

Analysis on How Nationalism in Britain Affected the Propaganda in a Film During World War II

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ABSTRACT

Emerging early in the 20th century, films were dominant representations of human spirits. Like its predecessors, all forms of entertainment media have the potential to have an enormous impact on manipulating the public. This paper examines the role of nationalism in British war propaganda films during World War II. This paper will first investigate the prevailing nationalistic ideas in Britain, then reveal how those ideas are reflected in the characteristics of propaganda films. This topic is significant because it not only analyzes the critical role film plays during wartime but also reveals the ideology of a country's nationalism. Even more, it shows how, under the historical period when the public had limited access to information, a film is used to reflect only one side of the story. This paper analyzed a film called *The Silent Village* from several aspects, and the standard for assessing the effectiveness of propaganda is unduplicatable. Also, further study will be made in the future.

Keywords: *film, British Nationalism, World War II*

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic is closely related to politics, media communication, and film. The films demonstrate how nationalism played an essential role in fostering national conflicts and manipulating the public. Nowhere was this more apparent than leading up to World War II. During wartimes, the conflicting parties need to justify their actions to their public. Nationalism, as a process and ideology, proved to be a practical approach to provide a systematic, rational, and even scientific framework for patriotism. The ideologies became particularly important in cinema. They became the medium to promote the nationalistic message. Previous investigations have included a general picture of how British propaganda films shifted the public's opinions during World War II [1], with most of its focus on appealing to the audience in joining the army and impacting the American citizens to forgo neutrality [1]. However, limited work has been done regarding the analysis of one specific film in that era, or examining the propaganda film as a whole genre. This paper will focus on exploring the directorial elements and propaganda messages of an anti-Nazi film from Britain.

2. NATIONALISM IN BRITAIN

British Nationalism during World War II was derived from the experiences of the British Empire, where famously "the sun never sets", and consisting of vast English territories and political ties to four semi-independent dominions: Australia, Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand. The British Nationalism was mainly comprised of their economic interest and former imperialism. This statement can be justified in multiple aspects. First of all, the official language of Britain, English, was not a cause of its

nationalism, but an end product of it. Britain's expansion is based on imperialization purposes, and English was just a language that the colonies were forced to use. Secondly, religion was also not a significant component of British Nationalism. Despite their catholic roots, Enlightenment had diminished the importance of religion in the 20th century [3]. Finally, it is justified that British Nationalism is mainly composed of economic interests. That was also the reason why the collective entity of Britain was called the 'Common Wealth'.

During World War II, the process of Nationalism in Britain sought to engender the following actions: to call to arms, to request for war loans, to encourage industrial activity, to express emotions like courage or hatred, and to urge the population to conserve resources.

3. ANALYSIS OF NATIONALISM IN THE SILENT VILLAGE

3.1. Brief Introduction of *The Silent Village*

The film focusing on British Nationalism is *The Silent Village*, which is directed by Humphrey Jennings in 1943. This film reveals the fascist genocide and the anti-Semitic actions taken by the German government. In Humphrey Jennings's movie *The Silent Village* (1943), British Nationalism was depicted through the lens of a mining community in the small Welsh village of Cwmgiedd. It was made to represent the people of Lidice in Czechoslovakia, revealing the acute difference in the lives of the people before and after the Nazi Germany regime. The Nazis have forbidden the use of Welsh, as well as the union activity of the workers [4].

Humphrey Jennings, a director known for his propaganda films, received positive reviews after the release of *The*

Silent Village. BBC Wales remarked the impact of the film as “calling for solidarity among miners faced with the German threat to freedom” and was “instrumental in forging enduringly strong relationships between Czech and Welsh miners[5].”

3.2. Film Analysis

3.2.1. Non-Diegetic and Diegetic Sounds

The opening of the film began with still shots on running rivers, transitioning to a set of high-angle shots of the village, accompanied by the church hymns. Then the scene moved to inside the church. This quickly established a religious background of the village, also foreshadowing a contrast between the singing voice and the silence later on in the movie. The singing stopped when the chimney scene appeared. The mechanical sounds introduced the other aspect of the background setting: an industrial village that focused on mining. The third scene in the opening section was the school. The sound of teaching and the students echoing were also a method of establishing contrast. The last scene during the opening section was the working women and the villagers’ daily lives. This scene was accompanied by the bird chirping and high key lighting, demonstrating the harmony in the village. The four main scenes in the opening section of the movie introduced the four aspects of villagers’ lives which were the most affected : religions, work, education, and daily lives.



Figure 1 Scene from the *The Silent Village*.

Church hymning re-emerged at 4:41, accompanied by scenes that were composed with multiple people. The humane aspect was built through the daily lives and citizens’ interactions. Close-up shots were used to reveal the characters’ joyful facial expressions. At 5:44, the children and adults in the cinemas were filled with laughter; the men in bars were also chatting with smiles on their faces.

3.2.2. Dialogue and Plot Points

At 14:40, the director presented the scene with a contrast in sound and camera movement. Quickly after the fast gun shots there was silence, showing the death of the victims with still shots. The movement in previous scenes built a juxtaposition. Even when they were going back with the stretcher, there was only pure silence. The absence of sound and juxtaposition emphasized on the victims’ vulnerability in the situation. It further appealed to the audiences that

many towns like this were in need of their help, due to a power imbalance between the Nazis. Only when the vulnerable were not able to defend themselves would people send help. The absence of sound enhanced the power of sympathy.



Figure 2 Scene from the *The Silent Village*.

At 17:00, the teacher of the school informed the students that Welsh was not to be spoken in school. She said: “our beautiful songs and poems are to be heard no more” As a teacher it was inherent that she should comfort the students. Rather she evoked the students’ anger about the Nazi’s rule. This dialogue could be interpreted as a direct message to the British audience rather than the children. The children’s reaction to the message could further push the emotions of the audiences in defending their own culture and of those that are similar to them.

3.2.3. Titles

At 7:53 the title wrote: “Such is life at Cwmgiedd in the western valleys of Wales—and such too was life in Lidice until the coming of Fascism”. The film addressed the Nazis as ‘Fascism’ instead of the ‘Nazi Germans’. This reveals that the British recognize the main conflict during the World War II is not on a national level, but rather on a political ideology level. This further supports the root cause of the British Nationalism: it is not the biological similarities but the pursuit of economic benefits. Thus British Nationalism does not place superiority upon its own citizen, but supports all of whom are beneficial to the country. By opposing Fascism as an ideology, Britain implies to unite all those that share the same belief. Its nationalism appeals to more audience than British citizens.

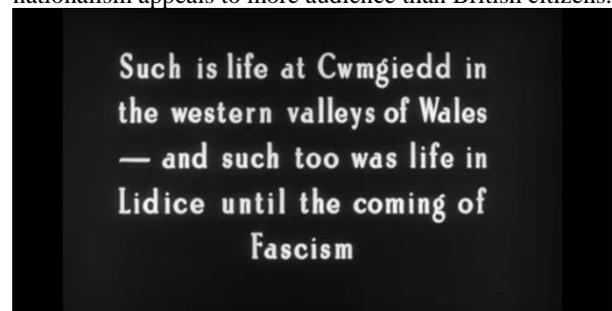


Figure 3 Scene from the *The Silent Village*.

At the ending of the story, around 31:55, the director used the fire scene along with the titles to explain the outcomes of the Nazi’s wrongdoing. With prior portrayal of the peacefulness in the village as well as the the opening title

suggests, the audience are quickly drawn into the grief with a collection of scenes that reflect the tragedy.

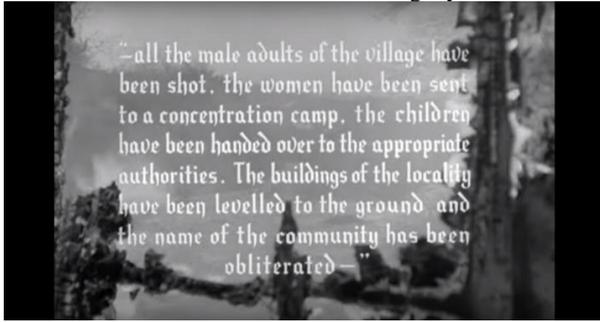


Figure 4 Scene from the *The Silent Village*.

After the titles, the man around the table exhorts to the audience by saying that with “knowledge and power, victory will be on our side”. The use of personal pronouns enhances the sense of personal connection. The scene of workers were at the end of the movie, suggesting that the target audience are the working class in Britain, and conveying the message that their work will also serve a great cause. Given their extensive imperial system which had justified British expansion globally, based on notions of the “White Man’s Burden”, this nationalistic idea was rooted in the public’s mind, impacting them to the extent that they are willing to sacrifice their lives.

3.3. The impacts of Nationalism in British on propagandas in film during WW II

3.3.1. Target audience

This film explored British Nationalism and its propagandas through many details. It chose the mining industry as the subjective of the story, because it was especially prevalent before and during World War II, employing 1.2 million working-class population. According to Anthony Smith, British Nationalism is mostly modernistic, thinking that whatever happens in the past is largely irrelevant, that nationalism is a newly emerging idea that resulted from industrialization and imperialization. By appealing to the working-class population, it represents that in British Nationalism, the people are distinctive by their socioeconomic class differences instead of cultural differences. The working class resonates with the other working-class, rather than a specific race resonating with another minority.

3.3.2 Sound

Secondly, the film utilized sound as a medium to convey the destruction that occurred in the village. In the opening section of the film, the sound was composed of church music and everyday working sounds, portraying the peaceful image in the village. The arrival of Nazi Germany was solely represented by a black car and the radio. The mechanical voice and its monotone established a cruel and indifferent image of the Nazis[6]. The radio was

accompanied by a series of marching sounds and gunfire, representing violence as well as wartime songs. At the end of the movie, the village indeed went silence. The ‘silence’ here represents not only the literal silence of the film but also the oppressed voices of the working-class people under the Nazi Germany regime. Dave Berry of the British Film Institute remarked: “A constant fear of reprisal permeates the film. In domestic scenes, the locals’ impassivity, listening to their radios, compounds the sense of oppression.” Little or no scenes have shown the citizens’ resentment towards the cruelty, which enhances the power imbalance between the parties. Drawing clearly the passivity and the incapability of self-helping evokes the sympathy of the audience, urging them to take action and prevention towards similar incidents.

3.3.3. Change in language

The film explored the change in language. In the opening scenes, Welsh was spoken. Since the film’s target audience was the British citizens, it was weird how the movie did not have subtitles for the Welsh dialogues. It could later be justified that the dialogues are not the emphasis of this movie, rather it was the change in language. After the Nazis banned Welsh, German became the primary language used in the film, followed by English. This change in language is the most direct way to reflect the destruction of a minority culture in a multicultural society.

All three components of this film contributes to the exploration of British Nationalism: established upon economic functions and resonate based on class differences; a savior to those who suffer from fascist regime and their violence; sympathetic towards the cultural minorities that are oppressed, since Britain was also a country that held multiple cultures, and they were proud for not forbidding the use of their mother tongue.

Those elements all, to an extent, shaped the existing British Nationalism. Thus it is fair to conclude that the unique focus on ideology for the Second World War demarcated the nuances. The countries from opposing parties are both more aware of the standardized guidelines for their propagandas. Stereotyping and othering are the main tools for this purpose. By denouncing a generalization, the people are more willing to accept the other extreme. Therefore, the incorporation of those elements in propaganda films are an unique reflection of the newly established demarcations.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper examines the role of Nationalism in British war propaganda films during World War II. This paper first addressed the foundation of British Nationalism. It is a modernistic idea that is composed by common economic interests. This root directly impacted the selection of target audiences in the film *The Silent Village*, by Humphrey Jennings. Its message towards the coal mining workers, or those of working class, is reflected through different film elements: sound, camera movements, montage, and several titles as a supplement. Sound is the most prevalent in the

establishment of British Nationalism and Anti-Nazism. The evocation of empathy and emotions are impactful to the audience. *The Silent Village* is a powerful propaganda film, and one of the many during the World War II.

This investigation is limited by the difference in modern film conventions and that of 1943. Though genre films have emerged by then, the techniques used were highly deficient. Thus the standard for evaluating the effectiveness of propaganda is unduplicatable. In further studies, multiple films of that era should be examined altogether. Such comparison could be made within Britain, across countries during World War II, or even war genre film across different time period, allowing for a more complete understanding of the extent of success.

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