



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
Advancing Knowledge, Driving Change

---

Review: Films of Peter Sellers

Reviewed Work(s): *Man in a Cocked Hat* by Roy Boulting and Jeffrey Dell; *Battle of the Sexes* by Charles Crichton; *The Mouse That Roared* by Walter Shensen and Jack Arnold; *I'm All Right, Jack* by

Review by: Kenneth J. Letner

Source: *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Autumn, 1960), pp. 51-54

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1211067>

Accessed: 04-03-2018 11:29 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*University of California Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film Quarterly*

The picture does excel, and both photographer and director may claim credit for this, in the depiction of groups and mass scenes. The wedding feast, with its increasing hilarious drunkenness, is a masterpiece. The conscription scenes also, and that of the fight between Cossacks and Ukrainians, give a splendid feeling of group movement and warmth, aside from the depiction of individual faces and types, which is noteworthy also.

The minor characters and some of the major ones are excellently played, and attention to casting is particularly impressive. Pytor Glebov, who plays Gregor, is somewhat impassive, despite his arrestingly Asiatic face. Ellina Bystritskaya as his lover is handsome in the heavy Russian way. Her acting, too, seems rather stolid and lacking in variety of expression.

Thus the film may be taken as a fairly pleasing example of Socialist Realism, though it is hard to account for the almost total failure to handle the political and social issues involved in even the first two parts of the novel (Stockman, the communist agitator, for example, is only very briefly presented, and his role in the film would be totally unclear to anyone who had not read the novel). As realism, and as a piece of documentary art, *And Quiet Flows the Don* is highly interesting. Despite its flaws, despite its lack of daring or innovation, it is never boring. The sense of race and community are convincingly presented. The violence and bestiality of the Cossacks are transmitted with intelligence and tact and without too much of the novel's detail being visually transcribed. One can only regret that Gerasimov did not permit himself more liberties of this sort, more deviations in some directions, and perhaps a little less tact in others.

—HARRIET R. POLT

### *Films of Peter Sellers*

MAN IN A COCKED HAT. Roy Boulting and Jeffrey Dell wrote and directed. Music: John Addison. Photography: Max Greene.

BATTLE OF THE SEXES. Production Scenario:

Monja Tanischewsky, from "The Catbird Seat," by James Thurber. Director: Charles Crichton. Photography: Freddie Frances. Editor: Seth Holt. Music: Stanley Black. Narrator: Sam Wannamaker.

THE MOUSE THAT ROARED. Original Story: Leonard Wibberly (of San Rafael and Hermosa Beach). Producer: Walter Shensen. Released through Carl Foreman. Director: Jack Arnold. Music: Edwin Astley. Photography: John Wilcox.

I'M ALL RIGHT, JACK. See review on a later page for credits.

Several years ago, Alec Guinness rose from island fastness to world renown in a series of deliciously fraudulent films: *The Man in the White Suit*, *Captain's Paradise*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Since then, Mr. Guinness has deliberately (temporarily, we can hope) forsaken the style which first won him acclaim.

Rising up in his place on the wave of a totally different kind of comedy is Mr. Peter Sellers. Mr. Sellers' background is radio and television, and he has thus emerged to screen prominence from vaudeville-like beginnings (which I have no intention of recounting here—check your nearest national magazine or tune in to the BBC "Goon Show" series). Sellers seems to be a part of—and a product of—his times in a way almost the antithesis of Mr. Guinness, who came to films from the Old Vic and other legitimate theater work.

Four films currently expose Peter Sellers to American view. In *Man in a Cocked Hat*, he has a strong minor role, in *Battle of the Sexes*, a strong major role. The contrast between them is like that between indolent summer and fragile fall. In *The Mouse That Roared*, with three roles, he *is* the film, and in *I'm All Right, Jack* he plays a bit at the beginning as an old crotchety peer, and throughout the film appears as a stocky, stiff, and somewhat ill-built labor organizer.

These films are all satirical comments on various phases of modern life. *Hat* chews on British foreign diplomacy (with a healthy bite at the United Nations *via* angelic choirs who burst into song whenever the Chairman rises to speak); *Battle* slices away at modern feminism

and male inadequacy (the “lady” in the film persistently tugs at neckties and handkerchiefs of her male co-workers, chiming brightly: “Must look smart!”); *Mouse* nibbles on diplomacy, war, America, bombs; *Jack* preys on both capital and labor. A sketchy synopsis of plots and a few random incidents will amply illustrate the more-or-less didactic nature of these films.

*Man in a Cocked Hat* takes off from a disturbance on a small island over some secret natural resource which the Russians seem anxious to obtain. The British resident, unaware that the island is no longer a British colony, dispatches a worried missive to the foreign office and the fun begins. Terry-Thomas, as Cadogen de Vere Carlton-Browne, temporary ambassador whom Britain sends to assuage the new island king, is pure delight. His mouth droops stupidly, his eye glints fearfully, his teeth hang forlornly in the mask of this simpleton entrusted with such a bewildering task.

His friend, Colonel Bellingham (Thorley Walters) is a nincompoop, pure and simple. Together they attempt to sway the young king (suavely played by Ian Bannen in the new fashion of movie heroes—slick, handsome, and just a wee bit weak). Amphibulous, prime minister to the king, is a sleepy-eyed, double-dealing political pusher. Sellers is convincing in this role, although fittingly relegated to the background fabric.

Along the way to a happy conclusion (which conquers both Russian bluster and British blunder), writers Roy Boulting and Jeffrey Dell (who also directed) have planted short conversations whose meaninglessness is only surpassed by their banality, a diplomatic greeting ceremony amidst cannon shot which is near slapstick, and the literal application of a UN resolution to divide the country in half—a patent absurdity almost too close for comfort. At one point, Thomas informs a flunky that they are now in possession of a raw material capable of blowing up the entire world.

“Why, that’s marvelous! Congratulations!” exudes the clerk.

To which Thomas, with all humility, rejoins: “Well, one does what one can.”

*Battle of the Sexes*, narrated with gentle humor, mock radio-announcer style, by Sam Wanamaker, is an adaptation of James Thurber’s “The Catbird Seat.” American business consultant Angela Barrows (smartly enacted by Constance Cummings) buttonholes bumptious Robert Morley, Scottish tweed manufacturer and distributor, and attempts to reorganize the firm along “efficiency expert” lines.

Miss Barrows’ entrance into the House of MacPherson allows scenarist Monja Tanischewsky to gambol in the gyres and wabes of super-efficiency, Americanism, feminism, and pomposity of all sorts. In spite of the expert foolishness of Morley and the deft characterizations of Jameson Clark, Moultrie Kelsall, Alex Mackenzie, Roddy McMillan and Donald Pleasence, the high points of the film belong to Sellers.

Sellers’ “little man” bears some resemblance to Chaplin, although one cannot press the point: watching him sneak back into his own offices in order to gum up Miss Barrow’s abhorred squawk-boxes and jumble her filing system reminds one of the put-upon but cockily vengeful Tramp. Later, when he has watched *The Perfect Crime* at the neighborhood flick, and has determined to do away with his tormentor, Sellers and photographer Freddie Frances gleefully conspire to fracture—if not Miss Barrows herself—the helpless audience. Eyes watch fascinated as Sellers reaches for a butcher knife, raises his arm and then stares, horror-stricken. The camera shifts to reveal a fist clutching a not-too-menacing batter-beater. (It is interesting that this long and furiously funny scene depends not at all on topical satire.) The film ends on the hint of a reversal to Mr. Martin’s triumph: the lady weeps, Mr. Martin buys a nose-gay, taps her on the shoulder, she turns—fade-out.

*The Mouse That Roared* possesses one of the funniest premises ever to adorn a syllogism. The island of Fenwick’s economic staple is wine. When California begins to export an imitation of same, Fenwick faces disaster. Queen Gloriana (Sellers) and Prime Minister Count Mountjoy (Sellers) decide to declare war on the United States. We’ll obviously lose, they calculate,

and then generous America will, as is her custom, bend over backwards to aid her vanquished foe. Forthwith they dispatch their most incompetent boob, Tully Bascomb (Sellers) with an army of farmers to invade New York. They arrive and heartlessly launch an attack of arrows at the skyscrapers during a civil defense experiment which keeps the entire population underground. They steal the Q bomb (10 times more powerful than the H bomb) and spirit it back with a handful of captured GIs led by a magnificently misused general (Macdonald Parke), the bomb's inventor (David Kossoff), and his daughter (woodenly presented by Jean Seberg). The crooked Prime Minister plots to reverse the victory and is foiled. The film's climax is a harum-scarum bomb-tossing episode—for, inevitably, the American bomb is designed in the shape of a football.

This film possesses more subtle satire and at the same time more outright farce than the other three, but somehow the two styles do not quite jell. Also, some portions are hurt by forced exaggeration, a result, perhaps, of either the producer's or director's elaboration of Leonard Wibberly's original story. (Mr. Wibberly had considerable difficulty finding a producer. When Walter Shensen did happen along, financing remained a problem. Finally, Mr. Carl Foreman agreed to release the film. Mr. Foreman, no longer part of the Hollywood scene, works out of England, but appears to be as concerned as ever with the correction of society's evils.)

Sellers' performances here constitute a triumph, at least in retrospect, for during the film, the curiosity of his triple role distracts from the excellence of his enactment.

*I'm All Right, Jack* (see full review elsewhere in this issue) is a positively devastating (and anteriorly depressing) blast at both capital and labor, with rapier as well as vaudeville-style broadsword strokes aimed at advertising, strikes, international bargaining, television, and the cocksure little man.

For his characterization of labor boss Fred Kite, Peter Sellers has chosen a confident, uneven voice, a sweetly-swaggering carriage, and push-pudgy gestures. As in previous roles, the

well-chosen bits of delineation masterfully illustrate the precise kind of man (or woman) Mr. Sellers wishes to convey.

Obviously, from the above synopses, all four films are barbed commentaries on our world—summit conferences, strikes, hot-and-cold wars, diplomacy (or the lack of it), and the emergence of the dominant female (with the simultaneous relegation of most males to second childhood).

These productions, in spite of their occasional thinness, thus belong to the heritage of Ben Jonson and Bernard Shaw—"They possess a basic outlook that is much more serious than many a lecture." And so, while it is true that "thoughtful laughter is still laughter,"\* the thoughts engendered here are, if analyzed, enough to make escape imperative—as, indeed, the hero of *Jack* escapes to a nudist colony. We live in a world, these films imply, in which dishonesty, incompetence, cowardice, and tomfoolery prevail at all levels of business and government.

It has been suggested that comedy has served different causes in the realm of social satire: conservative or revolutionary, hinging on the stand taken toward particular foibles of the society at hand. Ours is, perhaps, the Opportunity State, and its opportunist inhabitants must resolutely make the worst of it. These films possibly serve the double function of making the organized life *bearable* by poking fun at it (and thereby circumventing Beat or Angry reactions) while at the same time providing enough vision for objectivity, basic to any efforts for rebuilding the world around us without a prior destruction thereof.

Peter Sellers, by temperament, mind, and will is admirably suited to this sort of trenchant humor. He is a good comedian. He is not, however, consistently believable, and his performances in these films, while varied, intricate, lucid, and crisp, are somehow not corporeal enough. His characterizations appear to be interesting experimentations in styles, yet somewhat disembodied. Perhaps Mr. Sellers is delib-

---

\* Both quotes are from "Styles of Drama," in John Gassner's *Producing the Play*.

erately restraining himself: his restraint sometimes smacks of French classicism as well as of the vaudeville disciplines of slapstick simplicity. Nevertheless, not enough of the human being emerges—too much frosting and not enough cake.

In the future, let us hope that this mischievous clown Sellers will fill up his funny masks with all of the inner—not just the outer—resources at his command.—KENNETH J. LETNER

### *I'm All Right, Jack*

Director: John Boulting. Screenplay: Frank Harvey and John Boulting. Camera: Max Greene. Music: Ken Hare.

Spike Milligan of the BBC's "Goon Show" recently called the class structure the curse of British film comedy, the dead hand that keeps inventiveness down and confines characters to the nice lord and lady, titled or not, and those lovable uncouth comics belowstairs. Certainly the "lower classes" are indispensable to the "Carry On" brand of coarseness, in or out of uniform, and they've made even the best Ealing comedies too quaint to be as pointed as they might be. But now come the Boulting brothers, not to overturn the system, but to turn it to comic advantage. The structure here serves not merely to provide an endless supply of unlet-

tered drolls, a strategy well worn after generations of music-hall comedy, but to keep the classes in their place long enough to make them standing targets. *I'm All Right, Jack* is not only funny but unique; it manages to be unfair to almost everyone.

Labor, management, and, more casually, the public, are equally fair game, but labor seems, in *Animal Farm* terms, a little "more equal than others." Management's representatives are blackguards, bounders, and cads—written, played, and even dressed in those terms, so that they're not quite of this time despite their production of arms "to preserve peace in the Middle East." The nonworking workers, on the other hand, are clearly The Working Class: congenitally lazy, greedy, and—behind their slogans of the class struggle—envious of the bosses. The union leader, in one of Peter Sellers' best performances, is never seen working. Instead, he leads marches, makes pronouncements, usually mispronounced, and leads the most conventional of home lives. His daughter bypasses the Lenin in his library for movie magazines, and "Mum" turns out to have a lot in common with the hero's dowager aunt. Everyone in this picture sails under false colors, and one of the funniest sequences contrasts a candy bar's cheery jingle with the sickening reality of its manufacture.

*I'm All Right, Jack* abounds with sly touches, some not quite relevant, such as the hero's father, a nudist who looks a great deal like Bertrand Russell. But much more is right on target, with little of the scattering of shots that marred *The Mouse That Roared*. The time-and-motion man makes himself inconspicuous to the men by reading *The Daily Worker*, a crew that can't be fired plays cards behind crates, an executive instructs trainees in marketing techniques that are too true to be comfortable. And most of the performances, while not unfamiliar, are gorgeous. Terry-Thomas is a perfect rotter as the personnel chief; one longs to see him in Waugh. Liz Fraser's mindless leading lady is an ideal foil to Ian Carmichael's decent, not-too-bright, incurable optimist. The role is his usual one, but he makes it singular enough to balance



THE MOUSE THAT ROARED. Peter Sellers as Tully Bascom (left), the Duchess (center), and the Prime Minister (right).