

## **The Next of Kin: Propaganda, realism or a film with a purpose?**

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### **1. Introduction**

This is a film with a purpose. It is not propaganda, in the current sense of the word, for that word has come to have a debased meaning; it now means persuasion by means of revealing much but not all of the truth. This film quite uncompromisingly reveals every point for and against its purpose. (Dickinson, 1949)

The purposive intent of Thorold Dickinson, director of World War II film *The Next of Kin* and the film's role as part the "Careless Talk" public information campaign makes the film a compelling object for public relations (PR) historical investigation. A target audience of several million civilians and military personnel was engaged through Dickinson's use of "uncompromisingly" realistic film-making, which used actual examples of careless security lapses to convey a didactic message in a cinematic form, making the film an innovation in public information technique. Beyond the communicative purpose of Dickinson as author, the institutional intent of the sponsors who used the film in a campaign of persuasion as a communication tactic "employed with a specific purpose in mind" suggests that *The Next of Kin* fulfils Russell & Lamme's (2016, p. 4) concise criteria of "strategic intent and human agency" for determining whether or not an artefact or initiative can be seen as part of PR history. This paper presents the results of archival research into the purposive drivers that led to the making of *The Next of Kin* followed by analysis of how this didactic component was realised using realism and intertextual references. The project is intended to add to the literature on the "careless talk" public information campaign, that has attracted "relatively little scholarly attention" (Fox, 2012, p. 936) despite its catchphrase entering the lexicon and being so popular its posters are still sold today

### **2. Literature review**

Public relations filmic scholarship has included several papers and book chapters on individual films, their place in PR campaigns and their relation to the rhetorical dimension of PR (Pompper & Higgins, 2007; Xifra & Girona, 2012). Arnett and St John (2014) made a methodological advance in a paper that combined analysis of the 1940 US film *Your Town* as a visual text alongside archive-based historical study using The National Association of

Manufacturers' files, in order to describe the strategic intent of the institution commissioning the film. More recently, the pre-realism films of Roberto Rossellini, a realistic film-maker after Thorold Dickinson, were the object of a study by Quintana and Xifra (2016, p. 288) into both the "public relations audio visual techniques" of this work and the "elements of public relations film discourse" they contained.

The role of film as a component of public relations, propaganda and public information campaigns led to the cinematic past appearing in public relations historical scholarship. L'Etang (2004, p.32) included the emergence of the British documentary movement in the 1920s and 1930s in her wider history of the UK PR industry, describing the "educative mission" of the film maker, John Grierson, who worked at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) as head of its film unit, under its director, Sir Stephen Tallents. A biographer of Tallents, writing of his work at the EMB Film Unit saw innovation among the public relations documentary makers in the 1930s and a willingness to experiment with new methods of visual communication: "The pioneers of public relations in Britain imaginatively utilised a range of new technologies to illuminate and interpret" (Anthony, 2013, p. 63). Moloney (2006, p. 8) also classified the use of documentary film as a public relations tool and referred to one of Grierson's later films for the UK's General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit, as "promotional documentary." For Grant (1994, p. 19) this use of film for public relations purposes by Grierson and others was not only a tool for imparting "necessary information to the electorate" in the pre-war period but contributed to "introducing and legitimating the concept of government publicity."

Grierson himself recorded that he was impressed by potential of "creative treatment of actuality" in films alongside the use of drama, in an explicit reference to the use of realism (Grierson, 1966, p. 292). Kilborn (2006, p.189) inferred that Grierson's experience of working in the USA meant he saw potential to use mass media to accomplish both "educative and propagandist goals" while at the same time recognising that developments in film-recording technology "produced a heightened sense of realism.....and meant that filmmakers could experiment with new ways of representing the real." Arguably, the outbreak of war led to an acceleration of these experiments and film historians have recorded that World War II was a golden age for British cinema (Dickinson, 1983, p. 76). However, there was little such optimism at the outbreak of World War II, when all cinemas were closed on 3 September 1939 by the government due to fear of air raids although by 11 September they were reopened, according to a report by Mass Observation (1940) These early impediments for

cinemas – the distributive side of the UK film industry - were soon followed by restrictions on the production arm, with output reduced due to shortages of materials, loss of personnel and reallocation of production space as studios were requisitioned for storage or factory use. 228 long films were made in 1937 falling to just 103 in 1939. 108 films were made in the best wartime year of 1940 and 46 in the worst year, 1942, the year in which *The Next of Kin* was made (Aldgate & Richards, 1986, p. 2).

At the outbreak of World War II, Sir Samuel Hoare, one of four ministers to lead the UK's Ministry of Information between 1939-1941, described its aim as the delivery of "publicity rather than propaganda" (HC Deb 11 October.1939). The mixed language is a reminder of the importance of using the terms propaganda and public relations in historical studies in the same way as they were used in the time. In Germany, Bentele (1997) conceptualised public relations for the years 1933-1945 within his stratified model as a combination of media relations and political propaganda. While this intermingling of public relations, publicity and propaganda may grate on the ears of some 21st century readers who have paid close attention to academic contestation of the words in public relations historiography, this paper treats them as broadly equal in linguistic terms for the purposes of examining 1940s cinema propaganda, based on consideration of the categorisation in both original historical source material, the use of language by media historians, and L'Etang's (1998, p. 414) reflection that while this interchange "may appear to some either offensive or inaccurate. Nevertheless it seems historically more authentic to employ terms this way."

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Historical institutionalism*

The first phase of the investigation used the theoretical framework and related methodology of historical institutionalism to focus on the institutions, agents, supporting mechanisms (including routes and access to power) and the intended messages that led to the film being commissioned, followed by a consideration of the results of the project. Historical institutionalism as defined by Hall and Taylor (1996, p. 937) has been used primarily as a methodology for inquiry into political institutions, but also fits into the three-stage visual research methodology proposed by Rose (2012, p. 20) in explaining the "site of production" of a visual artefact by answering questions about why, for whom and how the film was produced. Historical institutionalism has been advocated as a methodology for use in public relations history by Sandhu (2015) for its strengths in ensuring a societal and political context

through its focus on institutions as “carriers of ideas” and messages. This element of the inquiry centred on the role of the Ministry of Information Film Unit as sponsor of the film, along with the agents that worked to get the project delivered such as Ealing Studios, based on examination of files in the archives of the Ministry of Information (MOI) on the MOI Films Unit and the “Careless Talk” campaigns. In this way, the social, political and military context behind the making of the film was researched using archival material that, for example, identified the sources of funding for the project from the mixed economy of the Directorate of Army Training, the MOI Film Unit, the service film units and Ealing Studios.

### *3.2 Auteur study*

The second line in historical inquiry of was based on *auteur* or authorship theory and considered how and why the film was made from the perspective of the director Thorold Dickinson. This artist-centred critical and theoretical formulation places the director of a film as the embodiment of the resulting artistic vision (Allen and Gomery, 1985, p. 71) who is therefore responsible for the resulting “form, style and meanings,” (Thompson & Bordwell, 1994, p. 492). While agreeing with Friedman (1999, p. 10) that this all-powerful concept of authorship theory as the sole controller of a film can be problematic, potentially outdated and should not be the sole focus of a historical film study, this authorship study into the individual vision of the director does complement institutional study in building a more complete historical narrative. The authorship investigation was based on scrutiny of primary documents relating to the project from various archives, with comparisons made across the different source material. Specifically, all known primary documents held by, written by or to the director relating to the film were scrutinised through a review of all material in the personal papers of Thorold Dickinson in the University of the Arts London Archives and Special Collections Centre alongside the files on the film in the archives of the British Film Institute (BFI) National Archives. Dickinson’s personal papers are comprehensive and include a set of production files (down to the level of original daily production logs, sketches and maps to plan the battle scenes) as well as correspondence with various institutions relating to the commissioning of the film. The authorship study was enhanced by the notes Dickinson wrote to introduce screenings of *The Next of Kin* after the war, and his wider reflections on film propaganda and the role of film in public information during his later career as an academic. These notes offered a useful level of analysis by the director himself on his authorship and a degree of self-reflection that could be compared with third party appraisal of the film.

### 3.3 *Interpreting the imagery of the Next of Kin*

For the third aspect of the research, a copy of the film was obtained via the Imperial War Museum in London and viewed several times with screen grabs sampled for analysis as well as used in conference presentations. This object of this investigation is what Rose's (2013, p. 27) visual methodology categorises as the "site of the image" or the visual material itself, along with the composition of the film and its meaning - followed by the nature of the audience and their response. Papers focussed on the analysis or application of theory to film from a public relations perspective (Xifra & Girona, 2013; St. John and Arnett, 2014; Quintana and Xifra 2016, for example) have illuminated the methodological possibilities in critically examining films as historical artefacts in their own right and also their role (or intended role) in campaigns. These methodological templates of filmic studies oriented around public relations concerns were extended in this paper to include a consideration of the careless talk posters that appear in the film, and which were obtained from the Imperial War Museum's collection of World War II material. This content in its totality (film and posters) was analysed using an interpretive methodology and vocabulary for visual cultural artefacts that assumes that films can be read in the same way as texts (Monaco, p. 450). The interpretive methodology used in this study was based on Geertz's (1973) semiotic approach and the associated acknowledgement that the symbolic and communicative form of visual artefacts that can in turn be "reduced to its own grammatical components" (Howells, 2003, p. 193). This methodological approach led to a focus on the grammatical tools of intertextual references and realism, and their role in the public relations discourse in *The Next of Kin*.

## 4. Institutions, policy and messages

### 4.1 *The Ministry of Information Films Division*

The Ministry of Information (MOI) was formed in September 1939, following a pre-war report by Sir Stephen Tallents, head of public relations at the BBC, which defined the template for its establishment (Tallents, 1938; McLaine, 197, p. 12). Tallents (who had been Director of Public Relations at the Post Office and went on to be founding President of the UK's Institute of Public Relations) was appointed as the Designate Director General. The MOI's Films Division was responsible for coordination of the diverse organisations generating film propaganda and its senior staff included experienced public relations specialists, such as Jack Beddington, who was made director in 1940. The MOI Films Unit was one component in a complex and interwoven infrastructure for war time film-making,

which included various service film units. The Army Film Unit (AFU), for example, made films while the Army Kinematograph Service (AKS) was responsible for their production and distribution. Similar structures existed in the Navy and Royal Air Force but the Army's film operations were by far the largest with eighty cameramen and eight directors by 1943 (Chapman, 1998, p. 139). The first director of the MOI was Sir Joseph Ball, previously Director of Publicity for the Conservative Party, who attracted "scathing attacks from several quarters," some of it based on Labour suspicions about his "record as a propagandist for the Conservatives," (Dickinson and Street, 1985, p. 112). The art historian Sir Kenneth Clark took over until April 1940 and was followed by Beddington, who was "very much his own man and had considerable professional experience of publicity and public relations," (Aldgate and Richards, 1986, p. 7) acquired during his years as assistant general manager and director of publicity at both Shell Mex and BP. Beddington had used film in his previous roles and commissioned documentaries for public relations campaigns, and so it was no surprise that the *Documentary Newsletter* trade magazine, welcomed his appointment reporting that "he will bring to his new post both taste and a sense of need – two qualities only too rarely associated with commercial ability," while specifically praising his support of artists to commercial ends as "one of the most noteworthy achievements of public relations in this or any country" ("Notes of the Month," 1940).

Early in its existence, the MOI was subject to review by the House of Commons' Subcommittee on Home Defence, which produced a report examining expenditure (Select Committee on National Expenditure, 1940). The report was highly critical of several aspects of the MOI's work in film and explicitly recorded disapproval of Clark's decision to finance feature film projects that the MOI felt had no value as home front propaganda. Film historians have recorded that this use of feature films as propaganda was an innovation which led to tension due to the potential for a clash of the propaganda motives of military and government paymasters with the narrative priorities of the film-makers, an issue that surfaced in the making of *The Next of Kin*;

This form of sponsorship was a new departure, since previously the production of propaganda or public relations films was associated with practices distinct from those involved in profit-making entertainment....In practice the lines were not so clear cut as that since some sponsors expected returns from a cinema release and the motives of those involved in entertainment film were often very mixed.

(Dickinson and Street, 1985, p. 115)

#### 4.2 A policy for film propaganda

While head of the MOI Film Unit, Clark circulated a *Programme for Film Propaganda* paper which suggested using three types of film formats – feature films, documentaries and newsreels. A copy of the paper is included in Thorold Dickinson’s personal papers (Clark, 1940a, p.1) as well as the National Archives, suggesting Dickinson had at least read the paper and thought it worth keeping. Beyond the three production formats, Clark suggests three purposes for wartime film making:

- i. An official record of the war
- ii. To form propaganda film for showing both in the country and abroad
- iii. For issue to the newsreels to supplement their own material

This in turn can be delivered through different formats:

- i. Instructional films for the forces
- ii. Home propaganda
- iii.. Direct propaganda (presented free of charge to cinemas)
- iv. Home front entertainment propaganda
- v. War time films for children (Clark, 1940a, p.2)

Clark further argued in a MOI Policy Committee meeting for including an entertainment component in films, even those with a propaganda purpose. “If we renounce interest in entertainment as such, we might be deprived of a valuable weapon for getting across our propaganda,” (Clark, 1940b, p. 2). Kenneth Clark was promoted to Controller of Home Propaganda in April 1940, but during his short tenure, he commissioned three films that were produced by Sir Michael Balcon of Ealing Studios, *The Next of Kin*’s producer. As well as favourable retrospective assessments by film historians, the early years of the Films Unit was recognised at the time as a period of high quality film production, with the Parliamentary Secretary for the MOI, Ernest Thurtle, reporting to the House of Commons that while “British film production has necessarily fallen in quantity during the war, I think it can be fairly claimed it has risen in quality” (HC Deb 7 July 1942).

### 4.3 *The careless talk message*

The didactic content of *The Next of Kin* was based on two separate but linked themes. It takes up a longstanding MOI campaign against dangerous gossip during war time and integrates this with warning of the dangers from a fifth column of enemy agents. The risks of a fifth column had been the subject of a speech by Prime Minister, Winston Churchill after the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk as they retreated from mainland Europe, in which he referred to a “malignancy in our midst,” (HC Deb 4 June 1940). The uncertainties and fear in Britain in 1940 after the retreat from Dunkirk led to varied and often entirely false rumors spreading throughout a locality. In July 1940, a month after his speech in the House of Commons after Dunkirk, Churchill ordered a “wide campaign....against the dangers of rumour.” (Ministry of Information, 1940a). This led to Kenneth Clark commissioning an advertising agency to deliver a press, poster and leaflet campaign that implored all gossips to “Join Britain’s Silent Column!”, (Ministry of Information, 1940b).

The careless talk campaign was part of a wider initiative on rumor and gossip and the poster campaign remains one of the most enduring public information efforts of World War II, with poster reprints still sold widely today. The careless talk theme linked well with the fifth column scare and was a recurrent theme of wartime propaganda. The message was delivered initially through a poster series, featuring the slogans “Careless talk costs lives,” “Keep it under your hat,” “Keep mum she’s not so dumb.” Despite the general popularity of the careless talk campaign, Lewis (1997) has drawn attention to the negative portrayal of women in some of the posters, arguing that women are pictured as “irresponsible in their garrulity” while at the same time “sinister in their silence.” The poster campaign went through various creative treatments but Fougasse, the artist commissioned by the Ministry of Information to illustrate the campaign felt humor was more compelling than horror as a propaganda tool, which he used as a “corrective device” to counter the serious messaging that fifth columnists and enemy spies were a danger in wartime Britain (Herbert, 1946, p. 38). Fougasse, whose real name was Cyril Kenneth Bird, was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire for this work in 1946 (Taylor, 2010, p. 17).

## 5. Sir Michael Balcon and Thorold Dickinson

Ealing Studios producer Sir Michael Balcon received £20,000 of funding for *The Next of Kin*, at a time when both the Army Film Unit and Crown Film Unit had started to produce



documentary features. Ealing Studios agreed to provide a further £30,000 to make a total of £50,000 (Aldgate and Richards, 1986, p. 99). This mixed funding reflected political thinking at the time that state funding was provided towards production of films that “while not treated as features in production, obtained a commercial cinema release as either first or second features,” (Dickinson and Street, 1985, p. 117). *The Next of Kin* was the first full length film on the subject of careless talk, and followed several 10-minute fictional short films from Ealing on the topic, including, *Dangerous Comment*, *Now You’re Talking* and *All Hands*. The project was born when General John Hawkesworth, director of military training, contacted Balcon about a War Office 20-minute short film on security. Balcon’s choice as director, Thorold Dickinson had just finished making *The Prime Minister* for Warner Brothers and was released from his contract after an approach by the War Office. Dickinson has been described as:

A mediator and proselytiser...it was a natural development that he should be engaged in the major propaganda exercise that became *The Next of Kin*. It provided an opportunity for him to exploit his exceptional enthusiasm for the authority of cinema and was an important enactment of his concern with the processes of communication. (Gough-Yates, 2008, p. 166)

Army funding led to some tensions between the military objectives for a training film and the civilian pressures (from the MOI) for wider distribution of a more populist format, as Dickinson records in his own papers, predicting the later decision to allow public distribution:

The idea of public exhibition has been discouraged but never ruled out; the stipulation has been that no concession to public entertainment should be made in the film, which is primarily an instructional film for the armed forces. The latest opinion was that the film should not be shown to the public. There is every reason to suppose that a discussion might change this opinion or a higher authority might overrule it. (Dickinson, 1941a)

From the outset, the military commissioners and the film makers shared a common commitment to a top quality production in order to achieve their didactic goals, with Dickinson writing in a letter that that one of his funders had “emphasised his opinion that nothing but a first rate film would have any value as propaganda” (Dickinson, 1941b). The film was shot between 26 July and 24 October 1941 (Dickinson, 1949) under the working title of *Security*. Casting involved a blend of service personnel and character actors, although

star names were avoided, in order to ensure no distractions from the central message of security and ensure the audience was focussed on that didactic component and not the glamour of a celebrity actor (Dickinson, 1949). The battle scenes at the climax of the film were deliberately not scripted but based on realistic combined operation procedures, with the invasion plan at the Cornish beach of Mevagissey put together with help from Captain Sir Basil Bartlett Bart., a writer who was assigned as liaison officer, and officers from the Royal Worcestershire Regiment. The Regiment played the role of invading commandos in the film. The resulting plans were used by Cecil Dixon, production manager, to coordinate filming in a way that reflected the reality of offensive amphibious operations and looked less like film and more like an insider's view of a genuine operation.

## **6. The Next of Kin**

The film starts with a scene in France, with a Free French agent and a local resistance worker exchanging intelligence. This opening scene is soon undercut by pre-title captions which convey the purpose of the film.

SECURITY

This is the story of how YOU – unwittingly worked for the enemy.

YOU – without knowing gave him the facts.

YOU – in all innocence helped write these tragic words.

*The Next of Kin* title then appears along with stirring music from the score composed by Sir William Walton. The theme of careless talk and its consequences then inform the film's narrative structure as an Army unit prepares to raid a French coast submarine base. A specialist security officer, Major Richards, is assigned to the operation and contributes to the film's narrative through a series of encounters with slack security, such as poor guarding of training sites and lack of care with documents. There is also dialogue with brother officers on the need to avoid careless talk along with a set-piece lecture to all members of the unit. Tension is then generated as a result of a series of information leaks about the raid, which members of the 95<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade pass on unwittingly to contacts, who in turn are shown to be agents who pass on information to German intelligence. The initial deployment of the brigade, for example, was leaked by an officer to his glamorous dancer girlfriend, from whom her dresser and supplier of drugs extorts information to pass to the Germans. This

initial leak leads to the German high command dispatching special agents to gather more intelligence and identify the target of the offensive operation. A soldier then gives away the likely date of the operation to his girlfriend by telling her when he is leaving the training camp, which is passed to German intelligence and leads to the time window for the operation being narrowed down. When the Royal Air Force (RAF) officer who is responsible for delivery of the air reconnaissance photography leaves his briefcase unattended while lunching with a girlfriend at a London railway station, the contents are copied and used by German intelligence to identify the target. The culmination of this series of incidents is that the Germans are able to deduce the time and place of the raid, which leads to reinforcements being sent to defend the installation, resulting in the invading British forces sailing into an ambush and suffering high casualties.

Dickinson built the film around a series of real incidents of security lapses on which he had been briefed by military training staff and the high number of breaches by Royal Air Force officers shown in the finished production led to inter-service complaints, especially so as the main sponsor of the film initially was the Army (Dickinson, 1949). Beyond the cumulative narrative tension built up as the number of breaches grows, additional audience concern is generated by cuts to scenes in Germany, which show growing interest in the operation by Nazi commanders. This tension is resolved through the highly realistic battle scenes and close-ups of casualties, showing the tragic consequences of careless talk and security leaks as the raid is met with an ambush from well-prepared German defenders whose heavy armour and air support overwhelms the lightly armed British invaders who were depending on surprise in order to achieve their mission. The final scenes are impactful as a result of the way the film skilfully combines an observational tone with realism to make the propaganda message more threatening, giving a vivid illustration of the meaning of the recurring careless talk slogan in an absorbing espionage thriller. The message of the high risks and tragic consequences of careless talk is reinforced by the closing sequence, which mixes visuals of the battlefield with a radio report giving details of the raid and the casualty figures. As the camera pans over immobile casualties on the ground, the voiceover concludes that “they paid the price for bad security,” with the final words using the BBC protocol to announce, “the next of kin of casualties have been informed.”

For Gough-Yates (2008, p. 171), the film was a “supreme product of Dickinson’s didactic temperament,” with a sense of unifying purpose behind what Dickinson himself described as “the idea of security, of how in wartime human weakness, largely

thoughtlessness, can drain away fragment by fragment the whole fabric of safety of hundreds of people.” Dickinson, who later became a film scholar, teaching at the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London, regarded this focus on a single message as an exceptional and innovative approach to film-making and central to the success of *The Next of Kin*:

Where our film broke all convention and has rarely been matched before or since was in its insistence on following one idea and sacrificing all of what is called ‘human interest’ in its ruthless following of that one idea. (Dickinson, 1949).

## **7. The audience and the reception**

While some wartime filmmakers were criticised for being insufficiently explicit and urgent with the required propaganda message, the War Office was so impressed with *The Next of Kin* and its effect on audiences that it appointed Dickinson to be head of production for the Army Kinematograph Film Unit and he was soon promoted to the rank of major. 1942 was a turning point in terms of awareness of a need for varied output in film propaganda and what the British Film Producers Association (BFPA) called a “balance between war and non-war propaganda,” which might include “realistic films about everyday life dealing with matters not directly about the war,” (Kinematographic Weekly, 1942, cited by Richards, 1986, p. 102). The director Sir Michael Balcon (1969, p.134) described the film as “one of the most important films made in the life of Ealing” and there was widespread and positive press reaction. A review in *The Observer* recorded the film as “a masterly team job, slick, unself-conscious, and about as dull as dynamite,” (Lejeune, 1942).

The purpose in *The Next of Kin* (the security messages and propaganda) is delivered through a combination of fictional drama and fact-based propaganda which engaged the audience at an emotional and intellectual level. This fact-based and informational approach produced a highly significant British Second World War film and arguably Thorold Dickinson’s most important work. As a piece of film commissioned with a clear message in mind, the film is noteworthy from a historical perspective for its delicate negotiation between propaganda and entertainment, alongside the way it combines dramatic threads with the pedagogic skill of a public relations and training film. In terms of propaganda impact, according to a summary by the director of Army Kinematography, a research panel of 1,000 members of the Inter-Services Research Bureau, concluded that the film “had achieved more than one would hope to do in 12 months by talking” (Kimberley, 1942). General Alexander told Dickinson (Aldgate and Richards, 1986, p.110) that “the film was worth a division of

troops to the British Army.” Awareness of the key messages was tested in checks on 90 London cinema goers undertaken by Mass Observation. 65% said they very much liked the film, 25% said they liked it with 5% saying they disliked it. 80% recalled the film’s propaganda message warning against careless talk with many of those interviewed actually mentioning the slogan in their responses (Mass Observation, 1942). Dickinson himself recorded people fainting as a result of the realism in the battle scenes, with women having hysterics:

The military cinema manager had to indent for a case of brandy and often called me across from my office across the road to come and help him talk people back to calmness. One woman told a doctor who was called to see her that the whole film was a newsreel record of actual events. When we told her the scenes in France were staged at a Cornish fishing village, she said we were lying.....Until this experience, I had never realised the appalling power that lies in the film and how slight are the margins that control the powers of suggestion in the cinema. (Dickinson, 1978, p. 5)

After initial distribution to the military, the film was put on general release, gained glowing reviews and generated £120,000 in profits for the Treasury – a 400% return on investment. The film was distributed to allies but Gough-Yates (2008, p.171) has also speculated that press reports seen by Dr Goebbels in the Nazi Propaganda Ministry may have led to Germany producing its own propaganda film on careless talk. Certainly, the plot of *Die Goldene Spinne* (The Golden Spider) by Erich Engels, closely follows the plot and intention of *The Next of Kin*.

## **8. Discussion: Intertextual references and realism**

Dickinson’s own appraisal of the persuasive dimension of *The Next of Kin* as not propagandist but rather “a film with a purpose” is instructive in conveying his determination to influence the audience by revealing realism and truth. This approach has been praised by the film director, Martin Scorsese, who described the film as a “fascinating picture” for the “degree to which it sticks to its guns (just following the procedures and the transmission of information). Dickinson succeeds in giving the film a life of its own, which is more than can be said for many propaganda films.....it sticks so closely to its purpose, following the information and showing the effects of leaks” (Horne, 2008, p. 30).

The sense of purpose in the propaganda elements of the film was partly achieved by the unity of message around the “careless talk” theme that is generated by a series of intertextual references. Intertextuality was defined by Kristeva et al. (1981) in relation to literary texts as existing at the semiotic and linguistic levels but has since been applied to film and other media, with individual works not seen as an isolated pieces but a “mosaic...any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” *The Next of Kin* includes intertextuality from the outset in the titling itself. The phrase was a reference to the wartime radio announcement of combat deaths, in which it was broadcast that the “next of kin have been informed.” Despite the varied locations in *The Next of Kin*, including night clubs, hotels, bookshops, Army barracks, almost all the posters in the film relate to the need for security. This is one of several recurring and directly didactic cinematic devices used to put the “careless talk costs lives” message directly before the audience. Throughout the film, the camera pauses and then goes in close on posters bearing careless talk messages and slogans such as “Keep it under your hat.” This familiar graphical material is then reinforced verbally and visually in the on-screen drama, when the soldiers in the operation receive a lecture from the security officers, reminding them, that “You are the real security men, not us.” This direct, empowering and involving message of solidarity is central to the public information or public relations discourse of the film, which emphasises that every person, whether high ranking officer, private soldier or civilian depends on others for their security and has a role to play themselves in being careful with information. The combination of realistic cases of security breaches in the film – without the distraction of star names - was intended to force viewers to confront the fact that ordinary people such as themselves could unsuspectingly supply information to the enemy, resulting in terrible although unintended consequences. The effectiveness of the film’s dramatisation of the propaganda slogan, “Careless Talk Costs Lives,” is achieved through the skilful constructions of a film around a set of stories and incidents that share the single central idea of security, which gives the film dramatic unity and power as a piece of planned communication. The intertextual references help to maintain momentum, despite the lack of a conventional central hero and narrative thread and the references to the careless talk posters are a further example of realism which relates to the didactic purpose of *The Next of Kin*.

The success of *The Next of Kin* confirmed the popularity and potential of realism in British wartime cinema. Realism in the general sense and as a historical movement in the visual arts is the deliberate tendency to approximate to reality and in film making has been

described as a “directorial strategy to elicit highly naturalistic performances” (Nichols, 1991, p. 13). In a talk Dickinson (1949) gave to accompany a screening of the film, he said that the deliberately realistic style of film making in *The Next of Kin*, “anticipated by several years.....the mood of intense realism,” that was adopted in the Italian post-war realism film making of Roberto Rossellini and the “post-war trend in realism and factual re-construction in the American and Italian cinema” and specifically the films of the American producer, de Rochemont, which were “reconstructions dramatised from actual events.” This realistic approach to film making was itself a device that contributed to communicative purpose of *The Next of Kin*, by making the issue and consequences of careless talk something to which audiences could relate and respond to at an emotional level.

The blend of fact and fiction in the plotline and the mix of propaganda and drama in the screenplay makes *The Next of Kin* compelling viewing today. Dickinson’s approach followed almost to the letter some aspects of the *Programme for Film Propaganda* written by the leader of the MOI Films Unit, Kenneth Clark, in the way it mixed dramatic film-making with newsreel-type sequences of realism. Clark was intrigued by the possibilities of documentary and newsreel to add realism to feature films, and in the copy of the document in Dickinson’s personal papers, Clark cites a German film on the invasion of Poland called *Baptism of Fire*, which used documentary film making technique and yet was directed throughout and shot to a prearranged plan, in a quite similar way to the final result of *The Next of Kin* (Clark, 1940a, p. 5). Shaw (2006, p. 21) has written that one of the reasons British cinema is said to have come of age during the second world war was partly because “film-makers exploited the opportunities provided by the conflict to explore new subjects and to use innovative techniques.” Dickinson’s use of realism was one such innovation in the delivery of wartime propaganda and although *The Next of Kin* was a fiction, the level of realism in its plotline anticipated live offensive operations that were to take place after the film was conceived. The film was based on a raid on a German submarine pen in Northern France, and was released just ahead of the St Nazaire raid by Royal Marine Commandos. This unforeseen anticipation of reality led to UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill intervening to get the film withdrawn as it was too close to the detail of the forthcoming raid:

Winston Churchill caused our film to be withdrawn after a few performances because its subject matter too closely resembled the forthcoming raid on St. Nazaire. Only after that raid was successful was our film put back into circulation. (Dickinson, 1949).

The war-time experience of realism as a film-making technique was the basis for the post-war development of the English social realism genre of film, with examples including *The Blue Lamp* (1950), *Room at the Top* (1958) and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962). *The Blue Lamp* was one of the most successful of the post-war social realism films, winning the 1951 BAFTA for best British Film as well a nomination for a Golden Lion at the 1950 Venice Film Festival. It also led to the development of the character of PC George Dixon in *Dixon of Dock Green*, in what could be argued was the UK's first reality-derived television drama series.

## **9. Conclusion and limitations**

The decision to focus on a single film is a limitation of this paper in drawing more general conclusions on the use of realism in World War II propaganda and public information work, either in the UK or elsewhere. However, findings from this initial analysis open up opportunities for further study on the use of neo-realistic film-making as a bridge between documentary and entertainment in propaganda campaigns in World War II. In particular, further work on the way in which cinema was used in war time and further investigation to add clarity as to whether it was for training, PR or propaganda purposes would be useful lines of investigation. The author's background and research focus on public relations and propaganda means that the film has been analysed primarily through the lens of public relations history and war time propaganda rather than using the rich mixture of theoretical approaches and resulting methodologies that exist in film studies. Although rudimentary elements of cinema history and film criticism were included in the paper, additional insights from cinema scholars on *The Next of Kin* would be welcome. In particular, the application of relevant cinematic theory to the film, comparative insights on the techniques used and an expert assessment of the historical importance of the film from a film studies perspective would add new dimensions of analysis which would enhance the project. Finally, alongside increasing interest in historical study of the visual aspects of public relations such as film, the visual component of contemporary public relations practice is also increasing, suggesting that both fields could benefit from and share advances in the development of a critical public relations research methodology for visual materials.



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