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

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to describe use of realism in the World War II propaganda film, *The Next of Kin* and the purposive approach to public information film making used by the director, Thorold Dickinson to convey a didactic message about careless talk in cinematic form. Through this historical exposition of a purposive and realistic form of public information discourse in wartime cinema, the paper seeks to add to public relations (PR) historical knowledge on the filmic past.

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1. Introduction

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

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

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2. Literature review

Public relations filmic scholarship has included several papers and book chapters on individual films, their place in PR campaigns and their relation to the rhetorical dimension of PR (Pompper & Higgins, 2007; Xifra & Girona, 2012). Arnett and St John (2014) made a methodological advance in a paper that combined analysis of the 1940 US film *Your Town* as a visual text alongside archive-based historical study using The National Association of Manufacturers' files, in order to describe the strategic intent of the institution commissioning the film. More recently, the pre-realism films of Roberto Rossellini, a realistic film-maker after Thorold Dickinson, were the object of a study by Quintana and Xifra (2016, p. 288) into both the "public relations audio visual techniques" of this work and the "elements of public relations film discourse" they contained.

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

Grierson himself recorded that he was impressed by potential of "creative treatment of actuality" in films alongside the use of drama, in an explicit reference to the use of realism (Grierson, 1966, p. 292). Kilborn (2006, p.189) inferred that Grierson's experience of working in the USA meant he saw potential to use mass media to accomplish both "educative and propagandist goals" while at the same time recognising that developments in film-recording technology "produced a heightened sense of realism. . .and meant that filmmakers could experiment with new ways of representing the real." Arguably, the outbreak of war led to an acceleration of these experiments and film historians have recorded that World War II was a golden age for British cinema (Dickinson, 1983; p. 76). However, there was little such optimism at the outbreak of World War II, when all cinemas were closed on 3 September 1939 by the government due to fear of air raids although by 11 September they were reopened, according to a report by Mass Observation (1940) These early impediments for cinemas – the distributive side of the UK film industry – were soon followed by restrictions on the production arm, with output reduced due to shortages of materials, loss of personnel and reallocation of production space as studios were requisitioned for storage or factory use. 228 long films were made in 1937 falling to just 103 in 1939. 108 films were made in the best wartime year of 1940 and 46 in the worst year, 1942, the year in which *The Next of Kin* was made (Aldgate & Richards, 1986; p. 2).

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

3. Methodology

3.1. Historical institutionalism

The first phase of the investigation used the theoretical framework and related methodology of historical institutionalism to focus on the institutions, agents, supporting mechanisms (including routes and access to power) and the intended messages that led to the film being commissioned, followed by a consideration of the results of the project. Historical institutionalism as defined by Hall and Taylor (1996, p. 937) has been used primarily as a methodology for inquiry into political institutions, but also fits into the three-stage visual research methodology proposed by Rose (2012, p. 20) in explaining the "site of production" of a visual artefact by answering questions about why, for whom and how the film was produced. Historical institutionalism has been advocated as a methodology for use in public relations history by Sandhu (2015) for its strengths in ensuring a societal and political context through its focus on institutions as "carriers of ideas" and messages. This element of the inquiry centred on the role of the Ministry of Information Film Unit as sponsor of the film, along with the agents that worked to get the project delivered such as Ealing Studios, based on examination of files in the archives of

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