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Anita Jorge

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A 'Symphony of Britain at War' or the 'Rhythm of Workaday Britain'? Len Lye's *When the Pie Was Opened* (1941) and the musicalisation of warfare.

Anita Jorge

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## Introduction

'Do you think that modern war has no music? That mechanisation has banished harmony, and that because her life is for the moment so grim Britain no longer thinks of singing? What an error' (Jennings, 1942, p. 1).

These words, taken from Humphrey Jennings's treatment of his 'sonic documentary' *Listen to Britain*, made in 1942 and sponsored by the British Ministry of Information, are emblematic of the wartime official discourse that postulated the intrinsic musicality of the sounds of warfare.

Official discourses on sound were not new: they had started to develop in the inter-war period in reaction to the emergence of new kinds of noise that came to be associated with the advent of 'modern civilisation'. As extensively shown by James Mansell (2016), during the war, the debate broadened out to become a matter of national well-being, and above all, social cohesion. Positing that a discrete collection of sounds possessed an intrinsic musicality was part and parcel of the official propaganda discourse aimed at rationalizing the unknown and controlling the fears of civilians. It implied that something as chaotic and unfathomable as the sounds of warfare was actually driven by a sense of purpose and harmony, and that Britons were 'pulling together' in the war effort to the sound of a 'national symphony' across social and geographical divides. It was also a way of reassuring the people by maintaining the illusion that there existed an organised and systematic retaliation to enemy attacks. As a result, such phrases as the 'symphony of war', the 'melody' of the guns, the 'tones' of the cannons, or the 'score' played by bombers were commonplace in government-sponsored documentaries. The most famous example of this idea is Humphrey Jennings's *Listen to Britain*, produced in 1942 by the Crown Film Unit under the aegis of the Ministry of Information. It is built around a collage of ordinary sounds made by the people of Great Britain at the height of the Blitz, which, 'blended together in one great symphony'<sup>1</sup>, emerge above the sounds of the enemy. The film was even built with an ear to the symphonic form — a device that was imitated by several of his contemporaries.

A substantial number of documentary films sponsored by the government during the war concurred in suggesting that, diverse though the sounds of the nation at war were, they formed a coherent whole, an organised work of art, which was the manifestation of the people's unity.

Certain documentaries, however, were also a field for formal sonic experimentation, and, due to the intrinsic polysemy of sound, appeared as a conduit for criticism against political power. This was especially true in the case of expatriate artists — a majority of whom were German or Hungarian refugees — whose ideas about the musical properties of sound were highly influenced by the Soviet school. This paper will focus on one such documentary, *When the Pie Was Opened*, made in 1941 by New Zealand-born filmmaker Len Lye, under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Information.

*When the Pie Was Opened: a 'symphony of Britain at war'?<sup>2</sup>*

After moving from New Zealand to London in 1926, where he had become a member of the London Film Society and an artist associated with the Seven and Five Group, Leonard Charles Huia Lye, also known as Len Lye, began making commercial spots for the GPO Film Unit. This gave him the financial and technical means to perfect his technique of the hand-painted film.<sup>3</sup> When the war broke out, Len Lye went on to produce several documentaries for the Crown Film Unit, as the GPO was renamed after it was transferred to the Films Division of the Ministry of Information. *When the Pie Was Opened* was the third of seven films that Lye made for the Ministry of Information,<sup>4</sup> and the first that he directed in collaboration with sound recordist Ernst Meyer, a German refugee whose leftist political allegiances (he belonged to the German Communist Party) led to his activities being monitored by MI5 throughout the war.

The subject matter of *When the Pie Was Opened* is rather simple: the film deals with wartime rationing, and how to make a vegetable pie in the absence of meat. It is set in a country house and features what appears to be a middle-class family, composed of a little girl, bored and longing for 'blackbird pie' (from the famous nursery rhyme 'Sing a Song of Sixpence', on which most of the film's imagery and script are based<sup>5</sup>), her mother (set on making a vegetable pie, whose recipe she reads from a newspaper clipping) and her father. It was commissioned by the Ministry of Food and produced by the Realist Film Unit, an offshoot of the Crown Film Unit, which mainly produced instructional films, and for which Len Lye had gained several jobs during the war. All the actors are non-professional, as was the case in many GPO documentaries made during the war. The film corresponds to Grierson's definition of documentary as the 'creative treatment of actuality' (1933, pp. 7 – 9) — actuality being in this case the shortage of food during wartime, and the creative aspect of its treatment being the scripted and 'story' aspect of it.

But despite the austerity of its subject matter, the film is extravagantly surreal and experimental, mainly due to its audacious sound effects. The whole documentary works according to the principle of asynchronicity and aural counterpoint — as theorized by Russian filmmakers Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov in their 1928 joint manifesto (Eisenstein, Pudovkin, & Alexandrov, 1928). The sequence that is most emblematic of this aesthetic is the pie-baking sequence. Indeed, it is built around a collage of sound effects, including the clank of factory machinery as well as the cackling of farmyard birds as the mother chops the vegetables, the lapping of waves and the cry of seagulls as the water boils, the sounds of sawing wood and hammering as the pie crust is indented, that of a train puffing as the mother brings the pie to the table, and the sound of marching orders and stomping feet as she collects the vegetables. Moreover, the sequence is characterized by the recurring voice of a woman reading the recipe aloud and giving the mother cooking instructions — or rather orders — to the accompaniment of a series of military drum rolls, and whose mouth surrealistically emerges from the newspaper clipping on which the recipe is written<sup>6</sup> (Figures 1 & 2). This contrapuntal sound collage epitomises the aesthetics of the origins of the word symphony,<sup>7</sup> that sounding together of all people across social classes, all contributing in their own way to the war effort. That the baking and serving of a pie by a civilian at home should be accompanied by marching orders, soldiers parading, drum rolls and bugle calls (especially the famous ‘mess call’, traditionally signalling mealtime to soldiers, played on the bugle when the pie is cooked and the table is laid<sup>8</sup>), could be seen as a direct illustration of the ‘pulling together’ principle. Keeping in line with propaganda principles, the feminine voice giving ‘marching orders’ to the mother in the kitchen could be that of Britannia herself, guiding her people throughout the ordeals of wartime.

### The distant rumble of war

Surprisingly enough, the war itself is never directly mentioned or heard in the film — it is only hinted at through visual or aural symbols, including trivial sounds that seem strangely ominous. This is not an altogether unusual device in wartime films — several of Humphrey Jennings’s films made for the Ministry of Information, such as *Listen to Britain* (1942) and *The Silent Village* (1943), do not overtly show civilians under direct enemy assault. Moreover, the enemy is neither seen nor heard in the former, and merely heard in the latter. But war is nevertheless omnipresent: we see RAF airplanes streaking the sky; armoured cars careering down the streets; and soldiers on leave at the ballroom, in the case of *Listen to Britain*.



Figure 1: 'Take the season's vegetables . . .' *When the Pie Was Opened* (Lye, 1941), 04:09 © British Film Institute

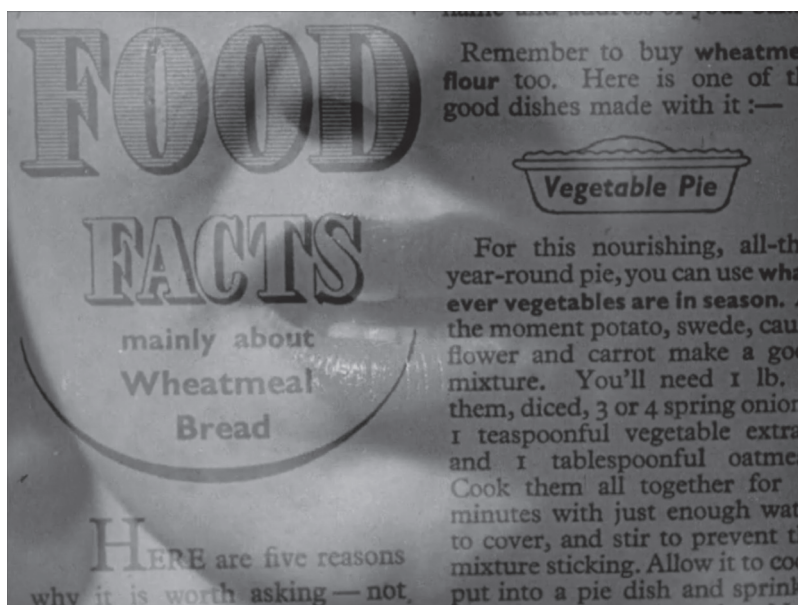


Figure 2: 'About one pound in all . . .' *When the Pie Was Opened* (Lye, 1941), 04:32 © British Film Institute

But war does not directly feature in *When the Pie Was Opened*<sup>9</sup>. The film opens with a trumpet melody on the radio (which is later revealed to be the opening to the song 'Solitude' composed by Duke Ellington and sung by Louis Armstrong), played against the background of a sky seen through a dotted curtain, as though ridden with bombs, which recalls the wail of an air raid siren — typically heard in contemporary instructional shorts. In a later sequence, the little girl's father, sitting at a table with a crown on his head, drops a plate containing a slice of pie. The plate crashes down to the ground and breaks into pieces with a sound that would no doubt have been associated by audiences with that of a bomb. As well as being shown at traditional theatre screenings, instructional films were channeled through non-theatrical distribution, organised by the GPO's mobile units, in factory canteens, social clubs, and village halls, and financed by the Ministry of Information. By 1941, people across the country were well aware of what an air raid typically sounded like, even if they were not direct eye (or ear) witnesses of the conflict. They would no doubt have been conscious of the similarities between the sound effects used in the film and their real-life counterparts. As explained by Roger Horrocks (2017), Len Lye's own family did not live in the city. In 1941, his wife and two children had been transferred to a cottage near Leigh, in Kent, so that they would be safer from German bombs than in their London home. Kent adjoined the Strait of Dover, the narrowest part of the English Channel and the most likely landing site for a German invasion. The sky was regularly streaked with German bombers and Spitfires passing over the farm on their way to London, their rumbling formed part of the regular soundscape of the area. Although Kent was not directly touched by the war at the time, the fear of German invasion was pervasive hence its indirect evocation in the film. Conversely, the natural sounds of daily life in rural Britain — the cackling of farmyard birds, the sound of a running stream, birdsong, and the cry of seagulls, the lapping of waves — are to be heard throughout the film as the aural foil to those ominous aural cues. They stand out and resound as the symbols of the nation's beauty and peacefulness, to be preserved at all costs. The survival of the natural sounds of the nation, in spite of the enemy's aural invasion, is a staple of wartime documentaries of which *Listen to Britain* is probably the most famous example.

These two types of sounds — alien and domestic — are not merely pitted against each other. Just as in a certain number of documentaries made during the war, there seems to be a conflation of domestic sounds and the sounds of warfare connoting the progressive assimilation of the war effort. The idea that everybody could contribute to winning the war — not just the soldiers on the front, but also simple civilians — is

illustrated by the sound collage in the pie-making sequence early on in the film.

The rationale behind this pervasive evocation of the war and the unifying sound collage is to be found in Len Lye's own political beliefs and theoretical writings. In the early months of 1941, Len Lye and his friend the poet and novelist Robert Graves, started to work on a pamphlet entitled 'Individual Happiness Now' or 'A Definition of Common Purpose'. Their aim was to produce a statement of values that could function as an alternative to Nazi propaganda. In the statement, Lye maintained that, since the beginning of the war, the shortage of amenities allowed people to concentrate more on the simple pleasures of life:

It may seem cynical to speak of 'Individual Happiness Now' in so cruel a year as this. Yet despite destructive air bombardment, separation of families, sinking ships, shortage of food, loss of amenities, it would be untrue to say that there has been less individual happiness since the Germans reached the Channel ports. It might even be maintained that there is more: because the emergencies and trials of the time have brought out individuality which was previously smothered in dead-alive routine, and people have a new sense of what really matters, of what remains when all else is lost. . . . They know, now, perhaps for the first time, how good a thing cheese is, or an onion, or a peaceful night's sleep on a spring-mattress. This is not an argument in favour of war, but only in favour of individuality as a by-product of one stage of this particular war (Lye, 1935, p. 6).

This statement could be taken as a variation on the 'business as usual' tenet of wartime propaganda. Yet the fact that sounds denoting the peace and quiet of country life should be chosen as the soundtrack for the war is not quite an illustration of the so-called British phlegm or resilience. Lye calls for British citizens not to pretend that war is just another nuisance, or to close ranks with all of their compatriots, but to acknowledge that the pleasures they derive from their own daily life are worth fighting for — something that would speak to the people more than the vague concept of 'defending the nation'.

*When the Pie Was Opened*, therefore, displays a certain number of thematic and formal similarities with classic informative documentary films of the Second World War. Its 'how to' format and practical purpose, its subdued evocation of war and seemingly unifying soundtrack, qualify it as a piece of propaganda. However, it stands out from similar documentaries insofar as the intention behind its creative and somehow musical treatment of sound is more subversive than it at first appears.



'The rhythm of workaday Britain'<sup>10</sup>

Classifying the film as a mere proponent of the propaganda idea of 'business as usual', or of the 'pulling together' of citizens from all social classes would be missing the point. Beneath the veneer of propaganda, sound experimentation in the film acts primarily as a vehicle for social criticism and the expression of deep wartime social conflicts. It suggests that the middle and upper classes were only sustained in times of war thanks to the working class whose labour is celebrated through an innovative and experimental sound composition.

Len Lye came from a working-class background. He sympathized with Socialist and Communist activists in London, but he was also very suspicious of politicians. Rather than identifying with the British political class, he would rather try to share in the plight of the ordinary people of Great Britain.<sup>11</sup>

Quite significantly, the fact that the orders are given by a disembodied female voice, whose accent is determinedly upper-class, and executed to the recognizable sounds of the working class (farmers, factory workers or shipyard builders) reads as a criticism of the rich and powerful, sheltered from the vicissitudes of war and never really having to cope with shortages or bomb damage.

The first part of the film is characterized by the repetition of the nursery rhymes 'Sing a Song of Sixpence', 'Old Mother Hubbard', and 'Nuts in May', all having to do with food, or the lack thereof, and sung by children's voices. Progressively and throughout the second part of the film, the nursery rhymes (the traditional musical expressions of the people's voice, the 'spiritual lifeblood of the people' as Ralph Vaughan Williams would call them [Vaughan Williams, 1987, p. 23]) are replaced by a new kind of musical leitmotif, namely the voice of the upper-class woman, and the accompanying drum rolls. At the very end of the film when the pie is served and eaten, 'Sing a song of sixpence' is heard again on the soundtrack, but this time the lyrics have changed. 'Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie' becomes 'all the season's vegetables baked in a pie'. This could be seen as an illustration of the resilience of the people who, despite the changes and trials brought about by the war, are able to fall back on their feet. But this progressive annihilation of the people's means of expression could also be interpreted as the voice of the governing class, or that of the government and its propaganda discourse glossing over the reality of war.

An earlier sequence in the film has a clearly subversive subtext which, once again, reveals itself through the soundtrack. The sequence is the little girl's fantasy on one of the verses of 'Sing a Song of Sixpence' that reads 'When the pie was opened the

birds began to sing, wasn't that a dainty dish to set before a king'. In the sequence, she is sitting at a table with her father wearing a crown — therefore embodying the king, and the ruling class as a whole. Her father cuts the pie, serves it on a plate, and gestures to hand it to his daughter — who could, by extension, be the personification of the British people (Figures 3 & 4). The slice of pie is topped with a sham blackbird — blackbirds being traditionally seen as bad omens, here the threat of German invasion. When the father-cum-king hands the pie to his daughter-subject, he drops the plate, which crashes to the ground in a cacophony of sound that echoes an aerial attack. Once again, the technique of sound counterpoint is used here: the slow-motion of the plate being dropped is accompanied by the sound of sawing wood (which could be identified as that of the timber industry, the backbone of shipbuilding, which was a staple of warfare). A straightforward interpretation of the sequence would be the king's — and by extension, the government's — inability to feed or help his or its people, who now have to devote their lives to helping the nation win the war.

Len Lye's sound recordist for this film (and for all of his wartime documentaries), Ernst Meyer, came to be particularly known for his use of 'orchestrated sound'. As a Jew and a communist, Meyer had fled Germany for Great Britain in 1933, officially to attend a musicological conference. In Berlin, he had been a student of Hindemith at the Hochschule für Musik, where the lessons included principles of soundtrack instrumentation and composing in counterpoint to the images. One of the instructional shorts he later worked on, *Mobilise your Scrap* (1942), a trailer-length documentary made for Films of Great Britain and sponsored by the Ministry of Information and the Ministry of Supply, was meant to encourage householders to save metal for the war effort. It was made with a soundtrack of factory sounds edited to fit the speech rhythm of the film's slogan, 'Mobilise Your Scrap'. The same rhythm is used over the images of civilians collecting scrap metal and salvage, through to factory workers transforming it into ammunition, and warships firing it at the enemy, once more showing the continuity of the war effort, a sonic device that was prefigured in *When the Pie Was Opened*. Both *Mobilise your Scrap* and *When the Pie Was Opened* seem to have found their inspiration in Walter Ruttmann's *Weekend* (1930), a purely sonic film without images, or *hörspiel* (radio drama), portraying the rhythm of a Berlin weekend urban landscape. Certain specific sounds used in both films by Lye and Meyer, such as sawing wood, birdsong, the clank of factory machinery, and indistinct shouts, directly call to mind the sounds repeatedly used by Ruttmann in his sonic portrayal of Berlin urban life in the 1930s. *When the Pie Was Opened* plays with the reference to *Weekend* by



Figure 3: 'Wasn't that a dainty dish . . .' *When the Pie Was Opened* (Lye, 1941), 02:21 © British Film Institute



Figure 4: *When the Pie Was Opened* (Lye, 1941), 02:29 © British Film Institute

making obvious use of sonic material displaying similarities with Ruttmann's *hörspiel*, and by constantly blurring the lines between diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. The film opens with Duke Ellington's song 'Solitude', whose belonging to the diegesis is revealed a few minutes into the film, as the music is shown to emanate from a wireless set. The sounds heard during the pie-making sequence, which we take to be non-diegetic, could therefore be conceived of as radio sounds — a subtle tribute to the innovative sound creations conceived by Meyer's fellow German sound artist. Interestingly, even though nothing proves that Lye and Meyer were aware of it, the first and last parts of Ruttmann's piece — which, of all six parts, are those they seem to have been most inspired by — were entitled 'Jazz der Arbeit' ('Jazz of Work'). The choice of a jazz piece for the film's soundtrack, combined with the sounds of the working-class, comes across as a variation — albeit an unwitting one perhaps — on the idea formulated by Ruttmann.

Both Meyer and Lye were themselves very much attached to the new possibilities offered by sound montage. Together with some of their fellow technicians at Realist, they attempted to patent a new method involving the printing of two sound strips side by side on the soundtrack, one for dialogue, and one for effects, in order to attain greater clarity. Although, because of the lack of investment from the government, the technique was only ever used for their film *Newspaper Train* (1942), this shows how committed to sound experimentation Len Lye was, despite his being more often praised and remembered for his innovative treatment of the image.

After settling in Great Britain, Ernst Meyer had resumed his political activities, joining the Workers' Music Association, and the Freie Deutsche Kulturbund (Free German League of Culture), the political and cultural association of German émigrés in London, which caused him to be under MI5's surveillance. That sound should serve as a conduit for criticism of class relationships in a film about food rationing is therefore far from fortuitous.

Although Len Lye directed seven films for the Ministry of Information, he was also very critical of the values conveyed by British wartime propaganda which, according to him, 'continued to rely upon clichés of nationalism or religion' (Horrocks, 2017, p. 4). The alleged unity of the people and resilience of civilians in the face of adversity — what historian Angus Calder later called the 'myth of the Blitz' (Calder, 1992) — were most likely creeds that Lye did not wholeheartedly embrace. Even though his approach to politics was much less up front than that of his collaborator Ernst Meyer, one could

assume that the subtle questioning of propaganda values, and leftist approach to class relations, was something that Lye had deliberately thought out.

### Lye, Ellitt and 'sound construction'

Len Lye was politically-minded. He was resolutely anti-Fascist, was sympathetic to Communists (he often took part in the May Day marches) and, as his theory about 'individual happiness' reveals, was well-versed in political reasoning. However, his interest in sound experimentation stemmed from an artistic impulse, more than a political one. As Horrocks (2017, p. 1) states in his introduction to the 'Declaration of Common Purpose', '[Len Lye's] flair was for visual statement . . . not as a hard thinker in social values.'

If we look back to Lye's pre-war productions, whose sound recordist and editor was not Ernst Meyer but his friend and electro-acoustic composer<sup>12</sup> Jack Ellitt, it appears that his experiments in sound were also not far from the later theories behind Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète*. As a sound editor, Jack Ellitt had explored the possibilities of 'drawn sound' (just as Lye had perfected the technique of 'drawn film'). As Horrocks explains in his essay on Jack Ellitt,

He learned to draw his own 'direct' sound-tracks via the variable area system.<sup>13</sup> He modified a hand-cranked Moy camera so it photographed only the soundtrack area, then set it up as a rostrum camera so it could film his hand-drawn soundtracks one frame at a time (1999, p. 25).

In the early 1930s, Ellitt had also devised a concept called 'Sound Construction', a new kind of composition he had described in a 1935 essay. At the core of his essay was the idea of abstract, non-representational sound, a concept that was also at the heart of Pierre Schaeffer's theory of *musique concrète*:

The word 'abstract' is here used in its common sense of 'nonrepresentational'. . . . An approach towards non-representational music has been made occasionally by certain modern and classical composers . . . [But] the means at their disposal were only meant to be used for the orthodox expression of a musical thought . . . It is therefore apparent that those who are experimentally inclined towards sound should now leave the old musical means of expression (Ellitt, 1935, p. 182).

Although their collaboration had ended before the shooting of *When the Pie Was Opened*, the film bears the traces of Ellitt's theories.

In an experimental short film that they made in 1937 for the GPO Film Unit, entitled *Trade Tattoo*, Len Lye and Jack Ellitt conceived of the British working class as having an overall rhythmic pattern like a tattoo (a military performance of music). The film was based on leftover footage from GPO documentaries showing images of workers in different types of industries — metallurgy, mail-sorting, cargo loading, steel milling, agriculture, railroads — to which Len Lye added animated words and coloured patterns thanks to the colour-separation method ('the rhythm of work-a-day Britain', 'the furnaces are fired', 'cargoes are loaded', 'markets are found', 'the rhythm of trade is maintained by the mails'). The soundtrack was made of excerpts from five songs by the Cuban orchestra Lecuona Cuban Boys, giving rhythm and unity to the different industry bodies. Bestowing 'work-a-day Britain' an inherent rhythm is also the intention behind *When the Pie Was Opened*. In the film, Lye and Meyer sought to highlight the existence of a working-class consciousness and solidarity across the different industries, by endowing them with an independent and idiosyncratic rhythmic pattern, free from all pre-existing canons. This is precisely what Jack Ellitt explains in his essay on 'Sound Construction': 'In speaking of form in sound we mean a construction of selected sound colours used irrespectively of any of those laws and dogmas of harmonic and melodic progression. . . . The ear can accept or reject a progression of various sounds without reference to preconceived laws' (Ellitt, 1935, p. 182).

It therefore seems that it was not so much a 'musicalisation of sound' that Ellitt, Lye and Meyer sought to achieve, but rather a more pragmatic approach to music, severed from classical formal canons, such as those of the symphony, whose form a great many wartime films precisely sought to imitate.

Ellitt goes on to state that 'Music is essentially the expression of an inner song. . . . Once the personal sense of song is submerged or replaced by a desire for something more abstract and non-associative, it is then time to think and hear in terms of sound' (Ellitt, 1935, p. 184).

This 'abstract and non-associative' quality of sound is characteristic of the treatment of sound in *When the Pie Was Opened*. Although the various sonic leitmotifs that recur in the pie-making sequence bring to mind certain activities or situations (the cackle of poultry, the drum rolls, the clank of machinery), they are not to be taken as such, but as more comprehensive symbols or concepts. Furthermore, some of the voices and shouts heard on the soundtrack are purposely blurred and indistinct (neither the words nor the context in which they are uttered are discernible), so much so that the message carried matters less than the sound itself.

This idea finds an echo in a comment made by John Grierson in a 1934 article entitled *Introduction to a New Art*, which reads: 'another curious fact emerges once you start detaching sounds from their origins, and it is this. Your aeroplane noise may not become the image of an aeroplane but the image of distance or of height. Your steamer whistle may not become the image of a steamer but of isolation and darkness' (Grierson, 1934, p. 103). This idea was then expanded upon by Paul Rotha, in his 1939 work entitled *Documentary Film*.<sup>14</sup>

What these sounds represent therefore is the idea that the working class has a rhythm of its own, which the governing class, in times of war, strived to annihilate and transmute into a mere 'instrument' of the national war effort, in other words, 'the symphony of Britain at war', with no consideration for those who really strived to feed the nation.

## Conclusion

Although *When the Pie Was Opened* was sponsored by the Ministry of Information and it displayed a certain number of typical characteristics of wartime propaganda short films (most particularly the 'pulling together' ethics that were dear to the government), one could call into question its value and efficiency as a piece of propaganda. As Brett Kashmere argues, 'Though Lye's information films were the product of their wartime context, these documentaries contain distinct auteur traces, experimental techniques, and technological innovations that run counter to their training and propaganda objectives' (Kashmere, 2007). That no direct mention should be made of the Blitz or the musical qualities of warfare distinguishes it from most of Jennings's films, for instance. Even though Jennings was a socialist with humanist ideals, who truly believed in the cohesive power of sound, he was sometimes — unfairly — criticized by his contemporaries for being a middle-class artist who only experienced the conditions of the working-class from a safe distance. For instance, his fellow GPO filmmaker Basil Wright (who directed *Song of Ceylon* in 1934), in an interview given in 1974, confessed to having at first dismissed Jennings's film *Spare Time* (1939) on account of its 'patronizing, sometimes almost sneering attitude towards the efforts of the lower-income groups to entertain themselves'<sup>15</sup> (quoted in Sussex, p. 110).

Undeserved though such scathing criticism may be, at any rate, the point of *Listen to Britain* is not to pay tribute to the working class only, but to all British people allegedly sharing a common experience of war.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, what *When the Pie Was Opened* deals with is not the heroism of the people, 'taking it' bravely in the face of adversity and fighting back, but simply the

day-to-day survival of those who had no choice but to continue to work and sustain the nation. It shows a middle-class family going on with their lives unperturbed — the mother manages to bake a pie, almost as in peacetime — thanks to the combined efforts of members of the working-class. Rather than expressing the 'music of a nation at war', the film truly enhances 'the rhythm of workaday Britain' and the subdued yet vital soundtrack of the nation's workforce.





- 9 The only telling visual clue is the newspaper clipping whose headline reads 'How to tackle fire bombs'.
- 10 This expression is taken from Len Lye's film *Trade Tattoo* (Lye, 1937).
- 11 I am indebted to Roger Horrocks, Len Lye's biographer, for providing me with an account of Len Lye's political beliefs and activities.
- 12 The term 'electro-acoustic' here might sound slightly anachronistic, given that the term was not officially used before Pierre Schaeffer's experiments in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However, Jack Ellitt himself talks about 'electro-acoustic sound' as early as 1935, in his essay *On Sound* (1935, pp. 182 – 4).
- 13 The variable area system is an optical soundtrack in which the audio signal is represented by a line of varying width running the length of the film. This system was still very new at the time, and became common in the 1970s with the advent of the stereo variable-area system.
- 14 'As soon as sounds are separated from their sources, they become images or symbols of those sources. . . . When separated from its source, a sound will not only become a symbol of that source but a symbol of what that source represents' (Rotha, 1952, p. 221).
- 15 In the same interview, Wright admitted having been mistaken in formulating this idea: 'I've revised my opinion on that. I think we were a bit too doctrinaire in our attitude in those days . . . I think we may have perhaps missed the point.' (quoted in Sussex, p. 110).
- 16 A famous example of the 'pulling together' discourse, and of the alleged cohesion of the British nation is to be found in the famous sonic dissolve in *Listen to Britain*, whereby a held top A links the sequence featuring a concert of popular entertainers Flanagan and Allen in a factory canteen, and the following sequence featuring pianist Myra Hess's lunchtime concert at the National Gallery, attended, among other 'ordinary' civilians, by the Queen Mother.

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