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ENGLAND, YEAR ZERO:
SATIRE IN POSTWAR BRITISH POPULAR CULTURE

by

ROGER E. RAWLINGS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2004

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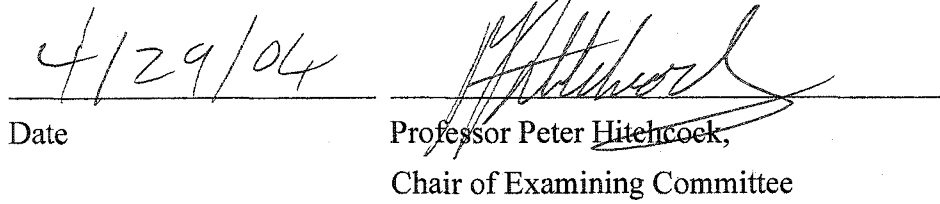

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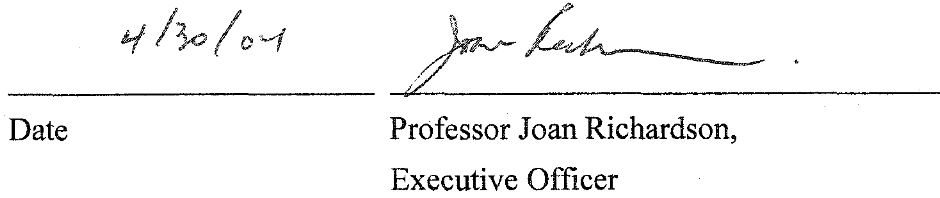

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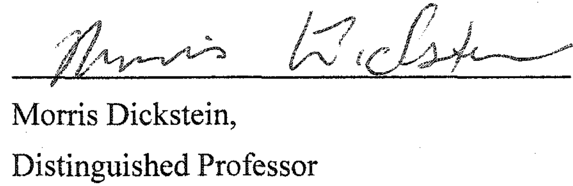

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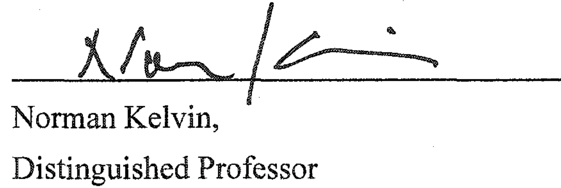

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Abstract

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by
Roger E. Rawlings

Advisers: Professor Peter Hitchcock & Professor Louis Menand

In 1945, out of the bankrupt European economies (what came to be called "Europe: Year Zero"), the major filmmaking countries were all, in some way, dependent on the U.S., either financially, due to the Blum-Byrne Agreement attached to the Marshall Plan, or culturally, because of their admiration for American films and literature. Italian filmmakers sought to document such devastation with a new genre of Neo-Realism using stock footage, off-the-cuff on-location shooting, and whatever raw film they could get their hands on; yet, they still look to emulate the style and structure of American films. France restarted its film industry first, with conventional French dramas, then later, with the newer films of the *Cahiers* auteurs of the New Wave whose makers adored the Hollywood cartel. The English, reduced to making propaganda and documentaries during the war, also started afresh, first by going back to their literary classics, from Shakespeare to Dickens, but then, more importantly, as they got further away from the traumas of war, to their national tradition of satire.

Though respected by Hollywood, critics, and the public in general for the intensity and zaniness of their characters and narratives, a serious study has yet to be made of certain English comedies after World War II, not as mere "comedies," but as

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achievements of high satire–key cultural documents in understanding the redefinition of a new England in a new world. Using a Cultural Studies methodology, this study will redress the balance by investigating the work of certain writers, filmmakers and performers working in postwar England, and identifies the period between 1947 and 1952 as a particularly fertile moment for British satire—a time when British cultural identity was seriously redefining itself amid a socio-economic landscape of loss of empire, crippling rationing, and Labour's newly implemented Welfare State.

Much has been written about the Angry Young Men, the Movement poets, and British social realism of the mid-fifties, but the satiric artists and filmmakers discussed here were making their commentaries earlier, in the immediate aftermath of war's end. The project specifically seeks to show how the British satires of the late-1940s/early-1950s were a highly original and authentic indigenous response to a nation's critical identity crisis. Some film texts considered are *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), *Kind Hearts & Coronets* (1949), *Whiskey Galore* (1949), *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), and *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), among others, as well as the militant satirist Spike Milligan's BBC radio program, "The Goon Show," which was also at its most prolific during this period.

The final chapter discusses later English satires inspired by these early 1950s artists, including works from *Beyond the Fringe* (1961), the Beatles' mid-sixties films (*A Hard Day's Night*, *Help*) and the Monty Python TV shows, as well as later satires in print (*Private Eye* magazine), on film (Bruce Robinson's *Withnail & I),* in music (Mark E. Smith and The Fall) and on stage (Bill Hicks). But the time between 1947 and 1952 is

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the central focus as the particularly fertile moment for British satire, a period when postwar British cultural identity was seriously redefining itself. The British satires of the late forties and early fifties held up a mirror to an England rife with change, helping to codify who they were and where they were headed as a newly inward-turning island culture.

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Acknowledgments

The order in which one thanks all the people who helped make an endeavor like this possible is, inevitably, unsatisfactory. But, it must, in any case, be done because the thing simply would not exist without them. Like my peers, this has been the major challenge of my adult life, and now that it's done, I really don't look forward to any more on this level of intensity and difficulty! However, and clichéd though it may sound, going through this has taught me a little more about character than I bargained for, and even more so, about how to face life's vicissitudes and major rites-of-passages on the way to some semblance of maturity.

That said, I would first like to thank my committee members, Peter Hitchcock, Louis Menand, Morris Dickstein, and Norman Kelvin, for helping to turn a rather disparate collection of notes and scattered ideas into a full-length study, and, more importantly, for putting in the time, energy and effort it takes to plow through such dense material, especially with my mangled syntax and inchoate writing style. I would extend this thanks to the reader in advance, too, with a word of caution that they might want to think twice before reading on.

More so, when we are faced with such Sisyphian tasks as the almighty "Diss.," it is our friends and family we inevitably lean on–for an uncritically open ear for our whining, for a reminder of our identity, and for the boosting of confidence we constantly need to persevere. So, I'd like to thank my parents, Patricia and Edward Rawlings, for

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their patience and (almost!) unending (financial and moral) support and kindness the whole way through, even when they seriously believed they'd never actually see this thing finally finished. And thanks further in this category, to my siblings, Ann Marie, Dennis and Sheila (and the latters' partners Magna Rodriguez and Robert Scagnelli, respectively), who put up with the overly "alpha-eccentric" member of the Rawlings' clan.

Next, thanks also goes out to my great friends at the "Gradual" Center, Ece Aykol, Tom Cerasulo, Sam Cohen, Patricia Coleman, Megan Elias, Susan Falls, David Hyman, Sertan Kabadayi, Jean Murley, Jennifer Starbuck, Elizabeth Toohey, Marilyn Weber, and Marion Wilson who were always there for me and for each other. And to my wonderful colleagues at Lehman College–David, Jay, Khema and Pedro–who were so incredibly good to me that I still can scarcely believe it, especially when I had little right to expect such treatment. And thanks to the generous crew at Queensborough–Tom, Nancy, Mike and Liisa who maintained a faith that it would surely get done.

Further thanks goes to my terrific friend Mark Flynn for his unrepayable support, help and encouragement, and to my other great friends Ed Bradin, Curtis Church, P.J. Dillon and Bob Pattison–my best friends in the world. But, most importantly, to my brilliant artist friend Tracy Miller, without whose encouragement, faith and committed understanding this never would have gotten finished. She alone endured and understood, uncomplainingly, the self-absorption and generally anti-social behavior that is inseparable from the creative process.

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Finally, a word of admiration must go out to the incredible artists who inspired this examination, and who inspired their own countrymen during continuing times of strife in a new world very different from what their culture had hoped and imagined for, just after saving their own republic, and civilization, in general, from abject barbarism.

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20c. Britain Timeline

1900s Victoria dies, but Edward continues her conservative political policies and cultural sensibilities.

1910s

- 1910 V. Woolf's proclaimed date (made in 1922) when the world changed.
- 1913 N.Y.Armory show.
- 1914 Rupture of the calm Victorian century; W. Lewis' Vorticism.
- 1918 England spent and (shell-) shocked from the bloodshed, horrific numbers of dead and modern-machinery style of The Great War. The world had changed. (Lewis abandons Vorticism).

1920s Inching towards modernity—new mod cons—Jazz Age rebellion; artists head for Monmartre (& Bloomsbury), but more gloom in the U.K.

- 1926 General Strike takes country by surprise; lasts 6 mos. for the coal industry. Industry wins.

1930s Depression and Appeasement; no military build-up in reaction to Germany; Waugh.

1940s War.

1944-54 Postwar Britain: Hope (The New Jerusalem), then immediately more of the same: self-denial, austerity budgets, rationing, New Realities and frustrations as Britain watches other euro countries boom. Britain's artists turn to satire given Britain's terrible abhorrence (fear) of violence; satire becomes the most logical, non-violent means of protest, a response to the incessant 30 years of the horrors of war, General Strike, Depression, Nazism/Appeasement, postwar absurdism; etc.

1945 *Animal Farm* (very dark, little humor, not a satire in the postwar sense, more a fable, like Aesop's; a warning of the dangers of totalitarianism).

1947 Ealing satires, beginning with *Hue and Cry*; the Movement Poets.

1948-ff. Pub Culture—The Goons explode in '47; on the airwaves in early '51.

- **1949** Annus Mirabilis of satire: Ealing producing their famous three; Goons ready to explode.

1951 The Festival of Britain (100 year anniversary of the Great Exhibition)—the Left celebrates, but it is actually a desperate attempt to salve the public's discontent; 1951-2: darkest/coldest winter—coal shortage and coal fog (thousands die trying to keep warm). *Tattler/Daily Mail*/papers specializing in satire; Goons' first BBC.

1952 Churchill re-elected; Festival torn down; Goons at their height.

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1953 Queen Elizabeth coronation announces, more importantly, the arrival of TV in Britain.

1954 New Britain: Social Realism, Angry Young Men and Free Cinema; Ealing sold to BBC; *Lucky Jim.*

1956 Suez frees England from burden of world military presence (though, they never forgive U.S. for not supporting them).

1958 Sputnik.

1960s:

1959 *I'm Alright, Jack*—beginning of the new satires of 60s and 70s.

1961 *Beyond the Fringe.*

1962 "Oh, What a Lovely War;" Vietnam (U.S. never forgives Britain for not sending troops in support).

1963 The Beatles.

1964-5 The Stones; Swinging England; fashion and films.

1967 Pythons--same means of protesting the madness in the culture, frustrations of the culture with their own lack of progress, w/o bloodshed (which is why there was so much bloodshed in goons/pythons!).

70s/80s/90s: Bruce Robinson's *Withnail and I*; Mark E. Smith; Bill Hicks.

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CHAPTER ONE:

A NATION TURNS INWARD: SETTING OF ECONOMIC AND ARTISTIC POSTWAR ENGLAND

Cultural revolutions often happen so quickly that it's hard to pin down when they began, when they ended, and who blazed trails through the chaos. Though little has been said or written about the phenomenon, in postwar Britain there were two artistic groups that were the cultural purveyors of their day, working in a genre that would come to define postwar British popular culture: the satirists of the Ealing Film Studios and of the BBC's Spike Milligan and the Goons. They would change the culture dramatically, influencing all that came afterwards. But a look into the economic and artistic atmosphere of the immediate postwar years, as well as exactly what satire's cultural purpose is in Britain first must be noted.

Adapting to Change: New Britain after Modernism

Britain at the end of the war found itself facing two immense cultural and economic monsters: postmodernism and the end of empire due to acute financial bankruptcy.

On the first point, just as the staple discoveries, events, and ideas of modernism (Freud, Darwin, relativity, fragmented-self and -language, the invention of flight allowing for new p.o.v.'s, the traumatic rupture of World War I, etc.) transformed western, and the world's, cultures, the new Cold War period was also defined by newer cultural models (its own events, inventions and ideas from antibiotics, plastic and the atom bomb to structuralism, computers and the discovery of DNA).

Finally capitalism and technology seemed to have gone too far: this time the

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entire destruction of the planet was at stake, not just the exploitation of labor. This was the new age, a new world where cause-and-effect were happening practically simultaneously. For David Harvey, a Marxist theorist at The Graduate Center of New York, the struggle between utopian visions and dystopian realities of the mid-20th century and an eventual world of fragmented, ephemeral, image-based, Disneyland-like aesthetics was due to what he calls the "Space-Time Compression," brought on, invariably, by capitalism and its push for faster modes of production, including transportation:

> I use the word 'Compression' because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by a sped-up pace of life, while also overcoming the spacial barriers that the world seems to collapse inward on us. As space appears to shrink to a 'global village' of telecommunications and 'spaceship earth' of economic ecological interdependencies, and as time-horizons shorten to the point where 'the present' is all there is (the world of the schizophrenic), so we have to learn how to cope with an overwhelming sense of compression of our spacial and temporal worlds.[1]

This period is labeled by Harvey as High Modernism, or Postmodernism, a new sped-up world Britain was ill-prepared to face after six long years of war.

On the second point, cultural imperialism, obviously coined by analogy to military imperialism, is the practice of promoting the culture and language of one nation over another, particularly when the former is a large and powerful one and the latter a small poor one.[2] Before 1939, England had a long history of cultural imperialism: throughout

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1 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity,* Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1989, 240.

2 It should be noted that 'cultural imperialism' can refer to either the forced acculturation

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the 18th and 19th century the dominant English establishment attempted (unsuccessfully) to eliminate all non-English languages within the British Island group (such as the Welsh language, Irish language and Scottish Gaelic language) by outlawing them or otherwise marginalising their speakers,[3] but the term was probably first applied to Britain when she achieved the *physical* imperialism of empire in the mid-19th century using many similar measures on her overseas conquests (including encouraging the game of cricket and teaching English to the indigenous populations) to further establish her grasp on countries and territories the world over.

But appearance and reality were less far apart in 1945 than they had been in the previous 200 years. In the aftermath of the Second World War, it was clear to anyone seriously concerned with public affairs that the age of British (in fact, European) cultural hegemony was over, even if their cultural imperialism "appeared" (especially to the British themselves) to continue unabated. The United States helped consolidate the new Europe into a more conservative strain, making sure that Britain's world dominance was over. After the formation of the United Nations in 1945, in 1947 the Marshall Plan (the European Recovery Plan) offered billions in aid to countries which maintained

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of a subject population, or to the voluntary embracing of a foreign culture by individuals who do so of their own free will. (Since these are two very different referents, the validity of the term has been called into question). This can take the form of active, formal policy or a general attitude.

3

Many other languages had almost or totally been wiped out by this point, including Cornish and Manx. A revealing instance of cultural imperialism was the Prayer Book rebellion of 1549, where the English state sought to suppress non-English languages with the English language Book of Common Prayer. In replacing Latin with English, and under the guise of suppressing Catholicism, English was effectively imposed as the language of the Church, one of the societal focal points of the time. At the time people in many areas of Cornwall did not speak or understand English. The Cornish language is no longer a matter of life and death, but in 1549 it was. Many Cornish people protesting against the imposition of an English Prayer book were massacred by the King's army. Their leaders were executed and the people suffered numerous reprisals.

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democratic governments and political allegiance to the U.S. over socialist ones.[4] Though many nations insisted on maintaining their distinct cultural identities, even already complaining that in fashion, advertising, and mass media, Europe was becoming a colony of the States, among other things, the lending of Marshall Plan funds was intricately tied to accepting of the Motion Picture Export Association of America's (known as the Blum-Byrne Agreement) terms of American film as the best form of propagandic defense against Communist and Fascist tendencies.[5] This demand was also made on America's biggest ally, Britain.

But, by war's end, England was caught up in the momentum of victory and the ideals of the "New Jerusalem,"[6] from which the English went forward towards the noble but unrealistic goal of a welfare society.

The New Jerusalem

On July 26, 1945, Clement Atlee was elected Prime Minister in a Labour coup, ousting the hero of the war, Winston Churchill. This ushered in the first non-coalition government in over 5 years and the partisan regime set about the creation of the regulatory and Welfare State.[7] Churchill lost because of a new movement that was

---

4

In 1949, the U.S. presided over the formation of NATO, absorbing Europe into the American sphere of influence; yet, also defending it against rampant fears of a Communist takeover.

5

It was out of this atmosphere and situation that the major European countries began to re-establish their (film) industries using American film and culture as influence for their styles.

6 The term comes from Correlli Barnett; see below.

7

Later, from 1951 to 1964 a Conservative government would control Britain. The Prime Ministers of the postwar period have been: Winston Churchill –1940-45; 1951-55 (Conservative); Clement Attlee–1945-51 (Labour); Anthony Eden–1955-1957

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swelling in England which Atlee platformed as the war was turning their way–the "New Jerusalem," in which he promised a new prosperous and responsible Britain to his islanders after the war.

The "New Jerusalem" Welfare State was the result of the William Beveridge Report in 1942, which identified five "Giant Evils" in society: squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease, and a series of changes was put in place to deal with them. (Ironically, the Welfare State would end up exacerbating almost everyone of these "evils." "The Beveridge Report" already appeared in its entirety in a very popular magazine of the time, *Photoplay*). The changes meant that the government recognized the responsibility to care for the people of Britain "from the cradle to the grave" (or, as some preferred, "from the womb to the tomb"): it was a commitment to health (in 1948 the National Health Service was created), education, employment and social security.[8] It was an ambitious plan and a noble gift to the heroic nation, but, there was just one small problem: after the high cost of the fight with the Axis Powers, including the huge debt in loans owed to the United States, and especially with the high cost of maintaining overseas territories that no longer were profitable to Britain, there were scant resources left to pay for it.

(Conservative); Harold Macmillian–1957-1963 (Conservative); Alec Douglas-Home–1963-4 (Labour); Harold Wilson–1964-1970, 1974-6 (Labour); Edward Heath–1970-74 (Labour); James Callaghan–1976-9 (Labour); Margaret Thatcher–1979-1990 (Conservative); John Major-1990-1996 (Conservative); Tony Blair–1996-present (Labour).

8

The classic Welfare State period lasted from approximately 1945 to the 1970s, although many features of it remain today. The British Welfare State is unique in that everyone has free access to a family doctor and most people get free medical prescriptions and treatment. Since the 1980s the government has begun to reduce some provision: for example, free eye tests for all have now been stopped and prescription charges for drugs have constantly risen since they were first introduced in 1951. However, providing some form of a welfare state is still a basic principle of government policy in Britain today.

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By 1945, the end of the British Empire had long begun its transformation into the modern Commonwealth as the white colonies of Canada (1867), Australia (1901), New Zealand (1907) and the newly-created Union of South Africa (1910) became federated self-governing Dominions.[9] Although Britain emerged victorious, the war's heavy cost created a climate within both the public and policy elites that was increasingly skeptical of the benefits of empire and unwilling to bear its costs.[10] The great British historian Correlli Barnett has explained away this decline as the British simply ignoring what it took to maintain dominance in world industry:

> Britain has been a nation blinded by pride (of being a world power) to the signs of decay at the technological roots of its strength... a (clear demonstration of) nation will cling to the political and economic faiths of the past. Even after fundamental change in the operating environment has rendered these faiths suspect strategies for survival.[11]

The end of the British empire also resulted in 1950s Britain becoming, despite the march toward state-sponsored support for all its citizens, an anxious, reactionary time where fundamental economic difficulties and social dissatisfactions arose after such early postwar hope, hope that was meticulously documented by the nations' literary and visual

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9

Within this context, the dominions were recognized as fully independent states under the British crown by the 1926 Balfour Declaration and the 1931 Statute of Westminster.

10

Postwar decolonization was accomplished with almost unseemly haste, with Britain rarely fighting to retain any territory. The independence of India in 1947 ended a 40-year struggle by the Indian National Congress for first self-government and later full sovereignty, though the land's partition into India and Pakistan entailed violence costing hundreds of thousands of lives. The acceptance by Britain and the other Dominions of India's adoption of republican status (1949) is now taken as the start of the modern Commonwealth.

11

Correlli Barnett, *The Pride and Fall: The Dream of Britain as a Great Nation*, New York: The Free Press/MacMillan, 1987, xi.

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satiric artists.

The Art Scene

The received wisdom of the late 1940s was that, after the Second World War, the "People's War," the landslide victory of the Labour Party in the General Election of 1945, and the establishment of the Welfare State, with free secondary and tertiary education, a newly democratized British society was set to rid itself of class divisions and inequalities for good. But many young Brits who grew up in the postwar period and benefitted from the 1944 Education Act, felt that the old pre-war upper classes still maintained their privileged position because they commanded the social and cultural high ground. These included those, like Knigsley Amis, doing National Service in the peacetime army, opening eyes to this fact: he gave his Jim Dixon, for example, a university post at a time when provincial universities were all mini-Oxbridges, aping and largely staffed by graduates of the ancient university:

> In 1954 it was acclaimed as marking the arrival of a new literary generation, the writers of the 1950s, sometimes referred to as the "Movement" or "The Angry Young Men." These were two distinct but overlapping categories. The Movement was a school of poetry, of which Philip Larkin was the acknowledged leader, and to which Amis himself belonged, along with other academics like John Wain, Donald Davie and D.J. Enright... they consciously set themselves to displace the declamatory, surrealistic, densely metaphorical poetry of Dylan Thomas and his associates with verse that was well-informed, comprehensible, dry, witty, colloquial and down-to-earth.[12]

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[12] David Lodge, "Introduction," Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, New York: Penguin, 1992,

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The "Angry Young Men," a journalistic term originally put into circulation by a leading article in *The Spectator*, grouped together a number of authors and/or their fictional heroes of the 1950s who vigorously expressed their discontent with life in contemporary Britain. They included John Osbourne/Jimmy Porter (*Look Back in Anger*), Alan Sillitoe/ Arthur Seaton (*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*), John Braine/Joe Lampton (*Room at the Top*) and Kingsley Amis/Jim Dixon.[13] At the same time, as David Lodge explains above, The Movement was a school of poetry which rejected the earlier poets, who sought to use a common language aimed at the common man. For them it was a precious conceit.

Although these writers 'arrived' in the mid-late 1950s, their education and careers had, for the most part, been delayed or interrupted by the Second World War, and their formative years were really the 1940s.[14] *Lucky Jim*, is clearly a novel about the late 1940s, distinctly under the shadow of the War: no dates are specifically mentioned in the text, but it cannot be set later than 1951 since a Labour government is still in power.[15]

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viii-x.

13

A cultural movement is a change in the way a number of different disciplines approach their work. This embodies all art forms, the sciences, and philosophies. Long ago, different nations or regions of the world would go through their own independent sequence of movements in culture (as example, the Romanticism movement occurred at different times in Germany, England, and France), but as world communications have accelerated this geographical distinction has become less noteworthy. When cultural movements go through revolutions from one to the next, genres tend to get attacked and mixed up, and often new genres are generated and old ones fade. These changes are often reactions against the prior cultural form, which typically has grown stale and repetitive. An obsession emerges among the mainstream with the new movement, and the old one falls into neglect - sometimes it dies out entirely, but often it chugs along favored in a few disciplines and occasionally making reappearances (sometimes prefixed with "neo-").

[14] This was certainly true of Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe.

15

Bertrand's remark about their inability to "pour water on troubled oil" may be a

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The atmosphere of the novel itself, too, is clearly that of socialist, 'austerity' Britain, when a young university lecturer might plausibly possess only "three pairs of trousers, live in a lodging house, surrendering his ration book to his landlady, not even dream of owning a car, and keep anxious count of his cigarette consumption, not on health grounds, but on financial ones."[16] The original inspiration for the novel was a glimpse of the Senior Common Room at what was then University College, Leicester, in 1948, when he was visiting Philip Larkin who was a librarian there:

> Jim is ill-at-ease and out of place in the university because he does not at heart subscribe to its social and cultural values, preferring pop music to Mozart, pubs to drawing rooms, non-academic company to academic... When he loses his university job, however, Jim resignedly prepares to take up school teaching (at his own school) as if there were no alternative. A huge portion of the first generation humanities graduates in the 1940s and 50s went into educational careers not because they had a vocational call, but because entry to the other liberal professions–administrative civil service, the foreign service, law, publishing, etc., was still controlled by the public-school-Oxbridge-old-boy network. They were the ideal readers of *Lucky Jim*.[17]

Much has been made of how these "Angry Young Men," and Movement poets critiqued and deconstructed British life under the new postwar realities of the Welfare State. But years before these artists, seven to be exact, the satirists of Ealing and the Goons were

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reference to the Persian Oil Crisis of that year. The point is that, although it was published when the Tory government elected in 1951 was well into its stride, the setting was the late 1940s.

[16] Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, New York: Penguin, 1992, 28.

[17] David Lodge, *Ibid.*, from the "Introduction," New York: Penguin, 1992, viii.

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long making *their* commentaries on new Britain, using the more immediately-accessible popular culture mediums of film and radio, their audience being the same (ideal) ones as Amis's.[18] And they were ever more intent on the satiric medium, a genre requiring some clarification.

Satire

In the arts, "genre" refers to the traditional divisions of art forms from a single field of activity (e.g. literature, film, music, painting, sculpture, performance) into various kinds or types according to criteria particular to that form. The field of literary endeavor often refers to the "poetic genres" and the "prose genres;" poetry might thus be subdivided into epic, lyric and dramatic, while prose might be divided into fiction and non-fiction. Obviously, these can be further subdivided *ad libitum*: dramatic poetry can be divided into comedy, tragedy, melodrama and so forth, as can fictional or non-fictional prose; this division can continue more or less as far as one likes.[19]

18

Appearing in 1955, *Lucky Jim* was actually a very late study of the immediate postwar years.

19

Parody is a form of satire that imitates another work of art in order to ridicule it. The line between parody and satire is often blurred. Satires need not be humorous, indeed they are often tragic, while parodies are almost inevitably humorous. Parody is a form of satire that imitates another work of art in order to ridicule it. Parodies exists in all art media, including literature, music and cinema. Some theorists see parody as a natural development in the life cycle of any genre, especially in film. Westerns, for example, after the classic stage defined the conventions of the genre, underwent a parody stage, in which those same conventions were lampooned (see also Mel Brooks). Because audiences had seen these classic Westerns, they had expectations for any new Westerns, and when these expectations were inverted, the audience laughed. This is successful parody.

Although a parody is usually a derivative work under United States Copyright Law, it is generally protected under fair use. For example, in 2001, the federal appeals courts upheld the right of Alice Randall to publish a parody of *Gone With the Wind* called *The Wind Done Gone*, which told the same story from the point of view of Scarlett O'Hara's slaves, who were glad to be rid of her.

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Satire, then, is both a literary and/or art technique which principally attempts to ridicule its subject as an means of provoking change or preventing it. In either case, its ultimate goal is always to "persuade" its audience to a certain point of view by exposing the subject matter it is attacking as weak. In other words, it is similar to the main goal of rhetoric, in general, persuasion.[20] James Sutherland explains how the art of satire *is* the art of rhetoric:

> What distinguishes the satirist from most other creative artists is the extent to which he is dependent on the agreement or approval of his readers. If he is to achieve this catharsis for himself, he must compel his readers to agree with him; he must "persuade" them to accept his judgement of good and bad, right and wrong; he must somehow inoculate them with his own virus. In actual practice, a minority of his readers probably already agree with him; the great majority are either quite indifferent and must be aroused, or they are actively hostile and must be converted.[21]

In Gilbert Highet's famous and excellent study of satire, still the standard work, he describes the rhetorical devices that are used in this act of "persuasion," which allows one to know when they are face-to-face with the genre:[22]

> Any author who often and powerfully uses a number of the typical weapons of satire–irony, paradox, antithesis, parody, colloquialism, anticlimax, topicality, obscenity, violence, vividness, exaggeration–is

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[20] This is not a title of a Jane Austen novel for nothing.

[21] James Sutherland, *English Satire*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1956, 5.

[22]

A Rhetorical device is a technique, sometimes called a resource of language, used by an author to induce an emotional response from the reader. These emotional responses are central to the meaning of the work. To Gilbert Highet, satirical devices include irony, paradox, antithesis, parody, colloquialism, anticlimax, topicality, obscenity, violence, vividness, and exaggeration.

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likely to be writing satire.[23]

Furthermore, Highet defines satire as "a playful distortion of the 'familiar'." Dr. Johnson, in the *Dictionary*, called it "a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured;"[24] Dryden said, in *The Battle of the Books*, "Satire is to tell the truth, laughing," while Pope wrote, it is to "Damn, with faint praise," (*The Dunciad*). Bakhtin noted (in *The Dialogic Imagination*) that satire is the most democratic form of art/literature because it is multi-voiced, where everybody has agency.[25]

Many great names have something to say about satire. For Northrop Frye, satire differentiates itself from comedy by being a mythos of winter–as opposed to summer's sweeter jesting (which is comedy's seasonal mythos)–for its militant irony: "its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured. It is the mythical pattern of experience because it attempts to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence."[26]

But satire differentiates itself from comedy in other ways, too. Though both expose and ridicule human folly, and both use similar rhetorical devices, the basic difference between comedy and satire is the difference between the optimist and the

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23

Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire*, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1962, 18. A common technique of satire is to take a real-life situation and exaggerate it to such a degree that it becomes ridiculous. (Some works of satire are subtle enough in their exaggeration that they still seem believable to many people. The comedic intent of these works of satire may be lost on the public at large, and there have been instances where the author or producers of a satirical work have been harshly criticized as a result).

24 Highet, *Ibid.*, 15-16.

25

In the Ealing satires and the Goons' shows, this was true in the sense that most of them were ensemble pieces, even if Milligan wrote the shows and Alec Guinness was often the central attraction of the films; he *was* the ensemble, often playing multiple roles in a single film.

26 Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1957, 223.

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crank: comedy is social, it is uniting, it always ends in a wedding. But satire is destructive, it seeks to destroy, to burn away the rot of what it sees as the virus destroying society, thus, often, ending in the blowing up of the world so a newer, purer one may be born. It is dis-uniting and anti-social, and though a bit of an exaggeration, it is also often told by a lone screaming prophet-madman out to change the world and its ills.

These differences the Ealing artists and the Goons' pursued with vehemence in a new postmodern, postwar, post-empire Britain.[27]

New Britain's New Satirists

In the Introduction to George Perry's terrific study on British cinema, *The Great British Picture Show*, he asks, yet again, the ubiquitous question posed about British cinema since anyone can remember:

> Speak of the French cinema and immediately there springs to mind a quality as hard to define as it is to imitate. Even if the film-makers are poles apart in intention and approach, as disparate in time and style as say Feullade and Godard, somehow we can sense the essential "Frenchness" of their work. That same robust uniqueness also characterizes the Italian and Swedish cinema. Is the British cinema in comparable achievement, or must it be dismissed as merely the product of a Hollywood satellite? In other words, is the British cinema worth regarding seriously, and if it is, are there recognizable threads of style relating the earliest pioneering of films today?[28]

27

For the Ealing satires, their rhetorical device became the entire mis-en-scene,, sound, and characterization. For the Goons, who were on radio, their rhetorical devices became sound effects, genre-parody, and characterization.

28 George Perry, *The Great British Picture Show*, Toronto: Little, Brown, 1974/1985, 9.

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This question has been quite tiresome. It is more than worth considering. In fact, it is worth stating *emphatically* that in the immediate postwar years, it was one of the *key* artistic European phenomena that re-examined a culture and character in an enormously changed world, making it one of the *key* postwar cinemas of the western hemisphere. He continues, further on:

> Throughout its whole seventy-five years or so it (the British industry) has stumbled from crisis to crisis, prey to political folly on the one hand and semi-fraudulent wheeler-dealer on the other... The British cinema's diffidence, its punch-pulling, its polite avoidance of controversy have something in common with the national character.[29]

Maybe the industry did face financial crises again and again, but of the films that did get made, "punch-pulling" is exactly what it did *not* do in the late 1940s and early 1950s as British cinema, and radio,[30] turned inward, re-awakening and re-employing the national genre, satire, to reinvent the national character.[31]

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[29] Perry, *Ibid.*, 11.

[30] And it also happened in the other main populist outlet, radio, with Spike Milligan's *Goon Show* appearing in the early Spring of 1951.

[31] It is curious that earlier explosive periods of satire occurred in England before also after some traumatic social rupture, with Butler, Dryden, Swift, and Pope writing after the English civil war of the 17th century, and Austen and Byron writing their great satires after the French Revolution, when the English feared another bloody one in their own country. But after World War II and the end of empire, with a furiously changing national mood and economic situation, the Brits turned on themselves to redefine the national character, taking a barometric reading of a rapidly changing culture. A phenomenon that would be the defining British cultural style for years to come.

And yet, in postwar America, where socialist ideas had flourished in the 30s and 40s, mass faith in big business reached new heights. No longer were companies merely viewed as monolithic oligarches as they had been since the 1860s through to the rise of unions in the thirties. Instead they were accredited as the defenders against the Red tyranny. For postwar left wing intellectuals and others out of the mainstream, reaction

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Film Setting

After the Second World War, the perennial debate about the economic and social impact of the American feature film in Britain was highlighted by the fact that many Britons and Americans had come into contact with each other en masse. For the first time (during the war) bases like the huge American supply and maintenance base at Burtonwood in Lancashire literally became American cities inside great Britain, complete with baseball diamonds, snack bars, beauty shops and 'washeterias'. It was one of the many ways in which newly outward-looking America shaped Europe (Britain) in very profound ways during and after the war:

> The American presence in Europe was sustained after 1945 by the large standing armies left there and also in the growing hordes of American tourists who visited each year. Harry Hopkins, following Defoe, Orwell and Priestly, wrote a travel diary for a journey through Britain in the early 1950s. Regularly he encountered 'Americanus Turisticus', in pearly-grey hat, hung about with 'leicas and light meters', and 'G.I. Joe, fresh-faced and crew-cut, rimless and earnest, bursting, as usual, in sheer rude health, out of those sleek blue Air Force uniforms'. The number of American tourists visiting Europe soon came to equal the total number of European migrants to North America. Never before had there been such a potential for cross-cultural contact between the peoples of different continents. The presence of American tourists reinforced the growing concern about the impact of American popular culture in Europe. At the same time,

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against such mass submission to consumerism was to be found in 'hipster' and 'Beat' ideologies, historical works like Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, and Abstract Expressionism, whose works expressed their most intimate alienation from the reigning postwar consensus culture.

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> Marshall Aid, the Anglo-American Loan, and the Berlin Airlift served to reiterate one of the principal themes of American popular culture in Europe: the United States as the land of plenty and opportunity. In Italy, for example: 'the popular ideal of America, particularly of the humbler classes, was that of a land where living and working conditions were much better than they were in Italy, and wealth was much easier to achieve.[32]

This was the setting in which Ealing found itself, and they took the opportunity as cultural arbiters and cultural producers/purveyors to re-shape and re-unite the British nation, and in the process re-image the British identity.

The factor which overshadowed and often compromised many of these changes was that postwar Britain was immediately plunged into an intractable international trading situation. Through 1947 and 1948, the United Kingdom participated in international trade at a deficit of $280,000,000 (1948 dollars). Half of Britain's mercantile marine had been sunk, an even greater proportion of pre-war investments had been sold off, and two-thirds of her pre-war international trade had disappeared. Other possible sources of revenue, such as the royalties which ought to have accrued to British patents and inventions, had also been mortgaged. The terms of Lease-Lend, and similarly, the terms of the postwar Anglo-American loan were not generous, they stretched Britain severely. Specifically, the United States had insisted on a return to full sterling-to-dollar convertibility within a year after the Anglo-American loan had been arranged. So,

> Britain embarked upon a postwar export drive, which was only possible at a price of a fairly hard life for most people. One sign of the times was the

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Paul Swann, *The Hollywood Feature Film in Postwar Britain*, St. Martin's Press: New York, 1987, 46.

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frequent use of billboard hoardings encouraging the British worker to 'work or want', a message which the average British worker was only too aware of, and yet did not want to hear, after so many years of hardship and deprivation. The stringencies of postwar food rationing were all too obvious at the time, as was the acute shortage of housing, clothing, furniture and, in fact, consumer items of any type. For example, in 1946, people who were eager to see new designs and the new used of materials developed during the war applied to less belligerent ends queued for hours to get into the 'Britain can make it ' exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was a sign of the times that most of the consumer items on display at the V & A were stamped 'export only', so that the popular press quickly renamed the show 'Britain Can't Have It'. There were many stories in the press at the time about the day-to-day grind of having to face shortages of all kinds. The Christmases of 1945 and 1946, for example were marred by the absences of anything very much to serve as presents.[33]

By 1947-8 the country quite frankly had quite enough. It was tired of duty and sacrifice and self-denial. It had served the cause of social progress since 1918–over thirty years. It had even given up alcohol! But the world was no better for it. Morality, based on duty, bored the newly educated (due to the Butler Act of 1944) younger generation. Young people traded in their parents' placards for hip flasks, the Socialist Party for the decade-long party called the fifties.[34]

So, with this setting, one might reasonably ask, after the horrors of war, the Bomb

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[33] Swann, *Ibid.,* 9.

[34] Norman Cantor, *The American Century: Varieties of Culture in Modern Times*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1997, 108.

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and the Holocaust, what could there be to satirize? Plenty, it seemed: the new Welfare State and its grand ambitions; the loss of empire in the shadow of America (not to mention the newest big power of Europe–the USSR); the push and pull between capitalism and socialism on the continent and in England; the always present class-issues in English life, from the fragile ambitions of the petit-bourgeoisie to the (perceived) lack of ambition of both the proletariat and the aristocracy which now faced a new urgency; the basic *absurdity* of the Cold War (and England's attempt to join it) and the burden of being the first generation to face the possibility of complete annihilation; the constant xenophobic struggle between conservatism and liberalism in English political life; the outrageously pretentious refinement of the upper class against the fight to conserve basic British cultural traditions; and, if nothing else, the great tradition of regaling the abundance of regional English traits and foibles, renewing themselves after five long war years, from the Home Counties to the Tyne valley.

As a suddenly new island-nation, England turned toward their long native tradition of satire for a reexamination of who they were and where they were headed now that they were no longer a world power. For the satirists, this new postwar world had three effects: one, it discredited the beliefs and assumptions of the era that preceded it–especially moral relativism; two, it was responsible for the unleashing of postmodern forces–the bomb, DNA, computers, globalization; and three, it created the unrealistic atmosphere into which the Welfare State would be born. The consequence was an emergence of intellectual skepticism in an even more sped-up postmodern Britain where new conditions required new forms of thought, new forms which tended towards absurdism and pure satire. Postwar British popular culture turned to their inherent tradition of satire, holding up a mirror to a new England and age that mattered greatly to Britain's new idea of itself facing the dilemmas and difficulties of postmodern life.

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CHAPTER TWO:

"FOG IN CHANNEL, CONTINENT CUT OFF": IN FILM, EUROPE AND THE STATES LOOK TO EACH OTHER; ENGLAND TO THEMSELVES

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Europe would have to start again, but according to what principles? Socialists and Communists believed that social revolution could start from scratch in this "year zero," and in some countries left-wing parties won substantial support. But the over-bearing United States helped consolidate the new Europe into a more conservative strain, and after the formation of the United Nations in 1945, in 1947 the Marshall Plan (the European Recovery Plan) offered billions in aid to countries which maintained democratic governments and political allegiance to the U.S. [1] Though many nations insisted on maintaining their distinct cultural identities, and already complaining that in fashion, advertising, and mass media, Europe was becoming something of a U.S. colony, the lending of Marshall Plan funds was predicated on recipients accepting of the Motion Picture Export Association of America's terms (known as the Blum-Byrne Agreement) of allowing American films into their domestic market in higher numbers to use as the best form of propaganda against Communist and Fascist tendencies. It was out of this atmosphere that the major European countries began to re-

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[1] In 1949, the U.S. presided over the formation of NATO, further absorbing Europe into the American sphere of influence.

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establish their film industries.

The U.S.

"The Streets were dark with something more than night."
–Raymond Chandler, *Trouble is My Business*

Hollywood came through the war years with all of its powerful studio production system and time-tested film genres intact, making America's the only major national cinema in the West to preserve a direct continuity of tradition with its pre-war past. Hollywood had experienced the war as the most stable and lucrative four years in its history, during the following years, the domestic audience would be the highest ever–an estimated 100 million *each* week–as the GIs returned to their lives at home. However, the industry's game was not without its curve balls, and it suddenly found itself facing union strikes, a drop in box office due to the "white-flight" to the suburbs and the newer competing leisure industries (bowling, night baseball, television, etc.), the HUAC hearings on Communist infiltration in the industry, and the break-up of the studios' exhibition and distribution branches. But even with these obstacles, American cinema would continue to exert its influence on the international film world long after the conclusion of the war and the pre-war infiltration of European directors and artisans meant their influence on Hollywood and American cinema would continue to be immeasurable long after the war was over.

In 1938, the Justice Department initiated the famous Paramount Case, in which

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they accused the Hollywood studios of violating antitrust laws.[2] After years of various decisions, in 1948 the Supreme Court handed down a decision declaring that the eight companies had indeed been guilty of monopolistic practices, and ordered the majors to divest themselves of their theatre chains (which incidentally they did, functioning thereafter merely as production-distribution companies). This ruling not only allowed independent theatre companies to thrive, but also enable stars and directors to break away and form their own independent production companies:

> The crack in Hollywood's united front began in 1944 with the formation of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American ideals (MPA), an organization of politically conservative movie workers who proposed to defend the industry against Communist infiltration. The MPA provided HUAC with something no outside critics ever had, a body of supporters within the industry willing to testify publicly against their colleagues.[3]

But that was only the beginning of government involvement. It would go further with the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation of Hollywood writers and artists. HUAC's goal was to bar all Communists (or former Communists) from working in Hollywood. In many ways it was just a thinly veiled means of persecuting immigrant film workers who had joined the Hollywood community after fleeing the increasing

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2 There were eight: the Big Five–Paramount, Warner Bros., Loew's-MGM, 20th Century Fox, and RKO, plus the Little Three–Universal, Columbia, and United Artists.

3 Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America*, New York: Vintage, 257-8.

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German militarism in the late-thirties. The hysteria surrounding the 1947-8 hearings did accomplish just that, creating a blacklist that wouldn't be broken for fifteen years.[4]

Toward the end of the 30s, Hollywood reinvigorated itself with new genres, the most significant of which was Film Noir.

> Most of the plots were rather ordinary and most of the characters were rather primitive types of people. Possibly it was the smell of fear which these stories managed to generate. Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction, and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine gun.[5]

The genre itself grew out of German Expressionism, brought west by German directors who had fled the rise of Nazism, and the earlier American pulp fiction of James Cain, Dashiell Hammett, and the hard-nosed characters and writing style of Ernest Hemingway.

> The hard-boiled school of crime writing which flourished in the pages of pulp magazines in the twenties and thirties had a great impact on noir tone. Noir also shows temperamental and philosophical affinities with the brand of naturalism practiced early in the century by such novelists as Theodore Drieser and Frank Norris, who themselves were influenced by the realism from Europe of Zola, Balzac, Strinberg and Chekov... The genre's most

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One of the big five, RKO, suffered so badly it shut down after passing through a variety of owners, including Howard Hughes.

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Raymond Chandler, *Trouble is My Business,* New York: Vintage/Random House, vii.

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> significant directors–Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder and Robert Siodmak–brought to their assignments on American thrillers the kind of visual styling they had developed in Germany in the twenties during the Golden Age at UFA.[6]

Along with the stories, the filmic stylistics were also established by these Europeans in Hollywood, too:

> The cinematic origins of film noir can be traced to the German Expressionist films of the late 1910s and the twenties, to the crime film of the thirties, and to one contemporary and less central source as, following the war , noir absorbed some of the concerns of Italian Neo-Realism. Expressionism and Neo-Realism are strikingly dissimilar, the German style edging toward nightmare, the Italian straining for documentary veracity. Sometimes the two modes collide within the same film; more often the divergent styles result in two distinct sub-categories within the noir keyboard.[7]

The gangster story of the thirties reflected different social conditions when translated to the screen in the forties, and the European directors and writers making these films brought their old-world European sensibilities to them and updated the genre to comment on the war, the absurdity of this dark historic moment, and the difficulties of the anti-hero in the brave new totalitarian world. Furthermore, after the elation of victory had passed, a

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[6] Foster Hirsch, *Film Noir*, California: Da Capo, 1981, 23.

[7] Foster Hirsch, *Ibid.*, 53.

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mood of disillusionment and cynicism came over America which had at least as much to do with the nation's image of itself as with the horrors of the war:

> The federal government's wartime propaganda machine (as witnessed by the emphasis placed on the Blum-Byrne Agreement in Europe), of which Hollywood was the most essential component, had created an image of an ideal America of white picket fences, cozy bungalows, and patiently loyal families and sweethearts--a pure, democratic society in which Jews, blacks, Italians, Irish, Poles, and WASP farm boys could all live and work together, just as they had done in the ethnically balanced patrol squads of so many wartime combat films. This America, of course, had never existed, but a nation engaged in a global war of survival had overwhelming need to believe that it did.[8]

When the war ended and the troops returned home, the public and the vets, in particular, (who complained of the "fakeness" of Hollywood's war films) really began to feel the discrepancy between American life as it appeared in the movies and as it really seemed to be. Wholesome technicolor depictions of American decency were harder to locate in postwar America than were social inequities and racial prejudices in every part of the country, profiteering in big business, and corruption in state and local government. (Film critic and director Paul Schrader has suggested that postwar disillusionment was in many ways a delayed reaction to the thirties and to socio-economic imbalances that had helped cause the Depression. This is possibly why the fifties strove for a consensus culture, to

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[8] David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film,* New York: Norton, 445.

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re-establish the belief in the basic goodness of the American way of life).[9]

Postwar noir continued with semi-documentary crime melodramas like Henry Hathaway's The *House on 92nd Street* (1945), and Jules Dassin's *The Naked City* (1948). By this time, these were as influenced by Italian Neorealism as the Neorealists were influenced by American pulp and forties noirs. Characterized by a downbeat atmosphere and graphic violence, Postwar American Noir films became darker and darker, carrying pessimism to the point of nihilism by implying the absolute and irredeemable corruption of society and of everyone in it. In this sense, film noir was very much a "cinema of moral anxiety." Several notable examples are Robert Siodmak's translation of Hemingway's *The Killers* (1946), Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), Orson Welles's *The Lady From Shanghai* (1948), Jacques Tournier's *Out of the Past* (1947), John Farrow's *The Big Clock* (1948), and Nicholas Ray's *They Live By Night* (1948).

New manifestations of American postwar social malaise transmuted these post-1945 noirs into "social-conscious," or "problem" pictures. (In 1947 nearly a third of the films Hollywood put out had a "problem" content of some sort or another.) Examples of this sub-genre include Edward Dmytyk's *Crossfire* (1947) and Elia Kazan's *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1947), both terse melodramas about American anti-Semitism; Mark Robeson's *Home of the Brave* (1949); Clarence Brown's adaptation of Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1949); and Robert Rossen's adaptation of Robert Penn Warren's *All*

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See his terrific essay on "Film Noir" in *The Film Genre Reader,* Texas: Texas UP, 1998.

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the King's Men (1949). The subject matters included alcoholism, mental illness (war-related post-traumatic stress), juvenile delinquency, prison injustice, war profiteering, and social corruption. As can be seen by these directors' names, this era was rich in trans-Atlantic influences. Most of the directors working in this postwar genre were European (many were actually eastern European) wanting to explore the dark undercurrents in American culture.[10]

A sub-sect genre of the "problem" films were the melodramas of the Eastern European Douglas Sirk, who masked his Communist leanings and contempt for American materialism in the schmaltzy narratives that, ironically, American audiences loved. Today his *All That Heaven Allows* (1956), *Written on the Wind* (1957), and *Imitation of Life* (1959) are all closely examined for Sirkian irony and the hidden critiques of the "true" American culture of the 1950s.

But it wasn't just continental filmmakers who had infiltrated American film, the Englishman Alfred Hitchcock was one of the most powerful persons in Hollywood at the time for his mastery of manipulating audiences–to get them to buy tickets in droves![11]

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In fact, one cannot find an American film from this period in which some aspect–doing the music, set design, writing, cinematography, lighting and so forth–is not handled by a European.

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Later, in the fifties the arrival of television would have a colossal effect on the studios, re-directing the attention and allegiance of the movie-going public. By 1949, there were one million TV sets in use in the States; two short years later there were ten times that, and by the mid-to-late fifties there were over fifty million. So, the studios were forced to improvise, and they did, creating drive-ins for the suburban audiences, new screen processes such as Cinerama and 3-D and new genres aimed at teenagers. They also forced the ratings board to loosen controls on content. So that, by the mid-50s, American audiences were watching super-surrounding visuals like *This is Cinerama* (1952), 3-D

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Being the first "liberated" European nation, Italy's film industry was the first to begin its recover. Right away its newly unchained artists forged what was seen as a "new" style of filmmaking that came to be known as Neorealism.

Italian Cinema Before and After the War

In the thirties, Mussolini had started, as part of his Ministry of Popular Culture, a state film school, Cento Sperimentale di Cinematografia, located at Rome's Cinecetta, then the largest studio in Europe (it had 16 sound stages). The government placed heavy import protective measures on foreign films and emphasized productions that celebrated Mussolini's regime. The other kind of pre-war Italian film described wealthy society and incorporated a heavy dose of formal morality reflecting the culture of the age. The genre was called *Telefoni Bianchi* ("white telephones") for its constant characteristic presence in so many domestic scenes.

In early 1944, the Germans occupied Rome, ironically calling it an "open" city.[12]

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thrillers such as *Dial M for Murder* (1954) in 3-D, the content-loosening *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955) and *Touch of Evil* (1958), the spectacles of *The Robe (1953)* and *North By Northwest* (1958), and new youth-culture films such as *The Wild One* (1953) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). The other genres of the period reflecting the political and social culture were allegories like *On the Waterfront* (1954), about the blacklisting trials, and westerns such as *High Noon* (1953), *Shane* (1954) and *The Searchers* (1956), which tapped in to the newly resurrected myths of Americans as pioneers, and America as lawman of the world; not to mention political allegories about American conformism and violence.

[12] An "open" city was one in which there was international agreement that neither side (the Allies nor the Axises) would bomb due to the civilian population and cultural history. It is an ironic title, therefore, as there was nothing "open" about Rome under the Nazis.

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Under the German thumb, Roman life was lived from scrappy moment to scrappy moment. However, by June 1944 Rome had fallen, which meant the end of Fascist control over the Italian studios. With the Germans gone as well, the Americans stayed for reconstruction, especially in the field of film propaganda, and Hollywood infiltrated the nation. After the Marshall Plan kicked-in in 1948, fifty-four films were made in Italy and 874 were imported, 558 of which were from the United States. Only 13 percent of the tickets sold that year were for Italian films.[13] It was thus a very lucrative market for American exploitation. As noted by P. Adams Sitney, "The massive domination of the American cinema in Italy was disturbing to many of the filmmakers of the period, especially those of the Left."[14] While that may have been true, Italian filmmakers still looked to America for their storytelling methods (sometimes even their stories) and filmmaking techniques.

With Mussolini's ouster and death, and with the government in shambles, independent filmmakers set about raising production money from private sources. Cesare Zavattini immediately proposed a manifesto of "New-Realism," in which he sought, and Italian filmmakers agreed, to document the devastation of the Italian nation.[15] To counter

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[13] P. Adams, Sitney, *Vital Crises in Italian Cinema,* Austen: Texas UP, 1995, 90.

[14] Sitney, *Ibid., 90.* In 1949, the year following the release of *The Bicycle Thief*, a law was passed requiring the screening of Italian films in every cinema at least eighty days a year.

[15] Italian Marxist, screenwriter and film theorist Cesare Zavattini's first screenplay, *Daro un Milione* (1935), fell so comfortably into formula that it was easily adapted into the Hollywood film *I'll Give a Million* (1938). Zavattini's script for *The Children Are Watching Us* (1943) was the first of 23 collaborations with director Vittorio De Sica, the

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the lack of financing, Italian filmmakers improvised. They shot on streets for lack of studios, employed non-actors, used raw stock found in the bombed-out Italian studios, and even added stock footage for 'establishing' shots of Rome. Forced by financial realities, these new 'bare necessity' standards and motifs became as dominant in postwar Italian cinema as Zavattini's manifesto proclamations.

The poetry and cruelty of life were harmonically combined in the works that De Sica wrote and directed together with Zavattini. However, despite the new look of these films, the new Italian filmmakers relied on American film and literature for influence on style and affect, borrowing heavily from the new realism already happening in American literature and cinema. Neorealism's first few films not only adopted but literally aped the noir styles that came out of the New York publishing houses in the thirties, and Hollywood in the forties. In fact, the first Neorealist film, Visconti's *Ossessione* (1944), was illegally based on James Cain's pulp novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

The second Neorealist film, Rosselini's *Rome: Open City* (1944-5), based its plot on events of the winter of 1943-4, and even recreated, a kaleidoscopic vision of the Allied invasion of Italy.[16] The film's episodes follow the movement of the American forces

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most internationally famous of which were *Shoeshine* (1943), *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), and *Umberto D* (1952). When De Sica decided that neorealism was becoming a cliché, he went on to such sentimental, box office safe comedies as *The Gold of Naples* (1954) and *Marriage Italian Style* (1964), Zavattini obligingly altering his writing style. Any accusations that Zavattini had abandoned neorealism were quelled by his searing screenplay for De Sica's *Two Women* (1962).

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Rome: Open City was shot on the streets for no money using unexposed stock found in demolished Italian studios and depicted German atrocities during the winter occupation of 1943-44; documentary-like, it intercut stock footage and staged re-enactments to achieve

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from Sicily north to the Po valley in fragmentary, documentary-like sequences. Though seemingly new and unique, this was exactly the film John Huston had made six months earlier, *The Battle of San Pietro*, for Capra's "Why We Fight " series, his realism so harsh the U.S. Army banned the film until long after the war. And though the realism of *Open City* was also quite harsh (as one might expect of any Nazi exposé), the characters were still cast in the traditional molds of heroism and cowardice. In other words, beneath the unflinching camera-view of Nazi crimes against ordinary Roman citizens, it was a classic example of melodramatic convention.

The most famous Neorealist film, *The Bicycle Thief* (de Sica, 1948), had the protagonist hanging posters of popular American films from the war period. Ironically, the job for which Ricci waited so long and which was to have given him so much security–though possibly read as a criticism by Zavattini and de Sica of the then unregulated collusion of the municipal advertising machinery with the colonization of Italian film-going by the American industry–the way it is exhibited and set up, it is also clearly a nod to American film style.

Also, in *The Bicycle Thief*, Ricci turns to every institution–police, Church, Labor union, political parties–and none come through for him (indeed, they are, if not incompetent, completely indifferent). The dissolution of trust in institutions was not a new theme in Italian or any other world film or literature. In fact it was the pervasive

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documentary feel. Rosselini and Zavattini sold international rights for $26,000, after which point it became a massive world-wide hit. Neither saw any extra revenue as the distribution deal was a one-time buy-out.

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narrative hook used in the B- and noir films of the *previous* period in American realist cinema.

So, then, what made these films seem so "realistic"? Of course, what seemed new, partly, was the stark contrast with many of the Italy's pre-war releases (including ones written by Zavattini). As already noted, before the war Italian films had become known across Europe for their magnificent studio settings. Besides the fact that the government's Cinecitta studios were bombed out and rendered practically useless, budget-wise, since filmmakers could no longer support opulent productions, anyway, they naturally moved into the streets and the countryside. Why was that such a revelation to international audiences who made the film such a hit? And to the film historians who today go on and on about how 'neo' this 'realism' was? Italy had long mastered post-synchronization for dubbing foreign (and domestic) films and crews were already used to shooting on location and dubbing in dialogue afterward. The exact look of and approach to filmmaking of the American B-films, suddenly on view at local Roman theatres–with their poor lighting, rough-looking film stock and photography, new-realist subject matter and characters, post-dubbed sound, and independent, low-budget production values–gave the new Italian filmmakers inspiration and an impetus to now just "go for it" and get the damned thing made. What was the mystery?

A more abstractly theoretical position, held by the French critics Andre Bazin and Amedee Ayfre, fixated on the ways in which Neorealism's documentary approach made the viewer aware of the "beauty" of ordinary life. In this respect, Bazin and Ayfre echoed the ideas of Zavattini's proposal that, "The perfect film would be 90 minutes in the life of

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an ordinary man in which nothing happens."[17] *The Bicycle Thief* is *not* that film, even if it *was* a step toward that ideal. (Perhaps, it's just as well that it isn't, as that film had been made twenty years later by Andy Warhol, under the title *Empire*, and was definitely no world-wide hit).

But what was such a big deal about being totally "real'? About shooting on-location or using non-actors?[18] How did employing non-actors differ from the discovery of Lana Turner in an ice cream parlor and bustling her onto the screen? Wasn't this how the silents *began*? Furthermore, hadn't this happened in so many other international films by 1945 already, anyway? The truth is, few Neorealist films actually displayed all of these so-called 'Neorealist' features. Most interior scenes *were* filmed in studio sets, and were always carefully lit. Much of the sound (including diagetic sound effects) was post-dubbed, allowing much more control after filming (in fact, the voice of the protagonist in *The Bicycle Thief* was supplied by another man, a "real" actor, and was dubbed in post).[19] And while some performers were typically non-professionals, *more* common was what Bazin called the "amalgam" technique, whereby 'non-actors' were mixed with professionals, and even such bonafide stars as Anna Maniani and Aldo Fabrizi.

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[17] Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1994, 683.

[18] Or letting the camera run and just record "real" life like in home movie fashion.

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According to the theory, the use of non-actors made it more "real." Well, if you're going to make realistic dramas, you might as well use "real" people instead of, say, "unreal" people, like actors.

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Moreover, for all their portentousness, the films *were* edited according to the norms of Classical Hollywood Style: over-the-shoulder shot-reverse-shot P.O.V. shots, moving from establishing shots to close-ups and dolly-out reveals, and carefully constructed Continuity Editing. While few Neorealist images were as self-consciously composed as those in the most stylized Hollywood film, shots virtually always balanced elements within the frame. Even when filmed on the run, scenes contained smooth camera movements, crisp focus, and carefully choreographed staging in several planes. The Neorealist film even typically included a sweeping musical score, especially to underline a scene's emotional development.

However, aside from the Italian settings and nationalist/nativist social commentary on real current events, there was one rhetorical device in which Neorealist drama was diverged from the American approach: non-linearity. The loosening of plot linearity was the most apparent change from Classical Hollywood Style, and has come to be known as the difference between an 'Episodic' Narrative and a 'Classical' Narrative. In the latter, the plot follows a cause-and-effect trajectory, while in the former, events happen in isolation, in no particular order so that cause no longer provides the plot's forward momentum. Often in Episodic Narratives the storytelling seems to rely on coincidence, or, at the least, to reject the carefully motivated chain-of-events of classical cinema, which both slows the action and produces a meditative tone about the "languid" encounters of everyday life. So, in *The Bicycle Thief*, we get the initial MacGuffin of the desperate need of the protagonist to find the stolen bicycle so he can earn a wage, but then we go from event to event–eating pizza in a restaurant, attending communist and socialist

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meetings, passing through a church service, etc., wherein the search for the bike is secondary to the social commentary.

Though this is a significant development in narrative technique, it's important to note, some Hollywood directors actually also utilized this stylistic device, and got away with it. For example, one whose films are considered "models" of Classical Hollywood Style, John Ford, used this as his very signature. A classic example is *My Darling Clementine*, where we get the MacGuffin of the murder of Wyatt's brother causing him to seek revenge, and then spend the next hour-plus hanging around Tombstone meeting different characters and taking in the diverse local color of the emerging American West. It's not until the last ten minutes of the film that we get back to the matter of avenging the early murder. Ford did this again and again in his narratives, capturing myth and reality in the slow contemplative scenes of an individual's pondering their lives, from *Judge Priest* and *The Informer*, to *Young Mr. Lincoln* and *The Searchers*. He was the master of the elliptical, episodic middle-section in all his films. This was not a Neorealist invention.

Neorealist films also employed Hollywood deadlines, appointments, and "dialogue hooks" as rhetorical devices to connect scenes, even if the results *seemed* like a string of events thrown together. And in terms of the supposed on-the-run shooting and off-the-cuff composition, Marcia Landy, in fact, says of *The Bicycle Thief* that

> the shots of rows of pawned sheets and the rows of bikes seen in the redemption center reiterate the sense of the world where difference is suppressed. The many and various images of the Roman landscape shift

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> the spectator's attention away from the characters as objects of identification, pointing instead to the intersection between those characters and their world and complicating any understanding of motivation.[20]

No audience had ever seen *this* kind of composition before. It sounds quite calculated, even suspiciously much like every shot in *Gone With the Wind*.[21]

In 1942, when Vittorio Mussolini, the head of the film industry, saw Visconti's *Ossessione*, he stormed out of the theatre shouting "This is not Italy!" Most Neorealist films elicited a similar reaction from postwar officials. The portrait of a desolate, poverty-stricken country outraged politicians anxious to prove that Italy was on the road to strength and prosperity. The Catholic Church condemned many of the Neorealist films for their anti-clericalism and their portrayal of sex and working-class life. Leftists attacked the films for their pessimism and lack of explicit political commitment (just like Populist Front did Film Noir in the states). Actually, few Neorealist works were popular with the Italian public as audiences were drawn more to the American films that flooded Italy in the same postwar period.[22] (Neorealist films were all huge hits everywhere in the

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[20] Marcia Landy, *Italian Film*, New York: Cambridge UP, 137.

[21] And again, see any Ford western.

[22] It came to the point where the state under-secretary in charge of entertainment, Guilio Andreotti, found a way of slowing the embarrassing excesses of Neorealism (as well as curbing the advance of American films). The so-called Andreotti law in 1949 established import limits and screen quotas, but also provided production loans, though only to those who could prove they *wouldn't* make a Neorealist style film. The Andreotti law created pre-production censorship.

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world except at home). As a result of this backlash, though, Neorealism's decline was as swift as its rise.[23]

It has been said that after *Umberto D* (de Sica/Zavattini, 1952) nothing more could be added to Neorealism.[24] Effectively, Neorealism did formally end with this film. Italian filmmakers turned toward lighter atmospheres (possibly just so they could get to make a film), perhaps to become more coherent with the changing economic conditions in the country itself; this genre was called the *Pink Neorealism*. It was the *"filone"* (vehicle) that allowed better "equipped" actresses to become real celebrities: the encouraging figures and measures of Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Silvana Pampanini, Lucia Boséé, together with other types of beauty like Eleonora Rossi Drago, Silvana Mangano, Claudia Cardinale, Stefania Sandrelli.[25]

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Instead, they funded semi-successful schlocky Hercules and lion-tamer films, again mimicking the low-budget B-films coming out of the new Hollywood independents.

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The sad, bitter *Umberto D.* (1952), the touching story of an old poor man who life forces to beg for alms against his dignity, and whose relationship with his dog emphasizes the loneliness of the new society, is perhaps De Sica's masterpiece and one of most important works of the whole Italian production. With a heavy polemic against a government that would have censored its alleged anti-national sentiment, the film did not score a commercial success and since then has been transmitted on Italian TV once, perhaps twice only. Yet, in the apparent quietness of the action, it is perhaps the most violent attack on the rules of the new economy, the new mentality, the new values, and manages to advance both a conservative and a progressive view.

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Soon the "pink neorealism" was replaced by the *Commedia all'Italiana*, a unique genre that occupied the Italian imagination just before the so-called "boom" of the 1960s. Later, as Italy strengthened itself economically, film funding started up again, but was aimed at American productions that were tapping into foreign currency frozen since the Marshall Plan; such productions included *Ulysses* (1954), *Helen of Troy* (1956), *War and Peace* (1956) and *Sodom and Gommorrah* (1959). In the late 50s and 60s, Italy's

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Financially, though, Hollywood continued to dominate. By the mid-fifties, in virtually every European country, American films occupied at least half of all screening time. Right up to today, Europe remains Hollywood's major source of foreign revenue, particularly in the other major European filmmaking country that looked to American film as a model for its postwar industry, cinema's country of origin: France.

France and the War of Mass Psychology

The French and American cinema have been in a battle over bragging rights ever since the advent of cinema (which itself is a bragging point for both sides). Individual European nations could never compete with the vast audiences and large productions of American films, though France always tried.[26] The Americans were the first to cultivate "mass" audiences, through such measures as promoting "genre" and "the star system,"[27] both of which–like McDonald's, capitalize on the appeal of the familiar and the expected. Films marketed this way promised to reproduce previously experienced sensations in their audiences. But, these mechanisms also required the concerted efforts of promotional departments which from this point on became a big part of the American industry. In the smaller French industry, many of these would-be promoters became

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rampant capitalist boom allowed newer directors (Antonioni, Fellini, and Visconti) to turn to documenting the excesses of the bourgeoisie in a more stylish, artful manner.

26 What would Hollywood be like if the South had won their freedom to become a separate nation? Which country would Hollywood be in?

27 Richard Abel, *French Cinema*, New Jersey: Princeton, 1984, 64.

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critics, another side of the "personalization of response" to films. The postwar French film culture instead concentrated on creating cinema clubs that would focus on the art of film, studying most essentially, the art of American film, while its industry sought to compete with American film by appropriating their production values and narrative strategies.

In May 1946, the Blum-Byrnes Agreement was signed (the Franco-American version of the Italian accord tied to the Marshall Plan funds) eliminating prewar quotas on American films–really just an agreement to allow American films to dominate the French market.[28] France restarted its film industry following the Liberation, first by purging the industry of supposed collaborators,[29] then by establishing the Centre Nationale du Cinema Francaise (CNC) in 1946 to regulate funding and protect French production. The industry turned to the old school directors such as Max Ophuls, Marcel Carne, Georges Clouzot,

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The pact guaranteed that exhibitors would reserve (only) sixteen weeks a year for French films, the rest would be given over to the "free market"–in other words, American films. By the end of the year the French output dropped 50% and the American imports increased to about ten times that of the French.

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This got very ugly. The Committee for the Liberation of French Cinema (the publisher of *L'Ecran Francais*) had drawn up a list of persons it found worthy of serious penalties. Both Georges Clouzot and Pierre Fresnay were imprisoned because, having made films in France during the war, they were believed to have been collaborators during the Occupation. The actor Robert Le Vigan received ten years hard labor and the confiscation of his assets for having acted in films during the period, and the director Jean Mamy was sentenced to death for having denounced members of a clandestine labor organization to the occupiers. That's how serious the French are about the cinema. For more on this interesting subject, see Alan Williams, *Republic of Images*, Cambridge: Harvard, 1992.

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and Jean Renoir, bringing many directors back from Hollywood in the hope that they would help the French industry achieve the same level of professionalism as the American output.

So, the first films to be seen from France were new works by the old guard. But, as the flood of backlogged American films not seen during the war also filled Parisian theatres the new French critics began to notice the dark turn by American films and documented this trend: noir stories of men who act without motivation or over-contemplation ("The heroes of Hemingway and Caldwell never explain themselves," Sartre explained. "They act only."), darker Westerns which commented on American nationalism, and a harsher realism drawn from the fiction of Dos Passos, Hemingway, and Steinbeck.[30]

French film-goers were suddenly swamped with five years of American (often classic) product, with films such as *Citizen Kane*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Little Foxes*, and *The Maltese Falcon* all playing at practically the same time. As a result, publications which covered this American film flood, such as *L'Ecran Francais*, *La Revue du Cinema*, *Positif* and *Cahiers* thrived.[31]

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Louis Menand, *The New Yorker,* (Feb. 17 & 24, 2003), From "How the French Saved Hollywood," 171. Here, we are also reminded that the Café de Flore was headquarters for a black market in American pulp novels.

31

Cahiers du Cinema was founded in 1951 by André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and Lo Duca. It was a development from the earlier magazine *Revue du Cinééma* and the members of two Paris film clubs - *Objectif 49* (Bresson, Cocteau and Alexandre Astruc, etc.) and *Cinéé-Club du Quartier Latin.* Initially edited by Eric Rohmer (Maurice Scherer) it included amongst its writers Jacques Rivette, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut. Here they later propose the 'Auteur' theory based on a

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The French were in the middle of one of their periodic love affairs with American culture. "The greatest literary development in France between 1929 and 1939," Sartre claimed, "was the discovery of Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Caldwell, and Steinbeck..." What French highbrows loved in American culture was the lowbrow element. Gangsters, criminals, derelicts, Hemingway's battered prizefighters, Faulkner's incestuous Southerners, Wright's angry black men: they seemed rebukes to the analytic refinement of the French tradition. The Hollywood movies that began arriving in France in 1946 had the same appeal. That was the year the French writer, Nino Frank, used the term "film noir" to describe the new American style. The French, who admired noir films admired them in part for the mise-en-scene–the low-key lighting, the night-for-night shooting, the soundtrack screeching panic and dread–but in part because they were so not-French. Even the French movies that the French themselves called noir–*Pepe le Moko* (1937), *Le Jour Se Leve* (1939), *Le Corbeau* (1942)–seemed talky and wan next to the films of Billy Wilder, Nicholas Ray, and Robert Aldrich. The French loved the Hollywood masters, too: Hitchcock, Hawks, and Welles, filmmakers whose technical

"director's" noticeable style coming through despite the rigid Hollywood Studio System the film was made under. The most important issue for the *Cahiers* group was the thinking of cinema as an art form, thus reviving theories of cinema from pro-montage to pro-realism (Bazin).

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resourcefulness was astonishing to French cinephiles.[32]

Partisan battles regarding the American cultural invasion of France were fought in these new cinema magazines. A divide developed between the *Cahiers* critics, who continued to write about American films, and those of the Communist-run *L'Ecran Francais*, which attacked American productions as capitalist propaganda. But even with this new inward-looking French patriotism, the newest French films mimicked American filmmaking values. They were called "Tradition of Quality" films.

These Tradition of Quality films dominated the first decade after the war. The C.N.C. formed a committee comprising management representatives, creative personnel, and labor, and selected projects deemed worthy of *primés á la qualité*, or "bonuses for quality":

> "Quality" meant, first of all, that the films could not be inferior to the best American products, either technically (smoothness of editing, glitchless camera movement) or materially (eye-catching, expensive costumes and sets, appealing stars, "seeing the money on the screen"). Quality cinema attempted to meet the American threat head-on: by beating it at its own game (making expensive movies with mass market appeal)... But the American films had the appeal of exoticism, and therefore the new French films had to exaggerate their own exoticism, too, in order to compete. For that, the Tradition of Quality films relied on American-style production

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[32] Louis Menand, *Ibid.*, 171.

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values and genres, above all, stars.[33].

Whereas the Italian Neorealist films borrowed from American films noir stylistically, the 'Tradition of Quality' films mimicked and resembled the Hollywood 'A-picture' romantic dramas. All the resources of studio filmmaking (lavish sets, special effects, elaborate lighting, extravagant costumes) as well as cinematography and editing styles (carefully composed one-, two-, and three-shot shots, three-point lighting, high central key-lighting, Classical Hollywood continuity editing moving from establishing shots to close-ups) were all used to amplify these refined tales of passion and melancholy.[34]

Again, the Tradition of Quality directors were the older directors, most of whom had worked in Hollywood during the war and returned to France at war's end: Abel Gance, Jean Epstein, Max Ophuls, Julian Viviers, Rene Clair, and of course, Jean Renoir, whose American-financed film, *The River* (1952), prompted a re-examination of his older work in *Cahiers*. It's ironic that the young Truffaut and his fellow critics at *Cahiers* contemptuously labeled the mainstream quality productions *"le cinema de papa,"* because the Tradition of Quality productions went out of their way to mimic Hollywood productions, throwing in a touch of French exoticism to match the perceived exoticism of American film.

It was the *Cahiers* group who most re-examined and championed American cinema of the thirties and forties. The critical writing of *Cahiers* re-invented the basic

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[33] Alan Williams, *Republic of Images*, Cambridge: Harvard, 1992, 278.

[34] See, especially, Aurenche and Bost's *Symphony Pastorale* (1946) and *Le Diable au Corps* (1947).

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tenets of film criticism and film scholarship (auteurs, mise-en-scène, la critique des beautés, etc.), establishing the 'value' of the Hollywood films of Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks, as well as Robert Aldrich, Nicholas Ray, Fritz Lang, and Anthony Mann.[35] The magazine would later help foster the Nouvelle Vague (New Wave) of French cinema, which was largely directed by ex-writers of the magazine.[36] Such films as *Jules & Jim, The 400 Blows, Breathless, Last Year at Marienbad, Day for Night,* would categorize the French New Wave of the late fifties/early sixties.

Neorealism? More like Neo-Modernism

In certain respects, postwar Italian and French art film marked a resurgence of the modernist tradition founded in the early decades of the century in literature, painting, music, and theatre–a modernism that had spread to the United States in film by the 1940s

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After being reactionary and isolated in the 1950s, *Cahiers'* replacement of Rohmer by Jacques Rivette in 1963 meant that the magazine staff were more sensitive to political and social trends as well as responding more to non-Hollywood films. The style moved through literary modernism in the early 1960s to radicalism and "dialectical materialism" by 1970 and through the mid-70s the magazine was run by a Maoist collective. A return to more commercial perspectives in the late 1970s, marked by a review of *Jaws*, and a more organized turnover of editors (Serge Daney, Serge Toubiana, Thierry Jousse, Antoine de Baecque, and Charles Tesson) meant the rehabilitation of some of the old *Cahiers* favorites as well as some new names (like de Oliveira, Raúúl Ruiíz, Hsiao-hsien, Chahine, and Pialat).

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These directors would go on to merge Existentialism's nihilistic angst with Neorealism's techniques of using stock footage, location shooting, and hand-held cameras, while adding their own new devices of non-continuity editing, jump cuts and discontinuous narratives, bringing *French* cinema finally into the arts of modernism (which later, in turn, would help Hollywood cinema re-invent itself in the late 1960s/early 70s). The most famous quote of the period is attributed to Godard: "Yes, a film should have a Beginning, a Middle and an End. But, not necessarily in *that* order."

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(it is said that with *Citizen Kane*'s frantic, fractured narrative, American cinema finally caught up to modernism).[37]

Postwar modernism can be described by three stylistic and formal features. First, filmmakers sought to be more true-to-life in the face the horrors of the war, the holocaust and the Bomb. Second, they stressed more 'episodic' narratives in which central plot lines are left open-ended and elliptical (or else a 'fractured' narrative, seemingly discontinuous), feeling as if "nothing happens" (including the use of the long take). Third, is what is called "authorial commentary," the sense that an intelligence outside the film's world is pointing out something about the events we see which is akin to modernist "self-reflexivity," of modernism with its emphasis on the work as a self-contained, self-sufficient work of art. All three are attempts at a new realism that modernism had brought to the expressive arts earlier in the century. But this grew out of what American film was already doing in the late 1930s-early 1940s.

There's no disputing that France is, and always will be, the country of the cinema. But in the decade after World War II, the French, like the Italians, looked to America in re-evaluating cinematic art, and for guidance and inspiration in their own Tradition of Quality films. (It was, and still is, a war of mass psychology with the U.S.).

Thus, the real story was the exchange of European and American ideas flashing across cinematic screens in the fifteen years between 1939 and the mid-nineteen-fifties. But, the English took a very different approach during this period of reconstruction,

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Especially modernism's always promising "the shock of the new," which came out of French Impressionism, German Expressionism, and Soviet Montage.

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turning completely inward to re-examine and, perhaps, rediscover themselves once again as an island nation instead of a world ruler. And rediscover themselves they did, through their great tradition of satire. The postwar English satires belonged to an English film culture that was decidedly not interested in copying American, Italian, or French style, but was more involved, if anything, in the indigenous English Music Hall tradition.

The English Music Hall Tradition

In the mid-1800s, with the new network of railways in Britain, the theatrical successes of London were able to travel faster to the provincial cities. What also traveled faster was the influence of the different regions of the British countryside on each other. A new phenomenon arose in the 1850s, the Music Hall, which soon created its own stars who began to mimic and parody provincial idiosyncracies more acutely.

> Soon, every town had its own music hall creating regionally local stars, many of whom went to London and returned on-tour as nationally-known entertainers. The music halls of London set the pattern for those in the provinces, which were regularly visited by the 'star' who considered Birmingham, Manchester, and other cities as important as London, and developed specific materials for them all. This grew out of earlier pub life where special annexes to public houses were staples, and by the late-19th century large and sumptuously decorated theatres were built to

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accommodate this form of entertainment.[38]

Large bars were built into these new theatres to remind audiences of the growth of the music hall out of the public house.[39] The mainstay of the music hall entertainment was the comic, sentimental or character song, performed by highly popular entertainers, usually with rapturous and raucous participation by the audience.[40]

During the First World War theatre rents and costs of production soared, producers turned to providing light entertainment, poached mostly from the music hall scene (the performers happy to graduate to West End professionalism), for a war weary audience swollen by the influx of overseas soldiers.[41] Musical comedy, melodrama and farce became the staple fare of most theatres, in London and the provinces.[42] The

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Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *British Music Hall*, London: London House and Maxwell, 9-11.

39

The great London music halls were Collins, the Empire, the Metropole, the Alhambra, the Canterbury, and numerous other halls in the outer districts of London and the provinces. After World War I, it was the rise of the cinema--a child of the music hall--and after World War II that of tv, which led to the decline and virtual demise of this form of folk art. The English music hall tradition has influenced the English pantomime, silent film comedians (such as Chaplin), and its American cousin, vaudeville (which spawned such comic greats as Buster Keaton, W.C. Fields, the Marx Brothers).

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Among entertainers, these included Leno, Albert Chevalier, and Fred Karno's troupe of knockabout comedians in which Chaplin earned his first laurels.

41 Mander and Mitchenson, *Ibid.*, 35-7.

42

With the dawn of the new century came the most famous of all music hall performers, named simply Grock. He was the supreme clown of his generation, skilled in the playing of 20 instruments. From 1903 to 1924 he delighted audiences in London, and then returned to the continent, where he died in 1959. The music hall, attacked on all sides by new forms of entertainment, was already dying when he left London, and only a few

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conflict between the First World War generation and the newer generation was a new theme, most notably in the works of Noel Coward and Frederick Lonsdale, both of whom attempted contemporary comedies of manners (of which, Lonsdale's *On Approval* (1927) is the closer type than Coward's *Private Lives* (1930)).[43]

But, most importantly, by the late twenties, the new possibility of synchronized sound drew the tradition of the music hall into the cinema in the early thirties, stealing the tradition, now, away from the theatres. The most successful films of this genre were those starring the music hall comedienne Gracie Fields, then at the height of her popularity.[44] (She is a special case because she *emphasized* her locality and roots in working-class life).[45] But, when the war hit in 1939, the music hall tradition fell away

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names are attached precariously to its last flickers, since what had been a full time profession had to be split up, not only between revue and musical comedy, but also the cinema, radio, and later, television.

43

However, the disillusioned and iconoclastic audiences of the 1920s and 30s were less enthusiastic about outright comedy, preferring the adroit understatement, and critical realism of the problem play and drama of social purpose. Naturalism, too, was a prevailing dramatic technique of the inter-war period, with the anti-naturalistic movement reaching its climax with T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935).

44

Gracie Fields (1898-1979) sang the praises of "The Biggest Aspidistra in the World," and became a legend in her lifetime due to her warm personality, quick wit and ability to hold an immense audience, making her the successor to the 19th century's Marie Lloyd; as did her fellow Lancastrian George Formby (1905-61), who sang and pattered to the ukulele and the droll-cum-comic-actor Sid Field (1904-50).

45

The opening section of *Sally in our Alley* (1933) is pure documentary, prefiguring the events that occur in the film: poverty, poor housing, delinquency, child abuse, absent fathers. *Sing as We Go* (1934), Field's first film set in her native Lancashire, uses documentary imagery of a mill factory and the fact of its closing to shed light on the working man's plight. Here the star's singing urges the workers to tough out the bad

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from British film as the British Studios turned to making war dramas and the BFI to wartime documentaries to support the war effort. So, back to the theatres the tradition went.

The upheaval of the Second World War, which closed many theatres in London and the larger provincial cities (which were heavily bombed for their industrial threat to Germany), nevertheless saw an important revival of theatre as the state began to subsidize it through the newly created Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts (CEMA), later known as the Arts Council. This resulted in the establishment of the Bristol Old Vic and in the formation of several excellent touring companies, many of which also grew out of music hall troupes.[46] The younger dramatists of the postwar period turned back to the music hall comedic tradition, as interest shifted from the modern verse plays of Fry and Eliot to plays of protest and satire that exalted the non-conformist, the misfit, and the martyr, and showed sympathy for the frustrations and fears of the common man. These satiric playwrights turned to the film studios and began to write for them.

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times and the film ends with the survival of the factory through new technology with the workers waving union jacks and singing along. Her character's singing always moderates the militancy of her acts, presenting a more docile, harmonious, consensus view of English working class life.

46

Peter Ustinov and Terence Rattigan emerged as young dramatists of promise through these grants. Most of the actors of the thirties were still active and they were able to make the transition from the classical and romantic repertory in which they made their names to the more realistic atmosphere of the postwar theatre. This was aroused by the sudden interest in the poetic plays of Christopher Fry: Gielgud starred in *The Lady's Not for Burning* (1949), Laurence Olivier in *Venus Observed* (1950), Edith Evans in *The Dark is Light Enough* (1954). (and Peggy Ashcroft and Ralph Richardson in *The Heiress* (1950) based on Henry James, and Alec Guinness in T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* (1949).

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In its heyday, Music Hall presented the type of entertainment most loved by the general population. It was gay, raffish, and carefree, and celebrated as it spoofed various English provincial traits and mores, dealing amusingly with the raw material of the different classes' lives. Though television would later appropriate its traditions, in the decade after the war England was too debt-ridden to produce television programs just yet (and even to afford household TV sets), but the English music hall tradition mutated back into film (and radio), this time in the form of postwar British satire.[47] And the studio located in the West London suburb of Ealing became ground-zero for these satiric productions, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter.

47

The only surviving music hall, the City Palace of Varieties in Leeds (of course, as far north as one can get in England), was restored to earlier glory in order to house the BBC televisions music hall series, "The Good Old Days." Pockets of the music hall tradition also still exist today as informal entertainment in the place where it all began, the public-house.

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CHAPTER THREE:

THE BLOODLESS REVOLUTION: THE EALING SATIRES

E.M. Forster wrote in 1920:

> when disaster comes, the English instinct is to do what can be done first, and to postpone the feeling as long as possible. Hence they are splendid at emergencies. No doubt they are brave–but bravery is partly an affair of the nerves, and the English nervous system is well equipped for meeting a physical emergency. It acts promptly and feels slowly.[1]

This may well be true in an instantaneous sense, but in a postwar historical sense, his statement is ironic since the English waited and waited and waited, through almost thirty years of hardship since the Great War, for some economic respite and/or moment when things would be better, when the country would once again experience the material comforts and wealth in the modern age they had come to expect from their nation in the previous one. Forster was perhaps just too close to that cataclysmic event to realize just how resilient the English could be, or possibly, almost ashamedly, how tolerant of its own poor fortunes and the political leaders who handled them they could be.

In 1945, this was the setting into which Ealing Film Studios found itself as the

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1 E. M. Forster, from "Notes on the English Character," from Dennis Walder, ed., *Literature in the Modern World*, Oxford U.P.: London, 176.

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voice of disgruntled public sentiment, and its artists set out to create stories aimed specifically at the domestic English market. They welcomed and grabbed the opportunity as cultural arbiters and cultural producers and purveyors to re-shape, re-unite and re-imagine the British national identity through the strongest means of protest of the age they were living through that they knew: filmic satire.[2]

Film Setting

Literary adaptations were very lean during the war years as emphasis was placed on documenting the devastation and promoting national solidarity through propaganda. The immediate postwar era, however, saw an explosion in adaptations.

> The postwar literary cinema boom really got under way with David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946). In the four years 1947-50, 115 of the 314 feature films released derived from novels; that is over a third. When 56 adaptations from plays are added, well over one-half of the total output derives from (more or less) literary sources. In fact, there is in each year of this period scarcely a handful of either critically or commercially significant films based on original screenplays, the most notable being the T.E.B. Clarke-scripted Ealing films *Hue and Cry* (1946) and *Passport to*

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Interesting that little comedy was produced in the States in the late forties/early fifties, but that's because there was an economic and materialist boom, and little need for satirizing the culture (though a new brash crop of stand-up comedians would do this on the late fifties nightclub scene). The critique by the movies of the underside of American culture would right after the war would come from the darker stories of film noir.

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> *Pimlico* (1949). Even the Powell-Pressburger team, perhaps most cinematically venturesome in the British team, based four of its five films of this period on novels, and the fifth (*The Red Shoes*) is indebted to Hans Anderson.[3]

The English first immediately turned to their classic literary and dramatic works to remind themselves who they were in this very changed atmosphere. It was a shot in the arm needed for their collective identity, and once they were secured again in their Britishness, they could now turn to satire to protest the country's later postwar stagnation. But, the film industry first had to face some hard facts, including the strong-arm power of Hollywood.

After the Second World War, the perennial debate about the economic and social impact of the American feature film in Britain was highlighted by the fact that because of the war many Britons and Americans had come into contact with each other en masse. For the first time during the war, bases like the huge American supply and maintenance base at Burtonwood in Lancashire became American cities inside Great Britain, complete with baseball diamonds, snack bars, beauty shops and 'washeterias'. These bases were just one way in which America shaped Europe from1942 on:

> The American presence in Europe was sustained after 1945 by the large standing armies left there and also in the growing hordes of American

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3 Brian McFarlane, "A Literary Cinema? British Films and British Novels," from *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, Charles Barr, ed., London: BFI Books, 1986, 132.

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> tourists who visited each year. Harry Hopkins, following Defoe, Orwell and Priestly, wrote a travel diary for a journey through Britain in the early 1950s. Regularly he encountered 'Americanus Turisticus, in pearly-grey hat, hung about with leicas and light meters', and 'Americanus G.I. Joe, fresh-faced and crew-cut, rimless and earnest, bursting, as usual, in sheer rude health, out of those sleek blue Air Force uniforms'. The number of American tourists visiting Europe soon came to equal the total number of European migrants to North America. Never before had there been such a potential for cross-cultural contact between the peoples of different continents. The presence of American tourists reinforced the growing concern about the impact of American popular culture in Europe. At the same time, Marshall Aid, the Anglo-American Loan, and the Berlin Airlift served to reiterate one of the principal themes of American popular culture in Europe: the United States as the land of plenty and opportunity.[4]

The biggest factor which overshadowed and often compromised many of these changes was that postwar Britain was immediately plunged into an intractable international trading situation. Through 1947 and 1948, the United Kingdom participated in international trade at a deficit of $280,000,000 (1948 dollars).[5] Half of Britain's mercantile marine had been sunk, an even greater proportion of pre-war investments had

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Paul Swann, *The Hollywood Feature Film in Postwar Britain*, St. Martin's Press: New York, 1987, 123.

5 Paul Swann, *Ibid.*, 125.

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been sold off, and two-thirds of her pre-war international trade had disappeared. Other possible sources of revenue, such as the royalties which ought to have accrued to British patents and inventions, had also been mortgaged. The terms of lease-lend, and similarly the terms of the postwar Anglo-American loan, stretched Britain severely. Specifically, the United States had insisted on a return to full sterling-to-dollar convertibility within a year after the Anglo-American loan had been arranged. So, to bring home some serious cash, Britain embarked upon a postwar export drive, which was only possible at a price of a fairly hard life for most people.

> One sign of the times was the frequent use of billboard hoardings encouraging the British worker to 'work or want', a message which the average British worker was only too aware of, and yet did not want to hear, after so many years of hardship and deprivation. The stringencies of postwar food rationing were all too obvious at the time, as was the acute shortage of housing, clothing, furniture and, in fact, consumer items of any type. For example, in 1946, people who were eager to see new designs and the new uses of materials developed during the war applied to less belligerent ends queued for hours to get into the 'Britain can make it' exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was a sign of the times that most of the consumer items on display at the V & A were stamped 'Export Only', so that the popular press quickly renamed the show 'Britain Can't Have It'. There were many stories in the press at the time about the day-to-day grind of having to face shortages of all kinds. The Christmases of

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1946 and 1947, for example, were marred by the absences of anything very much to serve as presents.[6]

But even with, or better yet, because of, this almost overwhelmingly hard economic times for postwar Britain and continued American presence, the artisans at Ealing went a different way, a totally English way. By 1947-8, the country, quite frankly, had had enough. It was tired of duty and sacrifice and self-denial. It had served the cause of social progress since 1918–over thirty years–it had even given up (well, rationed) alcohol! But the world was no better for it. Morality based on duty bored the newly educated (due to the Butler Act of 1944) younger generation. Young, very talented and bright artists turned their sights on critiquing the postwar disappointments through satire, and Ealing, with its ability to reach mass audiences through film, stepped up to the penalty spot, hiring the best and the brightest. They couldn't have cared less about what Hollywood was trying to market to the world, for they were out to make new British films for a new Britain which wasn't materializing the way it was supposed to have.

Ealing History

Ealing Studios began life as a small film production company located at Ealing Green in West London, occupied by Will Barker Studios from 1896, and acquired by theatre producer Basil Dean's newly formed Associated Talking Pictures in 1929 to seize

[6] Paul Swann, *Ibid.*, 126.

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the opportunity as sound came to the cinema.[7] In the next decade as many as sixty films were made at ATP, but by the end of the thirties, with the Depression taking its heavy toll on all industries, Dean left the floundering studio and the directors turned to Michael Balcon, who was then running British MGM, to improve its fortunes.[8] Balcon took the job because he was tired of Louis B. Mayor's invasively hands-on style and wanted to make British films with more modern British subject matter than the ones Hollywood was churning out:[9]

> Siegfried Kracauer, writing about the representation of other countries and nationalities in Hollywood films, noted that the 'gloomy atmosphere' which he felt pervaded in Britain and the 'socialist experiment' being conducted there had caused a dearth of Hollywood films set in Britain. After the war, just about the only American films in which Britain featured prominently were either historical subjects or films about the glories of the British Empire. The realities of postwar Britain were essentially invisible so far as Hollywood was concerned, except as a market. As Kracauer put it: 'Hollywood producers currently neglect, without perhaps consciously

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[7] It still exists and is used as a television studio by the BBC; for this reason it claims to be the oldest working film studio in the world.

[8] Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1977, 4.

[9] Hollywood only made films about the English which portrayed the less complicated 'old England' of Victorian pomp and empire. In fact, Balcon's first act as director was reinstating the Ealing moniker to announce its intent to be uniquely and contemporarily British.

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intending the living English in favor of the less problematic ancestors.' Hollywood producers were very reluctant to give any serious attention to the changes taking place in Britain, but most off-putting for the studios, apart from successive trade disputes with the British government, was the pessimism and gloom which they felt shrouded postwar Britain.[10]

Because of this, Balcon saw Ealing as the perfect vehicle to respond to such neglect (in fact, almost as a civic duty), and though the studio started slowly, and production even slowed to a complete stop as the war geared up,[11] as soon as the postwar euphoria ended, Ealing found its niche: documenting the new "fed-up" mood of postwar Britain with specifically British satires reflecting the new inward-turning, "island nation" mentality.

English Postwar Satire at Ealing

It is very frustrating to read account after account on the Ealing studios and their "little comedies" of the late forties and early fifties as being "quaint little English films." They were so much more than that. They were pointed satires and are thus far more

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Paul Swann, *Ibid.*, 34-5. Swann also notes that other factors, such as the opposition of the many prominent film producers to British policies in Palestine, were also significant in shaping American representations of postwar Britain in the late forties.

11

In 1944 the studios were taken over and distributed by the Rank Organization. The management and decision-making as to what kinds of stories would be produced stayed with Ealing and Balcon; they were an independent within a major. What was ironic about Rank in the postwar British cinema industry was, whereas in America the Supreme Court was breaking up the monopoly of the studio system, the British Institute of Film went out of their way to keep Rank in tact, so as to protect against American infiltration and into the British Film industry and the buying up of British studios and distributors.

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important than critics and historians perceive them to be. For example, Robert Sklar, in his excellent survey *Film: An International History of the Medium*, in the chapter on European postwar cinema, literally gives only a short blurb to postwar British film:

> In retrospect, the years 1945-48 seem a small golden age of British cinema. David Lean contributed *Brief Encounter* (1945), a poignant, low-key work concerning an unconsummated romance between a man and a married woman... as well as two adaptations of Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948). Reed directed *Odd Man Out* (1954)... and the *Fallen Idol* (1948). Powell, with his collaborator Emeric Pressburger, made among other works an enormously popular film concerning a ballet dancer, *The Red Shoes* (1948).
>
> In subsequent years, comedy became the most successful British genre in the international marketplace. The veteran producer Michael Balcon assembled a skilled comedy team at Ealing Studios. It's chief actor was Alec Guinness... who made the leap to comedy playing eight different roles in Ealing's *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), directed by Robert Hamer. Guinness's other important comedies included the Lavender Hill Mob (1951), directed by Charles Crichton, and *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), directed by Alexander Mackendrick.[12]

These are two of the mere four short paragraphs on postwar film in Britain in the entire

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12 Robert Sklar, *Film: An International History of the Medium*, 2nd Edition, Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002.

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book. Well, if this was such a "Golden Age," tell us about it!

Others spend just as little time on the moment. The most comprehensive account of Ealing, the studio which produced the most significant satires during this period, is by Charles Barr, entitled *Ealing Studios* (BFI, 1988). He writes about the financing schemes, who the writers and directors were who came to the studio, and who was hired on the various payrolls, along with a special concentration on Michael Balcon's controlling role as Ealing's studio head. It is an excellent source of information about the day-to-day running of the place, but little is discussed about the explicitly satirical material that was produced, and what the satires themselves were exposing about the changes postwar Britain was experiencing. Other film historians merely cursorily mention Ealing as an important British studio. For example, in *A History of World Film* (Oxford UP, 1996), Antonia Lant's otherwise excellent essay about "British Film After Empire" limits the postwar satires to a few facts about Alec Guinness and where Ealing's location was (West London). Marcia Landy, in her well researched and presented book on *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Princeton UP, 1991), talks a little about the Ealing films in a chapter on British comedy in general, but mostly concentrates on the fact that they included "Family Films," because she is especially interested in how some post-fifties films were unique because they were directed by two female directors (Wendy Toye and Muriel Box), rare in an other wise clubby, all-male atmosphere, no doubt. A valid approach to exploring the "comedies," but she doesn't go far enough in analyzing the content of the most prolific texts as satiric cultural commentary. Even Ephraim Katz's great *Film Encyclopedia* (HarperPerennial, 1994) talks about Ealing and

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its "fine comedies" but not their cultural significance.

So, the question arises, If it was such a "Golden Age," as Sklar declares, however small, shouldn't a bit more ink be spent on it? The Ealing satires are the *key* postwar artistic statements, coming long before the mid-fifties Free Cinema, Angries and Social Realists. They are key to the period not least of which because they expose, once again, England's biggest fear (as was witnessed in the 1930s, with incessant appeasement), of the abhorrence and fear of violence, going out of their way to avoid it by any means necessary, but moreover, because it would've been better to turn to satirizing life in postwar England than to go about causing trouble through violent means of protest.

So, after three hard years of postwar rationing, austerity and self-sacrifice, how best for the nation's artists to offer up their complaints? Through the strongest protest they could bloodlessly make–through their great indigenous tradition of satire. What's curious about this trend, however, is that at Ealing there was no "serious" intelligentsia theorizing about "auteurs" and "aesthetics" or some "new realism." Charles Barr notes,

> Insiders and outsiders alike commented upon Ealing's 'family' atmosphere.[13] On the walls was the slogan, 'The studio with the Team Spirit'. For the filmmakers whom Balcon employed, job satisfaction and security commonly made up for the modesty of the pay; the symbol of the Ealing system became the Round Table at which, every week, producers,

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World War II helped further to forge Ealing's identity. The mode of production at Ealing was related to the issues that were dramatized in the films produced and in the values celebrated.

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> writers, and directors consulted freely together. The values acknowledged were those of quality and craftsmanship.[14]

In spite of differences in the talent and outlook of the personnel, the films share certain preoccupations that stamp them as products of Ealing Studios: Ealing created a far more collaborative atmosphere, with little regard for cinema as "art," and they emphasized *pointed* social commentary, what Michael Frayn famously distinguished between Herbivore and Carnivore elements in British culture at the time of the "Festival of Britain" in 1951:

> Festival Britain was the Britain of the radical middle classes–the do-gooders; the readers of the *News Chronicle*, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, the signers of petitions; the backbone of the BBC. In short, the Herbivores, or gentle ruminants.[15]

The Ealing satires belonged with the Herbivores, even as they often ridiculed them. Ironic, this, since satire, in general, belongs with the *carnivores* (because it is often ruthless in its attack), but the carnivores, for the Ealing satirists, were the American capitalists and British bureaucrats (not to mention spivs!), whom they saw as corrupting British culture and leading the nation up-the-garden-path toward a raped and exploited postwar British community, not to mention a half-baked, half-achieved socialism. And

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[14] Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, *Ibid.*, 12.

[15] Michael Frayn, from his essay "The Festival" from *The Age of Austerity*, London: Penguin, 1963. A collection of essays on postwar Britain. It was also re-published in the *Manchester Guardian*, Thursday, May 3, 2001.

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these satires, most importantly, differed themselves from the French and Italian cinema by capturing and expressing the new British cultural identity without borrowing from either Hollywood or other European styles:

> They are, first of all, not lavish or spectacular in appearance. They were distinctively middle class in their outlook, and they probed tradition, loyalty, community, and social responsibility, expressing a distaste for overreaching and crass materialism. Rooted in a populist ethos, the films disdain rugged individualism, and are characterized by the struggle to overcome class and generational divisions. The negative figures in the films are bureaucrats, unyielding authoritarian figures who obstruct the sense of collectivity. At their worst, the Ealing films are weighed down by their populist ideology. At their best, they are mordant dramatizations of hierarchical society in which upward mobility can be achieved only through drastic means.[16]

In fact, these new films, using the old method of protest through satire, were as biting, culturally, for the late nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties, as the civil war broadsides of the 1660s when England was in the midst of their bloody domestic conflict, capturing again the divide of a country split between utopian dreaming and brutal reality.

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16 Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960,* New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1991, 36.

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1945-55 drama vs. comedy list

Production of postwar Ealing pictures was divided between small dramas and the satires. Here's a list of the complete titles of the films produced at Ealing, in the order in which they were made.

dramas:

march 1947– *Nicholas Nickelby*
June 1947– *The Loves of Joanna Gooden*
July 1947– *Frieda*
nov. 1947– *It Always Rains on Sunday*
feb.-1948– *Against the Wind*
nov.–1948– *Another Shore*
Nov. 1949– *A Run for your Money*
June 1950– *Dance Hall*
oct. 1950– *The Magnet*
feb. 1951– *Pool of London*
dec. 1951– *Where no Vultures Fly*
jan. 1952– *His Excellency*
feb. 1952– *Secret People*
march 1952– *I Believe in You*
July 1952- *Mandy*
mar, 1953– *The Cruel Sea*
nov. 1953– *Meet Mr. Lucifer*
Jan 1954– *The Love Lottery*
oct. 1954– *Lease of Life*
march 55- *The Night My Number Came Up*
sept. 55– *Touch and Go*

comedies/satires:

feb. 1947– *Hue and Cry*
apr. 1949– *Passport to Pimlico*
June 1949– *Whiskey Galore*
June 1949– *Kind Hearts and Coronets*
aug. 1951– *The Man in the White Suit*
march 1953– *The Titfield Thunderbolt*
feb. 1954– *High and Dry*
dec. 55– *The Ladykillers*

One can see from these titles, as Balcon sought to do, Ealing went directly for the topical in both genres, dealing exclusively with immediate and indigenous postwar British issues. Though most were dramas, it was the satires which came to define Ealing's reputation and, more importantly, the new postwar British popular culture's national identity.

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The Ealing Satires

They began in 1947, two years after war's end and the surprisingly hopeful election of Labour, after the dust of their new policies had begun to settle and crystalize.

The head writer at Ealing for the satires was a Cambridge-educated journalist named Tibby Clarke[17]–a writer whose sexually frank farces and feverishly witty satire foreshadowed the more hedonistic and cynical pop culture sensibilities that would become common-place in later decades (see Chapter Five). The first, *Hue and Cry*, appeared in 1947, two years into the English non-recovery. It was directed by Charles Crichton and produced by Balcon. It would set the model of what would become the hallmark of the Ealing satirical style in both topical subject matter, narrative strategy and characterization.

Made in February of '47, the outrageous plot concerns a gang of kids who very closely 'scrutinize' a weekly serialized comic,[18] *The Trump*, and surmise that it is being used by a band of crooks for coded communication on a series of heists that have been occurring in the neighborhood. After being brushed aside by the authorities as "fantasizing" kids, the group decide to track down the villains themselves. It is a prime example of the demand for "order-at-all-costs" by the British public, even if it means taking the law into their own hands.

Avoiding the studio for the bombed-out ruins of London to give it a look of 'realism' that counters the fantastic plot (borrowing slightly from Italian trends), what

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[17] Though he was thrown out of Cambridge (after only one year) for idleness.

[18] This *was* the height of New Criticism!

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marks the production is its determination to be totally British, its lack of sentimentality, its speedy pace and its especially good performances by the young actors. (Of the grown ups, Alastair Sim is over the top as the cowardly hack writing the comic serial, an odd eccentric in the true British style of wacky provincial characters). Particularly significant to the Ealing pattern is the memorable climax in which practically every child in London is seen running through the rubble in a carnival-like atmosphere to apprehend the crooks, a community coming together to maintain and protect British stability in the face of postwar domestic challenges. It was topical subject matter because of the basic fear and desire to maintain law and order in the new inchoate world, but narratively is also the beginning of the codification of the Ealing satiric film style, using a fantastic plot device, in this case, stemming from a serial comic book set against the brutal realism of bombed-out London.

1949–Ealing Satire's Annus Mirabilis

1949 would be *the* great year for Ealing satire, wherein three of the most important film satires were produced, *Passport to Pimlico*, *Whiskey Galore!* and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, classics in the manufacturing of postwar England's desire for the better life promised them, coming at the height of the British export and material goods crises and the height of the postwar British identity-crisis.

The first, in production in April of 1949, was the deservedly famous *Passport to Pimlico*. Directed by Henry Cornelius with script by him and Tibby Clarke, *Pimlico* is the

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film that explicitly challenged the social stagnation of the late forties.[19] Adding to the carnival is the fact that the film is not centered around one major figure but is completely dependent on ensemble acting, featuring such familiar character actors as Stanley Holloway, Margaret Rutherford, Hermione Baddeley, Naunton Wayne, and Basil Radford. Moreover, the film treats the community, even when a seemingly dangerous mob, not as a menace but as a collective, showing them as active participants (rather than mere spectators) of a newly Social democracy grasping for agency against the economic and social forces against them.

Like *Hue and Cry*, the premise reaches for the fantastic, with the plot using the satirical rhetorical device of a world turned topsy-turvy: One extremely hot day in Pimlico, children playing near a bomb crater roll a giant cast-iron wheel into the pit and the bomb explodes. Pemberton (Stanley Holloway) runs to make sure no one is hurt, and as he climbs down into the hole to check he discovers a trove of treasure and an ancient document which contains a proclamation that the area of Pimlico is in fact part of Burgundy, France. A medieval history expert, Professor Hatton-Jones (Margaret Rutherford), is brought in to examine and authenticate the document. When she does, the inhabitants immediately act as if they are freed from British rule and constraints. Declaring that British law has no jurisdiction over them, the new Burgundians go wild in

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Just as some earlier American films of the nineteen thirties, *Sullivan's Travels* or *The Grapes of Wrath*, say, dealt directly with the Depression; the difference being the exuberance of the satires in attacking the British social malaise. In fact, it may be even better to equate them with the Screwball Comedies (or Screwball Noirs) of the nineteen thirties.

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releasing all pent-up repressions and begin enjoying themselves through shopping, hoarding goods and eating and drinking as they haven't for years. A another pure fantasy for the still rationing British public. It is a brilliant premise that is brilliantly executed.

There's a catch, however, as without restraint imposed from London, Pimlico is open to all and any carpetbaggers and vendors who seek opportunity to sell and trade without barriers. Pemberton, concerned, organizes some of the towns-people to form an interim government to impose a sense of order on the place, especially as Whitehall strikes back with the imposition of customs taxes and fees on anyone who seeks to leave Pimlico for London. The tensions build and London threatens to "close the frontier," meaning, cut off Pimlico for good from the rest of England. The Burgundians fight back through the media by evacuating children and presenting themselves as helpless and starved-out by an uncaring British bureaucracy, especially when food and water become scarce and there is talk of people starving to death. Sympathizers stand outside the gates and throw food into the closed-off area and even organize an airlift, Berlin style. The two sides finally reach a compromise and the film ends with a banquet welcoming Pimlico back into England. Heavy on the metaphors, the heatwave breaks and as rain pours down on the relieved community, the banquet is moved inside.

One would be tempted to say that this is a clear allegory for postwar Britain, except it is played with such realism that it nears photo-documentary, making it less an allegory than a literal portrayal of a community protesting the policy failures of their own government, especially questioning "what had they fought the war for if life afterwards

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was to just be more of the same?" If not worse? For though rationing during wartime unites, rationing during peacetime agitates and divides.

Further, the community is also challenged to codify their identity when into the newly freed zone comes the bane of the English economy both during and after the war, the English "Spiv." Journalist Michael Quinion has spent much of his career researching such arcane English words:

> A "Spiv" was typically a flashily dressed man (velvet collars and lurid kipper ties) who made a living by various disreputable dealings, existing by his wits rather than holding down any job. (Another name was *wide boy*, with *wide* having the old slang sense of sharp-witted, or skilled in sharp practice.) He was a small-time crook, living on the fringes of real criminality. He is most strongly associated with the period during and immediately after the Second World War in Britain; he always seemed able to get those coveted luxury items that were unobtainable in that period of austerity except on the black market, such as nylons. Private Walker in the BBC television series *Dad's Army* was a typical spiv; Arthur Daly, the second-hand car dealer in *Minder*, was a linear descendent of the breed.[20]

In a new study of this new mid-century happy breed, *An Underworld at War: Spivs, Deserters, Racketeers and Civilians in the Second World War*, Donald Thomas explores

[20] World Wide Words is copyright © Michael Quinion, 1996—2003.

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this obscure British war, and postwar, phenomenon, where, interestingly, the crack down on such dangers was often as bad as the black market itself:

> When goods belonged to the state, no one was hurt by them going missing; when "fair shares" weren't being given, they had to be grabbed; when nobs were stockpiling provisions, proles had every right to use the black market - so the justifications for dealing and stealing ran. But it wasn't just the poor who ended up in court or prison. Among the celebrities who ran foul of the law were Noel Coward, fined the equivalent of £64,000 for failing to declare investments, and Ivor Novello, sent to prison for four weeks for the private - and therefore prohibited - use of his Rolls-Royce. Burglary, offences against property, GBH: all increased during the war, with an especially sharp rise in crime as hostilities drew to a close. The average citizen was 85 per cent more likely to be a victim of violence in 1945 than in 1940. But the vast majority of transgressions were minor (counterfeit ration books, over-charging, goods falling off the back of a lorry), and many offences wouldn't have been offences at any other time. The applauded peacetime profit-maker became the derided wartime profiteer. There was more lawbreaking because there were more laws to break.[21]

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Donald Thomas, *An Underworld at War: Spivs, Deserters, Racketeers and Civilians in the Second World War*, London: John Murray, 2003, 256-8. He continues:

> *Spiv* is a characteristically British English colloquial term whose meaning and cultural implications will be obscure to anyone outside the country. Having explained all that... nobody knows for certain where the word comes from. Its first known use in print was in 1934: "Spiv, petty crook

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Though the crack down was often overly harsh, for the community in *Passport*, more important than remaining free from British authority is the need to protect themselves against the particularly English blight of the spivs.[22] So, even with its fantasy premise, the film *is* an accurate document of specific aspects of postwar England in the long hot summer–the existence of black marketeering, the continuing expansion of state controls, an indifferent and hostile state bureaucracy and an accumulation of the spivs. The film also evokes memories of the war years in other numerous ways: the fighting spirit of the Burgundians, the Chuchillian militant rhetoric from both sides, the evacuations, shortages, airlifts, and even the newsreels echoing wartime reportage, a slight dig at the in-power Labour government which the satire suggests was incapable of the same British traits exhibited and accomplishments made during the war. But if the government wasn't, the Burgundians, the English people, themselves, always were.

> The populist ideology of the war years is reenacted as the Burgundians seek to resist a foreign and dictatorial government. The heat wave is symbolic of the fever gripping the population, which is finally broken by

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> who will turn his hand to anything so long as it does not involve honest work." It has indeed been said that it is *VIPs* backwards; also that it was a police acronym for *Suspected Persons and Itinerant Vagrants*. VIP does date from the same period, but it would be very surprising if it was the source. Apart from the sense being wrong, inverted acronyms based on word play were uncommon then. The police story is just a well-meaning attempt at making sense of the matter. The more usual explanation is that it comes from a dialect word *spiving*, meaning smart, or *spiff*, a well-dressed man. This developed into the adjective *spiffy*, smart or spruce, recorded from the 1850s, and into *spiffed up*, smartly dressed.

[22] The bureaucratic equivalent became known as 'snooker'.

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> the rainstorm, coinciding with the return to normalcy. The heat is the gauge of the intensity of this topsy-turvy world, which turns out to pose complications not only for the government but for the inhabitants of Pimlico.[23]

As a critique of postwar England, with its nostalgic look backward at the collective ethos of wartime England, *Passport* further explores more fundamental questions of the relationship between past and present history, between subjection to authority and release from restrictions, remaining suspended between the oppositions it dramatizes. In a study on the psychological implications of certain humor, Ian Green reflects,

> Comedy might be used as a framework or disguise that allows the overcoming of inhibitions, so that, within the context of comedy, the rupturing of the moral or political conventions of a society becomes possible. Others have argued that because such a supposed rupturing can only be achieved within the context of comedy, the function of comedy is therefore to negate any possibility of significant realignment or effect on a society's conventions and practices.[24]

But *Passport* is comedy's militant wing, satire. It carries ardent import, for jokes here don't just stand on their own, they have an edge, not just as social critique but also as social affect, prompting, agit-like, its audience to leave the theatre and do something tangible about (questioning) the governments' motives and/or competency in overseeing

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[23] Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, 45.

[24] Ian Green, *Ibid.*, 296.

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their lives. The fact that it is a satire makes the form a more sophisticated, more focused and more affective reflexivity.

Furthermore, the problem or inbuilt contradiction of the satiric framework, then, is that it can be seen simultaneously (1) to overcome censorship, both in the straight social meaning of the term and in the Freudian sense of the censorship of conscious and pre-conscious processes, and thus can treat sensitive issues of varying natures; and (2), through its mechanism, to avoid, repress or displace the treatment of sensitive issues by, so to speak, drowning them in laughter or ridicule. The first process negotiates, and the second avoids, possible unpleasure through the satiric form. This allows the viewing audience to experience and take part in the community protest in the film while also being able to leave the theatre in a less military fashion. It gave the 1949 audience a clear voice for their frustrations and disappointments, living vicariously through the Pimlico state.

None of the jokes could stand alone, however, they all need the context of postwar Britain and the fantasized narrative to be effective on the postwar English audience, which is the topical nature of influential satire. For example, Professor Hatton-Jones' remark, "I am now able to change the course of history," or PC Spiller exclaiming, "Blimey, I'm a foreigner," or the ultimate stance, "It's just because we are *English* that we are sticking up for our rights to be Burgundians!" all need to be contextualized within the moment of the late 1940s, the film's fantastic premise and satire's central goal of 'persuasion.'

> All the humor of these ironies and events depends on the framing of the story as a comic fantasy and on the logic that is permitted to develop

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within it. Finally the framing is taken away by the negating of the context of the fantasy as the heatwave ends in rain and a cooling of the temperate atmosphere. The thunder negates the explosion; the bomb-site is transformed into a playground and a swimming pool; it is the great satiric device of ending with the wiping away of all that came before to start anew.[25]

Ealing's genius was to dictate that the problems it explored through satire should be the problems of living in the real world; the network of inhibitions and censorship that is necessary, or seems necessary to set up and accept for people to live contentedly. "You never know when you're well off 'til you aren't," Mrs. Pemberton says at the end of the film. This is exactly the point: To show that the real world is worth living in, you have to show that the unreal world is not. In other words, postwar British satire points out, be careful what you wish for, you just might get it and dreams just might end up dreaming you.

Whiskey Galore!

Whiskey Galore!, directed in June of 1949 by Alexander MacKendrick with a script by Clarke (based on a novel by Compton Mackenzie, who appears in a minor role in the film) once again revisited many of the themes of *Pimlico* in a less encyclopedic, though in no less a sociological, manner. Also, again, to capture the realism that satires need to make them work, *Galore!* was shot on location in the Outer Hebrides on the

[25] Ian Green, *Ibid.*, 298.

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island of Barra in an intense, though mostly lovely, June. To add to the realism of the location and shooting style, MacKendrick and Balcon employed many indigenous islanders, borrowing slightly from the Italian Neorealism that was then vogue on the continent. Based on an actual incident involving a ship containing 50,000 cases of whiskey bound for the United States foundering off the island of Eriskay (rhymes with whiskey), *Galore!* portrays a (typically English/Scottish) community sorely hit by the war and its aftermath. The community is revitalized by the appearance of the ship, and the men join together to retrieve what they can from the sinking vessel.

> The main antagonist to the islanders is the scrupulous Captain Paul Waggett (Basil Radford), who is determined to deprive the men of the whiskey they have garnered. Waggett cannot understand the islanders, their customs, and their language. He measures their culture against his own English culture and finds theirs deficient. Even his own wife cannot understand his obsession with discipline, and she is permitted one of the final comments in the film as she laughs raucously at Waggett's being exposed while sending back what he believes to be ammunition to the mainland that turns out to be whiskey subject to excise. His rigidity produces nothing but blunders. The only character with whom he shares an affinity is Mrs. Campbell, a rigid disciplinarian who rules her son with an iron hand until the whiskey liberates his tongue, enabling him to stand up to her...[26]

[26] Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, 50.

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In this case the protest (and the audience's vicarious pleasure) comes from community undermining Waggett's overly-rigid and repressive authority, even though Colonel Linsey-Woolsey appreciates the whiskey more than Waggett can. Yes, the fact that the islanders are so addicted to alcohol is a swipe at Scottish culture and their pension for "the drink," but, in this case, whiskey symbolizes the lifeblood of the community and a freedom from restraint, thus the main thread that holds the community together, a trope that trumps the enforced rule of (colonial) English law.

For cultural differánce, this might as well be Forster's India in the way Waggett's English efficiency has little chance against Scottish mores. As a result, Waggett is increasingly isolated, whereas the islanders are brought closer together, closing ranks around their esoteric belief system which English law just cannot completely contain. Like in a John Ford film, the centerpiece is a party, or dance, that binds the community and helps reassert its identity. The villagers celebrate the regaining of the whiskey at an engagement party for the daughters of the postmaster while the English authorities attempt to impose an excisement on the saved precious cargo, with the islanders quickly hiding and storing their mother lode in every possible container, including cash registers, baby carriages, pots, and spigots–a transgressive act they do as protest to English rule. Though passed in legislation in the Home Counties, not all laws are obeyed in the Northern valleys.

Balcon insisted on authenticity in the use of the actual villagers, emphasizing their colorful customs to add an exoticism to the humor that would appeal to English audiences, and he hoped, those abroad as well. Images of the sea and the town also give

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the film a sense of life on the outer islands off Scotland and add a new portrait of the Scots apart from their usual "quaintness" in British films. Furthermore, the English, as personified concretely by Waggett, are caricatured as overly repressive and blind to the quirks and idiosyncrasies of other nations and cultures over which they rule:

> While Waggett seeks to remind the islanders of the war and their duty to England, his constant attention to duty is counterproductive. He is incapable of gaining the cooperation of the people, and literally becomes a laughingstock, both for the islanders and for the film audience. He is the typical spoilsport who, ironically, is responsible for bringing people together in opposition to what he represents. While the film is a celebration of community, its sense of community is not simplistic. It is based on the reality of privation and restriction, but also on the necessary struggle against institutional power... The film explores the particularly timely issue of state power as it encroaches on private life, seeking to legislate pleasure—a familiar theme of the postwar period. However, the film's vitality lies in its carnival atmosphere, its loosening of restraints.[27]

It's as post-colonial as anything by Ishiguro.

As in *Pimlico*, the satire worked on the then-current audiences by encouraging them to imagine alternatives to present social practices, more than just a vicarious thrill of "what if...," but to prompting them to leave the theatre with the idea that certain policies

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[27] Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, 51.

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and facts of postwar British life really needed to be changed, and they (the audience) were the only ones who could affect this change the most. This is Satire as pure agit-prop.

<u>Kind Hearts and Coronets</u>

The next Ealing satire, produced the same great year, in June of 1949, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* was literally the crown jewel of the period. Ironic that it should turn out to be Ealing's highest satiric achievement as, when it was being filmed, Balcon was very afraid that audiences wouldn't get it, that it was too black, that it was too high-brow, snobbish even, and he almost pulled the plug on it even halfway through production. He later came to view it as his favorite of all the Ealing films, with good reason–it's a masterpiece. This time, though, Tibby Clarke was not involved as the *Hearts* script was written by Robert Hamer and John Dighton.

Directed by Hamer, *Hearts* shares with *Passport* and *Galore!* a contempt for the abuse of privilege, but this film offers a much more trenchant psychological (not to mention social) examination of the effects of the British class system. As per satire's requirements, it is another outlandish plot based on classically 'fantastic wish-fulfillment': As Louis Mazzini (Dennis Price) sits in prison, waiting to be executed, he puts down his tale for posterity. Told in flashback and voice over, it's a story of his mother (Fildes), who married beneath her class for the sake of love—and who hoped that one day her son would be accepted by her family, the D'Ascoynes, as the D'Ascoyne family (each played by Alec Guinness) has a dukedom waiting for whomever may next in line. After she dies, she is cruelly barred from the D'Ascoyne family crypt and Mazzini is

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forced to bury her in "a hideous suburban grave," Louis vows revenge, despite the sheer number of family members standing between him and the title; he decides he'll just kill all of them off one by one until he gets what he feels is rightfully his. Louis also experiences humiliation at the hands of Sibella (Joan Greenwood), who, not believing in his potential rise in the world, marries a pedestrian bureaucrat, Lionel, but regrets her choice after Louis begins to get closer and closer to his fortune. After disposing of Edith's husband, another d'Ascoyne, Louis proposes to Edith (Valerie Hobson), to Sibella's chagrin. Exacting her own revenge, Sibella has Louis arrested for Lionel's death, but she finally has him exonerated, since Lionel actually committed suicide. Ironically, Louis is not arrested for any of his murders, but he gives himself away by leaving his memoirs in the prison cell.

The film is a period piece, taking place around 1900 in an Edwardian England which sought to continue Victoria's conservative political policies and cultural sensibilities. However, as with just like many science fiction stories which are set in the future, or westerns set in the 1800s, this film is about the moment at which it appeared, England, 1949, and its story is a comment on postwar English economic and social issues.

Unlike other Ealing satires, *Hearts* is told using a 'restricted' narrative in which we only see what our main character, Mazzini, sees. In using the restricted tactic, it is especially unique in that it daringly tells much of the story in heavy voice-over as Mazzini writes and reads to us his memoirs aloud. Voice over is risky in film at the best of times because film is a visual medium, it can often seem an act of desperation, as if the story

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being told isn't conveying enough information or isn't being told well enough through the visuals for the audience to understand what is going on. But in this case the voice-over is so calculated it adds another layer of depth as our anti-hero, highly educated and sophisticated, uses high language in a Wildean/Beau Brummel aetheticist manner. The emphasis and dependancy on language was what Hamer was looking to explore–the beauty of the English language, its cadences and lyrical rhythms and sounds, how it can seduce just as much as a rich visual image can. The voice over also acts as a counter-point to what appears on screen, often adding ironic twists to the visual events. For example, when Mazzini kills his first D'Ascoyne, who is off on an illicit weekend with his mistress, they sit snogging in a gondola as Mazzini unties their craft and sends both of them over a waterfall. Louis wryly observes in voice over, "I was very sorry about the girl, but found some relief in the reflection that she had, presumably, during the weekend, already undergone a fate worse than death." The learned and erudite prose seethes with transgressive delight. The omnipotent narration also acts as a distancing device which gives us a sense of glee and allows us to suspend moral judgment about the series of murders Mazzini commits, especially since Mazzini's tone of voice is so careful, robotic and unemotional, focused on explicit detail instead of affect. In perfect compliment to this, Guinness plays the (entire) D'Ascoyne family a as even colder and more self-possessed than Mazzini ever could be, making Mazzini's plight even more sympathetic.

But, we should be reminded, a purely restricted narrative (with voice over) is also suspect to questions of bias, legitimacy, authenticity and, of course, truthfulness. Since all is told by Mazzini, can we believe all he tells? The fact that the narration is restrictive

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becomes a comment, by Hamer, on the narrator himself, since all is seen through Mazzini's eyes and from his perspective. For 1949, this is very important, in a new dark and existential postwar world; the world of Late Modernity. Told this way, the text then can be seen as especially good at conveying, visually, verbally and psychologically, the changing nature of truth, especially in a new world order which, since the defeat of totalitarianism, came to believe in moral certainties. *Hearts*' critique of objective truth and the unreliable narrator of Modernism help audiences understand that their own relationship to the incessant visual stimuli which surround them, especially coming from the new British semi-Socialist state and its opposite–the old class system that was trying to hold on to their privileged world–is often problematic and, at the very least, extremely complicated, constantly suspect to self-conscious analysis.[28]

Much has also been made of how Alec Guinness's portrayal of all the D'Ascoynes is a virtuoso performance. It surely is, but only in relief to Louis's harsh relationship to class strictures. More importantly, by keeping his D'Ascoynes so pompous and with a shameless sense of entitlement (even the nicest of them, such as the vicar), Guinness makes Louis's confrontation with the d'Ascoynes an encounter with an institution rather than with individuals. Subconsciously, knowing it is Guinness in each role enables the viewer to focus on the caricature rather than on the specific character, on the whole Old

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Yet, in the same year, it should be noted, in *1984*, Orwell defended objective truth and attacked the Totalitarian effort to relativize and undermine it. This was the push and pull of the "What is Truth?" phenomenon in the immediate postwar years

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World class Establishment class system, since one does not ever really have to contend with a new personality each time out.

The woman characters are extremely important, too, as they are literally contrasted with each other, another set of opposites in a film filled with them. Sibella is sexy, and duplicitous, while Edith is the unimpeachable image of English proper correctness. Louis's attachment to his mother is also very key and not only for being the ostensible motive for his revenge. Her humiliation at the hands of her family for having married outside her class, aligned with Sibella's rejection of him for Lionel, only hardens Louis in his quest. But his attachment was assured long before these events.

> The mother is as important to *Kind Hearts and Coronets* as to *Citizen Kane*: seen only briefly, but frequently recalled and psychologically central to the story. Simply by the shock of his entry into the world, Louis kills his father; he thereafter settles down to an exclusive loving relation with his mother. Lacking a father from this point, he can't work through the Oedipal conflict. With the exception of Lady Agatha, a suffragist (also played by Guinness), the d'Ascoynes are all male, and emblematic of a class that is characterized by male prerogative and the rule of the father. Despite Louis's murderous acts, he is within this context a sympathetic figure, acting in the name of his mother to destroy the rigid and arrogant figures who are seen as destructive social forces.[29]

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[29] Charles Barr, *Ibid.*, 127.

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Such psychological complexity in male-female relations was one Hitchcock would love. As for the gruesomeness of the murders themselves, Roger Ebert chimes,

> The methods of Louis' murders are in the spirit of George Orwell's famous essay "Decline of the English Murder" (1946), in which he regretted the modern practice of simply shooting people and being done with it. Praising the ingenuity of an earlier generation of English murders, Orwell examines those crimes "which have given the greatest pleasure to the British public," finding that poison is the preferable means, and that an ideal murderer is a member of the middle class who hopes to improve his social position or get hold of a legacy. Mazzini admirably meets his criteria. One D'Ascoyne is dispatched by poison, another is blown up at tea, and a third is swept over a waterfall after Louis unties his boat. My favorite murder involves a suffragette D'Ascoyne who is demonstrating in a hot air balloon when Louis shoots her down, observing "I shot an arrow into the air/She fell to earth in Berkeley Square." Murder, Louis demonstrates, and Orwell would agree, can be most agreeably entertaining, so long as the story lingers on the eccentricities of the villain rather than on the unpleasant details of the crimes.[30]

And so long as, per Orwell, it is done in the name of improving class rank! A sentiment, like in *Passport* and *Whiskey*, postwar British audiences would have secretly taken vicarious delight in.

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[30] Roger Ebert, DVD review, *Chicago Sun Times*, September 15, 2002.

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Another technique that allows Hamer to get away with such sardonic humor is that most of the murders are shot in long and medium shots, generally avoiding closeups that would personalize the Guinness characters and so make us wince at the killings. However, the most entertaining of the incidents is that of the dignified poisoning of the sweet but clueless vicar, a subtle yet blistering critique of English stuffiness as one will ever see (but also clearly a postwar comment on the role of religion in war ravaged and poverty stricken England). His clueless platitudes on Chaucer and Canterbury pilgrimages is obviously completely useless to the struggling persons who make up his flock. And it is in this sardonic depiction that Price and Guinness and Hamer achieve the supremacy of their satire. It is the longest sequence in the film and the one in which we get to know, most intimately, a D'Ascoyne character. It is also one of the few possible instances of Method acting in British cinema, at least of this collective period, as Price, for this episode disguised as a touring bishop, and Guinness, seriously ham it up–two great actors playing it for all its humor, but also for all its pathos, possible. [31]

Kind Hearts and Coronets was the most perceptive satire yet on how the aristocracy had morphed in the first half of the twentieth century. David Cannadine's great *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* describes y noting the sudden rise in the readership of the old magazine, *Country Life*, aimed directly at country squires, who though effected by the war and the new welfare policies, seemed to maintain their upper class status and living:

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Note: The title comes from Tennyson, whose advice Louis should have taken: "Kind hearts are more than coronets,/And simple faith than Norman blood."

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> The magazine *Country Life* was started in 1890 by romantic, country-loving businessmen. It was started because the country and all that it stood for was being threatened by industrialization and the growth of towns. It aimed to cover every aspect of country life. Behind it lay two assumptions: that life in the country was inherently better than life in the town, and that the life of an English country gentleman was the best life of all. Just as the complaining, censorious, reforming attitude of the early-Victorian middle classes had helped to make the upper classes more moral and more religious, the idealistic, romantic country-loving enthusiasm of a large section of the early-mid-twentieth-century middle classes helped to make them very much more conscious of what they possessed, and careful and conservative in the way they looked after it.[32]

Kind Hearts takes place during the beginnings of *Country Life* magazine (the turn of the century), but was made during the mid-twentieth century period when the magazine was curiously becoming popular once again–a comment on the desires of postwar Britain to look back and regain their green and pleasant land as the class system was supposed to be completely altered under the New Jerusalem, yet wasn't quite.

A Turning Point: Spring, 1951–The Festival of Britain

The Festival of Britain opened in the Spring of 1951 in London (at the exact same

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Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History*, New Have: Yale UP, 1978, 303.

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moment the Goons were hitting the BBC airwaves). Because of the five years spent repaying American loans, unloading Asian, African and Middle Eastern states and municipalities to reduce the financial strain, and most government money still going towards maintaining the worldwide military, much of London still lay in ruins; appropriating redevelopment funds, and approving private building projects was still quite low on the list of government priorities. Atlee's Labour government conceived of the Festival in late 1949 as a last gasp, really, to their quickly diminishing hopes of being re-elected in the forced elections of 1951, as the Conservatives would indeed win that same year.[33] It was an attempt to give Britons, after further years of sacrifice, a feeling of recovery and progress, acting as "tonic" to the nation. The scheme would work, somewhat, psychologically, but it wouldn't get Atlee re-elected.

The idea was to take the still war-ravaged, warehouse district on the Thames, next to Waterloo station on the south bank, and build a shining testament to the bright future to come for the Socialist Britain of tomorrow. The only problem was the country was fed up with hearing about shining "tomorrows," they wanted tomorrow *now*, and the Conservatives used this as a wedge to regain power. Churchill and the Conservative party complained that the money (£8 million) would have been much better spent on housing, education or the overworked medical budget (ironically, the very issues Labour should've had covered)–anything the new Welfare State had brought. Construction

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The Labour party lost the October 1951 election despite polling more votes than any party in all elections ever held. (Labour 13,265,610. Conservative 13,718,026.). Because of constituency boundaries, they failed to gain enough seats. (Conservative 320. Liberal 6. Labour 296.).

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included a riverside walkway, a dome (later the inspiration for the Millennium Dome), the *Skylon,* an unusual cigar-shaped steel tower supported by cables, and the *Guinness Festival Clock.* Encompassing Industry, Architecture, Art and Culture of the British people, it also was to be a great advert to the rest of the world for Britain's own recovery. (Several double-decker buses toured Europe to publicize the event). And though the main exhibits were in London on the South Bank, others were held in almost every town in England, from a festival fairground in Battersea Park to an architectural event at the Lansbury Estate in Poplar.

Churchill, however, hated it, saw it as socialist propaganda, and in an egregious nose-thumbing to Labour's vision for the nation, had almost all of the Festival buildings demolished as his very first act after his reelection.[34] The best and most well-known revisionist history of the meaning and impact of the festival is Michael Frayn's classic "The Festival" from the 1950s Penguin book *The Age of Austerity 1945-1951,* first published in 1963.[35] In it he proposed that though the Conservatives won the election that October, it was the Festival which started Britain off, psychologically and economically, on her 1950s boom to becoming a prosperous nation once again.

Either way, the Festival was important because, though it helped the Conservatives return to power after the failures of Labour's over-reaching in the six years after the war,

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The Royal Festival Hall and a Council Estate in Poplar, named after George Lansbury were both built as part of the festival and are the only reminders of the event today.

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It has been (mis)quoted so many times by many different commentators on the Festival of Britain; its so-called 'Herbivores' and 'Carnivores' have become clichés.

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the Festival marked the turning point for a Britain that had now turned to satire as their chief agent of protest, and the satires would continue until Britain was back to strength economically, even if their fearless wartime leader was back.

The Lavender Hill Mob

Written by Tibby Clarke and directed by Charles Crichton, *The Lavender Hill Mob* went into production at Ealing in June of 1951. It is the simple story of a mild-mannered bank clerk who masterminds the robbery of the bank at which he works as a security guard. It, again, starred the Ealing favorites Alec Guinness and Stanley Holloway, but also the well-recognized Sid James and Alfie Bass, and, in a first for Ealing, it won the Academy Award Story and Screenplay Award and was nominated for Best Actor in a Leading Role (Guinness); the English satires were now beginning to be exported and seen, gathering recognition outside of England.

Again, the rhetorical device needed, and so, used again here, for these successful satires, was fantasy, the foundational satiric plot trope; and yet, the fantasy has to be *played* as completely and methodically real, like in *Pimlico* and *Coronets (*or, eve, in later satires such as *Dr. Strangelove*. This time the fantasy becomes the fantasy of a small group working class stiffs looking, as always, to escape their social position. In opposition to *Coronets,* though, who's hero's motivation comes from personal insult, in *Mob*, the hero is motivated by a rich day-dream life in which he imagines a better life, not for Britain itself but for *him*self, a fantasy of a newly relaxed hedonism and accumulated wealth which will free him from the restraints of staid English working-class routines. It

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was, essentially, the basic desire of the entire English postwar generation.

For the make up of the rest of the 'mob,' Halloway plays Pendlebury, who makes tourist souvenirs (no doubt a comment on both Americans' and continental Europeans' ability to afford to travel through England on the cheap at the time), while Bass and James, play Short and Lackery, respectively, two petty crooks. The scheme is to transmute the gold bullion into small, transportable Eiffel Towers with each man handling their part of the job, thus, reaffirming their English working-class skills as very important to England's economic life, even if used for underground petty crime and culture. During the robbery, Pendlebury absentmindedly walks off with a painting from a street exhibit and he's arrested. At the police station, Pendlebury sees Holland after he's been pulled from the water by the police (he blindfolded himself to act as an honest guard who has been duped), and thinks Holland actually has *been* arrested, and so he confesses to the robbery; but the police and the painter whose painting he stole think he is talking about the robbery of the *painting*. From this, both believe that the painter is actually famous and, flattered, the painter drops the charges and rushes off to sell his work thinking it is finally worth something. It is a classical English 'mistaken-identity' farce sequence with a message about hubris and art (the street painter's) versus hubris and craftsmen (Pendlebury's).

Released, Pendlebury and the others melt and recast the gold as the Parisian tower and ship them to France to act as worthless tchochtkes. Inevitably, these valuable towers get mixed up with regular ones, and finding the real ones becomes like looking for a needle in a haystack full of needles. In a bit of unrestricted narrative (where viewers are

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shown something that the main characters cannot see), the audience is privy to the real towers being brought back to England by some English schoolgirls, and, once back, through a series of wild episodes, the group track down all the pieces but one, which ends up at a police exhibition. In the final chase, Pendlebury is caught while Holland escapes to Rio de Janeiro. But, just as in *Coronets*, he is nabbed in the end, of course, through a dumb mistake of admission–by telling his story (he just couldn't resist) to a man at his table who happens to be a constable.

With much less emphasis, *Mob*, like *Coronets*, utilizes the main character's voice-over narration, and we get inside the head of Holland. Holland cleverly goes out of his way to be perceived as the quintessential postwar 1950s English "loyal" employee whose only wish in life is to preserve the status quo and serve queen and country by serving his office as best he can. Holland does this with such earnestness he is actually mocked by his fellow workers as being too "perfectly loyal" to the point of practically being an automaton. But, in the end, it is the audience, the very British audience, who, though they take place in the fantasy through the experience of the film, like the community closing ranks against the invading spivs in Pimlico, is the detective who finally catches up with him because they are the final moral arbiters. He is judged (by the 1951 British audience) by the wrong-doing he has committed and locked-up by reality and society's mores, but not before he is cheered on by fantasy.

Again, as in the other satires, none of the characters are really bad people, they simply want to remove themselves from the drabness that is postwar England. As example, though the four members each have different motives in the robbery, they have

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the same goals: to escape to a better rank, better condition, better life–aspirations which the audience clearly empathized. Obviously, as protagonist, Holland's goals are the most pronounced–a change-at-all costs from the bureaucratic nightmare and banality of life under the Atlee governmental policies and its effects on real life. While the others are content with just getting what they call a "leg up," Holland entertains more lavish fantasies: a house in Rio, where there's always a party going on with women, wine and horse racing at arms length. Thus, money in postwar Britain actually represents a way of life that is guarded, hoarded, and locked up, almost anti-community; another strike against the new American capitalists and English bureaucratic carnivores raping England's old values whilst never delivering the goods on the newly promised ones. Another message the postwar British audience wanted to hear; it is what put them in the cinema seats and made the satires hits.

The planning of the theft fuels the fantasy, for it is meticulously described and structured by Crichton and actually becomes a constant vicarious thrill in which the *actual* deed is almost too much of a chore for Holland to pull off. Interestingly, Pendlebury, by contrast, is an aesthete; he is always a craftsman first, one who is easily intimidated by authority because he has never done anything like this before in his life. He personifies the 'possible' in postwar British confusion and frustration. In fact, he tells the police, "I'm no thief, Officer. My character is an open book." It's true, for he *is* the clean slate of England, Year Zero. Short and Lackery, too, as working class men-in-the-street, are willing and useful accomplices in the theft, but also care little about Holland's desire to live on a grand scale, preferring a modest family life. Even so, in spite of their

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working class decency and loyalty, the film implicates the smugness of middle-class respectability as just as responsible for England's stagnation as industrial and governmental exploitation.

> The language employed in the film, particularly the use of double entendre, suggests that the world of the mob and that of the relevant social institutions are actually interconnected. For example, in a voice-over report on the robbery, the announcer comments on how "everyone who traffics in stolen gold will find it too hot to handle." He also refers to "cast iron evidence" being "forged," thus using language specifically reveling of the crime. Likewise, as in Pendlebury's earlier confession, the "truth" of the robbery is available to the police but rejected. It would appear in these telltale moments, which could be attributed to mere word play or conventional comic confusion, that a more serious issue is being explored: namely, the notion that the bureaucratic social world is characterized not by ignorance but by a refusal to look and to listen. Though the film's alliance of workers and underworld against the forces of respectability is subversive, the narrative, utilizing the comic mode of the world turned upside down, turns out not to be a utopian solution but to a sober restoration of law and order.[36]

In other words, why, in life, do we so often miss warning signs? Why do we refuse to "look and listen?" Since we don't, as in all the others, we need the sober restoration of law and order to be the final denouement in all these postwar British satires. Ian Green

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[36] Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, 56.

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notes:

> The framing devices used in the *Lavender Hill Mob* have similarities with those used in both *Hue and Cry* and *Passport to Pimlico*: the exotic feel of the opening and closing scenes of the film, the flashback device; the thriller that Holland reads from in the rooming house, the childlike characteristics and glee of the main protagonists. No doubt these similarities are accounted for the fact that T.E.B. Clarke wrote the scripts for all three films and that his type of comic fantasy leaves its mark on Ealing's output. But overall similarities in narrative devices and structure to other Ealing films, in which Clarke took no part, should not be ignored.[37]

It is true this was Clarke's favored narrative strategy, but theses satires also show that Balcon played a big role in the creation of the framework and the style of the Ealing satires. And satires they were, for this is what Green is really trying to get at when he emphatically states that the "narrative devices and structures to other Ealing films... should not be ignored." They shouldn't be ignored because the fantastic plot, the child-like characteristics of the characters who carry out their fantasies for themselves (and, more importantly, the postwar English audiences) and the subversive vicarious thrill of the upside-down world of English law and order are the staples of true and militant satire. (Moreover, it would be the same devices used by the Goons, who also arrived on the air the very same year, for their own transgressive subversion of the order of the new English world. See the next chapter).

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[37] Ian Green, *Ibid.*, 299.

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The Man in the White Suit

The next Ealing satire would be slightly different in character representation and narrative construction, but no less a satire on postwar British life. Filmed in August of 1951, at the height of the Festival, and the political race for office which Labour would lose, *The Man in the White Suit* was directed by Alexander MacKendrick, and scripted by MacKendrick, John Dighton and Roger MacDougall from MacDougall's stage play. It was the first time that Alec Guinness would finally get to carry a picture. And it would be another militant spin on Ealing's appraisal of corporate politics, including the corruption of the labor unions, socialist Britain's most celebrated achievement against corporate exploitation. When Sidney Stratton invents a miracle fabric that never stains or wears out, the powers-that-be naturally try to suppress it. After all, how would capitalism survive without "planned" obsolescence of product and people?[38]

In contrast to Louis Mazzini and Dutch Holland, Sidney Stratton (Guinness again) is the traditional *vir bonus*, a social idealist, not unlike Clement Atlee himself. The writers, directors and producers make him a Peer Gynt figure, naive about power and corporate structure and strictures, and ironically, as a result he necessarily and inevitably violates the workings of industrial capital and labor by trying *too* hard to create products that will make life easier and better for postwar Britain. Trying to make a fabric that won't soil or wear out is much like GE creating a lightbulb that won't burn out. It can be

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[38] Of course, the real joke nowadays is how Sidney Stratton spends the second half of the film in an electrostatic, vaguely radioactive suit, and the audience is led to believe he will go on to live a happy, cancer-free and fertile life.

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done, but it would eventually limit the sales of light bulbs, and so "destroy thousands of jobs in the meantime." Or so the argument goes.

Sidney is another classic eccentric English character living on the periphery of society. By default, he is the perfect foil for the unscrupulous industrialist Birnley (Cecil Parker) and his colleagues, along with representatives of labor, headed by Bertha (Vida Hope). "Capital and labor are hand and hand in this," is the motto of the industrialists and fellow workers who see his ambition as threat, as upsetting the apple cart of industrial normalcy. Sidney, ironically, then, brings these unusual adversaries, normally sworn enemies, together, however momentarily, exposing how their interests are far more similar than they portend in public.

Fortunately, Sidney gains the ear of a very important and influential person, Birnley's daughter Daphne (Joan Greenwood), who takes a liking to him because she herself, as a woman, has no say in company (or postwar patriarchal) policy, but also because she is able to enjoy Sidney's thwarting of her father and her fiancee, Michael (Michael Gough). What is more, she is able to provide him with the raw materials he needs to produce his shining suit, a glittering piece of armor any women seeking a knight would be attracted to. As a woman she understands Sidney's societal trappings first hand and welcomes the fact that he represents resistance to the massive forces of industrial patriarchal containment. In fact, in the narrative, Sidney's only allies are female—Daphne and the child who helps him to escape the mob— outsiders from the male dominated postwar corporate (and social) world (especially after women had gained some form of legitimate agency in industry during the war).

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Oddly enough, the film is also equally critical of Sidney's naivété towards the realities of postwar British industry. He is a graduate of Cambridge, so he, too, in some ways, represents the establishment (at least more than Daphne can). However, it is only as a quirky individualist that he subverts the dominant powers, fighting from the inside, but, like all insiders, dependent on the 'Other' outsiders (and their labor) to achieve his success; it is a statement on the nature of capitalism itself that all who try to get ahead, even for the most altruistic of reasons, necessarily exploit and use the under-represented to prop themselves up.[39] (The white suit is the main symbol of this material and class- and gender-based appropriation, especially when it disintegrates at the very end!). Further, sound, too, plays a supporting role in the signaling of his rebellion. The various explosions from his experiments are directly connected to the disruptive elements unleashed by him, acting as yet another form of narration in contrast to the narrative voice-over, sending signals to the audience that he is the symbol (the suit) and the voice (the noises) of rebellion against the state and policies of postwar industrial Britain. (It would become the signature satiric device used by Milligan and the Goons, too. See the next chapter).

As per the voice-over, this time it is not used to glory in the lyricism of the English language, but instead for further reenforcement of Sidney's actions, for the narration is not Sidney's, it is Birnley's, and this makes Sidney's attempt to rise in

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Just as the advertising world always co-ops fringe communities, whether it is punk rock or gay sub-culture, turning them loose on the mainstream after a little watering down, so capital appropriates rebellion, turning it into another way to make a buck.

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English society all the more subversive and threatening to the corporate carnivorous establishment since, unlike Mazzini, we are not dependent on just his point of view in our decision to side with him or not; like all great satire, the narrative offers no consolation, but is unremitting in its portrayal of social disintegration.

Furthermore, the suit gives the film an almost hidden reflexivity about the state of Ealing itself by the mid-fifties:

> Sidney's "invention" is, like British filmmaking in the postwar era, threatened by inertia, bureaucracy, and misapplied finances. The film in consonant with the ideology of many of the 1950s films which dramatize the conflict of the individual against organized society, and present that society as massively corrupt with few redeeming qualities... After *The Man in the White Suit*, Ealing comedies themselves begin to disintegrate.[40]

This last point is especially true, not because the quality of writing or directing went down after this satire, but because the cultural climate had begun to change, and, by 1952-3, these films could ease up on the agit-prop and deliver lighter satire (even if the Goons were still in full force now on the BBC; again, see the next chapter) as there was less need for the militant din high satire is able to conjure up.

The Titfield Thunderbolt

After the success of *The Man in the White Suit*, Ealing waited a whole year before filming their next satire, *The Titfield Thunderbolt*. Why would this be so when they were

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[40] Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, 59.

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on such a roll? And, when the satires had all been hits, even abroad, putting British film on the international map? It was because the culture was changing. The Conservatives were back in power and the economy was actually beginning to heat up as the massive debt from the war was now mostly paid off and beginning to ease; the 1951 Festival's moniker of "For Export Only" was becoming a thing of the past; the new modern conveyances other countries had been enjoying were finally becoming available domestically. Still, they weren't completely out of the woods yet, and satire still had its place, if in a less intense manner. Ironically, because these late satires became less angry in tone, they are the ones responsible for marking all the Ealing films with the "quaint" label, as they were more languid and even, in some ways, more sub-agrarian, pedestrian, and even prosaic.

Directed by Charles Crinchon from another Tibby Clarke script, *Thunderbolt* went into production in March of 1953. The film shares a kinship with the earlier ones insofar as it, too, directs its critique against the profit motive and bureaucracy of the carnivores. Titfield is a small country town whose railway line has been losing money for years and the government, now owning the railroads, wants to shut it down. However, for more than sentimental reasons, as it is the oldest railway in the world, just as in *Passport,* the community closes ranks and seeks to save the rail line because it is a symbol of mythic old England. It ends, also like *Passport,* with the community coming together, beating Whitehall Street and with the salvation of the dissident and esoteric town rail line remaining an umbilical to the mother nation to become, once again, part of a larger Britain. Yet, as Charles Barr observes,

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> ...what a change is evident, four years after *Passport*. After its fashion, that film tested out ideas about society in a genuinely open and exploratory manner, discovering its answers in the course of the film, or at least putting the audience through a process of discovery. *The Titfield Thunderbolt* knows all of the answers before it starts–knows them, in effect, from *Passport*. Like *The Man in the White Suit*, 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 consequence. But it in every way lacks the critical perspective of MacKendrick's film.[41]

This is so because the times had changed. The need for militant satire to ridicule failed postwar policies and poorly executed economic salves was fading. With these changes would come the Social Realists and Angries of mid-nineteen fifties Britain, but for *Titfield*, a lighter satire was the order of the day..

Within the allegory is the symbol of the train itself, a relic of the Victorian age, the older England that had obviously died, but like the myths of the west in the United States, the rural British wanted to maintain and conserve; its legacy represents a part of the British identity that should be preserved even if this was the New Britain. The story itself is a mirror on 1953 England in that, in the narrative, the community is divided between those enthusiasts bent on maintaining the railway line and those determined to bring in the buses; those who want to salvage the train are the most conservative members of society in real life, from the preacher (George Ralph), the squire (Naunton Wayne) and

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[41] Charles Barr, *Ibid.*, 160-1.

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the wealthy village eccentric (Stanley Holloway). They come together and push the community to save this symbol of Britain's great and powerful past, arguing that to let it pass into oblivion is to lose identity as British citizens themselves. As Holloway says, "We mustn't let this, too, pass, like so much of our heritage nowadays" reminding the 1950s audience how the tensions in the film are the same tensions in postwar Britain–the conflict between the cultural forces of English conservation and English modernity. And here, in a new twist for Ealing, in the odd effort at satirizing the dangers of the headlong leap into the new "shining" England, modernity is portrayed as associated with Americanization, the truest and most evil of carnivores as visualized in the film by the pub's television which only plays American westerns with their mythic yet overt American landscapes, a segment that operates as a reflexive reference suggesting an implicit contrast between Hollywood cinema and the Ealing films. This is ironic because *Titfield* itself emphasizes the beauty of rural England, its nearly-lost innocence and romantic allure, a mythology the conservative denizens fight vehemently for.

> Above all, the amalgamation of the squire, clergyman, and wealthy eccentric identify the film's sense of community, which is conceived of along the lines of traditional English pastoral mythology. Their "resurrection" of the train is, like the film's enterprise, a resurrection of a museum portrait of an earlier England. Instead of celebrating the utopias of community as it seeks to do at the end, the film reveals, in spite of itself, the efforts on the part of a few conservatives to salvage a way of life that is not merely passing but is

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actually gone.[42]

It was the first postwar Ealing film that most evoked, and sadly pined for, old England, exactly the type of film that Balcon, during the height of the satires ('47-'53), sought to avoid, learning from the over-sentimentality of the still current crop of films about old England pumped-out by Hollywood. Why, though? Why this almost sentimental change? Because England was finally on her way back, facing a brighter, shinier future of better services and flasher appliances and homes, back on the road to domestic prosperity and world influence, so, they could go back to their dreaming of the dear old Albion, of the Old Jerusalem mythologies.

The Ladykillers

One of the last of the roguish films produced by Ealing in December of 1955, *The Ladykillers* conveys the same sense of loss having retreated from the past the present brought. Directed by Alexander MacKendrick, and again lead by Alec Guinness, with a screenplay written by William Rose,[43] the plot is simple enough: an especially unpleasant criminal Professor Marcus (Guinness) rents a room in the rundown King's Cross house of a bewilderingly innocent old lady, Mrs. Wilberforce (Katie Johnson), who lives alone with her parrot. From that room, the Professor and, of course as always, his gang of eccentric English characters (from Cecil Parker as Major Courtney and Herbert Lom as Louis, to Peter Sellers as Harry–by now very famous on radio as the most talented

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[42] Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, 61.

[43] It is especially notable for it was the only widescreen color release Ealing ever made.

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Goon–and Danny Green as One-Round) plot a highly-involved train robbery while convincing Mrs. Wilberforce, by playing records, that they are in fact musicians using the room for rehearsal space. After the robbery is a success, the gang attempt to kill Mrs. Wilberforce, but end up knocking each other off instead in a complex manner of double-crosses; as the picture of Old Britain, of course, she survives, untouched.[44]

It is a snapshot of classic English hyper-hospitality, which the Goons were especially satirizing on the airwaves. It was also Hitchcock's great theme–how a culture of conformity creates loss of identity. Here the-not-so evil villains lose more than their identity in their attempt to con Mrs. Wilberforce and the police, they lose their lives! All because of English primness–symbolized by the genteel Mrs. Wilberforce (Katie Johnson), who, along with her house, personifies an aged, prim, and proper image of English rectitude and respectability:

> And, like the house, which is the sole survivor of another time, hemmed-in by the images of modernity, she is a relic, a survivor from another world. Everything in her house is original and authentic, in contrast to the disguises and impersonations of her lodgers. She is the incarnation of a sense of history, duty, and gentility. [45]

The gang is a microcosm of English society coming from different parts of the country for better opportunity in London, where grey areas of trade and hustle (as seen in *Passport*) can be viewed simply as the way to get ahead in now-booming Britain. Yet, again, they,

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[44] Is this where *Goodfellas* borrowed its narrative twist from?

[45] Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, p. 61.

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in the end, are all simply good Britains, with pure moral fiber as the professor states, "It was a good plan but for the human element." And, in the most satiric moment in the film, they compare their theft, after Mrs. Wilberforce finds out, to the government's attempts at social welfare as they are merely looking to spread the wealth of the country to the deserving working classes; they see themselves not unlike modern postwar politicians.

> Just as the train and the trio of men in *The Titfield Thunderbolt* represent rural England, so the house and its inhabitants in *The Ladykillers* are representative of the nation... Whereas the earlier film attempts to resurrect the past, this film is an elegy for its passing. Moreover, there is not sense of community in *The Ladykillers*. Rather, the film is like a dream, or rather a nightmare, in its style, in the use of chiaroscuro lighting, the play on shadows, the skewed perspective on the house, and the tight framing of the scenes. Finally, as Richards and Aldgate state, "the film is a paean to old age… Mrs. Wilberforce's world is an apt metaphor for mid-1950s England, a cul-de-sac slumbering peacefully but shortly to be violently awakened. [46]

Though everything in the house is "original and authentic," and everything about the gang is false ("disguises and impersonations"), the new Britain that they are envoys for, nonetheless they represent how newly diverse New Britain was. Still, from this ode to the "original and authentic," it is the house itself though which Old England, her values and historical culture, comes through. MacKendrick and Clarke use Mrs. Wilberforce's "English Country House" to contrast how the world had changed by the mid-nineteen

[46] Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, 63.

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fifties, intentionally illustrating the problems associated with the English country house as a symbol of civility and benign power.[47] Virginia C. Kenny writes, "The country-house ethos had the greater efficacy as a unifying metaphor because its setting-the country-house itself-was so palpably a functioning entity, bearing witness to the reality of the fusion of past, present and future social values in an ever-changing but seemingly unbreakable continuum."[48] Innovative English country houses were as rare since the 1930s as few Britons could afford them. Many observers believed the building type had come to its natural end with the second world war and the meltdown of the traditional class structure. Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* was a mourning for the departure of a lifestyle as much as for an architecture that he expected to vanish soon after 1945. Nostalgia, the rise of the conservation lobby and *Brideshead Revisited* itself combined to save old country houses. It is the same here in the mid-fifties in *The Ladykillers* with the house itself helping to defeat this Modern mob.

Ironically, though a robbery and murder story, the film actually begins as a melodrama, which is why there lighting styles and camera angles are very neo-noir. This is MacKendrick's great trick, to start his stories in another genre and then slowly reveal

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Country house poems became a popular genre in seventeenth-century England. In this genre, the poet praises his patron by praising his home and grounds. Throughout history, it was assumed that Ben Jonson''s "To Penshurst" was the first country house poem, but the relatively recent discovery of Aemilia Lanyer's volume Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum (Hail God, King of the Jews) and its supplementary poem "The Description of Cooke-ham" has modified literary history: the first country-house poem was by a woman.

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Kenny, Virginia C. *The Country-House Ethos in English Literature 1688-1750: Themes of Personal Retreat and National Expansion.* Brighton: Harvester, 1984, 204.

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that what the audience is actually watching is a comedy (err... satire), albeit a very dark one.[49] Suddenly a film that was purring along as a character study of English idiosyncracies becomes a film about a group of men way out of their element and how things within the old Victorian house go askew, one by one: they are forced on to a rooftop to save her prized parrot (this is another staple of British films! There's always a parrot or a pig or a herring or a fox or a goat or a hound or some other bizarre animal), or pretend to be playing whilst the record player covers for them.[50] However, though Old England wins in the end, Mrs. Wiberforce is not the one who aids in the gang's dissolution.

> ...she is ineffectual. She does not bring the men to justice, hard as she tries. She cannot convince the police that a robbery has taken place. In short, it is almost as if she were invisible to everyone except the audience. The men do themselves in with no thanks to her. The film begins as a parody of a horror film, and her house appears the perfect setting for a crime as it personifies age and decay.[51]

They, as Moderns, do themselves in. In the face of Mrs. Wilberforce's Victorian mores, none of the gang have the more modern sensibility to actually kill her; they'd be killing old England itself and <u>this</u> no true Englishman could endure, even the most ruthless of

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His most famous one was to come with *Sweet Smell of Success* in the states; that one was so dark it ruined his career; today, of course, it is a classic.

50 Sellers actually could play his instrument, the violin, in real life.

51 Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, 63.

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villains, and so, logically and ironically, this becomes their downfall, a metaphor for England's ability to ever become fully modern–a new twist on the earlier Ealing satires which cried again and again for Britain to modernize her soul. As Professor Marcus grumbles, "No really good plan could ever include a Mrs. Wilberforce!" I.e., old England, certainly not if she wanted to attain full modernization.

Who Done It?

In late 1956, with the completion of the studio being sold to the BBC, Balcon was asked by them to do what he did best, to make another comedy. But what the new regime didn't understand was that that moment, the moment of the great Ealing satires, had passed because the postwar malaise had passed. In any case, doing his job, Balcon gave it one more shot. It was called *Who Done It?* and was directed by Basil Dearden, and its most notable feature (since it is not a great film and is indicative of the decline of the Ealing production values) was a new young comedian on the music-hall scene, Benny Hill. The story follows a police inspector (Garry Marsh) who always arrives to a crime scene too late to find the evidence (New Britain's lack of Old Britain's success in maintaining cultural values). Hill plays Hugo Dill, an ice rink attendant who has dreams of becoming a detective, so he follows Marsh around. But when rejected, like the kids in *Hue and Cry*, he sets out to fight crime on his own. An also very young Belinda Lee becomes his accomplice and when she discovers a gang of Russian spies who are planning to eliminate British atomic scientists at a conference, Dill impersonates one of

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the spies and saves England from infiltration from within.[52]

Though the teams of MacKendrick and Sellers and Guinness and Holloway are greatly missed, Hill shows off some of the stuff that would make him a huge star on television later on in the sixties and seventies. Like an English Ralph Cramden, Hill's comedy is generated from his desire to be something other than he is but it is an altogether unlikely prospect as Hill constantly gets information wrong, mangles language and signs, and mishears crucial information. However, presented as a younger Alec Guinness, Hill plays a variety of roles expertly, from a German professor and a religious figure, to a salesman and a female contestant in a game show. The satiric targets in the film are technology, weather control, advertising, and radio and television, especially game shows, but, as this was the end of Ealing, they are carried out half-heartily and with far less bite than those between 1947 and 1953. As a result, it was a failure at the box office and Ealing's day was done.

The End of Ealing

Ailing and hemorrhaging money, Ealing was sold to the BBC in late 1955.[53] Although they were only a small proportion of the whole, the satires are what Ealing must

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The topical subject matter had obvious parallels to the discovery of Klaus Fuchs and Allan Nunn May in 1950 the British intelligence system, and further evidence that by 1956 the Cold War was in full throttle and a hot topic for filmmakers. It was also a forebearer to Hitchcock's *North by Northwest.*

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In 1995 the studios themselves were purchased by the National Film & Television School (NFTS).

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be remembered for, and not just as "cute little comedies." This was an especially major achievement as during the very early fifties, against his better judgement, Balcon was persuaded by J. Arthur Rank himself to make a few expensive and financially risky, and inevitably, unsuccessful historic dramas, including the most disastrous one, *Saraband for Dead Lovers*, which was the real cause of the need to sell the studios to the BBC to regain some form of solvency.[54] He knew it was the satires that were Ealing's calling and, similarly, their bread and butter. But he also knew they worked only as a voice in postwar England's still suffering times.

There were exactly ninety-six films made under Balcon's watchful eye, the smaller ones almost always making back their production costs because the average Ealing film was a collective endeavor that used a formula which allowed all the artisans to share in the creation of the excellency, and, more importantly for the artists, poignancy of the product. Film historians mention Ealing in passing, but often in a snotty or quixotic way, always blaming it for a cosiness and English paternalism, for its fail-safe method of working, and for being a sort of cottage industry of film-making. Charles Barr defends against this criticism, but still doesn't go far enough in saying why:

> Another canard is that Ealing never took any chances and always played safe. The record shows that Ealing often exposed itself to the risk of failure, and when it occurred Balcon wasted little time on recriminations. By its nature, the film business is one in which temperament and ego abound, and

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Scott of Antarctic the epic story of British heroism which starred the working class actor John Mills, was the other great overly-expensive ruinous production..

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> in which bitter rivalries can damage careers and work. Under his firm grip such things were not allowed to get out of hand. Proof of the success with which Michael Balcon kept things together lay in the consistency and loyalty of the Ealing team. Some who had joined him near the beginning or had even, as in Basil Dearden's case, worked at the Studios in Dean's time, were still with Balcon at the end, twenty years later. It was Balcon's mission to present the British character, or his idea of it. He regarded the British as individualists who were not averse to joining up with each other to battle against a common cause. He saw a nation tolerant of harmless eccentricities, but determinedly opposed to anti-social behaviour. He venerated initiative and spirit, personal achievement rather than reliance on some higher authority. He was of the 'small is beautiful' persuasion, not caring for large organizations or the bureaucratic powers of civil servants. Ealing's values were decent, virtuous and simplistic, and finite of ambition.[55]

But, it is their nature as satires which make them crucial as significant postwar works of art reflecting and promoting a view of the new British island, and in understanding the truth of the history of British cinema.

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[55] Charles Barr, *Ibid.*, 56. The quote actually goes on to say:

> "Balcon ran the Studios much as would be expected in the plot of a typical Ealing film, with him as a Jack Hawkins figure galvanizing a motley collection of disparate people into an efficient, cohesive force, capable of outsmarting and taking advantage of the faceless corporation (Rank) which would otherwise swallow them up, and of keeping their identity intact. The pity is that there could be no happy ending, only a slow fade-out. It was not really that the money men eventually won, but that the times changed and the special qualities of Ealing no longer seemed appropriate."

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Unlike many other old British film studios that are now furniture warehouses, factories, housing estates and shopping centers, the buildings on the compact site between Walpole Park and Ealing Green still stand and still houses some electronic conduit of popular culture voicing the fears, hopes and desires of the British people.

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CHAPTER FOUR:

SPIKE MILLIGAN AND THE GOONS: 1950s BRITAIN FACES ITS SUBCONSCIOUS

This chapter concentrates on the militant satirist Spike Milligan and his BBC radio program, "The Goon Show," which, along with the Ealing satires, was at its most prolific during the postwar 1945-55 decade. The focus is on Milligan because, well... he wrote all the shows.[1]

Milligan was one of the most original and influential British comic writers of the latter half of the twentieth century. While in the army as a gunner, Milligan met Harry Secombe, and after the war, the pair met Peter Sellers and Michael Bentine, where they worked together on the stage, and then at the BBC, as the Goons. Dubbed "the godfather of alternative comedy,"[2] Milligan took the prewar continental movements of Dada and Surrealism and inter-wove them with British music-hall tradition and the history of British satire. His fascination with language and the absurd qualities of everyday life broke new ground on English cultural influence in the early postwar years. Like the

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[1] After 1955, sometimes with Eric Sykes and Larry Stephens.

[2] By Eddie Izzard and many other contemporary alternative comedians; Broadcaster Michael Parkinson said Milligan was "indisputably the most important British comedian over the last 50 years," and Stephen Fry called him "immortal, always." He received an honorary knighthood from Prince Charles last year (Milligan held an Irish passport) despite making fun of him during a live television show in 1994 by calling him "a grovelling little bastard."

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Ealing satires, the Goons helped crystallize postwar British satire into a culture-defining phenomenon, an inward-turning culture after years of Imperialism, paving the way for Monty Python and all the waves of anarchic, anti-format humor that followed in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s.

Getting to the Goons: Milligan, Secombe, Sellers, Bentine

Spike Milligan was born on April 18, 1918, in Ahmednagar, India, and was educated at various Roman Catholic schools in India, Burma, and England.[3] Milligan's father was an Irish-born regimental sergeant-major in the British Army, his mother Florence Winifred Kettlebrand was English. Both his parents were talented performers, and, as a youth he, too, showed a talent for music, song, acting, and madcap jesting. As a teenager during the Depression, Milligan's family moved to England where they went from the security of army life to abject poverty. After high school he took music courses at Goldsmith's College (University of London) and joined the Harlem Club band, a jazz group where he sang, played drums and double bass. When World War II hit he was conscripted into D Battery of the 56th Heavy Regiment Royal Artillery, in which he was both a gunner and a trumpeter in the Battery Band. His personal brand of lunatic humor made him popular with his regiment (and a nightmare for his superiors), the Second World War reenforcing in him a sense of humor amidst the tragic but ridiculous events occurring around him.

In 1941, D Battery embarked for North Africa where he met future Goon Harry

[3] He died on Wednesday, 27 February, 2002.

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Secombe.[4] In January 1944, during the arduous advance to Cassino, Italy, he was wounded while trying to establish a radio-observation post. Unable to move, and having to be dragged off the fighting field, he was hospitalized for shell-shock and reclassified as "unfit for battle;" subsequently, he was forever after racked with guilt feeling he'd acted with cowardice and inadequacy. Blackouts, manic mood swings, and despair punctuated his life for the next two decades. After the war, Milligan played in the Bill Hall trio whilst living in the same house as Secombe, whose career in radio and stand-up comedy was just starting.[5] At this time they met producer, writer, and bar-owner Jimmy Grafton, who in turn, brought Milligan and Secombe together with Peter Sellers and Michael Bentine.

Harry Secombe (September 8, 1921-April 11, 2001) was a Welsh entertainer, with a fine tenor singing voice and a talent for comedy. Secombe on Spike:

> "I got on like a house on fire with Spike because we shared the same kind of humor. We'd both been through the mill as soldiers and a bond forms between you under those sorts of conditions which you can't really explain to other people. It's beyond the scope of normal experience. You know, I still go to all the regimental reunions, and I think Spike tries to as well, because you forge those bonds with those fellows that never break. It's

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The story of Secombe meeting Milligan is a famous one in Britain: as Secombe was advancing on foot up a North African hill, Milligan came running past him, down-hill, literally chasing a loose cannon, which proceeded to go flying off a cliff!

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Milligan, too, began his own radio career in 1949, making small appearances in *Opportunity Knocks*.

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very difficult to explain to people, even my own kids, what war is really like–what it's like to be shot at. It's all the noise and the smell and the rest of it, which is probably why the Goons were so noisy."[6]

And Spike on him:

"In the early days I was writing scripts for Derek Roy, and being left out were all these jokes that were piling up. It was at this time I met a man in Italy in the soldier's concert party; I though he was a Polish comic. I discovered he was a Welsh comic called Harry Secombe but I went on thinking of him as Polish because I couldn't understand a bloody word he said."[7]

After the war, Secombe started to work for Pat Dixon, a producer of programs that went out over the BBC Home Service with performers like Benny Hill, Vic Lewis and Bob Beatty, and Secombe turned him on to Spike while they were working at Grafton's. Once the Goons took off, Secombe's best known Goon role was as Neddy Seagoon (an amalgam of "Se"combe and "goon"), the protagonist of the show's ridiculous plots. Though just as nutty, Secombe, in fact, as a good family man (and later a very religious

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Norma Farnes, *The Goons: The Story*, London: Virgin, 1997, 92. This is the best source of information on the Goons–it is a collection of first-hand interviews with Milligan, Seacombe, Eric Sykes and producer Peter Eton collected by Milligan's secretary Norma Farnes. It is a trade paperback, with a very uniquely British style and type-face. The other is *The Goon Show Companion*, Roger Wilmut, London: Robeson's Books, 1971, though it was published over twenty years ago and has never been updated. There are also a handful of internet sites run by Goons' freaks that offer even less information, and, surprisingly, little else from the BBC.

[7] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 47.

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one), was the central stabilizer, which was a perfect contrast to Spike the surreal nut, and Sellers the playboy.[8]

Peter Sellers (born Richard Henry Sellers--September 8, 1925 - July 24, 1980), was born in Southsea, Hampshire, England, into a family of vaudeville entertainers. He was an excellent dancer, a skillful player of the ukulele and banjo, and good enough on drums to tour with several jazz bands, but his greatest talent was his dead-accurate mimicry of English dialects and character traits. Frustrated that his success was slow in coming, he phoned-up a BBC producer pretending to be Kenneth Horne (who was currently the star of the radio show *Much Binding in the Marsh*), in order to get them on the phone. They answered, and he put them on with an act about someone named "Peter Sellers" who was a "talented" up-and-coming performer. He was so convincing he was hired on-the-spot and given a supporting role on the very same show. Milligan explained meeting Sellers in London after the war:

> "Peter wanted to look like a male model–posh suit, posh collar and tie, macintosh, gloves he carried in his left hand... oh, and a trilby hat. I met him at the Hackney Empire. He was waiting for somebody who appeared to be a Polish comic (Secombe). Peter was so soft-spoken–I thought I was going deaf! He was quite dignified, only he didn't buy anybody a bloody drink all night. Dignified, but skint. Then the Polish comic met him and

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8 Much of this comes from the BBC Documentary on Spike's life, *Spike Milligan: Vivat Milligna!*, BBC Radio Collection CD # ISBN 0-563-53073-1, 2003.

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me.[9]

Sellers felt Spike made him the comedian he became, describing the experience as "I was just a vase of flowers, and Milligan arranged me." Milligan's response being,

> "Good god, that's a very poetic way of putting it; wonderful symbolism, yes, or a complete bloody lie! The interesting point was there *was* a central spark–a sheer delight in abstract comedy."[10]

Sellers fit the Goons perfectly, and though Milligan wrote everything, Sellers' acting ability later made him the biggest international star the Goons would produce.

The fourth member became Michael Bentine, who had also been in the war. Bentine represented everything that Spike wasn't: Bentine came from a well-off British upper class family, was an old Etonian, and had been an officer in the war, having seen no actual fighting. Spike was in awe of Bentine because of his tremendous intellectual capacity and educational background ("He used to talk about drom feasts and pranks. As far as I was concerned prank was Chinese for a piece of wood!"). So, Spike, feeling slightly inadequate, had many class-issue rows with Bentine. Spike seemingly won out as Bentine only lasted one year, however, and none of the shows he co-wrote, or starred-in, in the first series exist anymore on tape, his influence, unfortunately, lost forever.[11]

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[9] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 48.

[10] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 56.

[11]

It's important to note the absence of any of the recordings of the first two series. This was very new on the British airwaves, and though they began in the Spring of 1951, it is only the late '52 episodes that are the earliest available on tape or cd. Like the Ealing comedies, this change started about four years after the war ended–beginning in the small pubs and moving outward on to the big screen and popular radio, as its influence and

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They appeared at Grafton's from late '49 to early '51–putting on shows in a real pub, just like the original music-halls.[12] They made an audition tape, got it to producers at the BBC, and were hired to do an half-hour weekly program.

The Goon Show

Though the quartet had been performing at Grafton's from early 1949, the first Goon Show was broadcast on April 12, 1951. They wanted to call it "The Goon Show," but the BBC named it "Crazy People." A change of producer for the second series led to

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popularity spread.

A major reason for the loss of the recordings was a rationalization by the BBC in 1962 to only preserve a *selection* of the recordings to save space on shelves. They chose to pick those that represented the style and range of the show during its nine-year run. One direct result of this decision was the loss of virtually all the Goon Shows featuring Michael Bentine to posterity. This decision was made by the BBC purely for practical reasons and not because of any specific intention to remove Benetine's contribution from Goon history. You'd think the BBC would put out offers to anyone who may have actually home-taped (and so, preserved) the early shows aired during the 1951-2 period, for their re-sale value alone.

[12] On the music-halls before and during the war, Peter Stead writes:

> The Bohemians thought that they were glimpsing 'humanity at large,' the 'throng,' but more recently historians have questioned whether that was the case. The theoretical debate has tended to follow Raymond Williams's suggestion that although the urban working-class found in music-hall performers "their most authentic voice" the halls were not full manifestations of working-class culture but were rather "a very mixed institution." They were mixed because although all the vitality, the songs, the humor, and much of the idiom came from what E.P. Thompson has described as the traditionally 'rowdy' element in working-class culture, these things had now ceased to be spontaneous and informal and had passed into other hands. (Peter Stead, *Film and the Working Class*, London: Routledge, 1989, 4-5).

Thus, by going back into the original pubs to put on their shows, and making it 'spontaneous' again, the Goons were reacting against the then-current music-hall situation, and so reinventing, the tradition, essentially, in order to *preserve* it.

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a more story-based format from the previous collection of rough comic sketches, as well as the name change.[13] Milligan is said to have picked the word "goon" out of a Popeye comic, using it as a derogatory term for people he saw as idiots.[14] So, began his influence on the British language.

With its appearance in prime time on Sunday nights, very quickly the *Goon Show* became *the* most popular show on the BBC Home Service, revolutionizing radio comedy in Britain forever because they used a completely new approach: the scripts mixed ludicrous plots with surreality, puns, catchphrases, and an abundant array of over-the-top sound effects.[15] But most revolutionary of all was its inherent pointed satire challenging changing British opinion of the day, and of how the new island-nation would and *should* see itself. Its instant popularity proved the culture was ripe for its satirical bent.

Milligan played many of the parts, ranging from Minnie Bannister to Moriarty and, most memorable, Eccles. But, more importantly, he was responsible for writing all

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The first Goons were a collection of sketches interspersed with music-hall-like musical interludes. It wasn't until the third series that the shows became one 'three-part' story. This was advised and developed at first by producer Eric Sykes, but more so later by Peter Eton who came from drama and who really forced the Goons to become a sort of drama troupe telling a straight-out, tightly-structured story, demanding that each week the stories have a clear beginning, middle, and end.

14 It was also used by the British army to describe the Germans in the P.O.W. camps.

15

Bentine left in 1952, and Sellers, Secombe, and Milligan took the Goons to 1960. During the same period, Milligan wrote a television show called *A Show Called Fred*–winning the writer of the year award for 1956. He also began his acting career, which spanned more than 25 movies.

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the shows.[16] Predictably, worried about their own history as 'tasteful' broadcasters (especially as arbiters and providers of British tastes), and about even *allowing* such heavy satire of English culture, the BBC resisted many of *The Goon Show* ideas, creating a running feud with Milligan that spanned more than a decade. But the postwar British public was ready for it, and because of their success, the Goons gained unprecedented freedom for their half-hour of mayhem (invective satire can't really handle a longer format, particularly on a weekly basis), and so, they became cult figures for BBC listeners all over the world–in some ways, ironically, allowing some traces of the empire to remain, culturally, in their satiric humor. Norma Farnes writes:

> It is widely acknowledged that *The Goon Show* was a new departure in comedy and the seemingly free-form style of humor practiced by the Goons led many to believe they were virtually making it up as they went along. But, as writers and performers, Milligan and Eric Sykes understood the painstaking effort which went into constructing the Show and warned against trying to imitate such a style: "A lot of young comics now say "Oh, I just go on stage and improvise." That's impossible. You can't have a theatre full of people who have paid good money to see somebody

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Milligan wrote the majority of the Goon scripts but during series three he suffered a breakdown and had to miss 12 episodes. (The system was that while, during the week, Secombe and Sellers were booked into a West End theatre, Milligan wrote the Goon scripts for the Sunday performance). Eric Sykes and Larry Stephens would occasionally write or co-write stories, but they were always by their own admission only reproducing the style of Spike's scripts, using characters he'd created. He was the master, they were the understudies.

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> who hopes to improvise," Sykes commented. "When you improv there is no guarantee of success. It must be perfectly planned. When Spike finished his script it was all there, every word, especially with a 30-minute program it has be perfect and disciplined."[17]

The most poignant satire is very serious business–so, it was no accident. And Milligan was the ring master.

A Militant Satirist's Personal Psychology

So, where did Milligan garner his sense of absurd satire? Certainly, one place was where any comic gets it from: the need for attention--to make up for a some lack or heavy insecurity. The satirist uses his attacks as a defense mechanism against the incessant forces of the world. In his study of the satirist's personality and psychological make-up, Leonard Feinberg sees the motivation of the satirist as coming from a desire for creativity, morality, and compensation for some social or personal deficiency and/or a strong need to "adjust" to his or her society:[18]

> Many psychiatrists believe that the humorist is a person suffering from a neurotic maladjustment to society, a man who uses humor as his defense against, or aggression towards, a menacing world. Dr. Jacob Levine, for instance, says "It is no accident that comedians are often basically sad,

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[17] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 165.

[18] The adjustment theory is based on the assumption that the primary motivation of the civilized man is the achievement of a desirable "status" among his peers.

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depressed persons. For them humor serves as a defense against anxieties arising from their relations with people and their society."[19]

Spike would be the first to admit this. An Indian-born, poverty-stricken Irish-Englishman (whom the English refused citizenship) lost in a new inward-turning, little England–its new island-nation personality and xenophobic tendencies burnished after 150 years of empire–Milligan grasped for a solid identity by fighting back.[20]

The lone script-writing process, too, took a lot out of Spike, creating a maddening life for himself. Writing a show a week affected his health greatly and caused him to have a series of nervous breakdowns. On one occasion, in fact, Milligan tried to kill Peter Sellers (and it's a mark of their friendship that they remained close pals until Sellers's death); on another, Sellers and Secombe broke into Milligan's dressing room, fearing he was suicidal. Secombe once commented that he and Sellers had all the fun of performing for a grateful audience at the Sunday recording sessions, while Milligan painfully immersed himself in his craft throughout the week leading up to it. The fact that he was also a *performer* only exacerbated Milligan's tendency to manic depression and bipolar disorder, forcing him to spend intervals in psychiatric hospitals for most of

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Leonard Feinberg, *The Satirist: His Temperment, Motivation, and Influence*, Iowa: Iowa State UP, 1963, 137.

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Although he fought for the United Kingdom during the War and lived in England from 1933 until his death, in his later life he had so much bureaucratic flak about the official status of his citizenship (he was declared stateless in 1960) that he took an Irish passport instead. He was offered citizenship through naturalization, but Spike felt it ridiculous that a person who (but for a legal technicality to do with his birth date) was British should be forced to take an oath with a room full of foreigners.

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his life, having at least ten breakdowns (eventually lithium was found to be the most effective treatment).[21] In the fifties, his existence was pure madness and this after his traumatic war years.

> "It all came from my fragmented fertile mind. My umbilical with life had been cut and I was floating in a womb of my own, revolving around and around with ideas spilling out of my head faster than I could catch them, grabbing at them. I didn't know that the first show would be the first of two-hundred. I didn't know there was that much in me. I had to write one every week--it was willing me on to death... Keeping up the constant stream of ideas and scripts which were required for the show took a heavy toll on me. I suddenly had a breakdown. The AA towed me away to the psychiatric hospital. This all really went back to the war when I was blown up. If I'd known what was good for me, I'd have never have come down. Writing the show broke up my first marriage. I've just become normal again in the past four or five years."[22]

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In the end, the strain proved too much, and he decided to end the series in 1959. However, a wave of protest from devoted fans convinced him to make one extra set of programs which ended with *The Last Smoking Seagoon* on January 28, 1960. But even this was not to be quite the end, and *The Very Last Goon Show Of All* was recorded on television before a Royal audience in 1972. Spike screamed the last line after the applause, "Right. That's it. Now get out!"

A decade of script-per-week pressure did as he says claim another casualty--Milligan's first marriage: he had married June Marlow in 1950 and divorced her by the end of the Goons' run. His second marriage, to Margaret Patricia Ridgeway, ended with her death in 1978, and he married Shelagh Sinclair who today survives him, as do his four children.

22 Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 54.

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So, Spike's absurdist outlook was also a combined result of the crazy pressures of relentless creative production, and war-related post-traumatic stress syndrome.[23]

Furthermore, it is also interesting to note that the radical British theorists of psychoanalysis, R. D. Laing and Melenie Klein, came to their most famous ideas in the early sixties, a full decade *after* Milligan's Goon shows essentially proposed that the mad are the real sane ones (it always takes cultural critics years to catch up with, and explain, cultural revolutions). Laing, especially, spent twenty years of his career working with schizophrenics, evolving his theory of madness. He found that, in many ways, schizophrenics were rational personalities living in hostile (familial) environments where their only solution and escape from their situation was to become either catatonic or violent. These people were not mad, Laing believed, but merely adapting the best approach to survive in horrifying situations and events. In short, to "go mad" was the only perfectly rational response (not unlike Lear in the face of the dissolution of his own world). Laing asked the simple but interesting question, Who, after all, could be called mad and who, sane? He went to the extent of suspecting that perhaps those we call mad were, after all, the truly sane, and those held sane, the "normal" repressed people, it could turn out, were really mad.[24] Rational society is really mad society, and the more extreme

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Although Sykes was the only writer to pen an entire show without input from Milligan, he has always been quite adamant that all he was doing was copying a style created by Spike. Still, today there are 15 or more writers on any given comedy show, but Milligan was the Goons' *only* writer; it's no wonder he cracked up.

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See R.D. Laing, *Wisdom, Madness, and Folly: The Making of a Psychiatrist, 1927-1956*, New York: MacGraw Hill, 1961; *Sanity, Madness, and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics*, Baltimore, Md.: Pelican, 1964; *The Divided Self: An Existential Study*

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the form of that which we call madness, the more one approaches genuine sanity.[25] Spike's 1950s English madness certainly manifested itself this way, in a surreal satire of postwar Britain:

> "Essentially, it is "critical" comedy. It is against bureaucracy, and on the side of human beings. Its starting point is one man shouting gibberish in the face of authority, and proving, by *fabricated insanity*, that nothing could be as absurd as what passes for ordinary living."[26]

Spike, a full decade earlier, anticipated Laing's relativism. And, if looked at through the eyes of Foucault, where the 'invention' of mental illness by the nineteenth century reformers was a means of power grab through exclusion of the mad from modern civilization, this type of absurd madness exposes the fear of the madman as a rigid social construction by the power elite; in this case, literally the BBC, and those in the Attlee government.

Thirdly, as seen with his clashes with Michael Bentine, feelings of class inferiority also fueled Spike's need to be cleverer than everyone else around him. Secombe agreed:

> "I think that part of the chip on Spike's shoulder was his anti-officer thing. Any former officers who worked at the BBC, he'd take the piss out of. When he was brought up in India as a warrant officer's son, he wasn't

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in Sanity and Madness, London: Havistock, 1960; and *The Politics of Experience,* New York: Pantheon, 1970.

[25] This became a popular stance in the 60s as a rationale for taking psychedelic drugs.

[26] *Ibid.* BBC Documentary cd, section 4.

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allowed to play with officer's children. That must've rankled."[27]

After experiencing the trenches, Spike would have none of the peacetime self-importance that authority figures took for themselves; it cut no ice at all after being under enemy fire, not to mention his own predilection for self-deprecation. He felt Sir Winston Churchill was the last major politician with a sense of humor. "The ones we've got now are ridiculously pompous," he said again and again.[28] It is an interesting quote, because, satire is often conservative in its values, using innovative techniques to disguise this, attempting to create radical transformations of tradition in order to *preserve* it. This was Milligan's (and the Goons') ultimate contribution to postwar British popular culture. So, he would also go out of his way to satirize the mores and airs and graces of the privileged British aristocracy and upper classes, which irked the BBC higherarchy to no end.

> "The Goons gave me a chance to knock people who my father, and I as a boy, had to call "Sir." Colonels, chaps like Grytpype-Thynnen with educated voices who were really bloody scoundrels. They'd con and marry rich old ladies; in reality, they were bloody cowards charging around with guns."[29]

Milligan's satirical view of fifties life was sharp, focused, and uncompromising, and again, this intense satire was only permitted because the show was gaining so much popularity with the listening public. Yet, even with his spleen, in the end, he always

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[27] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 103.

[28] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 120-1.

[29] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 51.

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came down on the humanistic side against the dehumanizing influences of the postwar world, British class rules and society, rules of authority, and modernism itself.

One would expect such free-for-all to be, possibly, just gibberish, but in Milligan, militant humor secreted a special venom against establishment as Milligan had run nose to nose again and again against the army, the church, and the BBC, his resentments coalescing into a career of idiot bigwig characters. For this satirizing, the Goons created a whole spectrum of voices (Sellers especially could do anything from a dustman to the Queen); but, again, the BBC fought them from doing voices like General Montgomery, Churchill or the Queen (they often only approved staid vaudeville jokes like, "I used to play the Palladium." "Yes, I know. I've never heard it played better."). But, the Goons constantly defied the BBC powers, knowing that the time was ripe for such attacks on ubiquity, and so they pushed the envelope. Yet, what was also new in this postwar British satire, too, was the decline of respect for authority, getting the British, as he said, "to finally be allowed to act and be silly, for no apparent reason." Secombe concurred:

> "The Goons were a reaction against the pomposity we all shared during the war. When you see old time wartime films on tv you realize how incredibly artificial and pompous we (the British) were. People like Spike and Peter and Larry tried to cut through this... we used to do outrageous things and there were lots of BBC Execs (retired generals, all sorts) who said, "bad taste," especially about anything against the forces. I was nearly sacked because of a joke about OBEs. Peter said, "Have an OBE" or something. For that I was hauled up before a board with these old boys

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sitting around a table saying “we mustn’t say that...” it happened altogether about eighteen times and once it was an official reprimand which got entered into my BBC records.”[30]

Spike agreed that authority should be respected, but only to an extent, for he learned from his upbringing and his war experiences, life just isn’t always that neat: when authority becomes overly repressive, the results are always worse than allowing for some dissent. A wonderful example comes from a show in late1953:

Setting: Brighton, 1898, The local Courtroom.

FX: Bells ringing, woman screams, chickens squark, a huge splash, and an explosion.

Bailiff (Spoken in a deep black man’s voice, like Louis Armstrong): Silence in the Court! Silence! The court will now stand for Judge Snarl. (Aside) And if you’ll stand for him, you’ll stand for anything.

Judge Snarl (in a Cockney voice, with a lisp): Awright, Awright, get seated and let the malarkey start.

Bailiff: M’Lord, the first case: “The Case of Prunella and Nugent Dirt: Mrs. Dirt vs. Mr. Dirt.” (Shouting) Mrs. Prunella Dirt??

Mrs. Dirt: Yes, mate?

Bailiff: Now, raise your right hand, and your left leg. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

Mrs. Dirt: I do.

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[30] *Ibid.,* BBC Documentary cd, section 2.

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Bailiff: Well, you ain't gonna get far! (Laughs) My Lord, the witness for the "persecution" is ready. (More laughs).

Bailiff: Silence in court!!

Everybody then screams, "Silence in court!" And the sound **F/X** descend into a mad trample and, of course, another series of explosions. It's wonderful here to have the black Bailiff making these asides, lampooning the British system of justice, especially at a moment when India had been given Independence, the Suez was in (perennial) crisis, and the Empire's various African holdings were also entering a new post-British, post-colonial phase. And it was eaten up by popular British audiences, no matter how much the BBC feared Spike's influence. In an age of postwar rationing and welfare bureaucracy, the British public had finally begun to agree with, and in fact admire, the Goons' satirical perspective.

While Milligan's own psychological motivation came from his rough international upbringing, the mad pressure on him to pump out quality half-hour scripts each week, his war experiences and a desire to undermine and ridicule overt British forms of authority, artistically, he was also borrowing from the continental art movements of dadaism and surrealism, and English satirical tradition.

Milligan Challenges a Changing Culture with a Surreal, Absurd Satire

Though Beckett's *Godot* appeared around a year later in London (1952) (the work of another Irishman interested in the absurd), the Theatre of the Absurd trend didn't reach its height in England until late 1957, while the Goons' brand hit the airwaves (and before

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that, the pubs) in the late winter/early spring of 1951. And the Goons were out for blood--to "absurdly" satirize everything British, American, French, Italian, etc., (but, especially British!), as well as everything the crazy fifties represented, and the absurd postwar world wrought. A quick look at a short list of some titles of their shows illustrates exactly the kind of topical 1950s (almost exclusively English) issues the Goons denigrated and satirized: "*The Army, Navy, and Forced Air*," "*The Building of Britain's First Atomic Cannon*," "*The Missing Bureaucrat,*" "*The Case of the Missing Prime Minister,*" "*The Collapse of the British Railway Sandwich System,*" "*The Fear of Wages,*" "*Insurance, the White Man's Burden,*" "*The Conquest of Space*," "*The Building of the Suez Canal,*" "*The British Way,*" "*The Case of the Missing Heir,*" "*Manhattan: The Lost Colony,*" "*Drums Along the Mersey,*" "*The Nasty Affair at the Buramai Oasis,*" etc.

Clearly, Milligan and the Goons stand in a great English tradition of silly, anarchic, satirical humor that connects William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson with English pantomime; Austen and Byron, Charles Dickens, and vaudeville with the Ealing comedies.[31] But their addition of extreme "absurdity for its *own* sake" made it unique to a postwar Britain searching for cultural signifiers to help redefine itself. That attitude was what Spike coined as his "Theory of *Irr*elativity:"

"How would you describe a Goon? Mankind is a "Goon"–anyone who

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31

Satire has a long tradition in English life and literature: Chaucer and the great etchings of Hogarth; the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century masters Dryden, Swift, Pope; the wicked elegance of the nineteenth century's Austen, Byron, and Dickens; and the twentieth century's Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell. But, satire really exploded during the early years of the 1950s, in print, on the airwaves of the BBC, and on the big screen.

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can get a perfectly quiet planet into such a bloody state in 2000 years must indeed be a GOON. It seemed silly to go on being serious after five very serious war years. I suppose the idea was to get as far away as possible from what was normal. It was a reaction against the stringencies of the war and *after*-war, years."[32]

Personal experience aside, Spike's absurdist comic ideas gained greater dimension drawing on the dadaist and surrealists who thrived after the First World War for similar reasons.

Dadaism, or Dada, was a post-World War I cultural movement in visual art as well as literature (mainly poetry), theatre and graphic design.[33] According to its proponents, Dada was not art; it was anti-art. Where art was concerned with aesthetics, Dada ignored them. If art is to have at least an implicit or latent message, Dada strove to have *no* meaning. The artists of the Dada movement had become disillusioned by art, art history, and history itself, in general. Many of them were veterans of World War I and had grown cynical of humanity after seeing what men were capable of doing to each other

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Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 10 and 13. Odd that this quote would appear around the same time as Mel Brook's and Carl Reiner's *2000 Year Old Man.*

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It probably began in Zurich in 1915, but there were also active dadaists in New York such as Marcel Duchamp and the American art student, Beatrice Wood, who had left France at the onset of World War I. By the dawn of World War II many of the European dadaists fled or were forced into exile in the United States. The movement became less active as the founders died off and post-World War II optimism led to new movements in art and literature. The origins of the name "Dada" are unclear: some believe that it is a nonsensical word, others that a group of artists assembled in Zurich in 1916, wanting to form a movement, chose a name at random from a French-German dictionary. "Dada" in French is a child's word for "hobby-horse."

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on the battlefields of Europe.[34] Thus, they became attracted to a nihilistic view of the world, and created a new form of art in which chance and randomness formed the basis of creation. There is not an attempt to find meaning in disorder, but rather to accept disorder as the *nature* of the world, using it as a means to express their distaste for the aesthetics of the previous order (Victorian, and for Milligan, Edwardian) and the carnage it reaped after a century of relative calm. Through this rejection of traditional culture, aesthetics, and random narrative structure, they hoped to reach a personal understanding of the true nature of the world around them. Voltaire's great satire, *Candide*, had also used this random structure, having no real pattern, except the elementary pattern of constant change and violent contrast–logic and system never appear–and, beyond the basic plot, the story is *designed* to be illogical, unsystematic, fantastic, and absurd.[35] Spike's response to his

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Hemingway, too, along with other American expatriates who returned to Paris in the 20s, felt the uselessness of living in the U.S. among those who could not comprehend the trauma of war. Hemingway's staple protagonist, Nick Adams appears in many of his stories of the 20s:

> Hemingway employed him as a shock absorber and seismographer... His characteristic response to situations he finds himself in is open-eyed shock; he registers the events as though he was a slow motion camera, but rarely, if ever, does participate in the events... Nick Adams differs in no essential way from that of any middle class American male who started life at the beginning of the 20th century or even with the generation of the nineteen twenties... On this level, then, the Nick Adams projection is a vital defensive weapon in Hemingway's combat with the universe. (Earl. Rovit, *Earnest Hemingway*, G. K. Hall & Co.: Boston, 1963, p. 56-59).

This fictional character is an illustration of the angst-filled man in the new world of the machine, both utopian and dystopian, where the incessant flow of stimulations causes one to become numb to the inhumane acts of violence, even to the point (as Marionetti pointed out) to becoming *addicted* to the numbness. The crisis was twofold: the end of the war which left so much of Europe in rubble, and our own 20th century addiction to alienation.

35 As did Rabelais's *Gargantuan*.

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own traumas experienced during the war was similar to the 1920s Dadaists', and his scripts and satirical style, to Voltaire's. But to these, since it all came from his "fertile mind," he also incorporated surrealist tendencies.

Surrealism, too, was an aesthetic-political movement that emphasized the critical and imaginative powers of the unconscious.[36] Although related to Dada, it is significantly broader in scope. While Surrealism is typically associated with the arts, it can refer to a wider range of creative acts of revolt and efforts to liberate the imagination.[37] Thus, one might say that surrealist strands may be found in movements such as Free Jazz (Don Cherry, Sun Ra, etc....), and even in the daily lives of people in confrontation with limiting social conditions. In fact, Milligan was a great jazz lover and structured his scripts to play like a Free Jazz piece–seemingly random but actually very structured and

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Often misinterpreted as an artistic movement, Surrealism transformed post-World War I visual art, writing, poetry and film. The publication of André Breton's [First] Surrealist Manifesto marked its beginning in 1924, where Breton defined surrealism as "pure psychic automatism," "automatism" being spontaneous creative production without (conscious) moral or aesthetic self-censorship; the surrealist artists made up the most popular artistic movement of Paris throughout the 1920s and 1930s (some included Louis Aragon, Marcel Duchamp, Renéé Magritte, Joan Miró, Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Alberto Giacometti, Valentine, Hugo, Oppenheim, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, Jacques Préévert, Raymond Queneau). Yet, after World War II, many of the once-startling effects of surrealism moved into popular culture all over Europe, so that even advertisements commonly displayed "juxtaposed realities," just as Breton once cultivated. The most famous surrealist painting is Magritte's, "Ceci n'est pas un pipe." It isn't a pipe; it's a drawing of a pipe.

37

If one looks back in American poetry, the work of the first American Surrealist Poet, Charles Henri Ford, stands out. He wrote his first surrealist poem in 1929, welcoming Breton when he came to New York before WWII. Other American poets brushed shoulders with surrealism, William Carlos Williams among them, but none surpassed Ford in creating astonishing images and compelling landscapes of the mind.

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carefully thought out, which is absolutely essential to high satire. Even so, Milligan knew that the unconscious was at true source of it all. He said what he did was "William McGonagall meets George Gershwin–that it is a free-fall comic fantasy in which the *subconscious* is the *author.*" This holds true for all of his works, as Secombe attests:[38]

> "Spike was educated partly in an Indian convent school. He had this tremendous imagery, but wasn't always able to spell out what he wanted. He had a wonderful gift for surreal humor which I think we understood and joined in. It wouldn't have been any good for us to have someone like Max Miller with us. He wouldn't have understood what we were all about. We were different. We had things in common such as a liking for Edward Lear or Lewis Carroll. There was a chemistry there between the four of us that happens very rarely."[39]

Max Miller was a vaudeville comic (like George Formby, et al., even Gracie Fields) who specialized in quick quips and one-liners (usually about marriage) and singing comedic songs between his gags. He was classically old school, as far from Dada and Surrealism as one could get, exactly what the Goons were rebelling against. It is the difference between satire and (stand-up) comedy, plus generations.

At one level, surrealism may be said to be the product of a specific culture, time and place–that is, early 20th-century Europe. But, thought of as the effort of humanity to *liberate* the imagination as an act of insurrection against society, Spike's brand of comedy

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[38] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 67.

[39] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 96-7.

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was completely new and refreshing to a changing Britain making it all the more impressive that it exploded on the popular postwar British radio waves. While Dada is relatively nihilistic in nature, surrealism possesses a more positive perspective, and Milligan combined these two elements and added the pointed social criticism that satire specializes in:

> "Ours was a kind of anarchy in comedy," Secombe noted. "We were against the established form of presentation. At the same time we began, the profession was full of stand-up comics who came on and told a string of jokes and finished either with a song or dance. Our approach was different. We spent the war with the lads of our own age in the Services and we had fresh ideas."[40]

Most of those associations were in the Milligan mind, which could and would ricochet anywhere, yet always be held together by the acute satirical slings and arrows he let fly at British cultural mores, generating a slew of first-, second- and third-generation puns ("where was Seagoon's father, his four mothers, the first cook, the underfootman, and, for that matter, the *over*-foot man?"); perversions of homely cliches ("What has become of mother? Dear mother, she was like one of the family"); and even simply, unacceptable thoughts (SEAGOON: "How did you get back on board?" BLOODNICK: "I was molested by a lobster with a disgusting mind."). According to Peter Sellers, the essence of the process of Spike's nonsensical logic and surreal "mind-pictures" was,

> you take an idea and you just let your mind wander: it's the "runaway"

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[40] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 14.

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> idea. The only way I can describe the form of humor that we enjoyed is to say that we took a given situation and carried it to its *ill*ogical conclusion."

In the beginning, this newly synthesized comic style was very shocking to British audiences, and few got it when the *Goon Show* began in April 1951 as "Crazy People." In fact, when Milligan subjected his first script to the trauma of a live audience, he felt that it was the musicians who saved the day:

> "Peter and Harry had been in recording studios before, I was the only one outside the pale. I was worried if no one liked the script. In fact, the audience didn't understand a word of it! God bless the band; *they* saved it. Having all worked the music-halls, they dug and got *all* the jokes. They were muzos and they dug the jokes."[41]

And occasional co-writer Eric Sykes, who worked on some of the later scripts, also explained the newness of the style:

> "I worked or wrote for many of the top performers during and just after the war–I was far more aware of the range of comedy acts which were around in the 50s, but there was no comparison to the Goons. Stage comedy came in the form of farces or vaudeville. It came from comics who had an act they honed over forty years. But radio brought comedy into people's homes in a completely new way, and the Goons broke that wide open, from their use of sound to characterization. Between them, Spike and Peter Sellers created characters which represented every aspect of life in

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[41] *Ibid.* BBC Documentary cd, section 4. Also, Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 51.

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Britain as we knew it, from the idiot do-gooder (Eccles was honest but thick), to the incredibly aged like Minnie and Crun. And, unlike other shows, despite their familiar traits, these characters were from another world."[42]

Stones and dirty words whistle through the air of satire. In its world no one can preserve decorum, maintain virtue, or expect happiness. This is a crucial technique for satire.

After a few minutes the rush of crazy language undid character, setting, and theme, until it all hung by a very slender filament, replete with self-reflexive, fourth wall-breaking techniques (clearly Brechtian, breaking any pretension of suspended disbelief). A classic example is an excerpt from the show titled, *The Childe Harold Reward*:

Greenslade: This is the BBC.

Secombe: Mr. Sellers? Forward with your hand-knotted legs.

Sellers: My music, please, minstroon.

FX: *[Milligan sings]*

Sellers: Ah, that music! It's 1899 and always on time. It comes from Winchell See in the heart of the Brown country, a typical English village with a population of 8 million, two-thirds under seven. From time to time, nothing happened.

Seagoon: But it always gets into the Sunday papers, mate! *[laughs]*

FX: *[many laugh and growl]*

Yorkshire Voice: I don't suppose we'll ever stop it in Winchell See!

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[42] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 167-8.

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[laughs]

FX: *[baby crying, cows mooing]*

Bannister: Itsy bitsy, tiddle-iddle... there, there, there, there.

Crun: Dib, dib, dib, dib.

Bannister: Dibble, dibble, oh

Both: Dip, dibble, clue

Crun: Min?

Bannister: Hmm?

Crun: Look. One tooth.

Bannister: So you have, Henry.

Crun: How many months is he now, Min?

Bannister: 439.

Crun: So he's 37 years old, is he?

Bannister: Yes. Dib, dib... dib.

Seagoon: Listen, Auntie Min and Uncle Hen, I know you love children,,

but isn't it time I was weaned?

Crun: Listen, Min, he's trying to talk!

Bannister: Oh.

Both: *[baby talk]*

Seagoon: I can't go on kipping in this pram, it's had ten extensions already.

People are starting to talk!

Bannister: There, there.

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Seagoon: Another thing: I can't go on wearing nappies any longer!

Crun: Long nappies are a must with you.

Bannister: Oh!

Seagoon: It's embarrassing, I tell you! Look, look what happened to me in the poltroons last night!

Crun: You won a spot prize?

Seagoon: Yes, but what a spot to pick!

Bannister: Oh!

Crun: Let's go in and I'll show you how to bend mangoes. Oh, on with leather, Min *[fades]*.

Bannister: *[mumbles]*

Seagoon: They've gone in, folks *[laughs]*. Now's my chance to escape! I'll knot me nappies and slide down the pram! Whoop! No! That would leave me starkers! And there's frost about!

FX: *[piano music]*

Bloodnok: *[singing]* "I travel the road, I travel the road, I travel the road, in a military way." *[bang]* Oh, oh! "I travel the road, I travel the road (he travels the road) I travel the road, in a military way" *[speeds up]* "All day long you'll see me, down the old road, and when you see me, I am on the road, away!" *[etc]*

Seagoon: What luck! Here comes a man pushing himself along on a piano! I must say, he's a funny shape.

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Bloodnok: Scroll me progs and sorts me plue! What's this? Where's me regimental tape measure? Oh! Three foot by three? Either it's a tall child or a short man.

Seagoon: I'm the latter.

Bloodnok: Oh! We must be related, I'm a former latter, you know. I retired, the strain became too much for me, oh.

Seagoon: Then those lumps on your head are not fakes.

Bloodnok: What a practiced eye you have.

Seagoon: It's been practicing all day. Listen!

Bloodnok: Really?

Seagoon's Eye: *[sings]* do rey me fa so la ti dooooh!

Bloodnok: Oh, yes![43]

But hang it did, on its serious satirical foundations: like Socratic pre-arranged dialogue, the dialogue here is meant to persuade, a disguised monologue aimed at exposing the British to their own cultural idiosyncrasies and inadequacies. It is the satirist as cultural critic. And since to convince the audience of the point of the satire, the satirist has to carefully ply his or her trade with special rhetorical devices, for the Goons, in this new radio-based satire, these were sound, narrative genre-parody and characterization.

43

From *The Childe Harold Reward*, fifth series, broadcast in 1956. Script by Spike Milligan, Produced by John Browell, Announced by Wallace Greenslade, Orchestra conducted by Max Geldray.

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Rhetorical Devices in Milligan's Satire

Since the art of satire is the art of rhetoric, all satire uses rhetorical devices to persuade and convince. In his famous and excellent deconstruction of satire (still the staple study), Gilbert Highet describes the devices that are used in this act of persuasion, and which allows one to see when they are face-to-face with the genre:

> Any author who often and powerfully uses a number of the typical weapons of satire–irony, paradox, antithesis, parody, colloquialism, anticlimax, topicality, obscenity, violence, vividness, exaggeration–is likely to be writing satire.[44]

These the *Goon Show* contained in spades. But, because his medium was radio, Milligan's chief satirical rhetorical devices were sound, parodying the structure of other genres, along with character association and recognition.

As can be seen from the two previous script examples above, Milligan discovered that the best rhetorical device for his new surreal satire was a wide variety and diametric juxtaposition of sound effects, and he pushed the show's producers and sound effects team to the extreme, demanding more and more unusual sounds to lampoon modern British life. Sound became the *key* trademark of the show, including the actors' mimicking of regional British accents. The high number of effects can be sen in the highlighted **F/X** bits in previous examples. Further examples include a Wurlitzer organ crossing the Sahara, changing key each time it changes gear in *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, and, the Sound Effects (**FX**) instruction when one character was "offered" a cocktail:

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[44] Gilbert Highet, *The Anatomy of Satire*, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1962, 18.

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> Make the effects of eight jet planes. A police siren, the victim of a maniacal strangler, the San Francisco earthquake and the Hydrogen bomb. It dies away in a strangled sob and hiss. Moriarity takes a sip and the verdict on the cocktail follows–"Quite nice, that."[45]

It almost always ended with the Hydrogen bomb, because, remember, satire *destroys* all in its wake.

Spike was very exact about the final soundscape of each script produced, experimenting with different noises and musical arrangements until he got what he wanted, especially as the audience expectations became higher as the series went on.[46] Milligan acknowledged this was the secret ingredient to the satire of the Goon Show, saying, "We made it essential to radio, where the pictures are better because they happen on the other side of your eyes."[47] One can feel the Goons reveling in their power to create outlandish images in the hearer's mind. It is especially poignant in that very often these sonic collages would carry themselves out to the extreme, *reductio ad absurdum*–from charging rhinos to atomic explosions–the loudest possible noise imaginable, for Milligan's absurd satiric point was that noise was the *ultimate* bane of modernism; he

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From *Ye Bandit of Sherwood Forest*. Script: Spike Milligan and Eric Sykes. Originally broadcast December 28, 1954, Producer: Peter Eton, Band Leader Ray Ellington and Max Geldray.

46 Milligan ended the series partly because he had exhausted the BBC sound library.

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Not only a surrealist notion, but also a romantic one–like the fragment, imagination is the highest of all human faculties, for what cannot be seen *must* be imagined. And, in fact, an attempt to convert the series' scripts onto television in the 1960s as The Telegoons did not prove satisfactory.

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literally was an ardent campaigner against unnecessary noise the rest of his life.[48]

As Secombe recalled, Spike's one major influence, sound-wise, was Canadian novelist Stephen Leacock:

> "We weren't like any other comedy act. Not even the Marx Brothers or W.C. Fields or the Ritz brothers. We liked Lear and Beachcomber. But mostly, at the time, we admired a Canadian humorist called Stephen Leacock--he was a very aural writer."[49]

As a novelist, Leacock would seek to create mental pictures in the minds of his readers through sound effects.[50] Spike adapted Leacock's technique in the extreme for the

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Interestingly, he was a strident campaigner on *all* environmentally-related matters, worrying about the effects of modernism on the earth, from over-population to the destruction of the rain forest.

49 Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 54.

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It is this *sympathy* for man that made Leacock's humor so appealing to Milligan. Though Milligan used the carnivore style of satire, his final love and telos was the human soul. Leacock pre-figured Milligan, and acted as an antenna for early 20th-century social anxieties, revealing the absurdities of man's relationship with advancing technology and mushrooming institutions. It is with these insights that Leacock was soon recognized as the world's best known English-speaking humorist between 1915 and 1925. He always appealed to the largest audience, and was an inclusive instead of exclusive writer. Although his humor was formulaic (this permitting a large readership), he mocked formula in most of his stories by often parodying popular genres.

Leacock's output of humorous works was extraordinary. He produced more than 25 books of humor; some of them include *Literary Lapses* (1910), *Nonsense Novels* (1911), *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), *Behind the Beyond, and Other Contributions to Human Knowledge* (1913), *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914), *Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy* (1915), *Further Foolishness: Sketches and Satires on the Follies of the Day* (1916), *Frenzied Fiction* (1918), *The Hohenzollerns in America: with the Bolsheviks in Berlin,* and *Other Impossibilities* (1919), *Winsome Winnie and Other New Nonsense Novels* (1920), and *Last Leaves* (1945).

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Goons, using, for example, the sound of a jet engine for someone simply going from A to B (it was classic mock epic, mock heroic). *That* was very new to radio. These sound effects also extended to the musical interludes, played by Max Geldray and Ray Ellington, as transitions and filler. The show would not have been the same without these two jazz experts, for their music broadened, complimented, and even helped create, crucial satirical set pieces.

Another technique was the parodying of other genres for the structure of the shows. Milligan used what is known as "inverted travelogues," like in Voltaire (*Candide*), Swift (*Gulliver*), or Byron (*Don Juan*). The Goons adapted this stereotyped adventure story each week, sending their inept heroes to far-off lands and times–ancient Egypt, Rome, 1920s Europe, the Far East, even early 20th-century Manhattan. In such classic satires, the writer disguised himself as a visitor from far away, but in reality was observing and describing his *own* country (thus, the "inversion") in his own time, exposing its customs and mores, character flaws, faults and idiosyncrasies through outright disgust, social satire or gentle mocking. In these, the hero could be a passive observer or some sort of knight-errant, interrupting and helping to resolve some social or political quandary. For the Goons, this role was given to Secombe's Neddie Seagoon. The Goon Show followed this pattern, while adding some dastardly villain (e.g., the Phantom Head Shaver) who threatened truth, justice, and the *British* way of life.[51] These

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51 The Goons, interestingly, were satirizing the British staples the English studios turned to (in fact, their *need* to have turned to) to reassert their national identity just after the war.

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satiric mock-heroic fantasies allowed Milligan to reflect and critique the new postwar British landscape week in and week out.

Included in this stock-structure design was a specialized format created for the show and used infallibly each week. Each show would open with the Announcer Wallace Greenslade pronouncing in a very deep, earnest voice, "This is the BBC." This would immediately be followed by a sound effect–for instance, a cash register ringing–underscoring their attitude toward the BBC's pretentiousness. Next, Secombe would announce "The Highly Esteemed Goon Show!," followed by a quick musical intro, always different, always humorously absurd (like a short blast of the 1812 Overture for 20 seconds). Then, Greenslade and the Goons' would explain, Brecht-like, the complete plot of *that* night's show, always parodying a classic story, (usually with a mystery to keep listeners waiting for the very type of resolution that satire disavows and, hence, denies), which would proceed to spin wildly out of control. This same structure every week gave the listeners the comfort of knowing who was who and what was what, allowing all to be in on the joke.[52]

The staple story's resultant collapse, would resort, normally, to extremely silly behavior–like knocking people's teeth out, surreptitiously shaving their heads, hitting them with batter puddings, or stealing massive Wurlizter organs to set a new land speed record at Daytona Beach. But, to get in the satirical jibes, speed was crucial–both to keeping people laughing and giddily unaware of the satire's brutality. In the most intense

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52

This basic format was the fore-runner to future television satirical shows, from the 60s and 70s variety shows to *Saturday Night Live* in the States.

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satire there is little room to move, and the satirist has to work fast (like Swift's *Modest Proposal*, say). This is the chief reason for the frantic madness (and, because of it, as a result, Milligan pioneered the joke without a punchline); the gradual approach would never do. An example of how public satire of politics and current events of the early fifties would slip in again and again can be seen from the program *The Phantom Head Shaver* from 1954:

> Eccles is guarding an army station in the Midlands, when Neddy Seagoon, acting as a solicitor for the defense in the Head-Shaver case, comes up to him:
>
> Eccles: Halt! Who goes there?!?
>
> Seagoon: Have no fear, I'm Queen's Council Neddie Seagoon, in the Dirt case.
>
> Eccles: Oh.
>
> Seagoon: Let me through! I have on me several documents of identification, including a letter of personal trust from the commander of the British Army; a memo of recommendation from Mr. Anthony Eden, the Foreign Secretary; a special pass signed by Mr. Clement Atlee, leader of the Opposition; and last, but not least, a permit to go where and when I please, signed by the Right Honorable Prime Minister himself, Sir Winston Spenser Churchill!
>
> Eccles: Friend or *foe*?!

Like getting injections from the dentist to numb the pain, after two or three injections, by

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working fast, the satirist can now start drilling as hard as he likes, for the satirist has get us to *accept* the premise of normal English life as socially, and speedily, absurd.

Along with the rapid pace, also essential, was the turn towards the solidly recognizable 3-part format, as producer Peter Eton, strongly supporting the Goons' silliness and satiric commentaries, knew that true high satire requires stern discipline:[53]

> "Main Wilson (head of production at the BBC) and Eton were hard men to make laugh. Eton made the character of the program change to a strict format. It can be heard in the earliest surviving recordings from his time on the Show. Peter Eton was a disciplinarian. He made it work together. Before Peter Eton, the show was just a series of sketches which had no chronological sequence, we all spoke so quickly it was a gabble."[54]

Pope was especially adamant about the care and attention needed for high satire, which is why he set the standard in manipulation of the heroic couplet that later poets sought to emulate but could never match. He and the Goons' recognized that discipline in satire is essential because the genre is so fragile–if not "perfectly express'd" the satire can backfire on the satirist, making him the fool in the public's eye.

But, the most recognizable rhetorical technique was making people completely familiar with the characters, just how and where they would appear each week in each story, and how they facilitated the satire (special fun for the audiences was always

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Eton was so tough on the narrative structure and keeping to strict melodramas he referred to the Goons as "bums" for their inability to discipline themselves.

54 *Ibid.* BBC Documentary cd, section 3.

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identifying who was playing who among the three voices of Sellers, Secombe, and Milligan). And so came a Dramatis Personae of Goons regulars: Eccles, the "original Goon" and all-purpose kindly idiot; Neddy Seagoon, "true blue British idiot and hero always;" Bluebottle, Seagoon's cowardly sidekick; Miss Minnie Barrister ("Spinster of the Parish") and her high-pitched mate, Mr. Crun; Mr. Grytpype-Thynne (the villain) and his sidekick, the Frenchman Moriarty; and Major Denis Blodknock, "military idiot, coward, and bar." These characters were regional British staples, and Milligan and the Goons used them to mask, and forward, their satire of postwar British cultural life.

The Goons' Characters Supinely Reign

The very fey Bluebottle, played by Sellers, appeared in each episode mainly for one reason--to get the dreaded "deading," a sort of spanking of the effeminate Englishman (with his barely closeted queenish quirks), so often found in the English literature of Waugh and Forster. Bluebottle was the one character so self-absorbed he always not only read his lines but read aloud his Stage Directions, too, self-reflexively.[55] As example,

> Stage Directions (read aloud by Bluebottle): Enter Bluebottle, pauses for audience applause, as usual, not as saucy. (Laughs) Strikes defiant Bus Driver outside garage pose, but trousers fall down and ruin effect.

55

Also very self-reflexive was how often the actors themselves mentioned their own names, including announcing the composers and band-leaders Max Geldray and Ray Ellington, who'd provide the interludes, along with *always* noting Announcer Wallace Greenslade.

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Bluebottle (pulls up trousers, tucks in shirt): "Uhh... my hands are cold."[56]

Often appearing alongside Eccles in memorable conversational exchanges, (for example, the classic, "What's the time Eccles?"), Bluebottle's favors can easily be bought by Seagoon, amongst others, by buying him sweets which he claims will, "increase my influence in the playground."[57] Another example from 1953:

And later, Seagoon enters quickly.

Bluebottle: Ahh!! I'm unarmed, you wouldn't hurt a nursing mother would you!?

Seagoon: Bluebottle! Go in and get him!

Bluebottle: I don't like this game, let's play another game. Let's play the husbands of Rita Hayworth.

Seagoon: Bluebottle, don't tell me you're a coward??

Bluebottle: Okay, I won't, but you're bound to hear about it sometime!

Seagoon: Bluebottle!

56

Bluebottle always breaks the story and narrates his own actions. Another example in an earlier show: "Hurriedly wraps up Captain in brown paper parcel labeled 'Explosives' and stuffs him through headquarter letter box. Jumps on to passing dustcart and exits left to buy bowler before price goes up. Thinks–"that wasn't a very big part for Bluebottle." Bluebottle's best catchphrases were: Niddle-naddle-noo! I don't wish to *know* that!

57

In 2002 the British network Channel Four aired a satiric "mockumentary" entitled *Paedogeddon*, which was intended to mock and satirize the fascination of modern journalism with child molesters and pedophiles. The TV network received an enormous number of complaints from members of the public, who were outraged that the show would mock a subject considered by many to be too "serious" to be the subject of humor. And yet, the Goons got away with this in Bluebottle because of the rapid-fire satire.

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Bluebottle: Okay, I'll go in... for Eng-*gland*!

In and out the door he goes. FX: Door slams! Bluebottle, after he gets shaved, screams: Oh, you rotten swine, I've been balded! There goes my Tony Curtis-type haircut!!

Bluebottle was ridiculed, but in an odd way also gave voice to English effeminacy, making homosexuality more open by its portrait on the show every week, making it thus, in the new England, less of a crime and more of a variation on traditional English mannerisms.[58]

Voiced by Peter Sellers, often heard approaching by the characteristic inarticulate expression of frustration, "Mnk-mnk-mnk!," Henry Crun usually takes the part of Seagoon's uncle, employer or shopkeeper amongst other things. Often he appears along side Minnie Bannister (played by Milligan), and in many shows they appear to be in a relationship with each other ("You sinful woman, Min!"). They were the original aged married English "pensioners" arguing with each other over absolutely nothing.[59]

Grytpype-Thynne (also Sellers) was a shady character who set up Neddie Seagoon in order to profit from him in some way. He often hatched the most diabolical plans to

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58

It's actually amazing the thinly-veiled gay references the Goons got away with with Bluebottle, from homo-erotic suggestions of his own pedophilia to Seagoon's affection for him, and Bluebottle's own returned admiration. Though the Wolfenden Report was published in 1957, it wouldn't be until the late 60s that homosexuality would be decriminalized in British society with the Sexual Offenses Act of 1967.

59

Crun also appears as an inventor in several episodes, providing Seagoon with the resources for many of his insane expeditions. These have included underwater gas stoves and supplier of clues in order to solve the mystery of *The Dreaded-Batter-Pudding-Hurler* (1954).

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involve Neddie which almost always lead to Seagoon's downfall. Often in cahoots with Moriarty, Grytpype also appeared in a position of some authority from which he had an influence on Seagoon (Voiced by Milligan, Comte-Toulouse Moriarty appears in the Goon Shows mainly as Grytpype-Thynne's sidekick.[60] He often works with him to bring about Seagoon's downfall to his and Grytpype's advantage).[61] Should his plans come to fruition, Grytpyp-Thynne often left Moriarty out in the cold. (He also often used Eccles and Bluebottle as scapegoats for his plans).[62]

In high satire, the most specific character the satirist uses is the "panurge." Coming from Rabelais, he represents one of the essential elements in satire: personifying

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60 The only non-English character. He's pretentiously, yet devilishly, French.

61

Moriarty's Background (taken from The Goon Show Scripts): (French scrag and lackey to Grytpype-Thynne) Born 1920 Paris. Educated - Sorbonne and St. Cyr Military Academy. Captained French Moron Racing Car Team at Brooklands 1927 - became the Latin darling of the Motoring Set, lionised by London, seen at all smart places - The Cafe Royal - the Ritz - danced the Tango all night long with Lady Astor. Wall Street crash - family fortune decimated. Started work as a gigolo at New Cron Palais de Danse, was befriended by Hercules Grytpype-Thynne, who offered to 'manage' his career. Under Grytpype's careful 'management' he is now bald, daft, deaf and worthless.

62

Grytpype-Thynne's Background: A plausible public school villain and cad; Son of Lord "Sticky" Thynne and Miss Vera Colin, a waitress at Paddington Station. Educated at Eton "Mixed" Grammar School, Penge; was manager for the rugby team, 15th man at cricket, subject of a police investigation on homosexuality. Eventually left school at 20--did two years at Oxford, subject of a police investigation on homosexuality with Masai goat herd. on homosexuality. Joined Household Cavalry; served throughout the war at Knightsbridge barracks; on release became a life member of Harrow Labour exchange. Joined the Foreign Office; roving Ambassador to the Outer Hebrides. (Some of his most fiendish plans have included sending Neddie to Africa in order to catch the International Christmas Pudding, boxing up snow for Seagoon to sell abroad in parts of the world which lack snow and using him to convince parliament that the "Lurgi" - a new disease has infected Britain in order to sell vast quantities of brass band instruments when Seagoon reveals that all the immune to the disease play in a brass band).

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satirical scorn for the small and the mean, the prejudiced and conventional:

> To mock and expose the gullibility of mankind is one of the chief functions of the panurge, the clever, unprincipled character who is the friend and associate of Prince Pantegruel. They make a strange couple, the good prince and the bad courtier: they do not closely correspond with the other master-servant pairs who are notable in satire: Dionysus and Xanthias, Don Quixote and Sancho, Don Juan and Leparello... Pantagruel takes Panurge into his service, and spends much time talking with him. Panurge can in no sense be called an advisor or a minister of his Prince... and it is impossible to excise Panurge from Rabelais' wonderful story. He is the crook who plays cruel jokes on pretty girls and well-dressed men, can out-gesture a symbolist, out-jargon a psychologist, out-language a semanticist–he personifies the mischievous, destructive force of satire, evil in itself, and only potentially good when attached to a good prince or good principle.[63]

This is Grytpype-Thynne's role. In Rabelais, the exploits of the Panurge, also, are almost always shocking as their heroes are beaten, soused in filth, threatened with instant execution, while in equally outrageous ways, the satiric villain often abuses and humiliates the rest of mankind right back: he steals the bells of Notre Dame, urinates over the royal palace, befools priests, nobles and monarchs, *enjoying* the absurd sufferings of others. In the Goons, he shaves heads, mummifies Egyptian pianos and uses

[63] Highet, *Ibid.*, 210-11.

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them as weapons, mocks ex-Indian Army men as well as diplomats and force Welsh people to prove they are from Peru. As example:

> Late one night in 1927, young archaeologist Neddie Seagoon is working in the Oriental Exhibits Room at the Victoria and the Albert Museum trying to decipher a parcel of ancient Mongolian clay tablets. They hold the key to the location of the tomb of Tartar Emporer Ghengis Khan with its untold treasures. Two unexpected visitors in the shape of Grytpype-Thynne and Moriarty arrive. Seagoon is struck on the head by a mummified Egyptian piano and the two villains vanish with an incredibly rare inscribed tablet. (Grytpypye: "Dear listeners, the sound you hear is Neddie Seagoon hamming it for all he's worth." Seagoon: "I just like to give the Seagoon fans their money's worth."). Seagoon summons the police with the aid of Eccles the trail leads to the Singapore/China frontier. As a safety precaution, Dr. Fred Fu-Manchu has tattooed the entire inscription from the missing clay tablet on the back of Grytpype-Thynne's false teeth![64]

Milligan borrowed straight from Rabelais' panurge for his villainous satirical characters.

And the Goons' hero was voiced by Harry Secombe, Neddie Seagoon was the most important Goons' character for he always solved, or better yet, failed to solve the mystery (always playing a cop, a detective, a defending Q.C., or adventurer

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64 From *The Lost Emperor*. Originally broadcast October 4, 1955. Script: Spike Mulligan. Producer: Peter Eton.

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extraordinaire). The hero/idiot/charlie of the shows, Neddie was a righteous (although rather large) young man who was fiercely loyal to Britain--a true patriot. Neddie had one downfall--money. Many of Grytpype's schemes involved him in the promise of Seagoon becoming fabulously wealthy; all too often, however, he signed his life away before realizing the consequences. Often heard bursting into, "They'll always be an England..." at a moment's notice, he always announced his Britishness, and because of it, he'd claim he "cannot be bribed;" but, of course, he always took the money anyway.[65]

In the end though outside the heroes and villains category, the most recognized and celebrated Goon of all was Milligan's famed idiot NON-savant, Eccles. Eccles was the original Goon, and the character most identified with him. As Milligan simply put it, "Eccles could not be defeated by logic." He was often heard (especially in the later episodes) in long, often completely pointless conversations with Bluebottle which did little to push the plot forward but commentated on postwar British life by ridiculing the lack of change made by Labour's frustrated efforts. These often develop into complex, impossibly illogical situations such as, again, the famous, "What's the time, Eccles?" sequence in *The Mysterious Punch-up-the-Conker*.[66] Eccles especially was the key

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65

Described mainly by Grytpype as "you silly twisted boy," Neddie is often the cause of Bluebottle's deading, sending him into places where Neddie is afraid to go. Although incredibly gullible, Seagoon is a likeable character who often loses his wallet, personal possessions and even clothes to Major Bloodnok. He is always incredibly bad at cracking jokes and is often to be heard making a sharp intake of breath and coughing embarrassedly afterwards.

66

Eccles' favorite response to a question is: "What what what what what what?" For early 1950s England, he was *the* impersonator of blue-blooded aristocracy, the entire Royal Air Force and English idiocy, in general. (When in conversation with the other

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character used by Milligan also to ridicule the average British army troop, a statement on England's ineffectual role on the world stage.

Eccles and Seagoon were to the Goons' satiric narrative what Shadwell was to Dryden's MacFlecknoe. It takes a moment to realize that what seems to be praise is actually denigration of the deadliest kind:

> Shadwell alone my perfect image bares,
>
> Mature in dullnes from his tender years;
>
> Shadwell alone of all my sons is he,
>
> Who stands confirm'd in full stupidity.[67]

As Milligan maintains the mock heroic of Seagoon and Eccles, he makes it difficult for us to realize immediately just what is being implied, and yet, when we realize the irony, the effect is magnified; their maturity, like Shadwell's, is in *dullness*. As Dryden continues:

> Besides, his goodly Fabrick fills the eye
>
> And seems design'd for thoughtless majesty:
>
> Thoughtless as Monarch Oaks that shake the plain,
>
> And, spread in solemn state, supinely reign.[68]

So, borrowing from Dryden's technique, Seacome's Seagoon was constantly mocked

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characters, it appears that he knows Bloodnok, who often appears as his old commanding officer from World War II. Crun and Bannister often appear as his employers, or his uncle and aunt, while Grytpype-Thynne and Moriarty often try to dispose of him as quickly as possible). Also see footnote #58.

[67] Dryden, *MacFlecknoe*, ll., 15 ff.

[68] Dryden, *Ibid*., ll., 25 ff.

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each week, most notably his girth (an especially sore point in a supposedly "rationing" postwar Britain), like Shadwell's "goodly fabrick." And there is no denying Eccles "thoughtless majesty." These were Milligan's most memorable characters, who supinely reigned on his strictly structured format.

> Unrelieved invective soon grows monotonous. It becomes much more amusing–and this is true of satire in general–when the satirist discovers some form or mould which will give his satire an effective shape. No one has yet written a History of Satirical Forms, but it would be something well worth having.[69]

By utilizing and getting the audience to recognize the staple structure and staple characters each week, Milligan created a disguised format to get his satire across.

As Social/Cultural Criticism and the New Popular Culture

Like the modern artistic movements which Milligan borrowed from and used for his new brand of British satire, the *Goon Show* furiously worked to keep pace with this world 'shrinkage' David Harvey has described as "The Space-Time Compression," as a mirror image of what *exactly* was going on. But, it was the parallel movements in the world of critical analysis which truly foreshadowed the world we are confronted with today, and in immediate postwar England it was critical satire which popular culture embraced. Spike's anarchic brand of satire reflected this shrinking, sped-up and compressed view of the new late-modern, Cold War world. In fact, each script always

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[69] James Sutherland, *English Satire*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1956, 39.

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had its own dig at Cold War fears and madness (including satirizing the absurd levels of secret police and espionage worries), and Milligan often told a story of Bentine that emphasized his position:

> "He once told me face-to-face in Birmingham, I asked him, as he was a mathematician, could he give me the formula for the atom bomb? He took out a lipstick and covered the mirror in the dressing room with Pythagoras and he finished off at the bottom right-hand side, "there, that is the formula for the atom bomb." Unfortunately Professor Penny happened to be in the audience that night and he was a friend of mine. He came into the dressing room and looked at the mirror. I asked him what it was and he said, "that's a load of bollocks." I told Michael this, and he said, "of course it is, you don't think I'd give away the secret of the atom bomb in a dressing room, do you?"[70]

He was mocking both the seriousness of the new age, but also its absurd consequences.[71]

In an article called "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic," in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, Stephanie Koziski noted:

> The best comics are sensitive cultural critics. They pattern their comic material close to everyday reality, making obvious behavioral patterns, explicit and tacit operating knowledge and other insights about society's

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[70] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 49.

[71] This craziness would foreshadow one of the great 60s Cold War satires, *Dr. Strangelove*, also starring Sellers.

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> objects of conscious reflection. Contrasting a familiar society with an alien one, anthropologists' observations may evoke in their (scholarly) audiences a new perception by incongruity, as something of the pan-humanity of man is glimpsed through their explanations of culture. But, many stand-up comedians jar their audience's sensibilities by making individuals experience a shock of recognition. This occurs as deeply-held popular belief about themselves–even the hidden underpinnings of their culture–are brought to an audience's level of conscious awareness–elevating them to a new cultural focus.[72]

Bringing "a level of conscious awareness to audiences from the hidden underpinnings of their culture" was *exactly* Milligan's great genius and importance to redefining the new postwar, early 1950s English national identity.

National identity, however, is by no means a fixed phenomenon. It is constantly shifting, constantly in process of becoming. The shared, collective identity which is implied always masks a whole range of internal differences and potential and actual antagonisms. But by the late 1940s, Britain, its mores and self-concept were changing, and the Goons were there, responding as concretely as the Ealing satirists to the new society, and helping to reinvent it by giving it a satirical hook to hang its new identity on. "We weren't trying to undermine the BBC," Peter Eton summed, "we were trying to

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72

Stephanie Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic," *The Journal of Popular Culture,* Fall, 1984, 57.

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undermine the old order in Britain."[73] Or, in script form, from the Goons:

Woman: Blueyes of Grisham, I have a question.

Milligan: *Darling*!

Woman: No, I have a serious question.

Milligan: Continue.

Woman: I'm a middle-aged woman.

Milligan: Well, give it up–there's no future in it!

By critiquing the fearful climate of change in England, along with its desire *to* move on, get where they were going as a new island-nation without empire, and be who they were to become, the Goons' militant topical humor always came round to score trenchant points against the status quo and current British events:

> "We would go to the cinemas and often see something completely mad. The news shows would run for about an hour, and there was always one we sat through many times. It included movietone news items about life in dying parts of the British empire."[74]

Consistently, they'd inject quick quips on the current state of British social and political life:

Announcer Wallace Greenslade: The Head Shaver had frightened the public so badly, only two people came to Brighton that summer.

Unknown voice (spoken by Peter Sellers): C'mon Clem, What've *we* got

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[73] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 89.

[74] Norma Farnes, *Ibid.*, 97.

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to lose?

Audience laughs.[75]

The danger of course, as always, was that nothing dates like topical humor. The Goons overcame such dangers with their energy and disciplined anarchy.

Writing about the Kinsey Report's effect on American culture in the 50s, Lionel Trilling commented,

> By virtue of its intrinsic nature and also because of its dramatic reception "The Kinsey Report" is an event of great importance in our culture. It is an event which is significant in two separate ways, as symptom and as therapy. The therapy lies in the large permissive effect Report is likely to have, the long way it goes toward establishing the community of sexuality. The symptomatic significance lies in the fact the report was felt to be needed at all, that the community of sexuality requires now to be established in explicit quantitative terms. Nothing shows more clearly the extent to which modern society had atomized itself than the isolation in sexual ignorance which exists in us.[76]

This is exactly what Milligan's Goons, using less scientific means, were also

75

When first heard, it is impossible to understand just why the audience laughs at this quip, which comes out of nowhere. It took me a number of listens to figure out that Sellers was doing Winston Churchill, and Clem was Clement Atlee, two already very bald politicians then in-the-news.

76

Lionel Trilling, "The Kinsey Report," from *The Moral Obligation to Being Intelligent*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, 120.

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accomplishing across the ocean.

By the end of World War II, Waugh and Orwell were past their satires, and wrote little of significance after war's end.[77] Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* didn't appear until late 1954, almost a full 4 years after the Goons hit the airwaves, and 6 years after the Ealing films appeared on the scene.[78] In literary circles, it was an important moment for the working class poetry of the Movement, and five years later, the realist drama of the Angry Young Men, but in early 1950s English popular culture, it was a watershed moment for British *satire*, one that would not have existed without Ealing, and certainly not without Milligan, no matter what Martin Amis might claim.[79] The times had changed, and in immediate postwar and early 1950s Britain, it is little wonder that an inventive knave was found to make his profit out of the public credulity, providing the satire that helped redefined who they were, and who they were going to be, in an empireless, Welfare State, re-vamped future.

77

Waugh wrote a satire of the number of Brits in Hollywood in the 40s–*The Loved One* (1948).

78

However, it is fair to note that Amis had begum write his satire by 1949. Radio is simply more immediate than book publishing; so, the satire was definitely in the postwar air.

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Martin Amis has said his dad was the leading satirist of his day. He wasn't. See his biography of his dad.

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Postscript:

Cultural revolutions come quickly, and often it's hard to pin down exactly what happened and who the trailblazers were. Many complain later of how their innovations were stolen by later, bigger personalities and watered down for mass consumption. Every so often, however, they have their legitimate gripes. Milligan's genius was his intellectual incisiveness cobbled with an acute neurosis where the satire and mockery was free-floating as the Atlee and Eden years' public relations mania gave way to the swinging London and post-MacMillan era's arcid cynicism. What usually bugs comedy veterans is that they once had a few good years as the beloved idols of hipsters and media types, and then they went largely unremembered, with no one to feed their adulation addiction.[80] It is a poignant point in exposing the ways groundbreaking artists are eventually usurped by popular culture, and how satire *especially*, obliterates its best.

Even though he was a gifted mimic and performer, after the Goons ended in 1960 (a choice more his than anybody's), Milligan felt just an unemployed scriptwriter, and, in fact, the BBC wanted little to do with him (even as a performer), thinking him too loose a canon for such a "respectful" institution.[81] This is not to say he became irrelevant, or that he failed to produce. After the final Goons series, Milligan turned to writing plays (*Oblomov, The Bed-sitting Room*), children's literature (*The Bald Twit Lion*), poetry,

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80

Most aging movie stars are like retired ballplayers, still charismatic and glowing; while most aging comics are like retired boxers, frail and dead-eyed. Pope, for example, (mostly because of his Roman Catholicism) was rejected by the scholars of his day. He wrote the last book of *The Dunciad* as a reaction to the rejection of the Oxford honors that were only offered him far too late in his life to be acceptable to him.

81 And especially without Sellers and Secombe to protect him.

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novels (*Puckoon*), motion picture scripts (*The Postman's Knock* and *The Magnificent Seven Deadly Sins*), and, of course as always, humor. He also went on to write and star in the TV sketch series *Q*, and publish lots of other written material including his interpretation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, as well as his famous best-selling war memoirs which began in 1971 with *Hitler, My Part in his Downfall.* Several characters from *The Goon Show* also appeared in a film he made with Peter Sellers called *The Muckinese Battlehorn,* and the *Running, Jumping, Standing Still Film.*[82] Spike Milligan produced a mammoth body of work, from the 50-odd books to the 200-plus *Goon Show* episodes. All this after being in the army and attempting a musical career. "Not bad for someone who started at 33 years old," he acknowledged. He had definitely caught up, but the Goon Show was the pinnacle of his career and contribution to postwar British culture.[83]

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On film, ironically, the Goons didn't transfer as sound was so important to let the viewer create her own images in the mind. But one was–hardly had the last Goon Show been transmitted, however, than the quintessential Goon 'short,' *The Running, Jumping, Standing Still Film* was released in 1960. Only eleven minutes long, each short gag sequence was filmed whenever they could afford to buy more film (it was filmed on Peter's own 16mm pia-bolex camera). The producer of Spike's new TV show, *A Show Called Fred*, Richard Lester, was the producer and editor. In fact, it was just a chance to fool around and was not meant to be theatrically released, but it created a buzz in the British entertainment industry and was then distributed to cinemas bumped up to 35mm. It was nominated for an Academy Award and widely praised: John Lennon called it "a rare and beautiful film–a masterpiece."

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One year, at the British Comedy Awards, host Jonathan Ross was going along on autopilot spouting cliches as he presented Milligan with a lifetime achievement gong and read out a gushing letter from Prince Charles. Milligan, annoyed at the situation, brought the house down by saying on live TV; "That grovelling little bastard!" He later sent Charles an apology, as the two were old friends. He also cheerfully asked if he'd blown his chances of a knighthood. Spike *was* eventually knighted in the 2000/2001 New Year Honors list, and although technically his foreign citizenship forbade him from using the title, everyone called him Sir Spike Milligan regardless. At the ceremony, Prince Charles

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He never reached such heights or level of influence again.

But it would be enough to influence generations. The Goons were the biggest factor in the evolution of the popular culture satires of the sixties and seventies. John Cleese and the other Pythons grew up listening to them. Dudley Moore, Peter Cook, and others of *Beyond the Fringe* have paid him homage. John Lennon's wordplay was often called "Joycean," when it really was "Miliganesque," and Lennon himself pointed to the influence of Milligan's "coup d'etat of the mind."[84] In America, the members of the Fireside Theatre, Second City, and other later comedy groups such as the Upright Citizen's Brigade all have at one time or another credited Milligan and the Goons. Comedian Stephen Fry paid tribute to his talent by stating on the BBC on the day Milligan died, "Spike was entirely his own mad Irish self. He came out of nowhere. If there is a definition of genius, it is that whatever province you are in, you leave it different. He left comedy completely different and it was never the same after him." But it wasn't just *comedy*, it was satire of the highest order, coalescing a Britain in a serious postwar identity crisis.

As a final note, as of this writing, a film is being made called *The Life and Death*

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tried to convince him to take the oath of loyalty and become a British subject again, pointing out even he had to do it as Prince of Wales. Spike quipped that it was different for Charles because he had to pledge allegiance to his mum as she provides him bed and board. He also informed the Prince that there were no dry cleaners in Peru.

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Moreover, the Goons were produced by George Martin, who would go on to greater glory as a producer of a (nameless) famous musical group heavily inspired by the Goons' style of humor and technique of attack. It was the single deciding rerason for Lennon for working with Martin their whole career.

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of Peter Sellers. The rotund comic Johnny Vegas has been signed up as Sellers' (similarly rotund) Goon Show cohort Harry Secombe. The warts-and-all bio-pic, which has already come under fire from Sellers's son, has begun filming in London. Sellers is played by Oscar-winner Geoffrey Rush, with Charlize Theron as Britt Eckland, Sophie Dahl as Sophia Loren and Ed Tudor-Pole as Spike Milligan. We'll see, not only if they get it right, but whether or not the 00s British public is ready, once again, for the Goons' absurd satire.

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CHAPTER FIVE:

"WE'VE DISCOVERED OUR VOICE!": SATIRE EXPLODES IN LATE 20th CENTURY BRITISH POPULAR CULTURE

In the United States, and other Western countries a little later, a generation traumatized by the Great Depression and World War II created a postwar culture that sought to emphasize normality and calm conformity. This would not come to Britain until the late nineteen fifties and the early nineteen sixties when it would be the "swinging capitol of the western world." As a statement of protest, immediately after the war, in the late nineteen forties and early nineteen fifties, England's artists turned to satire to voice their dissent and dissatisfaction with the continued economic and social stagnation of their home country.

Yet, since then, satires have continued out of Britain, exploding into the popular culture in the sixties with the Boulting Brothers, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, the Beatles and Monty Python, the films of expatriate Americans like Stanley Kubrick (*Lolita*, *Dr. Strangelove*), and Richard Lester (*A Hard Day's Night*, *How I Won the War*), and, later, in the 70s, and 80s with publications like *Private Eye,* the films of Bruce Robinson (*Withnail and I, How to Get Ahead in Advertising),* and the pop-oriented word smiths Mark E. Smith and Bill Hicks to mention a few. These artists all took their cue from the seeds of the highly original and revolutionary satirists and satires of the late forties and early fifties.

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One cannot document all the satiric comedy that has sprouted in England since World War II–it has easily become the dominant genre the British have concentrated on almost as a psychological crutch to face life as an island nation once again (in fact, it is quite out of control). But a quick look at some of the most poignant satirists over the last fifty years is appropriate here.

Film

The Boulting Brothers and the End of the Fifties

That the 1960s was a turbulent decade of change around the world is hardly news. And that the sixties put the English back on the map as international trend-setters is just as well known. Many of the trends of the 1960s were due to the demographic changes brought about by the baby boom generation coming of age and the dissolution of European colonial empires. But amongst their cultural product, after the golden period, were some amazing satires picking up where the 50s satirists left off.

In film in the west, the 1960s really began in 1959 with a series of outstanding films signaling a new era, including, the first French New Wave films (discussed earlier), such new groundbreaking and stylish new American films like *North by Northwest*, *Paths of Glory* (late 1958), *Some Like it Hot,* and *Ben Hur*; and in England, it was the Boulting Brothers' new satires that signaled the beginning of the new era.

John and Roy Boulting became English film producers and directors during the nineteen fifties and sixties. They were twin brothers born in Bray, England in 1913, and as producer and director, respectively they worked together whenever they could and,

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when they could not, their work is almost indistinguishable.[1] They made a mix of tight, economical dramas (*Brighton Rock*, *Seven Days to Noon,* etc.) and flabby, fuddled comedies (*Carlton-Browne of the F.O.*, etc.). But, following Ealing's model and looking to fill the gap left by Ealing's decline in the late 1950s, the brothers turned from melodrama and espionage to satire, directing such films as *Private's Progress* (1956, here the satiric target being the army), *Brothers in Law* (1957, dissing barristers and solicitors equally), and *Lucky Jim* (1957, based on Kingsley Amis's novel about postwar English academia). But in 1959, they made their greatest satire when they took on capital and labor with *I'm Alright, Jack.*[2]

I'm Alright, Jack is about a tyrannical factory shop steward named Kite (played for all his pomposity by Peter Sellers–a high flyer who, due to his own heavy hot air, never gets off the ground) who believes in his own self-importance to the point of calling his men out on strike at the smallest suggestion of any change in contractual agreements between union and management. While he mouths democratic platitudes (and simultaneously keeps, unread, copies of Marx on display on his office shelf), he knows less what they mean and more what is best for him to keep himself in a position of power.

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[1] John died in 1985 and Roy in 2001.

[2] As Guinness was Ealing's main star vehicle, the Boulting films often starred Ian Carmichael, a late 1950s actor who best embodied the young male ingénue as the agent for exposing the failure of British institutional practices. In *I'm All Right Jack*, we see him as Stanley Windrush, a young, overprotected Oxford graduate, who attempts to find a place for himself in the world of industry only to discover that his honesty clashes with the self-seeking behavior of his employers—Uncle Bertram (Dennis Price) and his unscrupulous crony, Sidney de Vere Cox (Richard Attenborough).

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He claims to have respect for the workers in Russia, but his own workers avoid work as much as they can, with his endorsement–a problem that was especially acute in Britain during the sixties and seventies (even with the often high unemployment) making this a poignant and topical subject. Roy Strong explains:

> The unions were of course deeply committed not only to full employment but also to nationalization. As the revival of Britain depended on its economy and therefore its workforce, the co-operation of the unions was regarded as crucial to any government. By the mid-1950s a new generation of trade union leaders had emerged. They took full employment for granted, and now saw their role as one of pressing for better conditions and higher wages, irrespective of the state of the economy. No government was prepared to out face them. When, in 1956, the Conservatives passed their Monopolies and Restrictive Practices Act, for example, the unions were excluded, meaning a golden opportunity was lost. If the Conservatives dared not cross the unions, Labour's inability to do so was even more constricted for the party was actually enmeshed in a system which depended on the unions for its funds via political levy. Progressively the electorate became aware of this link, and saw how it impaired the ability of any Labour government to take independent action... It was not until the 1970s when strikes soared out of control that a Conservative government determined to make a stand, but they, too,

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were defeated.[3]

This is exactly what *I'm Alright, Jack* foresaw, and so, satirized. The irony is interesting since better wages and conditions actually improve economies. But here, Windrush is a worker who questions such tactics, and Kite, even more so, conspires with management to get rid of such bad apples. He is played with total pompousness which allows the satire to flourish with his pretensions to social consciousness undercut by his uncouth appearance and pontificating malapropisms. The film attacks labor especially hard, but also exposes the corruption of capitalists and their shady manipulations of Third World markets.

As in *The Man in the White Suit*, it is the women, even more than the obstructive unions, who see the truth of the paternal industrial order, and so, his wife and daughter disobey him to the point of refusing to play their roles at home, leaving him to fend for himself, leaving him lying helplessly lying prostrate in a *Lysistrada* setting. The satire is so blatantly against Kite that the only question one asks is why Mrs. Kite ever married him in the first place. Was it because he had a secure job? Or better yet, because she at first bought into the traditional gender roles? Was he a different person as a young man? because there is little evidence to suggests he is a changed one by the end from when we first meet him. The film doesn't quite answer these questions, but it does show the women to be far more pragmatic and insightful about their position in British postwar industrial life–a clear comment on how wartime necessities changed gender roles forever, no matter how much the English expected to return to a completely patriarchal society.

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[3] Roy Strong, *The Story of Britain*, London: Pimlico, 1996, 512.

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The women are grateful for "full" employment after so many years of hardship,[4] but with it comes a whole host of new problems leading to a different kind of economic and social stagnation:

> With memories of the twenties and thirties still vivid in people's minds "full" employment remained at the top of any political agenda. Throughout the fifties and sixties unemployment never exceeded more than 3% of the workforce, allowing it to rise beyond that was considered dangerous to the country's social stability. To achieve this figure meant ignoring over-manning, restrictive practices and resistance to change. Ironically, no objections were raised to the growth of automation, as jobs were so plentiful. Such a policy, however, bore within itself the roots of its own destruction. Full employment meant bidding for workers and so wages spiraled ever upwards, in the end reaching unaffordable heights, fueling a deadly inflation and pricing British goods out of the world markets.[5]

Their daughter, Cynthia (Liz Fraser), also questions his omniscient authority that he wields at the shop. She is a very bold, curvy and sexy woman who uses her looks in a constant search for pleasure, already a very different attitude from that of her parents'

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4 "Full" employment was promised in the twenty years after World War II, no matter which party was in power. However, there was always some level (often high) of unemployment.

5 Roy Strong, *Ibid.*, 513.

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generation. She has little time for her father's bluff. Of these women, only the classic old maid aunt, Dolly (Margaret Rutherford), agrees with Stanley and his proto-Marxist, ultimately very conservative positions. She wants him to be true to his class, in fact to vote Conservative, and do whatever it takes to maintain the status quo in and out of the workplace. She and Mrs. Kite butt heads on these issues, but when she arrives at their house after Stanley is dismissed for his overt insubordination, she finds that they actually share attitudes toward work, responsibility, and duty. It is a sharp contrast to the work ethic the men have at the factory, and this is what makes the satire so subversive and progressive.

The tension between these two ethics comes to a crescendo during a television program hosted by Malcolm Muggeridge (great name! The media as 'mugger,' even if it *was* based on a real name), debate show whose subject becomes Stanley's firing, affecting a metaphoric Socratic dialogue on the state of the government's over-involvement in peoples lives. In classic satiric form, Stanley creates an anarchic mob scene by crashing the show and throwing the blackmail money into the air making the audience leap from their seats to try and grab some. It is a not so subtle symbol for late-fifties Britain's rampant materialism (quite a change from late forties rationing). Stanley is then declared mentally unstable by a court and he ends up in a nudist colony with his own father. Using many mediums, from newspapers and billboards to TV and even documentary footage, thus making it also a critique on the mass media who also take much of the satiric vitriol, I'm Alright, Jack works as a late high satire, putting the Boultings on the postwar satiric map. The final ending of the ugly and pretentious

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Stanley having to run from a horde of nude women evokes a Swiftian disgust for the body (or a Bakhtinian love of the body, depending how you "look" at it), especially the female body. In any case, the Boultings at gotten it right, and *I'm Alright, Jack* would be their highest achievement and sharpest satire.

During this period, other British studios also pumped out a series of farces that were not really satires, but bawdy and lewd comedies which exhibited a shameless male chauvinism doing even more damage to late twentieth male propriety than even Benny Hill would inflict later on (they were bawdy because it was a way to out-do television, to get people into the theatre seats, through more risque content). Actually filmed at the old Ealing studios, they were known as the *Carry On* films, films with a strict formula playing on regional English idiosyncracies or class. The series began with *Carry On, Sergeant* in 1958, about a bunch of recruits on National Service and was so popular that it created an entire industry of vulgar, dumbed-down comedies, keeping a core of regulars employed, from Barbara Windsor, Sid James, Joan Sims, Hattie Jacques, Kenneth Williams and Charles Hawtry, to Bernard Bresslaw, Kenneth Connor, Fenella Fielding, Jim Dale and Bernard Cribbins. The screenplays were almost exclusively written by Talbot Rothwell, a music-hall veteran who simply transferred what he brought to the music-hall to film with lewd jokes about sex, seaside postcard vulgarity and dreadful puns. It is not an accident that these films prospered in the mid-sixties with the same sexual revolution that was happening in the States happening in swinging London, with

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the Beatles and the Stones forcing the establishment to change with the times.[6] The series, thankfully (as it wasn't exactly the high satire of Austen or Waugh or even Greene for that matter), eventually petered out by the late seventies as its style looked ever more dated. Though, the *Carry On* films are important to mention, it was the Boultings' who were producing the most authentic satire in th elate fifties and early sixties. Marcia Landy sums this moment thus:

> In contrast to the comedies of consensus produced during the 1930s and the war years, these satiric comedies portray the world of the late 1950s as a time of apathy, stagnation, crass materialism, and intellectual bankruptcy. The films make no pretense of resurrecting a community, but rather, as the Boultings' film shows, a philosophy of "You scratch my back, I'll do the same for you, Jack," a message Lord Wilcott in *Left, Right and Centre* would endorse. The object of attack in these films is no longer a particular class but the society at large, and the media, particularly television, become the scapegoats for social environment devoid of difference, engagement, and integrity. Like the melodramas, the comedies of the late 1950s validate the changing landscape of the cinema in the appearance of new comic types, language and situations that are more boldly sexual, and representations of institutional life that leave little room

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The Profumo affair broke in 1963 and went to trial in '64. Philip Larkin said that the swinging sixties (as well as when 'sex' began) started here, between "the end of the ban on *Chatterley* and the Beatles first LP."

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for envisioning amelioration and compromise. In fact, the tendency to compromise seems to bet the major object of attack.[7]

Or the inability of the successive governments to get the unions to compromise. 1959 was the beginning of the sixties with this film–the beginning of the atmosphere of the sixties which would be announced also with a government scandal of John Profumo, adding to a satire boom greatly influenced by the artists of the late forties/early fifties.

Profumo at the start of the Sixties Revolution

At the start of the decade, the prime minister, Harold Macmillan was still basking in the glow of his 1959 near-landslide election victory with a Commons majority of over 100. The cartoonists called him "Supermac," and political writers were addicted to the adjective "unflappable." Urbane, patrician and when the occasion demanded, utterly ruthless, he seemed scarcely threatened by a Labour party wracked by left-right dissent. But Supermac ended up not being invincible at all. Rising discontent led to a series of resounding by-election defeats for the government, most sensationally at Orpington in Kent in March 1962, when a Tory majority of nearly 15,000 was turned into a majority of 7,800 for Jeremy Lubbock of the suddenly resurgent Liberal party. Macmillan, hitherto unflappable, began to flap like a wet hen. Four months after Orpington, in one of the most ruthless political bloodlettings of modern times, he abruptly sacked and replaced seven senior ministers, one-third of his entire cabinet; instantly dubbed "the night of the long knives," Supermac became Mac the Knife overnight. Conservative disarray, meanwhile,

[7] Marcia Landy, *Ibid.*, 65.

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was mirrored by Labour consolidation. Harold Wilson, seen as a pragmatic leftist, and he and his generation of Labour leaders - George Brown, Jim Callaghan, Denis Healey - were honing a newer, more populist politics which looked to the challenges of the future not the ideology of the past. Still, they could not have known that their ascent to power would be hastened by a scandal more sensational than any in modern British politics.

Today, some still get bent out of shape by sexual scandal, when ministers and other public figures are caught with their pants down, but in 1963, the very notion was deeply shocking as it was still mostly a pre-pill, pre-promiscuity age, when unmarried pregnancy was a matter of deep family shame, and back-street abortionists thrived. But when the storm broke, it was not simply driven by sex–there was a deep, dark context of mysterious treachery.[8] For months, rumors had circulated about the private life of John Dennis Profumo, secretary of state for war, educated at Harrow and Oxford (he was a quintessential high Tory who had achieved cabinet rank after serving in a number of junior posts) was jeopardizing national security.[9] The "object

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Since the early 1950s, when diplomats Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean fled to their paymasters in Moscow, the chattering classes had speculated about the existence of a "third man." The new world of the 1960s did nothing to curb the rumors; indeed, as the cold war intensified, the issue assumed ever more menacing implications. The Cold War was at its coldest, and the Soviet Union was at the zenith of its power, launching the first man into space and defying the world by supervising the construction of the Berlin Wall while America's apparent impotence, meanwhile, was underlined by the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, in 1962-4. Close to the peak of the crisis, a 38-year-old Admiralty clerk and the son of a vicar, William Vassall, was jailed for 18 years for spying for the USSR. He had been recruited by the KGB in a homosexual "honey trap." In July 1963 the government named Kim Philby, former Foreign Office colleague of Burgess and Maclean, as the "third man."

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He was married to the film star Valerie Hobson, and moved effortlessly in the highest

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of his passion" was a young woman named Christine Keeler who, unlike Profumo, had had an extremely undistinguished life.[10] It was at Lord Astor's country mansion, Cliveden, that John Profumo first met her. A brief but passionate affair ensued which, even then, might have been brushed under the carpet in the time honored English way, but Profumo made a fundamental error: he lied to the House of Commons. In March 1963, he told the chamber that there was "no impropriety whatever" in his relationship with Keeler. Ten weeks later he appeared before MPs again to say "with deep remorse" that he had misled the House, and would resign. What brought Profumo down even more than his deceit of the Commons, was the startling revelation that Keeler had also slept with Eugene Ivanov, the naval attache at the Soviet embassy. Nobody cared that he had had relations. Or even that he lied about it. But in a world of Cold War politics, straight out of *Dr. Strangelove*, it was the fearful anxiety of Soviet penetration in to the secrets of the West which captured world attention. Profumo's downfall naturally caused a huge sensation, inflated by the Establishment's crude and cruel attempts to find

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of society.

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Born in 1942, she left home at 16 after an unhappy childhood in the Thames Valley, and gravitated to London where she found work of a sort at Murray's cabaret club. There she met and befriended another showgirl, Marilyn "Mandy" Rice-Davies. Soon, both young women had drifted into the racy circle around Stephen Ward, a fashionable West End osteopath and socialite. From Ward's connections, Keeler and Rice-Davies were circulating in more exalted milieu, including Lord Astor's country mansion of Cliveden.

Now, in the new age of iconoclasm, the whispers were amplified in the media. *That Was The Week That Was* scored a telling blow with a splendid parody of the old music hall number, "She was Poor but She was Honest." The words of the new version went: "See him in the House of Commons/Making laws to put the blame/While the object of his passion/Walks the streets to hide her shame." Another sign that satire was about to explode once again.

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scapegoats for its own embarrassment. The media had a field day and English culture was changed forever, marking the true beginning of the sixties in Britain and the newer more sexually and artistically permissive atmosphere in the culture, in the streets, and in the arts; what had been brewing underground since the mid-fifties now blew in to the mainstream. The culture had lost its innocence.

And as the Baby Boom generation began to come of age satire exploded with the new voices of boomer precociousness. The next great satires in English popular culture would come from the most famous British cultural export of the twentieth century–the Beatles. Of the Beatles, what can one say that hasn't been written about already? Well, as far as satire is concerned, its best to deal exclusively with the director of two of their satiric films, Richard Lester. Lester (born in Philadelphia in 1932) was something of a child prodigy, and at 15 began studies in English literature at the University of Pennsylvania where he first developed an interest in British film, too, particularly the Ealing comedies.

As an Anglophile, after his studies, Lester moved to London and got work in advertising as a director of TV commercials. Soon he was directing on independent television, most notably a farcical variety show which he also produced, which was seen by Peter Sellers who subsequently hired Lester to help translate episodes of *The Goon Show* to television under the name *Idiot Weekly*. It was a hit, as were two follow-up shows, *A Show Called Fred* and *Son of Fred*, all written by Spike Milligan. Milligan, Sellers and Lester then made a short 35mm film to be used as a promo for a feature with the Goons that got shown before some of the Boulting comedies. It was called *The*

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Running, Jumping and Standing Still Film, and was a huge success on the English film circuit where it ran for over a year and became John Lennon's favorite film before the Beatles hit. So, when the Beatles were asked to make a feature film in 1964, Lennon immediately requested Lester as director. *A Hard Day's Night* was the result, showing an exaggerated and simplified version of The Beatles' characters, and proving to be an incredibly effective marketing tool. The rest is well-known history. The DVD of the film comes with a great documentary on the writing of the script, in which it is explained how the group and Lester set about satirizing their own popularity, especially in the absurdist style of Milligan and the Goons, and Lester made it happen, even if United Artists was wary of this approach. Obviously it was the perfect anti-dote to, and anodyne for, their fans who would've understood satire from their upbringing in the late forties and early fifties. Many of its stylistic innovations survive today as the conventions of pop promos, in particular, the multi-angle filming of a live performance and the absurd, surrealist jump-cuts (borrowed from Godard's 1959 innovations in *Breathless*) inter-cut with some completely non-related, often ridiculous, insert. Ti was a way to keep themselves amused and the narrative from ever getting too serious.

Lester went on to direct several quintessential 'swinging' films, including the sex comedy *The Knack* (1965), the second Beatles film *Help* (1965) and another more serious satire, also with Lennon, *How I Won the War* (1966).[11] His Beatles' satires are especially

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11 In the 1970s and 1980s he worked on several big budget films, amongst which *The Three Musketeers* (1973) and *Superman* II (1980) were the biggest commercial successes. In recent years, Lester has all but retired, although the re-release on DVD of *A Hard Day's Night* in 2002 saw An excellent behind-the-scenes documentary on the making of it

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important because of their direct association to popular culture through their enormous success, bringing the very provincial and esoteric English satire of the immediate postwar era, now, to an International audience, helping to fuel a new form of British cultural imperialism fifteen years after the war had killed off their colonial hegemony.

Another American expatriate who moved to Britain for artistic license and the same love of absurdist humor was Stanley Kubrick, employing Sellars for his two great early sixties satires, *Lolita* (1961) and the most affecting and powerful satire to come out of this period, *Dr. Strangelove* (1963). Again, so much has already been written about these two very popular satiric artifacts of the period there is little to add here, though, it should be noted that this was the country to which both would permanently move to for the very idea that they could make these kinds of films and have successful careers; America, just wasn't ready for Britain's satiric style.

Bruce Robinson's career spans more than thirty years, encompasses acting, writing and directing. But, he is easily best known for his great 1986 satire and cult film *Withnail and I,* which he both wrote and directed. Trained as an actor at London's Central School of Speech and Drama, Robinson got off to an early with a reasonably prominent part as Benvolio in Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968). But despite this and other parts for the likes of Ken Russell (*The Music Lovers*, 1970) and François Truffaut (the male lead in *L'Histoire d'Adele H*, 1975), he found that acting mostly involved fruitless waiting for the phone to ring interspersed with the occasional TV

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with amazing footage of the period adding to the feel of Britain in the mid-sixties as the place to be.

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commercial, while desperately trying to make ends meet. So he began writing screenplays in the mid-1970s, and was lucky enough to secure the patronage of producer David Puttnam who finally produced Robinson's script about Cambodia, *The Killing Fields,* in 1984 for which he was nominated for an Oscar. But great cult success was to come a couple of years later when he wrote and directed the brilliant satire *Withnail and I* (1987), a film about two unemployed actors living in total squalor in the late sixties that was elevated to iconic status by students all over the world and which shot newcomer Richard E.Grant to stardom.

Living in Camden Town, the pair desperately seek an escape from the characteristically mundane existence that has become their lives by retreating to a supposedly blissful weekend out in the country. Withnail, (played by Richard E. Grant in his debut role) is a bitter alcoholic actor desperately in search of some form of employment, while Marwood, or "I", the narrator of the film (played by Paul McGann) becomes the audience's guide to how the film transpires. The holiday turns from a good idea to an awful debacle, of course, in the great satiric tradition, when it is realised that their classical and idyllic English 'country house' is a decrepit old farmer's cottage devoid of any possible living standards, even more than their ruinous flat back in London. Being city-dwellers, they find impossibility in arranging means for food or methods of keeping themselves warm:

Withnail: This place is uninhabitable.

Marwood: Give it a chance. It's got to warm up.

Withnail: Warm up? We may as well sit round this cigarette. This is ridiculous. We'll be

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found dead in here next spring...

The satire comes from the ideal of English Romanticism (Wordsworth's love of the earth and the country; Blake's "England's green and pleasant land") juxtaposed with the reality of the harsh English winters. And each subsequent attempt at civility becomes more and more outrageous.

But satire is often a subtle business, and *Withnail* can be quite subtle. So, when *Withnail And I* was previewed to a small, hand-picked audience in London's West End so that the producers could gauge reactions and conduct on-the-spot, things did not go well. Robinson has said "it was a morgue. It was like the fucking Producers." Robinson has admitted that his model was Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, an American version of the same kind of relationship - a fat Samoan lawyer and the mad hatter himself traveling across the southwestern States. But as an ode to the death of the sixties, or at least the ideals of the sixties, of what the sixties were supposed to represent and bring to the world in terms of realities out of its intense idealism. What makes the satire work here is how, again and again, it debunks such romantic notions of the age as a great swinging time for all in London. It wasn't. It was the classic struggle by young artists wondering if they were going to be able to make it doing what they wanted to be doing, or would they be living on the dole forever, or, even worse, would they have to join the labor force to eke out some sort of living for themselves and possible families, like their fathers before them? It's funny for the audience, but it's not funny for them. In fact, as Robinson has stated,

It's deadly serious. When we were tramping around in those fucking bags

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> up some fell in Ullswater, there was nothing funny about it - it was fucking horrible. Awful. The comedy comes out of it post the event, taking an artistic view of it. For example, the drunken landlord in the pub in the Lake District was based on a publican from a dump called The Spreadeagle in Camden Town. He used to get completely wasted and very acerbic, and say, "Isn't it time you two cunts left?" So I had him in my head, then I had us with these carrier bags on our feet, then I had the publican up the hill in Ullswater.[12]

Since it is the symbolic death of the sixties in English popular culture, at the end of the film, Robinson gives his main protagonist a very short and sharp haircut signaling the death of hippiedom and of the dreams of his generation.

> With the haircut - "They're selling hippie wigs in Woolworth's man." That's exactly what happened - I got a job in a play called *Journey's End,* the text that you see the I character reading - in Theatre 69 in Manchester. I came back one day with that very haircut. I was moving on, I was moving out. I still have nightmares about having my hair cut, because in the late Sixties it was something that fucked with your head. Everything was about long hair - Granny Takes A Trip Down The King's Road and all of that. And when I came back and went for Sunday lunch with my friends in a restaurant I would be stared at like a Martian because I was the only guy. with short hair. Because the rest of my clothes were like everyone else's

[12] Bruce Robinson interviewed in *The Idler*, No. 12, November, 1995.

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they'd all think I'd been in jail.[13]

And yet, his brand of rebellious satire was more a comment on the Thatcherite eighties in which it appeared (1984), than the death of the sixties:

> I'm still pretty much Left establishment but I'm very establishment now in the sense that I'm lucky to live in a nice house and I've got some money. But my passion is still very much towards the left. I'm a classic champagne fucking socialist. But what's wrong with that, two of the words are very nice - champagne and socialism. I know what it's like to have no money but I've only ever been broke - never poor. Because I'm educated, I could listen to Sibelius or read fucking Shakespeare even if I couldn't eat. One of the worst indictments of the Conservatives is not educating people, not allowing them to be broke. The opposite of broke isn't rich.[14]

Again borrowing form Hunter Thompson's classic, Robinson gives flagrantly gay (and pining for "I") Uncle Monty the great speech on the death of the age and the ideals of youth.

> **Uncle Monty**: The old order changeth, yeilding place to new, and God fulfills himself in many ways. And soon, I suppose, I shall be swept away by some vulgar little tumor. My boys, my boys, we're at an end of an age. We live in a land of weather forecasts and breakfasts that set-in. Shat on by Tories, shoveled up by Labour. And here we are, we three; perhaps the

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[13] *The Idler*, *Ibid.*.

[14] *The Idler*, *Ibid.*.

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last island of beauty in the world. "Laissez-moi. Resperaire. Longtemp. Longtemp. Le Du de tais chevere..." Ahh, Baudelaire. Brings back such memories of Oxford. Oh, Oxford. Oxford

"I" (in Voice Over): "Followed by yet another anecdote about his sensitive crimes he committed in a punt with a chap called Norman, who had red hair and a book of poetry stained with the butter-drippings of crumpets."

Uncle Monty, continuing: I often wonder where Norman is now. Probably wintering with his mother in Gildford. A cat and rain. Vim under the sink and both bathes on. But old now. Old. There can be no true beauty without decay. **Withnail**: Illegium probitannia.

Uncle Monty: How right you are, how right you are, boy! We live in a kingdom of reigns where royalty comes in gangs.

It is Robinson's ode to his own youth and England's 'perceived' glorious past, not to mention allowing the incessantly dramatic Monty a moment to show that he is actually not crazy; in fact, he is, in some ways, the absolute height of sophistication. It is the singular solemn moment in a full-out satire of the rights of passage before one turns thirty and towards a life of full adulthood and responsibility, one England was to face as the swinging scene was now fading into the thin air of the seventies malaise, like the baseless fabric of Robinson's flickering, lighted cinematic vision.

After the poor showing of *Withnail* (it is now a huge cult hit), Robinson retired, like Pope, to a country estate to write private satires and generally stay far removed from

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the sick city and vulgar mob. Robinson's subsequent films would go on to mock the advertising world and explore crime psychology, but he would never achieve the same height of his satiric vision that he did with *Withnail* ever again.

Theatre and Television

The influence of Brecht, whose plays were now beginning to be seen in translation on the English stage, showed itself in the Episodic narrative methods of Robert Bolt in *A Man for All Seasons* (1960), while that of the Theatre of the Absurd, as developed in France by Beckett and Ionesco, had already reached London with the former's *Waiting for Godot* in 1955. These plays made clear the cosmic absurdity of Man, his imperfect powers of communication with his fellows, and his inevitable fears and loneliness. The new movement brought a refreshing variety of contemporary idioms and dialects to the stage and made effective use of functional and symbolic settings, breaking down the 'fourth wall' convention. They also, inevitably, turned to satire to aid this idea of the absurd in the unabating Cold War world.[15]

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The British theatre was fortunate in that both the innovative and the naturalistic spirit among dramatists, architects and designers was found also in the new generation of young players and directors (among them Peter O'Toole, Tom Courtney, Joan Littlewood, Peter Brook, and Peter Ustinov). As the new movement, typified by its youth, grew in strength, it fueled the rebellion against forms of authority by directing attention to the taboos of sex and religion, and by channeling its energies into a coordinated battle for the freedom of the theatre, led by the artistic director of the Royal Court, George Devine.

In 1968, Parliament finally repealed the Old Licensing Act and abolished the Lord Chamberlain's powers of censorship. The heady sense of freedom that followed generated a brief wave of plays in the early 1970s that sought to test public reaction to verbal obscenity and physical nudity and eventually to prove that playwrights , actors and managers between them could be trusted to know where artistic necessity ended and

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Satire's later revolution was led by such luminaries as Peter Cook, Alan Bennett, Jonathan Miller, David Frost, Eleanor Bron and Dudley Moore. One of the most successful was a West End show that appeared in early 1961 called *Beyond the Fringe*, created by new talented young comic Peter Cook, who cleverly mimicked Milligan's anarchic style. Interestingly, the show opened in the Spring of 1961, just as the were Beatles training for their coming world domination in Hamburg, Germany.

Peter Edward Cook (November 17, 1937-January 9, 1995) was a British satirist of the highest order, specializing in an anti-establishment style of comedy influenced by the Goons and the madness of life in the depths of the Cold War. Cook was himself 'Establishment' educated, at Radley and Pembroke College, Cambridge, and it was at the latter that he first performed and wrote comedy sketches. After graduation, he wrote professionally for Kenneth Williams, before starting a partnership with Dudley Moore, which led to the West End show *Beyond the Fringe* and to the popular and critically feted television show *Not Only... But Also*, clearly, by the titles alone, announcing themselves as "alternative" comedy to the old music-hall stand-ups. Like the Goons they drove the BBC crazy with their pushing of the boundaries the early sixties demanded, and using few props, and with musical interludes performed by Moore, they created a new style of

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pornography began. Of the playwrights confronted with this new liberty those most successful in finding compromises acceptable to audiences were Peter Shaffer and John Mortimer. With censorship no longer an issue, drama in the 1970s showed two main trends: towards sardonic comedy and political polemic, the former best exemplified in the plays of Alan Bennet, Michael Frayn, and Tom Stoppard, the latter by those of Howard Barker, Howard Brenton, and David Hare.

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dry, absurdist televison which found a place in the mainstream.[16] Perhaps Cook's most enduring comic character is the static, dour, and monotone E. L. Wisty, created for *Beyond the Fringe*. In it he is one of two old pensioners chatting over pints in a pub about any topical subject they could find, the routine descending into absurdity as they satirized English provincial life, the knotty bureaucratic messiness of the Socialist experiment and the irrationality of celebrity life itself.[17]

Peter Cook also started and became the proprietor of the satirical magazine, *Private Eye* (see next section), and financed the publication through a number of difficult periods, particularly when the magazine was punished financially in the wake of a number of high-profile libel trials, believing vehemently in the right to freedom of speech and the right to use satire as the chief means for the culture to fight back against the interpreters of the "rules and standards" implemented by the prevailing powers that were. Cook was an avid media follower, reading nearly all the British newspapers every day and following TV and radio programs with vigor. He even gained a regular slot on a night-time London radio program, where he would phone-in using a pseudonym and entertain listeners with his complaints and musings. Cook understood implicitly the importance of questioning who is controlling the media in a democracy and then

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The more risque humor of the Pete and Dud characters was taken to excess on long-playing records where the names "Derek and Clive" were used.

17

Moore went on to Hollywood stardom in the 1970s and 1980s, which was a cause of some bitterness to Cook. Later, both Peter Cook and Dudley Moore acted in films, and Cook worked with Moore in such films as *The Wrong Box* (1966) and *Bedazzled* (1967) (with Eleanor Bron).

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challenging them as to what they do with that control. He was an acknowledged influence on an apparently never-ending stream of comedians who have followed him from the amateur dramatic clubs of British universities to the Edinburgh festival and from thence to the radio and television studios of the BBC. Some have seen Cook's life as tragic, insofar as the brilliance he exhibited in his youth did not lead to the recognition many thought he deserved.[18]

And so the atmosphere was ripe for *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, the comedy television series that originally aired in Britain from 1969 until 1974. And so, again, what can one say that hasn't been covered in countless books written by themslves and fans alike?[19] The show was written by and starred the members of the Monty Python comedy troupe, Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin, as well as the requisite sexpot, Carol Cleveland. Like its precursors, *Python* was also so clearly modeled after the Goons that even the Pythons themselves admit near-plagiarism, for the skits ranged from the completely silly and nonsensical, to the bitingly satirical (usually the latter), targeting the idiosyncracies of British life, though this time because all the players were so well educated (another product of the 1944 Butler Education Act as they were Oxford and Cambridge graduates). Their comedy was

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[18] His death in 1995 was as a result of internal hemorrhaging caused by alcoholism. UK chart singles: "Goodbye-ee" (1965); with Dudley Moore: "The Ballad Of Spotty Muldoon" (1965).

[19]

The show involved neither snakes, avian activities (except Harold the sheep) nor circus performance. Furthermore, none of the performers or characters appearing was called Monty. It became a hit series in Britain and soon after was syndicated to the United States, where it attracted a huge cult following.

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often pointedly intellectual with numerous references to philosophers and literary figures. Skits were often punctuated with Terry Gilliam's graphics and animations, which leaned towards his education in surrealist art making much of it just as bizarre as the absurdist skits and dialogue.[20]

Although the show was made by the BBC, the BBC was widely against it and and tried to censor much of it.[21] The show has aged very well and remains widely popular. Because of its frequent re-broadcasts, many of its skits have become ingrained into English-speaking culture, and are commonly referenced in other shows, movies and stand-up routines.

Print

We have spoken about Kingsley Amis's contribution to postwar British satire in the mid-fifties. In the moment immediately at war's end, the great novelist Evelyn Waugh also published his most famous work in 1945, *Brideshead Revisited.* It is a very different, more serious in tone, satire than anything to come from Ealing or the other postwar satirists, one more nostalgic and rhetorically-based in pre-war literary modernity.

A more sophisticated member of the catholic group was the novelist

Evelyn Waugh, who was also anti-Semitic as well, and very much

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20 Cleese had developed his harsh establishment characters in the 1962 Cambridge Footlights Revue, the Frost Report and on the humourous BBC radio program *I'm Sorry, I'll Read that Again.*

21 Most noticeably the word 'masturbation' in the Proust sketch.

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> committed to traditional Catholicism. But he was, at the same time, a novelist of extraordinary ingenuity. His most ambitious work, *Brideshead Revisited*, was published in 1945 and constitutes a lament for, and a panegyric on, an old aristocratic Catholic family of the kind that had ruled England for centuries, but had become provincial, eccentric, and powerless after the Reformation as a result of its marginization within English society and culture. Nevertheless, according to Waugh, these were the people who knew how to provide disinterested leadership, a decent ethic, a fine balance in English life. Had old England only survived–this is the longing of *Brideshead Revisited*, which is one of the major political novels in the English language... *Brideshead* is a passionate but a rightist polemic from start to finish. [22]

But Waugh was the old guard, who the newer artists satirized as being out of step with the modern world and modern Britain. Soon newer literatures were published taking their aim at the old and the new alike.

Private Eye is a British satirical magazine, founded in 1961 by Christopher Booker, Peter Cook, Richard Ingrams and Willie Rushton during the 1960s UK satire Boom. *Private Eye* specializes in gossip, often of a scurrilous nature, about the misdeeds of the powerful and famous. The magazine has a number of running jokes and jokes accessible only to those in the know. For example, the phrase, "Ugandan relations," is a *Private Eye* euphemism for extra-marital sex; Queen Elizabeth II is always referred to as

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[22] Norman Cantor, *Ibid.*, 366-7.

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"Brenda;" and "tired and emotional" was a phrase used to describe the drunken stupor in which 1960s Labour party Cabinet Minister George Brown was discovered one night, and which has now entered common parlance for any public figure caught in a similar act. Besides the jokes and gossip, it also has a section of investigative journalism, and has been responsible for uncovering a number of major political scandals in the UK; for example, it was the first outlet to actually name the Kray twins as the gang leaders terrorizing the London underworld in the 1960s. It has been repeatedly sued for libel by the rich and powerful, and lost on several occasions: the magazine was only kept running by appealing to readers for money to pay the legal costs and damages awarded against them. (The current editor is Ian Hislop). Its equivalent in the United States today is a now-popular satirical weekly called *The Onion*, indicating, after thirty years of British satire being exported abroad, Americans have finally caught on with the import of the genre. *The Onion* is a parody newspaper and website, originally published in Madison, Wisconsin (and now in New York), whose articles comment both on current events and non-existent stories (sample headline: "Newly Elected George Bush Declares: 'Our Long National Nightmare of Peace and Prosperity is Finally Over!'") of the real world.[23]

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[23] Just after the 2000 U.S. Presidential election, when the future President remained undetermined, *The Onion* published a story titled "Bush or Gore: 'A New Era Dawns'" which parodied the similarities between the two politicians. The noteworthiness of this story was largely a matter of luck: the paper went to press election night, at a time when the uncertainty was not yet noteworthy. The staff of the Onion have produced numerous books, including *Our Dumb Century* and *Dispatches from the Tenth Circle*.

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And Finally, Wordsmiths: Mark E. Smith, and Bill Hicks

Mark E. Smith is a poet, musician and the acid-tongued leader of the English rock band The Fall. Amelodic, cacophonic and magnificent, The Fall easily remain the most enduring and prolific of the late-70s punk and post-punk iconoclasts. Though this study includes no real rock musicians (except, of course, the Beatles, and, not to mention, Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan who, also, were incredibly proficient musos), Mark is *the* key satirist of his generation because in his art the music is always secondary to his voice, lyrics and message. Formed in Manchester in 1977, The Fall has attracted a cult following in numerous corners of the globe, but has managed to bend commercial necessities (even for the most militant satirist it's necessary to eat and live!) to its own needs and carve no small chart success in the UK. The group's influence on like-minded conceptual noisemakers — in England, the US, Iceland, New Zealand and elsewhere — cannot be overstated. Emphasis is placed on the lyric and the abrasive voice to put across Smith's own persuasive brand of satire, a brand that, it is no exaggeration to say, is as prolific and powerful as Swift or Pope or the Earl of Rochester were in their own time. And, without the pretensions.

First off, right from the first song of his career, Smith declared,

We are the Fall!

Northern white crap that talks back

We are not black. Tall.

No boxes for us.

Do not fuck with us.

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We are frigid stars.

We are spitting, we are snapping "Cop Out, Cop Out!"

as if from Heaven!

"Northern" because he is a proud Madchesterian; "frigid" because he is the sensitive poet; "spitting, snapping from heaven" because he is the classic satirist-prophet screaming in the wilderness for attention to point out society's ills so as to save his beloved English culture from the poisoning infidels.

Take for example, "Kicker Conspiracy," from 1983. When "Kicker Conspiracy" came out "no bugger wanted to know about soccer songs," Smith later reflected.[24] The game itself was in turmoil: beset by hooliganism, assaulted by the government, and on a collision course with some kind of disaster, even before the triple blows of Heysel, Hillsborough and Valley Parade served to change the game's reputation beyond redemption. Smith sniped at the casual hordes who swaggered around the stadium in matching shirts and, which in hooligan culture are called, "stadium" knives. As much a sequence of linked tirades (the satirist's great narrative strategy), including a brilliant, and still pertinent, parody of television football reporting, "Kicker Conspiracy" addressed what, even today, seems the guiding principle of the game's leaders–crushing individual flair in favor of workmanlike doggedness, not to mention the complete disarray of both the national team and national league at the time.

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[24] Mark E Smith. and Mick Muddley, *The Fall,* London: Omnibus Press, 2003, 54.

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Kicker, Kicker Conspiracy. Kicker, Kicker Conspiracy.

J. Hill's satanic reign.

Ass-lickers King O'Team.

Borrowing from Blakean imagery, Smith attacks Jimmy Hill, England's leading TV football pundit at the time. Depending on one's point of view, he was considered either a leading voice in English football or a reactionary buffoon. Smith clearly chose the latter.

In the marble halls of the charm school.

How *flair* is punished!

Under Marble Millichip, the F.A. broods

On how *flair* can be punished!

They're guest is a Euro-State magnate.

How *flair* is punished!

This is pre-Premiere League, before England began to accept foreign players (i.e., those with "flair") in to their League, before it became a world class league on par with Italy and Spain. Sir Bert Millichip was then the head of the English FA (Football Association; F.A. is also a reference to having nothing to do, as in "sweet F.A. (Fuck All) to do today," so, off to the match they go), who, xenophobically, went out of his way to keep the league English-only, seeing himself as a pillar of the Establishment, a hark back to the days when Britannia ruled the waves; in other words, to Smith, a "dinosaur-like anachronism in the modern world."

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In the booze club, George Best does rule.

How flair is punished.

His downfall was a blonde girl,

but that's none of your *business*!

Best was a Northern Irish footballer who played for Manchester United and is seen by many as the greatest player of the modern age. He was the first "pop" footballer because of his long hair and partying ways on the London and Manchester club scene and is regarded as integral to 1960s Britain as the Beatles. He clashed somewhat with the authorities and was a burnt-out alcoholic wreck by the time he was 27. Yet, despite all of his problems he is still vastly popular, even by Smith who here suggests the F.A.'s crushing of individualism drove Best to drink. Smith continues next by scolding the blind allegiance of the beer-soaked, working-class fans, along with the authorities that berated them.

Former fan at the bus stop.

Treads on the ball at his feet, in the Christmas rush.

And in his hands, two lager cans.

Talks to himself. At the back. At the top.

Pat McGatt. Pat McGatt, the very famous sports reporter is

talking......there.

"FANS! ! ! Remember, you are abroad!

Remember the police are rough!

Remember the unemployed!

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Remember my expense account!"

HOT DOGS AND SEAT FOR MR. HOGG !!

HOT DOGS AND SEAT FOR MR. HOGG!!!

AAAAAANNNNDDD HIS GROTTYSPAWN! ! ! !

It's important to note that the video for the song was filmed at Burnley Football ClubBurnley is a small town in Lancashire but, as recently as the mid '70's, they were one of the top football (soccer) teams in England. By 1983, though, they had plunged down the leagues at the same time as the town was being devastated by recession as English Soccer teams play on a relegation system that mirrors the fortunes of many companies and/or individuals in the English class system. In 1983, too, Britain's greatest export was gangs of football hooligans heading to mainland Europe to start riots. "Kicker Conspiracy" was uncool, uncouth, un-everything that a right-minded mid-80s pop star should be thinking about, but Smith would never be your right-minded average pop star.

Another example of Smith's genius is the simplicity of his brilliant song "L.A.," as, over a pulsing, sinister beat, the only lyric he chants over and over repeatedly are the letters "L.L.L.L.L.L.L.L.L.L.L..A.A.A.A.A.A.A.A.A.A.A.A.A. L.L.L.L.L.L.L.L.L. .A.A.A.A.A.A.A.A.A.A.." It is all he needs to say for us to conjure up the image of dark, "Bladerunner"-like visions of the glam, Top Gun/cocaine-fueled Los Angeles of the mid-nineteen eighties. It is Smith's vision of Reagan-America, and by extension, Thatcher's New Britain.

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Smith might also be heard mocking their very obsessive and lemmings-like English habit of heading to Spain for their holidays, not to mention the puritanical postponement of personal satisfaction that comes with saving for such a holiday:

I've sold my car, thrown in my job, I'm 34 years old

I think it's time I saw the world, and not Australia

I've sold my car thrown in my job I'm 34 years old

I think it's time I saw the world coz I hate the cold and rain and grey

I'm going to Spain

Cousin Norman had a real fine time last year

He said it doesn't rain

I hope I can quickly learn the language, yeah

I hope I can quickly learn the language there.

–from, "I'm Going to Spain."

Or yuppie self-absorption, self-aggrandizement and ultimate paranoia about their self-worth, giving his English brethren "The Man Who's Head Expanded":

The man whose head expanded was corrupted by Mr. Sociological memory. Was corrupted by Mr. Sociological Memory Man.

Could not get a carrier bag for love nor money.

The man who's head expanded explained:

The scriptwriter would follow him around,

of this he was convinced. It was no coincidence.

The lager seemed poisoned.

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It was no matter of small consequence. No little pub incident.

A red faced post- 'Jolly Grapes' would steal his jewels, and put

them in the mouths of Vic. actor fools.

Of this he was convinced.

A paranoid suspect for a Thatcher climate.

And parodying the socialist tendencies in constantly creating "five-year" plans that never go quite as they are supposed to, along with the English tendency to shift the blame to anyone but themselves:

O'er grassy dale, and lowland scene

Come see, come hear, the English "Scheme."

The lower-class, want brass, bad chests, scrounge fags.

The clever ones tend to emigrate

Like your psychotic big brother, who left home

For jobs in Holland, Munich, Rome

He's thick, but he struck it rich, switch

Peter Cook's jokes, bad dope, check shirts, lousy groups

Always pointing their fingers at America

Down pokey quaint streets in Cambridge

If we was smart we'd emigrate

–from, "The English Scheme."

"The English Scheme" is the lame attempt to constantly do what is best, what is right for the British who live day to day, often on the dole, on lower class wages in crap housing

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waiting for their government to come through for them. Smith here satirizes both the government that doesn't provide, and the masses who let them get away with it year after year.

In "Hail the New Puritan!" he rails at the moral majority in the U.K. under Thatcher; in "Copped It" at artistic stealing, err, "borrowing," while he proclaims that "The North Will Rise Again," (read: Manchester despite Thatcher's destructive policies, will become a vibrant economic and artistic English city once again). But, above all, as a classical satirist, he will shout at anyone within ear shot about his sacred, satirical mission:

> All those whose minds entitle themselves,
> and whose main entitle *is* themselves,
> shall feel the wrath of my bombast!
> The Clanging in my heart.
> Bastard! Idiot! Feel the wrath of my bombast!
> Those who dare mix real life with politics
> And go on, regardless of the discoveries
> Will feel the wrath of bombast!
> The clanging in my heart!
>
> –from, "Bombast."

Often the cantankerous titles alone tell the story of Smith's intense and unrelenting late 20th century British satire: "Solicitor in Studio," "(I Just Want) Room to Live," "Bend Sinister," "The Wonderful and Frightening World of The Fall," "Code: Selfish," "The

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Infotainment Scan," "This Nation's Saving Grace," "Spoilt Victorian Child," "Lie Dream of the Casino Soul," "Disney's Dream Debased," "Have You Seen the English Deer Park?," "Second Dark Age," "Eat Yerself Fitter!," "Why Are People Grudgeful?," "No Xmas for John Quays," "Middle Class Revolt!," "Behind the Counter," "Oswald Defense Lawyer," etc.

As cultural historians, it is interesting to look back at Smith's take on 80s/90s Britain because Smith still rants on today. The band, which has gone though 40 different members over the years–he alone is the sole survivor (it is no mistaking it is Smith's project)–has created a huge body of unique, adventurous and challenging approaches to modern music rock has ever seen, not to mention British satire. Whether you enjoy the sounds or not, the Fall has made a crucial difference to modern satire with Smith's running commentaries. Satire can expose and capture the air of the time helping us contextualize the mood of the artist and the country at any given moment. In fact, he is so unique amongst pop stars that there is no Fall song at all that is not in some way satirizing late twentieth century/early twenty-first century post-modern life in Britain and the rest of the west, in general, with his own satiric brand of cultural studies (actually, he has a hilarious song mocking Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, et. al., as merely selling another commodity wit their studies and theories of culture, entitled, "The Birmingham School of 'Business' School"). Needless to say, with his genius and complex art, Mark E. Smith is not for neophytes.

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The last satirist in this survey is an odd one, for he was an American who never became an ex-patriate and who never denounced his Americaness. He merely had to go to England to gain a following and a career. His name was Bill Hicks, he was born on December 16th, 1961, in Valdosta, Georgia, when his family (father Jim, an executive at General Motors; mother Mary, a teacher; and elder brother and sister, Steve and Lynn) lived in Florida, Alabama and New Jersey before moving to Houston when Bill was 7. They lived in the Memorial area to the west of the city, a place called Nottingham Forest, a "strict Southern Baptist ozone," as Hicks later called it–an early indication that Hicks had no time for didactic morality. Hick is important to late twentieth century British satire because, before his young death at 33, while he had a cult-following in the States, it was England which first and truly embraced him and where he was most popular and well-known while he was alive.

In 1978 Hicks began visiting the Comedy Workshop on San Felipe in Houston, while he was still in high school, even though he was only 16 (he would sneak out of his house at night). Sometimes Bill was even allowed to perform and when the manager, Steve Epstein, saw him, he was so impressed he put him in contact with the circuit managers who booked touring stand-up, where Bill met anarchic comedian Sam Kinison who became a huge influence and helped shape his style. Hicks took Kinison's anger and some of his political ideology and shaped it into something much more metaphysical and speculative. An on-stage philosopher, Hicks thought on his feet, taking off on tangents, his ideas and narrative forming and developing as he got better and better.

In 1984 Hicks got his first Letterman appearance, engineered by Jay Leno who

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was aware that Bill was too controversial for the more traditional *Tonight Show*. Hicks did a five-minute slot, then slumped down in the guest chair and lit a cigarette. The devil-may-care attitude won admiration and further bookings and he went on to do eleven other shows, hugely popular despite the fact that his routine was somewhat watered down from his stage shows. Letterman later said of him: "What I liked about Bill was, here is a guy that nobody knew, myself included, who had a swagger to his demeanor, both physical and emotional. And I just liked that. For no good reason, no justifiable reason, 'I'm cocky. Nobody knows me. Too bad.' You could almost see him turning his shoulder to the audience."[25]

For the next ten years hicks did about 300 gigs a year on small and large stages, as the confrontational satirist, true to his beliefs, wasn't interested in furthering his career by having his own talk show or sit-com; for him television was "Lucifer's dream box." "I get a kick out of being an outsider constantly. It allows me to be creative. I don't like anything in the mainstream and they don't like me" he told The Chicago Sun Times. So, he lived for the stage and really saw himself as a satiric prophet/preacher. He said: "Listen, the next revolution is gonna be a revolution of ideas. A bloodless revolution. And if I can take part in it by transforming my own consciousness, then someone else's, I'm happy to do it."[26] A bloodless revolution of satire. Earlier in his career he experimented with a lot of drugs to fuel his anger, but after he stopped using, post-drugs Hicks was the most productive period of Hicks' career and his satire became more cogent and pointedly

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[25] From the Comedy Central Documentary, *A Tribute to Bill Hicks*.

[26] John Lahr, *The New Yorker*, January 25, 1993, "The Goat Boy Rises," 54.

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fierce. His emphasis as always on the exact right choice of words with just the right delivery (especially inflections) to cut his subjects down for he knew his words had the power to sway audiences to outside the mainstream, often unpopular even, points of view, and it was the English who would best understand his approach.

Hicks's first introduction to Britain came in November 1990 when he was one of eighteen comedians in 'Stand Up America!', a six week engagement in London's West End. His perceptiveness and militant use of irony was completely understood in the U.K., if not in the States, and in 1991 he won the Critics' Award at the Edinburgh Festival. He toured Britain and Ireland extensively to completely laudable, sympathetic and responsive audiences. Explaining his success there Hicks said, "People in the United Kingdom and outside the United States share my bemusement with the United States that America doesn't share with itself. They also have a sense of irony, which America doesn't have seeing as it's being run by fundamentalists who take things literally."[27] Hicks' growing sophistication continued to receive the English critics' praise, especially his material about the Gulf War where telling people things they really hadn't been allowed in the states because of media manipulation. He saw the war as a complete hypocrisy:

> "I'm so sick of arming the world and then sending troops over to destroy the fucking arms, you know what I mean? We keep arming these little countries, then we go and blow the shit out of 'em. We're like the bullies of

[27] John Lahr, *Ibid., 60.*

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the world, you know. We're like Jack Palance in the movie Shane...

throwing the pistol at the sheep herder's feet:

'Pick it up.'

'I don't wanna pick it up, mister; you'll shoot me.'

'Pick up the gun.'

'Mister, I don't want no trouble, huh. I just came down town here to get some hard rock candy for my kids, some gingham for my wife. I don't even know what gingham is, but she goes through about 10 rolls a week of that stuff. I ain't looking for no trouble, mister.'

'Pick up the gun.'

Sheep-herder reaches down, 'Okay. If you say so.'

(Three gunshots)

'You all saw him. He had a gun.' "

---At the Dominion Theatre, London, November 1992

Altering people's perception of events, Hicks made them see things from a different angle, and made a wedge for himself in an England whose postwar satiric genre had long been codified. He had joined the English satirical ranks.

In November 1992 he recorded the *Revelations* video for Channel 4 in England. Filmed at the 2,000 seat Dominion Theatre, Hicks punctured media hypocrisy with his sharp humor. In then-current routines he would say, "If the FBI's motivating factor for busting down the Koresh compound was child abuse, how come we never see Bradley tanks smashing into Catholic churches?" The reviews for his scathing shows were

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excellent; "Hicks may be the freshest - surely most daring - voice in stand-up in years... Midway through his act, I realized just how banal and predictable comedy has grown," wrote The San Francisco Chronicle on August 8th.[28]

> In another example, Hicks skewers the puritanicalism of nineties America: "When did sex become a bad thing? Did I miss a meeting? Playboy - pornography - causes sexual thoughts. Penthouse - pornography - causes sexual thoughts. You know what causes sexual thoughts when it's all said and done? Let's cut to the chase; I'm tired of the debate, OK? I'll clear it up for ya mmmmmm right fucking now. Here's what causes sexual thoughts... having a dick. End of story. I can speak for every guy here tonight, aaaand, OK I will. In the course of our day ANYTHING can cause a sexual thought. You can be on a train, and it's rocking kinda nice. Pants are a little tight. Oh my God, I've got a woody! I got a woody on the El train. What are we gonna do, ban public transportation? I find it ironic that people who are most against sexual thoughts are generally these fundamentalist Christians who also believe you should "be fruitful and multiply". It seems like they would *support* sexual thoughts, you know, perhaps even have a centerfold in the Bible. Miss Deuteronomy. Turn offs: floods, locusts, smokers. I actually did that joke in Alabama, right. These three rednecks met me after the show, man. 'Hey, buddy! Come here. Hey, Mr.

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[28] *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 8, 1987, 23.

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Comedian! Come here. Hey, buddy, we're Christians, we don't like what you said.' So, I said, 'Then forgive me.'

---At the Vic theatre, Chicago, November 1990

Hicks saw his mission as slaying all the "fevered egos" polluting the planet. He called himself "goat Boy" or Shiva The Destroyer, using satire as a weapon to expose truths and expose government hypocrisy. He tried to reach as many people as possible, to put them in touch with inner and outer space in a majestic flight of one consciousness thinking.

But Hicks life was cut short when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 1993. October 1st 1993 saw Hicks' 12th and final Letterman show, from which his routine was axed as it was felt the material might not go down well with the show's sponsors. His act had attacked pro-lifers: "If you're so pro-life, do me a favor: don't lock arms and block medical clinics. If you're so pro-life, lock arms and block cemeteries." He became the first comedy act to be censored at CBS's Ed Sullivan Theatre. Hicks was so incensed he wrote a 39 page letter to *The New Yorker*'s John Lahr. It all became clear that the corporation was behind the censorship when a pro-life commercial appeared during the Letterman Show that very same night.

"As long as one person lives in darkness then it seems to be a responsibility to tell other people." This encapsulated Hicks' philosophy; that we are all one consciousness, that it is the role of every individual to do something to enhance the human condition. Unlike those we place our trust in - politicians and all manner of professionals - Bill wanted to have a lot of fun doing it, so he turned to humors most persuasive genre, satire.

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By December Hicks' deterioration was evident and he knew he was dying, moving back to his parents' house in Little Rock in January 1994. On January 6th, his health clearly ailing, he played his final show in New York. He died of pancreatic cancer a month later.

> "It's a strange world; I don't know what we choose, WHY we choose the things we do as a collective. You ever wonder that? You know what I mean, the fact that we live in a world where John Lennon was murdered, yet Milli Vanilli walks the fucking planet. You know? Bad choice. Just from me to you, it wasn't a good one. But isn't that weird, we always kill the guys who try to help us. Isn't that strange, that we let the little demons run amok, always? John Lennon: murdered. John Kennedy: murdered. Martin Luther King: murdered. Gandhi: murdered. Jesus: murdered. Reagan... wounded. You know. Bad fucking choice."
>
> —Hicks in his final routine, 1993.

History, as the saying goes, is written by the victors. And then rewritten by each successive generation as re-examined through the lens of its particular time, that distance serving to clarify and obscure all at once. The later satirists were paying homage to the original postwar satirists as they found their own voices within the genre. In film, theatre and television, print and the popular mediums of pop and stand-up, satire reigned as the favored genre through which subsequent generations voiced their concerns and

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disillusionments with their times in British culture. The English (and expatriate) artists of the last fifty years–since the war and loss of empire didn't so much as 'find' their voice as borrow their voice from the immediate postwar great satirists. Satire has become the key genre which the English use to keep themselves and community in-check, and to re-define what their culture could be, should be, and so, is.

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EPILOGUE:

ENGLAND YEAR, ZERO : SATIRE IN POSTWAR BRITISH POPULAR CULTURE

Writing in the late 1990s, Andrew Higson sought to make the case for a national cinema of Britain but felt frustrated that other previous critics had pooh-poohed English film:

> In the late 1960s two prominent film critics complained that "British cinema was an "unknown cinema" (Lowell, 1969), utterly amorphous, unclassified, unperceived" (Wollen 1969: 115). What Lowell and Wollen had in mind was not that there wasn't a popular film culture, or that audiences didn't watch British films or know how to make sense of them, but that British films had not been written about extensively by the new generation of critics, historians, and scholars.[1]

This "new generation" he was talking about was comprised of younger critics, writing in France for *Cahiers* in the 1950s, and in England, for publications like *Screen* which became, typically, a 1960s Marxist and Structuralist screed. But why the big concern? The French were obsessed with American films–not English ones. And the 1960s intellectuals had little faith in English cinema since the Grierson documentaries and the

[1] Andrew Higson. *The Oxford Book of Film*, New York: Oxford UP, 1998, 288.

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50s Social Realist age. [2] Agreeing with these temperamental and sensitive critics (nee, spoiled) Higson, himself, goes on to talk only about the "collective nature" of British social realism, from the Grierson documentaries to the Mike Leigh and Ken Loach realist fictional films, and how their genre is the one 'true' contributor to British cinema. It wasn't. Even today, few critics feel that the period between 1945 and 1960 was important for English cinema other than for its "kitchen sink" realist dramas. But it was. The British were doing something more daring than the Italians and the French, who were looking to America for their sources of inspiration, not to mention funding. They were re-awakening their indigenous heritage of satire. And it wasn't only happening in English cinema, it was also erupting in the other most popular cultural medium, radio, with Milligan and the Goons. Satire defined the British early 1950s experience and was key to the immediate postwar 'non'- recovery period.

The historian Harold William Chase says of postwar America, "Rarely has a society experienced such a rapid or dramatic change as what occurred in America after 1945." He suggests, despite representations of stability and calm, that

> the 1950s were 'more a time of transition than stolidity'. The period is characterized by shifts from production to consumption, from saving to spending, from city to suburb, from blue- to white-collar employment, and from an adult culture to a youth culture. Whether it is read as post-industrial, post-capitalist, or postmodern, postwar America is designated

[2] It just goes to show how muddle-headed the Left can be.

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by those who study it as a time of significant change.[3]

In England, these industrial and material changes would have to wait a decade, but while they waited for that the new British satirists expressed the postwar thoughts, hopes, dreams and frustrations of the 'newly' island nation that sought, once again, to become a relevant cultural influence. But this time, to do so they had to turn inward, not outward, toward themselves, reassessing who and what they were in the New World Order. The satirist became their most reliable voice, re-defining the British culture and people coming of age in the immediate decade after the war.

It was a moment that lasted about six years, until the British were forced to realize for once and for all that they were no longer a major force on the world stage. For, by 1956 England would have other international matters on their minds with the seize of the Suez Canal by Egyptian militants, and with the United States refusing to help, it would represent the true end of English international hegemony.

> Shortly before 900 on Saturday 22 December 1956, the last of te British troop embark in a landing craft at Port Said... The vessels made for the open sea; the Suez was over. Less than forty years separate this national rout in a petty conflict from Britain's triumph in the Great War. Then she had stood at the head of the world's empire in arms. Then her sixty divisions on the western front had won the crescendo of victories in 1918 which compelled Imperial Germany to sue for an armistice. Then she had

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Harold William Chase, *The Case for Democratic Capitalism, 1945-1971*, New York: Crowell, 11.

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> possessed the largest army and navy and air force in the world. .. And by armistice day Britain had already drawn bold blue prints for further strengthening the sinews of British power–plans to carry forward the new industrial revolution to fulfillment, to remodel the education and training of the nation, to exploit the natural resources of the colonies, and to weld the Empire into a closer political strategic union.[4]

The sorry and shameful feebleness of 1956 attested the tragic decline in Britain's fortunes since 1918. For England, it wouldn't be until the late fifties/early sixties where the elements of the society they live in today would be consolidated–advertising and the mass media, housing and unemployment compensation, information technology, automobiles, education, mobility, and style are the recognizable central structuring elements in British society. But in the decade after the war, they were possible only in dreaming of other societies which were accomplishing these modern achievements. For the British, it was satire which became the medium of protest, release, escape and cultural identity.

When she was Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher attributed the social ills of the age to what she called "sixties culture" and said she wanted to "take England back to the 1950s," which she presented as "an old fashioned Britain, structured and courteous."[5] But 1950s Britain was in many ways an anxious, reactionary time where fundamental

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[4] Norman Cantor, *The American Century*, 154.

[5] *Daily Mail*, April 29, 1988.

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economic difficulties and social dissatisfactions arose after the early postwar hope that life was going to be better as a new British society moved towards fairness and equality.

Societies need to produce–materially, to sustain themselves, but also culturally (through their arts and media), as cultural production generates concepts, systems and understandings to explain who they are, who others are, and how the world works. The British satires of the late 1940s/early-1950s held up a mirror to an England rife with change and facing a critical identity crisis, and gave her the strength and the way-forward into the modern world.

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Stephen Frears--*My Beautiful Launderette, The Snapper, High Fidelity*

Danny Boyle--*Shallow Grave, Trainspotting*

Michael Winterbottom–*24 Hour Party People*

American Ex-Patriots: *Stanley Kubrick--*Lolita, Dr. Strangelove, Clockwork Orange, Barry Lyndon*
*Joseph Losey--*The Servant, The Go-Between, King and Country,*
*Nicholas Roeg--*Performance, Walkabout*

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