

Propaganda for Democracy: The Curious Case of *Love on the Dole*

Caroline Levine

In 1936, the British Board of Film Censors was scandalized when a film company proposed to make a film called *Love on the Dole*. Based on a best-selling novel by Walter Greenwood, the story follows the travails of a brother and sister, Harry and Sally Hardcastle, inhabitants of struggling industrial Salford.¹ Both are hardworking and respectable, and though both begin with good jobs, economic conditions are worsening, and the family falls deeper and deeper into financial trouble as workers are laid off and factories close. The crisis comes when the government introduces the Means Test—suddenly insisting that thousands of unemployed workers no longer qualify for government aid and throwing them off the dole. Sally's fiancé Larry, a soft-spoken, courteous socialist activist, forms part of a deputation of workers intending to complain to the Mayor about the Means Test. On his way, a crowd of other workers start to riot against police control, and Larry is hurt in the struggle. He dies shortly thereafter. Meanwhile, Sally's brother Harry is unable to find work, and their father throws him out of the house when he discovers that Harry's girlfriend is pregnant. The final scene offers a bitter resolution to the family's troubles. Sally becomes the mistress of the wealthy bookie Sam Grundy, a repulsive character whose lecherous interest in her has been clear from the beginning. Only by losing her respectability to become Sam Grundy's

Caroline Levine is associate professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She has published on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She is currently completing a book on liberal democracy and avant-garde art.

¹ Greenwood's novel was an immediate success when it first appeared in England in 1933. Reissued ten times in just three years, it was also translated into a number of languages, including Hebrew. Kept in print in England throughout the 1930s, *Love on the Dole* was soon turned into a play with a hugely successful stage run, starting in Manchester and finishing brilliantly in London's West End. See Stephen Constantine, "‘Love on the Dole’ and Its Reception in the 1930s," *Literature and History* 8 (Autumn 1982): 232–47. Greenwood boasted that, by 1940, 3 million playgoers, including the King and Queen, had seen the dramatic version. Letter to the *Manchester Guardian* (26 February 1940), 10.

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mistress can Sally find jobs for both father and brother so that their families can survive.²

One of the British Board of Film Censors reports called it “a very sordid story, in very sordid surroundings.” They vetoed the proposal to turn Greenwood’s novel into a film. Apart from the coarse language, the most worrying parts of the text from the Board’s point of view were “the scenes of the mob fighting the police” and “Sally selling herself.”³ One of the censors went on to note that such scenes might be fine in a novel or play, but the cinema was a different matter.⁴ Implicitly, in other words, if the authorities could afford to be nonchalant when it came to novels and theater productions—with their largely middle-class audiences—they would have to remain vigilant when considering the mass of spectators who flocked to the cinema.⁵

This ruling was certainly consistent with other decisions made by the British Board of Film Censors in the 1930s. Thirty-seven films about sexual subjects—including prostitution, birth control, abortion, and bigamy—were prohibited during the decade, and Sally’s decision to trade sex for economic favors fell squarely into that category.⁶ The scene of the mob riot was condemned under a more general ban—the proscription of “stories and scenes which are calculated . . . to ferment social unrest and discontent.”⁷ Sally’s fall from respectability also had radically unsettling implications, since it presented an image of a working class who could find no palatable alternatives within the existing system. The scene of the workers’ uprising seemed to reinforce this message, and the death of Sally’s fiancé suggested that activists who attempted to argue for a peaceful alternative to the political and economic status quo would only be martyred in the process. It made sense that the censors would be eager to quell such radical impulses in the cinema, especially in the wake of a severe economic depression.⁸

² The story took three forms in the 1930s: the novel put its emphasis on Harry and his desire for masculine self-sufficiency. The play, written by Greenwood in collaboration with Ronald Gow, shifted the emphasis to Sally, though it changed few of the novel’s crucial events. The dramatic version was then rewritten for an American audience, but again most of the scenes and dialogues remained faithful to the novel. See Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole* (Harmondsworth, 1969); Ronald Gow and Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole* (London, 1935), and *Love on the Dole: A Play in Three Acts* (London, 1936).

³ British Board of Film Censors, “Scenario Reports,” 1936, British Film Institute Library, London, 42, 42a.

⁴ “Even if the book is well reviewed, and the stage play had a successful run, I think this subject, as it stands, would be very undesirable as a film.” *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵ Ivor Montagu’s 1929 pamphlet, *The Political Censorship of Films*, bears out the presumption that contemporary experts saw cinema and stage as having very different audiences and patterns of reception. Montagu writes: “It is desirable to exercise for the commercial screen more stringent standards than those applicable to the theatre; for a theatre-going public is relatively selective . . . while the clientele of a given cinema is relatively habitual.” Quoted in Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930–1939* (London, 1984), 90. Sarah Street concludes that “the medium of the cinema is clearly . . . the problem.” *British Cinema in Documents* (London, 2000), 31.

⁶ Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, 112.

⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 116.

⁸ Constantine makes the case that Greenwood’s novel and the dramatic version were not actually radical at all: they were popular with middle-class audiences in the 1930s precisely because the plot merely emphasized a value that could never ruffle middle-class complacency—respectability. But although it is true, as Constantine maintains, that Greenwood’s work refrains from condemning the bourgeoisie as responsible for poverty and unemployment and fails to advocate either trade union

The British Board of Film Censors was not, officially speaking, a government body. Set up by the film industry in 1911 to vet scripts and scenarios, it was intended to offer a kind of self-censorship for the trade. By regulating themselves, filmmakers thought, they could prevent the government from seizing or supervising their business. But if the Board was established to keep the government out of the cinema, it had to satisfy the government that the film industry was neither inflaming nor corrupting the public. Thus the Board frequently—and covertly—consulted the Home and Foreign Offices. Indeed, despite the censors' semblance of independence, there is plenty of evidence that they worked hand in glove with official politics. They routinely brought scripts set in foreign countries to the relevant embassies for approval, for example.⁹ As the Home Secretary put it in 1931: "The Home Office is . . . not responsible for the Board of Film Censors and does not desire to assume any responsibility at all. . . . At the same time, it is necessary that the Home Office should keep in touch with the Board of Film Censors."¹⁰ In keeping with its role as a government ally, the Board's rules targeted not only moral matters in film—prostitution, premarital sex, nudity, incest, and abortion—but also explicitly political ones. The Board policy most obviously friendly to conservative politics was its 1917 decision to prohibit all images of "the relationship between capital and labour."¹¹ By 1937, the president of the Board was proud to announce "that there is not a single film showing in London today which deals with any of the burning questions of the day."¹²

In 1940, after the war against Germany had broken out, the novelist Walter Greenwood complained publicly in a letter to the *Guardian* about his treatment at the hands of the British Board of Film Censors. He called the censors "an unofficial body which has taken upon itself the power of a Dr. Goebbels." Indeed, since Britain was waging war in the name of liberty and democratic government, the Board's powers to restrict free expression were making a mockery of the war itself: thanks to the Board, "all the talk of the freedom for which we are told we have been fighting [is] so much claptrap."¹³

The following year saw *Love on the Dole* made into a feature film. How did this happen? Decades later, the writer Ronald Gow gave a surprising explanation. In 1984, he wrote a letter to the *Guardian*, claiming that back in 1940, he and

activity or outright revolution, it certainly offers a stark critique of government indifference and slum-dwelling despair. And in barring it from the cinema, the British Board of Film Censors made it clear that the plot's endorsement of respectability was not enough. See "'Love on the Dole' and Its Reception in the 1930s," 232–47.

⁹ Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, 122.

¹⁰ Proceedings of the First Meeting of the Film Consultative Committee (26 November 1931), BBFC Verbatim Reports, 1930–31, 4, British Film Institute Library, London.

¹¹ Nicholas Pronay, "Introduction," in *Propaganda, Politics, and Film, 1918–45*, ed. Nicholas Pronay and D. W. Spring (London, 1982), 15.

¹² Quoted in Nicholas Pronay, "The Political Censorship of Films in Britain between the Wars," in Pronay and Spring, *Propaganda, Politics, and Film, 1918–45*, 122. In 1938, Geoffrey Mander, a Liberal Member of Parliament and a consistent opponent of censorship, suggested that the government had solved its democratic public relations problem by hiding behind the BBFC: "The British Board of Film Censors . . . is an unofficial body, and it is extremely convenient that it should be so, because, of course, the Government can say, 'They have nothing to do with us; they can do anything they like.' But that does not prevent useful contacts being established with the Government all the same." Quoted in Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, 92.

¹³ Walter Greenwood, letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, 26 February 1940, 10.

Greenwood were summoned to meet with J. Brooke-Wilkinson, then Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors. “Brookie” told the two writers that they must turn their dramatic script into a screenplay without delay. “This film’s got to be made,” he reportedly told them. “We’ve got a tip from someone ‘higher up.’ I can say no more.”¹⁴ If Gow’s memories are accurate, then out of the blue, the highest echelons of government were insisting that a film of *Love on the Dole* be sped into production. Soon British National Films was producing it. The film, directed by John Baxter and starring Deborah Kerr in her first major role as Sally Hardcastle, appeared in June 1941.

Compared to Hollywood movies of the same period, *Love on the Dole* has a low-budget look and a number of clumsy shots. All outdoor scenes happen against obviously painted sets, and there are remarkably few point-of-view shots, which makes it difficult to identify strongly with the characters. The film’s bleak view of living conditions in working-class England is interspersed with stock footage of huge, churning machines and groaning factories. But Deborah Kerr is spunky and appealing as Sally, and her brother is played as honest, innocent, and diligent. Their parents look exhausted and ancient—obviously worn down by poverty. Larry, Sally’s socialist fiancé, gives several rousing speeches about the need for change, and he is shown to have a sense of humor and a love for Sally that offsets his earnest political oratory. A small crew of sinister women drink gin and periodically comment on the events of the plot, and in the background a mass of working-class men jeer, drink, place bets, and declare themselves ready to riot. It is only in the final scene, after her fall from respectability, that Sally suddenly looks like a real Hollywood star. Before confronting her anguished parents, she emerges from a taxi, dressed in a beautifully tailored suit and draped in furs.

Despite its undistinguished cinematography, the film was an instant critical success when it appeared in 1941. Its grittiness was a stark departure from the many genre films produced in Britain in the 1930s, which tended to favor costume dramas, thrillers, musical-hall comedies, and a focus on glamorous heroines and aristocrats.¹⁵ Thus newspapers repeatedly called *Love on the Dole* “courageous” and said that it was “one of the most moving and most significant [films] ever to be made in Britain.”¹⁶ According to the *Daily Express*, it was “a great British film—perhaps the greatest.”¹⁷ *The Times* praised it for “never falter[ing] into sentimentality,” and the *Spectator* compared it “with the best that Hollywood can offer in world-markets.”¹⁸ Even Winston Churchill himself was impressed when he saw

¹⁴ Ronald Gow, letter to the *Guardian*, 3 April 1984, 12.

¹⁵ Costume dramas from the thirties include Alexander Korda’s *The Private Lives of Henry VIII* (1933) and Robert Stevenson’s *Tudor Rose* (1936); the best-known thrillers were Alfred Hitchcock’s *Thirty Nine Steps* (1935) and *The Lady Vanishes* (1938). The decade also featured Gracie Fields and George Formby in a number of low-budget “quota quickies” that borrowed heavily from music-hall conventions, such as *Sally in Our Alley* (1931), *Keep Your Seats Please* (1936), and *Keep Fit* (1937). The focus on aristocrats included such films as *Knight without Armour* (1937), with Marlene Dietrich as a Russian countess, and Korda’s *Nell Gwynn* (1934), one of a number of films from the period about shopgirls who fall for noblemen.

¹⁶ For example, A. Jympson Harman, “New West-End Films,” *Evening News*, 30 May 1941, 2. Moore Raymond, “New Films,” *Sunday Dispatch*, 1 June 1941, 2.

¹⁷ Jonah Barrington, “New Film,” *Daily Express*, 31 May 1941, 2.

¹⁸ “*Love on the Dole*: An Outstanding Film,” *The Times*, 30 May 1941, 6; Edgar Anstey, “The Cinema,” *Spectator*, 6 June 1941, 607.

the film in a private viewing.¹⁹ If the box office did not count it as one of the best commercial successes of 1941, the critics' response suggests that it nonetheless marked a new epoch in British filmmaking.²⁰

When a government covertly commissions a film during wartime, we usually call it propaganda. But what is most striking about *Love on the Dole* is how little it resembles conventional examples of propaganda, especially those made in wartime conditions.²¹ Devoid of fighting heroes and short on rousing national sentiments, daring in its unsentimental storytelling and challenging to authority, it seems more like a pointed critique of British government policy than an inspiring tale of a nation coming together to fight for its life. Certainly it is easier to see how it might ruffle conservative viewers—as it had ruffled the British Board of Film Censors—than how it might answer the urgent need for national cohesion and morale.

And yet, *Love on the Dole* could certainly be characterized as an “official” film.²²

¹⁹ Lord Beaverbrook reported that “the Prime Minister and Mrs. Churchill . . . praised it highly” in a letter to G. W. Parish (2 June 1941), Lance Comfort Collection, British Film Institute Library, London.

²⁰ There are no numbers documenting the success of *Love on the Dole* in cinemas. But Len England, one of the administrators of the Mass-Observation survey, which tried to gather information about British life and habits starting in the 1930s, reported that *Love on the Dole* was one of a very few films that gave a bleak picture of family life and “one of the biggest box-office failures for years.” Quoted in *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, ed. Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (London, 1987), 298.

²¹ There is little scholarly consensus about how to define the term *propaganda*, in part because the scholars who have considered the subject come from an array of fields, including psychology, sociology, communications, history, literary criticism, rhetoric, and even philosophy. There are long-standing debates about whether propaganda always entails falsehood; whether it is always pernicious; and whether it is defined as emanating only from the state—or whether it could include media, education, bureaucracy, and advertising. For a recent account of these debates, see Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1999), 1–34. Despite the variation in definition, a common thread in theories of propaganda is an insistence on transparency of message, on immediacy and simplicity: as psychologists Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson write in *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York, 1991), the “classic propaganda formula” involves “a simple image that plays on prejudices and emotions to produce a simple, but nonetheless effective, response” (36); similarly, marketing expert Nicholas Jackson O’Shaughnessy defines propaganda as “generally involv[ing] the unambiguous clarity of message: ‘clarity’ may not be an essential definition of propaganda, but it is certainly a normative one” (*Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* [Manchester, 2004], 16). Communications scholar James Shanahan defines “traditional” propaganda as having “specific purposes and messages that are immediately evident.” *Propaganda without Propagandists?* (Cresskill, UK, 2001), 5. *Love on the Dole* is hardly a straightforward and unambiguous example of state propaganda, and so it does not fit most traditional definitions of the term.

²² There is some dispute among film historians about what qualifies as an “official” film. Philip M. Taylor makes the case that every film that appeared during the war was “official”: “The simple fact of the matter was that any film which appeared on British cinema screens during the war could do so only if it had secured the approval of the British government, and in so far as the specific official body responsible was concerned, this meant the Ministry of Information. . . . Itself the producer of 1887 ‘official’ films, the MoI was also responsible for approving (or otherwise) over 3000 newsreel issues and nearly 400 feature films. In other words, their influence was invariably more real than apparent. . . . In effect no newspaper article, radio broadcast, or clip of film was allowed to reach the public unless the British government, operating through the MoI, allowed it to do so.” Taylor also notes, however, that there were mistakes that eluded government oversight: see his “Introduction: Film, the Historian, and the Second World War,” in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Philip M. Taylor (Houndmills, UK, 1988), 7. Frances Thorpe and Nicholas Pronay agree that “in strict theory, all films publicly exhibited in Britain during the war were official films because no film could be shown

Although it was not actually produced by the state, it did not pass under its radar: the Ministry of Information permitted the famous ban on the film to be lifted and, if Gow's account was accurate, even went out of its way to ensure that the story appeared on screen. Such a decision raises more questions than it answers. Why exactly would sources "higher up" suddenly decide that *Love on the Dole* should now reach the big screen? Clearly, the outbreak of war must have changed the state's relationship to Walter Greenwood's plot. But just what was it about this scandalous and radical story that made it seem harmful when the nation was at peace yet useful and constructive for the war effort?

This essay argues that *Love on the Dole* exemplifies the necessarily paradoxical character of propaganda made for liberal democracies at war. Specifically, I propose four motivations that are likely to have prompted the state's sudden preference for the film in 1940. First of all, the Ministry of Information was looking for ways to publicize the notion that Britain was a free society, but since propaganda itself was closely associated with the unfree states Britain was fighting against, the Ministry needed propaganda that did not look like propaganda. Second, it was crucial to the Ministry's campaign to show that the nation was equal and fair, and a film that marked the distance between the poverty of the thirties and the full employment of wartime would be helpful for national cohesion. Third, the film's bleakly realist style suggested that Britons were allowed access to difficult truths and so lived in an open society. Finally, the film's plot suggested that it was urgent for the individual to sacrifice herself for the collective. These four values—freedom, equality, openness, and collective unity—sound like familiar principles expressed by liberal democracies at war, but they are not always complementary. Individual freedom and national unity are unavoidably at odds, since the individual's right to dissent invites criticism, division, and disunity, and then, too, putting together a government-led campaign for individual freedom is patently contradictory. A team in the Ministry of Information claimed that "it would greatly strengthen home morale if Ministers could express their belief in democracy in homely examples" because "generalisation has little appeal for the masses."²³ But it was not so easy to find a striking example of something as paradoxical as a liberal state unified for victory. This essay shows how challenging it must have been to find an appropriately "homely example," and in the process, it reveals just how difficult the task of creating propaganda for liberal democracy must be. Strikingly successful at joining crucial but often contradictory propaganda aims, *Love on the Dole* emerges, in this context, as a film peculiarly well suited to the complex needs of the British war effort.

PROPAGANDA FOR FREEDOM

A flurry of propaganda studies appeared after the First World War—including Harold Lasswell's classic *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927), John

in a public cinema without official approval," but they add that "the application of the Ministry of Information's wide powers stopped well short of a total direction of the film industry." *British Official Films in the Second World War* (Oxford, 1980), 40–41.

²³ "Themes on Which Ministerial Statements Are Desirable" (October 1939), The National Archives: Public Record Office (hereafter TNA: PRO), Ministry of Information: Files of Correspondence (hereafter INF) 1/867.

Dewey's *Impressions of Soviet Russia* (1929), and Elmer J. Ellis's *Education against Propaganda* (1937).²⁴ Indeed, it was not until the Vietnam era that propaganda would again receive so much sustained and critical attention from scholars and theorists.²⁵ In the aftermath of the Great War, theorists were particularly concerned to make sense of the new impact of mass media, including radio and cinema, on participants in the conflict. And they warned of newly powerful and devious techniques of manipulation that had emerged in wartime, including doctored photographs, falsified official documents, and deceptive reports of enemy atrocities spread through newspapers, radio, and newsreels. British antiwar activists such as Arthur Ponsonby publicized the lies used by the belligerents in wartime—including the British themselves—because he wanted to issue an alert for the future: “With a warning before them, the common people may be more on their guard when the war cloud next appears on the horizon and less disposed to accept as truth the rumours, explanations, and pronouncements issued for their consumption.”²⁶ American scholars also tried to sound the alarm so that their compatriots would not be drawn into another European war on the basis of lies and exaggerations: H. C. Peterson's 1939 *Propaganda for War: The Campaign against American Neutrality, 1914–17*, singled out the covert cunning of British propaganda and showed how it had persuaded the neutral United States to join the conflict—and so warned Americans of the dangers posed even by their allies.²⁷ The British in fact became world famous for having developed the most sophisticated and efficient propaganda organization of any of the belligerents in that terrible global conflict.²⁸

Thus when war loomed again on the horizon, and when the British government again wanted to enlist their own people as well the Americans on their side, they faced an acute public relations problem. The very success of their propaganda efforts in the First World War had put the world on guard against further British efforts at persuasion. At home, too, it seemed important to dismantle the prop-

²⁴ Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927; repr., Cambridge, MA, 1971); John Dewey, *Impressions of Soviet Russia and the Revolutionary World: Mexico, China, Turkey* (New York, 1929); Elmer J. Ellis, *Education against Propaganda* (Philadelphia, 1937).

²⁵ Stanley B. Cunningham argues that before World War I the term *propaganda* was used infrequently and “the mass phenomenon as we have come to know it” did not exist. After World War II came a dearth of theoretical work on the subject that lasted until the 1980s. *The Idea of Propaganda* (Westport, CT, 2002), ix, 2. J. Michael Sproule makes the case that analysis of propaganda underwent a “lull” after the Second World War and reemerged in the United States in the 1960s, as the works of theorists such as John Fiske and Michel Foucault “swept onto” the American scene. See his *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion* (Cambridge, 2005), 264–68. In Europe, French sociologist Jacques Ellul ushered in a whole new attention to propaganda in the social sciences in the early 1960s, with his *Propagandes* (Paris, 1962).

²⁶ Arthur Ponsonby, M.P., *Falsehood in Wartime: Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated throughout the Nations during the Great War* (New York, 1928; and London, 1929).

²⁷ H. C. Peterson, *Propaganda for War: The Campaign against American Neutrality, 1914–17* (Norman, OK, 1939), vii, 326. See also James Duane Squires, *British Propaganda at Home and in the United States from 1914 to 1917* (Cambridge, 1935).

²⁸ M. L. Sanders and Philip M. Taylor argue that the British were particularly successful in their World War I propaganda campaign, but they also point out that the Germans widely exaggerated Britain's canny uses of propaganda in order to broadcast the idea that they had been stabbed in the back, rather than straightforwardly defeated in battle—and so the renowned success of World War I British propaganda was itself the product of a German propaganda campaign. See *British Propaganda during the First World War, 1914–18* (London, 1982), 250.

aganda apparatus to show that the government was no longer seeking to shape public opinion. Propaganda “was associated with subversion and secrecy, . . . a somehow ‘un-English’ activity made necessary only by the activities of the enemy.”²⁹ British officials knew that it was crucial to persuade subjects and allies that the war was being fought to preserve the British tradition of openness and freedom. Paradoxically enough, then, the ideal propaganda campaign seemed to involve persuading the world that the British were not actively engaged in propaganda.³⁰

BBC broadcaster Richard Stanton Lambert explained in 1938 that propaganda was “essentially an instrument of authority.”³¹ And although Lambert and others agreed that propaganda was necessary in moments of national crisis, he also took great pains to argue that propaganda was necessarily out of place in a nation like Britain.³² He traced the roots of the term *propaganda* to the Catholic Church—specifically, to the Catholic effort to win back Protestants during the Counter-Reformation—and maintained that Northern European Protestant countries had long recoiled from any reliance on propaganda because of its associations with Rome. He defined propaganda as that which “influence[s] persons to do or think things which they would not do or think if left to themselves” and concluded that propagandist techniques were unnecessary in a genuine liberal democracy, where people must have the intellectual freedom and political agency to make their decisions deliberately and independently.³³ For Lambert, Britain clearly came closer to this ideal than its fellow nations: “The Germans, most herdlike of peoples, are also most susceptible to propaganda; while the Americans, though proud of their individualism, suffer and cultivate propaganda through lack of a national tradition.”³⁴ Although he claimed that no modern state could always live up to the ideal, he also insisted that Britain, which united force of habit with a staunch individualism, was the least likely nation to respond to—or to need—propaganda.

Lambert, despite his jingoism, was not wrong to note an entrenched British resistance to both censorship and propaganda. By 1939, it was clear to the Ministry that the mass of British citizens mistrusted any hint of government control over the circulation of fact and opinion. Just as war broke out, the British Institute of Public Opinion reported that the latest news censorship provoked outrage on the part of the public, who immediately leapt to compare their government to the one they were fighting: “It savours too much of the dictator’s attitude,” they complained: “Keeping the truth hidden is contrary to all democratic principles.”³⁵ And this kind of protest was not only limited to acts of suppression. Observers

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁰ As Thorpe and Pronay argue, “The element of surprise, especially important in propaganda, had been lost: the British government was now expected to produce sophisticated propaganda devices and everyone at home and abroad would be on the lookout for them.” *British Official Films*, 5.

³¹ Richard S. Lambert, *Propaganda* (London, 1938), 12.

³² According to Lambert, propaganda was appropriate in a democracy in those moments when people had “to act first and think afterwards”—those “pathological states” like “wars, revolutions, and physical and economic disasters.” *Ibid.*

³³ “[Propaganda is] needed least by people that are individualist, trained to think for themselves, and reasonably prosperous. So that we may say with confidence that the more propaganda is used in a country the less does it approach to this ideal state.” *Ibid.*, 8–10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁵ British Institute of Public Opinion, “Public Opinion during the Week Ending 30th September 1939,” TNA: PRO INF 1/261.

found that British cinemagoers resisted “strongly exhortational messages” in official films.³⁶ Given such a skeptical citizenry, it would seem likely that government attempts to direct national morale were bound to fail.

Yet, the British government was reluctant to abandon its attempts to manage the national consciousness. Most importantly, the Ministry worried that Germany was outstripping Britain in the force and sophistication of their propaganda techniques and would use these methods to win the war. “Hitler himself has repeatedly said that his strongest weapon is propaganda,” they fretted, and “he has proved it . . . by his remarkable victory over strong opposition in Germany.”³⁷ In fact, anxieties about the inadequacies of British propaganda predated the war. As early as 1938, Sir Stephen Tallents wrote: “War, if it came, would be against . . . a state which, by the possession of a fully equipped Ministry of Propaganda, . . . would enter a war against us with a long start of preparedness.”³⁸ By February of 1940, members of the Ministry of Information were bewailing their backwardness: “whereas German propaganda . . . is developed to a fine art, British propaganda . . . is unfortunately conspicuous by its shortcomings.”³⁹

Thus the British government faced an almost insuperable challenge: German propaganda was widely perceived as dangerously successful, but to imitate German political methods was to suggest that Britain was turning into the very totalitarian enemy it was battling. F. C. Bartlett, a professor of psychology who was consulted by the Ministry of Information, maintained that the “outstanding character of a democracy is that there cannot be merely a single, official, one-sided statement on any major problem of policy, with all other kinds of statements suppressed.”⁴⁰ Spectacular pageants of national unity and superiority, demonstrations of military might, and a homogeneous and centralized press all functioned as exhilarating and unifying strategies for regimes like Hitler’s, but though democratic leaders might crave the same control and the same unanimity for the sake of wartime morale, it would be too easy to be exposed as hypocrites if they simply borrowed the propaganda techniques of their illiberal enemies. How, then, to persuade citizens to unite around a paradoxical common value—the freedom to dissent from common values?

The only full-length feature film to be openly funded by the Ministry of Information—Alexander Korda’s *The Lion Has Wings* (1939)—shows the strain of this paradox. The film begins by intoning, “This is Britain, where we believe in freedom.” To demonstrate the national commitment to liberty, the film shows British people on holiday, playing sports, and dancing, and sets these images up against German military discipline. Juxtaposing images of individual athletes with spectacles of Nazi parades, the narrator says, “While we played or cycled or walked, others preferred to march.” And yet in order to suggest that the British could win

³⁶ James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State, and Propaganda, 1939–1945* (London, 1998), 46.

³⁷ Professor Gilbert Highet and Mrs. Gilbert Highet, “Memorandum on British Counter-Propaganda” (26 March 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/848.

³⁸ Sir Stephen Tallents, letter to Sir Warren Fisher (21 December 1938); quoted in Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London, 1979), 13.

³⁹ “German versus British Propaganda” (C.C. paper no. 7, February 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

⁴⁰ F. C. Bartlett, *Political Propaganda* (Cambridge, 1940), 133.

the war against the Nazis, the film also had to show that Britain was united and ready for victory—that the military and civilian populations were well organized, well equipped, and prepared to fight effectively. In the middle of the film, then, comes an abrupt shift, and suddenly we are treated to images of Britain’s “clock-work” readiness, including scenes of Britain’s own military parades. Korda’s way of resolving the contradiction between a free society and a disciplined military, in other words, was to separate his film into two distinct portions: a peace part, which showed that British subjects prized their individual freedom; and a war part, which showed that Britons were following a streamlined and cooperative effort to meet the exigencies of war. Audiences complained that *The Lion Has Wings* offered “too much propaganda.”⁴¹ This was perhaps not surprising, given that the film was explicitly a product of the Ministry of Information and given that British audiences were on their guard against strong exhortations from authority. But I want to suggest, too, that the film may have faltered in part because of its contradictory pressures, caught as it was between championing the value of individual freedom and celebrating the achievement of collective military discipline.

It was in the context of this struggle to make propaganda for freedom that Walter Greenwood—almost certainly unwittingly—seems to have played right into the hands of the Ministry of Information. It was within a month of the publication of his letter to the *Guardian* comparing the British Board of Film Censors to Josef Goebbels that the Board not only retracted their ban but notified Greenwood and Gow that they had to finish a screenplay of *Love on the Dole* so that it could be rushed into production. Decades later, as Gow explained in his 1984 letter to the *Guardian*, he located the source of this command. Around 1980, he confronted the eminent art historian Kenneth Clark, by then Lord Clark, who had been head of the Films Division in the Ministry of Information in 1940, and asked him if he had been the one who had given the order to make *Love on the Dole*. Lord Clark confirmed that he was.⁴² If Clark was telling the truth—and there is no particular reason to doubt his word—then we can date the official order to make the film to Clark’s short tenure in the Films Division of the Ministry of Information: sometime between January and April 1940. In this context, the chronology of events is compelling: Greenwood’s letter complaining that the Board was as pernicious a censor as the Nazi Goebbels was published in the *Guardian* at the end of February 1940. Kenneth Clark’s sudden demand for *Love on the Dole* had to have come sometime between January and April. Thus it seems plausible that Greenwood’s letter in February actually provoked the Ministry’s abrupt change of heart.⁴³ Indeed, since the Films Division was trawling for ideas in the spring of 1940, this hypothesis seems especially likely. In a meeting on 1 April, Clark reported that “film producers were asking for fresh subjects, and asked for suggestions to be given to him for books, etc. capable of being turned into suitable

⁴¹ Mass-Observation, quoted in Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema and the Second World War* (Oxford, 1986), 23.

⁴² Gow, letter to the *Guardian*, 3 April 1984, 12.

⁴³ It does not make sense for Greenwood to have publicly complained about the BBFC after he knew that his novel was going to be made into a film, so his letter almost certainly predated his meeting with “Brookie”—unless, that is, he was already in cahoots with the Ministry of Information and wrote the letter in order to draw attention to the fact that the BBFC was about to lift the ban. I know of no evidence for this latter hypothesis.

films.”⁴⁴ Greenwood’s public complaint thus came to the attention of Kenneth Clark at exactly the moment that he was looking for inspiration.

Clearly, an individual letter of complaint to a national newspaper is not usually enough to shift government policy, especially in wartime. And Greenwood’s arguments for freedom of speech were hardly new or revolutionary. But it is suggestive that the novelist’s letter of complaint in February of 1940 echoed the Ministry’s concerns exactly: he argued that by exerting any form of government control over speech, the British could be said to be acting like their dictatorial German enemies and thus showing contempt for those who were fighting in the name of freedom. And while Greenwood’s letter could have seemed like a confirmation of the Ministry’s worst fears, it is also possible that in 1940 it provided a much needed inspiration. After all, what could be a more effective display of liberty than publicly lifting an onerous ban imposed by an earlier, more repressive regime? By removing the prohibition, the government in power could act out its commitment to the liberties of the British subject, trumpeting its dedication to freedom by contrasting it with past oppression. No matter that it was the same state that had been the oppressor—the performance of liberation was what national morale demanded.

Nor was this gesture limited to the nation. In September of 1939, the documentary filmmaker John Grierson, the pioneer of documentary filmmaking who reported on North American perceptions of Britain early in the war, insisted that Americans would offer their support to Britain only as long as they were persuaded that the war was being fought in the name of freedom.⁴⁵ In the winter of 1939 and 1940, Britain seemed to be succeeding. The *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote: “It seems that even under war censorship Britain allows more freedom of expression than is permitted by the Dictators in time of peace.”⁴⁶ But it was difficult to maintain this reputation, especially given restrictions on news in the early months of the war. As Ronald Gow remembered it, pressure from the American press was the single most important factor in the relaxing of the restrictions on *Love on the Dole*: “There were headlines in the American papers saying, ‘Britain Bans Workers’ Film’; and in 1940 this was thought to be a bad report from a country fighting for freedom. So Mr. Brooke-Wilkinson . . . summoned Greenwood and myself to lunch.”⁴⁷

Thus, in an effort to create a persuasive propaganda campaign for its liberal ideals, it seems likely that the Ministry of Information was only too happy to stage a public performance of liberty by abolishing an earlier censorship. If there was an irony to the government’s plan to flaunt its commitment to freedom of ex-

⁴⁴ Minutes of the Co-ordinating Committee (1 April 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

⁴⁵ He recommended that British propaganda illustrate “such themes as ‘the price of democracy is eternal vigilance’ and ‘the day of the free ride of freedom is over.’” Grierson, Memorandum (20 September 1939), TNA: PRO INF 1/628. The chairman of the National Committee of the USA on International Intellectual Cooperation agreed, citing “the vital interest which the democracies have at the present time in securing data upon the ways in which they have developed their various institutions under the regime of freedom.” Letter from James T. Shotwell to Lord Lothian (10 October 1939), TNA: PRO INF 1/628.

⁴⁶ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 November 1939; quoted in “Publicity in the United States” (22 January 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/848.

⁴⁷ Gow, letter to the *Guardian*, 12.

pression by revoking its own prohibitions, the Ministry perhaps did the right thing for the wrong reasons. After all, Greenwood's radical *Love on the Dole* was now permitted to reach mass audiences wherever a dedication to free expression held sway. As Edgar Anstey wrote in *The Spectator*: "Here is a film which comes to the most depressing conclusions about the effects of pre-war unemployment upon the national life and which contains, in its moving sequence upon the Means Test, the most damning exposure of reactionary politics which has ever appeared in a British feature-film. Yet *Love on the Dole* is good for wartime morale . . . because, in the fact of its production, it proves the survival of free speech."⁴⁸ The same logic did not hold true for the United States, where *Love on the Dole* was banned until 1945.

PROPAGANDA FOR EQUALITY

The Ministry of Information was looking for subtle ways to establish Britain's commitment to freedom, but when *Love on the Dole* appeared, the press offered another interpretation of its central message. "Now, with unemployment a minor headache, the moralists have relaxed," the *Sunday Pictorial* explained when the film version of *Love on the Dole* played for the first time: "What a difference a war makes!"⁴⁹ By 1940, it was safe to represent the sordid poverty of *Love on the Dole* because it had ceased to look like a subversive commentary on existing conditions and had become instead an image of a bygone era. The newspapers, both tabloid and broadsheet, agreed that the film was valuable because it would remind the public that the war was an economic turning point. "If every man and woman in Britain came to this film, I don't think we would ever return to those dreadful pre-war years," wrote one reporter.⁵⁰ Or as *The Spectator* put it: "*Love on the Dole* is good for wartime morale . . . because it demonstrates that the one inconceivable war-aim would be a return to the *status quo ante*. It makes clear what we are *not* fighting for."⁵¹ *The Times* reported that the film's "story of waste and want and suffering" was courageous and "the lesson for the future is implicit in every foot of it."⁵² And the *Daily Express* claimed that the "message throughout is—It Can Happen Here, and It Mustn't Happen Again."⁵³ Thus *Love on the Dole* emphasized that the war had ushered in an altogether new economy, and it encouraged its viewers to be vigilant about preventing the shameful economic conditions of the Depression from befalling the nation again.

Whether the press knew it or not, the impression of vast economic change was a message the Ministry of Information had recently been hoping and planning for as part of their new propaganda campaign. In January of 1940, the Minister of Information, Sir John Reith, former head of the BBC, exhorted the Ministry to put Britain's economic progress at the center of the wartime propaganda effort. He urged his staff to take a lesson from the spread of fascism and communism. Clearly the age was witnessing a widespread desire for radical social change "of

⁴⁸ Anstey, "The Cinema," *Spectator*, 6 June 1941, 607.

⁴⁹ "A Film to Shake Britain," *Sunday Pictorial*, 1 June 1941, 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Spectator*, 6 June 1941, 607.

⁵² *Times*, 30 May 1941, 6.

⁵³ *Daily Express*, 31 May 1941, 2.

which both Nazi and Communist revolutions are morbid symptoms.”⁵⁴ The Ministry, he argued, should publicize Britain’s own recent social and economic transformations, using propaganda to convince the nation that its hunger for progress was in the process of being satisfied. An emphasis on the latest innovations and modernizations would have two effects: first, by suggesting that Britain was undergoing its own economic revolution, the Ministry could divert any inclinations toward communism and fascism and win those citizens over to its own cause; and second (and more cunningly), all of the obstructions and disturbances caused by the war could be recast as part of the disruptive experience of profound and thoroughgoing social change. “Propaganda should . . . be directed towards representing every social and economic upheaval which the war involves not as an inconvenience but as an opportunity.”⁵⁵ If the Ministry could promote the notion that the war was bringing Britain into the dawn of a new age—an age without the squalid poverty and old-fashioned class divisions of precisely the kind shown in *Love on the Dole*—it would simultaneously dampen revolutionary impulses and justify the upheavals of the war effort.

In 1940, then, the government abruptly left behind the conservative cultural politics of the thirties, with its active censorship of radical politics, and began wanting to seduce citizens with the promise of a new Britain. The Ministry of Information argued that this commitment to a new era was important to promote not only at home, but in the colonies as well. In January, one advisor wrote: “Though we can boast freedom of the person, of speech, and faith, throughout the Empire, economic freedom is admittedly relative and incomplete. There is no burking the fact that large bodies of opinion in the oversea Empire are suspicious of class motives in British policy. For this reason it is necessary that for purposes of Empire propaganda our expression of war aims should be linked with an avowal of faith in a better world that we can build when the war is won.”⁵⁶ Similarly, Americans were perceived to be skeptical of Britain’s dedication to an egalitarian society.⁵⁷ It seemed that they were particularly concerned about entrenched class divisions and would need persuading that Britain was entering a new classless era. Grierson suggested that the popular feature films of the thirties, with their emphasis on aristocratic manners and values, were not helping the British cause: “It is suggested that we are still regarded as having a ‘caste system.’” Grierson warned: “The ‘traditional England’ angle should be somewhat tempered.”⁵⁸ Following Grierson’s recommendation, the Ministry decided to send American film societies a documentary film called “Welfare of the Workers,” advertised as “Pictures of the steps which have been taken to preserve and improve the better conditions for workers for which the Trades Unions have fought.”⁵⁹

⁵⁴ “Minister’s Memorandum on General Policy” (30 January 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/848.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Mr. Hodson, “Propaganda Policy in the Empire” (C.C. Paper no. 4, January 1940), 4, TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

⁵⁷ For a fascinating account of British efforts to influence U.S. attitudes toward the war, see Nicholas John Cull, *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign against American “Neutrality” in World War II* (New York, 1995).

⁵⁸ John Grierson, Memorandum (20 September 1939), TNA: PRO INF 1/628.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Information Documentary Film List (16 September 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/629. Grierson got himself in trouble with the Ministry, and his recommendations were not always taken seriously, but his notes from the United States spawned quite a lot of debate.

Thus at home and abroad in early 1940, the Conservative-led government was striving to present an England that was far from conservative. There was a particular urgency to this effort, according to the Ministry of Information, because the Germans were making much of British poverty and class conflict, seeking to persuade the world that Germany had progressed much farther than Britain when it came to living conditions for the working class. Particularly worrying were the propaganda broadcasts from Germany that reached British listeners nine times each day in the winter of 1939–40. These satirical programs were transmitted in English, and they featured a caricature of the British aristocracy, Lord Haw-Haw, who offered a critical commentary on British society and particularly class inequality.⁶⁰

The Ministry, keen to discover how these “Hamburg Broadcasts” were affecting British listeners, turned to the BBC for help. Technically speaking, BBC radio was neutral and self-governing, and although their reputation for objectivity had been somewhat compromised in 1939, they still maintained their official independence from party politics.⁶¹ And there was no organization better equipped to gauge listener responses to radio broadcasts. Indeed, the BBC claimed that it questioned a sample of 800 people each day in the “ordinary course” of their Listener Research work.⁶² The Ministry of Information employed their services covertly, asking them to incorporate a number of questions about the Hamburg broadcasts into their surveys. Reassuringly, the BBC concluded that Lord Haw-Haw was failing to shake British confidence in national unity or in the justice of Britain’s cause in the war. Only a tiny number of listeners (0.8 percent) believed German allegations of a sinister Jewish influence over British politics and business, and most of those who paid any attention to the broadcasts claimed to listen only because they took a general interest in public affairs and wanted to be “in the swim.” But Lord Haw-Haw did persuade a noteworthy portion of the British public on one crucial topic. His “description of British social conditions, unemployment, slums, and working-class distress in wartime” won the approval of 14.5 percent of respondents. One Manchester postal worker was reported to have said: “Haw-Haw keeps the government awake with his criticising [and] the ordinary man benefits.”⁶³ The proportion might have been small, but the BBC concluded that the British people were willing to give the German broadcasts credit for “their concentration on

⁶⁰ See Francis Selwyn, *Hitler’s Englishman: The Crime of “Lord Haw-Haw”* (London, 1984); and Horst J. P. Bergmeier and Rainer Lotz, *Hitler’s Airwaves: The Inside Story of Nazi Radio Broadcasting and Propaganda Swing* (New Haven, CT, 1997), 84–135.

⁶¹ According to a Mass-Observation survey, respondents in 1939 complained of an “over-emphasis on the Ministry of Information as source of news.” The survey concluded that “the great mass of listeners now believe that the BBC has lost the objectivity and independence on which its news reputation was founded.” “Mass-Observation Survey of Attitudes toward the War” (11 October 1939), TNA: PRO INF 1/261. The Ministry of Information employed the services of Mass-Observation reporters and other nongovernmental research services at the beginning of the war but worried that they would be discovered and accused of domestic “political espionage.” “Minute on ‘Use of Mass-Observation’ and ‘British Institute of Public Opinion’” (27 September 1939), TNA: PRO INF 1/261. The scandal over “Cooper’s Snoopers” in the summer of 1940 bore out this fear.

⁶² “Hamburg Broadcast Propaganda: An Enquiry into the Extent and Effect of Its Impact on the British Public during Mid-Winter 1939/40,” conducted by the BBC’s Listener Research Section and submitted to the Ministry of Information in March of 1940, TNA: PRO INF 1/867, 5.

⁶³ “Hamburg Broadcast Propaganda,” TNA: PRO INF 1/867, 1, 14, 16.

undeniable evils in this country”: “It is significant that the Hamburg points which meet with any substantial measure of approval from listeners are all ones which could, and frequently are, made within this country and are accepted as perfectly legitimate criticisms in no way inconsistent with the desire to prosecute the war to a successful conclusion.”⁶⁴

To be sure, broadcasters had a vested interest in the assertion that free and open circulation of criticism was the best way for the government to respond to disparaging German commentaries about British social conditions, working-class life, and poverty. But the BBC report on the Hamburg broadcasts only reinforced what others in and around the Ministry had already begun to suspect. In January of 1940, Oliver Bell, director of the British Film Institute, was exhorting his colleagues at the Ministry of Information to promote “such themes as the almost revolutionary social and industrial developments of recent years as an off-set to German allegations . . . that our people should in their own interests prefer the German system.”⁶⁵ In March, two researchers for the Ministry recommended the dissemination of “stories and photographs and films demonstrating . . . British achievements in slum clearance and public health.”⁶⁶ The inference was clear enough: since the German critiques of economic disparities in Britain were widely perceived to be valid, the most effective answer to them was to improve British conditions and to flaunt all economic improvements as signs that circumstances were changing for the better.

Love on the Dole suited the new propaganda efforts nicely. As the newspapers attested, social and economic conditions had changed enough by 1940 that the film’s depiction of hopeless poverty was no longer threatening to the status quo. More importantly, Greenwood’s bleak images of working-class life could be used to remind the British people of the great progress they had witnessed since the Means Test, revealing the government’s dedication to building a nation free of urban destitution, high unemployment, and class conflict. Workers at home and nations overseas would see the film as the symptom of an emerging egalitarian consciousness—and would be all the more eager, as a consequence, to take the side of the British in the war.

Whether or not *Love on the Dole* was deliberately commissioned as a trendsetter, it certainly paved the way for a number of egalitarian successors, all approved by the Ministry of Information: feature films also directed by John Baxter, including *Let the People Sing* (1942) and *The Shipbuilders* (1943), and a documentary short called *The Dawn Guard* (1941)—which Ealing Studios made for the Ministry—were among the films “imbued with the same vision of a ‘brave new world’ arising from the ruins of the old and of the war as the ‘midwife of social progress.’”⁶⁷ As

⁶⁴ “Hamburg Broadcast Propaganda,” TNA: PRO INF 1/867, 16.

⁶⁵ Oliver Bell, “Memorandum to the Films Division of the Ministry of Information” (17 January 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/615. Bell was sitting on the Committee for Overseas Publicity in January 1940 and thus was part of the Ministry. Kenneth Clark later called Bell “a muddle-headed busy-body” and eventually ousted him. See the memo from Clark to Lord Hood (14 May 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/615.

⁶⁶ Hightet and Hightet, “Memorandum on British Counter-Propaganda” (26 March 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/848.

⁶⁷ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 15.

one of the characters in *The Dawn Guard* puts it: “We found out in this war how we were all neighbours, and we aren’t going to forget it when it’s all over.”

PROPAGANDA FOR TRUTH

In the spring of 1940, Sir John Reith, following the lead of the Prime Minister, recommended three themes for the Ministry to push: “What Britain is fighting for,” “How Britain fights,” and “The need for sacrifice if the fight is to be won.”⁶⁸ The first of these themes underscored the Ministry’s central paradox: since Britain was fighting above all for freedom, state control of culture and information must be employed in the name of liberty. Surprisingly enough, the most powerful resolution to the paradox came from liberal intellectuals—who were not, in the end, entirely opposed to government propaganda. Indeed, even severe critics like Lambert acknowledged that in wartime and other moments of national emergency, the most democratic governments must urge their citizens into unthinking allegiance. “If individuals have been trained to think out all their actions in advance, they may prove too slow in responding to the demands of a crisis,” Lambert reasoned: thus it “becomes the responsibility of government or powerful societies to utilize [propaganda when] in their judgment the community is in danger.”⁶⁹ F. C. Bartlett, the psychology professor who championed democracy to the Ministry, also agreed that propaganda could be regarded as “a temporary necessary expedient.”⁷⁰

But liberals put a twist on the popular conception of propaganda. If the war was justified, they argued, why could the government not simply devote its efforts to disseminating the truth? A government that was fighting a righteous cause would only unite its people more effectively by relying on forceful and verifiable facts. Every enemy atrocity could be documented, every act of German deceit revealed. And even when the news did not look promising for the nation, British citizens would be grateful to hear the truth, since it would mean that their government treated them with the respect due to them as mature political subjects. Bartlett argued that such a show of respect was absolutely crucial to the government’s efforts: pro-democratic propaganda must distinguish itself from authoritarian campaigns by demonstrating an esteem for the intelligence and judgment of the citizenry. “The propagandists of dictator States have . . . an unshakeable belief that people in the mass exhibit a childish, primitive, inferior, mean, and altogether despicable intelligence,” he wrote.⁷¹ It was time for democracies to contradict this assumption: “Appeals to what is right, sensible and true are appeals to human judgment. Once an issue, an action, a statement is judged right, intelligent, or true, it will gain the assent of most people everywhere.”⁷²

Bartlett’s argument might smack of a naive idealism, but his recommendations did make public relations sense. After all, the facts did frequently support the war effort. The Ministry maintained that “the nation needs reminding of the horrors of the concentration camp, the persecution of the churches, the Jewish pogroms,

⁶⁸ “Minister’s Memorandum on General Policy” (30 January 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/848.

⁶⁹ Lambert, *Propaganda*, 12.

⁷⁰ Bartlett, *Political Propaganda*, 8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 117.

and the barbarities of the Polish campaign”—all of which were true enough.⁷³ To Bartlett’s credit, too, many British citizens suspected that their government might share the same undemocratic assumption as the Nazis—that the public was child-like, primitive, and irrational, unable to handle the truth. When polled about censorship, some complained: “It is time we were treated as adults and told the truth plainly.”⁷⁴ Thus Bartlett seemed to be justified in his assertion that “suppressing, or delaying, or distorting all unfavorable news . . . is a handicap, not a help, to democratic propaganda.”⁷⁵

If truth should be a democracy’s main propaganda object, then a reliable news service would be “the shock troops of propaganda.”⁷⁶ To be sure, in wartime some details concerning the location of military vessels or targets should be left out of public discourse so that the enemy would not profit from them, but on the whole “the first principle is that, for Britain, both at home and abroad, propaganda is *truth*. Falsehoods must not be told or implied.”⁷⁷ Clearly, the embarrassment of being caught in a lie far outweighed any benefits that might have accrued from misrepresenting the facts.⁷⁸ And the chances of being discovered were high: people who had become informed about propaganda lies and tactics from the First World War were savvy enough and skeptical enough to detect manipulations and obvious falsehoods—and could easily lose their faith in their government’s democratic motives. A similar principle held true for counterpropaganda. The Ministry could use the standard of truth against the Germans. In November of 1939, the Co-ordination Committee came to the conclusion that it would be useful to have “a regular, if possible *weekly*, feature in which selected enemy lies should be collated and carefully written up so as to emphasise contradictions and discrepancies in the enemy lies, and thus induce a general disbelief in enemy propaganda.”⁷⁹

While the Ministry did not in fact dedicate itself entirely to the dissemination of reliable facts, it was clearly good propaganda to seem to do so.⁸⁰ And the

⁷³ “Themes on which Ministerial Statements Are Desirable” (October 1939), TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

⁷⁴ British Institute of Public Opinion, “Public Opinion during the Week Ending 30th September 1939,” TNA: PRO INF 1/261.

⁷⁵ Bartlett, *Political Propaganda*, 138.

⁷⁶ Hodson, “Propaganda Policy in the Empire” (C.C. Paper no. 4, January 1940), 4, TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

⁷⁷ Quotation from Highet and Highet, “Memorandum on British Counter-Propaganda” (26 March 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/848. As Bartlett put it, “the unrestricted publication of news would . . . often be of service to an enemy.” This meant that “not even the most democratic State can, or ever will be able to, get on without a form of censorship.” *Propaganda*, 134–35.

⁷⁸ “Everywhere propaganda must be based on facts, revealed as fully, as accurately and as rapidly as possible. In many parts of the Empire the British authorities are suspected of suppressing facts. . . . [Propaganda efforts] are liable to collapse like a house of cards if they are not based on ample and rapidly revealed fact.” Hodson, “Propaganda Policy in the Empire” (C.C. Paper no. 4, January 1940), 4, TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

⁷⁹ Ministry of Information Co-ordination Committee Meeting (1 November 1939), TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

⁸⁰ For example, in the summer of 1940, “despite the prodigious armaments drive then under way, it was far from certain whether Britain possessed enough arms to repel a successfully landed German force. But the propagandists can hardly be blamed for putting out information to the contrary, since only a government bent on surrender would have admitted the dearth of arms at that time.” McLaine, *Ministry of Morale*, 76.

commitment to truth telling had an intriguing consequence for the cinema. After more than a decade of censorship that had largely squelched unsettling plots in favor of escapist fantasies and music-hall comedies, the Ministry began to encourage a sober realism in filmmaking. “Nowadays realism is the thing,” the *Documentary News Letter* cheered in 1941: “Many films [are] set against a factual background, and the tendency to separate characters from the economic and sociological consequences of their environments appears to be less pronounced.”⁸¹ Film historians generally agree that the wartime turn to realism in film “constituted a revolution in British cinema history”⁸²—ushering in a whole new style of domestic film that began to focus on the realities of ordinary, and often working-class, life. They agree, too, that the shift was perceptible as early as the first year of the war. James Chapman celebrates the “wartime wedding” of feature films and documentary techniques, apparent in such films as *For Freedom* (1940), *Convoy* (1940), and *Ships with Wings* (1941), which employ real footage, realistic situations, and conventional feature-film narratives.⁸³ And Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards describe a complex series of ways that producers began to fuse documentary realism and feature filmmaking during the war. There were feature-length documentaries such as the Army’s *Next of Kin* (1942) and the RAF’s *Journey Together* (1945), which were shown commercially in theaters. Some shorter documentaries adopted “dramatic narrative structures” to tell true stories, including *Target for Tonight* (1941) and *Western Approaches* (1944). Fictional feature films in turn often borrowed elements of documentary realism. Noel Coward’s *In Which We Serve* (1942), for example, was highly praised for its use of documentary techniques. Some feature films, such as *The Way Ahead* (1944), actually incorporated documentary footage. And renowned documentarists Henry Watt and Alberto Cavalcanti went to work for Ealing Studios, the feature filmmakers.⁸⁴ Peter Stead suggests that documentary techniques were gradually gaining ground from 1938 onward, but “the fact that a new era had well and truly dawned was only finally confirmed by the appearance in 1941 of *Love on the Dole*.”⁸⁵

Whether or not this film was a crucial watershed, the timing of the grittily realistic *Love on the Dole* certainly coincided with the Ministry’s new and more liberal theory of propaganda. Frances Thorpe and Nicholas Pronay claim that John Reith’s tenure as Minister of Information in early 1940 coincides with the policy of “propaganda with the truth”—a system that was “both novel and sophisticated,” and James Chapman makes the case that Kenneth Clark’s agenda for the Films Division borrowed significantly from the theories of liberals like F. C. Bartlett.⁸⁶ In short, *Love on the Dole*—with its unsentimental and stark images of working-class life, complete with poverty, urban ugliness, and a pregnancy out of wedlock—could form an integral part of a new propaganda campaign, launched in early

⁸¹ “Two Films of the Month,” *Documentary News Letter*, July 1941, 135.

⁸² Taylor, “Introduction,” 9.

⁸³ Chapman, *The British at War*, 182.

⁸⁴ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 219.

⁸⁵ Peter Stead, “The People as Stars: Feature Films as National Expression,” in *Britain and the Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Philip M. Taylor (Houndmills, UK, 1988), 66.

⁸⁶ Thorpe and Pronay, *British Official Films*, 9. Chapman explains that there is some debate about how much Bartlett influenced the Ministry but claims that Clark’s agenda was “broadly in line with the liberal academic discourse.” *The British at War*, 55.

1940, to persuade the public that Britain was not only a free and equal society but also an open and candid one, willing to face up to the hardest truths.

In adopting unsentimental subjects and fostering documentary techniques and aims, the government might be said to have taken a sudden left turn. The documentary movement, spearheaded by Grierson, had always been politically radical in its aims. And the feature film's uses of realism, for the documentary movement, implicitly meant an emphasis on material conditions and a growing analytical recognition of the inequalities of social relationships. It meant understanding characters as the results of the economic and social circumstances that they had inherited. It is telling, then, that in feature films made during the war, documentary techniques began to supplant more traditional methods. But this swerve to the left was less a partisan gesture, it would seem, than an attempt to resolve the democratic propaganda paradox. Since it was clearly good propaganda to appear to rely on the truth, as the Ministry maintained, and since truth in films had been claimed by the left, the radical impulses of documentary realism might have seemed like the Ministry's best aesthetic choice.

If the goal was to make the government look not only daringly permissive but also committed to the cause of truth, the press suggested that the effort had largely been a success. *Love on the Dole* was consistently praised for its truthfulness. It "describes with ruthless sincerity the horror of Lancashire industrial life."⁸⁷ It was "grim, vital and true to life," and "It's not a pretty film but it's real."⁸⁸ In its sincerity and its truth, "*Love on the Dole* makes history," claimed the *News of the World*.⁸⁹ It might seem naive to accept such grandiose claims for this relatively forgotten film, especially given the fact that *Love on the Dole* was hardly a popular success. But it is important to note that the Ministry of Information was struggling to win over a number of constituencies, and the fact that *Love on the Dole* proved particularly appealing to a small but influential and very vocal group—the film critics—was no small matter. Press coverage of the Ministry of Information's films in the first six months of the war had been scathing, and this hostile criticism by the press in turn prompted unrelenting complaints in Parliament about Britain's failure to make domestic films that were worth watching. As Thorpe and Pronay put it, "The *litterati* proved to be formidable opposition. They possessed their own journals, dominated the film reviews and literary sections of the quality press, and they were people with the finely honed pens needed to fill the correspondence columns of the influential newspapers."⁹⁰ In short, the Ministry needed to take the critical response to its cinematic production as seriously as it took the popular reaction in part because the critics' voices were loud and merciless. And in this regard, *Love on the Dole* was a resounding success. When film critic Dilys Powell looked back in 1947, the film still seemed like a realist breakthrough: "[*Love on the Dole*] savagely attacked a social and economic structure which wasted human lives in idleness and poverty, and its picture of the slump in a Lancashire factory town held no flattery for the British. Yet those who most bitterly attacked the

⁸⁷ A. E. Wilson, "Slump Film Is Uplifting," *The Star*, 29 May 1941, 6.

⁸⁸ "A Film to Shake Britain," *Sunday Pictorial*, 1 June 1941, 12; Ian Coster, "This Film Is One of Britain's Best," *Evening Standard*, 31 May 1941, 6. The reporter added: "It even has the courage to avoid a happy ending."

⁸⁹ "Film Notes," *News of the World*, 1 June 1941, 6.

⁹⁰ Thorpe and Pronay, *British Official Films*, 21, 25.

conditions it showed could not but praise the public honesty which permitted the showing.”⁹¹

Public honesty: this was precisely the image of the democratic Britain that the Ministry most needed to spread. By encouraging truths about the economic and social conditions of the poorest and bleakest sides of British life—even if that meant criticizing government policy in order to promote a progressive realism—the Ministry was doing its best to make wartime Britain look like a democracy worth fighting for.

At the same time, if the willingness to invite unsettling truths into cinema seemed to demonstrate a respect for the citizens’ desire for truth, for open debate, for plural viewpoints, and for criticism, *Love on the Dole* was a remarkably safe bet, since the unemployment it condemned had given way to a wholly different economy, and the government was keen to publicize this. And so, while there was no question that the film’s image of working-class life could be read as critical of government policy, *Love on the Dole* suited the Ministry’s propaganda needs like a dream: the state publicly and concretely enacted democratic freedom in lifting the ban; it seemed “courageous” to allow such a critical, radical, and starkly realistic film to show; and, all the while, the message of the film also promoted the government’s new economic agenda.

MORE PROPAGANDA FOR FREEDOM

Lifting the ban on *Love on the Dole* and sponsoring cinematic realism might seem like remarkably indirect propaganda techniques, but indirection was crucial to the government’s theory of successful propaganda. In 1940, Kenneth Clark presumed that “film propaganda will be most effective when it is least recognisable as such.”⁹² Clark explained that cartoons could act as “a very flexible medium of propaganda [with] the advantage that ideas can be presented under cover of absurdity. They can present (as in Mickey Mouse) a system of ethics in which independence and individuality are always successful, bullies are made fools of, the weak can cheek the strong with impunity, etc. With a slight twist they can be made topical without being recognisable as propaganda.”⁹³

Clark was supported by contemporary theorists, who routinely argued that propaganda would only work if it was covert. In 1939, P. L. Mannonck wrote in the *Kinematograph Weekly*: “If the history of screen propaganda tells us anything at all, it tells us that the less blatant it is, the more effective the result.”⁹⁴ And in his psychological analysis of propaganda, Lambert explained that governments should always refrain from the explicit promotion of their principles, no matter how righteous: “Propaganda implies essentially the use of persuasion rather than force. It achieves its object best if it makes the individual feel that he is being persuaded by an appeal to his normal reasoning habits. For this he both retains his self-respect . . . and is brought to act quicker than his unaided reasoning power would make

⁹¹ Dilys Powell, *Films since 1939* (1947), quoted in Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London, 2000), 63.

⁹² Kenneth Clark, “Programme for Film Propaganda” (C.C. Paper no. 1, January 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ P. L. Mannonck, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 28 September 1939, 19.

him act if he were left to himself. . . . It is bad psychology to let a man think he is being persuaded, if you can induce him to think he is persuading himself.”⁹⁵ Lambert viewed stealth as crucial not only to governmental attempts to persuade but to all attempts to persuade. No one, according to Lambert’s reading of contemporary psychology, likes to feel that opinions, ideas, or values come from others. From this perspective, all persuasion seems like manipulation, and it is not surprising that a self-respecting populace would resist all efforts at government propaganda. But Lambert hinted at a way to move beyond this struggle of self against other. He suggested that it is possible to persuade someone as long as the thoughts seem to emerge from “normal reasoning habits.” In order to be effective, then, government propaganda should seem to be generated, as if spontaneously, by the people themselves.

If this seems like a tall order, it did not deter the Ministry of Information in 1940. And indeed, the task might not have been quite so hard as it sounded. After all, it was only necessary for the government to slip its agenda into the public consciousness through the vehicles of persuasion that already existed—making use of whatever molded the “normal reasoning habits” of British citizens in peacetime. To this end, the Ministry sought to take advantage of nongovernmental channels of influence that were already at work shaping British cultural life. They made agreements with Oxford University Press and Penguin Books, they broadcast through the BBC and conducted surveys through independent bodies like the British Institute of Public Opinion and the Mass-Observation survey, they sought the help of American film producers to distribute propaganda films in Europe, and they took an active role in advising British film companies to develop scripts on useful themes and values for the screen.⁹⁶ Craftily, the Ministry exploited commercial channels to suggest that all values, opinions, and facts that came from the government had actually emerged from “normal” sources. When it came to the cinema, Sir Joseph Ball, head of the Films Division in 1939 and former Conservative spin doctor famous for playing dirty tricks on the Labour Party, advocated “reaching ready-made world-wide audiences with films produced by the trade for commercial purposes . . . which will, therefore, not be suspected of being propaganda at all.”⁹⁷

A great deal of Ministry attention went to ensuring that its own involvement in commercial channels of communication went undiscovered. All Ministry content “should be unidentifiable as originating from an official source. . . . It should, as far as possible, follow the types of publicity sent out by the firms and companies acting as Channels.”⁹⁸ The same held true abroad. Ball reported himself “horrified

⁹⁵ Lambert, *Propaganda*, 12–13.

⁹⁶ Minutes of a Co-Ordination Conference of Directors of Divisions (14 September 1939), TNA: PRO INF 1/867. In May of 1940, the Ministry noted that “the leading film producing companies continue to make films of propaganda value in consultation with the Division.” Note for Inclusion in General Report to the Cabinet: Films Division, Ministry of Information Progress Report (May 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/5. The Ministry also worked through American reporters rather than seeming to impose British perspectives on U.S. audiences. Susan A. Brewer, *To Win the Peace: British Propaganda in the United States during World War II* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), 7.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Chapman, *The British at War*, 21.

⁹⁸ Memorandum on the Production of Propaganda Material for Commercial Distribution (17 May 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/533.

to find that the words ‘and complies with the requirements of the Ministry of Information’” had been added to the normal prewar form for film exports.⁹⁹ Similarly, Kenneth Clark, who succeeded Ball, was eager to send British films to the United States, but as he explained to his colleagues: “We have got to find some deodorising agency to get the films distributed under another name.”¹⁰⁰

Capitalist methods of exchange and distribution were especially useful to the government in 1940 because the marketplace, then as now, seemed to be guided by no single source, attached to no centralized set of values or motivations. Instead, the market appeared to be driven by the impersonal forces of competition and innovation. From a capitalist perspective, it was up to film audiences to vote with their feet if they were unimpressed by the messages or values the cinema offered them. It must be said, of course, that it was difficult to assess the film until after one had paid to see it. And since film going was such a regular habit, the conventional role of the cinematic institution may have overwhelmed the audience’s relationship to any single film; one-third of all adults chose to see at least one film each week, and the proportion was much higher—as much as 79 percent—for adolescents.¹⁰¹ Moreover, since the bulk of cinemagoers were young and working class, the industry was particularly eager to indulge the tastes of one sector of the population. Still, the government neither compelled nor enforced the entertainment of cinemagoers. And in seeming to choose freely, British audiences implicitly made the decision to support the film industry. From this perspective, commercial films were the very best vehicles of covert government propaganda, since they appeared to gratify a public who was voluntarily consuming their ideas and values.¹⁰² As Kenneth Clark explained it to the Ministry: “The film being a popular medium must be good entertainment if it is to be good propaganda. A film which induces boredom antagonises the audience to the cause which it advocates. For this reason, an amusing American film with a few hits at the Nazi regime is probably better propaganda than any number of films showing the making of bullets, etc.”¹⁰³

Given Clark’s agenda, *Love on the Dole* can be seen as a flawless example of good propaganda. First, it was produced and distributed through the usual commercial outlets. When the British Board of Film Censors called on Greenwood and Gow to complete their screenplay, the source of the order remained shadowy, and an ordinary commercial film company produced the film. Thus the government left no trace of its influence on the making or distribution of *Love on the Dole*. Second, the film offered a compelling fictional plot, one that had been hugely popular as a novel and a play throughout the thirties. As fiction, it did not obviously press citizens into any particular line of action or belief and thus lacked the explicitly exhortational messages that made British audiences distrustful. It sought to en-

⁹⁹ Undated letter from Sir Joseph Ball to Admiral Usborne, probably from September 1939, TNA: PRO INF 1/178.

¹⁰⁰ Minutes of the Committee of Films for Overseas Publicity Meeting (19 January 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/629.

¹⁰¹ The Social Survey, “The Cinema Audience” (June–July 1943), TNA: PRO RG-23.

¹⁰² Taylor argues that “by 1942 the MoI was operating such an effective system of censorship that even the majority of those 20 to 30 million weekly cinema-goers were unaware of the extent to which the images before them were being controlled by the government.” “Introduction,” 7.

¹⁰³ Clark, “Programme for Film Propaganda” (C.C. Paper no. 1, January 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

tain with its absorbing love story and tragic events. It also took its place well within recognizable genres of cinematic narrative, and to the extent that it resembled other entertainment films, it seemed like a spontaneous product of the film industry, intended, first and foremost, to satisfy willing consumers. So successful was this stratagem that even those in the know doubted that *Love on the Dole* was anything other than a normal feature film. The Newsreel Association, when asked by British National Films to provide footage to be used in *Love on the Dole*, refused, writing to the Ministry of Information to ask “on what grounds they consider this subject to be of propagand value.”¹⁰⁴ Thus *Love on the Dole* played its patriotic part as exemplary propaganda for democracy precisely by failing to be recognizable as such. Though it took some fancy footwork, the film appeared to move through the same channels as all other “normal” cinematic offerings and to give audiences what they wanted—a good story.

If the state’s propaganda campaign had to work covertly through commercial channels to preserve the image of Britain as a free society, then the state was forced to rely on the wisdom and discretion of private corporations. And when it came to relations between government officials and the film industry, *Love on the Dole* helped to launch the newly harmonious relationship that was developing in 1940. At the start of the war, the government had alienated filmmakers by closing down all cinemas—arguing that enemy bombs might cause massive bloodshed wherever people gathered in large numbers. And even after the theaters were opened again, the Ministry of Information—over the protests of the Films Division—refused to give the newsreel companies access to military sites and operations, preventing them from publicizing images of the war effort.¹⁰⁵ An intense series of debates ensued, as both filmmakers and government officials tried to imagine a productive and beneficial role for Britain’s film industry. In the early months of this discussion, some studios actually complained that the Ministry offered them too little advice about the kinds of feature films they should make, while others criticized the films actively commissioned by the Ministry. Kenneth Clark has been credited with learning how to foster “friendly relations with commercial film-makers,” and his successor, Jack Beddington, built on this relationship by setting up a biweekly meeting between representatives from the Ministry and from the film industry—the so-called Ideas Committee—which has been widely hailed as the beginning of the successful collaboration that would last through the rest of the war.¹⁰⁶ Film historian James Chapman argues that Michael Balcon’s *Convoy* (1940) formed a turning point in this story: without any input from the Ministry, Balcon developed his own stirring military plot, which features a naval officer on a tiny British ship that is part of an essential supply chain; the ship is targeted by the Germans, and an exciting chase and battle ensue. *Convoy* was a resounding popular success, and Chapman makes the case that it taught the Ministry to trust the industry’s know-how when it came to cinematic propaganda.¹⁰⁷

But *Love on the Dole* might well have played an equally crucial role in this story. By lifting the ban on the film, of course, the government showed a willingness to

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 26.

¹⁰⁵ Chapman, *The British at War*, 19.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 70–82.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

accommodate the industry's, rather than the censors', sense of what would make a good feature, and in that sense it was a friendly gesture to the filmmakers. But even more to the point, *Love on the Dole* helped to usher in a wholly new dynamic between the cinema industry's projects and the government's aims and interests that would come to be associated with the Ministry's largely successful efforts at film propaganda after the initial mistakes of 1939–40. Unlike *Convoy*, which took shape without any Ministry of Information participation, *Love on the Dole* exemplifies a reciprocal interplay between the industry and the state. It was public knowledge that a number of producers had wanted to make *Love on the Dole* in the thirties, and so it was widely known that the idea for the film first originated in the industry. But the actual impetus to make the film in 1940 seems to have come from the Ministry. And yet, the Ministry, in turn, was likely responding to the industry's request to provide ideas for feature films that would support the war effort. In short, if *Convoy* taught the Ministry to trust the instincts of commercial filmmakers, *Love on the Dole* launched “a two-way process in which ideas could be suggested by both sides”—precisely the process that would characterize the great success of the Ministry of the Information Films Division from 1940 onward.¹⁰⁸

PROPAGANDA FOR COLLECTIVE SACRIFICE

Although the Ministry of Information has often been criticized as inept and disorganized, its production of *Love on the Dole* hints at a highly sophisticated handling of wartime propaganda for democracy.¹⁰⁹ Indirect, contradictory, and even critical of government policy, liberal propaganda had to be far from straightforwardly stirring and jingoistic. At the risk of giving the Ministry of Information too much credit, it is tempting to embrace a Machiavellian reading even of its famously muddled decisions early in the war, conjecturing that the widespread reputation for ineptitude and ineffectiveness was all part of the plan: after all, if the people imagined that their government was incapable of manipulating them with infor-

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 82.

¹⁰⁹ To the public at the time, the Ministry seemed inept and embarrassingly chaotic, and it was called “The Ministry of Muddle.” The poor morale of the staff was notorious, and “complete unsuitability” was said to be the major justification for employment. Since Ian McLaine's *Ministry of Morale*, the first scholarly account to argue that wartime morale was far shakier than subsequent invocations of the “Dunkirk spirit” would imply, many scholars have reinforced the public perception of a hopelessly incompetent and rudderless unit. McLaine maintains that “for nearly two years [1939–41] the measures taken by the propagandists were unnecessary and inept, based . . . on misunderstanding and mistrust of the British public which, in turn, were products of the class and background of the propagandists themselves” (10–11). Philip M. Taylor contends that it was the low British opinion of propaganda that led to the slow development of propaganda techniques: see *The Projection of Britain* (Cambridge, 1981). And more recently, Cull makes the case that the “early failures of the MoI became legendary” for good reason: the appointment of Lord Macmillan as Minister, who had no publicity experience whatsoever, was particularly damaging. See Cull's *Selling War*, 38–39. But a strain of dissent has also emerged, suggesting a more complex account of the Ministry's decisions. Mariel Grant argues that the government was committed to developing publicity but resistant to centralizing those efforts between the wars: *Propaganda and the Role of the State in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford, 1994); James Chapman invites us to rethink the success of the Films Division of the Ministry of Information in *The British at War*; and Susan A. Brewer, in *To Win the Peace*, shows that Britain was following a complex “No Propaganda” policy, which seriously hampered Ministry efforts both at home and abroad.

mation and entertainment, they would be far less likely to be on their guard and far less likely to oppose the messages they encountered. It was in the Ministry's interests, in other words, to appear chaotic and incompetent.¹¹⁰

Whether or not the Ministry was guilty of such thoroughgoing and organized deceit, the state's abrupt decision to promote *Love on the Dole* in the spring of 1940 hints at the difficulties of establishing a successful propaganda campaign for liberal democracy's core values: freedom, equality, truth, and openness. But the final piece of the puzzle is less devious: it lies in the narrative itself. I want to suggest that *Love on the Dole* not only suited the new and complex government agenda in 1940 but also that the story itself was capable of generating newly patriotic meanings in its new context. That is, the very narrative episodes that seemed to foster upheaval and social disunity in 1936 appeared to promote national determination and wartime solidarity in 1940—not only because the nation's economic circumstances had changed but also because audiences were now interpreting differently. The details of the film were not under the Ministry's control, but director John Baxter seems to have understood the peculiarly patriotic potential of the film's dramatic action, and, like a good soldier, he put the screenplay to use as propaganda in ways that perfectly suited the Ministry's agenda.¹¹¹

In 1936, the story of *Love on the Dole* appeared worryingly subversive to the censors on two main counts: political upheaval and sexual immorality. In 1936, the representation of the workers' march appeared to set the concerns of the working class against the repressions of an indifferent middle-class government, which wielded its massive, unjust, and violent power through the police. But by 1940, the workers' protest seemed to audiences to have a different significance: now a band of angry workers could be read as a metaphor for the British army, fighting together in the name of justice against the repressive regime of Nazi Germany, whose SS police force was notorious. A review of *Love on the Dole* in

¹¹⁰ Cull explains that given the widespread fear of propaganda in the United States, American broadcasters deliberately presented "an affectionate picture of a crusty liberal Britain muddling through the war, congenitally incapable of efficient propaganda and insistent on preserving the rights of genuine conscientious objectors." *Selling the War*, 45.

¹¹¹ In his unpublished memoirs, Baxter suggests that he was responsible for the uplifting and patriotic message of the film as it eventually appeared. "Many had thought this was not a suitable subject for wartime, and in fact appeared just the opposite of the policy of laughter which I was endeavouring to follow. But I felt that the successful outcome of the war depended in no small measure on the loyalty and hard work of . . . 'the working man.' . . . In some strange way I felt this subject was something special." Quoted in Geoff Brown with Tony Aldgate, *The Common Touch: The Films of John Baxter* (London, 1989), 78. Baxter and the other directors who worked for British National Films typically raved about the freedom allowed to them by producer J. Arthur Rank, who claimed to know little about film and so rarely interfered with any work in progress. As Michael Wakelin argues, Rank was so "safe" financially that "he was able to give freedom to his creative workforce that no other situation would have been able to." *J. Arthur Rank: The Man behind the Gong* (Oxford, 1996), 66. All of this suggests that the propaganda messages within the film were Baxter's initiative. On the other hand, it is worth noting that Rank was close to some Conservative party insiders who wanted to see the British film industry transformed, that British National Films had a consistently patriotic agenda, that Rank supported realism in film and had contempt for Hollywood as "Fairyland," and that, during the war, when "there were severe shortages of everything from raw stock to studio space . . . Rank seemed to have the lion's share of what was on offer." Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London, 1993), 42. All of these details hint that Rank and the Ministry might possibly have colluded behind the scenes.

The New Statesman and Nation made it clear that audiences were interpreting the authorities portrayed in the film as an image of the Nazis, not of Britain's own government. As the reviewer explained, the unfair economic policy shown in the film—the Means Test—“break[s] up households like the Gestapo.”¹¹² Thanks to the war, the most prominent villain was now not a divided Britain but a foreign invader. The dialogue in the film hinted broadly at this message. When Sally's fiancé tries to teach his fellow workers a lesson about capital and profit, he ends with a rousing speech that clearly invoked the war that was raging at the moment:

Millions of men in this country want work. Millions of men in other countries are in the same boat too. You can think of it if you like that a huge dam is beginning to crack. And next year, or the year after, or in ten years time perhaps, there'll be a catastrophe. It takes a disaster to wake people. But life will go on. What we've got to remember is that human conditions are not beyond human control. I said that man has made those conditions. Well, he can remake them. Ay, and rebuild a new and better world as soon as he's got the real desire in his heart.¹¹³

The fictional Larry of 1931 says that the catastrophe may come in “ten years time perhaps,” gesturing to the very moment in which the film appeared. If his socialist arguments would have been interpreted in the 1930s as a call to radical political change, the same kind of language in 1941 instead justified the war, calling on British audiences to celebrate the outbreak of the conflict with Germany as the solution to inequality and poverty. The war, not revolution, was the catastrophe that would get people working for a better future.

Again, however, the work of propaganda was startlingly complex. If British workers could be persuaded to see the Germans as their enemies and the bourgeoisie as their allies, they would be more likely to fight unconditionally on the side of Britain, and a unified nationalism could replace class divisions. In this case, *Love on the Dole* would succeed as propaganda only if it persuaded audiences to read the government portrayed in the film as German rather than British. But this was a risky venture, since the government depicted was not only explicitly British, but verifiably so according to the record—the Means Test was an actual Conservative measure that had been passed within living memory. Yet, as always, *Love on the Dole* permitted a complicated compromise: it was useful to suggest that the police in the film represented both Britain and Germany—the Britain of the past, the Germany of the present. It was likely that British audiences would interpret the battle between workers and police as a metaphor for the war then raging around them, becoming in the process more likely to unite behind the crown. Watching a film about the powerlessness of British workers during the Depression, audiences would also be invited to feel that their government had stopped wanting to repress working-class experience and unrest and was now willing to air and

¹¹² “The Movies,” *New Statesman and Nation*, 7 June 1941, 578.

¹¹³ *Love on the Dole*, videocassette, directed by John Baxter (London: British National Films, 1941; distributed by Video Yesteryear, 1998).

acknowledge the concerns of Britain's poor.¹¹⁴ It was crucial to the propaganda success of *Love on the Dole* that it allowed audience sympathies to cohere while their antipathies split: on the one hand, the violent strike scene in the film would seem to gesture to contemporary events, helping viewers to turn against the current national enemy, Germany; on the other hand, the film depicted a historical episode, allowing audiences to see their own past government as tyrannical and unjust compared with the new and more inclusive Britain. To put this another way: in 1940, the film evoked two enemies, both at one remove from contemporary Britain, and thus quelled the internal divisions that the same story had seemed to stir up as recently as 1936. By placating working-class cinemagoers while inciting them to join a common national war effort, *Love on the Dole* divided the blame and thus unified the nation.

So much for the political plot. But the war had also changed the sexual plot. In the 1930s, Sally's choice to become Sam Grundy's mistress looked dangerous not only because it exposed the sexual exploitation of poor women in difficult economic times but also because it implicated the whole society in this immorality. The censors particularly objected to a scene in which two women in the community try to persuade Sally's mother that her daughter should become Sam's mistress, a scene that implied that poor people were willing to overlook sexual mores in the interests of economic well-being.¹¹⁵

But when the war broke out, Sally's decision could be read according to a different set of criteria. From the outset, the Ministry of Information insisted that the need for sacrifice was an absolutely essential theme for propaganda. In January of 1940, the British Film Institute's Oliver Bell told the Ministry of Information that the film industry wanted to help the war effort and welcomed suggestions for films. Bell suggested that it might "be desirable to encourage the production of films whose object it would be . . . to increase the determination of the people of this country to sustain with fortitude any hardship that the exigencies of the time may demand."¹¹⁶ Kenneth Clark put it much more forcefully: "British character must be shown as capable of great sacrifices; British institutions must be shown as having been won and retained by sacrifices." According to Clark, films must treat this theme with care: all sacrifices should be "shown not as something which the Government is afraid to ask, and the public expected to resent, but as something to be accepted with courage and pride."¹¹⁷

In the screenplay of *Love on the Dole*, Sally's "fall" was recast as heroic sacrifice. In the middle of the film, Sally, roused by her fiancé's rhetoric about class injustice, says, "I wish I could help." Larry replies: "You can, Sal. You must. If only everybody'd lend a hand." The film thus sets the scene for Sally's eagerness to help the

¹¹⁴ In 1943, the latter message became clearer when the film was reissued with a written postscript by A. V. Alexander, Minister of Defense, which read: "No longer will the unemployed become the forgotten men of peace." Programme Notes for *Love on the Dole*, National Film Theatre, 1984, British Film Institute Library, London.

¹¹⁵ British Board of Film Censors, "Scenario Reports," 1936, British Film Institute Library, London, 42.

¹¹⁶ Bell, Memorandum to the Films Division of the Ministry of Information (17 January 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/615.

¹¹⁷ Clark, "Programme for Film Propaganda" (C.C. Paper no. 1, January 1940), TNA: PRO INF 1/867.

collective. The film's ending then makes her selflessness abundantly clear. The last lines are spoken by Mrs. Hardcastle, after her daughter has left in a luxurious cab. "Can't you see? She only done it for us," she admonishes her despondent husband, and she adds, looking into the distance: "One day we'll all be wanted." Now, instead of a coerced fall into depravity, Sally's act of prostitution is interpreted as the ultimate sacrifice for her loved ones, her community—and implicitly her nation. The sexual impropriety and corruption of the ending thus became a call for national sacrifice, and the last lines are among the most unabashedly propagandistic in the film. The shock of prostitution, here, has been reinscribed as altruism, and as such it looks heroic, self-denying, and patriotic.

As if on cue, the press read the sexual plot of *Love on the Dole* exactly according to the Ministry's agenda. *The Evening News* was one example. The paper's reviewer praised the "courageous picture" and then described Sally as "the daughter who makes the great sacrifice for the family."¹¹⁸

CONCLUSION

What does the case of *Love on the Dole* teach us about propaganda and liberal democracy? First, it suggests that a propaganda campaign meant to encourage a loyalty to a liberal democratic state found itself in an almost impossible position, since state propaganda itself was closely associated with totalitarian regimes and methods.¹¹⁹ Thus the Ministry of Information learned that it had to broadcast its appeals to liberal democratic values through carefully organized covert channels. For propaganda in a democracy to work, it must be unrecognizable. It must flow through existing channels and persuade audiences that they have chosen its messages for themselves. Capitalist markets, which look so decentralized and so driven by consumer desire, serve government propaganda beautifully in this respect—especially if the producers are secretly meeting with the government behind closed doors. Second, *Love on the Dole* suggests that democratic propaganda does not necessarily strive for simple and obvious messages, designed to press unthinking citizens into clear action. In this case, unsentimental realism in style and subject matter became a hallmark of the wartime cinema because this soberness seemed best to communicate Britain's commitment to equality, truth, and openness. Third, and even more paradoxically, propaganda for liberal democracy must ideally work to unite a commitment to individual dissent with a celebration of collective will and cohesion, and thus it requires an intricate interplay between starkly contradictory impulses. Torn between the value of nonconformity and the importance of unanimity, liberal propaganda ends up, necessarily, seeking to intertwine conflicting messages. In this context, the story of *Love on the Dole* suggests that successful democratic propaganda in wartime must have precisely the qualities we conventionally associate with art: it must be complex and composite, productive

¹¹⁸ A. Jympson Harman, "New West-End Films," *Evening News*, 30 May 1941, 2.

¹¹⁹ For further discussion of British film and wartime propaganda, see Jo Fox's article in this issue, "Millions Like Us? Accented Language and the 'Ordinary' in British Films of the Second World War," *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 4 (October 2006): 819–45.

of multiple meanings, and capable of generating new significance in new contexts. Indeed, the very subtlety and radical innovation of *Love on the Dole* added to its success as propaganda, since the film appeared courageous, critical, and groundbreaking—all the while helping to serve the interests of the liberal state at war.