‘If they want culture, they pay’: consumerism and alienation in 1950s comedies

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For every 1950s British comedy assimilated into the academic canon, there are many which have fallen into obscurity, reinforcing the alleged disposability of the form. One of the highest-profile casualties is The Horse’s Mouth (Ronald Neame, 1958), which was justly celebrated at the time for Alec Guinness’s performance as aggressively anti-social artist Gulley Jimson, but has since suffered from the critical neglect regarding Neame’s work. It is true that the film dilutes the complex themes of Joyce Cary’s novel with broad comedy, and its removal of darker plot points – not least Jimson’s death – reinforces complaints grounded in fidelity criticism that ‘beside the novel it looks very small’. However, acknowledging the dispersal of authorship inherent in adaptation and judging the film in its own right, The Horse’s Mouth is an intriguing oddity which proves that there is more to British comedy films of the 1950s than meets the eye. Neame’s assured direction exploits Arthur Ibbetson’s gorgeous colour photography, Guinness’s performance and the art of John Bratby to succeed where the novel partly failed to show how the artist ‘expresses himself in colour rather than words’.

In particular, The Horse’s Mouth is a fascinating starting point for a discussion of 1950s comedy, because of its treatment of the genre’s defining themes: consensus and its breakdown through the alienating individualism of consumerism. It shares key characteristics with such ‘canonical’ Ealing comedies as The Lavender Hill Mob (Charles Crichton, 1951) and The Man in the White Suit (Alexander Mackendrick, 1951). As in those films, Guinness plays an obsessive (Jimson) whose pursuit of a financially configured personal vision (attaining the means to paint) leads him to clash with the
community (violence, vandalism, verbal assault). This is particularly striking given that Guinness himself wrote the screenplay, adapting Joyce Cary’s 1944 novel (for which he was nominated for an Academy Award). Meanwhile, its acidic one-liners give it a similar edge to late-1950s satires like *I’m All Right Jack* (John Boulting, 1959), while sharing that film’s limitations through ‘its socially determined need to adopt a ‘broader’ style’.3 Like *I’m All Right Jack*, *The Horse’s Mouth* questions the efficacy of Ealing’s representations of consensus, but does so by assimilating its tropes. The attempt of a group to save a church wall from demolition echoes the recurring Ealing plot in which ‘ordinary people enacting the value of co-operation and community’ rally around symbolic objects, but the group’s failure and degeneration into violence problematises national solidarity.4 Of course, some Ealing films were themselves aware of the limitations of their consensual representations. *The Lavender Hill Mob* satirises Ealing’s ‘projection of Britain’ by way of its ironic representations of America – through the lurid gangster tales read to Mrs Chalk – and France, where traders sell Eiffel Tower paperweights made in England by Pendlebury, who admits ‘I perpetuate British cultural depravity’.

For many critics, this comment could be extended to 1950s comedy, an attitude which finds symbolic expression in the Bijou Kinema in *The Smallest Show on Earth* (Basil Dearden, 1957), an outdated purveyor of lowest-common-denominator entertainment. In *The Horse’s Mouth*, Jimson, possibly referencing critical responses to Neame’s occasional flourishes, warns against artistic cleverness as ‘the kiss of death’. Responding to the threat of television, British cinema found a winning formula in the *Doctor*, Norman Wisdom and *Carry On* series, which were rooted in a rhetoric of consensus: ‘Uneven, loose or non-existent at the level of narrative, these films depended on the mise-en-scène of particular, isolated sequences which were paced specifically to create and deliver a sense of audience commun-
ality.’ However, there is a constant tension between a form built on consensus and content built on alienation. Rather than harking back to wartime collectivism, the decade’s comedies are shaped by the general election of 1951, particularly its anti-collectivist sub-texts. The communities of *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (Charles Crichton, 1953) and *The Mouse That Roared* (Jack Arnold, 1959) reflect the triumph of the British spirit over Nazi Germany’s unsportingly ruthless professionalism, but their villains, rather than being improbably moustached failed Austrian artists, are profiteering businesses. Throughout the decade’s comedies, consumerism is the enemy of consensus, an alienating presence impinging on the value of work and, through the individualising agency of television, the domestic space.
The Horse’s Mouth opens with Gulley Jimson emerging from a short prison sentence, growling at the desire of his would-be protégé Nosy to see him made ‘a citizen, recognized by society’. Jimson seeks not the recognition of the community, but payment for the products he has made. Therefore, he recommences the threatening phone calls to his former sponsor Hickson for which he was originally imprisoned. He also nearly kills former wife Sarah in his attempt to recover one of his rare early pieces, and on a private commission demolishes the flat of Lady and Sir William Beeder. The unlawful, and anti-social, pursuit of finance is a key theme of Ealing’s 1950s output, stemming from the construction of a ‘new’ nation in Passport to Pimlico (Henry Cornelius, 1949), as Charles Barr wrote: ‘Insofar as the anti-controls, anti-rationing feeling means outright acquisitiveness, every man for himself, Ealing plainly means to present it as frightening … the question is whether it can reconcile the desire to maintain the wartime spirit with the desire to be freer and more affluent.’ In The Lavender Hill Mob, the attempt of entrepreneurs to attain affluence is presented as a criminal act, recognising the ability of institutions (in this case the Bank of England) to resist the claims of private individuals and the working class. Alienated from a sense of inclusion in the invisible product of his employers, the Bank of England, Holland seeks to reward his ‘worth’ in their terms. In order to achieve the theft of their invisible product, he has to conspire with Pendlebury, a maker of visible products. Morality asserts itself as the robbers are caught by the collective action of the police, but this is possible because of the intervention of anti-consumerist consensus. The robbers are first obstructed by a stall keeper who mistakenly thinks that Pendlebury has stolen a painting. The arrival of the police warns of the dangers inherent in the gang’s inability to grasp that consumerism is dependent upon exchange value – all they can exchange for the bullion is their freedom. The gang’s nemesis is an Eiffel-Tower-clutching schoolgirl who will not be bought off. This innocence reflects back the selfishness of the gang’s acquisitive motives and asserts the moral authority of consensus against the gang’s oppositional thinking. Because the consensual rhetoric of ideology has led to an internalisation of capitalist modes as natural, the public view the Bank of England as part of their society, so that stealing from them means stealing from innocent children.

The internalisation of economic consensus is further explored in The Ladykillers (Alexander Mackendrick, 1955), in which a lone moral voice championing the status quo destroys a bank-bothering gang from within. Professor Marcus’s attempt to articulate an oppositional economic reading (because of insurance, ‘nobody wants the money back’) is thwarted because
Mrs Wilberforce has become the mother figure, acting as a conduit for the family-unit model of ideological indoctrination. Reading her as a mother figure requires a psychoanalytical interpretation of the film, in part inspired by its source material in a dream by writer William Rose. Called ‘Mum’ by most characters at some point, Mrs Wilberforce emasculates the gang, for example interrupting an argument between Marcus and Louis with a pot of tea: ‘Shall I be mother?’ Just as in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), another film set around an expressionistically designed lodging house, a dominating mother figure provokes transferred murderous impulses (‘mother hate’, or, on the licence plate of one of the gang’s cars during the robbery, ‘MUV 8’). In the best British tradition, *The Ladykillers* represses and makes respectable the impulses that *Psycho* more clearly exposes, but the characters are driven on by a wish to hide guilty secrets, particularly those involving bodies and trains plunging through tunnels. The final round of carnage is caused by One Round’s uncompromising statement ‘I’m staying with Mum’, as the others react with Oedipal jealousy to this closer relationship. Mirroring a Gramscian reading of consensus as the “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group, Mrs Wilberforce indoctrinates the gang with the dominant ideology to such an extent that they murder each other. Reflecting this insidious process, Alexander Mackendrick problematises the notion that ‘good’ consensus has prevailed over anti-social impulses by undermining Mrs Wilberforce as a representative of society. She is introduced with twinklingly harmless music, but when she stands over a pram the baby screams; later, her effect on a crowded street is to provoke a decidedly non-consensual punch-up.

Several 1950s comedy series achieved success with narratives showing the upward mobility of the individual. The series that began with *Doctor in the House* (Ralph Thomas, 1954) follows aspiring professionals along their career path. Doctors prove their worth to society, and implicate the public in their accession to power, a trope subverted in *The Horse’s Mouth* by Jimson’s disdain for public respect. This affirmation of the meritocracy is a key feature of both the Norman Wisdom and *Carry On* series, in which bumbling individuals endure disasters but ultimately prove their worth. In *Trouble in Store* (John Paddy Carstairs, 1953), Norman is seen apparently in the boss’s car, only for it to pull away, revealing him to be on a pushbike. The film follows Norman’s struggles to become a window dresser advertising consumer goods, and its climax takes place in a sale, a consumerist feeding frenzy ripe for criminal exploitation. Identical sequences in *Trouble in Store* and *The Square Peg* (John Paddy Carstairs, 1958) show Norman assuming
the voice of authority, using the boss’s phone to baffle sales staff, and
imitating a drill sergeant to confuse obedient soldiers with silly orders. In
both sequences, Norman breaks into hystericst at the incongruity of attaining
power, but, like Will Mossop in *Hobson’s Choice* (David Lean, 1953), deserves
his eventual success all the more for not pursuing it aggressively.

*Carry On Sergeant* (Gerald Thomas, 1958) establishes the early *Carry On*
formula, following the progress of staggeringly incompetent groups within
institutions. In often surprisingly sustained parodies of dramatic forms, the
result is not so much a professionalisation of amateurs as an amateurisation
of the professions. *Carry On Nurse* (Gerald Thomas, 1959) opens with the
stock dramatic scenario of an ambulance hurtling back to hospital, where the
crew’s dash is revealed to be motivated not by a public-service imperative
but by a desire to get the racing results.

Consumerism is acceptable when it is used to beat the profiteer at his own
game; Matt and Jean in *The Smallest Show on Earth* act not through ‘an
intrinsic love for the old flea-pit, but rather to increase the asking price’.
Audiences abandoning the Bijou for the comfort of the Grand are lured back
through consumerist roles; the wheeze of turning up the heating during
desert films to sell more refreshments predicts the evolution of the industry
to a point where films have become trailers for their merchandising.

This internalisation of dominant ideology, a shaping of ‘the imaginary
relationship of individuals in their real conditions of existence’, expresses
itself in *I’m All Right, Jack* and *The Man in the White Suit*. Alienated,
individualistic publics appropriate the languages of consensus to protect
their own interests. The speech by Stanley Windrush that gives *I’m All
Right, Jack* its title illustrates the idea that ‘underneath the apparent divisions
there is, at root, consensus: that is to say, the common self-interest and greed
uniting all in the modern consumer society’.

Therefore, ‘the phoney patriotic claptrap of the employers’ is linked with ‘the bilge I’ve heard talked
about workers’ rights’. Although Windrush goes to court for his crime against
consensus, he receives leniency as, like the limited satire, he has exposed
general trends rather than the real (‘businessmen’) villains. *The Man in the
White Suit* reveals the limitations of consensus by opening with a voice-over
which places subsequent events in the past tense, giving a foreknowledge of
all returning to ‘normal’ which makes the audience complicit with repres-
sion. This enables the film, and Mackendrick’s other Ealing work, to subvert
the circularity of the studio’s comedies with ‘an intimation of stasis and
stagnancy, of a system seizing up under the dead weight of tradition’.
This tradition has assimilated the new consumerism; Sidney is punished for his
crimes against capitalism, producing the suit for its ‘use’ value and not for its
exchange value. He craves not the ownership of consumer goods but the free use of private space and equipment, and works obsessively but announces ‘I don’t want to be paid’. Kierlaw is prepared to pay him handsomely not to produce his work. Daphne negotiates herself a wage (‘Aren’t you rating my value a little low?’) to reward a seduction she does not intend to go through with. Mackendrick reflects Sidney’s interruption of the progressive rhetoric of capitalism in smooth camera movements that Sidney brings to a halt by crashing into scenes. Sidney realises the extent to which human relationships are determined by economic relationships when an old woman asks, ‘What about my bit of washing when there’s no washing to do?’ The workers ignore the white suit’s socialist symbolism; they want to be defined by the products they make. This reflects a process of alienation described by André Gorz: ‘The height of alienation is reached when it becomes impossible to conceive that an activity should have a goal other than its wage.’12 The use of economic rhetoric by employers in I’m All Right, Jack – ‘If we cannot sell the things we produce, we cannot buy the things we need’ – results not in consensus but in indolence, as it alienates the workforce from the true ‘value’ of their work.

This alienation is central to the film version of The Horse’s Mouth. Gulley Jimson loses his motivation after assisting in the commodification of his work, arguing that ‘If they want culture, they pay’. Rather than basking in the social admiration of having his work displayed in the Tate Gallery, he attempts to cash in on the display by selling an earlier piece. He seems unaware of the contradictions in his description of one of his pictures because of his inability to distinguish value: ‘It’s a work of genius, Cokey. It’s worth fifty thousand pounds. It’s worth anything you like, because it’s unique.’ Exploiting the commodity value of his work, he pursues Lady and Sir William Beeder for a private commission, sardonically linking ownership with understanding in his statement that the rich are ‘the most enlightened people in the world’. Jimson bypasses commissions to attempt a huge artwork on a church wall, which due to time constraints is made as a composite work. This involvement of the community implies that Jimson has grasped the importance of spectatorship in the construction of art, the ‘reception by the primary imagination of the disparate images that will be broken up and reunited by the secondary imagination’.13 Neame captures this aesthetically with a fluid reverse tracking shot over the rubble of the church, which reveals the bigger picture available to the spectator. However, subsequent events reveal the gaps in the consensual rhetoric of the act of viewing.

The transition of Jimson’s art from the private domestic space to public
display enacts a tension at the heart of the decade’s comedies, the interaction between televisual and cinematic forms. Throughout, his artistic experiments are related not to content but to form, a search for the correct wall. As Jimson states in the novel: ‘Walls have been my salvation … In form, in surface, in elasticity, in lighting, and in that indefinable something which is, as we all know, the final beauty of a wall, the very essence of its being.’ In his early work on an interior wall at the Beeders’ home, this represents itself as an attempt to overcome the reproducibility of television. The presence of a unique artwork counteracts the theory that ‘that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of a work of art’. But individualised spectatorship within the home is an alienating experience, so Jimson attempts to find a public canvas, tracing the shift from cult value to exchange value. His use of the church wall symbolises the cinema screen, an artwork validated by the presence of a crowd, and particularly by their diegetic involvement in the picture’s construction. This juxtaposition of individualised viewing and the communal viewing of cinema is a recurring concern in 1950s comedies.

The communality of genre is reinforced by many comedies’ attempts to assimilate oppositional discourses. Youth rebellion is assimilated into the mainstream by the redirection of leather-clad hooligans in Barnacle Bill (Charles Crichton, 1957) and the hidden conservatism of destructive pupils in Carry On Teacher (Gerald Thomas, 1959) who ‘cheer uproariously at the maintenance of the status quo’. However, it is overly simplistic to see the rhetoric of consensus in 1950s comedies as a unifying force; for example, ‘working-class British people were depicted in terms of patronizing ignorance’. The Smallest Show on Earth is aware of this, demonstrating the form’s inability to represent non-hegemonic discourse. The opening sequence utilises a crane shot to show Jean coming down from her home ‘above’, prefiguring a plot in which she and Matt are drawn to Sloughborough. As tuxedo-clad Matt later barks to an unruly audience: ‘You down there! I shall come among you!’ In a semiotic struggle with the signification of names, Matt and Jean interpret Sloughborough in their bourgeois terms as ‘Slahw-brahw’ and imagine the delights of Samarkand (‘Doesn’t the very name …?’), which seems less exotic to them than the industrial North. Matt is amused to find that a Marilyn Monroe lookalike is called ‘Miss Hogg’. The representational value of words is a constant problem; the plot turns on a misunderstanding between Old Tom and Matt for which the latter refuses to take responsibility, arguing that ‘he was always saying things that didn’t mean anything’. Jean disagrees with a local’s description of his area’s glue factory – ‘pungent’s hardly the word’ – then ironically assimilates the discourse to
call the Bijou’s foyer ‘pungent’. The film acknowledges cinema’s weaknesses but states its consensual elements. Although satirising British cinema and Ealing whimsy, the film seeks to achieve ‘the redefinition of cinema as an institution, and plays upon the nostalgia for a sentimental notion of cinema as a social practice’. If the enemy here is the Hollywood symbol of the Grand, elsewhere the enemy – both of cinema and of society – is television.

The impact of television on British film comedy was more insidious than the use of vehicles for its stars – like Benny Hill in *Who Done It?* (Basil Dearden, 1956) – or such spin-offs as Hammer’s *I Only Arsked* (Montgomery Tully, 1959), derived from *The Army Game* (Granada 1957–61). Low-cost, quickly made film series borrowed the aesthetic and performative modes of television situation comedy, particularly the *Doctor* series, with its recurring characters involved in episodic farce plots in a fixed idiom. Although the settings of each *Carry On* film are different, the cast are recurring characters, and the style itself enables a self-reflective continuity. An incident in *Carry On Nurse* involving a daffodil and a Wilfred Hyde-White orifice is referenced when Frankie Howerd bristles at a daffodil in *Carry On Doctor* (Gerald Thomas, 1967): ‘Oh no you don’t! I saw that film!’ Although cinema’s swipes at television, in *Simon and Laura* (Muriel Box, 1955), or the set in *The Titfield Thunderbolt* which breaks down after attempting to contain a (filmic) Western, are so playful as to become mutually supportive, some 1950s comedies view the medium in darker terms.

*I’m All Right, Jack* links television with the consumerist impulse. Commercial television is a vehicle for the consumerist propaganda of advertising that sells products and encourages people to work harder to attain the lifestyle they portray. Windrush experiences the faceless factory behind the Num-Yum adverts, which marry a lively jingle with images of leisure. The contrast between life and lifestyle is made clear when a Num-Yum hoarding is glimpsed on a rubbish dump near Sidney’s more prosaic seduction. The effect is to portray consumerism as the ‘false consciousness’ that distances people from an understanding of their place in society. An Althusserian reading of ‘false needs’ is foregrounded when a voice-over about the post-war ability ‘to supply those vital needs for which the people had hungered for so long’ is followed by a jingle advertising Detto detergent. The construction of consumer needs through advertising is so pronounced that, in the Arthur Askey vehicle *Make Mine a Million* (Lance Comfort, 1959), characters cannot sell their detergent because of an inability to advertise on television. This limited satire on the elitism of the monopolistic BBC reclains popular entertainment as a consumer product from the imposed consensus of hegemonic public-service discourses. The film satirises the
content of commercial television, but shows a link between commercial television and the public through advertisements paid for by consumer spending. Although alienated from the lifestyles presented to them, the fragmented television audience derives a sense of freedom, as Make Mine A Million ‘puts forward the perspective of the British working class for whom advertising was seen as a symbol of the end of postwar austerity’.19

Such duality between the consumer-based consensual rhetoric of television content and the social fragmentation necessitated by its form is further addressed in the climax of I’m All Right, Jack. After the establishment-supporting soundbites of BBC and ATV news reports, a television debate offers the people a chance to speak for themselves. ‘Argument’, claiming to put ‘YOU’ In The Picture, has an adversarial format to appeal to television’s fragmented viewers. The alienated consumerist audience storms the stage to grab the money Windrush tosses away: ‘This is what they all want! Something for nothing!’ The scene’s location within a film legitimises the communal experience of being an audience in a cinema. The contrast between the communality of the cinema experience and the individualising experience of television (an ‘instrument of the Devil’) is similarly explored in Meet Mr Lucifer (Anthony Pelissier, 1953). Television erodes communality to the extent that families ignore each other to gaze at it, fooled by the convention of direct address into reading ‘communion between the viewer and the screen’. Through a misunderstanding of broadcasting codes, the viewer fails to grasp their alienation from the social space of cinema viewing. Entertainment which takes place in a public space can be encoded as an extension of the work process, an act of conditioning as individuals take their cue from the responses of others (hence television’s enduring use of canned laughter). Responses without this validation are dangerous, as shown by a man’s unrequited affection for a TV image. The film’s ending prioritises mass viewing as ‘a fictional diegesis which is clearly recognised to be fiction’ configured in the pantomime subject-relationship desired by the lead character.20

In the film version of The Horse’s Mouth, Jimson shocks the community gathered before the public screen by personally bulldozing his own creation. This act reclaims the film from the lazy category of consensual comedy, illustrating the theory that artistic insight ‘is an act of the imagination asserting the noncommunality of the mind’.21 While the novel ends with Jimson being killed by the falling wall, in the film Jimson is inspired and liberated by it, setting sail in the boat which has long been marooned on dry land. Seated alone on deck as if in a living-room armchair, Jimson is passed by a liner which Neame allows to dominate the frame as another cinematic
‘wall’. In the film’s most expansive shot, the camera moves to track Jimson’s attempt to compose his/the director’s vision, again viewing the community – the passenger ship – from the outside. This non-communality enacts the threat of television’s individualism to social cohesion, and its capacity to undermine a Lacanian impression of the screen as an extension of the ‘mirror stage’, an Imaginary conception of unity before the mediating screen. The self-reflexivity of media-based plots undermines the psychological processes of suture; if television is constructed, then so is film. In *The Smallest Show on Earth*, the Bijou’s problems with projection draw attention to the beam of light above as a hitherto unseen creator. This culminates in the collision of diegetic and non-diegetic sound as a train arrives outside the cinema simultaneously with a train’s arrival in the Western being viewed. The intrusion of the outside world (‘The train now standing at Number Three Platform’) breaks the ‘spell’ of suture, uniting both diegetic and non-diegetic audiences in an understanding of their constructed status as audiences, made amusing by the spectator’s ironic understanding of the film illusion. Comedy narratives have their own levels of ‘realism’, acting generically to incite expectation, an interiorised knowledge of cause and effect which enables an audience to ‘know’ the modes of film-making. Therefore, the Bijou’s audience leaves as soon as the hero and heroine kiss, because this connotes ‘The End’ seconds before the end titles come up.

It is this familiarity which problematises the attempt by 1950s comedies to construct an ‘aura’ around the cinematic experience. Jimson’s destruction of the wall becomes a deconstruction of form, reconstituting its viewers’ responses to it. However, critics may be tempted to read the wall as a symbol for British film comedies of the 1950s – a gaudy, enjoyable construction that is ultimately transitory and disposable. Perhaps they were the appropriate entertainment for a period negotiating the effects of consumerism. As Cary wrote in a new preface in the film’s year of release, Jimson ‘has to create not only his work but his public … the public consists of creative artists. Every living soul creates his own world, and must do so’.22 Regardless of whether ‘forgotten’ 1950s comedies are simply consumer products with as short a shelf-life as Num-Yum blocks, *The Horse’s Mouth* found its public. In the 1950s ‘British audiences’ taste for American comedy declined sharply, and they soon preferred the home-grown product’.23 In an age when sporadic (and American-financed) comedy hits like *A Fish Called Wanda* (Charles Crichton, 1988), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell, 1993) and *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) are heralded as triumphs for British cinema, 1950s comedies remain one of Britain’s most successful forms of indigenous popular cinema.
‘If they want culture, they pay’

Notes