', *The Midwest Quarterly*, Winter 2004, Volume 45, Number 2, p. 155.

consensus.²⁸⁰ Politically progressive attitudes naturally seeped into the creative community at Ealing where, according to Burton:

The degree of radicalisation taking place at Ealing was evident in the flirtations of some staff members with the Workers' Film Association. Balcon's seminal articulation of Ealing's wartime ethos - his famous contrast between 'Realism' and 'Tinsel' – was first propounded in an address to a WFA film school at Brighton in 1943'. Basil Dearden lectured to a WFA film school toward the end of the war, the only Ealing film director to do so, demonstrating some sympathy with the radical aims of left political films in Britain.²⁸¹

However it is the associate producer on *They Came to a City*, Sidney Cole, which Burton ultimately credits as 'the most notable leftist at Ealing'.²⁸²

Sidney Cole worked at Ealing in a variety of positions from Basil Dean's stewardship at ATP virtually up to the point of the studio's demise. The last film Cole worked on at Ealing as a producer was *Secret People* which as directed by another prominent left-wing filmmaker, Thorold Dickinson, in 1952. Interestingly, this film has been denounced by some critics, 'attacked on release by left-wing groups [...] and has since been a subject of intermittent controversy'.²⁸³ Nevertheless, the attack on *Secret People* aside, Cole's left-wing credentials are otherwise

²⁸⁰ Gary McCulloch, 'Labour, the Left, and the British General Election of 1945', *The Journal of British Studies* Volume 24, Number 4, October 1985, pp. 465-89.

²⁸¹ Burton, 'Ealing Studio's Wartime "Mild Revolution"', p. 152.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 203.

exemplary. Cole began his career as an editor, an assistant to Dickinson in the early 1930s, and his role varied between producer and editor on a variety of studio films and left-wing documentaries. His political commitment led to his co-founding the Association of Cine-Technicians (later the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph Technicians Union) and he remained active in the union throughout his life, becoming its Vice-President and President. Amongst the films he helped to make for the union were the two Spanish Civil War documentaries, *Behind the Spanish Lines* and *Spanish A.B.C* (both co-directed with Dickinson in 1938), but he also worked on numerous other documentaries often focusing on working-class themes and subjects which continued to complement his commercial film work throughout his career, including *Our Film* (Harold French, 1942) and *One in Five* (Michael Paul, 1972).

Prior to *They Came to a City*, Cole had previously worked as editor on a number of Ealing war films including *Went the Day Well?* and *San Demetrio, London*. In 1944 he was the Supervising Editor on *The Halfway House* before *They Came to a City* saw him make his debut in the position of Associate Producer after Cole had initially suggested the idea to Balcon of turning Priestley's play into a film.²⁸⁴ Confirming his contribution to this

²⁸⁴ Brian McFarlane (ed), 'Sidney Cole', *An Autobiography of British Cinema* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 137.

most radical of Ealing ventures in an interview where Cole described how he and Dearden had worked on Priestley's script making a number of changes, *They Came to a City* became Cole and Dearden's largest collaboration for the studio.²⁸⁵ After working on *They Came to a City*, Sidney Cole would work as Associate Producer on a number of Ealing titles, the most notable being *Dead of Night*. He also contributed a section as director to *Train of Events* alongside Dearden and Charles Crichton in 1949. Later he would work again as Associate Producer on Mackendrick's *The Man in the White Suit*, which - as we shall see in Chapter six- developed *They Came to a City*'s radical critique of capitalism into a satirical direction.

Conclusion

By 1945 Ealing, like much of the rest of the nation, had made its political journey – via the unity of the war years – to stand at the walls of a prospective new city. They had, in Balcon's words, 'voted Labour for the first time.' *They Came to a City* singularly differs from the remainder of Ealing's output by the very nature of its impassioned and emotional appeal for the necessity of a socialist society. As Tony Williams has argued, the film 'remains a unique work in contemporary British cinema' as the remainder of the nation's wartime output, 'usually reinforced or vainly

²⁸⁵ Burton, O'Sullivan and Wells, *Liberal Directions*, p. 263.

struggled against the dominant status quo'.²⁸⁶ In contrast *They Came to a City* declares its staunchly left-wing political viewpoint with vigour. By contrasting the politics of the film with Dearden's *The Halfway House*, Barr summarised the uniqueness of *They Came to a City*'s ideological position perfectly:

The Halfway House is a soft left, or liberal film, tolerant of everyone's problems and failings and confident that rationality and kindness can ultimately gather them all in within the benevolent community, as in due course it does. *They Came to a City* is much harder left, ruthless with those who won't compromise their wealth and position and commit themselves to the socialist dispensation.²⁸⁷

Despite the claim that Priestley's politics advocated a moderate, centre-of-the-road socialism, the society that is envisaged in *They Came to a City* amounts to much more than a social democratic reformism of capitalism. The fact that the film was produced at the moment when the nation was on the brink of electing the first majority Labour government, yet the socialist society has to be depicted as an ethereal 'other' is instructive. The society that is suggested by the city: utopian, egalitarian and democratic remains the ultimate 'dream' of every revolutionary idealist. Despite the criticism levelled at the film that it fails to convince because the audience is not allowed to view the actual mechanics of such a society does not diminish the text's

²⁸⁶ Williams, *Structures of Desire*, p. 88.

²⁸⁷ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, pp. 186-7.

radicalism. *They Came to a City* manages to avoid both didacticism and the risk of becoming too fanciful by locating its meaning in the characters' responses, which are all indicative of the contemporary society in which the film, and play, was produced. Read in this manner, *They Came to a City* ought to be given more recognition as a revolutionary call to arms for the socialist transformation of society, audaciously extending its ideology far beyond a reformist position and recognising the real class divisions that were inherent within contemporary British society.

Even a revolutionary socialist thinker like Karl Marx had very little to say about the precise design of the future socialist society he envisaged, preferring instead to spend time on developing a systematic theory of the historical development of class relations, and developing these relations into a theory and critique of class based society and capitalism. If socialism represents the democratic organisation of society from below, as the society in *They Came to a City* advocates, then any detailed suggestion of the form such a society would take becomes meaningless, as the mass of the people would collectively make such a decision when the time arrives and such a society comes into being. Therefore, if the role of the revolutionary is to convince the masses that such a society is both viable and

necessary for the future development of humanity, then *They Came to a City* confirms this radical ideological position.

Even though Priestley was certainly no revolutionary in the Marxist sense, *They Came to a City*'s socialist polemic forges a link between the radical social-democratic tradition to which Priestley belonged and Marxist ideology, critiquing the capitalist economy and arguing that the society must be radically altered to benefit the mass of the people. The text suggests that ideology is a result of material conditions and a direct response to class relations within capitalist society. *They Came to a City* is among the rarest of films which actively seeks to textually foreground ideology as its major thematic concern. In so doing, Ealing's adaptation of Priestley's play can lay claim to be the most sincere depiction of the need for social change along socialist lines that the British cinema has ever dared to produce and the most radical example of the studio's 'mild revolution.'

4. The Consensus Unravels: *Passport to Pimlico*

Introduction: Themes and Reception

We have traced Ealing's political progression from the radicalism of the 1930s and through the 'socialism' of the war years up to the historical moment of Balcon's self-proclaimed 'mild revolution'. The release of *They Came to a City*, which not only cemented Ealing's support for Labour's New Jerusalem but also represented the apotheosis of the studio's radical intent, mirrored the idealistic fervour which brought into power the first majority Labour government. From here, the films we shall look at increasingly call into question Ealing's rhetoric of consensus and problematise the studio's social democratic impulse.

Passport to Pimlico was the only film directed for the studio by the South African Henry Cornelius. One of the major approaches established by Ealing during the war was the prioritisation of contemporary narratives and *Passport to Pimlico*, set in the immediate post-war period, marks a continuation with this trope. Balcon explained Ealing's strategy at this time, claiming that 'the comedies gave us the opportunity to tell our stories almost exclusively in cinematic and visual terms. They were not, with the exception of *Whisky Galore*, stories taken

either from novels or plays. They started as ideas designed from the outset in screen terms'.²⁸⁸

Passport to Pimlico originated as an idea by Cornelius who, according to the film's publicity material, 'wanted to do a film based on old [territorial] laws which had never been repealed' and developed by scriptwriter T.E.B. Clarke who after 'delving into the whole question of extra-territorial rights, came across case after case of such rights being enjoyed.'²⁸⁹ Clarke's script for *Passport to Pimlico* received critical praise with the *Daily Mail* stating that one of its 'advantages' was that it began as 'an original idea' whilst describing the film as 'an author's picture' where the 'author is the star'.²⁹⁰ One of the subsidiary themes of this thesis has been the question of the authorship of a cinematic text which has sought to prioritise the collaborative process of production at Ealing and to acknowledge the studio as auteur. The previous chapter considered Priestley's contribution to *They Came to a City* and here we shall continue this approach by considering *Passport to Pimlico* as a product of Ealing's ideology and begin to look at Clarke's contribution towards the studio's social and political ethos.

Clarke was a vital component of the team at Ealing, scripting 15 films at the studio in a period of 14 years from 1944

²⁸⁸ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p.159.

²⁸⁹ *Passport to Pimlico Press Book* (London: BFI Library)

²⁹⁰ *Daily Mail*, 29 May 1949.

to 1957 and becoming the writer, according to Barr, who ‘settles Ealing definitively on its new but “natural” course with *Passport to Pimlico* and then *The Blue Lamp*’²⁹¹, two films which re-establish the studio’s postwar engagement with political and social consensus established during the war. Richard Dacre claims Ealing’s wholesome image was largely the result of Clarke’s involvement as the director became

the architect of Ealing’s popular image of cosy whimsicality. Most of Clarke’s comedies [...] depict a Britain of shopkeepers, friendly spivs, jolly coppers, incompetent but honest bureaucrats, kind-hearted squires, contented old-age pensioners and eccentrics. If there are villains, they tend to be hard-nosed businessmen – most other sections of society are ignored or minor irritants. The Clarke structure can be taken as a crystallisation of Ealing’s values and the films of Robert Hamer [...] and Alexander Mackendrick [...] a dark commentary on those values.²⁹²

We will examine how Hamer and Mackendrick challenged Ealing’s consensual norm as represented by the Clarke mainstream in the following chapters. However, despite Dacre’s claim that the scriptwriter was largely the architect of the studio’s cosy whimsicality, the films Clarke scripted can also display an uneasy tension within Ealing’s consensus mentality. For example, it could be argued that the Clarke scripted *The Lavender Hill Mob*’s failed bullion robbery attempt fits into Dacre’s

²⁹¹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 66.

²⁹² Richard Dacre, ‘Traditions of British Comedy’, Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book 1st Edition* (London: British Film Institute, 2009), p. 109.

classification which has become the orthodox critical appraisal of the studio, containing a moral denouement which sees the criminals apprehended, encapsulating Ealing's social didacticism and promotion of British values. However, as Dave Rolinson explains, 'some Ealing films were themselves aware of the limitations of their consensual representations' and their projection of positive British national characteristics:

The Lavender Hill Mob satirises Ealing's 'projection of Britain' by way of its ironic representations of America – through the lurid gangster tales read to Mrs Chalk [Marjorie Fielding] – and France, where traders sell tourists Eiffel Tower paperweights made in England by Pendlebury [Stanley Holloway], who admits 'I perpetuate British cultural depravity'.²⁹³

Rolinson proceeds to argue that *The Lavender Hill Mob*'s moral denouement only becomes 'possible because of the intervention of anti-consumerist consensus' because 'the consensual rhetoric of ideology has led to an internalisation of capitalist modes as natural'.²⁹⁴ Therefore even a 'non radical' text such as *The Lavender Hill Mob* highlights the tension within the studio's consensus ideology, allowing for a much more radical reading than has previously been acknowledged. This thesis has located the process of the internalisation of the dominant ideology in both

²⁹³ Dave Rolinson, "'If They Want Culture, They Pay": Consumerism and Alienation in 1950s Comedies', Ian Mackillop and Neil Sinyard (eds.), *British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) p. 88.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

The Proud Valley and *San Demetrio, London* whilst establishing that the films also display radical features which expose tensions within Ealing's supposed moderate progressive ethos. This argument will be developed when discussing *The Man in the White Suit* in chapter six. Here we shall consider how *Passport to Pimlico* attempts to reinstate the collectivism of the war years and Ealing's promotion of national consensus during the period of postwar reconstruction.

Cornelius explained his inspiration for making *Passport to Pimlico* in an interview he gave to the *Daily Graphic*:

I am a timid man and in making *Passport to Pimlico* I wanted to get a message of hope across to my fellow sufferers whose bones, like mine, turn to water when confronted by authority. If after seeing the film there is bit of extra determination in the way in which they face their boss, landlord or mother-in-law (sic) then *Passport to Pimlico* has not been made in vain. Not that I am waging a campaign against these or any other reputable agents of authority. In fact, I am sure that a great many of the controls and restrictions facing mankind all over the world today are necessary and will ultimately help progress. But I am equally sure that we shall never get anywhere unless we constantly remind ourselves that all these frustrating limitations of freedom are man-made and if "they" put them up "they" can, presumably, also pull them down – and in this country "they" still means us.²⁹⁵

Cornelius' remark aptly summarises Ealing's approach to filmmaking and, in particular, the restrained anti-authoritarianism inherent within most of the studio's comedies. This moderate,

²⁹⁵ *Daily Graphic*, 16 June 1949.

anti-establishment spirit has become the critical orthodoxy when discussing Ealing's themes, encapsulated by Balcon's description of the studio's 'mild revolution'. Balcon described the historical context in which *Passport to Pimlico* was produced in his biography, when he claimed that 'in the immediate post-war years there was yet no mood of cynicism; the bloodless revolution of 1945 had taken place, but I think our first desire was to get rid of as many wartime restrictions as possible and get going. The country was tired of regulations and regimentation, and there was a mild anarchy in the air'.²⁹⁶

Passport to Pimlico was generally well received by contemporary critics. Elspeth Grant described it as containing 'one of the brightest scripts a film has ever had, poking sly but affectionate fun at us, our characteristics and our institutions' before adding 'I congratulate Ealing Studios on the most entertaining British films in years'.²⁹⁷ It is in this period that the depiction of Ealing's gentle lampooning of national institutions, which has subsequently become commonplace in any discussion of the studio, begins to come to the fore, with the *Times Educational Supplement* describing how *Passport to Pimlico* 'sheds a ridiculous light all around – on officialdom, diplomacy, the forces of law, the newsreel and the press, and all the pomp of

²⁹⁶ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 159.

²⁹⁷ *Daily Graphic*, 29 April 1949.

man as member of a civilization'²⁹⁸ and the *Daily Herald* remarking that it 'laughs at Government, at officialdom, bureaucracy, bumbledom'.²⁹⁹

Although the contemporary critical response to *Passport to Pimlico* was positive, several commentators chose to criticise Cornelius' direction. Richard Winnington argued the film's premise to be 'ripe for treatment as a satiric fantasy', but criticised the 'nervousness of Ealing Studios who will make one bold step and then play doubly safe', ultimately claiming the film to be 'directed without the semblance of the visual wit or speed requisite to the handling of fantasy'.³⁰⁰ Similarly, Dilys Powell in the *Sunday Times* wrote that 'had the direction been entirely equal to the script, we might have had a film on the level of René Clair, though without Clair's poetry. The satire [...] often reminds one of Clair. It laughs with and at the English and, by implication, at the brouhaha of international relations'.³⁰¹ Contemporary reviews made numerous comparisons between Clair and *Passport to Pimlico*, although many also tempered these comparisons by suggesting that the film's satire amounted to little more than a restrained caricaturing of Britain's national social characteristics rather than a full-blooded satirical assault. Thus, *The Times*

²⁹⁸ *Times Educational Supplement*, 13 May 1949, *Passport to Pimlico Press Book* (London: BFI Library)

²⁹⁹ *Daily Herald*, 29 April 1949.

³⁰⁰ *News Chronicle*, 20 April 1949.

³⁰¹ *Sunday Times*, 1 May 1949.

suggests that the latter period of the film ‘breaks away [...] from the business of pure comedy to throw out an objective comment and draw an ironic parallel, but with the cut and edge of satire it has no dealings’, declaring that ‘the essence of the film is English good humour’ and ‘the end [...] tacks on a comforting and characteristic moral’.³⁰² Undoubtedly the social didacticism of Ealing honed during the war years was a continuing feature in much of the studio’s postwar output.

These minor criticisms aside, as an example of cinematic comedy, *Passport to Pimlico* was judged an overall success. Most critics generally agreed that the comedy was successfully conveyed and the film won the *Sunday Pictorial* film of the month in April 1949 with the paper declaring the film as ‘essentially filmic’ and ‘first-class light comedy entertainment for “all-brows”’.³⁰³ Even those publications that criticised the final product usually declared the comedy within the film to be largely successful. *The Film User*’s criticism is typical of those that were disappointed in the final analysis yet still saw much to be commended, declaring that the film contained ‘a succession of episodes well garnished with good fun, but as a whole the film is unconvincing’.³⁰⁴

³⁰² *The Times*, 2 August 1949.

³⁰³ *Sunday Pictorial*, 1 May 1949.

³⁰⁴ *The Film User*, Volume 4, Number 5, December 1950, *Passport to Pimlico Press Book*.

Considering the film's canonical position within Ealing's comedy output it is surprising that many of the contemporary reviews that criticised *Passport to Pimlico* compared it unfavourably with Ealing's earlier *Hue and Cry* (Charles Crichton, 1947). In 1949, in addition to *Passport to Pimlico*, Ealing released a total of 5 films, including the three comedies: *Whiskey Galore* (Alexander Mackendrick), *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Robert Hamer) and the less acclaimed *A Run for Your Money* (Charles Frend). This quartet of films resulted in 1949 being regarded as a highpoint in Ealing's comedic output as never again would the studio have such a large concentration of comedies in a single year. As Tim Pulleine suggests:

Four decades after the company's shutdown, Ealing remains, with the possible exception of Rank, the likeliest response in any word-association game to the phrase 'British cinema.' Or more precisely, the response might be Ealing comedy; and while of the nearly 100 films made by Ealing, fewer than thirty are comedies, the fact is, that in the handful of 'essential' Ealing movies, comedies figure strongly.³⁰⁵

The status applied to comedy within Ealing's overall output as highlighted by Pulleine makes an analysis of the genre essential towards an understanding of the studio's socio-political discourse.

³⁰⁵ Tim Pulleine, 'A Song and Dance at the Local: Thoughts on Ealing', Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book 3rd Edition* (London: British Film Institute, 2009), p. 259.

Ealing's Social Comedies and the Comedy Tradition

As has already been noted, the first film made at Ealing which fits into the definition of what we call Ealing comedy was the Clarke scripted *Hue and Cry*. Containing many narrative and thematic similarities to *Passport to Pimlico*, *Hue and Cry* set the tone for the later comedies, containing features that are instantly recognisable as 'Ealingsque'.

Hue and Cry, set in the immediate post-war period with much of its action taking place on a bombsite in London, continues Ealing's preference for contemporary settings and continues the studio's engagement with issues of community and solidarity, cemented during wartime. In fact, of all the comedies made at Ealing during this period, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is the only example that does not feature a contemporary setting. Puleine emphasises the importance and originality of the contemporary milieu of *Hue and Cry* whose 'extensive use of locations, for all that they remain subordinated to a studio-based style, communicates a topicality patently not to be found in prestige literary pictures'.³⁰⁶ Attempting a definition of Ealing's thematic approach after the war and summarising the studio's attitude during the period, Barr wrote that 'the crisis of the war having passed or at least shifted to more distant locations, attention turns to what happens afterwards, specifically to ways of

³⁰⁶Ibid., p. 262.

learning from the experiences of the war, consolidating its social changes, carrying over the discovery of unity and solidarity into the postwar world.³⁰⁷ Therefore, *Passport to Pimlico* continues Ealing's engagement with issues of postwar reconstruction begun with *They Came to a City*, only shifting its generic form onto a comedy terrain.

Hue and Cry, like *Passport to Pimlico*, can be viewed as a type of daydream, or fantasy. Barr described Ealing's comedy as possessing an 'ingrained polarisation of romance and reality' and that the dramas made at the studio attempt to contain this polarisation as 'the comedies [...] can play out not only "daydreams" of timeless, seamless communities [...] but bolder fantasies which Ealing in its realistic convention clamps down upon'.³⁰⁸ The daydream in *Hue and Cry* concerns a group of schoolchildren who fantasise about the crime stories they read in their comic books and subsequently find themselves in a true life adventure caper, eventually thwarting the criminals in the film's denouement. Once the schoolchildren's fantasy has been played out, they return to the social reality of the rationing and bombsites of postwar London. As Pulleine explains, *Hue and Cry* is 'an exercise in fantasy [...] but the fantasy acts for the characters – and arguably for the audience as well – as a safety valve; at the

³⁰⁷ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 50.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

end they return to the quotidian round of school and work in the fantasy-free zone of austerity Britain'.³⁰⁹ In a similar, though more adult context, the daydream of *Passport to Pimlico*, involves an escape from rationing and bureaucracy, and once indulged, just like the schoolchildren of *Hue and Cry*, the neighbourhood of Burgundy returns to the national fold.

The suggestion that Ealing comedy acts as a 'safety valve' for a variety of repressed societal impulses is one notion that emerges regularly throughout the critical evaluation of the studio. This tendency was admitted by Balcon when describing the postwar mood of the country in relation to the oppressive bureaucracy of the period, stated that the comedies acted as

a safety valve for our more anti-social impulses. Who has not wanted to raid a bank (*The Lavender Hill Mob*) as an escape to a life of ease; commit mayhem on a fairly large scale to get rid of tiresome people in the way (*Kind Hearts and Coronets*); make the bureaucrat bite the dust (*Passport to Pimlico* and *Titfield Thunderbolt*).³¹⁰

The interesting thing about all these comedies - with the exception of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* - is that once these dangerous impulses have been enacted, the Ealing propensity to contain these anti-social drives comes to the fore as most of the studio's comedies are defined by a moral and social didacticism

³⁰⁹ Palleine, 'A Song and Dance at the Local', p. 262.

³¹⁰ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 159.

which is a continuation of Ealing's desire to censor any conflict during the war.

John Ellis placed Ealing within the overall comedy paradigm as follows:

Ealing's comedy, the kind of film with which the studio is most popularly identified fits into [the] natural assumption of the language of the real. There seems to be two kinds of comedy: first that which is aware of language and works by deconstructing and recombining it, the comedy of gags, of illogicality and incongruity; and second that which rests on a natural language and instead deals with social disruption. The first is that of a Tashlin or a Chaplin, the second that of Ealing or of a Preston Sturges.³¹¹

The two structural types of comedy described by Ellis become apparent if we trace the origins of British cinema comedy.

Originally British comedy, Ealing's included, drew heavily from the music hall tradition.³¹² According to Richard Dacre:

British cinema has a rich history of comedy which divides into two traditions: films which rely on a writer and films which rely on a star entertainer. Literary comedies prospered in the days of sound [...] But it was paralleled by a music-hall tradition which took its stars from the variety stage, from revue, and later from radio and television. In the silent period the heritage of the British music-hall has been ignored or wasted as raw material for the cinema. Film was used to record sketches but anyone with more ambition was either frustrated in their aims or – like Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel – went to America. It was not

³¹¹ Ellis, 'Made in Ealing', p. 113.

³¹² For an analysis of the Music Hall's influence on British cinema see Andy Medhurst, 'Music Hall and British Cinema', Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1986) pp. 168-88.

until the coming of sound [...] that comedy began to come into its own. Both traditions benefited. Sound meant that writers were encouraged to pen pages of witty repartee as audiences were thought hungry for dialogue. Variety artists were placed under contract and expected to bring humorous characters and situations (and an audience) to their films with a minimum of investment.³¹³

George Formby, Gracie Fields, Will Hay and Tommy Trinder were all music-hall performers who starred in early Ealing films that managed to forge a link between the stage and British screen comedy. The contribution of Will Hay towards Ealing comedy is crucial, as Hay starred in a number of Ealing films during the war and, according to Richard Dacre, ‘always saw himself as a comic character actor, and can be seen as a stepping stone between music-hall comedies and comedies populated by character actors playing comic roles’.³¹⁴ A similar case can be made for Trinder, who successfully managed to recreate his stage comic persona in Ealing war films such as *The Foreman Went to France* and *The Bells Go Down*. However, the key figure that links Ealing with its music hall heritage and made the smoothest transition from stage to screen is undoubtedly Stanley Holloway. In *Passport to Pimlico*, Holloway plays Arthur Pemberton, the shopkeeper who is responsible for unearthing the treasure and the ancient deeds that confirm the borough of Pimlico to actually be a part of Burgundy and therefore not

³¹³ Dacre, ‘Traditions of British Comedy’, p. 107.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

subject to British law. Holloway also played a music hall star in Ealing's *Champagne Charlie* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1944), a film that is set in the late 19th century music halls which acknowledges the importance of the music hall tradition to the studio.

The influence that the music hall exerted on early British comedy cinema begun to wane during the war years, to be replaced by a less physical, more literary form of comedy. As Marcia Landy explains:

The silent cinema's emphasis on the chase, on gags, on bodily movement, on physical traits can be traced back to music hall humour [...] The films of music hall stars such as Gracie Fields and George Formby were tailored to suit their particular personalities and talents. Thus the narratives that were subordinated to their performances have been denigrated as episodic, lacking in the narrative unity and coherence associated with classic cinema.³¹⁵

Ealing's post-war comedies, those which are critically bracketed as "Ealing comedies" rather than those made prior to the war, corroborate the studio's progression from physical humour to a more narrative-based literary comedy. Those comedies made at Ealing after the war which continued this progression relied more on narrative than mere physicality and began to diverge from the single star comedic performer, to involve ensemble casts. According to Dacre:

³¹⁵ Landy, *British Genres*, p. 331.

[A]bout two-thirds of the comedies made during the war were from the slapstick music hall tradition but things altered dramatically with the coming of peace. [...] Ealing were at the centre of this change [...] Ealing comedy brought the literary comedy tradition to the fore, demanding actors with a gift for comedy who could flesh out well-constructed scripts.³¹⁶

Ealing post-war comedies, relying more upon a successful, well produced script, continued the socially didactic approach of the non-comedies made during the war. Ellis described the social approach of the studio as follows:

Ealing comedy rather belongs to the type which deals with the disruption of social reality, something that is often defined as the safe playing-out of ‘base urges’: the enactment of desires that are not socially sanctioned. This applies as much to hatreds and utopian desires as it does to sexuality: comedy is the space in which these motivations can be revealed and played through. This produces a disruption of the surface tranquility of existence, and this disruption is sometimes expressed in the disruption of codes that produces laughter, in unexpected twists and logical incongruities etc. But the basis of this kind of comedy is the way in which it deals with feelings that are not socially sanctioned.³¹⁷

Ellis’ analysis is similar to the one made by Balcon’s describing Ealing’s comedy as acting as the ‘safety-valve for our more anti-social impulses’. We will address the themes of *Passport to Pimlico* and how the text manages to suppress these impulses later in this chapter, however, it is interesting to compare both Ellis’ and Balcon’s analysis of Ealing’s comedy

³¹⁶ Dacre, ‘Traditions of British Comedy’, p. 109.

³¹⁷ Ellis, ‘Made in Ealing’, pp. 114-5.

with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the medieval carnival. Bakhtin's theory which developed the ideas of the Russian formalists to include 'social and ideological features'³¹⁸, is particularly revealing when applied to an analysis of the social function of comedy. His theory of the carnivalesque has been referred to, not only in relation to the comedy genre as a whole, but also to Ealing's brand of comedy in particular:

Carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and spectacles of the middle ages [...] As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from established order, it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges norms, and prohibitions.³¹⁹

The carnivalesque, as described by Bakhtin, finds immediate comparison with a number of Ealing comedies which attempted to 'celebrate temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order.' John White described *Passport to Pimlico*'s narrative as dealing 'with ordinary characters in everyday situations in an amusing way. And following a specific strand of the genre the ordinary and everyday is transformed into the brief liberation of a carnivalesque escape'.³²⁰ Similarly,

³¹⁸ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, (eds.) *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p. 5.

³¹⁹ Mikhael Bakhtin, 'Rabelais and His World', *Literary Theory*, p. 45.

³²⁰ John White, 'Passport to Pimlico', Sarah Barrow and John White (eds.), *Fifty Key British Films* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 69.

Marcia Landy claims that 'Ealing comedies [...] at their best are carnivalesque. They focus on dominant social institutions [...] and turn them on their heads'.³²¹

We can discern examples of Ealing's portrayal of carnivalesque escape within a number of the studio's comedies. The children have what could be regarded as a temporary liberation from the rigours of austerity Britain and the mundanity of school life when they embark on their crime adventure in *Hue and Cry*. Similarly, both the bank heist in *The Lavender Hill Mob* and the murder spree committed by Louis Mazzini (Dennis Price) in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* represent liberation from established moral norms and there is the additional escape from customs regulations which allows the islanders to illicitly enjoy contraband alcohol in *Whiskey Galore*. The fact that most of Ealing's social comedies attempt to ultimately reintegrate the social order after a brief period of disruption matters little, as Ellis acknowledges:

Comedy has to effect some kind of reconciliation between the desires it deals with and the society which these desires are disrupting [...] comedy is progressive in that it reveals the partially repressed areas, the areas of unease, tension, guilt, of potential change, but in the end it has to effect, in the reading preferred by the film-makers, some kind of re-integration. Yet this can be an uneasy confirmation of traditional values even within the preferred reading.³²²

³²¹ Landy, *British Genres*, p. 333.

³²² Ellis, p. 115.

The theory of carnivalesque liberation perhaps goes some way to explaining the fact that Ealing's propensity for moral and social didacticism is less distinct in their comedies than in other genres of films made at the studio. Even though the social equilibrium is restored at the end, most of Ealing's comedies allow for a degree of social disruption to occur. Sue Harper and Vincent Porter are largely correct when they claim that '*The Lavender Hill Mob* entertains the idea of a challenge to order but it is a jeu d'esprit. The challenge is playful and inconsequential. [...] The main purpose of the film is to bring the miscreants round to knowing guilt and experiencing justice'.³²³ However, throughout the film the audience sympathies are constantly with the criminals, as they are with the Scottish islanders in Mackendrick's *Whiskey Galore!* which we shall look at in greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis. Furthermore, in the following chapter we shall consider the amoral decadence of Robert Hamer's Ealing films. Hamer's *Kind Hearts and Coronets* displays Ealing's comedic carnivalesque at its darkest perspective with an ambiguous and open-ended plot conclusion, which shuns the social-didacticism of *The Lavender Hill Mob*'s plot denouement.

³²³ Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 60-1.

The comedy genre's reliance on humour often allows for constant social and moral violations, as Landy points out:

The pleasure of comedy is [...] related to the subversion of the mechanisms of repression. [...] The notion of law is integral to comedy. In its license to expose cultural transgressions, in its emphasis on deviancy and marginality, comedy is involved with fundamental issues of social and antisocial behaviour.³²⁴

Whilst allowing for an acceptance of the perceived whimsicality of Ealing, the comedies made at the studio, in varying degrees, consistently embrace transgressive themes even if this transgression is ultimately contained within most of the films' plot conclusions. Despite the darker elements inherent within Ealing's comedy output, the overriding image of Ealing comedy is one of gentle lampooning rather than caustic satire. However, as Charles Moore suggests, it would be 'wrong to dismiss Ealing films as twee and cosy. They are capable of being fierce and sad but true'.³²⁵

Moore's description of Ealing is illuminating, especially when one considers that, if we exclude *A Run for Your Money*, of the three classic comedies made during 1949 the twee perception of the studio is not immediately apparent. In his comparison of the three films, Barr argues:

³²⁴ Landy, *British Genres*, pp. 334-8.

³²⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 4 March 1989.

What *Passports* two contemporaries, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* and *Whiskey Galore* do is restore what is suppressed. *Kind Hearts* is about sex and class. *Whiskey Galore*, like its characters, is cruel and clever. The curious thing is that although the reputation of these two has endured at least as well, it is *Passport* that has overwhelmingly conditioned the public image of Ealing comedy.³²⁶

Barr then proceeds to argue that ‘if any of the trio is the odd one out then it must be *Passport to Pimlico* with its mellow vision of consensus set against the others’ more ruthless energies’.³²⁷ Moreover, in a similar manner, White refers to the satire employed in *Passport to Pimlico*, suggesting that it

does not employ the biting sarcasm used to attack corruption in Juvenalian satire but instead the relatively gentle laughter at people’s vanity and hypocrisy found in Horatian satire. This is comedy that lampoons over-inflated, self-important individuals and exaggerates perceived weaknesses in society in order to highlight them. There is criticism of social institutions, but these are seen not as corrupt so much as in need of a little reform. [...] Ealing comedies in general involve this gentle social criticism.³²⁸

For Tony Williams, ‘*Passport to Pimlico* represented Ealing Studio’s definitive breakthrough into comedy [...] It was the first studio exploration of national eccentricity that emerged during one of the harshest periods of the postwar Labour government’s “age of austerity” and offered light relief from the

³²⁶ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 110.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³²⁸ White, ‘*Passport to Pimlico*’, p. 69.

drab world of rationing'.³²⁹ Therefore an appraisal of *Passport to Pimlico* is essential in any analysis of the social politics of the studio as the film represents a continuation of Ealing's wartime consensus politics. Furthermore, in order to fully appreciate the level of satire employed in *Passport to Pimlico* and its contemporary commentary on postwar British society, we need to understand the historical context in which it was produced and relate this to the themes of austerity and national consensus with which the film engages.

Daydreams and Reality: Pimlico, Austerity and the Financial Crisis

Passport to Pimlico opens with a caption which states that the film is 'dedicated to the memory of...', followed by a cut to a shot of ration books. Thus, from its very opening, the 1940s audience is instantly made aware that we are in the contemporary milieu of postwar rationing and austerity. White explains that, in order

to understand the comedy we need to be alert to the ways in which this film expresses the nature of the historical moment. Ordinary people wanted change after the sacrifices of the Second World War. They wanted new freedoms and a new society [...]. However, from the end of the war through to the time of *Passport to Pimlico* was released three years later, the public was also

³²⁹ Williams, *Structures of Desire*, p. 163.

being urged to show restraint and being forced to accept increased austerity.³³⁰

Production on *Passport to Pimlico* began in the summer of 1948, a summer that was defined by poor weather, the very opposite of the heatwave depicted in the film. At this moment in the country's political history, the optimism that had greeted the election of the first majority Labour government and seen Clement Atlee become the Prime Minister was already beginning to wane. This is not to denigrate any of the government's vital reforms in the earlier part of their term in office. 1946 had seen the National Health Service Act and two National Insurance Acts which had bolstered Labour's commitment to advancing the welfare state. By 1948 the Bank of England, coal, electricity, gas, and the railways had all been nationalized confirming, to some extent, Labour's commitment to public ownership. However, by the middle period of Labour's term in office, the belief in the political journey towards a New Jerusalem had all but diminished, as Williams suggests, '*Passport to Pimlico* appeared in a period that [...] saw the beginning of the end of the Labour government's utopian aspirations'.³³¹

There are constant references to contemporary Britain's economic, political and social climate in *Passport to Pimlico*,

³³⁰White, '*Passport to Pimlico*', p. 70.

³³¹Williams, *Structures of Desire*, p. 163.

which call into question Vicki Eves' declaration that 'Ealing comedies... were not conceived on a social basis' and that '*Hue and Cry, Passport to Pimlico, Whisky Galore* etc' ... ignore social comment'.³³² Most notably, the moment when Pimlico becomes independent and the borough no longer has to endure the nation's postwar restrictions, placards appear on the street proclaiming that goods are 'Off the Ration' and urging the public to 'Forget that Cripps Feeling', a direct reference to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Cripps, who had replaced Hugh Dalton in the financial crisis of 1947. According to David Rubinstein 'in the long term Labour supporters were promised the socialist commonwealth, but in the short term they faced constant appeals for higher production and harder work, symbolised in the unattractive and unpopular government slogan "work or want" first used early in 1947'.³³³

From 1947 the country was beset by a number of financial crises. The harsh winter of 1947 initiated a fuel crisis with the Annual Register recording:

Coal stocks, already falling, slumped to below the four million tons level, which was regarded as the minimum for national survival. Coal could not be transported by rail or road; collier

³³² Vicki Eves, 'Britain's Social Cinema', *Screen*, Volume 10, Number 6, November- December 1969, p. 58.

³³³ David Rubinstein, 'Socialism and the Labour Party: The Labour Left and Domestic Policy, 1945-1950', David E. Martin, David Rubinstein (eds.), *Ideology and the Labour Movement* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 244.

vessels from Newcastle, bringing coal to power stations in London and the south-east, could not be put to sea. [Emanuel] Shinwell told a stunned House of Commons on 7 February that many power stations had run out of coal, that much of industry would therefore have to close down, and that many domestic consumers would have to do without electricity for large parts of the day... Factories were closed down; villages were cut off; livestock died in thousands; people froze in their homes without even the radio as a solace since that, too, was a victim of the power crisis. Unemployment reached over two million by the start of February.³³⁴

When taken into consideration alongside increased rationing, wage restraint policies and harsh financial austerity measures, it is hardly surprising that ‘hostility to shortages, restrictions and controls led many voters into apathy, cynicism or antagonism towards the Labour Party and its approach to socialism’ and that ‘freedom from austerity and controls was eagerly sought, and symbolised by the Conservative demand to “set the people free”’.³³⁵ As White states, it is the ‘frustration’ at this harsh austerity ‘that *Passport to Pimlico* expresses’³³⁶, as the social, economic and political reality of Britain in 1947 is dramatically conveyed.

The fiscal reality of the period led to Hugh Dalton declaring 1947 as the Labour Government’s ‘*annus horrendus*’, and Cliff and Gluckstein summarising the economic predicament that the government was forced to confront as follows:

³³⁴ Quoted in Cliff and Gluckstein, *The Labour Party: A Marxist History*, pp. 228-9.

³³⁵ Rubinstein, ‘Socialism and the Labour Party’, p. 242-3.

³³⁶ White, ‘*Passport to Pimlico*’, p. 71.

In the first quarter of 1947 Britain's reserves of dollars were heavily depleted as a result of a world-wide shortage of food and raw materials which left the USA as virtually the sole supplier. The 'dollar drain' was associated with very negative terms of trade for Britain. The British fuel crisis of January-February 1947 made things even worse. [...] Since Britain was committed, by the terms of the July 1946 American loan, to allow the pound to be freely convertible into dollars on the foreign exchanges by July 1947, the country faced financial catastrophe. The government was not responsible for the weather. But this natural event uncovered [...] the tendency for rising domestic demand to encourage imports as much as home production [...] The first postwar financial crisis, of August 1947, was the gravest Britain had experienced since August 1931 [...] A new financial policy was put forward, with dire implications for the entire thrust of Labour's reforming strategy [...] The entire direction of government had been dramatically altered.³³⁷

The change in the fiscal direction of the government included public spending cuts, increased taxation and a wage restraint policy³³⁸ and, as Williams argues, it is 'not surprising that these [economic] factors indirectly influence the narrative of *Passport to Pimlico*³³⁹, as the public's desire for a release from the desperate austerity measures implemented by the government to counter the financial crisis is conveyed within the film. One of the most famous lines of dialogue in the film is expressed by

³³⁷ Cliff and Gluckstein, *The Labour Party: A Marxist History*, pp. 229-30.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 229-31.

³³⁹ Tony Williams, 'The Repressed Fantastic in *Passport to Pimlico*', Wheeler, Winston Dixon (ed.) *Re-Viewing British Cinema: Essays and Interviews* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 99. Williams mentions a 'dollar-sterling convertability chart' that 'appears on a wall' in the bank in the film and also points to the film's reference to Montague Norman, an ex-governor of the bank of England, as further evidence of *Passport to Pimlico*'s engagement with the contemporary economic situation.

Connie Pemberton (Betty Warren) when she shouts from an upstairs window to a group discussing their national identity in the street below that 'we always were English and we always will be English and it's because we *are* English that we're sticking up for our right to be Burgundians.' This is a deliberately ironic line and multifaceted in potential meaning. Its importance in the text's engagement with the austerity of the period is perhaps less obvious than its more obvious relevance to the textual discourse of national identity and consensus, which we shall look at later. However, when isolated from themes of national identity, Connie is also expressing a desire, which encapsulates the mood of the rest of the residents of Pimlico, to escape the rigours of postwar austerity and official regulations by ambiguously stating that it is the current economic and social conditions in England that make the Pimlico inhabitants desire to become Burgundians. Connie's line comes at the moment in the film when the British state is threatening Burgundian Pimlico with 'complete isolation' and the reality of the blockade upon their material aspirations is fully beginning to be understood by the residents. Pemberton realises the high stakes involved in the struggle with the British state whom he accuses of playing 'power politics', a confirmation that the dispute between Pimlico and the British government is not merely an abstract argument about the ideology of national

identity, but rather the issue of identity is inextricably connected to the economic conditions experienced by the people living within the borough.

One of the chief characteristics of *Passport to Pimlico* is its ambiguity in relation to its political themes. Central to this ambiguity is the differing outlooks and motivations of the inhabitants of Pimlico, demonstrated most convincingly by the Pemberton family. Shopkeeper and Pimlico councillor, Arthur Pemberton, is an archetypal Ealing petty-bourgeois representation, the embodiment of those who had embarked upon their own 'mild revolution' by voting Labour for the first time. From the very outset of the film, Pemberton appears a wholly selfless individual who proposes to the council that the bomb site ought to be redeveloped into a children's playground and lido. After Pemberton has lost the vote and the council has opted to redevelop the land for business purposes, the chairman remarks to him that 'we've got to face economic facts, Mr Pemberton. This borough is in no position to finance daydreams.' This line of dialogue is illuminating on a number of different thematic and narrative levels. Pemberton's reply states 'that's just plain ridiculous. Do you ever think of anything besides pounds, shillings, pence?', affirming his altruism and social convictions.

In many ways, the argument in the council chambers can be regarded as a direct reflection of the debates surrounding the Labour government's change of direction. Pemberton here appears to be arguing for a social-democratic planned economy which prioritises the community over the financial imperatives of business, whilst the chairman opposes this social viewpoint by arguing first and foremost for the primacy of free enterprise. The council meeting in *Passport to Pimlico* is one example where the text directly reflects the debates held in the political sphere, which went to the heart of the government and threatened to split the left and right of the Labour Party. The debate within the council chamber mirrors the government's change of course which increasingly allowed private capital to dictate policy.

For Sidney Pollard, rather than being the result of pragmatism in relation to the financial reality of 1947, the change of course in the Labour government could be traced directly back to Labour party policies of the 1930s where

Labour's Immediate Programme, introduced by Atlee to the 1937 Party conference, did indeed start out with the brave words that 'the community must command the main levers which control the economic machine. These are finance, Land, Transport, Coal and Power ... No nation can plan its economic life unless it can control both its finances and its financiers.' But the [proposed] nationalisation of the joint-stock banks had been quietly dropped and all that was left was the alignment of the central bank with the practice of other capitalist countries, in the

interests of employment; there was no word of socialist planning beyond mention of the [National Industrial Bank].³⁴⁰

Therefore, it appears that as early as 1937 the Labour leadership were beginning to relinquish any radical policies directed towards any genuine state control of Britain's finances and this has led Paul Addison to ask of the Labour leader:

[H]ow did he cross the bridge from socialist principle to consensus politics? Atlee was subject to the common enough human predicament of being compelled to believe in certain aims, and compelled to behave as though he did not. His ethics compelled him to believe that Britain must become a socialist commonwealth. His upbringing, affection for the parliamentary system, and professional commitment as a politician to represent his party and win the consent of the electorate, forced him steadily down the road to reformed capitalism.³⁴¹

All of the characteristics applied to Atlee by Pollard would appear to reflect those of Ealing's personnel during the period, Balcon included. As Ellis suggested, Ealing's radicalism was tempered by their middle-class upbringing and the studio's affection for Parliament and British institutions led them to seek consensus rather than conflict with *Passport to Pimlico* reflecting the studio's support for the reformed capitalism embodied by the Labour government's policy direction. The fact that Labour was increasingly looking towards a mixed economy with a degree of

³⁴⁰ Sidney Pollard, 'The Nationalisation of the Banks: The Chequered History of a Socialist Proposal', *Ideology and the Labour Movement*, pp. 177-8.

³⁴¹ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, p. 271.

Treasury control combined with a substantial input from the business community is confirmed by Pollard, who wrote:

After the Bank of England was nationalised on 1 March 1946, it became clear very quickly from the public utterances of successive governors that whatever ultimate power the Treasury might have acquired over banking, the City had meanwhile also acquired a firm foothold inside the government [...] The former belief in the need for control over all banks in the interest of direct planning [...] seemed to have evaporated completely.³⁴²

John Saville makes a similar point to Pollard on the moderate approach of the Labour government, describing the party leadership as ‘those who win elections with socialist phrases on their lips ... and then proceed to administer a capitalist society, which they have previously denounced, in as efficient way as possible’.³⁴³ We can trace this dichotomy between the socialist ideology of Labour whilst in opposition and its subsequent adherence to capitalist economics once in government back to the Gramscian theories of ‘transformism’ and ‘passive revolution’ outlined earlier in relation to *The Proud Valley*. The abandonment of revolutionary change and the rejection of Labour’s promotion of a New Jerusalem whilst in power is expressed within the council debate in *Passport to Pimlico* and directly mirrored in the

³⁴² Pollard, ‘The Nationalisation of the Banks: The Chequered History of a Socialist Proposal’, pp. 180-1

³⁴³ John Saville quoted in Pollard, ‘The Nationalisation of the Banks’, p. 185.

opposition between Pemberton's viewpoint and that of the rest of the council.

Although it would be an exaggeration to describe Pemberton as a socialist, his proposal for a playground and his insistence that council policy ought to be directed with more consideration given towards the community rather than a simple adherence to financial imperatives, places him towards the left of the council's ideological divide. Therefore in the film's narrative, Pemberton is linked closely with those sections of the Labour party that advocated a planned economy which placed society's needs above those of narrow business interests. Pemberton's 'mild revolution' in *Passport to Pimlico* is confirmed when this archetypal Ealing representation of the petty-bourgeois appears to reject financial imperatives in favour of social and communal values. Alternatively, the council decision is a reflection of Labour's subsequent abandonment of social democratic principles for a reformed style of capitalism.

Once the council decides to reject Pemberton's suggestion, the Chairman reads out a proposed advertisement to sell off the bombsite. The advertisement relinquishes all democratic control of the area by surrendering any future council control of the proposed site:

For sale: Freehold valuable building land in much sought after position, eminently suitable for business premises or factory site. Heart of busy trading centre, unlimited prospects, full transport facilities to hand. Special appeal to purchaser of vision. No obstruction to future development. Thoroughly safe investment.

Therefore, free-market economics have superseded any ambition towards social planning, just as Labour's 'daydream' of a socialist New Jerusalem had been diluted by the government's accommodation with free-market capitalism.

At this point in the film, the idea of socialist principles is equated with a daydream, emphasised by the film's *mise en scène*. As the council chairman reads out the advertisement, Pemberton is looking out of the window, framed in medium close-up and seemingly distracted from the wording of the proposal as though dreaming of his rejected ambition for the playground. As the advertisement is read out off-screen there is a juxtaposition of shots which alternate between medium close-ups of Pemberton and his point-of-view reaction shots of what he is witnessing below where the local children are rolling a tyre across the bombsite. As the words of the advertisement are read out, finally emphasising the council's decision, the tyre rolls down the bomb crater causing the explosion that sets in motion the rest of the film's events. Thus, on one level, the remaining narrative of *Passport to Pimlico* could be regarded as an extension of

Pemberton's apparent daydream out of the council window, as the narrative turn necessitates a change in Pimlico's fortunes and which will eventually see the implementation of Pemberton's "dream" with the construction of the proposed swimming pool and playground at the film's conclusion.

Pemberton's desire for the council to see the bigger picture, rather than merely addressing short term narrow self interest, is confirmed in the court scene when ownership rights to the treasure and the territorial rights to Burgundy are confirmed. When the court reaches its conclusion, Pemberton remarks that the ruling is 'historical.' His young daughter, Shirley (Barbara Murray), at this point replies 'History my foot, its money.' For Ealing, this represents a dislocation of the ethos of community. Unlike the characters of *Whiskey Galore*, for example, who represent a tight-knit community acting in unison with a unity of purpose, the inhabitants of Pimlico appear a much more divided unit and, as White suggests, 'Burgundian Pimlico is always a fragile alliance of disparate types with their own agendas'.³⁴⁴ The question of whether the cinematic audience is supposed to sympathise with the inhabitants of Pimlico, or regard them as selfish individualists, remains problematic, and in many ways much of the comedy is constructed in the tension created by the various characters motivations and oppositional viewpoints. In

³⁴⁴ White, 'Passport to Pimlico', p. 71.

this way, the film has a much more ambiguous tone than either *Whiskey Galore* or *The Lavender Hill Mob* where audience identification with the nonconformist protagonists appears much easier to locate.

The scene when they are discussing proposals for the bombsite confirms the social fragility and here the text displays an engagement with the socio-political landscape of postwar Britain. When the chairman confirms that financial imperatives are more important than ‘daydreams’, the link between the textual narrative and the ideals of Labour’s New Jerusalem are exposed. If you take into account that the film was made during a period of financial crisis for the government who subsequently adopted to change the country’s economic course, seemingly rejecting the ideals of a socialist commonwealth for financial considerations which necessitated a turn towards a reformed style of capitalism, then at this moment in the film, *Passport to Pimlico* reflects the loss of idealism of the Labour government.

The fact that Pemberton’s ambition is regarded as nothing more than a ‘daydream’ by the council is crucial on a number of narrative and ideological levels. As the Pimlico locals are represented as having different and contrasting agendas according to their own personal ambitions and drives, the film seems to be a continuation of the fragmented society depicted in *They Came to*

a City. This fragmentation depicted in *Passport to Pimlico* is a direct comment on the dislocation of British society which was increasingly becoming less united and more individualistic in nature. This fragmentation could also be detected within the split between left and right in the government benches where, according to Rubenstein:

Socialist planning was at the centre of the demands made in Keep Left, the manifesto signed by fifteen Labour MPs led by Richard Crossman, Michael Foot and Ian Mikardo. Maurice Webb and Barbara Castle were two of the MPs most insistent that the housewife should be protected by delaying or abandoning the 'bonfire of controls' begun by Harold Wilson at the Board of Trade in the autumn of 1948. The bonfire, Webb warned the party conference in 1949, could well become 'the funeral Pyre of social justice.' In the House of Commons during the economic crisis of 1947 a number of MPs demanded that sacrifices be shared equally by all social classes, urging the need for higher taxes on profits, control of dividends and the introduction of a capital levy. They condemned the availability of luxury goods at a time of cuts in the rate of construction of new houses and factories [...]. In February 1948 the publication of a White Paper on incomes and prices enunciating a doctrine of severe wage restraint resulted in a letter to the Prime Minister from sixty Labour MPs calling for a limitation of profits.³⁴⁵

Passport to Pimlico engages consistently with the issue of a left/right split within the government, reflecting upon Harold Wilson's bonfire of controls policy in the scene in the public house where the clientele tear up their ration cards in full view of a police officer who tries to stop them drinking after hours. Moreover, a similar reference to luxury goods is made when

³⁴⁵ Rubenstein, 'Socialism and the Labour Party', p. 227.

official corruption is demonstrated by the admission that officials steal soap from the French embassy, implying that rationing restrictions applicable to the majority of British citizens can be circumvented according to the social status of the individual. Therefore, *Passport to Pimlico*, like *They Came to a City* before it, suggests that, despite the solidarity and consensus of the war years and the coming to power of a Labour government, Britain as a nation was still divided along class hierarchical lines. Moreover, in its depiction of official misconduct, *Passport to Pimlico* again appears remarkably prescient, anticipating the forthcoming scandal of 1948 which led to the Lynskey Tribunal which was set up to investigate alleged corruption and financial irregularities at the Board of Trade.³⁴⁶

Another parallel between *Passport to Pimlico* and *They Came to a City* is that both texts involve a dislocation from their surface narrative realities and both these dislocations appear in the form of a daydream or fantasy. In *They Came to a City*, the utopian society is viewed by the characters after they emerge from the fantasy construct of the eerie and dreamlike fog whereas the narrative turn in *Passport to Pimlico* sees the Pimlico residents become Burgundians and reject the realities of British contemporary society. We have already seen how on one

³⁴⁶ For a summary of the scandal and the findings of the tribunal see John Gross, 'The Lynskey Tribunal', Michael Sissons and Philip French (eds.), *The Age of Austerity 1945-51* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 266-86.

narrative level the events contained within *Passport to Pimlico* could be regarded as an extension of Pemberton's daydream in the council chamber at seeing his hopes of a lido and playground eventually fulfilled. However, there are other elements within the film's structure to suggest the idea of a daydream or fantasy.

In commenting upon the text's narrative structure, Pulleine suggests that *Passport to Pimlico*'s 'construction is artful, with a rapid exposition and a compression in the subsequent action which gives the impression of a hectic series of events being contained within a few days, when in mundane reality they would drag on for months'.³⁴⁷ This temporal narrative illogicality fits perfectly with the idea that the events unfolding before us appear as a dream. However, there is a constant tension in *Passport to Pimlico* between the fantasy of the break from austerity that the daydream represents and the social reality that the film also aims to depict. Despite the numerous critical references to the daydream of *Passport to Pimlico*, the film ultimately must be regarded as a comment on the reality of the economic and social climate of postwar Britain which utilises the fantasy element of the daydream of escape in order to hold a mirror to society to reflect the reality of the postwar austerity Britain.

³⁴⁷ Pulleine, 'A Song and Dance at the Local', p. 263.

The tension between realism and fantasy - or actuality and fiction - is conveyed within *Passport to Pimlico* via a number of narrative and formal strategies. One method adopted is the utilisation of the fictional newsreel which appears during the siege of the borough. The Gaumont British newsreel element plays a clever trick upon the audience by placing the spectator watching *Passport to Pimlico* within the narrative of the film and connecting the actual spectator with the fictional cinema audience. Thus, this section of *Passport to Pimlico* works on two opposing levels, engaging with both reality and fantasy and confirming the textual dislocation between the two inherent within the film.

Ealing studio's masterstroke at the dislocation between fiction and reality involved the inspired inclusion of E.V.H. Emmet who narrated the fictional newsreel voiceover and worked as associate producer on the film. We shall examine the political and social importance of the newsreel sequence later in this chapter but the importance of the inclusion of this sequence within the text towards the film's realism must be stressed. The contemporary cinema audience of *Passport to Pimlico* would have been accustomed to such newsreels, and the fact that Emmett was an actual newsreel commentator during the period could only have augmented the reality effect of this fictional

newsreel device. In addition, the documentary-style shots depicting the real life political figures of Winston Churchill, Clement Atlee and Ernest Bevin add to the film's vérité by including genuine archival film footage to further supplement the film's verisimilitude. A similar usage of newsreel footage occurred in Ealing's *Frieda* where Robert and Frieda visit the cinema only to be confronted with newsreel images of Nazi concentration camps.

Another method adopted within *Passport to Pimlico* to augment the film's textual reality is the utilisation of fictional headlines to drive the impetus of the narrative forward. Ealing had previously adopted a similar technique in *The Proud Valley* during the march to London when newspaper headlines proclaimed the commencement of war but this device is utilised to much greater degree in *Passport to Pimlico* which includes numerous shots of newspaper headlines which help to relate the events as they unfold. The first use of this device occurs quite early in the film, just after the realisation that as Pimlico is now considered a part of Burgundy and therefore British law is no longer applicable to the area. After an extended drinking session at a public house made possible due to the fact that British licensing hours are no longer applicable, a headline reads: 'Pimlico: Police Powerless. "Burgundy" is outside the law.'

The use of headlines reaches its peak in the film just after the newsreel sequence during the intensification of the siege of the area. One headline proclaims, ‘World Sympathy for Crushed Cockneys: Whitehall faces Barrage of criticism’ before the camera pans up from the newspaper to reveal the Houses of Parliament. This shot is followed by a notable sequence which begins in Trafalgar Square, where several headlines follow in quick succession to inform the viewer of the progress of the siege and the commencement of talks. Finally, there is montage of close-up shots of headlines that relate the progress of the talks all of which are cut, documentary-style, with long-shots of the streets and surrounding environment of Pimlico.

The utilisation of the headline montage, combined with the newsreel sequence, could be considered as a conscious decision by the filmmakers to represent an attempt to stitch the reality effect into *Passport to Pimlico*’s fictional narrative, resulting in an undermining of the fantasy elements of the film in order to reinstate Ealing’s preference for a realist aesthetic. Once again this technique borrows from the documentary form and it could be argued that this section of *Passport to Pimlico*, which blurs the distinction between reality and fiction by its utilisation of referential material such as newsreel and fictional representation of newspaper headlines, sees the text adopt a quasi

mock-documentary approach. Similarly, the utilisation of actual politicians and archive material in the newsreel sequence sees this section of the film also adopting a technique that has been used in a variety of mock-documentaries.³⁴⁸

The result of the adoption of quasi documentary styles undermines the fantasy and dreamlike elements of *Passport to Pimlico*'s narrative and reinstates the social-realist elements of the film, allowing for a textual engagement with the socio-political landscape of postwar Britain. The inclusion of several real-life characters within the fictional diegesis further confirms *Passport to Pimlico*'s attempt at verisimilitude as the promotional material for the film points out:

Among the people taking part in the location sequences were the genuine Pearly King and Queen of Battersea, Mr and Mrs Emmers [...] with Mrs Polly Smith, one of the most familiar figures in London's Lambeth Walk, as a stall-keeper, and three of the best-known characters from Petticoat Lane, Jack Brafman, Mrs Overs and Mike Stern, all of whom were seen in *It Always Rains on Sunday*.³⁴⁹

All the realistic elements inherent within *Passport to Pimlico* point towards the conclusion that the fantasy component of the film is merely a construct adopted in order that the text can

³⁴⁸ For a discussion of the mock-documentary see Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001)

³⁴⁹ *Passport to Pimlico Press Book*.

comment upon the social and political realities of the period. Pimlico's "daydream" which temporarily sets residents free from postwar austerity and rationing restrictions represents an escape from the various financial crises of 1947. However, despite Pimlico's brief liberation from State intervention and bureaucracy, Ealing's dispensation towards promoting national consensus meant that ultimately, as in *The Proud Valley* and the wartime films made at the studio, the film must reinstate the principle of national unity.

Threats to the National Consensus

The ideology of *Passport to Pimlico* operates on two seemingly contradictory levels. On the one hand, the film could be considered to be a satirical attack on the increasing levels of bureaucracy wielded by the state in order to implement government reforms and to deal with the financial crisis. However, ultimately the film confirms the necessity of such regulations by reasserting Ealing's social values at the expense of individualism. In order to achieve this, the narrative neutralises a number of threats to the national consensus ideology which was cemented during wartime and was beginning to unravel during the early years of Labour's tenure in office.

Peter Hutchings locates the threat to the community

cohesion in the text as twofold, explaining that

the main location in *Passport to Pimlico* is Miramont Place, which to all intents and purposes functions as an enclosed village-like community within the city, a community in which everyone knows everyone else and where there is an established social hierarchy [...]. In the course of the narrative, that community becomes threatened – by the agencies of the British state and, more worryingly for the filmmakers, by a capitalist materialism unfettered by community control that sees Miramont Place filled with seething crowds of spivs and black marketeers.³⁵⁰

For Barr, Ealing films contrast two opposing views of the crowd

which

can either be herds (bad) or flocks (good). This makes explicit a tension which is always central to Ealing's view of the world. [In *Passport to Pimlico*] The crowd is a herd, aggressive and frightening. They cheat and exploit, and have to be expelled. Contrast the flock of the closing stages, all benevolence, rallying round to sustain gallant little Burgundy by its moral and material support. [...] But the suspicion remains that the first crowd, the herd, represents Ealing's uneasy vision of how in the real postwar world, when you open the window, venture out from behind the protective barriers, people actually behave. That is here it rests, in a polarisation that is alternatively nervous and complacent.³⁵¹

Throughout *Passport to Pimlico*, individualism is

constantly allied to criminality which is regarded as a threat to

community cohesion and solidarity This threat is introduced

³⁵⁰ Peter Hutchings 'Uncanny Landscapes in British Film and Television', *Visual Culture in Britain*, Volume 5, Number 2, 2004, p. 31.

³⁵¹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 106.

immediately after the film's opening credits when we see gambling on a street corner, overlooked by Police Constable Ted Spillar (Philip Stainton). However, at this point in the film the danger appears to be contained, it is only perceived as threatening when the society of Pimlico becomes independent from British state regulations and unbridled, unreformed free market capitalism is seen to challenge social cohesion. Once the inhabitants are released from the regulations of the state and the police, no longer having any jurisdiction are unable to prevent gambling, after hours drinking and entertainment in the public house, and the encroachment of the black market, Pimlico ceases to be a safe environment as community cohesion begins to break down. It is at this moment in the narrative that *Passport to Pimlico's* discourse upon the nature of selfish individualism and materialism is equated with unregulated free-market capitalism. The symbolic act of tearing up identity cards and the rejection of other regulatory practices, mark Pimlico's reversion towards anarchy with rampant black marketeering and lawlessness threatening the entire community. At this point in the film, the business community of Pimlico and the residents are divided over whether the changes in Pimlico are desirable or not.

Barr suggests that within *Passport to Pimlico*:

‘Every man for himself’ is anathema to the community just as we would expect it to be to Ealing. [...] Insofar as the anti-controls, anti-rationing feeling means outright acquisitiveness, every man for himself, Ealing plainly means to present it as threatening [...] An audience which may well have come to the cinema in a mood to dream about Free Enterprise (the dominant Tory slogan in the next election) is pulled up short – and this is less than half-way through the film.³⁵²

Therefore, *Passport to Pimlico* would appear to suggest that for Ealing, unregulated free-market capitalism naturally becomes the spivs paradise that is depicted in the film, described as an ‘annual outing from Dartmoor’ by one of the Pimlico residents. This links the film once more to the idea as mentioned in the preceding chapter on *They Came to a City* which suggested Ealing’s propensity to link the pursuit of finance with criminality, confirming Dave Rolinson’s assertion that ‘the unlawful, and anti-social, pursuit of finance is a key theme of Ealing’s 1950s output, stemming from the construction of a ‘new’ nation in *Passport to Pimlico*’.³⁵³

As the tight-knit community that is introduced at the beginning of the narrative lurches into crisis, Pimlico which, initially at least, represented a microcosm of Britain’s social consensus becomes increasingly representative of an ideologically and materially divided nation. Despite the initial argument that Pemberton loses in relation to the use of the bombsite in the

³⁵² Ibid., p. 102.

³⁵³ Rolinson, “‘If They Want Culture They Pay’”, p. 89.

council offices at the beginning of the film, the scene at least highlights Pimlico as a democratic and politically accountable borough. However, once the area becomes embroiled in the ensuing crisis, this democratic accountability is briefly lost, only to be rescued by the formation of a representative committee at the request of Whitehall later in the narrative.

The division of Pimlico along material and ideological lines mirrors the divisions occurring within the nation as a whole. In the immediate moments in the film following the siege of Burgundy, there is a montage of differing political groups who rally to the cause of 'Hands Off Burgundy' contrasted by opposing viewpoints of 'Burgundy: No Appeasement.' Later, another news headline reads 'Burgundy Issue Splits Britain. Party Members Divided: Tempers Flare at Mass Meetings', highlighting the fact that the issue has divided both public *and* government opinion. It is clearly evident at this point in the film that the previous wartime notions of national solidarity and consensus have been eroded and that Britain is now a politically divided nation. Furthermore, it is the events surrounding Pimlico's dislocation from the national fold that have become the catalyst for the nation's reversal to a pre-war ideologically and socially divided state.

There is a correlation between the political divisions hinted at within *Passport to Pimlico* and the Labour government's battle to contend with the financial reality and its struggle to keep the socialist aspirations of many of its members and supporters allied to its change of political course. Therefore, in order to fully appreciate the contemporary political and social relevance of *Passport to Pimlico*, it must be assessed in relation to the political divisions which went to the very heart of government, combined with the social and economic crises faced by the country during the period in which the film was produced. It is only through such an engagement with the historical context that the thematic complexities of the text can be fully understood.

In addition to the criticism of the government's austerity measures, typified by the Keep Left campaign, another of the key areas of disagreement occurred in Labour's introduction of the NHS which was regarded by the left of the party as an example of the government's backtracking from its original radicalism. The creation of the NHS was beset with difficulties as the government struggled to balance its ambition towards the creation of a free and national service in the teeth of opposition from hostile vested interest groups. According to Cliff and Gluckstein:

In introducing the NHS [Aneurin] Bevan met bitter opposition from the British Medical Association (BMA), the main doctors'

pressure group, which was supported by the Tory Party and their press run rampant. Bevan made a whole series of concessions to them [...] Hospital consultants could retain private beds as well as receiving a salary for cooperating with the state scheme. [...] The Socialist Medical Association and Labour backbenchers were disappointed to find the 1945 manifesto promise of a national, full-time salaried service had been lost through concessions to the BMA.³⁵⁴

Bevan eventually resigned from the Cabinet in April 1951 over the introduction of prescription charges for teeth and spectacles which he regarded as a ‘betrayal of the fundamental principle of a free NHS’.³⁵⁵ The forces of reaction and the threat they pose to national social cohesion and Labour’s reforms is the overriding thematic concern of *Passport to Pimlico*, represented within the narrative by the crowd of spivs and black marketeers drawn to the burgeoning state by its freedom from government restrictions

Tony Williams explains that ‘like the general British public, Ealing studios shared in that brief period of postwar optimism following Labour’s victory in the 1945 general election [...] But beneath the euphoria existed reactionary factors that would emerge both historically and culturally’.³⁵⁶ *Passport to Pimlico*’s depiction of reactionary forces is personified in the pub landlord Garland (Frederick Piper), a character whose representation, according to Williams, seeks to ‘demolish the

³⁵⁴ Cliff and Gluckstein, *The Labour Party*, p. 224.

³⁵⁵ Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51*, p. 417.

³⁵⁶ Williams, ‘The Repressed Fantastic’, p. 98.

utopian aspirations of Labour's mild revolution'.³⁵⁷ Garland is motivated by self-interest and his individualism and materialist outlook represent the antithesis of Ealing studio's progressive, community values. When Bert Fitch (Charles Hawtrey) plays the piano in the after-hours drinking session in the pub, Garland is informed that his playing will 'be worth 20 quid a week' to which the landlord replies that he will put up his wages by a meagre 'dollar'. Garland's greed and opportunism, described by Edie Randall (Hermione Baddeley), as has ability to 'skin a maggot', is evident throughout the film and his lack of interest in the community is emphasised by his reluctance to get involved in the public meeting that is called to discuss the increased levels of criminality in the borough. Garland encapsulates the flourishing self-interest of the un-regulated market forces depicted in the film; the extended after-hours drinking at the pub represents an opportunity to make more money, as does the illicit beer that he is seen buying from the black market. Therefore, Garland becomes a further addition to Ealing's gallery of middle-class discontents whose individualism is seen as threatening the social-democratic order, finally abandoning the community by becoming the only adult member of the borough to voluntarily agree to join the children evacuees when the siege begins to bite.

³⁵⁷ Williams, *Structures of Desire*, p. 102.

The community of Burgundian Pimlico, threatened by the encirclement of unfettered market forces and unchecked criminality, embodies the threat to the wartime consensus created by social and political division. However, *Passport to Pimlico*, unlike *They Came to a City*, does not explicitly attempt to position class hierarchy as an explanation for this division. As Ellis explained:

Ealing's comedy was new in that it dealt with the utopian desires of the lower middle class rather than its resentments. Certainly, resentment played a part in the working of the comedy [...] but it was not its main emphasis. Rather this style dealt with the consequences of that resentment when it was played through; these consequences were the release of subterranean values. These values and their playing out in a specific area in a limited amount of time, constitute the 'fantasy', the affectionate 'whimsicality' often noted in the Ealing comedies. They are values which are felt to be lacking in lower-middle-class life, either denied or under historical pressure. The expression of these fringe values, the ideals of community which tend to be denied by the facts of a competitive, status-conscious middle-class life, produced the more progressive comedies. Hence in *Passport to Pimlico*, resentment about rationing produces an expression of the utopian desires for a self-regulating, independent community.³⁵⁸

The lower-middle-class populace of Pimlico represent the section of the country that had been radicalised during the war years and had responded by voting Labour for the first time in 1945. Pimlico's rebellion, therefore, is Ealing's response to the

³⁵⁸ Ellis, 'Made in Ealing', p. 116.

considerable decrease in middle-class support for the government, highlighted by Rubinstein:

A crucial section of the Labour vote in 1945 had come from the middle class. One opinion poll suggested that the proportion of the middle class who voted Labour declined by about a quarter between 1945 and 1950, and small shifts of opinion were of great importance in the 1950 election [...] It seems probable that middle-class resentment of their apparently lower standard of living outweighed any element of working-class rallying to Labour in 1950, especially as younger working-class people tended to take full employment and the welfare state for granted [...] For resentment of controls, austerity and taxation, while voiced especially strongly by middle-class voters, was by no means restricted to them. Even more disliked by the working class, despite relatively high post-war wages, were inadequate housing, a monotonous diet and a rising cost of living.³⁵⁹

There are rare examples where class division is hinted at within *Passport to Pimlico* and these incidents mostly occur during the siege segments of the film's narrative. It is the lower-class evacuated children of Pimlico who initially break the siege by throwing food over the barricades and moments later a group of working-class adults steal from the pockets of businessmen who are refusing to help the besieged borough. These isolated incidents hint at an engagement with issues of class solidarity that emerged at Ealing and found its most radical expression in *The Proud Valley*. However, like both *The Proud Valley* and *San Demetrio, London*, the text continually prioritises the national

³⁵⁹ Rubinstein, 'Socialism and the Labour Party', p. 244.

question at the expense of any thorough engagement with the issue of class hierarchical division. Therefore, *Passport to Pimlico* represents a continuation of the wartime dominant ideology which became British cinema's objective to present a united nation which comes together once threatened.

For Ealing, the issue of national identity is continually fused with the notion of community and marks a continuation of both Ealing's and British Cinema's wartime ideological intent. This attempted fusion of national and community values is apparent in much of the British cinema from the second World War and beyond with Andrew Higson locating this discourse in a number of British wartime cinema texts, especially *Millions Like Us* and *This Happy Breed* which he linked to the 'earlier story documentaries [where] the nation is represented metaphorically as a small, self-contained, tight-knit community, a unity-in-diversity, but one which is structured like a family'.³⁶⁰

Passport to Pimlico's political discourse remains rooted within this ideology of national consensus and unity that Ealing vigorously sought to promote during the war. However, once the dislocation between the community of Pimlico and the national community occurs in the narrative the borough is regarded as an alien 'other' and Pimlico's predicament throughout the film is

³⁶⁰ Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 179.

related to issues of ‘foreignness’. In the court scene when Pimlico is officially declared a borough of Burgundy, PC Spiller casually remarks, ‘blimey I’m a foreigner’, a line of dialogue which is contrasted by a cut to a shot of the seat of British power - the Home Office at Whitehall. Similarly, a bus conductor states the bus destination as ‘Miramount Place’ before referring to the passengers as ‘aliens’ and, later, as Pimlico’s dispute with the state intensifies, Pemberton says ‘if that’s the way Whitehall wants it in future we’ll *be* foreigners.’ Moreover, once the community rejects British authority what is essentially a domestic issue becomes a quasi-foreign diplomatic incident which takes on the nature of international politics. Initially roadblocks are set up by the British state on the borders of Burgundian Pimlico and ad-hoc immigration laws are enacted as residents realise that they cannot leave or enter the area without suitable documentation. The Burgundians decide to retaliate, following the British methods by demanding a British passport in order for citizens of the Crown to be allowed into Pimlico, checking goods and cash that are crossing the internal “border” as a radio news report declares that there is ‘concern in Whitehall’ at the developments coupled with concern from the British public of the ‘abuse of their native soil.’

The notion of national difference, conveyed through comedic devices, is most notable within the newsreel sequence where the commentator's voiceover states that in order to overcome the severe rationing in Pimlico, brought about by the intensification of the nation's siege of the borough, 'communal eating has been organised.' The newsreel claims that this venture has been a 'great success as continental food is much more tasty', a statement which is followed by shots of Pemberton and Connie turning their noses up at the foreign food, contradicting the commentator's view.

The communal eating venture has been set up by the Duke of Burgundy, Sebastiane de Chavalier (Paul Dupuis). The Duke's role in the film is vital in relation to the text's depiction of the exotic 'otherness' of the foreign. Initially, the Duke begins a romance with Shirley Pemberton, which at the outset would appear to confirm the stereotype of the overt sexual nature of the foreign. However, the Duke's tentative romance with Shirley is thwarted on every occasion as the film ultimately refuses to sexually stereotype the Frenchman, as Williams points out:

The Duke of Burgundy presents no foreign sexual threat to the community [...] he is no virile presence. In Ealing films, the Frenchman is either represented as a comic character [...] or as a figure of tedious normality. His nighttime attempts to romance Shirley are respectively defeated by Ealing's "comic" defensive

strategies of disruptive cat, gargling man, and Pemberton's call interrupting their kiss.³⁶¹

The narrative's negation of the couple's romantic aspirations confirms Ealing's postwar continuation of British cinema's wartime enterprise of containing the threat that overt sexuality may have posed to national unity and social cohesion. As Williams suggests, 'Ealing films impose ideologically induced repressive closures on forces they see as dangerous to British society. These forces involve different forms of desire'.³⁶² The sexual threat is symbolically represented within *Passport to Pimlico*'s narrative by the decidedly un-British heatwave depicted throughout the film. Immediately after the opening credits we are presented with the establishing shots of Pimlico enjoying the sultry weather and this is immediately equated as being 'foreign' and once the borough reverts to British control at the end of the film the typically British weather returns.

The encroaching cosmopolitanism of the period is first introduced early in the film when Mollie Reid (Jane Hylton), desperate to attract Frank Huggins (John Slater) discusses her new modern look with the fishmonger. Mollie is described in the shooting script as 'a would-be glamorous girl' who 'has seen too

³⁶¹ Williams, 'The Repressed Fantastic', p. 104.

³⁶² Williams, *Structures of Desire*, p. 154.

many films'³⁶³, confirming Ealing's mistrust of the modern glamour of Hollywood cinema. Pointing out her fashionably made up face, Mollie informs Huggins that 'it's the shiny look' and asks him whether he likes it to which Frank replies 'not much. No wonder we're short of fat.' Moments later Mollie and Edie Randall discuss the problem of finding attractive new clothes under rationing and attempt to illicitly circumvent the restrictions. This is an issue that is temporarily solved when the black market comes to Pimlico bringing with it an abundance of luxury goods previously in short supply, including silk nylon stockings. As Williams points out:

In this era, nylons had a sexual attractiveness, due to their general unavailability for postwar females. Postwar 'nice girls' simply accepted rationing restrictions for the common good. They certainly would not wear silk nylons. [...] The later introduction of the Parisian 'New Look' was condemned in some quarters as involving an overindulgent use of dress fabric.³⁶⁴

Modernity, sexuality and consumerism, typified by the 'New Look' that emerged in Paris with Christian Dior's newly established fashion house in 1947, were increasingly seen as being out of touch with the austere realities of postwar Britain. When Mollie attempts to entice Frank with her alluring 'shiny look' she is remarking upon the emerging consumer and fashion

³⁶³ *Passport to Pimlico 2nd Shooting Script* 13935 (London: BFI Library)

³⁶⁴ Williams, 'The Repressed Fantastic', p. 102.

culture and the desire to escape the drab reality of postwar society as the film links both sexuality and modernity with the shortage of rations which are equated within the film's overall comedic strategy as threatening to the community cohesion.³⁶⁵

Ealing's reluctance to engage with the subject of sexuality is well documented, admitted by Balcon when he confessed that the studio was 'not terribly good at films dealing with sex'.³⁶⁶ Balcon's strait-laced morality has been consistently noted as contributing to Ealing's 'cosy' image with Ealing's chief declaring that 'none of us [at Ealing] would ever suggest any subject, whatever its box-office potential, if it were socially objectionable or doubtful'.³⁶⁷ Similarly, in his biography, Balcon expressed a dislike of certain films that 'shelter behind the argument that films must reflect the society in which we live' as this 'provides a hypocritical justification for sensationalism, squalor and licence – usually sexual'.³⁶⁸

Passport to Pimlico contains one revealing shot in relation to the studio's moral attitude towards cinematic sensationalism when a Foreign Office official is packing a case for a meeting and he throws a copy of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* into a suitcase.

³⁶⁵ For a discussion on the subject of the postwar Parisian New Look and its implications for austerity Britain see Pearson Phillips, 'The New Look', *Age of Austerity*, pp. 132-54.

³⁶⁶ *Omnibus: Made at Ealing- The Story of Ealing Studios* (BBC2, 2 May 1986)

³⁶⁷ Quoted in Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 58.

³⁶⁸ Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents*, p. 138.

James Hadley Chase's crime novel was made for the cinema in 1948, directed by St John L. Clowes, and the film was greeted with such outrage that it is difficult not to conclude that this seemingly inconsequential shot is Ealing's ironic, self-reflective comment on the studio's wholesome ethos.³⁶⁹ Ealing's prudish attitude to sexuality was described by Bryan Forbes who once remarked that 'sex was buried with full military honours at Ealing',³⁷⁰ and famously commented upon by Kenneth Tynan in 1955 who stated that:

Balcon never made a film which paid any real attention to sex. His favourite productions – *The Captive Heart*, *Scott of the Antarctic*, *The Cruel Sea* – deal exclusively with men at work, men engrossed in a crisis, men who communicate with their women mainly by post-card. A wry smile, a pat on the head, and off into the unknown: such is Ealing's approximation to sexual contact.³⁷¹

On the rare occasions when the issue of sexuality does make an appearance in Ealing films, it is often suppressed or, as we shall see in the following chapters in the case of *The Blue Lamp*, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* or *It Always Rains on Sunday*, equated with criminality and therefore regarded as threatening. Within

³⁶⁹ For an analysis of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*'s reception see Brian McFarlane, 'Outrage: *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*', Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy (eds.), *British Crime Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 37-50.

³⁷⁰ Quoted in Ellis, 'Made in Ealing', p. 123.

³⁷¹ Quoted in Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 77.

Passport to Pimlico, themes of sexuality and modernity are subtly linked with wealth as society's newly emergent materialism and the consumer society represent a further threat to the one-nation consensus promoted by Ealing.

Passport to Pimlico presents the combined threats of modernity, with its consumerist and sexual undertones, and socially-divisive individualism, all of which endangers the wartime ethos of solidarity and national cohesion. It would appear that in the immediate postwar period, for Ealing, the one-nation consensus, like the borough of Pimlico itself, lay under siege. As Pulleine explains, *Passport to Pimlico* 'turns, in a fashion that its surface speed serves partly to obscure, on a kind of double bluff: a supposed celebration of the jettisoning of wartime restrictions becomes a nostalgic evocation of the wartime spirit of solidarity'.³⁷² The issue for Ealing at this precise moment in the nation's history is how to circumvent the varied threats to postwar society in order to reaffirm the wartime ideology of national solidarity and cohesion during peacetime.

Re-establishing the National Consensus.

Passport to Pimlico concludes with the borough of Pimlico returned to the national fold and to celebrate the favourable end to the crisis, Pimlico has organised a street party. Although the

³⁷² Pulleine, 'A Song and Dance at the Local', p. 263.

celebration is rather austere, with rationing and restrictions once again a reality for the borough, these are no longer seen as negative features, as the film's dialogue makes clear when Spiller points to the ration books and states, 'I never thought anybody would be pleased to see these things again' and with Connie replying that 'you never know when you're well off 'till you aren't.'

Passport to Pimlico's denouement represents a general confirmation of Ealing Studio's endorsement of the Labour government's postwar policies regarding rationing, as Barr contends:

The prime 'fantasy' of the film [...] is not –whatever publicity might suggest- the dream of release from rationing and restrictions. That impulse in the film is ambivalent and half-hearted, indulged even to the extent that it is only in order to be reversed: to see self-fulfilment coming in that way is a delusion. The more potent dream that takes over from it is of a return to wartime solidarity, which means an intensification of rationing and restrictions: in the course of the film these become truly romanticised.³⁷³

Whether the desire to return to the wartime ethos of solidarity and togetherness represents what Barr terms as Ealing's support for the 'intensification of rationing and restrictions' is open to question, however, Barr is correct to discern nostalgia for the return to the solidarity of the war years within *Passport to*

³⁷³ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 104.

Pimlico. The film offers a critique of the postwar political and social environment which ultimately counters free-market ideologies in favour of a social democratic need for a planned economy that requires a *degree* of state control and which would necessitate a continuation of the rationing programme.

According to Graham Goodlad, rationing ‘was viewed as generally fair in its impact by working-class people, even though it became increasingly irksome to sections of the middle class, who felt that the government was unnecessarily prolonging the era of postwar austerity’.³⁷⁴ Therefore, with its support for rationing control, *Passport to Pimlico* is seemingly sympathising with the working-class section of its audience who were generally in agreement with the government’s rationing policy. Once again Ealing’s implication suggests a confirmation for a social-democratic political perspective which seemingly counters the studio’s usual engagement with a middle-class ethos. Furthermore, there could clearly be a case made that in rejecting the arguments for an end to rationing, Ealing’s social-democratic outlook contains a genuine radical element, which harks back to the “war-socialism” of the war years which was highlighted in *San Demetrio, London*. Again, there are ideological parallels

³⁷⁴ Graham Goodlad, ‘Atlee’s Economy’, *Twentieth Century History Review*, Volume 7, Number 2, November 2011, p. 23.

between Ealing's fictional engagement with the issue and the documentary movement, especially the films of Paul Rotha.

According to Roy Armes, Rotha's

World of Plenty, made for the Ministry of Information, is the clearest reflection of the positive, forward-looking socialism of the war years. It looks squarely at the folly of the prewar situation, when food was destroyed while millions were underfed, and explains how things are now being put right by international cooperation. [...] The State's role is seen as crucial in establishing a policy for food production and an equitable system of distribution (through rationing and the provision of special foods for children and expectant mothers, etc).³⁷⁵

Thus, *Passport to Pimlico*, through both its plot denouement which shows cooperation replacing conflict, and its confirmation of the need for a rationing policy, confirms Ealing's support for the new radicalism that was instigated during the depression and galvanised during the war years.

The apparent yearning for the solidarity and togetherness of the war years intensifies with *Passport to Pimlico*'s plot progression. As the borough comes increasingly under pressure to concede to the British state and the siege begins to take its toll on the morale of the community, Burgundian Pimlico essentially becomes a direct re-enactment of the conditions and united spirit of wartime Britain. This is epitomised by Shirley's support for her father's stand against the British state bureaucrats, encapsulated

³⁷⁵ Armes, *A Critical History of the British Cinema*, p. 151.

in her Churchillian remark that ‘we’ll fight them in the tram lines, we’ll fight them in the local.’ Similar lines of dialogue can be located throughout the text, all of which serve to maintain *Passport to Pimlico*’s retrospective engagement with the war. Most notable are Connie Pemberton’s remarks to government officials that, ‘If the Nazi’s couldn’t drive me out of my house with all their bombs and rockets and doodlebugs, you don’t catch me packing up now,’ and ‘you can’t push English people around like sacks of potatoes’ which reaffirm Ealing’s ambition in *Passport to Pimlico* to revisit the mentality of wartime Britain.

If films like *San Demetrio, London*, whilst ostensibly dealing with events occurring during the war, manage to also debate the future postwar political environment and engage with the changes required once victory was ensured, then *Passport to Pimlico* reinforces Ealing’s wartime approach by suggesting that, with Britain having overcome the Nazi threat, the lessons learned during the conflict must be utilised if society is going to progress. Therefore, *Passport to Pimlico* is making the claim that certain wartime conditions and attitudes must prevail in the postwar climate, as White argues:

In *Passport to Pimlico* there is a nostalgia for the war years. Evidence of the war can still be seen but is beginning to disappear [...] Wartime films are recalled in the community singing that takes place after the ration books have been torn up,

reflecting a longing for the (supposed?) sense of community found during that period. When it opened the film offered audiences the opportunity to re-live wartime experiences of solidarity and celebrate that key supposed aspect of 'Britishness', bulldog determination.³⁷⁶

The blockade sequences in *Passport to Pimlico* offer the most obvious correlations with wartime conditions, with the chronic shortages of provisions resulting in the children of the borough being evacuated, directly mirroring the evacuation of children which occurred throughout the country. Similarly during the siege, Pimlico becomes a nation that is, under all intents and purposes, under attack from an outside and threatening force. As has been suggested, the text at this point makes constant references to Nazism by equating the nature of the threat to Pimlico's independence by the British state to the previous Nazi threat to the nation. By evoking the 'we're all in it together' attitude of wartime Britain, *Passport to Pimlico*, achieves its aim to invoke the wartime national consensus and re-engages with the wartime propagandist myths of national solidarity and shared sense of purpose which were vital to Britain's war effort.

The scene where the rest of the London population help to break the siege by throwing food parcels over Pimlico's barricades becomes an example of where the text is seen to be

³⁷⁶ White, '*Passport to Pimlico*', p. 71.

‘directly evoking the celebrated “Dunkirk spirit”’.³⁷⁷ Moreover, certain other scenes within the film relate back to wartime conditions, either directly or through the film’s comedic intent. For instance, the newsreel sequence declares that ‘wherever our sympathies may lie in this cold war in a heatwave. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the case, one cannot but say: plucky little Burgundy,’ a sentiment that further evokes the ‘Dunkirk spirit’ of the war years. Similarly, during the air lift sequences we see pigs and tin hats being parachuted into Pimlico and the aeroplane writing ‘stick it out’ across the sky and even the raid across the barricades to turn on the water hydrant contains a militaristic undertone.

The longing for the supposed national political unity of the war years is also demonstrated in *Passport to Pimlico*’s newsreel section which begins by describing ‘Burgundy’s self-imposed iron curtain’ before proceeding to fictionally re-enact Britain’s wartime political consensus. ‘For the first time since World War Two,’ the newsreader’s voiceover states ‘Britain’s party politics have been forgotten. The nation’s leaders have come together to seek a solution to the unprecedented crisis.’ This commentary is accompanied with aforementioned images that hark back to the party political consensual approach of the war

³⁷⁷ Mark Duguid, *Passport to Pimlico*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/441383> [date accessed 20 July 2011]

cabinet, as we see shots of Atlee, Churchill and Bevin arriving at the Houses of Parliament.

Comparing the ideological rationale of *They Came to a City* with that of *Passport to Pimlico*, Barr concludes that ‘Priestley tested out the idea of basing a community on a “wartime spirit” of solidarity by using an overt theatrical contrivance. *Passport* does something similar, within its more realistic conventions’.³⁷⁸ However, whereas *They Came to a City* problematised the issue of community solidarity by presenting the various characters’ differing responses to the socialist city, *Passport to Pimlico* ultimately seeks to naturalise notions of national unity and consensus. However, the issue here at this precise moment in the nation’s history, is whether the ideology of consensus is a continuing possibility, given the fact that austerity was gripping the country and, without a common ‘foreign’ enemy to unite against, suppressed class, material and political differences were once again coming to the fore.

At the centre of *Passport to Pimlico*’s ideological engagement, there remains the contested question of whether a return to wartime conditions is indeed possible during peacetime. For all its progressive intent, by engaging in wartime nostalgia the text cannot help but appear to retreat into a form of political and social reaction, leading Hutchings to suggest that the film’s

³⁷⁸ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 81.

‘emphasis on community has become defensive and regressive, a way of holding onto the past rather than engaging with the future’.³⁷⁹ However, *Passport to Pimlico*’s attack upon modernity and its nostalgic yearning for the wartime spirit of national unity, contains an inherent tension which, to some extent, remains unresolved at the film’s conclusion. As White asks of the film:

The question is whether [...] the film ultimately aims to bring about change or convince people of the necessity of continuing to conform. Although the film focuses upon acts of rebellion, in the end it praises restraint and affirms the importance of law and order. [...] The war produced a need for cohesive images of British national identity based upon unity and togetherness, but once the threat was removed film-makers were able to take part in redefining the image of Britain and ‘Britishness’ for the post-war era. Should they re-assert traditional (pre-war) values or champion a new radicalism?³⁸⁰

The contradiction between the traditional and radical aspects of national identity goes to the very core of Ealing’s political ethos. Furthermore, the same tension can be found within the political and social landscape of the period. Williams argues that ‘the postwar Labour governments retreat from its initial optimistic promise was no isolated incident. Rather, it heralded a continuing feature within British society: a lack of nerve, that is, failure to advance into new horizons from the dead hand of the

³⁷⁹ Hutchins, ‘Uncanny Landscapes’, p. 31.

³⁸⁰ White, ‘*Passport to Pimlico*’, p. 71.

past, a retreat into escapist nostalgia or brutal reaction'.³⁸¹ Ealing studios' ambition of 'projecting Britain and the British character' has often been misinterpreted as retreating into a nostalgic evocation of the past but this would appear to be an oversimplification. *Passport to Pimlico* confirms Ealing's political position on the fringes of social democracy as advocated by the Labour Party and the policies of the 1945 Labour Government. There is an inherent tension within this perspective, however, as the film ideologically reflects the government's rejection of the socialist New Jerusalem in favour of a 'synthesis of class and nation' where 'capitalism would not be overthrown, but made more efficient and more humane by laying the basis of a mixed economy and welfare state'.³⁸² This is essentially the ideology expressed in *Passport to Pimlico* and the basis of Ealing's 'mild revolution.' However, attempting to impose a homogeneous model of national identity is problematic, especially if such a model relies on wartime mythologies of consensus. As Kenneth O. Morgan explains:

The decades that followed the Second World War produced, and continued to produce, a wide array of diagnoses of the course of modern British history [...] The most fashionable interpretation was that of 'consensus', a somewhat ambiguous and deceptive concept,

³⁸¹ Williams, 'The Repressed Fantastic', p. 95.

³⁸² Cliff and Gluckstein, *The Labour Party*, p. 222.

which broadly saw the war as enshrining welfare democracy as the dominant national creed.³⁸³

The major contention thematically debated within *Passport to Pimlico* concerns the problematic issue of national identity. Within the text, Ealing's vision is apparently Janus-faced, on the one hand looking to the past wartime ideology of national consensus whilst simultaneously looking forward and expressing itself as supporting radical reform. Andrew Higson argues that

Confronted with the new mass public with its potentially diverse, multiple, and contradictory interests, any attempt to impose a concept of the general interest, or the public interest, or the national interest, is necessarily the site of struggle: all social interests manifestly do not have an equal voice, consensus must be negotiated or acquiescence imposed.³⁸⁴

In *Passport to Pimlico*, Ealing sought to negotiate what Higson terms as the 'site of struggle' by advocating the national interest as a progressive, rather than a reactionary concept. However, one should not overlook aspects of the text which do contain what a left-of-centre reading would maintain as traditionally regressive elements. For instance, once Burgundian Pimlico adopts its independent status and despite its rejection of

³⁸³ Kenneth, O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History 1945-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 51.

³⁸⁴ Higson, *Waving the Flag*, pp. 184-5.

aspects of British state regulations, it still adopts a form of monarchy in the shape of the Duke of Burgundy and, as Williams argues, ‘despite its temporary independent status, Burgundy is always a little England mobilizing its energies to maintain repressive identities and repulse any invaders’.³⁸⁵ Similarly, Mark Duguid states, ‘for all their dogged resistance, the Burgundians never lose sight of their true national identity as the film’s most memorable line wittily makes clear: “We always were English and we always will be English, and it’s just because we are English that we’re sticking up for our right to be Burgundian”’.³⁸⁶

John White cogently summarises the ideological site of struggle between the progressive and regressive elements in *Passport to Pimlico* as follows:

Ultimately *Passport to Pimlico* aims to reinforce what it sees as positive images within the back catalogue of shared concepts of Britishness. The difficulty is that it wants all the time to hark back to the past. [...] The film attempts to reinforce aspects of the imagined national community existing within the individual (and collective?) imagination. It attempts to shore up that shared stock of images, ideas, norms and values, stories and traditions the film makers see as being the essence of Britishness. National identity affects the way we see ourselves and the way we perceive others who are classified as existing outside of the chosen ‘in-group’. But the nature of that identity is a site of struggle, so that the identity is constantly undergoing a process of either re-affirmation or re-definition. Put simply, national identity does not exist in some singular, uncontested form. *Passport to Pimlico* works within this arena, expressing disapproval of certain aspects of the perceived state of the

³⁸⁵ Williams, *Structures of Desire*, p. 164.

³⁸⁶ Duguid, *Passport to Pimlico*.

nation and positive approval of other potential facets of a contested, shifting national identity. With the end of the war [...] the nature of social order in Britain is being particularly strongly fought over (or renegotiated). This film reflects the accompanying turmoil and uncertainty as hegemony is being contested.³⁸⁷

As the major argument of this thesis has been to acknowledge the radical aspects of Ealing's political ideology, it must be stressed here that an over-emphasis upon the negative undercurrents within *Passport to Pimlico*'s engagement with the shifting terrain of national consciousness risks neglecting Ealing's social democratic radical perspective. The ending of the film, refuses to represent a closing-off of the studio's radical engagement with contemporary British society. *Passport to Pimlico* represents Ealing's critique of both the negative and positive aspects of national identity, seeking to confirm what it sees as the positive aspects of this identity whilst simultaneously advocating the need for social change and renewal. What at the outset appears to be an attack upon the regimentation of postwar society eventually confirms the need for a planned economy that benefits the entire community. For all of its perceived criticism of modernity and its attack upon bureaucracy and government regulation which appear to, initially at least, suggest a regressive conservatism, *Passport to*

³⁸⁷ White, 'Passport to Pimlico', pp. 72-3.

Pimlico ultimately expresses Ealing's confirmation of a reformist social-democracy, broadly reinforcing the studio's support for the policies of the Labour government. Aldgate and Richards precisely positioning the studio's political discourse within the framework of the capitalist hegemony arguing that:

The Ealing comedies [...] were produced against a background first of post-war change and later of post-change complacency [...] Given the admitted Labour allegiances of the Ealing film-makers, it is arguable that the early Ealing films (1947-51) constitute a programmatic attack on the evils that labour wished to eradicate: entrenched aristocratic privilege (*Kind Hearts and Coronets*), the power of money (*The Lavender Hill Mob*), monopoly capitalism (*The Man in the White Suit*) and colonialism (*Whisky Galore*). *Passport to Pimlico* [...] is perhaps the arch-Labour film pointing to the evils of a blanket removal of restrictions and seeking to reconcile the public to its lot.³⁸⁸

When the process of reconciliation is complete and the residents of the borough of Pimlico finally decide to return to British jurisdiction and state control, accepting the restrictions that such a compromise entails, *Passport to Pimlico* has turned its initial premise upon its head. After experiencing a brief taste of independence, Pimlico welcomes the return of British authority, however, the Borough has managed to win a number of concessions from the government which have allowed Pemberton's plan for a lido and playground to be fulfilled, overturning the initial council decision made at the film's

³⁸⁸ Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, pp. 154-5

outset. During the final moments of the conflict between the British authorities and the independent state of Pimlico, economic agreement is reached and such a compromise is another example of how the text is referring retrospectively back to the war period and the party-political, social and economic compromises necessary at a time of conflict. Rather than championing social discord and rebellion, which appears to be its intention at the outset, the conclusion maintains Ealing's and Britain's supposed political and social *rapprochement*, prioritising the liberal virtue of compromise and suggesting that the nation comes together at times of crisis as confirmed aspects of British national values.

The character central to securing the agreement between the two states is the bank manager Mr P.J. Wix (Raymond Huntley). Wix becomes the archetypal representation of the Ealing newly radicalised middle class, performing a similar role and function in *Passport to Pimlico* as he did in the earlier *They Came to a City*. Stressing the similarities between the two texts' engagement with issues of postwar reconstruction, Barr claims that 'the link is strengthened by the presence in both films of Raymond Huntley, in near-identical roles, of a bank manager

converted from “hawk” to “dove”, or in Michael Frayn’s terms from carnivore to herbivore’.³⁸⁹

We are introduced to Wix when we see him voting against Pemberton at the council meeting. His personal ‘mild revolution’ begins with his refusal to accept head office’s request for him to transfer from the Pimlico bank to another branch after he is photographed by the press for storing the Burgundian treasure in the bank vaults. ‘I was born here in Burgundy, you can’t kick me out of my own country’, he says. ‘Legally this is Burgundy. Head office no longer has any jurisdiction over this bank. This is *my* bank.’ Later on in the film, we see him taking control of the bank’s finances when he places a notice outside the branch which states that the bank is ‘open all day Sunday for short term loans to local traders.’ Initially at least, Wix sees the newly independent state as a means to stimulate local trade, rather than as a means to instigate communal ventures such as Pemberton’s plan for the lido and he is a willing participant in the rebellious act of burning his ration card in the pub which sets the borough in its course of action against the British state. However, as the negotiations between the British state and Burgundian Pimlico are derailed on the issue of ownership of the treasure, it is Wix who suggests a compromise. As the newly elected chancellor of Pimlico, Wix

³⁸⁹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 81. For Frayn’s description of the opposing social and political characteristics of ‘herbivore’ and ‘carnivore’ which Barr refers to see Michael Frayn, ‘Festival’ in *Age of Austerity*, pp. 330-52.

proposes a solution to the crisis by suggesting that the treasure is loaned to Britain with the interest from the loan to be paid to Burgundy. Therefore, Wix in the course of the film comes to embody the Ealing ethos of compromise as his initial rebellion is tempered by a desire to seek a consensual conclusion to the crisis.

The solution to the crisis represents Ealing's fictionalised comment upon the fiscal realities of postwar Britain. It is the loan which secures Pimlico's immediate financial future, allowing the borough to finance the building of the lido and playground. The parallels between *Passport to Pimlico's* fictional narrative and Britain's financial realities are clearly evident. According to Goodlad, 'in order to finance the war effort Britain had incurred a threefold increase in its national debt. Much of the country's infrastructure had been damaged by enemy bombing and a massive rebuilding programme was needed'.³⁹⁰ In order to finance their considerable reforms, the Labour government sought a US loan in 1945. This loan came 'with tough conditions attached' and the subsequent financial crisis, a direct result of the US demand that sterling should be converted into dollars, was not eased until the arrival of Marshall Aid in 1948 which saw the nation's balance of payments move 'back into surplus'.³⁹¹ Whatever the arguments

³⁹⁰ Goodlad, 'Atlee's Economy', p. 22.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

concerning the future implication of Britain's economic agreement with the US, the government realised that economic isolation was not the answer to the financial crisis. The British government, like the independent state of Pimlico, made the decision that economic compromise was required to reconstruct the infrastructure decimated by war in order to implement the New Jerusalem. Read in this manner, *Passport to Pimlico's* conclusion which sees an economic arrangement and rapprochement between the two states of Britain and Pimlico over the treasure directly mirrors Britain's acceptance of Marshall Aid.

In addition to domestic and financial issues, further parallels can be drawn between *Passport to Pimlico's* fictional engagement with various aspects of the Labour government's overseas policy. Britain's economic reliance upon the US also initiated a convergence in foreign policy and *Passport to Pimlico* could also be read as an endorsement of Britain's alliance with the US in the Cold War. As has already been suggested, *Passport to Pimlico's* narrative is structured in such a way as to thematically present various threats to society in an initially positive manner before ideologically reversing this supposition in order to reinstate various wartime social and political attitudes. Initially, Pimlico's bravery in standing up to

the British state is regarded in a positive light by the text, another example of Ealing's dispensation of siding with the weak against the strong. However, this attitude is not borne out by the film's conclusion which ultimately rejects isolationism in favour of cooperation and compromise between the feuding states. Thus the international cooperation we see at the end of *Passport to Pimlico* correlates with the Labour government's contemporary foreign policy. As the tension between the two states starts to increase, one of the invading black marketeers remarks 'fancy starting a new country when they don't know how to protect it', suggesting defence of the nation state as a prerequisite for the society's security and development. The question of national security is an important one within contemporary politics, as the Labour government had increasingly allied its foreign policy to that of the United States and had wholeheartedly supported NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) during the period. Cliff and Gluckstein argue that 'the American cash injections of 1946 and 1948 helped pay for the welfare state and tied Britain firmly to US imperialist objectives. The price of Labour's reformism was an alliance with international capitalism, and the Cold War'.³⁹² This alliance with US foreign aspirations, including 'a decision to fund a large-scale rearmament programme, to support

³⁹² Cliff and Gluckstein, *The Labour Party*, p. 249.

Britain's participation in the Korean war, 'would come to threaten Britain's financial position once more, with Goodlad forcibly arguing that 'there are strong grounds for the claim that, by playing an active role in the Cold War, the government sacrificed the possibility of sustained export-led growth'.³⁹³

It is hardly surprising considering the close proximity to the war that the importance of national security is stressed in *Passport to Pimlico*, emphasised by the film's re-enactment of wartime conditions and attitudes. What is remarkable is that a film made in 1947 that advocates international cooperation at the expense of isolationism in depicting the wartime conditions of siege and insularity should be echoed in reality only a year later when the issue of spheres of influence in the new Europe led to the blockade and eventual airlift of Berlin. In many ways the fictitious conditions of postwar London, as portrayed by *Passport to Pimlico*'s treatment of a divided city, mirrors the conditions of Berlin with its differing areas of control and its depiction of feuding states could be regarded as a comment upon the increasing diplomatic tensions between the USA and the Soviet Union. Similarly, the film could also be regarded as a comment on another aspect of the Labour government's foreign policy of the period with the story of independent Burgundy, according to Williams, forming 'an ironic contrast to a period

³⁹³ Goodlad, 'Atlee's Economy', p. 23.

when colonies began seeking independence from the British Empire'.³⁹⁴

Conclusion

Passport to Pimlico concludes with a celebratory gathering depicting the ending of the Burgundian/British crisis. Like the ending to *The Proud Valley*, the site for the street party is bedecked in British and Burgundian flags and the scene concludes with complementary speeches on the conduct of each side during the conflict. Once the speeches are over, Pemberton celebrates the fact that 'we're back in England' just at the moment that lightning strikes and the heavens open. A final close-up shot of a thermometer confirms Pimlico's return to Britain's jurisdiction as the temperature plummets, suggesting that the borough's daydream of isolation is finally over. As Barr has indicated, the film's conclusion 'comes over not as a downbeat ending – one of resignation and drabness [...] but as a romantic one' where, despite the regret at losing its independent status, there is 'no sadness in the return to Government restrictions as such' and this, Barr suggests, is Pimlico's 'consolation'.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁴ Williams, *Structures of Desire*, p. 164.

³⁹⁵ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 106.

Passport to Pimlico is an essential text in the study of the politics of Ealing studios as it represents what Williams described as ‘an important hegemonic example of British culture and society of that era’.³⁹⁶ In relation to the issue of cinematic form, and despite its fantasy, dream-like elements, the film affirms Ealing’s preference for narrative realism which engages with social contemporary issues in a modern setting. In terms of its political engagement, the film represents a confirmation of Ealing’s ‘mild revolution’ which prioritised consensus over division and community values at the expense of individualism and free market ideologies whilst reaffirming the studio’s alignment with the social democratic reformism of the Labour government. The final chapters of this thesis will discuss the ‘other’ Ealing texts which, whilst maintaining the studio’s ideological commitment, simultaneously offer radical oppositional discourses to Ealing’s consensual rhetoric.

³⁹⁶ Williams, ‘The Repressed Fantastic’, p. 96.

5. The 'Other' Ealing: The Films of Robert Hamer.

Introduction: Ealing's Darker Strain.

In challenging the critical orthodoxy which located a conformist dominant strain within Ealing's political ideology, this thesis has argued that the studio's output contained barely submerged radical subtexts which mirror the radicalism of their historical moment. In its promotion of Labour's 'New Jerusalem' Ealing's 'mild revolution' continued in the immediate postwar period and beyond, endeavouring to maintain a progressive outlook even during the studio's later years of decline. The preceding chapter noted the contribution made by T.E.B. Clarke to Ealing's political and social ethos, questioning the assumption that the films he scripted for the studio represented Ealing's whimsical, mildly rebellious archetype. This chapter will consider the contrasting side of Ealing, examining the films of Robert Hamer and analysing their engagement with the studio's cherished consensual and collectivist ideals.

Tracing the comedies in relation to the studio's affinity with Labour's social democratic project, Aldgate and Richards argue that:

[I]f the early Ealing comedies can be seen as an affirmation of Labour's programme, the later ones can be seen as a retreat from it. Interestingly the early Ealing comedies were more or less remade in the Conservative era [...] and show interesting and

instructive changes. *Whisky Galore* (1949), in which a Scottish island community fools and frustrates an English laird in order to keep a cargo of illicit whisky, is reworked in *The Maggie* (1954), in which the crew of an old Scottish ‘puffer’ fools and frustrates an American laird to keep its ship. *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), in which a small urban community defies the attempts of Whitehall to suppress its independence, becomes *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953), in which a small rural community defies the attempts of British Railways to close its branch line. *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), in which a shop assistant wipes out all those who stand between him and a ducal title, becomes *The Ladykillers* (1955), in which a group of criminals fail to wipe out a little old lady and polish off each other instead.³⁹⁷

The conclusion to this thesis will question Ealing’s supposed political retreat from its earlier radicalism in greater detail. However, for the time being, it is sufficient to acknowledge Aldgate and Richards’ argument and to recognise the studio’s thematic and plot progression from the earlier comedies to those made post-1951 as the latter comedies do appear to suggest a more parochial and reactionary outlook. The urban community’s embrace of national unity in *Passport to Pimlico*, for example, is replaced by the ‘rural community’ of Titfield whose opposition to the rationalisation of the nationalised railways appears to suggest Ealing’s political reversal to a more traditional and conservative standpoint. Similarly, Mazzini’s successful murder spree in Hamer’s *Kind Hearts and Coronets* is contrasted with the gang’s failure to eradicate Mrs Wilberforce in *The Ladykillers*. These examples alone would appear to confirm,

³⁹⁷ Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, p. 157.

superficially at least, Ealing's progressive regression. The remainder of this thesis will continue to challenge this critical assumption.

It has been noted that the ending of hostilities introduced a concern with the political and social nature of postwar society, instigating an engagement with a number of problematic social issues which initiated what could be termed as the Ealing social problem film. In addition to *Passport to Pimlico*, other features that dealt with a variety of perceived threats to the postwar political settlement include Hamer's *It Always Rains on Sunday*, three films directed by Dearden *The Blue Lamp* (1950), *Cage of Gold* (1950) and *Pool of London* (1951) and *Dance Hall* (Charles Crichton, 1950). The comedies made during this period, such as *Whisky Galore*, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* and *The Lavender Hill Mob* also negotiate a similar terrain to the social problem films made at the studio as they deal with issues of criminality, marking a continuation of Ealing's promotion of community values. However, the image of Ealing as a producer of conservative consensual comedies is also often challenged within these texts. The most consistent challenge to this orthodoxy can be found in the films made for the studio by Hamer and Alexander Mackendrick.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁸ Chapter 6 examines the films of Alexander Mackendrick in greater detail.

The Dark Psychology of Robert Hamer

The films directed for the studio by Hamer and Mackendrick are often attributed as offering a counterpoint to the accepted Ealing image of producing cosy and whimsical cinema. Much darker in tone, the combined oeuvres of these two directors are regarded as the tougher counterparts to the gentler films made by the studio, posing a challenge to Ealing's consensual ideals and containing formal and thematic features that are difficult - though not impossible - to locate within mainstream Ealing.

Claiming a distinctive role for the two directors, oppositional to the overall Ealing paradigm, Tim O'Sullivan suggests:

Far from celebrating the resilience of national or any kind of imagined consensus or solidarity embodied in the English or British way of life, [Mackendrick and Hamer] unleash stories of maverick and dangerous eccentricity, resulting in suspended moral fables based on "black" (or at least dark grey), understated English comedy, which recount and play with stories of criminal, violent, murderous –and even sexual- desire and their consequences. These films, dealing with themes of repressed and released revenge, resistance and strangely authorized greed [...] are the hallmarks of the work and influence of Robert Hamer and Alexander Mackendrick within the Ealing team ethos and times. Almost imperceptibly, they manage to add a distinctive touch of subversion and, in spite of their recuperative endings, to destabilise a little of the established values of Ealing, and its self-conscious projection of Britishness, from the inside.³⁹⁹

³⁹⁹ Tim O'Sullivan, 'Ealing Comedies 1947-57: "The Bizarre British Faced With Yet Another Perfectly Extraordinary Situation"', I.Q. Hunter and Laraine Porter (eds.), *British Comedy Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 71.

Similarly, Aldgate and Richards argue that Ealing

[F]ilms fall into two distinct groups, which bear no relation to chronology. The dominant strain, which is nostalgic and conformist, is that associated with the scripts of T.E.B. Clarke [...] Clarke's films come closest to the popular image of Ealing and conform with Balcon's stated desire not to attack established institutions too forcefully. The subversive strain is represented by Robert Hamer and Alexander Mackendrick.⁴⁰⁰

Both Hamer and Mackendrick made separate admissions regarding their individual departures from the Ealing paradigm. Mackendrick admitted that he possessed 'a perverted and malicious sense of humour', and explained that comedy 'is the only way that certain things get to be said. It lets you express things that are too dangerous, or that a certain type of audience can't accept'⁴⁰¹, a statement that links his idea of comedy to Bakhtin's theory of the 'carnavalesque' which was outlined in the previous chapter. Similarly, Hamer notoriously expressed a desire 'to make films about people in dark rooms doing beastly things to each other'⁴⁰² suggesting a malevolent streak to his character which goes against the grain of the Ealing norm. For Brian McFarlane:

⁴⁰⁰ Aldgate and Richards, *The Best of British*, p. 158

⁴⁰¹ Quoted in Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 65.

⁴⁰² Quoted in Philip Kemp 'The Long Shadow: Robert Hamer After Ealing', *British Cinema of the 1950s*, p. 76.

Hamer was the Ealing director least in tune with Balcon's idea/ideal of 'projecting Britain and the British character'. Hamer subverted any notion of a homogenous 'British character' and was more concerned in his films to look beneath the accepted surfaces of British life, exposing elements of hypocrisy and repression with a rigour that makes his films stand to one side of the Ealing ethos.⁴⁰³

Hamer's darker insights were considered to be at odds with Ealing's social-didacticism resulting in an often fractious relationship with the studio which mirrored his own difficult personal life where he had a lifelong battle with alcoholism and struggled to reconcile himself to his repressed homosexuality. In addition to his haunted mirror sequence in the portmanteau *Dead of Night* (Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Dearden, Robert Hamer, 1945), Hamer made only four films for Ealing and, after leaving the studio after making *His Excellency* (1951), his filmmaking career steadily declined. Nevertheless, despite his deteriorating health, he did manage to direct the critically praised *The Long Memory* (1952) and the well-received *Father Brown* (1954). Whilst shooting his final film, the enjoyable, but ultimately lightweight, *School for Scoundrels* (1960), he was taken ill and replaced by Cyril Frankel. He died of pneumonia exacerbated by his chronic alcoholism in 1963.

⁴⁰³ Brian McFarlane 'Pink String and Sealing Wax', Brian McFarlane (ed.), *The Cinema of Britain and Ireland* (London: Wallflower, 2005) pp. 56-7.

Tim Palleine ascribes to the director ‘a thematic concern with the clash between natural instinct and institutional restraint’, as ‘Hamer refracts the studio’s themes of community and togetherness through the prism of a socially agnostic sensibility, achieving a creative tension rare in British cinema’.⁴⁰⁴ Similarly, Barr commented that Hamer’s films:

[C]ontain a gallery of individuals, across the range of classes whose sexual and emotional drives are strongly repressed and as strongly burst out, only to be damped down in an adjustment to the prevailing Ealing/British dispensation which, in a consolidation of the spirit of wartime, accepts restraint on sex drive and ambition and class resentment.⁴⁰⁵

Hamer’s first major contribution for the studio after the collaboration on *Dead of Night* was the Victorian melodrama *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (1945) which combined themes of murder and sexuality which set the tone for much of his subsequent output. *Pink String and Sealing Wax* was similar to Hamer’s contribution to *Dead of Night* as both films, according to Charles Barr ‘bring a suppressed dimension of passion to the surface’.⁴⁰⁶ Hamer’s sequence in *Dead of Night* and his first full-length feature for the studio, *Pink String and Sealing Wax*, both contain a number of the director’s recurring themes. Although

⁴⁰⁴ Palleine, ‘A Song and Dance at the Local’, p. 263.

⁴⁰⁵ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 120.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

ostensibly featuring denouements which appear to confirm Ealing's ideological commitment to promoting family and community values, the films are notable for exhibiting an uneasy tension with the studio's moral and consensual ethos.

The plot of Hamer's 'The Haunted Mirror' segment in *Dead of Night* concerns Joan (Googie Withers) and Peter (Ralph Michael), whose happy marriage becomes threatened when a recently acquired antique mirror the couple have hung in up in their new home begins to exert a supernatural hold over the husband, which manifest in out-of-character violent outbursts and increasingly intense feelings of jealousy towards his wife. Driven to the brink of madness, Peter finally assaults Joan and the psychological spell is only broken when, in order to stop her husband from strangling her, Joan cracks the mirror, shattering the malevolent hold it has over him and allowing the couple to resume their happy marriage. However, the reversal to bourgeois conformity suggested by the sequence's denouement feels, according to Barr 'like a lobotomy'⁴⁰⁷, confirming Hamer's pessimistic vision and reflecting his ambiguous feelings towards middle-class family values. For Philip Kemp, Hamer's contribution to *Dead of Night* 'not only conjures up a dark world of violence and sexuality, but finds it perversely attractive'.⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴⁰⁸ Kemp, 'The Long Shadow', p. 75.

This perverse attraction towards suppressed anti-social impulses would continue in Hamer's next film he made for Ealing, the melodrama *Pink String and Sealing Wax*.

Set in Victorian Brighton, the plot of *Pink String and Sealing Wax* focuses on two contrasting locations: the domestic setting of the middle class Sutton household and the working-class milieu of the environs of the local pub. Tying these two socially contrasting settings together is the character Pearl Bond (Googie Withers). Pearl, married to an aggressive and drunken husband, Joe (Garry Marsh), is having an affair with the uncommitted Dan (John Carol). In an attempt to secure an escape from her loveless and violent marital relationship, Rose poisons her husband and, after failing to blackmail the patriarch of the Sutton household, Edward Sutton (Mervyn Johns), to lie for her in court in order to save his son, David (Gordon Jackson), who has become recklessly infatuated with Pearl, the film concludes with Pearl committing suicide by throwing herself off a Brighton cliff-edge

As it does not strictly adhere to the critical orthodoxy which associates Ealing with a contemporary realist aesthetic - the studio's dominant paradigm - *Pink String and Sealing Wax's* melodramatic mode and sensational subject matter appears out of place at Ealing, perhaps having more in common with the films

made at Gainsborough Studios. Speaking of ‘a new critical orthodoxy’ which emerged in the 1980s, Christine Geraghty argues that:

Gainsborough’s women’s films, with their costumes, contradictions and narrative excesses, are deemed (to varying degrees) to be the films of the period that best speak of and to women, who constituted the main audience during and immediately after the Second World War. In this criticism, Ealing operates as the opposite pole, the patriarchally run studio making films committed to realism and social order.⁴⁰⁹

Pink String and Sealing Wax is one film made at Ealing which does not easily fall within the critical distinction as expressed by Geraghty and more recent revisionism has sought to re-address the film’s neglect, leading McFarlane to argue that ‘it establishes a strong claim to be considered the most resonant melodrama of the heyday of British cinema’.⁴¹⁰

Pink String and Sealing Wax’s engagement with issues of gender and patriarchy could be read in a variety of different ways. On the one hand it could be argued that the film’s denouement ultimately seeks to punish Pearl as her refusal to conform to the patriarchal order and her criminality transgress against the established values of community and family. The “happy” ending which sees Edward Sutton’s son happily married seems to uphold

⁴⁰⁹ Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the ‘New Look’* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 76.

⁴¹⁰ McFarlane, ‘*Pink String and Sealing Wax*’, p. 62.

the view that the text seeks to reaffirm the positive qualities of family life. Initially, the staunchly Christian Edward Sutton is a stern, authoritarian figure who strictly dominates his wife and children. However, by the end of the film his attitude towards his family has softened, leading Barr to conclude that *Pink String and Sealing Wax* 'is a story of this man being humanised', whilst also suggesting that, in a similar manner to the conclusion of Hamer's segment in *Dead of Night* 'the happy ending is very equivocal'.⁴¹¹

The overall feeling that emerges from viewing *Pink String and Sealing Wax* is an uncomfortable and claustrophobic comprehension of the repressive nature of family life which is dominated by an autocratic paternalism. Throughout the majority of the film, as MacFarlane suggests, 'the Sutton household is registered as a model of Victorian repression, sexual and otherwise'⁴¹², whereas Marcia Landy positioned *Pink String and Sealing Wax* within its socio-historical context, arguing that the film is a response to the postwar changing gender values which increasingly questioned women's role in society:

The "happy" ending of the film sits uncomfortably with the bulk of the narrative, which is devoted largely to the brutality of family life at the hands of two abusive and tyrannical male figures. The extended scenes in the Sutton house [...] and the scenes depicting Pearl's rough and physically brutal husband [...] are an unqualified critique of family life in both the middle

⁴¹¹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 67.

⁴¹² McFarlane, '*Pink String and Sealing Wax*', p. 55.

and working classes. [...] Like many of the 1940s films *Pink String and Sealing Wax* raises the question of altered familial relations. The Victorian paterfamilias has given way to a more democratic portrait of power in the family, but underlying this benevolent resolution is a darker image of family violence and sexual repression.⁴¹³

One of the film's central strengths is that *Pink String and Sealing Wax* features an outstanding performance by Withers as Pearl, the abused, yet strong woman struggling to escape from the brutally repressive patriarchal order. In fact, both *Pink String and Sealing Wax* and *It Always Rains on Sunday* are exceptional in the British cinema of the period as they both contradict Sue Aspinall's assertion that, unlike their American counterparts such as *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) and *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946), 'strong female characters in British films were upper class women' and that 'British thrillers rarely placed women at the centre of the narrative'.⁴¹⁴ Many of Hamer's films at Ealing feature strong female characters, an uncharacteristic attribute for the primarily male-dominated artistic community at the studio and in the case of Withers' roles in both *Pink String and Sealing Wax* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*, Hamer deals directly with working class female experience which are the focal point of both film's narratives. For McFarlane in *Pink String and*

⁴¹³ Landy, *British Genres*, pp. 304-5.

⁴¹⁴ Sue Aspinall, 'Women, Realism and Reality in British Films, 1943-53', *British Cinema History*, p. 285.

Sealing Wax, ‘Withers establishes images of erotic potency and magisterial authority’ where ‘Victorian values may seem to win out eventually but her boldly self-serving strength is the film’s great positive’.⁴¹⁵ Diana Morgan, who wrote the script for *Pink String and Sealing Wax*, praised Hamer for his ability to work with female performers claiming that, ‘he was just awfully good at directing women – no other Ealing films gave such parts to women. He was the only one who liked women, really’.⁴¹⁶

Rather than fall into the “wicked woman” escapist and sensational trope favoured by Gainsborough, Withers role in *Pink String and Sealing Wax* elicits sympathy, an achievement she would similarly come to repeat for Hamer at Ealing in *It Always Rains on Sunday*. Despite her criminality, as Barr argues, ‘we can’t see Pearl as evil; her warmth and tenderness are too convincing. Trapped in a dull marriage and job, she is too big and too passionate a character for her milieu, and for the film. The resolution has exactly the same resonance as *Dead of Night*’.⁴¹⁷

For McFarlane, the cinematic presentation of Pearl’s suicide - via a long continuous tracking shot – showing her journey from the pub to the cliffs at Brighton towards the end of *Pink String and Sealing Wax* contains a power and resonance

⁴¹⁵ Brian McFarlane, ‘Ingénues, Lovers, Wives and Mothers: The 1940s Career Trajectories of Googie Withers and Phyllis Calvert’, Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams (eds.), *British Women’s Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 72.

⁴¹⁶ McFarlane, ‘*Pink String and Sealing Wax*’, p. 56.

⁴¹⁷ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 67.

which elevates the film above mere melodrama and confirms both Withers' strong performance and Hamer's ability to cinematically convey strong female characters. The sequence, McFarlane argues:

[I]mposes on the audience an admiration for Pearl's courage. It is arguable that no other contemporary British actress, and certainly not the two biggest box-office attractions, Margaret Lockwood or Anna Neagle, could have so risen to its challenge, as Withers does, or that any other Ealing director would have given her this chance.⁴¹⁸

In the films he made for Ealing, Hamer was displaying thematic divergences from the socially-didactic norm established at the studio during its wartime 'mild revolution'. Michael Newton claimed that Hamer brought a distinct individual outlook to Ealing's collectivist approach, arguing that the director was one of the few filmmakers at Ealing that one could claim auteur status and describing the 'auterist patterns in his work' as 'a powerful eroticism; a witty literariness; realism; guilt; doubleness; playfulness; and above all, the fate of a trapped protagonist hemmed in by the tiny possibilities that life offers'.⁴¹⁹ Most of these qualities can be discerned within *Pink String and Sealing Wax*, however, Hamer's next film for Ealing, *It Always Rains on Sunday*, transferred *Pink String and Sealing Wax*'s portrayal of

⁴¹⁸ McFarlane, 'Pink String and Sealing Wax', p. 56.

⁴¹⁹ Michael Newton, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), pp. 18-19.

trapped lives into the contemporary setting of the East End of London where once again Hamer's bleak vision and charged eroticism sits uncomfortably against Ealing's supposed established consensual norm.

It Always Rains on Sunday is a tough, neo-noir depiction of the East-End borough of Bethnal Green which superficially appear to adhere to Ealing's realist ethos as the film seeks to authentically portray its working-class milieu. However, *It Always Rains on Sunday* also offers a departure from the Ealing paradigm, notably in its generic treatment of its working-class subject matter. Alan Lovell counters the usual reading of the film as another example of the studio's preference for realism, noting that:

Realism is usually cited as a central strength of the British cinema and *It Always Rains on Sunday* is frequently discussed within this context. With the benefit of hindsight, this seems misleading. There is, in fact, a creative tension between realism and Expressionism in the film.⁴²⁰

It Always Rains on Sunday's narrative concerns a day-in-the-life- of a variety of working-class characters in Bethnal Green whose interlocking stories are connected by the film's central drama which concerns the arrival of an escaped convict, Tommy Swann (John McCallum), to the Sandigate household. Rose

⁴²⁰ Alan, Lovell, 'It Always Rains on Sunday', Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book 3rd Edition*, p. 8.

Sandigate (Googie Withers), married to George (Edward Chapman), is another Hamer female character who appears trapped by circumstance. We learn through a number of flashbacks that Rose had previously had a love affair with Tommy before she was married, and the escapee's return reminds her of the previous passion and adventure sadly lacking from her life with the honest, dependable, but ultimately dull, George. Rose shelters the escaped convict from the law and the couple rekindle some of their lost passion in the Sandigate's marital bed before Tommy is discovered by a local news reporter, Slopey Collins (Michael Howard) and Tommy assaults the journalist and Rose before fleeing. Finally thwarted in her desire to escape, Rose makes an unsuccessful suicide attempt and the film then climaxes with a dramatic night-time chase across the drab London streets, foreshadowing a similar chase sequence to apprehend a criminal in *The Blue Lamp*, culminating in a memorable sequence at a railway goods yard where Tommy is finally recaptured. Before being apprehended, rather than return to the brutality of the prison system from which he has escaped, Tommy unsuccessfully attempts to end his life by hurling himself on the rail track in front of a moving train. Therefore, in the closing moments of the film, we are witness to two attempts made at suicide, emphasising the

bleak reality of lives lived on the edge of society in postwar Britain.

According to Mark Duguid, *It Always Rains on Sunday* stands apart not only from Ealing's postwar output but also from most of the British cinema of the period, as:

[N]o film conveys more effectively the entrapment of life in austerity Britain. It builds its reality from the accumulation of detail of life on the cliff-edge of poverty: the petty family squabbles born of cramped opportunities and cheek-by-jowl living; the snatching of half-dreams of escape; the squalid doss-houses and low-rent spivery [...] It's Ealing's most convincingly downbeat evocation of the immediate post-war era, and at least a match for the Boulting's near-simultaneous *Brighton Rock*.⁴²¹

The film has several similarities with Hamer's *Pink String and Sealing Wax*, most notably in its narrative focus upon two separate families: the Sandigates and the Hyams. In addition to George and Rose, the Sandigate family has two teenage women, Vi (Susan Shaw) and Doris (Patricia Plunkett) neither of which are daughters of Rose, which leads to conflict within the family structure. Vi is having a tentative relationship with Morry Hyam (Sydney Tafler) and Doris is courting Ted Edwards (Nigel Stock). These various relationships add to the tension within the household which is heightened by Rose's dissatisfaction with her

⁴²¹ Duguid, 'The Dark Side of Ealing', p. 58.

circumstances and surroundings and her longing to escape. However, despite Rose's inner-conflict, the Sandigates appear a respectable family, whereas the tensions within the Hymans extended family structure are acknowledged by bandleader Morry's compulsive womanising and his brother, Lou Hyam's (John Slater), criminal dealings on the black market.

As in *Pink String and Sealing Wax*, the family unit is regarded as a stifling and repressive entity and the dark brooding narrative combine with the *noir* aspects of its *mise en scène* to make *It Always Rains on Sunday* the bleakest of all films made at Ealing during the immediate post-war period. According to McFarlane, 'repression of various forms is at the heart'⁴²² of all of the three films Hamer made for the studio and *It Always Rains on Sunday*'s pessimistic outlook refracts the studio's usual social optimism. Similarly, for Barr, in *Dead of Night*, *Pink String and Sealing Wax* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*:

Hamer shows people trapped in situations where their family and community and daily life have already had passion (and the word is meant to have wide connotations) drained out of them: it forces its way back, but in distorted and destructive forms, and there is no alternative but to stamp it out. Hamer is the Ealing director most aware of the loss, and he makes us feel it acutely.⁴²³

⁴²² McFarlane 2005, '*Pink String and Sealing Wax*', p. 57.

⁴²³ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 70.

The film's depiction of community has similarities to that of *Passport to Pimlico*, but the Bethnal Green community depicted within the film is the antithesis of Pimlico. Whereas *Passport to Pimlico* shows its London borough uniting to repel the threat of crime, criminality is rife within Bethnal Green and there is very little social cohesion to speak of. The negated passion within Hamer's films which Barr refers to draws interesting parallels with Ealing's overall social outlook. Compare the communities as depicted in *It Always Rains on Sunday* and that of *Passport to Pimlico*. Both these films engage with postwar austerity Britain but Hamer's film is the harsher of the two, offering no solution to the bleak reality of working-class existence. *Passport to Pimlico*, on the other hand is supportive of Labour's reforms as an antidote to the problems of society. Therefore, the community as depicted in *It Always Rains on Sunday* can be linked to earlier Ealing film *The Proud Valley* which depicted the harsh reality of working-class existence in the Welsh coalfields. Hamer's films are certainly more pessimistic in tone, lacking in the social-didacticism of mainstream Ealing, yet they still partially confirm to the studio's political evolution as they attempt to portray social issues of class which was a vital component of Ealing's socio-political agenda and the primary motivation of its 'mild revolution'.

Hamer's films portray the community, not as a united consensual body that pulls together in times of crisis which was Ealing's usual approach, but as a socially divided and antagonistic unit. By displaying the harsh realities of British society, Hamer's output depicts those excluded sections of the community, struggling to exist as they attempt to eke out an existence in the face of overwhelming odds. This manifests itself, as Newton suggests, to a feeling of solidarity with those living beyond the margins of society as a 'compassion for the criminal, and a resentful contempt for the process of the law pervade both *Pink String and Sealing Wax* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*'.⁴²⁴ Thus, Hamer's films often display an amoral aloofness and stark pessimism which ran counter to the studio's cherished ideals. This amoral detachment found its most perfect expression in the elegant decadence of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*.

Hamer explained his primary motivations for making *Kind Hearts and Coronets* as follows:

Firstly, that of making a film not noticeably similar to any previously made in the English language. Secondly, that of using this English language, which I love, in a more varied and, to me, more interesting way than I had previously had the chance of doing in a film. Thirdly, that of making a picture, which paid no regard whatever to established, although not practised moral convention. This last was not from any desire to shock, but from an impulse to escape the somewhat inflexible

⁴²⁴ Newton, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, p. 67.

and unshaded characterization which convention tends to enforce in scripts.⁴²⁵

Thus, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, widely considered to be Hamer's masterpiece, transposes the director's attitude towards criminality established in *Pink String and Sealing Wax* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*, onto the comedy genre. In its portrayal of Louis Mazzini's (Dennis Price) attempt to murder his way to become Duke of Chalfont, the film exhibits all of Hamer's ironic and amoral detachment towards criminality, managing to critique the British class system and lampooning the greed and self-interest of the aristocracy in the process. As Landy has noted, the film 'shares with *Passport to Pimlico* and *Whiskey Galore!* a contempt for the abuse and privilege, but [...] offers more trenchant psychological as well as social exploration of the nature and effects of social class'.⁴²⁶

For Raymond Durnat, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* 'in its suave, sharp insolence, is the most brilliant, and the least typical, of Ealing comedies'.⁴²⁷ One of the major reasons that the film stands apart from most of the other Ealing comedies is due to its sexual amorality which for Newton makes it 'one of the most

⁴²⁵ Quoted in Newton, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, p. 7.

⁴²⁶ Landy, *British Genres*, 1991, p. 373.

⁴²⁷ Durnat, *A Mirror for England*, p 116.

sophisticated and sexy British films ever made'.⁴²⁸ Much of this is owed to the performance of Joan Greenwood as the flirtatious and scheming Sibella, and her sexually charged relationship with Louis. At one point in the film, after Sibella's marriage of convenience to the dull Lionel (John Penrose), Louis and Sibella embark upon an adulterous affair. We have already learned of Sibella's dissatisfaction with her marriage, when she expresses her frustration at not being apart from her husband during their honeymoon in Italy making it impossible for her to romantically pursue the many attractive Italian men she saw. Louis describes Sibella's behaviour towards their affair as 'playing with fire' to which Sibella seductively replies 'well at least it warms me.' Sibella's eroticism and amorality is neatly contrasted with the virtuous Edith D'Ascoyne (Valerie Hobson). Landy captures the opposition between the two female characters perfectly, commenting that 'Sibella is feline, sensual, and unscrupulous, while Edith is the inscrutable image of correctness'.⁴²⁹ It is almost as if, in the film's dichotomy between the upstanding Edith and the self gratification of Sibella, that Hamer is commenting upon his own psychology and contrasting it - and his approach to filmmaking - with the socially didactic and moral outlook of Balcon and Ealing in general. For Duguid, *Kind Hearts* is the

⁴²⁸ Newton, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, p. 9.

⁴²⁹ Landy, *British Genres*, 1991, p. 374.

studio's 'most cynical film' which 'comes out of left field: no other Ealing film – perhaps no British film up to that time – even approaches its elegant amorality'.⁴³⁰

Hamer's dark vision discernible within these three major films he made for Ealing and his haunted mirror segment in *Dead of Night* exhibit a more intense psychological ambiguity which appear to sit uncomfortably with the more wholesome ethos at the studio. Hamer's themes, coupled with his more melodramatic and expressionistic forms that, while not entirely eschewing realism nevertheless make significant departures from the studio's preferred mode of filmmaking, have placed him critically alongside Alexander Mackendrick within the bracket of representing the 'other' Ealing. Although Mackendrick's output at the studio is regarded as being more consistent with Ealing's ethos, and his relationship with Balcon certainly less fractious, there are similarities between the two 'maverick' directors' approaches. Whereas Hamer had to fight to get his projects supported by Balcon, Mackendrick was much more successful at getting his ideas for films to reach fruition. However, despite their contrasting fortunes, certain comparisons can be made between the two filmmakers, as McFarlane has suggested 'at Ealing, only

⁴³⁰ Duguid, 'The Dark Side of Ealing', 2012, p. 59.

Alexander Mackendrick's films come near to Hamer's dark insights'.⁴³¹

⁴³¹ McFarlane, '*Pink String and Sealing Wax*', p. 57.

Alexander Mackendrick and *The Man in the White Suit*

Introduction

Alexander Mackendrick's initial contribution for Ealing was as a storyboard designer on the studio's first Technicolor film, the costume drama *Saraband for Dead Lovers* (Basil Dearden, 1948), where he also earned a screenwriting credit alongside John Dighton. *Saraband* was Ealing's response to pressure from Rank to make a 'prestige' film, and featured Gainsborough regular Stewart Granger and a then relatively unknown Anthony Quayle. Overall, the film is regarded as being an unsuccessful emulation of the Gainsborough paradigm which, despite its sumptuous visuals, is another of those films made at the studio that owing to its formal removal from the Ealing realist tradition is regarded as something of an oddity. For Mark Duguid, despite representing 'another intriguing blind alley in Ealing's frantic quest for postwar direction', *Saraband* is notable for containing an

unusually heady menu for an Ealing film: glamour, passion, Machiavellian intrigue, adultery, sexual jealousy and murder – not to mention expressive Technicolor, uncharacteristically rich art and costume design, and some magnificent wigs [...] It's an uneven film, but one with some arrestingly baroque images – most memorably the six-minute, dialogue-free masked carnival, a flight of bacchanalian delirium that almost outdoes Powell and Pressburger.⁴³²

⁴³² Duguid, 'The Dark Side of Ealing', pp.58-9. For an appraisal of the use of Technicolor in the film and Ealing's adoption of colour in general see Keith M. Johnston, "'A Riot of all the Colours in the Rainbow": Ealing Studios in Colour', *Ealing Revisited*, pp. 195-205.

Saraband's cinematographer, Douglas Slocombe, attributed the 'visual intensity'⁴³³ of *Saraband* to Mackendrick's storyboarding technique, a method which he would utilise throughout his career.

In addition to making his mark visually with his storyboard contribution to the film, *Saraband* is also noteworthy for introducing a key theme for Mackendrick, one that would resurface regularly within his films and what Kemp termed as Mackendrick's narrative concern of 'the clash between innocence and experience'.⁴³⁴ We shall return to this particular narrative trope of Mackendrick's later in the chapter whilst discussing the comedies the director made at Ealing. In addition to the dichotomy between innocence and experience, *Saraband*'s narrative, focusing upon the intrigue and power politics of the Hanoverian court, displays, as Durgnat has noted, 'a quiet cynicism about the dignity of history'.⁴³⁵ This thematic trope elevates the film above the Gainsborough model it was attempting to emulate and, disregarding its flaws and departure from the studio's usual realist and contemporary milieu, establishes *Saraband* as an Ealing film in its social concern with the abuse of power, despite its un-Ealing cynicism. For Kemp 'the most remarkable aspect of the film' was that, despite Balcon's patriotism and respect for royalty, *Saraband* 'continually

⁴³³ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 19.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Durgnat, *A Mirror for England*, p. 179.

emphasises the corruption, cruelty and naked ambition of the House of Hanover, and portrays the future King George I of England as a crude, licentious bully'.⁴³⁶ Therefore, despite the fact that it was not directed by Hamer or Mackendrick, *Saraband* becomes another example of Ealing departing from its consensual norm in its criticism of the Royalist tradition.

Whisky Galore! and *The Blue Lamp*

Mackendick's directorial debut came at Ealing with *Whisky Galore!*, the first of four comedies he made for the studio. The film is based on the 1947 novel by Compton Mackenzie and adapted for the screen by Angus MacPhail. The novel was based on a true story that occurred in February 1941 when a freighter, the SS *Politician*, ran aground near to the islands of Eriskay and South Uist. The freighter's cargo included 22,000 cases of Scotch whisky - a commodity which was rationed at the time - and the opportunity to seize the contraband alcohol became too tempting for the inhabitants of the surrounding islands who took to the water to retrieve the whiskey with an estimate of 7,000 cases eventually being salvaged.⁴³⁷ Mackenzie's novel, a sequel to his earlier *Keep the Home Guard Turning* (1943) which supplies

⁴³⁶ Philip Kemp, 'Saraband for Dead Lovers', <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/457268/index.html> [Accessed 18/01/13]

⁴³⁷ See Arthur Swinson's *Scotch on the Rocks* (London: Peter Davies, 1963) for a full account of the incident.

additional scenes to the film, transposes the action to the islands of Great Todday and Little Todday and, as Kemp explains, both novels ‘derive much of their comedy from the rivalry between the islands, exacerbated by religion – the people of Great Todday being Presbyterian and those of Little Todday Roman Catholic’.⁴³⁸ The film version of *Whisky Galore!* shifts the action to the single island of Todday, dispensing with the rival sectarian subject matter of the novels, a move that was made, according to Kemp, ‘probably to placate Balcon, who found jokes about religion even more alarming than jokes about sex’.⁴³⁹

Drawing upon his earlier experiences at Pathè and the MoI where Mackendrick set up Merlin Productions with his cousin Roger MacDougall making wartime documentary shorts, *Whisky Galore!* is clearly influenced by documentary aesthetics. When speaking about the film at a film festival in France in 1990, Mackendrick informed the audience, ‘I hope you realize it’s a parody of a documentary’⁴⁴⁰ and McArthur has described the opening of the film as a ‘parody of traditional documentaries about Scotland’ where ‘the images of crashing seas, accompanied

⁴³⁸ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 22.

⁴³⁹ Ibid. Kemp also indicate that Mackenzie ‘also made a last ditch attempt to restore the element of religious rivalry, but in vain’, p. 23.

⁴⁴⁰ Quoted in Colin McArthur, *Whisky Galore! and The Maggie* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), p. 34.

by “dramatic” music, are very reminiscent of Robert Flaherty’s *Man of Aran*.⁴⁴¹

The film begins with a montage of the coastline and shots of the local fishermen and a variety of islanders and the mock-documentary visual feel of the opening is reinforced with a documentary-style voice-over, narrated by the quintessentially Scottish actor Finlay Currie, relating various facts about the island’s natural environment and its inhabitants to the audience. However, the jaunty music which accompanies the voice-over counteracts the documentary tone of the opening and when the voice-over proceeds to inform us that ‘in 1943, disaster overwhelmed this little island; not famine or pestilence, nor Hitler’s bombs, or the hordes of an invading army. But something far, far, worse... There is no whisky’, the comic interjection jolts the film from the textual terrain of documentary, positioning the narrative more firmly within the comedy genre. Moreover, the opening also calls into question the notion of documentary authenticity as the narrator’s voice-over contradicts the corresponding images that we are witnessing, as McArthur explains:

This paradoxically banal commentary is accompanied by stereotypical images of, for example, a fisherman mending his nets and his smiling wife at a spinning

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p. 35.

wheel before a thatched cottage. There is even the characteristically inane music that usually accompanies such images. At one level the sequence is actually giving concrete information to an audience which does not know where the Hebrides are. The parodic element comes in the disjuncture between Currie's plangent words and some of the images accompanying them. For instance, against the words 'the inhabitants scrape a frugal living from the sea' there is an image of a well-fed fisherman holding up a meaty lobster, and counterpointing the words 'a happy people with few and simple pleasures' nine children of diverse ages run from the thatched cottage.⁴⁴²

When, later on in the film, the islanders are partaking in the illicit whisky, the narrator's voice becomes audibly slurred as the objective nature of the documentary-style voice-over is called further into question, thereby subjectifying the normally objective voice-over of documentary within the film's fictional narrative.

The fact that *Whisky Galore!*, like *San Demetrio, London*, was based on a true story, one that subsequently 'has passed into Scottish legend'⁴⁴³, further manages to blur the distinction between narrative fictional film and the supposed authenticity of documentary. The film's opening acknowledges this distinction as immediately after the opening credits have shown the Ealing logo, a caption appears on the screen which states:

⁴⁴² Ibid., p. 36.

⁴⁴³ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 21.

By a strange coincidence the SS Cabinet Minister was wrecked off the Island of Todday two years after the SS Politician, with a similar cargo, was wrecked off the Island of Eriskay. But the coincidence stops there, for our story and the characters in it are pure fiction.

Despite the film's fictional status, several aspects of its production point to the fact that the makers of *Whisky Galore!* were intent upon augmenting the realistic elements of the film as much as possible. Apart from a few scenes that were filmed at Ealing when the film ran £20,000 over budget,⁴⁴⁴ *Whisky Galore!* was shot on the on the Isle of Barra, adding to the documentary aspects of its production by the use of location shooting. This was supplemented by the utilisation of local residents as extras and, as Kemp suggests, this aided in 'lending the film an authenticity hard to replicate in a London studio'.⁴⁴⁵ It has already been noted that Ealing used a similar tactic to complement cinematic verisimilitude in a number of wartime productions, but here the technique is heightened by the fact that the extras were on their own territory. As Matthew Norgate observed of the film, 'it is often hard to say which of the small-part players are actors and which the recruited inhabitants' owing to the fact that 'the local actors were able to feel at home before the cameras, since they

⁴⁴⁴ McArthur, *Whisky Galore! and The Maggie*, p. 24.

⁴⁴⁵ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 23.

were at home.’⁴⁴⁶ Mackendrick also indicated how the housing of the actors within the local community had additional beneficial factors to their performances:

Now for about one or two weeks in the year when the weather is bearable Barra has a tourist industry; they all set up little bed-sitting rooms. Danny [Danischewsky] bought out every room on the island and moved the unit into them. The effect of this was that people like Joan Greenwood, who had a very good ear, were living with the Hebridean accent all the time, and being trained by natural dialogue coaches. Also, because you were using the islanders as crowd artists, you couldn’t play phony. You’re brought absolutely down to a level of reality because you’re up against the real thing.⁴⁴⁷

In addition to the film’s realistic attempt to authentically portray the mannerisms and attitudes of a small Scottish island, *Whisky Galore!* is also relevant to the contemporary social and economic situation of the nation as a whole. Released in the same year as *Passport to Pimlico* when the country was in the grip of austerity, the two films contain several parallel themes as Mackendrick’s film can also be regarded as a reaction to rationing, described by Colin McArthur as ‘a potent utopian fantasy generated by the social conditions of the time.’⁴⁴⁸ Like the borough of Pimlico, the island community of *Whisky Galore!* unite to ward off a perceived outside threat imposed by the British

⁴⁴⁶ Quoted in Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 23.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁴⁸ MacArthur, *Whisky Galore! and The Maggie*, p. 7.

authorities, personified in the hapless figure of the Home Guard's Captain Waggett (Basil Radford). However, unlike the community of *Passport to Pimlico* which ultimately seeks to compromise in order to reach a conclusion to its crisis, the community of the Hebridean island of Todayday succeed in their ambition to thwart officialdom and the rigours of rationing and, through their unity of action, they manage to secure the bootleg whisky, destroying Waggett's authority on the island in the process.

With its cruel denouement which sees the innocent figure of Waggett ultimately crushed and humiliated at the hands of the experienced and manipulative islanders, *Whisky Galore!* turns Ealing's premise of a national community which is motivated by consensus upon its head. The film represents the antithesis of the one nation ethos as it accords with Barr's assertion that the film's of Mackendrick are 'unique in British cinema' as 'the characters are so robustly Machiavellian', thereby 'undermining the Ealing polarisation of nice and wholesome and harmless versus coarse, tough and brutal'.⁴⁴⁹ The ruthlessness of the islanders and their unflinching dedication to the task of retrieving the whisky is emphasised by Sammy MacCodrum (John Gregson) when he states that 'any man who stands between us and the whisky is an

⁴⁴⁹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 118.

enemy', a remark which places an almost militaristic tone to the islanders actions.

Kemp finds thematic comparisons between *Whisky Galore!* and both *Passport* and *Kind Hearts*, arguing that:

The community depicted by *Whisky Galore!* displays traits in common with those of both *Passport* and *Kind Hearts* – prepared to be as ruthless, in pursuit of its interests, as Hamer's aristocracy, but also internally supportive like the people of Miramont Place. No question here, though, of compromise or integration into an external community. Todday remains fiercely independent and self-reliant, prepared to accept only those outsiders who [...] seek entry on the islanders' own terms. Those like Waggett, who threaten the values of the community, can expect no mercy.⁴⁵⁰

With the Todday islanders uniting to embrace - rather than dispel - criminality, *Whisky Galore!* subverts what Barr termed as 'Ealing's vision of a benevolent community'⁴⁵¹ and, therefore, the film's message, though not its audience identification, is much more ambiguous than *Passport to Pimlico*. The moral uncertainty at the heart of *Whisky Galore!* centres upon the issue of audience sympathy within the film and the ultimate destruction of Waggett who is depicted as being increasingly out of his depth in his encounter with the Machiavellian islanders. The treatment of Waggett led to disagreements between the film's producer, Monja Danischewsky and Mackendrick. Considering Mackendrick's

⁴⁵⁰ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 29.

⁴⁵¹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 75.

subsequent critical positioning as one of Ealing's mavericks who constructed films that were increasingly at odds with the studio's social didacticism, it is perhaps surprising that in this instance the director wanted the film to take a more forthright moral stance, as opposed to Danischewsky. Whilst the pair were writing the script, Danischewsky explains that he 'discovered to [his] horror that [Mackendrick] really disapproved of the islanders taking the whisky. No real moral sanction could be found for it,' and 'as our work on the film progressed, Sandy found himself more and more in sympathy with Waggett'.⁴⁵²

Despite Mackendrick's professed affinity for Waggett, whilst viewing *Whisky Galore!* it is difficult to establish any sympathy for the pompous home guard officer whose arrogant and inflexible attitude is contrasted throughout with the more relaxed, fun-loving islanders. Commenting upon the voice-over's rather unconvincing moral conclusion, Peter Bradshaw suggests:

Insouciantly, the film finally reveals that the mass pilfering drove whisky prices up, and eventually caused another booze famine. So victimless crime doesn't pay? Well. this looks like mere lip-service being paid to the moral justice of the free market. The film's sympathies are entirely with the drinkers.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵² Monja Danischewsky, *White Russian- Red Face* (London: Gollancz, 1996), p. 162.

⁴⁵³ *The Guardian*, 29 July 2011.

The major reason for audience sympathy focusing upon the islanders is Wagget's inflexibility and authoritarianism which embodies an English superiority complex. Read in this manner, Waggett's arrogance within the film thematically constitutes a satire on colonialism and the revolt of the islanders against his authority represents Today's rejection of colonial attitudes and English hegemony over Scotland. Barr suggests that the islanders' 'encounters with Waggett play out deep cultural oppositions', and he even compares the Home Guard officer with Colonel Nicholson (Alec Guinness) in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (David Lean, 1957), complacently representing traditionally public-school conservative values.⁴⁵⁴ Indeed, it is not difficult to ascertain several "Blimpish" qualities to Waggett's character, whose condescension, bordering on colonial arrogance, is revealed when he recalls an incident to Sergeant Odd (Bruce Setton) of a football match that took place on the island:

They're so unsporting. They don't do things for the sake of doing them like the English. We play the game for the sake of the game. Others play the game for the sake of winning it. I tried to introduce football onto the island. I managed to get hold of a football and presented it to the school. I was the referee. I had to give a foul against the Garyboo team. It was more than a foul, it was a deliberate assault. [...] Young Willie Maclellan, the captain of the team, deliberately dribbled the ball to the touchline and kicked it into the sea.

⁴⁵⁴ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 114.

The contrast between Waggett's stiff authoritarianism and the free-spirited attitude of the islanders is emphasised by aspects of the film's *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. To emphasise Waggett's inflexibility, he is continuously rigidly posed in static shots which are contrasted with the camera movements utilised to great effect in the dance sequence at the *rèiteach*, when the locals are enjoying their illicit whisky. At the celebration, the spinning camera places the audience's perspective within the drunkenly giddy mood of the dancers, a method of filming that is repeated in a similar manner in the Eiffel Tower sequence in *The Lavender Hill Mob*. Kemp argues that '*Whisky Galore!* adopts the dance as the archetypal image of social cohesion',⁴⁵⁵ as

the *rèiteach* itself is filmed with so vivid a sense of pleasure and involvement, professional actors and islanders indistinguishably mingled, that it's hard to believe that we're not watching a genuine island party at which the camera just happened to be present. The scene becomes a celebration, not only of the fictional community, but of the relationship between people of Barra and the filmmakers, and perhaps should stand as a joint tribute to Mackendrick's direction and Danischewsky's gift for conviviality.⁴⁵⁶

The celebratory scenes of the *rèiteach* are contrasted with the preparations for Waggett's search for the contraband alcohol.

⁴⁵⁵ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 35.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-6.

The joyous dancing scenes are intercut with the Excisemen's approach and arrival at Todday and are followed by the famous whisky-hiding sequence where the islanders, warned of the authorities' approach, secrete the alcohol in a variety of ingeniously comical places. At this point, the film utilises music to contrast the two opposing attitudes of the locals and the excise authorities and, in a similar manner to *The Proud Valley*, to emphasise community solidarity. The joyous celebration of the *rèiteach* is preceded by the *port a beul*- or mouth-music- scene 'when the frame is bursting with Islanders all singing in unison and downing large quantities of whisky'.⁴⁵⁷ This celebratory tone continues into the *rèiteach* scene and then is supplemented by the whisky-hiding sequence which, like the *port a beul* and *rèiteach* scenes is accompanied by lively spirited music. For Barr, the whisky-hiding montage is 'the one sequence in *Whisky Galore!* which no-one who has seen the film forgets', and its rapid editing means that 'on screen the images flash by in a blur, communicating a sense of urgent intuitive teamwork as the community protects its pleasures and its autonomy against the bureaucrat'.⁴⁵⁸ Much like other Ealing comedies as described earlier in the thesis, these animated sequences confirm the fact that the island, freed from the rigours of rationing are enjoying a

⁴⁵⁷ McArthur, *Whisky Galore! and The Maggie*, p. 47.

⁴⁵⁸ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 113.

carnavalesque escape from the restrictions of the period, has been brought back to life by the arrival of whisky and the lively movement of the *rèiteach* is contrasted with the more sombre music which accompanies the images of Waggett and the excisemen whom are mostly statuesquely shot.

Developing his comparison between *Whisky Galore* and *Passport to Pimlico* in relation to the two texts' relationship towards postwar austerity, Kemp argues:

In *Passport to Pimlico*, ration-books symbolise that drab, reassuring normality into which the briefly independent community relapses. *Passport* reverses the time-switch of *Whisky Galore!*: though its setting is contemporary, it harks nostalgically back to the camaraderie and shared deprivation of the war years. *Whisky Galore!*, by contrast, not only replays a wartime situation in a post-war mood, but compounds the irony of exploiting the dramatic conventions of a war film – or, to be exact, a Resistance movie [...] The last half hour of the film borrows a series of war-movie episodes, never insisted upon but readily identifiable to anyone watching for them: the Gestapo house-to-house search, the duel of wits between Nazi and Resistance leader, the guerrilla harassment covering the escape of Allied airmen, even the bumbling local Kommandant summoned to Headquarters to face the music.⁴⁵⁹

In a similar manner to Kemp, McArthur also discerns a war genre “look” in the film’s portrayal of the excisemen as ‘dressed in black, they resemble nothing so much as a squad of SS or Gestapo men [...] fanning out to do a house-to-house search for

⁴⁵⁹ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 32.

the whisky. Indeed, as they leave their cutter, the lighting makes their oilskins look like leather coats'.⁴⁶⁰

Maintaining the war theme within *Whisky Galore!*, McArthur also detects a 'quisling' figure among the Today islanders.⁴⁶¹ The innkeeper, Roderick MacRurie (James Woodburn), whose business is threatened by the arrival of the illicit whisky, betrays the islanders by informing the authorities of its location. The portrayal of MacRurie as an individualist, prepared to sacrifice the well-being of the local community in favour of his own self-interest, makes him one of those stock Ealing characters that emphasise the studio's distrust of business, emphasising how the antisocial pursuit of profit can be damaging to the interests of the community. Like Garland in *Passport to Pimlico*, Mrs Owen in *The Proud Valley*, the disparate characters in *Halfway House*, or those who reject the egalitarian society of *They Came to a City*, MacRurie is portrayed as an enemy within, whose petty bourgeois self-interest threatens the community's collective cohesion.

Despite MacRurie's treachery, his character is not treated as harshly within *Whisky Galore!* as other individuals who threaten social cohesion in other Ealing films. This is perhaps accountable to Mackendrick's more ambiguous treatment of

⁴⁶⁰ McArthur, *Whisky Galore! and The Maggie*, p. 51.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

character motivation, as the director's 'moral universe', according to Kemp, 'is essentially relative' and 'generally his directorial perspective remains detached,' and 'ironically critical'.⁴⁶² However, if MacRurie is spared punishment by the film's narrative, the same cannot be said of Waggett, whose ultimate humiliation and destruction foreshadows similar endings in later Mackendrick films, especially *The Man in the White Suit* and *The Maggie*, and sets a trend for the director in fashioning cruel plot denouements which seemingly delight in the protagonist's downfall.

Comparing Mackendrick's directorial debut for the studio with his later output, Kemp suggests that *Whisky Galore!* is 'the most light-hearted of his films' which 'pokes fun at the dour bureaucratic excesses of the post-war Labour government with its regime of austerity and ration-books'.⁴⁶³ It would appear that, with *Whisky Galore!*, Mackendrick was flexing his muscles and beginning to exercise his satirical streak, his most caustic satire would come later and the film only differs from *Passport* in its cruel denouement and treatment of criminality which offers a counterpoint to the Ealing norm of treating the community as a stabilising force within society. In *Whisky Galore!*, the community is seen as a manipulative and ruthless and, rather than

⁴⁶² Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 28.

⁴⁶³ Philip Kemp, 'Satire With Tweezers', *Sight and Sound*, Volume 14, Issue 8, August 2004, p. 23.

being altruistically motivated, its power is exercised to further its own self-interest. However, rather than read *Whisky Galore!* as a socially conservative text which counters Ealing's support of the policies of the social democratic labour government, there is a radical element to the islanders' rebellion which places the film on the far-left of the political scale.

For Kemp:

Mackendrick was always the most politically aware of the Ealing directors, and in the films he made there it's possible to trace the growing disillusionment, from a non-conformist left-wing viewpoint, of someone who voted for change in the crucial general election of 1945 hoping to see a new social dispensation, only to watch all the old class-ridden, tradition-encrusted barriers against change come creaking back into place.⁴⁶⁴

Mackendrick himself suggested a radical strain to his personal beliefs. Reflecting back on his earlier time spent working at J. Walter Thompson's London advertising agency, the director described advertising as 'an industry that I in effect despise'⁴⁶⁵, suggesting a personal attitude which mirrors Ealing's general antipathy towards the pursuit of finance.

Developing his argument that Mackendrick was the most radical of the filmmakers at Ealing, Kemp claims that '*Whisky Galore!* puts forward the highly subversive doctrine that the

⁴⁶⁴ Kemp, 'Satire With Tweezers', p. 23.

⁴⁶⁵ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 5.

structure of authority can be rendered powerless by consensual action of the whole community – social anarchism in its essential form’, proceeding to compare the film’s engagement with its anarchistic subtext with Cornelius’ film:

Both *Passport to Pimlico* and *Whisky Galore!* deal with anarchy. In *Passport* it’s what follows after the miniature Burgundian state has declared independence. With British law suspended and controls abolished, rapacious outsiders flood in to create [...] ‘a spivs’ paradise.’ This is the conservative view of anarchy as a ruthless free-for-all shattering the community, a Hobbesian dystopia [...] The people of Todday, by contrast, oppose their instinctively anarchic structure to all forms of external authority (with the notable exception of the church). They act in concert, without deferring to a leader [...] This is anarchism from a sympathetic, left-wing viewpoint.⁴⁶⁶

The notion that the islanders’ actions represent a form of anarchism in action is reflected in a remark made by Waggett who, despite the disinterest of the Home Guard on the mainland, is determined to ensure the islanders fail to seize the contraband alcohol. ‘Once you let people take the law into their own hands it’s anarchy,’ is Waggett response to his wife’s suggestion that he ought to allow the locals to have the whisky, a statement which highlights the officer’s strict morality and resolute attention to his official responsibility and which sets him up for his confrontation with the islanders. Waggett’s steadfastness in the face of increasing hostility is emphasised later on in the film when he

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 34-5.

warns that ‘once I’ve started something, I see it through to the end’ and during the authorities search of the island when he assures the Excise Officer, Farquharson (Henry Mollison) that ‘he has done nothing more than his duty’, confirming his refusal to compromise and admit that he may have handled the situation with more diplomatic tact.

The fact that Mackendrick’s professed sympathy for Waggett becomes difficult to locate in the film’s narrative problematises the director’s authorial influence upon *Whisky Galore!*, confirming this thesis’ assertion that Ealing’s output ought to be considered as a collective studio endeavour rather than seeing the films as products of auteurist principles.

According to McArthur:

To complicate the question of meaning of the film and to whom responsibility for that meaning should be attributed, Balcon was so dissatisfied with the completed film that he was prepared to cut it one hour and release as a second feature. [...] Charles Crichton shot some additional footage, took it and the film as shot into the cutting room and (Crichton claims in consultation with Mackendrick) emerged with the film as we now have it. The complicated history of *Whisky Galore!*’s production should, at the very least, make us wary of celebrating it, in auteurist terms, as an unambiguously Mackendrick film.⁴⁶⁷

After Balcon’s dissatisfaction with *Whisky Galore!*, Mackendrick’s next contribution for the studio, Dearden’s police drama *The Blue Lamp*, represented something of a demotion for

⁴⁶⁷ McArthur, *Whisky Galore! and The Maggie*, p. 28.

the director as he was moved onto scriptwriting and second unit work. Working as an uncredited 2nd unit director, Mackendrick is also credited with providing additional dialogue for the film, most of which involved the juvenile delinquent character of Tom Riley, memorably played by Dirk Bogarde. Kemp places great emphasis, both on Mackendrick's script additions and to the fact that his contribution highlighted Mackendrick's themes which he would develop in later films he made for the studio, especially his more nuanced treatment of the subjects of criminality and how it relates to Ealing's treatment of consensus and social cohesion. Speaking of his later contribution as scriptwriter to *Dance Hall* and comparing the two criminals within the separate films, Kemp claims that:

Easily the most interesting figure in *Dance Hall* is the villain, Alec, played by Bonar Colleano. This character, one of those quick-thinking manipulators that always fascinated Mackendrick, seems so much more intensely alive than anyone else in the film that his final defeat feels like the wrong ending. It may be no coincidence that the villain is again the most vivid character in *The Blue Lamp*, where Mackendrick also had a hand in the script.⁴⁶⁸

The Blue Lamp is an archetypal Ealing venture, forthrightly displaying all the studio's formal and thematic concerns in its cherished documentary realist approach to celebrating community values and promoting the public interest at the expense of

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 42.

individualism. For Aldgate and Richards, *The Blue Lamp*, marks a continuation with Ealing's wartime promotion of the people's war as 'the life of service and duty under discipline that had characterized Ealing's wartime films passed in peacetime from the war against the enemy without – the Germans – to the enemy within – the criminal' and the film's overriding 'mood is one of continuity, tradition and service'.⁴⁶⁹ Similarly, for Kemp, *The Blue Lamp* is one of the films most associated with Ealing's social agenda encapsulating the studio's promotion of public service in its depiction of the working class PC George Dixon (Jack Warner):

The Blue Lamp is a key work in Ealing's development, laying down the pattern for the studio's serious output, as did *Passport to Pimlico* for the comedies. Both films were scripted by 'Tibby' Clarke, the single most important influence on the post-war Ealing mainstream[...] *The Blue Lamp* is the only film in which Clarke and Mackendrick worked together – the two strands, maverick and mainstream, briefly intertwined.⁴⁷⁰

The Blue Lamp highlights the studio's promotion of national consensus ideals and its denouement- as in *Passport to Pimlico* - is quintessential Ealing, with the criminal fraternity uniting with the forces of law and order to collectively apprehend Riley and repel the threat of delinquency to society. For Barr, the

⁴⁶⁹ Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, pp. 130-31.

⁴⁷⁰ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 43.

film highlights Ealing's 1950s reversal which began to see the studio champion tradition at the expense of social change:

We read *The Blue Lamp* as an image of how society is, especially as it deals with as powerful a social force as the police. From the start the film defuses all revolt of new against old, simplifying it into aberrancy, delinquency. [...] From the time of *The Blue Lamp*, the balance at Ealing is overwhelmingly on the side of accepting authority and the way things are run: the young don't stand up to the old, but learn from them.⁴⁷¹

As has been outlined throughout this thesis, there is a tension between Ealing's consensual, socially didactic impulse and the darker, more ambiguous psychology and these tensions is clearly evident within a number of comedies and particularly by those films made for the studio by Mackendrick and Hamer.

Aldgate and Richards emphasise the social dichotomy that occurs in *The Blue Lamp*, where:

Bogarde gives an electrifying performance as Riley, a new kind of criminal, a new kind of male, a new kind of youth, the antithesis of everything Ealing stands for, the threat to settled order and stability. He is neurotic, erotic, arrogant, revelling in violence and power, caressing his gun like a phallic symbol, beating up his girlfriend, shooting down an unarmed policeman. He sets the pattern for a series of such threatening young males who emerge in post-war cinema [...] The juvenile delinquents are self centred individuals out for kicks and personal gain. The police, in line with Ealing's collective ethos, are a community.

⁴⁷¹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 134.

They are the epitome of British life, rooted in the local community and committed to protecting it.⁴⁷²

In *The Blue Lamp*, Riley's brutal and shocking murder of Dixon emphasises that he has, according to Kemp, 'transgressed a code acknowledged equally by police and criminals, and thus by general agreement placed himself beyond the communal pale'.⁴⁷³ However, despite the fact that Riley's transgression necessitates his capture and punishment, the tension between Ealing's propensity for clamping down on any threat to community and the almost perverse appeal of Riley's psychology is never satisfactorily resolved in the film. The major reason for this lies in the portrayal of Riley by Bogarde and the influence of Mackendrick script contribution to his character.

Noting the similarities between *The Blue Lamp* and *Passport to Pimlico*, Kemp argues that in both films 'superficial disagreements are submerged within the underlying consensus: cop and villain, like Pemberton and Gregg [in *Passport to Pimlico*] readily shelve their differences to work together'.⁴⁷⁴ However, Kemp goes on to emphasise how the darker elements of the film sit uncomfortably alongside this consensual ethos, notably in the erotically charged scenes between Riley and his girlfriend, the more innocent Diana Lewis (Peggy Evans) which

⁴⁷² Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, p. 131.

⁴⁷³ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 44.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

suggest ‘a hint of moral ambiguity’ and ‘a striving towards greater psychological intensity’.⁴⁷⁵ These more intense, psychological elements within *The Blue Lamp* are attributed to Mackendrick by the film’s producer Michael Relph who sensed ‘a rather more sophisticated viewpoint’⁴⁷⁶ to Mackendrick’s script than is normally the case for Ealing.

Mackendrick’s contribution to *The Blue Lamp*, in addition to the performances of Warner and - especially, Bogarde – helps to elevate the film from what is essentially a rather earnest exercise in social didacticism which, as the opening caption points out, is dedicated to the ‘men and women of the Metropolitan Police’ and to ‘their colleagues in the Police Service of Britain’ into being a much more sophisticated psychological study of criminality. On the one hand, the film is instantly recognisable as a typical Ealing exercise in restraint and decorum, yet at the heart of this there lies a contradictory fascination with the attraction of criminality. This dichotomy is apparent in the problems the film encountered from the British Board of Film Censors when the shooting script was submitted for approval in 1949.

A. Fleetwood Wilson of the BBFC reacted to the ‘sordid, vicious unpleasant story’, writing ‘I deplore this type of film

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁶ Quoted in Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 44.

being produced in the country'.⁴⁷⁷ Similarly, Norah Crouzet argued, 'it is a pity that a film illustrating the London police work should be just another "American" gangster story' advising that:

As the company is to have police co-operation, one can reasonably hope for a factual treatment without sensationalism. It would be disastrous to treat this dangerous subject of adolescent criminals with any glamour. On the other hand, whilst it is necessary to show the criminals as mean, cowardly sneak-thieves, there should not be too much emphasis on cruelty towards women; and though the background is sordid, there should not be any prostitution or eroticism.⁴⁷⁸

Despite the BBFC's concerns, *The Blue Lamp* somehow managed to smuggle in an erotic undercurrent to the text which did indeed contain a sexualisation of cruelty towards women in the relationship between Riley and Diana. For Barr, not only does Riley manage to 'stand aloof from' the 'shared code and shared idiom' of consensus, but is also

violent, hysterical, irresponsible, and – a significant part of the package – sexy. (The way he handles his gun, when threatening the girl, announces that his violence and sexuality go together; the girl is rejection both together, and renouncing her surrender to both impulses.) He is labelled from the start as a postwar phenomenon, disrupting the "social contract" of the war years.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁷ Quoted in Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, 1991, p. 129.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid. See Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and Society: Britain in the 1950s and 1960s* (Milton Keynes: Open University Study Guide, 1992) for a summary of the BBFC's objections and suggestions for alterations to the film, pp. 68-70.

⁴⁷⁹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 85.

Despite its complexity in relation to its psychological portrayal of delinquency, *The Blue Lamp* ultimately encapsulates the studio's promotion of national unity, according with Balcon's statement on the studio's reluctance to criticise British institutions and representing the more socially-conservative Ealing in its attempt to 'project Britain and the British character.' In both its portrayal of the police which, in the opinion of Mark Duguid, qualifies the film as 'police propaganda'⁴⁸⁰ and its thematic engagement with criminality it stands as the antithesis of the 'other' Ealing as represented by Mackendrick and Hamer whose films often employed a far more social and psychological critique of the issue. *The Blue Lamp* stands as a marked contrast to Hamer's depiction of criminality and social inequality as discussed in the previous chapter. Similarly, the film's portrayal of a 'benevolent community' uniting to dispel the threat of the juvenile delinquent Riley is a far remove from the ambiguous morality of communities as expressed in the comedies Mackendrick directed for the studio. Mackendrick would combine his interest in the duality of innocence and experience with an even more nuanced approach to the theme of character motivation in his next film, *The Man in the White Suit*, the most perceptive and intelligent critique of capitalism and the one-nation consensus to be made at Ealing.

⁴⁸⁰ Duguid, 'The Dark Side of Ealing', p. 56.

The Man in the White Suit

During his demotion to second unit direction and scriptwriting on *The Blue Lamp* and *Dance Hall*, Mackendrick had come across the play, *The Flower Within the Bud*, written by his cousin and occasional Ealing scriptwriter, Roger MacDougall. Although MacDougal's preference for writing for the stage meant that that he never signed a full-time contract for the studio⁴⁸¹, he nevertheless scripted a total of six films for Ealing between 1939 and 1952, including two of his own adaptations: *The Man in the White Suit* and the IRA drama *The Gentle Gunman* (Basil Dearden, 1952). However, *The Man in the White Suit* apart, the most celebrated film written for Ealing by MacDougall is probably the *The Bells Go Down* the firefighting drama which helped to cement the studio's people's war credentials.

Believing that *The Flower Within the Bud*'s central premise of the creation of a fabric that doesn't wear out and its subsequent impact upon the cotton industry contained potential for a screen adaptation, Mackendrick approached Balcon and began to draft an initial script. Despite MacDougal's initial reaction to what he considered to be the butchering of his original play, he eventually agreed to work on further re-drafts and the duo were later joined by John Dighton who took the third scriptwriting credit on the film.

⁴⁸¹ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 43.

The Man in the White Suit and *Whisky Galore!* contain a number of narrative and formal parallels. Like *Whisky Galore!*, *The Man in the White Suit* begins with documentary-style opening shots of a Northern industrial landscape of cotton mills accompanied by voice-over introduction of mill-owner Alan Birnley (Cecil Parker). Similarly, the cruelty inflicted upon Waggett by the islanders of *Todday* is replicated in the final scenes of *The Man in the White Suit* as both films end with the humiliation of their respective protagonists as they are forced to suffer the indignity of expulsion from the community amidst gleeful and cruel laughter, a narrative trope that Mackendrick would repeat in his third comedy for the studio, *The Maggie*.

In the case of *The Man in the White Suit*, Sidney Stratton (Alec Guinness), sporting his luminous new suit is pursued by a determined crowd anxious to apprehend him in order to suppress his creation. When he is finally cornered, the mob set about tearing the suit from his back and in doing so discover that the formula has not worked and the cloth disintegrates, leaving the chemist semi-naked. However, the cruelty of the ending is tempered slightly by the ambiguity of the film's final scene. Birnley's voice-over informs us that 'the crisis is now over... We face the future with confidence we have seen the last of Sidney Stratton', only for Stratton face to light up as he glances inside his

notebook, and exclaiming 'I see', realising that his experiments may still yet reach fruition and suggesting he intends to continue in his endeavours. 'At least I hope we've seen the last of him', Birnley says, as Stratton walks away with a renewed spring in his step and with the gurgling sound of his scientific apparatus making a final non-diegetic reprise.

A fascination with the cruel aspects of human nature is one of Mackendrick's major themes and this has led to him being described as a 'scabrous director'⁴⁸² by Kemp who, commenting upon how Mackendrick's films for Ealing act as a counterpoint to the studio's wholesome image declared that 'the world of Mackendrick's comedies are about as cosy as a snakepit'.⁴⁸³ *The Man in the White Suit* combines Mackendrick's fascination for the callous, Machiavellian nature of humanity with a level of satire that, *Kind Hearts and Coronet* apart, surpasses anything that emerged at Ealing.

Commenting on how by utilising the comedy genre, a text can engage with perspectives that other forms would find dangerous to articulate, Mackendrick asked:

I wonder what would have happened if I had proposed to Sir Michael Balcon an earnest and gripping drama exposing the

⁴⁸² Philip Kemp, 'Teaching Galore', *Sight and Sound*, Volume 14, Issue 8 August 2004, p. 38

⁴⁸³ Philip Kemp, 'Mackendrick Land', *Sight and Sound* Volume 58, Number 1, Winter 1988-9, p. 50.

viciousness of some leaders of British industry, who combine with shop stewards in an attempt to bribe, to morally corrupt and finally to lynch an idealistic young man who was trying to offer the benefit of his science to humanity. It is a rather brutal theme; a slander of left and right wing behaviour, and pretty insulting to the liberals, too. Yet we made it, we called it *The Man in the White Suit*, and because it was a comedy with Alec Guinness, nobody objected at all.⁴⁸⁴

Similarly, Mackendrick was almost apologetic about the film's cruelty, admitting that 'if made seriously' the film would represent 'a horrendous attack on contemporary society. But I hope we did it with enough good humour that the undercurrents in it – which are also fairly melancholy, if you like – are not oppressive'.⁴⁸⁵ Moreover, on another occasion, responding to a suggestion of the inherent realism in his comedy, Mackendrick countered with a quote that encapsulates his inherently intellectual approach to the genre highlighting an affinity with the notion of the carnivalesque:

Not realism, no – but truth in a way. I have a strong feeling about comedy, that the only jokes worth making are those which would be unbearable unless you make them as jokes. To be frivolous about trivial things is childish – but to make fun of the things that really scare you, that if you like is the basis of truth in comedy. You see, I believe laughter to be not just a grace, but *the* saving grace of mankind.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁴ Quoted in John Cutts, 'Mackendrick Finds the Sweet Smell of Success', *Films and Filming* June 1957, p. 8.

⁴⁸⁵ Quoted in Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 55.

⁴⁸⁶ Quoted in Philip Kemp, 'Saving Grace: Mackendrick at Quimper', *Sight and Sound*, Volume 59, Number 3, Summer 1990, p. 149.

Mackendrick's trademark dark and cruel humour which was initially suggested in *Whisky Galore!* had matured in *The Man in the White Suit* into a much more sophisticated satirical direction, described by Duguid as 'perhaps the most cynical, and certainly the most complex, of the Ealing comedies'⁴⁸⁷ and becoming the major comedy made at Ealing to comprehensively challenge the studio's consensual ideals. This thesis has highlighted the radical aspects of Ealing's politics but, with the notable exception of *They Came to a City*, *The Man in the White Suit* remains the studio's most overtly political statement, described by Philip Kemp as 'Ealing's only true political satire',⁴⁸⁸ and praised by Jonathan Coe as having 'some claim to be considered the only really mature and generous political comedy ever to be made in this country'.⁴⁸⁹ It was also, revealingly, the last film to be made at Ealing under a Labour government.

The complex nature of *The Man in the White Suit's* satire, which occurs in a variety of thematic and formal levels, is acknowledged by Mackendrick when he explained that,

⁴⁸⁷ Mark Duguid, 'The Man in the White Suit', *Screenonline*: www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/bb1408/ (Accessed 24/04/2009)

⁴⁸⁸ Kemp, 'Satire With Tweezers', p. 23

⁴⁸⁹ Jonathan Coe, 'Political Comedy at its Best', *New Statesman*, 22 August 1997, p. 40.

It wasn't intended to be a satire only at the expense of Industry... Each character in the story was intended as a caricature of a separate political attitude, covering the entire range from Communist, through official Trades Unionism, Romantic Individualism, Liberalism, Enlightened and Unenlightened Capitalism to Strong-arm Reaction. Even the central character was intended as a comic picture of Disinterested Science.⁴⁹⁰

Before addressing the different political perspectives which are satirised throughout the film, it is worth considering the formal satire employed within *The Man in the White Suit*, particularly how the film engages with the science-fiction genre. The narrative's central premise of an invention of an indestructible fabric is one which is lifted straight from the terrain of science fiction even if, ultimately, the film remains restrained in this generic connection. For Richard Porton, stylistically the film 'belongs somewhere between the earnest social realism of Robert Hamer's *It Always Rains on Sunday* and the exhilaratingly baroque films directed by the late Michael Powell', suggesting that it 'looks forward to the more radically dystopian visions of Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1986)'.⁴⁹¹ Aspects of the film's thematic content and *mise-en-scène* clearly owe a debt to sci-fi with Stuart H. Stock and Kenneth von Gunden even going as far to declare *The*

⁴⁹⁰ Quoted in Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 46.

⁴⁹¹ Richard Porton, 'A Second Look', *Cinéaste*, Volume 18, Number 1, 1990, p. 30.

Man in the White Suit as ‘one of the most mature, enjoyable and intelligent SF films ever made’.⁴⁹² Elements of the fantastic, most notably when Stratton escapes from his captors by using the thread of his cloth to scale down the house, wrestle the film from the realist mode associated with Ealing, seemingly apparent in the film’s documentary-style opening. However, there is a tension within the text between the fantastical and realist elements of the narrative and this is apparent in the film’s fictional engagement with science. On the one hand, it could be argued that the variety of machines utilised by Stratton to conduct his experiments into the construction of the cloth belong to the fantastical generic trope of science fiction. However, the filmmakers were keen to ground the depiction of scientific exploration in the film - and the language used to describe this experimentation - as realistically as possible.

The publicity material for the film, keen to stress Ealing’s efforts at keeping the film’s central premise as close to reality as possible, emphasised that much of the film was shot on location in Burnley and Bolton where ‘close co-operation came from several local factories, which gave permission for the film-makers to shoot indoors as well as outdoors’ whilst also pointing out that ‘before the film went into production, Mackendrick and Sidney

⁴⁹² Stuart H. Stock and Kenneth von Gunden, *Twenty All-Time Great Science Fiction Films* (New York: Arlington House, 1982), p. 50.

Cole made a long series of visits to textile factories, laboratories and research institutes from Fifeshire in Scotland to Pontypool in South Wales' in order to receive 'advice and assistance'.⁴⁹³

In addition to Ealing's attempt to foreground the realistic elements of *The Man in the White Suit*, the film also thematically engages with the major contemporary concern of the threat of nuclear weaponry. Mackendrick explained that prior to working on the film, he and MacDougal 'had been trying to think of a comic way to deal with the invention of nuclear weapons'⁴⁹⁴ but after reaching a dead-end developed the initial premise by contemplating the role of disinterested science in the field of textiles rather than weaponry. There are parallels within the film's treatment of a scientific invention of an indestructible cloth with the production of nuclear weapons as the language adopted by the film in its description of the technological process such as 'radioactive thorium' and 'heavy hydrogen' echo similar terminology in the nuclear industry. On one level, the film can be read as a veiled critique on the anti-social impulse of the advancement of deadly technology which ultimately threatens - rather than advances - society with Iain Millar recognising 'recurrent nuclear references' within the text, including 'the suit

⁴⁹³ *The Man in the White Suit Exhibitors' Campaign Book* (BFI: London, 1951)

⁴⁹⁴ Quoted in Kemp *Lethal Innocence*, p. 51.

itself' which 'glows in the dark as if worn by Pierre Curie's ghost'.⁴⁹⁵

The nuclear threat to civilisation during the emerging Cold War was an obvious contemporary concern, highlighted by a speech made by Clement Attlee to the Royal Society in 1945. Shortly after returning from a summit on nuclear weapons in Washington, Attlee stated:

The scientist and the poet have to live in the world with other citizens and have their civic responsibilities. If, as I believe, it is right that in all departments of our national life, and particularly in those of government, we should seek the advice of scientists and should understand as far as we can the problems in which they deal, it is equally important that scientists should understand the problem of those engaged in government and the difficulties with which that are confronted. I believe that the ideal of scientists for free interchange of knowledge can only be realized in a world from which war has been banished. It is not merely the dangers to which, through scientific achievements, the human race is exposed that should be in our minds, but we must realize the beneficent advantages which science can give us and which can only be fully utilized in a world of peace where free peoples freely cooperate in their common ends.⁴⁹⁶

The obligations and the benefits of scientific advancement which Attlee stressed in his speech is one of the major themes of *The Man in the White Suit*. The pressing issue of the threat of nuclear obliteration is emphasised by the explosions created by Stratton in the laboratory as he undertakes his experiments. At these moments in the film the war imagery becomes impossible to

⁴⁹⁵ *Independent on Sunday*, 26 June 2005.

⁴⁹⁶ Quoted in Sweet, *Shepperton Babylon*, p. 185.

ignore as Stratton and his assistant, Wilson (John Rudling) cower behind sandbags wearing tin helmets. As they nervously wait to ‘push the button’ to discover whether their experiment is going to be successful, the nuclear subtext becomes glaringly apparent. For Kemp, the experiments increasingly adopt ‘the trappings of war’, strengthening the film’s link with the science fiction genre:

At this period, such a wary attitude to science was uncommon in movies, which generally viewed it as an enlightened force, bringer of health and prosperity, saviour of humankind against natural and even (as in *When Worlds Collide*) extra-terrestrial disaster. Mackendrick’s film anticipates later developments, as the mid-fifties science-fiction cycle got under way and nuclear metaphors darkened its initial optimism. Indeed the blackened, pulsating pit left by Sidney’s first titanic blast looks remarkably like a miniature version of those mysterious craters around which gawking bystanders would collect, to be zapped by emerging aliens.⁴⁹⁷

The Man in the White Suit’s affinity with science fiction also offers a comparison with what is considered to be one of the earliest examples of the genre: the gothic romanticism of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. In his single-minded pursuit of scientific progress, the Promethean figure of Stratton becomes a Dr Frankenstein figure in the film, ultimately punished for his scientific invention and its disturbance of the social order. Instead of a monster, the hero of Mackendrick’s film has created a cloth

⁴⁹⁷ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 52.

which, like Shelley's creation, is perceived as a threat to society and has to be eliminated. Mark Duguid even goes as far to suggest that the end of the film's 'massed pursuit through the night-time streets ... suggests the climax of Frankenstein, minus only the pitchforks and braziers'.⁴⁹⁸

The dichotomy between innocence and experience in Mackendrick's work has been noted earlier, but within Stratton the two distinctions are dangerously combined within one character's psyche. Stratton is undoubtedly a scientific genius, but this positive attribute is tempered by a naiveté unwilling, or unable, to comprehend the social ramifications of his endeavours. To the last, Stratton remains dumbfounded by the reactions his discovery invokes as he strives onwards with his experiments. Therefore Stratton can be regarded as an archetypal Mackendrick character, encapsulating the director's interest in the representation of the dichotomy between innocence and experience. For Kemp, in *The Man in the White Suit*:

The interplay between innocence and experience is no straightforward clash of opposites, but a matter of ambiguities, of moral relativity. Each character is an admixture of qualities: naïve in some contexts, crafty in others, as the ethical perspectives shift. Sidney [...] is by no means always the simple innocent he appears. Up against Kierlaw and his colleagues he seems hopelessly naïve – but earlier in the film he's a devious, underhand figure, insinuating his buccaneer experiment into the conformity of the research lab, relying on

⁴⁹⁸ Duguid, 'The Dark Side of Ealing', p. 60.

the mental limitations of his colleagues to let it pass unnoticed.⁴⁹⁹

There is one fleeting moment in the film when Stratton seemingly becomes aware of his responsibilities towards society and this is conveyed during the final chase sequence when the community pursue him through the streets. Confronted by his landlady, Mrs Watson (Edie Martin), whose additional income from washing clothes is jeopardised by Stratton's invention, Mrs Watson pleads, 'Why can't you scientists leave things alone? What about my bit of washing when there's no washing to do?' This simple remark appears to strike a resonance in Stratton's appreciation of the situation. Captured in close-up, a brief look of understanding appears on Stratton's face but, quickly replaced by his former individualist determination in his endeavour, the scientist continues with his attempt to flee the mob and inform the press of his discovery.

Barr sees the confrontation between Mrs Watson and Stratton as displaying the scientist's brief moment of recognition, suggesting that:

We can see her appearance simply as forcing on Sidney, for the first time, the fact of other people's existence as people, with their own motivations, which cannot be taken away from them.

⁴⁹⁹ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, pp. 50-1.

The long close-up of Sidney then implies [...] the dawn of a new recognition on Sidney's part: of society as a network of vested interests which, however narrow, sectional and bloody-minded they may be, exist and are part of the data. [...] Sidney has gone through the film like a zombie in his personal relationships, a scientist with no private dimension at all. Now for the first time, *in extremis*, he has to look at someone as another human being, someone whom he has taken for granted as a friend and who is now inexplicably hostile. Mrs Watson sums up, in the starkest possible way, the spirit of the arguments used by unions and bosses alike, which Sidney has always managed not quite to take in, because they were expressed in oblique, wary terms. Now they are spelled out very clearly and basically. In the close-up, we can sense the machinery in his computer mind whirring and clicking as he feeds in the amazing new data.⁵⁰⁰

However, James Walters offers a slightly more nuanced assessment of the shot, arguing that:

Guinness's blank gaze in the extended close-up might be yet more ambiguous than Barr allows for in his reading. If it does indeed represent Sidney's recognition, it also represents the dogmatic dedication of a man who can see the direct implications of his actions for others yet dedicates himself anew to those actions regardless.⁵⁰¹

Up until the confrontation with his landlady, Stratton had naively imagined himself to be playing the role of the hero. This is emphasised in the speech Stratton makes after he is fired from the mill at the beginning of the film. Stratton, shot in medium close-up, and seemingly addressing the owner of the Mill, Michael Corland (Michael Gough), declares:

⁵⁰⁰ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, pp. 139-40.

⁵⁰¹ James Walters, 'Ambiguity and Achievement: Alec Guinness's Ealing Performances', *Ealing Revisited*, p. 147.

No, Mr Corland, you're not firing me, I resign. I'm not a cheat; not a swindler. I did what I did because there was no other way. I may have had just a menial job here but at Cambridge they gave me a first and a fellowship. I would have been there still if they had not been so short-sighted- just as you are, and all the others I've worked for. One day there'll be someone with real vision. I shall have a laboratory given to me; a proper laboratory with really modern equipment and assistants of my own – no don't interrupt me – its small minds like yours that stand in the way of progress.

The moment Stratton concludes his speech a cut reveals that he is not in the boardroom delivering his impassioned speech to Corland but in fact in the company washroom speaking to himself in the mirror. The sequence is important on a number of levels. In addition to succeeding as a piece of comedy by getting the audience to laugh at Stratton's self-delusion, the speech reveals important traits to his character and to various themes within the text as the effect of seeing Stratton in the mirror reinforces the binary aspects of his character and his inner dichotomy between innocence and experience.

Stratton's single-mindedness and innocence never allow for him to reach an understanding of the social ramifications of his work. When he is successful in creating the indestructible cloth, Stratton visits Daphne Birnley (Joan Greenwood) in his newly fitted white suit and she describes him as 'a knight in shining armour.' Daphne attempts to explain the consequences of

Stratton's discovery to him: 'Don't you understand what this means? Millions of people all over the world living lives of drudgery, fighting an endless losing battle against shabbiness and dirt. You've won that battle for them. You've set them free. The whole world's going to bless you.' However, Stratton appears incredulous to this suggestion as throughout the film the entire motivation of his character is connected absolutely to his scientific work at the expense of not only those around him and the wider society but also his own desires and needs.

The enigmatic figure of Stratton remains a mystery to the audience precisely because the scientist refuses to be distracted from his primary objective. Neglecting essential human requirements for a comfortable existence, such as money, food, and social contacts such as love and friendship, as well as encapsulating the film's satire on disinterested science, Stratton embodies the archetypal figure of the driven, but flawed, Romantic genius, representative of the film's satire on romantic individualism which Mackendrick referred to. Whether it can be accountable to arrogance or naivety, or a combination of both, remains ambiguous, however, Stratton undoubtedly regards himself as superior to those around him and not accountable to the conventions and codes of society and it is this hubris which is responsible for his lack of capacity for both self and social

analysis and the cause of his ultimate downfall. As Porton suggests, ‘Although many feel compelled to embrace Sidney Stratton as a valiant fighter against the Establishment, he clearly regards himself as a scientific Übermensch and dismisses all doubters as myopic and pigheaded’.⁵⁰² In his almost Nietzschean rejection of the morality of the herd, Stratton becomes completely isolated by the end of the film as he is confronted and then persecuted by almost the entire population of the town, hunted down by bosses and workers alike.

The fact that the workers and industrialists unite to expel the threat imposed by Stratton’s invention to the industry could be regarded, as Mackendrick suggested, as representing a satirical attack on both left and right. For Harper and Porter, the film, ‘can be interpreted as a conservative fantasy about creativity and social control, and the way in which inventiveness can threaten the powers of both capital and labour’.⁵⁰³ Similarly, Perry acknowledges how *The Man in the White Suit*’s ‘theme was rather more ambitious than those usually tackled in Ealing comedies, for it is an ironic view of both capital and labour’.⁵⁰⁴ Essentially both these readings regard the film as a “plague-on-both-your-houses” attack upon the antithetical perspectives of the political spectrum which tend to overlook the nuances of the film’s political

⁵⁰² Porton, ‘A Second Look’, p. 30.

⁵⁰³ Harper and Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s*, p. 62.

⁵⁰⁴ Perry, *Forever Ealing*, p. 128.

engagement with issues of industrial relations. *The Man in the White Suit* is undoubtedly addressing issues of class consensus and how such a consensus can stifle progress. However, under closer examination, it becomes apparent that the film's treatment of its engagement with the balance of opposing political forces opens the film up to much more radical reading than Harper, Porter and Perry suggest. As Porton points out:

[P]opular culture can serve as an astonishingly accurate barometer of political and social contradictions, and Mackendrick's satirical treatment of industrial strife in a Northern city captures the tensions that divided postwar Britain with gleeful accuracy [...] Although *The Man in the White Suit* appears to engage in a traditionally cautious satirical ploy by playing both ends against the middle, it is not a conservative polemic couched in the form of evenhanded satire. Mackendrick's seriocomic account [...] reflects the delicate social contract following World War II which conveyed the illusion that British capital and labour benefited from mutually advantageous quid pro quo. It eventually becomes clear that *The Man in the White Suit* is not skewering both capital and labour with Swiftian equanimity.⁵⁰⁵

There is scope within *The Man in the White Suit*'s treatment of industrial relations that allows for a radical left wing reading, which does not adopt an equal attack upon opposing industrial forces. Such a reading links the film to Gramsci's theory of 'transformism' introduced in the opening chapter of this thesis' discussion of *The Proud Valley* which suggests the unification of antagonistic political forces to strengthen the

⁵⁰⁵ Porton, 'A Second Look', p. 30.

hegemony of the ruling class. The consensus between the bosses and the workers also draws a contemporary comparison to the notion of Butskellism and is articulated during the meeting between the striking Trade Union and management. One of the bosses, Cranford (Howard Marion Crawford), explains to the union committee that they have no desire to manufacture the cloth. Epitomising Ealing's cherished wartime national consensus, Cranford explains to the workers, 'My dear friends you must see that our bone of contention is non-existent. Capital and Labour are hand-in-hand in this. Once again, as so often in the past, each one needs the help of the other.' From that moment in the film the alliance between capital and labour is confirmed, as both forces take to the streets to hunt Stratton.

If we take into account what we have seen previously in the film, the consensus between capital and labour remains an uneasy alliance. As Mackendrick suggests, *The Man in the White Suit*, represents a satirical exposé of a variety of political ideologies but this remains unbalanced as, throughout the narrative, the film's most savage attack is consistently aimed at the management with a far more gentle satire aimed at the trade unions and the working class. As Kemp explains:

In its treatment of the various factions the film is far from even-handed. The workers, though mocked for the narrow rigidity of

their attitudes, are depicted much more sympathetically than the management. [...] There is about them an independence, and a pride, completely lacking in their layabout counterparts of *I'm Alright Jack* (a true plague-on-both-your-houses film) or in the Commie-manipulated louts of *The Angry Silence*. The first appearance of Bertha, manoeuvring a truckload of castings with practised confidence, presents an image of capable, industrially skilled woman rare in British (or indeed American) cinema after 1945.⁵⁰⁶

The Man in the White Suit's satire against both trade unionism and communist ideology is encapsulated within the character of Bertha (Vida Hope) who is presented as a caricature of left-wing ideals. When she first meets Stratton at the Birnley mill, blinded by her own political dogma, Bertha mistakes the scientist as a victim of capitalist injustice and misjudges his class background, describing him as 'flotsam floating on a tide of profit', before adding, 'There's capitalism for you.' Moreover, after her criticism of 'the old school tie' she refuses Stratton's desire to avoid the tea break, arguing that 'we had to fight for it', emphasising how gains were made in industrial relations through the struggles of the working class. However, despite her regular echoing of bland and empty Marxist platitudes such as her description of 'vested interests' and 'the dead hand of monopoly' which is her explanation of how the indestructible cloth will never be marketed, Bertha is treated sympathetically throughout the film and her communist rhetoric is generally used for comic

⁵⁰⁶ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 62.

effect. She is the first to befriend Stratton at the mill and only turns against him when she realises that his invention represents a threat to employment in the industry. When Stratton says he is working at Birnley's for no money she offers him her savings, a kindness that is matched equally by the working-class Mrs Watson who allows him to stay at her lodgings rent free. There is also one other telling moment of altruism in the film and it occurs at the climax of the chase sequence when Stratton's suit disintegrates and he is left standing semi-naked in the street. The only characters who refuse to join in the cruel laughter are Bertha and Daphne, and it is a working-class male who hands Stratton a coat to cover his nakedness.

All of these acts of human kindness, which one could describe as a representation of working class solidarity towards an individual whom they consider to have been victimised, are in stark contrast to the attitude of the management of the industry. The workers oppose Stratton only when they realise his invention poses a real threat to their jobs and livelihoods whereas the stance of the bosses is always driven by their enthusiasm for increased profits. The unions in *The Man in the White Suit* are not motivated by avarice but by self-preservation, whereas the capitalists are depicted throughout as being motivated by greed. Contrast the generosity of Bertha and Mrs Watson with Birnley's

refusal to invest in Corland's mill at the film's outset. This could be regarded as a decision undertaken on the grounds of pure business sense, but if we consider the fact that Corland is Birnley's daughter's fiancé then the decision would appear to be driven by self-interest and a rather malicious act by Birnley, crudely motivated by his personal animosity towards his future son-in-law.

Richard Porton has argued:

While *The Man in the White Suit*'s political stance is far from radical, its working class characters are not caricatures. [...] Bertha offers him solace during his initial struggles with management, and the impetuous scientist's working class neighbours form a community whose warmth and conviviality is in sharp contrast to the stuffiness of Birnley's boardroom. It is true that the Birnley workers flail out at Sidney with a ferocity that surpasses the more nuanced rage of the business tycoons. The workers' anger, however, is clearly engendered by a desperation – a sense of powerlessness – that elicits our empathy rather than scorn.⁵⁰⁷

Although Porton is correct to point out the sense of community expressed within *The Man in the White Suit*'s engagement with the working class and how this is sympathetically portrayed, it is hardly the case that the workers are more aggressive to Stratton than the management of the industry who use all the means at their disposal to get him to sell

⁵⁰⁷ Porton, 'A Second Look', p. 31.

his rights to the invention in order to suppress it. Moreover, there is a class distinction between the two responses. Admittedly it is the case that before their uneasy consensus both groups resort to kidnapping Stratton but previous to resorting to such heavy-handed techniques workers and management adopted actions appropriate to their material positions within society. The workers withdrew their labour, utilising the only collective strength they possess under capitalism, whilst the bosses attempted to bribe Stratton, using their material wealth to reach a favourable conclusion to the crisis.

Mackendrick's earlier quote that the film satirised enlightened capitalism is articulated in the film within the character of Birnley. However, if Birnley is a representation of benevolent capitalism then he is seemingly as motivated by self-interest as the other, more hard-line, factory owners. Having failed to bribe the inventor, Birnley refuses to submit to violence to force Stratton to acquiesce in the demands of the industry, but he is still capable of underhand dealings with the other capitalists whenever necessary. It is Birnley who initially wants to manufacture the cloth, falsely believing he has control of the rights to the invention, only altering his viewpoint to support its suppression when he realises Corland has the ownership rights. Throughout the meetings with Stratton, the bosses initially

attempt to deceive him to sign a contract which passes ownership to the industry. Their next tactic involves offering to buy him out, before finally offering the lure of sex to tempt the scientist. They are unable to see beyond their own material positions to understand that individuals can be motivated to act without the lure of money, profit and self-interest.

If Birnley represents what Mackendrick termed as enlightened capitalism, then *The Man in the White Suit*'s representation of unenlightened capitalism is undoubtedly portrayed in the character of the grand oligarch of the cotton industry, Sir John Kierlaw (Ernest Thesiger), who is feared by the other owners of the mills because of his extreme authoritarianism. Introduced in a memorable chiaroscuro sequence which borrows from the expressionistic terrain of both the horror and film noir genre, Kierlaw is driven north in the dead of night, glimpsed in half-shadow in the back of his chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce with a ghostly white hand the only part of his body visible, representing, for Neil Sinyard, 'the dead hand of monopoly'.⁵⁰⁸ Kierlaw is the embodiment of industrial capitalism, personifying its regressive tendencies and its amorality. As the film went into production during the final months of the Labour administration, Kierlaw represents the failure of the government to ultimately eradicate

⁵⁰⁸ Neil Sinyard, 'Film', Boris Ford (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to the Arts in Britain, Volume 9: Since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 243.

capitalism and to instigate the New Jerusalem. He is a cadaverous figure, kept barely alive by his portable breathing apparatus, representative of capitalism as both a dying economic system and one which has an extraordinary ability to adapt and survive. Kemp praises the decision to cast Thesiger as Kierlaw and the film's departure from 'The Flower Within the Bud':

In Macdougall's play, Kierlaw appears as standard-issue bloated plutocrat: he 'strides massively', smokes large cigars, affects a hearty manner to cloak his avarice. By stripping this cumbersome figure down to the frail, wizened Thesiger, the film creates a monstrous incarnation of concentrated will, indifferent to appearances and wholly unhampered by altruism. Like some science-fiction Superbrain, Kierlaw has mutated into a cerebellum of pure, malignant intelligence yoked to an atrophied body.⁵⁰⁹

Kierlaw's malignance is demonstrated during the moment in the film when Stratton is knocked unconscious at Birnley's after a plaque falls onto his head and Kierlaw expresses his disappointment when informed that the scientist is still alive. The shooting script for the film describes the plaque as containing 'allegorical figures representing the spirit of progress leading capital and labour towards the millennium'⁵¹⁰, encapsulating the film's political theme as the 'spirit of progress' represented by

⁵⁰⁹ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 48.

⁵¹⁰ *The Man in the White Suit Third Shooting Script*, 8 December 1950 (London: BFI Library)

Stratton and his invention is suppressed by both capital and labour. Thus, *The Man in the White Suit* questions the progressive spirit of capitalism with the sequences where the factory bosses gather in Birnley's office to discuss their plans regarding the invention of the suit and the following scenes where Stratton is imprisoned and they plot to suppress it, containing some of the most extensive critiques of capitalist "progress" ever displayed in the British cinema.

Previously *The Man in the White Suit* has highlighted the poor organisation of industry as Stratton is allowed to conduct his experiments at both Corland and Birnley's factories undiscovered for a reasonable length of time, ordering equipment through the finance departments without the knowledge of the factory hierarchy. When Stratton is discovered at Birnley's, the factory owner, initially believing that the manufacture of the cloth will allow him to gain an advantage over his competitors, allows the experiments to go ahead despite the huge costs and damages to the laboratory caused by the explosions. Later, when Birnley argues his case for processing the material in his office in front of Kierlaw and the other factory owners, the delusory notion of 'progressive' capitalism is revealed: 'I will not stand in the way of progress' Birnley states. 'The welfare of the community must come first.' When the others suggest that the invention will be a

disaster for the industry, Birnley argues, ‘Was the spinning jenny a disaster? Was the mechanical loom?’, and Kierlaw replies, ‘For those that didn’t control them, yes.’ Finally Birnley’s personification of ‘enlightened capitalism’, is shown up for its hollowness when he realises he will not get the ownership rights to the material and he falls behind its suppression while simultaneously, the other bosses demonstrate how capitalism is not interested in progress but instead seeks the domination of the means of production.

Kemp claims that ‘the trio of scenes in which Kierlaw confronts first Birnley, then Sidney and finally Daphne finds the film’s satiric thrust at its sharpest. Birnley never stands a chance. His flatulent liberal clichés [...] whither in the cold blast of the old man’s *realpolitik*’.⁵¹¹ Birnley’s promotion of the lofty ideals of progress appear clichéd, precisely because there is no conviction behind his argument. At this moment, both ‘enlightened’ and ‘unenlightened’ capitalism, appear as extreme as each other, as the distinction between the two dissipate under the system’s motivation for control and profit as the film starkly exposes the myth of the progressive rhetoric of “liberal” capitalism. Therefore, where previously Ealing had sought - within a radical social democratic framework - to seek consensus between capital and labour, *The Man in the White Suit* starkly

⁵¹¹ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 58.

tears away the façade of the studio's consensus mentality, revealing tensions within Ealing's hegemonic discourse which previously had been hinted at, but owing to its dispensation towards national unity, the studio had sought to compromise. It is only in *The Man in the White Suit* and *They Came to a City* where Ealing's 'Mild Revolution' is revealed at its most explicitly polarised left-wing perspective. It is illuminating that these two texts bookend the historical moment of the nation's 'New Jerusalem' as the ideological optimism of 1945, as expressed in *They Came to a City* has retreated into the pessimism of *The Man in the White Suit*'s politically consensual discourse.

There is one moment in the *Man in the White Suit* where the differing shades of capitalism - as represented by the factory owners - coalesce to display the system at its most morally corrupt. When all attempts to convince Stratton to give up the rights to his invention fail, the bosses consider one further option. Daphne has entered Birnley's office and the bosses wonder if Stratton could 'be persuaded by Women?' and bought with sex. The millowners ask Daphne to prostitute herself so as not to allow the invention to 'upset the delicate balance of trade' as the film, at its most extreme, depicts the depths that capitalism will sink in order to protect its profit system with even Corland being prepared to sacrifice his fiancé as a sexual lure to protect the

industry. This scene shows the studio at its most socially caustic moment, with Barr claiming that it manages to ‘express a vision of the logic of capitalism as extreme as anything in Buñuel or Godard’.⁵¹²

Daphne is an important figure in *The Man in the White Suit*, integral to the film’s relationship to its major themes. Perhaps to account for this, in the original shooting script, her character was to provide the narrative voice over but the filmmakers astutely chose to abandon this and opt for Birnley’s voice-over instead. To have the narrative point of view articulated by a figure representing the ideology of industrial capitalism makes more sense than having that dominant hegemonic point of view compromised by adopting the voice-over technique representative of a character sympathetic to Stratton. Despite her obvious intelligence, Daphne is entrapped by the patriarchal system, linking her character to the roles played by Withers in *They Came to a City*, *Pink String and Sealing Wax* and *It Always Rains on Sunday*. Stating that she ‘is sick of the Birnley mills and everything connected to them’, Daphne is another of those atypical Ealing females which only feature consistently in the films made by Hamer and Mackendrick for the studio.

Greenwood’s Daphne repeats her similar roles in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* and *Whisky Galore* as, like those characters,

⁵¹² Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 142.

she is sexy, resourceful, intelligent, shrewd and manipulative. She is the first to realise that Stratton is continuing his experiment at Birnley and is astute enough to understand the potential in his work and to argue his case. However, for all of her intelligence and resourcefulness, she is confined by her gender as the patriarchal system has no outlet for her talents and her only option for social advancement appears to marry into wealth. Therefore, in addition to the social politics of class and capitalism, the film also engages with gender politics, as Porton explains: 'As a film produced during a pre-feminist era, Mackendrick's witty parable presents with stark precision the limited options that were available to an independent woman during the Fifties'.⁵¹³ Moreover, through a comparison of Greenwood's character in *The Man in the White Suit* and her earlier role in *Saraband*, Williams argues that in both films her 'identity becomes reduced to an object of bodily exchange in a corrupt patriarchal economy'.⁵¹⁴ Barr advances the argument that *The Man in the White Suit* is a comment on the patriarchal order, arguing that a repressive family structure operates within the text, allying the film to other Ealing texts which beneath the surface engage with issues of repressive patriarchal order, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* in particular:

⁵¹³ Porton, 'A Second Look', p. 31.

⁵¹⁴ Williams, *Structures of Desire*, p. 160.

If Birnley is like a capricious father to Sidney – indulging him to a certain point, then disciplining him sternly – then Kierlaw is a grandfather. Sidney and his invention are stifled by an extraordinary ‘family’ structure: father and Grandad, plus Nanny and Granny (the factory nurse who sedates him, and old Mrs Watson). It is they who speak at important moments for the whole industry: they represent England as ‘a family with the wrong members in control’, closing ranks, not against ‘the enemy’, but against innovation as such – now perceived *as* the enemy.⁵¹⁵

In the scene where she is asked to sell herself for Stratton’s acquiescence Daphne skilfully manipulates the industrialists. Fully aware of the fact that she is being asked to sell her body to save an industry she despises, Daphne plays the industrialists at their own game. ‘Since we are on the subject of price what do I get out of it?’ Daphne asks. ‘I haven’t had much experience of these sorts of things but I’d always understood it was comparatively well paid.’ Her bargaining eventually gets Kierlaw to increase his offer from £2000 to £5000 and Kierlaw’s admiring look shows that he respects the manner in which she has conducted “business”. However, we discover later during the seduction scene that she has tricked the bosses into believing she wanted to carry out the deal when in fact she was using their suggestion merely to get access to Stratton. She is delighted when Stratton turns down her advances and it is her idea to use the

⁵¹⁵ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 140.

indestructible thread from his suit to scale the wall of the house in order to escape.

As rumours of the invention enter the public domain leading to a drop in share-prices, the industrialists gathered at Birnley's realise that the invention will 'upset the delicate balance of the market' as they deny knowledge of the invention and renew their efforts to suppress it. At this point in the film the leaders of the industry are seen to be at each others throats, concerned about the falling share prices and the prospect of a loss in profits. It is at this moment when they have Stratton imprisoned that the union works committee demand a meeting with management that the consensus between capital and labour is established. Both realise the dangerous effect the cloth will have on the industry and both agree to work together, eventually joining forces to hunt Stratton down after they discover he has escaped a second time, on this occasion from his lodgings where Bertha had imprisoned him.

Mackendrick's juxtaposition of innocence and experience is further highlighted in the film by Stratton's escape from the lodging house which is achieved through the intervention of the innocent figure of a young girl, Gladdie (Mandy Miller), who first tricks his guard to allow him to escape and then proceeds to help thwart his pursuers. As Kemp argues

Once again a female has to supply the cunning [Stratton] lacks and this time she's a six-year-old girl. This is the first child to play a significant part in a Mackendrick movie [...] prefiguring much of Mackendrick's subsequent work. [...] her performance – like those of all his child actors – is direct and unselfconscious, and wholly un sentimentalised. Beside Sidney's helplessness, she appears refreshingly practical; like Daphne, she makes an instinctive moral choice and acts on it.⁵¹⁶

Gladdie's 'instinctive moral choice' is a result of her character's innocence to the social drama which is occurring around her. This is paralleled with the response of the trade unions in the film, especially Bertha, whose obvious intelligence and skills at her industrial job are also tempered by an almost childlike naiveté. We have previously touched upon the issue of *The Man in the White Suit's* satire on trade unionism, questioning the assumption that this represents 'a-plague-on-both-houses' attack on both trade unionism and the bosses by highlighting how the film reserves its most hostile satire for the management of industry and the nature of the capitalist system itself. From this emerges the possibility of a much more radical reading of the text. Although the film is undoubtedly critical of trade unionism, it could be suggested that the workers are guilty of innocently playing the bosses game and this unholy alliance creates a false consensus which will ultimately be detrimental to the workers' cause. The previous chapter noted how Dave Rolinson had

⁵¹⁶ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 63. For an assessment of Ealing's child performers, including Mandy Miller's roles for Mackendrick, see Colin Sell, 'Children of Ealing' in *Ealing Revisited*, pp. 155-64.

detected Ealing's unease with its consensual ethos. Similarly in *The Man in the White Suit*, Kemp suggests that the alliance between capital and labour highlights how 'any consensus can only be patently phony, a cynical expedient' and in commenting upon the condescending and contemptuous attitude of the bosses toward the workers 'Mackendrick exposes the hollowness behind the Ealing – and British- consensus mentality'.⁵¹⁷

While discussing a number of British comedies of the 1950s, including *The Man in the White Suit*, and their collective engagement with notions of national consensus, Rolinson seeks to counter the argument that the films made during the period represent a conservative social and political viewpoint, claiming that:

[T]here is a constant tension between a form built on consensus and content built on alienation. Rather than harking back to wartime collectivism, the decades' comedies are shaped by the general election of 1951, particularly its anti-collectivist sub-texts. The communities of *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (Charles Crichton, 1953) and *The Mouse That Roared* (Jack Arnold, 1959) reflect the triumph of the British spirit over Nazi Germany's unsportingly ruthless professionalism, but their villains, rather than being improbably moustached failing Austrian artists are profiteering businesses. Throughout the decade's comedies, consumerism is the enemy of consensus, an alienating presence impinging on the value of work.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁷ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, pp. 62-3.

⁵¹⁸ Rolinson, "“If They Want Culture, They Pay”", p. 88.

The trade unionists in *The Man in the White Suit* also represent an attitude towards their collective labour which results in an ideological alienation from the value of their work. In their acceptance of their hegemonical subordination to capitalist production, the workers regard themselves purely as an extension of the commodities they make. For all the Marxist dogmatic language she adopts throughout the film, Bertha also adopts this false consciousness. In their acceptance of their role as wage labourers, the workers in the film reject the revolutionary possibility that the cloth represents, as their uneasy alliance with the bosses establishes the forces of Labour's accommodation with capital. As Kemp argues:

Released in the same year which saw Atlee's Labour Government ... replaced by the Tories under Churchill, the film can superficially be read as suggesting that between workers' party and bosses' party there's not much to choose. But Mackendrick [...] is offering nothing so trite or blandly uncommitted. His target is the system itself, class-ridden and self-perpetuating, which can ingest and remould in its own image any impulse towards change. In this film can be sensed the disillusion of those who believed in 1945 that Labour's victory could mean a new dispensation – a revolution, even...⁵¹⁹

The satirical treatment of the trade unions in *The Man in the White Suit* raises questions as to the political purpose of trade unionism. Are unions merely a force to improve workers'

⁵¹⁹ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, pp. 61-2.

conditions within capitalism or can the labour movement be galvanised into more far reaching radical ends? The workers in the film appear to have accepted the permanency of capitalism and their roles within it. By rejecting the suit and forming an alliance with the bosses, they have rejected what the suit symbolically represents: the possibility of a society that is run for the needs of the community rather than for the profits of the owners of the means of production. Read in this manner, the acquiescence of the trade unions opens the film up to an ideological engagement beyond the narrow confines of political reformism, to engage with the more revolutionary left theories of Marxism and anarcho-syndicalism. Rolinson explains the film's construction as an 'internalisation of dominant ideology' where 'alienated, individualistic publics appropriate the language of consensus to protect their own interests'.⁵²⁰ The acquiescence of the workers in the film thematically accords with Marx's theory of the alienation of labour. For Marx, this ideological process involves: the 'relationship of the worker to the product of his labour as an alien object that has power over him' which also involves:

The relationship of labour to the act of production inside labour. This relationship is the relationship of the worker to his own activity as something that is alien and does not belong to him; it

⁵²⁰ Rolinson, "“If They Want Culture They Pay”", p. 91.

is activity that is passivity, power that is weakness, procreation that is castration, the worker's own physical and intellectual energy, his personal life [...] as an activity directed against himself, independent of him and not belonging to him.⁵²¹

Therefore, the workers in *The Man in the White Suit*'s display all the passivity which the Marx's theory of alienation suggests. In their alliance with management, and rejection of the suit's symbolism they have finally emasculated themselves to the point where it is difficult to establish whether the film's ultimate tragedy surrounds the failure of Stratton in his scientific endeavour or the symbolic loss to society that his invention represents.

For Barr, the symbolism of the suit denotes 'a dazzling future, a resource for the world'⁵²², whereas others have extended the symbolic meaning of the suit even further. Reading the text in broadly Marxist terms by developing Kemp's observation of how the cyclical plot developments within many Mackendrick films lead to 'an intimation of stasis and stagnancy, of a system seizing up under the deadweight of tradition'⁵²³, Rolinson argues:

This tradition has assimilated the new consumerism; Sidney is punished for his crimes against capitalism, producing the suit or its 'use' value and not its exchange value. [...] Mackendrick

⁵²¹ Karl Marx: *Selected Writings*, p. 89.

⁵²² Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 137.

⁵²³ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 43.

reflects Sidney's interruption of the progressive rhetoric of capitalism in smooth camera movements that Sidney brings to a halt by crashing into scenes. [...]. The workers ignore the white suit's socialist symbolism; they want to be defined by the products they make. This reflects a process of alienation described by Andre Gorz: 'The height of alienation is reached when it becomes impossible to conceive that an activity should have a goal other than its wage'.⁵²⁴

Kemp argues that the film's ambiguity negates a precise reading of the suit's meaning and that its symbolism depends upon the various characters' material position within society, as:

What it means [...] depends – in true Mackendrick style – on who's looking at it. To Sidney it's the apotheosis of science [...] To Birnley, it means stealing a march on his competitors. To the tailor, just another measuring job. To Daphne, a boon for humankind. To the industrialists and workers, a threat to their respective livelihoods. Nobody has the complete, privileged position. We, the audience, may think we have; but in finally making the suit disintegrate before our eyes, Mackendrick intimates that perhaps we hadn't – and that he hasn't, either.⁵²⁵

Therefore, as this plurality of readings has established, the symbolic meaning of the suit is subjective and contingent. However, if it is accepted that *The Man in the White Suit's* primary theme is the stifling of progress and how tradition thwarts idealism, it is possible to see the destruction of the suit as a motif for the cul-de-sac of both Britain and Ealing in the 1950s

⁵²⁴ Rolinson, "If They Want Culture They Pay", pp. 91-2. For Gorz's analysis, see Andre Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism* (Pluto Press, 1982), p. 36.

⁵²⁵ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 56.

reflecting that, despite Labour's reforms, the government had unsuccessfully challenge the hierarchical order and that the promise of the New Jerusalem, like Sidney's disintegrating suit, had failed to materialise.

The idea that *The Man in the White Suit* operates a further level of satire upon the film industry and, particularly, the methods and ethos of Ealing studios has been well documented. Kemp argues that 'the film can [...] be seen as subversive portrait of Ealing itself, most British of studios, comfortable and well-intentioned, setting its face increasingly against any serious consideration of conflict'.⁵²⁶ The fact that many characters were based upon a variety of personnel at the studio is emphasised by Kemp, who noted a "private" level of satire built into the film' including Birnley [...] whose flustered, paternalistic liberalism is borrowed from Michael Balcon. Not only was Birnley given several of Balcon's pet phrases, but Mackendrick told Cecil Parker [...] to "model yourself on Mick".⁵²⁷ Other 'caricatures' in the film, according to Kemp were:

Frank, the shop steward, based on Sidney Cole, the film's producer and a staunch union man; and the bustling, bossy nurse who slaps Alec Guinness's face, "an absolute portrait of our studio nurse", according to Mackendrick. Ernest Irving, Ealing' autocratic (and asthmatic) music director, inspired the wheezy old magnate, Sir John Kierlaw, though Slocombe

⁵²⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵²⁷ Ibid pp. 46-7.

believes the character also incorporates elements of Major Reg Baker, Balcon's partner and financial *éminence grise*.⁵²⁸

In addition, Barr ask the question whether 'Sidney can be seen as 'a satirical (self-) portrait of the harassed young Ealing director struggling to express himself [...] in defiance of the paternalistic hand of his boss and the general inertia of the industry' and, in a similar manner, Sinyard sees the film's reflexivity as firmly integrated within its social satire:

It might not be too fanciful [...] to see *The Man in the White Suit* as an allegory of the film industry in general and of Ealing in particular. One suspects a strong identification between Mackendrick and Sidney Stratton. Stratton is not averse to diverting business funds for his own uses if he feels he is on to something important; similarly, Mackendrick was not averse to stretching rehearsal time and shooting schedules to achieve his ends. Both [...] are perfectionists in industries given over to profit. Both of them are not simply trying to invent and market a product: they wish to produce something permanent from their labours. [...] *The Man in the White Suit* is thus a debate on the fate of individualism within a capitalist framework, [...] just as Sidney's inventiveness has been squashed [...] so Mackendrick's radicalism has been contained within Ealing's boundaries, and the film is finally a pessimistic allegory of the artist.⁵²⁹

The Man in the White Suit is Mackendrick's first feature where the director's artistry came to prominence and his ability as a filmmaker was beginning to be critically acknowledged. Noting Mackendrick's promise and compared the director to both

⁵²⁸ Ibid., p. 47.

⁵²⁹ Sinyard, 'Film', pp. 243-4.

Hitchcock and Elia Kazan, while seemingly anticipating Mackendrick's later move across to the US, Ewart Hodgson wrote that Mackendrick had an 'exciting future in films that may easily revolutionise things both over here and in Hollywood too'.⁵³⁰ Much contemporary criticism commenting upon the films denouement recognised the cruelty underpinning much of the humour. C.A. Lejeune wrote that *The Man in the White Suit* 'resorts in the climax to a device for laughter that is more painful than funny, and sends the audience away with a sense of discomfort'.⁵³¹ Similarly, Gavin Lambert declared that 'the scene of Stratton's final humiliation makes it clear that *The Man in the White Suit* is in fact a tragic-comedy, but that Alex Mackendrick has not followed through all its implications', however, noting the film's originality and ambition, he also stated that 'it will certainly remain one of the liveliest and most interesting experiments in British films this year'.⁵³² Unsurprisingly, a number of reviews focussed upon the political satire within the film. Recognising its generic debt to Science Fiction, William Whitebait described it as a 'near-Wellsian fantasy',⁵³³ however, in terms of the film's political thrust, the most interesting review of the film appeared in the *Daily Worker*, where, unsurprisingly

⁵³⁰ *News of the World*, 12 August 1951.

⁵³¹ *The Observer*, 10 August 1951.

⁵³² *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1951.

⁵³³ *New Statesman*, 18 August 1951, *The Man in the White Suit Press Book* (London: BFI Library)

given the paper's Marxist outlook, the review criticised the film's satirical position of showing workers and bosses united in a common cause, 'which leads to the crowning absurdity of the scientist fleeing from the combined forces of labour and capital to the freedom of the Manchester Daily Express'.⁵³⁴ Despite this criticism, the *Daily Worker* still managed to find a great deal to be commended within the film and urged its readers:

[D]o not let this defect spoil your enjoyment of what is after all one of the best British comedies you are likely to see for a very long time. And even if its punch is muffled, it is still a punch. [...] Here is a film which, despite its weaknesses, does a powerful job in showing how capitalist society strangles scientific advance directed towards making life easier instead of exterminating it.⁵³⁵

The Man in the White Suit's critique of the nature of capitalist production and its depiction of how the alliance between the antagonistic forces of capital and labour combine to sustain the system, marks the film as the most politically astute and radical of all the Ealing comedies. Mackendrick's next film for the studio shows the director, and Ealing, re-emphasising their support for the Labour government's reforms during the early period of a new Tory administration.

Mackendrick would make only three more films at Ealing before departing for Hollywood. Following *The Man in*

⁵³⁴ *Daily Worker*, 11 August 1951.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*

the White Suit, he directed his only non-comedy for the studio, *Mandy* (1952), a film noted for featuring a remarkable performance from a seven-year-old Mandy Miller playing the title role of a deaf and mute girl struggling to overcome her disability. The film marks a formal departure from the Ealing norm, as Annette Kuhn observed:

[C]onfounding conventional wisdom about the unobtrusive style of the Ealing product, some parts of *Mandy* are marked by an extraordinary degree of expressivity, at the levels of both sound and image: low-key lighting, marked camera angles, big distorted close-ups, deep focus cinematography, narratively unmotivated mobile framing distortions – even momentary absences – of diegetic sound. [...] Other parts of *Mandy*, though, do retain some of the qualities of domestic realism more familiarly associated with Ealing films [...] the film's melodramatic qualities pervade its social realism, rather than vice-versa.⁵³⁶

To establish elements of the documentary-realist aesthetic, Mackendrick shot parts of the film at an actual school for the deaf and asked some deaf children to play some minor roles within the film. *Mandy* also marked a thematic continuation with *The Man in the White Suit* in its depiction of repressive family structures. For Kemp, 'where families, real or surrogate, feature in [Mackendrick's] work, their function is almost invariably to choke off any impulse to growth or change'.⁵³⁷ In *Mandy*, this

⁵³⁶ Annette Kuhn, 'Mandy and Possibility', *Screen*, Volume 33, Number 3, Autumn 1992, p. 235.

⁵³⁷ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 59.

impulse is clouded somewhat by a rather melodramatic sub-plot which shows a burgeoning romance between Mandy's mother Christine (Phyllis Calvert) and the girl's teacher Searle (Jack Hawkins) which many contemporary critics found to be an unnecessary distraction to the central story of Mandy's struggle to receive an education. CA Lejeune was one critic who criticised the romantic sub-plot but nevertheless found the film to be 'genuinely moving'⁵³⁸ whereas Richard Winnington declared it to be 'both inspired and trite', suggesting that the 'domestic drama is disappointing' but in the key passages' of Mandy's story 'the film is ... unsurpassable'.⁵³⁹ More recently, Harper and Porter have suggested the film displays 'an insistence on the untrustworthy nature of women'⁵⁴⁰, however, Melanie Williams counters this viewpoint, pointing to the importance placed upon providing a female perspective apparent in Ealing's promotional material for the film, and arguing that 'Christine struggles to do the best for her daughter, facing opposition from her husband and his family'.⁵⁴¹ Kemp also counters Harper and Porter's argument, commenting on the melodramatic elements within the film that have often been equated with Women's cinema: 'If *Mandy* can be classified as a 'woman's picture', it is not in the pejorative – and

⁵³⁸ *Observer*, 3 August 1952.

⁵³⁹ *News Chronicle*, 2 August 1952.

⁵⁴⁰ Harper and Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s*, p. 61.

⁵⁴¹ Melanie Williams 'A Feminine Touch?: Ealing's Women', *Ealing Revisited*, p. 191.

patronising – sense of a romantic weepie, but as a film which gives expression to a woman’s concerns without trivialising or over-simplifying them’ and declaring that *Mandy* ‘is a study, not only of the deaf in a world designed for the hearing, but of women in a world designed for men’.⁵⁴²

In addition to its engagement with gender issues regarding repressive patriarchal structures, *Mandy* can also be read as a comment upon the postwar political settlement and the creation of the welfare state which prioritised the public over the private domain and how this was in danger of being eroded in the 1950s with a return to Conservative power with its renewed emphasis on individualism and the free market. Mandy’s father, Harry (Terence Morgan) is reluctant to allow his daughter to receive an education away from the home, therefore regarding the private sphere of influence as superior to a public education with Kemp suggesting that Christine ‘embodies all the left-liberal, welfare-state values that her husband’s family mistrust and fear’.⁵⁴³ Thus, the film supplants within its domestic setting, the political dichotomy between the public and private and dramatises the arguments for an increasing role for the state within a social democracy and the opposing argument of prioritising individualism within the free-market. The film as produced in a

⁵⁴² Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, pp. 75-6.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

period of political transition which according to Cook was emphasised by ‘a shift [...] in terms of national values, community spirit giving way to individualism and an increasing emphasis on the private domain of home and family’.⁵⁴⁴ This ideological split between Christine and her husband is similar to the one depicted between Malcolm and Dorothy Stritton in *They Came to a City*, reflecting different political values of the bourgeoisie in relation to the postwar reforms of the Labour government and further highlighting Ealing’s alignment to Labour’s social-democratic aspirations. Both films, in different ways, promote the idea of social renewal and change.

Conclusion: Mackendrick’s Relapse?

We have established how - right up until the release of *Mandy* - Mackendrick’s contribution to Ealing’s ‘mild revolution’, including those films where he relinquished directorial control, had managed to simultaneously confirm *and* challenge the studio’s consensual and collectivist ethos. It has been suggested by Kemp that 1952 appears to represent a watershed in Ealing’s radicalism as, post-*Mandy*, the films made by the studio begin to lose their radical impetus and that:

⁵⁴⁴ Pam Cook, ‘*Mandy*: Daughter of Transition’, *All Our Yesterdays*, p. 355.

After *Mandy*, with its overt commitment to change, Mackendrick's last two Ealing films could be seen as something of a relapse. *Mandy* represents a gesture of defiance: an affirmation of communal values in the teeth of reaction back to the private domain of the family, but also a rejection of the ethos that was coming to dominate Ealing's output. From the early fifties onwards, the studio's films are increasingly coloured by an attachment to tradition...⁵⁴⁵

Mackendrick's final two films made at Ealing show an apparent awareness of the studio's stagnation. He followed up *Mandy* with another comedy set in Scotland: *The Maggie* (1954), a film remarkably similar in its narrative and theme to both Mackendrick's *Whisky Galore!* and Crichton's *The Titfield Thunderbolt*. The film's plot centres on a deteriorating old puffer-boat working from the Clyde - the *Maggie* of the title - skippered by the wily and manipulative MacTaggart (Alex Mackenzie). The puffer is threatened with losing its licence as it has fallen into disrepair, until MacTaggart convinces the American boss of World International Airlines, Calvin B. Marshall (Paul Douglas), to charter the boat to carry a cargo to the island of Kiltarra. A battle of wills ensues between the crew of the *Maggie* and the US businessman which climaxes in the humiliating defeat of Marshall who loses his cargo. The similarities between *The Maggie* and *The Titfield Thunderbolt* are clearly evident as both films central focus are on celebrating the quaint and obsolete. However, Mackendrick's film is typically more complex and more

⁵⁴⁵ Kemp, *Lethal Innocence*, p. 88.

ambiguous than Crichton's and lacks *The Titfield Thunderbolt's* sentimentality towards tradition. One of its central themes is the encroachment of US finance upon British capitalism and Mackendrick had to defend the film from claims of anti-American bias from Fletcher Grimm who, in a letter to *Time*, complained that the film was 'a perfect allegory of America's fate in Europe' where Americans were 'taken for our money, cheated, fooled, our advice ignored, our skills wasted, our intentions sneered at – and in the end we wind up thinking that its our fault and there is something morally and aesthetically fine about old rustbuckets'.⁵⁴⁶ Mackendrick professed sympathy for the beleaguered Marshall, replying to Grimm that there was no malice intended in the film and that the makers 'saw the story very much from the viewpoint of the American'.⁵⁴⁷ However, despite Mackendrick's professed affinity for Marshall, the film's conclusion refuses to spare the businessman from ultimate defeat at the hands of the Machiavellian crew of the Maggie.

Like Waggett in *Whisky Galore!* and Stratton in *The Man in the White Suit*, *The Maggie's* conclusion exhibits Mackendrick's trademark cruelty in its depiction of Marshall's final humiliation. However, this is tempered somewhat by the fact that it is at Marshall's suggestion that, in order to save the puffer,

⁵⁴⁶ Quoted in McArthur, *Whisky Galore! and The Maggie*, p. 92.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

the crew jettison his cargo which ultimately results in his character redemption from the its previous cold businesslike demeanour. Therefore, *The Maggie*'s conclusion engages with Ealing's ethos by displaying the consensus between the traditional and the modern, symbolised by the dilapidated puffer and its battle against the hegemony of American capitalism. Its cruel ending suggests there are limits to Ealing's consensus mentality and this limitation would be further articulated in Mackendrick's final film for the studio.

As had previously been the case with *The Man in the White Suit*, *The Ladykillers* satire operates on both private and public levels. The film critiques the indomitable force of tradition at Ealing and in the nation as a whole, personified in the character of Mrs Wilberforce (Katie Johnson) who thwarts a gang of criminals who commit a robbery orchestrated from her dilapidated house at Kings Cross. In a statement which appears to contradict Mackendrick's radical perspective, the director thematically positioned the film within its historical context, claiming:

The fable of *The Ladykillers* is a comic and ironic joke about the condition of post-war England. After the war, the country was going through a kind of quiet, typically British but nevertheless historically fundamental revolution. Though few people were prepared to face up to it, the great days of the Empire were gone forever. British society was shattered with

the same kind of conflicts appearing in many other countries: an impoverished and disillusioned upper class, a brutalised working class, juvenile delinquency among the Mods and Rockers, an influx of foreign and potentially criminal elements, and a collapse of 'intellectual' leadership. All of these threatened the stability of the national character. Though at no time did Bill Rose [scriptwriter] or I ever spell this out, look at the characters in the film. The Major (played by Cecil Parker), a conman, is a caricature of the decadent military ruling class. One Round (Danny Green) is the oafish representative of the British masses. Harry (Peter Sellers) is the spic, the worthless younger generation. Louis (Herbert Lom) is the dangerously unassimilated foreigner. They are a composite cartoon of Britain's corruption. The tiny figure of Mrs Wilberforce (Wilberforce was the name of the nineteenth-century idealist who called for the abolition of slavery) is plainly a much diminished Britannia. Her house is in a cul-de-sac. Shabby and cluttered with memories of the days when Britain's navy ruled the world and captains gallantly stayed on the bridge as their ship went down, her house is structurally unsound. Dwarfed by the grim landscape of railway yards and screaming express trains, it is Edwardian England, an anachronism in the contemporary world. Bill Rose's sentimental hope for the country that he and I still saw through fond but sceptical eyes was that it might still, against all logic, survive its enemies. A theme, a message of sorts, one that I felt very attached to. But one that it took quite some time for me to consciously recognise and appreciate.⁵⁴⁸

Mackendrick's retrospective viewpoint appears to confirm the established orthodoxy which maintained that Ealing's political position as displaying - in Mackendrick's words - 'fond but sceptical' admiration of the nation's traditions. It's almost as if Mackendrick's caustic idealism, like the gang in the film, had been worn down and ultimately defeated by traditional forces of reaction as he finally regards his comedy as a celebration of

⁵⁴⁸ *Alexander Mackendrick: On Film-making*, pp. 104-5.

conservative values and an attack upon modernity, as Duguid et al. point out:

Mackendrick asserts his support for the little old lady and all that she represents – by extension traditional Englishness *and* traditional Ealing. It seems that even the studio's most maverick voices were still wedded to a celebration of establishment values rather than the challenges posed to them [...] No wonder the studio lapsed into self-parody and repetition.⁵⁴⁹

In what he described as 'an admittedly fanciful reading of the film', Barr has attempted to wrestle a more radical reading from *The Ladykillers* than Mackendrick suggests:

The gang are the post-war Labour government. Taking over 'the House', they gratify the conservative incumbent in their civilised behaviour [...] and decide to use at least the façade of respectability for their radical programme of redistributing wealth (humouring Mrs W and using her as a front). [...]

I hardly need to say that this is not a dimension which needs actually to have been in the mind of anyone involved. But the film can be entertainingly read in these terms; what it undeniably does is to enact a compulsive process of the *absorption* of the dynamic by the static, of change by tradition, of the new by the old, which is the essential pattern of postwar British history, politics included.⁵⁵⁰

Despite Mackendrick's view of the film, *The Ladykillers* subverts Ealing's cherished social democratic ideals, expressing a pessimistic attitude towards the unravelling of the

⁵⁴⁹Duguid, Freeman, Johnston, Williams, *Ealing Revisited*, p. 13.

⁵⁵⁰ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, pp. 171-2.

studio's 'mild revolution'. At one point the gang discuss whether to use Mrs Wilberforce as a decoy to their robbery and allow her to unwittingly pick up the stolen money from the railway station. The decision is reached via a democratic vote and the class structure of the gang is emphasised by an argument over whether they ought to allow the working-class character, One Round, to vote in the decision. One Round replies: 'We've all got a vote haven't we? It's a democracy ain't it?' as the film shows democracy in action being adopted for criminal rather than progressive purposes. It is a total subversion of earlier treatments of democratic processes in films such as *San Demetrio, London* which, as we have seen in Chapter 2, attempted to outline how increased democratic participation was a natural political consequence of the people's war. Similarly, towards the end of the film, the gang draw lots to decide who is going to kill the old lady, which recalls the drawing of lots in *The Proud Valley* to decide who is going to sacrifice themselves in order to save the rest of the men when they find themselves trapped underground in their attempt to re-open the pit. These scenes in *The Ladykillers* show Ealing coming full-cycle in relation to the studio's democratic and collective ethos, as the gang represents the national 'community' with its differing class structure in a complete subversion of Ealing's benevolent community as it turns

inwards and destroys each other. If we think back to the closing moments of *They Came to a City* and its portrayal of the revolutionary possibilities of a New Jerusalem, the gang in *The Ladykillers* implies the defeat of the nation's radical urge and a perversion of its progressive impetus.

At one point in the film, describing the indestructibility of Mrs Wilberforce, Professor Marcus (Alec Guinness), remarks to Louis that 'it would take 20 – 30- 40, perhaps, to deal with her because we'll never be able to kill her, Louis. She'll always be with us. For ever and ever and ever, and there's nothing we can do', emphasising that, despite the encroachment of modernity and the post 1945 spirit of a socialist New Jerusalem, the class-bound sterility of the old traditions will persist. Thus, *The Ladykillers* refracts Ealing's decline which, from the radicalism of the war years and the hope generated by the postwar political settlement had dissolved into pessimism. The conclusion to this thesis will consider Ealing's supposed decline in relation to the progressive politics of the studio's 'mild revolution.'

Conclusion: The ‘Decline’ of Ealing

The 2013 release of Ken Loach’s paean to the reforms of the Labour government, *The Spirit of ’45*, makes for a timely reassessment of Ealing’s politics, the studio which - more than any other - came to be associated with Labour’s postwar ambition towards creating a New Jerusalem. Previous studies of Ealing have established, almost as a *fait accompli*, the moderate nature of the studio’s political engagement, suggesting that there were inherent limitations within the studio’s progressive outlook. This thesis has questioned this assumption. In delineating Ealing’s political ideology during Michael Balcon’s tenure, beyond the historical moment of its ‘mild revolution’, right up to the moment of the studio’s eventual demise in 1959, a number of recurrent themes emerge which challenge the critically orthodox viewpoint of the studio as an advocate of moderate social reform.

Ealing’s progressive outlook evolved in conjunction with the nation’s increased radicalism during the economic depression of the 1930s. This resulted in an acceptance of the social importance of the role of the working class as Ealing’s increasing engagement within a working-class milieu in films such as *The Proud Valley* and *There Ain’t No Justice* mirrored the British cinema’s reluctance to marginalise this section of society. However, as has been pointed out, Ealing’s engagement with the

working-class was not a factor confined to Balcon's stewardship, as this trope existed in the Basil Dean era of ATP. The approaching war merely provided a fresh impetus in Ealing's engagement with the lower classes as the studio's commitment to collective community values endorsed the official requirements of the MoI to promote the people's war as a component of the nation's wartime propaganda. Ealing's output during the war, exemplified by *San Demetrio, London*, reflected the hierarchical levelling of social class which mirrored the changes occurring in the country and would lead to the new postwar social democratic consensus.

Whilst recognising that Ealing's consensus mentality could occasionally restrain its radical impulse, it must also be acknowledged that the studio's politics always remained firmly located within the broad spectrum of left-wing ideology. If we are to accept that at the furthest right of its political orientation, Ealing suggested a moderate 'liberal' ethos, then the studio's output also encompassed both social democratic reformist values with more revolutionary textual discourses. Ealing's political perspective consistently sought to challenge the dominant ideology and hierarchical hegemony of capitalism, most notably in *They Came to a City*'s socialist polemic. This progressive impetus emerged in the wartime texts which criticised the role of

the political establishment in leading the country into war and proposed a democratic meritocracy, not only to defeat the Nazi threat but also to progressively advance the cause of social justice during the period of postwar reconstruction. In varying degrees - and with fluctuations within its radical outlook - the films made at Ealing confirmed the country's ideological shift, as proposed by Orwell and Priestley, which argued that the mitigation of class division as a wartime requirement would necessitate the birth of a more progressive, egalitarian and democratic society once victory was achieved.

The fact that the genuinely revolutionary prospect of the New Jerusalem never transpired has been a continual thread of this thesis. The chapter which deals with *Passport to Pimlico* suggests that there were fissures appearing in the nation's postwar social contract and that Ealing sought to engage with the contemporary loss of ideological nerve - not by supporting a return to a more divisive individualism - but, rather, by making a film which wholeheartedly supported the progressive policies of the Labour government. This has been a common characteristic of Ealing's political ideology which, in its attempt to 'project Britain', has consistently emphasised positive national characteristics whilst simultaneously critiquing those hegemonic aspects which it deemed to be regressive. This becomes apparent

within the studio's engagement with the people's war which sought an increase in the democratic impulse but, owing to the nature of the historical moment in which the films were produced, Ealing were obliged to negate the genuine divisions and antagonisms that were a social factor of the war years.

Once Britain had prevailed in the war and an optimistic, resurgent radicalism had suggested the possibility of a revolutionary new society, the nation's traditional, regressive tendencies began to reassert their hegemonic power. Therefore, Ealing's postwar output underlined this ideological loss, increasingly exposing tensions within the studio's consensus mentality. The comedies suggested a carnivalesque escape from the social order, displaying a mild anarchical release from accepted social and moral norms and this thematic trope was also related through the studio's non-comedies. The films made by Hamer and Mackendrick are notable for their oppositional positioning to the Ealing norm which presented the issue of class as a prerequisite for seeking cooperation in order to affirm national unity. However, it becomes apparent that, from *The Proud Valley* onwards, Ealing consistently sought to express subtexts which would critique the false one-nation ideology, until a more radical engagement with consensus emerged with *They Came to a City* and, to a lesser degree, *Passport to Pimlico*.

Similarly, *The Man in the White Suit*'s representation of how the convenient alliance between management and labour manages to thwart progress, savagely undermined the false ideology of consensus within its satirical critique of the fundamentally regressive nature of capitalist production.

In addition to challenging the critical assumption of Ealing's promotion of class consensus, this thesis has also questioned John Ellis' assertion that the class background of its personnel resulted in a limitation of its social scope. In the studio's confirmation of what Stead termed as Britain's cinema's representation of 'the people as stars' the films combined a reluctance to marginalise the working class with a critical exposure of the ideology of the middle class. Both these assertions contradict Ellis' argument that Ealing sought to portray 'the people' as those elements of the social hierarchy which mirrored the studio's class orientation: the lower middle classes of shopkeepers etc which constitute a sizable amount of the studio's narratives. However, within this social engagement there are numerous examples where the studio highlights the negative features of the petty bourgeois. Mrs Owen in *The Proud Valley*, the middle-class malcontents of *The Halfway House* and *They Came to a City* and their respective antagonisms towards the war effort and the socialist New Jerusalem, and the mob of black

marketeers who descend upon Pimlico are all notable examples where the studio exposed the reactionary features of the class into which it belonged. This class critique often manifested itself as an exposure of the anti-social commercial aspirations which Ealing deemed to be hostile to social progress as they threatened the studio's commitment to community and collectivist values.

Whenever Ealing chose to favourably portray the middle class it would invariably take the approach of highlighting those radicalised sections of the petty bourgeois who had adopted a progressive outlook and absorbed the nation's collectivist, communal ethic. This variety of characters are epitomised by Malcolm Stritton's embracement of the socialist society in *They Came to a City* and the inhabitants of Pimlico who initially reclaim the spirit of wartime unity to claim independence only to backtrack in the interest of social cohesion, finally accepting regulation and the postwar socio-political contract. Rather than display an internalisation of the dominant ideology, the progressive sections of the middle class portrayed within the Ealing films of the immediate postwar period all exhibit the same features of the studio's 'mild revolution', linking these characters to Ealing's creative community who, in Balcon's words, 'voted Labour for the first time' in 1945.

In relation to Ealing's personnel, this thesis has adopted the strategy of a studio-based study, seeking to prioritise the collective process of filmmaking at the studio. Rather than adopt a strictly 'auteurist' approach which tends to locate the 'meaning' within a cinematic text as a product of a single individual - normatively privileging the role of the director in the creative process - there has been a promotion of scriptwriters, such as Clarke, and an acknowledgement of the vast contribution by Balcon to Ealing's political ethos. Although we have not looked at the four films Alberto Cavalcanti's directed for the studio in any great depth, this thesis has acknowledged the debt the studio owed to the director as he was influential in establishing Ealing's promotion of 'realism' over 'tinsel' and its adoption of a documentary-realist aesthetic. Moreover, a similar approach has been made to promote the radical Ealing by highlighting the more left-wing sympathisers from the studio's ranks. Pen Tennyson was a pivotal figure in the development of Ealing's promotion of a community ethos and its engagement within a working-class milieu and the producer Sidney Cole's contribution has also been acknowledged. Similarly, Basil Dearden's films further established Ealing's progressive credentials. Despite Dearden's politics coming from a more centre-left viewpoint, he was also responsible for directing *They Came to a City*, which showed the

studio at its most trenchant in its support for the postwar socialist New Jerusalem.

In addition to acknowledging Balcon, Clarke and Dearden and Relph's, encapsulation of Ealing's progressive reformism alongside Tennyson's and the producer Sidney Coles' representation of a more left wing articulation of this ideology, this thesis has also recognised the 'other' Ealing which converges with both political perspectives. The films made by Hamer and Mackendrick consistently challenge the studio's consensus mentality, exposing tensions within its centre-left ethos. The 'other' Ealing finds its most radical expression in *It Always Rains on Sunday*'s bleak exposure of the harsh realities of working-class existence, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*' portrayal of aristocratic privilege and self-interest and *The Man in the White Suit*'s critique of capitalist organisation and methods of production. Hamer and Mackendrick's comedies also display a carnivalesque escape from prevailing social norms, but this feature is also prevalent within other 'mainstream' Ealing comedies such as *Hue and Cry*, *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *Passport to Pimlico*. However, Hamer and Mackendrick's films also feature an additional level of private satire which exhibit personal unease at the modus operandi of the studio which could occasionally inhibit both directors' darker and more ambiguous visions. Hamer's *Pink*

String and Sealing Wax and *It Always Rains on Sunday* in particular challenge the studio's social-didacticism, conveying anti-consensual features within their brutal depiction of the harsh realities of community life, especially working-class poverty and lack of social cohesion. In addition, both films also critique the notion of the family as a unifying social unit, and expose the oppressive nature of patriarchal structures. Therefore, rather than being positioned as oppositional to Ealing's political perspective, the films made at the studio by Hamer and Mackendrick offer darker, more pessimistic insights into the studio's promotion of consensus and social cohesion.

The contribution of ideology upon the meaning of a cinematic text has been foregrounded into this study. Within its self-proclaimed aim of 'projecting Britain and British national characteristics', Ealing prioritised those progressive aspects of the nation's political character - democracy, community collectivism, and social unity - whilst simultaneously exposing the negative features of class hierarchy and aspects of ruling-class hegemony apparent within the dominant ideology. The fact that the studio, even within what are considered to be its more moderate 'liberal' films, would consistently propose the anti-social pursuit of finance by both big and small business enterprises as posing a threat to social cohesion, exposes the dichotomy between the

interests of capital and community and emphasises the studio's radical orientation. When the texts do suggest "conservative" features they also display an uneasy tension between the regressive elements which sit uncomfortably alongside the studio's impulse towards progressive, social-democratic principles.

If the studio's output does suggest a polarisation between far-left revolutionary discourse and a more moderate social-democratic reformism, then this can largely be accounted for by the particular moment in history when the texts were produced. The zeitgeist of 1945 produced a leftwards shift in the nation's ideology, resulting in the studio's 'mild revolution and its support for Labour's New Jerusalem. That this "revolution" failed to ultimately materialise and was replaced by Labour's reformed style of welfare capitalism and a post 1951 return to Conservative power which threatened the gains made in 1945 is mirrored by Ealing's later decline and reversal towards regression. However, rather than seeing the studio's post 1951 output as a political retreat, the later texts, especially Mackendrick's comedies and *Mandy*, and Dearden's social problem films, exhibit the studio's disconsolation at the 1945 failure of the New Jerusalem and an attempted reassertion of those declining values.

As has been noted, *The Man in the White Suit* was the final film to be made at Ealing under a Labour administration. Therefore, it is tempting to position its critique of capitalism within its historical context as marking a watershed in Ealing's politics which instigated a decline in the studio's output and a subsequent retreat from the studio's progressive values. However, this supposed decline is mostly apparent in the studio's comedies, as a number of later dramas made at the studio reaffirm Ealing's ideological perspective, only readjusting these principles in a downbeat evocation of the declining possibility of the creation of a New Jerusalem

There appears to be some justification in Charles Barr's assertion that towards the end, Balcon 'had committed Ealing to go on making films of the same type, with the same team, rather than making any adaptation to changing times and a changing industry'.⁵⁵¹ However, there are also indications that the studio was attempting to experiment once more with different genres and styles to accommodate the shifting social, cultural and political climate. Latterly, Barr has admitted that Balcon, towards the very end, seemed aware of Ealing's shortcomings suggesting that the appointment of Kenneth Tynan as a script editor in 1956,

⁵⁵¹ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 12.

highlights Balcon's concern.⁵⁵² Similarly, in an assessment of the studio's embrace of colour photography in the 1950s, Keith M Johnston argues that:

Any claims that Ealing, in the final nine years of the studio's existence, had become staid or was resting on the laurels of their past success have failed to take into account the studio's experimentation with, and use of Technicolor, Eastmancolor and Technirama [...] Such willingness to take risks shows a studio that was still open to new ideas...⁵⁵³

In addition to the studio's innovative experiments in colour, Ealing also thematically attempted to widen its audience appeal. For a studio with such an unquestionable phallogentric outlook, Ealing produced two films in 1950: *Dance Hall* (Charles Crichton) and *Cage of Gold* (Basil Dearden) which, as Melanie Williams states, 'directly addressed dilemmas faced by contemporary women'⁵⁵⁴. The same can be said of the studio's final female ensemble film, *The Feminine Touch* (Pat Jackson, 1956), as its narrative focus upon the nursing profession and its promotion of the NHS marked a continuation of Ealing's support of Labour's reforms. A similar case for Ealing attempting to break new ground could also be made for *Pool of London* (Basil Dearden, 1950) and *Nowhere to Go* (Seth Holt, 1958). Both films

⁵⁵² See Charles Barr 'Against the Grain: Kenneth Tynan at Ealing', *Ealing Revisited*, pp.206-16.

⁵⁵³ Keith M Johnston, "'A riot of all the Colours in the Rainbow"', pp. 204-5.

⁵⁵⁴ Melanie Williams, 'A Feminine Touch?: Ealing's Women', *Ealing Revisited*, p. 189.

are examples of Ealing-*noir*, the former being ‘Dearden’s tentative venture into racial politics’ as it shows ‘the first interracial relationship in a British film’⁵⁵⁵, a fact that emphasises the studio’s progressive attitude to social change.

Barr makes a bold claim for *Pool of London*’s importance towards Ealing’s ethos, stating: ‘If only one film could be preserved for posterity, to illustrate the essence of Ealing [...] this would be a good choice, with its clear-cut embodiment of Ealing’s attitudes to women, violence, social responsibility and cinematic form’.⁵⁵⁶ By contrast, it is worth considering *Nowhere to Go*’s departure from Ealing’s formal and thematic norm in a little closer detail. Based upon a novel by Donald Mackenzie, *Nowhere to Go*, was Co-scripted by Holt and Tynan, who declared an ambition to ‘do the least Ealing film ever made’.⁵⁵⁷ Therefore, the film breaks all the studio’s conventions, as its crime narrative ‘jettisons the preoccupation with a benevolent community’⁵⁵⁸ linking the text thematically, if not formally, with other films made at the studio, especially *They Came to a City* and those made by Mackendrick and Hamer which explore the limitations of the studio’s consensual rhetoric. The film is also,

⁵⁵⁵ Carl Daniels, *Pool of London*, *Screenonline*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/475521/> (date accessed 10 July 2013).

⁵⁵⁶ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 202.

⁵⁵⁷ Seth Holt, interviewed by Kevin Gough Yates, *Screen*, Volume 10, Number 6, November 1969, p. 9.

⁵⁵⁸ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 178.

according to Barr, ‘remarkable [...] for its boldness of its formal experimentation’, claiming ‘there is nothing comparable with this in previous Ealing films, and little enough in the wider field of British cinema’.⁵⁵⁹

Contemporary critics acknowledged how *Nowhere to Go* marked a radical departure from the Ealing paradigm. The *Manchester Guardian* regarded the film as an example of ‘the changing Ealing’⁵⁶⁰ and Harold Conway described it as an ‘attempt ... to match the Hollywood slick thriller school’, although he lamented the fact that it ‘tries to be too clever’.⁵⁶¹ For Jympson Harman, *Nowhere to Go* ‘suggests the French method’⁵⁶² as there are touches of the French *Nouvelle Vague* discernible in the film’s stylistic camerawork and expressive editing. The film’s existential depiction of its amoral central protagonist, the con-man Paul Gregory (George Nader) also manages to defy spectator identification, leading Pulleine to compare Gregory’s demise with that of Tommy Swann in *It Always Rains on Sunday*. Claiming that the two films’ outcomes are historically bound up within Ealing’s notion of community, Pulleine argues:

⁵⁵⁹ Barr, ‘Against the Grain’, 2012, p. 215.

⁵⁶⁰ *Manchester Guardian* 8 December 1958.

⁵⁶¹ *Daily Sketch*, 5 December 1958.

⁵⁶² *Evening News*, 4 December 1958.

It would be possible to see in Nader's lonely death an analogy with the fate of the fugitive in *It Always Rains on Sunday* a decade earlier; the crucial difference is that in the later film there is no alternative community to which the other characters, and the audience's allegiance can be returned and no prospect of a song and dance at the local, after hours or not.⁵⁶³

Nowhere to Go confirms the trend of later Ealing dramas which attempted to re-engage with issues of community, however, it's moral ambiguity towards its criminal subject matter stands it apart from the rest of the studio's 1950s output. By contrast, *The Ship That Died of Shame* (Basil Dearden, 1955) and *The Long Arm* (Charles Frend, 1956) differ from *Nowhere to Go* as both seek to reaffirm Ealing's values by depicting criminality as threatening to social cohesion. The former, concerns a group of ex-servicemen whose re-appropriation of the unity of the war years, like the gang in *The Ladykillers*, is utilised for criminal purposes, representing a perversion of the wartime democratic spirit. The film, as John Hill points out, 'revolve[s] around the problem of post-war experience and the inability of peacetime society to provide the excitement and solidarity represented by the war' as the gang's illegality, 'attempts to reconstruct wartime community are necessarily doomed to failure and futility.'⁵⁶⁴

Therefore, there are parallels in the film with *Passport to Pimlico*

⁵⁶³ Palleine, 'A Song and Dance at the Local', p. 265.

⁵⁶⁴ John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63* (BFI: London, 1986), p. 69.

as both films attempt to re-engage with the spirit of wartime unity.

Rather than accept Ealing's 1950s output as confirmation of a studio in interminable decline, a number of films would appear to suggest that Ealing was attempting to adapt its consensual ethos to the changing postwar social climate. Robert Murphy locates the later dramas within their socio-historical context, claiming that:

The films made between 1946 and 1953 are marvellous evocations of Britain at the beginning of the 50s, still gripped by austerity and unrecovered from the battering of war. A handful of the later films, particularly *The Ship That Died of Shame*, *The Long Arm*, *The Man in the Sky* and *Nowhere to Go*, are equally effective at delving into the problems of a more affluent society but one troubled by social discontents, pressures for social mobility and an uncertainty of purpose [...] Their sometimes deliberate, sometimes inadvertent inclusion of dark and disturbing elements make them able to project a more complex vision of Britain and the British character than one might assume.⁵⁶⁵

If the studio's final dramas demonstrate Ealing's attempt to 'project Britain' by reconnecting to the studio's progressive ethos in the face of the changing socio-political environment, this is starkly contrasted by the comedies made during the same period which are mostly permeated with a sense of fatigue. Ealing's later collection of comedies suggest a parochial attitude, either championing antiquated forces of resurgent tradition or, in

⁵⁶⁵ Robert Murphy, 'Dark Shadows Around Ealing', p. 90.

the more progressive films such as *The Ladykillers*, pessimistically exposing the return of socially ‘conservative’ values. In an analysis of the comedies, Barr claims that ‘1951 is its last really buoyant year’ as those films made afterwards ‘have a decadent or backward-looking character’.⁵⁶⁶ Although the comedies made by the studio during the 1950s display similar engagements with issues of community, they tend to lack the dynamism of their earlier counterparts which reflect the failure of the studio’s ‘mild revolution’.

In 1953 Ealing released *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (Charles Crichton) and *Meet Mr Lucifer* (Anthony Pellisier). The former concerns a small rural community fighting British Railways decision to close their village branch rail line. It is a typically Ealing enterprise, insofar, as it shows a community defiantly uniting to repel an outside threat. However, as Perry indicates, the villagers’ ‘argument for retaining the line seems to be merely for the sake of quaintness and tradition.’⁵⁶⁷ Barr compares the film to both *The Man in the White Suit* and *Passport to Pimlico* as ‘it shows a society which has committed itself to the backward-looking, soft-option path which *Passport* settled for, and is thus a warning of some of the consequences. But in every way lacks the

⁵⁶⁶ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 8.

⁵⁶⁷ Perry, *Forever Ealing*, p. 136.

critical perspective of Mackendrick's film'.⁵⁶⁸ However, despite *Titfield*'s obvious parochialism, the film still manages to convey Ealing's political ideology, as within the text's apparent conservatism there still is a concern with collectivism, albeit a more diluted engagement with the issue than in the studio's more discernibly radical output.

A similar attack on modernity is apparent in *Meet Mr Lucifer* which poses modern television as the work of the devil and a threat to Ealing's community ethos. Described by Perry as 'a laboured and limp attempt at satire'⁵⁶⁹, the film has mostly been neglected. Barr sees the text as an early example of cinema's discourse upon the imposing threat of the commercialised mass-media⁵⁷⁰, and Josephine Botting recognised the film, alongside *The Love Lottery* (Charles Crichton, 1954) and *The Night My Number Came Up* (Leslie Norman, 1955), as a return to the 'fantastic strain' initiated by *Halfway House*, *Fiddlers Three* and *They Came to a City* discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis.⁵⁷¹ Therefore, despite its regressive attitude towards encroaching modernity, *Meet Mr Lucifer*'s re-engagement with fantasy ought

⁵⁶⁸ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, 160-1.

⁵⁶⁹ Perry, *Forever Ealing*, p. 139.

⁵⁷⁰ See Charles Barr, 'Broadcasting and Cinema 2: Screens Within Screens', *All Our Yesterdays*, pp. 206-224.

⁵⁷¹ See Josephine Botting's chapter "'Who'll Pay for Reality?": Ealing Dreams and Fantasy in *Ealing Revisited*, pp. 175-84.

to be recognised as an attempt to halt the studio's decline by exploring new forms.

Ealing's final two comedies appear to have little to recommend as they emphasise the divergence in attitude between the later comedies and the dramas. *Who Done It?* (Basil Dearden, 1956) is condemned by Barr as 'a dull slapstick vehicle for Benny Hill' which shows the studio's comedic output turning full-cycle as it merely 'reinforces the sense of a 20-year throwback to the Formby days'⁵⁷² of the studio. Similarly, Ealing's last two comedies which were both released in 1957, *Barnacle Bill* (Charles Frend, 1957) and *Davy* (Michael Relph,) exhibit Ealing's stagnation and the studio's unsuccessful attempt to revisit its past. For Barr, *Barnacle Bill* was 'a dismal failure on every level' and 'an unmistakeable end of the line for Ealing comedy'⁵⁷³, and for Perry the film highlights that 'the passage of nearly a decade had taken a toll' upon the studio, as 'the style was clearly seen to be anachronistic, and a sad reminder of the former greatness of Ealing'.⁵⁷⁴

Davy saw Ealing return to its Music Hall roots in a tale of a comedian (Harry Secombe) in a music hall family act who wishes to leave the ensemble to seek his ambitions abroad.

⁵⁷² Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 207.

⁵⁷³ Ibid., pp. 164-5

⁵⁷⁴ Perry, *Ealing Forever*, p. 142.

Eventually persuaded to remain with the act, it is an example of choked ambition and familial ties. For Barr:

It is the natural end of a twenty year cycle in which [Ealing] has remained true to itself, consistent in its relation to a certain national culture. The exhaustion of this culture, of the Music Hall act in *Davy*, of Ealing itself, are bound up together. Appropriately, *Davy* is one of Ealing's dullest films on any level. At the end of the 'fifties, Ealing is making films about stagnation and weariness in a style that partakes of those qualities.⁵⁷⁵

This thesis has located Ealing's progressive values within the socio-historical context of the period in which they were produced. As Ealing's political ideology was inextricably linked to Labour and the postwar political and social reconstruction the party sought to bring into being, the highpoint of Ealing's political engagement occurred as the studio was swept up in the ideological fervour which had advanced social-democratic values during the war and had culminated in Labour's victory. The films made post-1951 continue to engage with the Ealing themes of community and social unity, either promoting those values established during the war or, increasingly, exploring the limitations of Ealing's consensus mentality in post-Labour Britain.

We shall conclude by returning to *The Ladykillers'* closing moments which perfectly capture the resurgence of

⁵⁷⁵ Barr, *Ealing Studios*, p. 12.

traditional conservative values. After leaving the police station, Mrs Wilberforce pauses to give a pavement artist some money. As she totters down the street in her old-fashioned outfit, the genteel Mrs Wilberforce appears, as she has done throughout the film, anachronistically out of touch with her contemporary surroundings. Mrs Wilberforce, and the house in which she resides, represent, as Barr states, ‘an entrancing portrait of a Victorian civilisation lingering on, tottering into the postwar world’.⁵⁷⁶ In the background is the street artist’s portrait of the grand statesman of Tory values, Winston Churchill, whose eyes appear to follow Mrs Wilberforce as she heads home. Despite Labour’s post-war reforms, the old hierarchical class structure had remained intact. 1953 had witnessed the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and Sir Anthony Eden had been instated as the new Prime Minister of a Conservative government which would remain in power for a further decade. The final shot is of the old house which, despite its subsidence and the encroachment of modernity around it, defiantly refuses to crumble away. It is a symbolic image, both of Ealing’s decline and of the nation itself. One cannot see the twee and cosy ending of the film and fail to recognise that, despite the orthodox viewpoint of the studio as representing a moderate form of social reformism, the final

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., p.171.

classic comedy made at Ealing represents the studio's lament at the declining possibility of its 'mild revolution'.

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