

## **Passport to Pimlico (1949) Analysis**

*Passport to Pimlico* (1949) has been said to be quintessentially Ealing, as it creates a blend of fantasy and realism and of wartime and postwar feeling. Looking at the first 12 minutes of the film in detail will investigate how the camera work, lighting, editing, sound and narrative structure achieve this style.

Let us first look at the men behind its making. Michael Balcon was the Producer of *Passport to Pimlico*. Before moving to Ealing, Balcon had already been involved in cinema and film. Co-founding Victory Motion Pictures in 1921, in charge of production at Gainsborough Pictures in 1924 and Director of Production at MGM-British in 1936 until joining Ealing in 1937, where Balcon emerges as a somewhat head masterly figure and benevolent dictator.

*'Instead of trying to make films that appealed to the American market, he became an outspoken campaigner for films that reflected British values, and could recoup their cost in Britain. And recoiling from MGM's brand of escapism, he embraced realism.'* (Drazin [on Balcon], 1998, p.102).

Henry Cornelius was the Director of *Passport to Pimlico*. The success of the drama-documentary, *Painted Boats* (1945), and two key Ealing movies: *Hue and Cry* (1946) and the poetic-realism-influenced East End drama *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947) persuaded Michael Balcon to let Cornelius try his hand at directing a feature: *Passport to Pimlico* (1949). Director Henry Cornelius made no further films at Ealing, though he later directed the Ealing style *Genevieve* (1953) for Rank. T.E.B. Clarke wrote the original screenplay for the film.

To look at a film in terms of its camera work, lighting etc it is important to look at the film as a puzzle of separate scenes, to break down the 'wholeness' and concentrate on the detail of the film's make-up. To help me do this I did a film segmentation, which can be seen in Appendix I. This helped me to analyse the beginning of the film in depth and in an orderly manner.

Firstly, I wish to discuss the films' realist style, which is notoriously Ealing. The term realism comes from literary and art movements of the nineteenth century which went against the grand tradition of classical idealism and sought to portray 'life as it really was.'

There are arguably two types of realism with regard to film. First, seamless realism, whose ideological function is to disguise the illusion of realism. Second, aesthetically motivated realism, which attempts to use the camera in a non-manipulative fashion and considers the purpose of realism in its ability to convey a reading of reality, or several readings even. This second type of realism uses location shooting and natural lighting. *Passport to Pimlico's* style fits tightly into the second type of realism, which is close to the documentary visual style.

*'British audience needed realism because the experience of the war had made it unable to accept any other style.'* (Lant, 1991, p.14).

We have to remember here though, that no film ever reflects reality. Moreover, a film tends to select, interpret and construct reality based on the real. A film made in the 1940s may have seemed realist in its day, but now the costume, manner of speech, furniture etc does not reflect our real world as it is today, instead we understand this is a realist film reflecting that era, not ours.

*'Wartime critics urged a new style of realism on British cinema that would be the basis of a specifically British product, perhaps parallel to the emerging Italian Neorealism.....Films were to reflect the spirit of the terrible national urgency without false emotion or sentimental heroics. One of the main impulses of the style of realism was that it should give a picture of everyday life, but in wartime the everyday was strangely new.'* (Lant, 1991, p.14).

Italian Neorealism began in the 1940s, it stemmed from 'a younger generation's desire to break free of the conventions of ordinary Italian cinema'. (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001, p.417). 'Neorealist mise-en-scene relied on actual locales, and its photographic work tended toward the raw roughness of documentaries.' (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001, p.418). This can be applied to the style that emerged from Ealing in the *Passport to Pimlico* period.

*'Undoubtedly, it is the influence of realism on the British film in wartime which has given it its new and individual character and which has weaned it away from*

*being an amateur and clumsy pastiche of its Hollywood counterpart.' (Michael Balcon in Higson, 1995, p.213).*

*Passport* begins with a still shot of Personal Points coupons, Clothing books, ration books surrounded by a reef – already rooting itself in the present social climate. The audience would have identified with these items, as they would have used them in their own lives. This still shot seems to act as a moment's silence in remembrance of people lost in the war. This leads to the first scene, which starts with the camera looking up at the sky, perhaps heaven; where the loved ones the audience lost now belong.

The documentary feel continues in the first establishing shots of the location. The 'fly on the wall' style as we see the fish and chip shop open for lunchtime trading while we listen to the local radio station. Throughout this sequence, and to a certain extent throughout the film, the camera seems to keep a distance, giving the audience a sense of voyeurism and the film a documentary aesthetic.

Characters are used that would be easily identifiable to the audience, that reflect those people the audience encounter in their daily lives in the real world. Perhaps making use of stereotypes to aid easy story telling. For example the friendly 'bobby on the beat', P.C. Spiller, the fish shop owner Frank Huggins and the hardware store owner Arthur Pemberton, who seems to know everyone and have their respect.

*'If a British film lacked at times the hard technical perfection of an American film, it was substituted and overbalanced by its human impact on its audience.'*  
*(Michael Balcon in Higson, 1995, p.211).*

Towards the end of the section I looked at, when the boys set the unexploded bomb off, the camera work is in news footage style. As Pemberton watches from the Council meeting window, the camera watches the 'cause' in the narrative – the boys rolling the wheel towards the hole, where the unexploded bomb is housed, then we see the 'effect' as the bomb explodes.

We then get closer to the action, seeing the parents question their sons about the explosion, P.C. Spiller questioning the boys also, the community coming to see what has happened. This all takes place at a certain distance away from the camera and therefore the audience feels at a distance from the action also, until we are moved closer to see Pemberton fall down the hole.

This brings me to the use of camera movement and angles used in *Passport to Pimlico* that were the work of Director of Photography, Lionel Banes and camera operator, Cecil Oxley. Throughout the section I looked at, there seemed to be three main uses of the camera.

Firstly, the straight-on angle medium shot, with one to three people in the frame. This can be seen in the scenes: the man at the window in first scene, Shirley and Mr Huggins in the fish shop talking about bream, down the bomb hole with the two men reading the newspaper and Pemberton and Connie after his fall down the hole.

Secondly, the long pan or lateral tracking shot. This can be seen in the establishing shots of the streets at the start of the film and when Pemberton is looking out the window at the Council meeting just before the bomb explodes. The second example here is notably rickety, the tripod not as smooth as used in the making of films today. When Shirley walks over the bombsite from the fish shop and says hello to the paperboy Benny, this is along shot as a long shot.

Thirdly, the close up. This is used when Molly is wrapping the bream in newspaper in the fish shop. The camera stays on the newspaper just long enough for the audience to read that the headline is 'Heat wave breaking all records' on the Daily Express. When P.C.Spiller is in the hardware store and Connie shows him Pemberton's model for the bombsite land, the camera focuses on this for maybe longer than you would expect, later in the film it is evident why this model is given so much screen time earlier on. To begin the Council meeting scene, the camera takes a bird's eye view of the same model, this gives the impression, at a glance that we are actually looking down

on that playground, as if it was a real place already. The camera then pulls back to show us it is only the model again and we are placed in the midst of the Council meeting.

The lighting throughout this section of the film seems uncomplicated and naturalistic, there is no fill light used to eliminate shadows. The only different type of lighting is in the very first scene with the man at the window with a fan on, this is backlight so he only appears in silhouette.

*'Sound has a spatial dimension because it comes from a source. Our beliefs about that source have a powerful effect on how we understand that sound.'*  
(Bordwell and Thompson, 2001, p.305).

Non-diegetic (which has a source outside the story world - music added to enhance the film's action is the most common type) music is used over the titles, a soundtrack. Then the first scenes soundtrack song seems to also be non-diegetic but we later find out that it is actually diegetic (has a source in the story world, character dialogue, objects in the story making noise e.g. cats, dogs, cars etc, and music represented as coming from instruments in the story space), as the characters are listening to the song on their local radio station. The rest of the section is mainly just character dialogue and sound effects for the explosion. George Auric composed the music for the film.

A film does not start it begins. I choose to look at the opening of *Passport to Pimlico*. The audience is thrown into a place where the action seems in full swing, a heat wave; this was inspired by the actual heat wave in Britain in 1947. This is called '*in medias res*' in Latin, 'in the middle of things'.

*Passport's* narrative structure is basic, with no use of flashbacks or flash forwards. The story follows chronologically along with cause and effect style of narrative. This section of the film starts with fairly traditional narrative structure of the establishing shots.

In this short opening section, the newspaper seems to be the main avenue for expositional information being passed onto the audience. Firstly in the fish

and chip shop when Molly is wrapping the bream up for Shirley, the camera pauses over the headline of the Daily Express, giving the audience information of the heat wave happening in that location. Secondly down the hole with the bomb, the two men are reading the paper to see if there is any information about 'Pamela' the unexploded bomb and we learn of their location, Miramont Place, Pimlico, London. This is also interesting as it may mirror how society in this era gained information, mostly from the newspaper.

*'The shot is the basic unit of film construction; it is defined, physically, as a single piece of film, without breaks in the continuity of the action.'* (Monaco, 2000, p.129).

The editing employed in *Passport* (taken on by editor Michael Truman) is, like the narrative structure, simple. The titles use the dissolve to transform from one 'page' to the next. There is a fade out / fade in to the first scene. Most of this section then just cuts from one scene to the next. There are no fancy wipes or any editing techniques that would seem obtrusive. There are dissolves used when the narrative is taking a different direction into the next shot, for example there is a dissolve into the Council meeting, into the first aid at the home of the Pemberton's and at the end of this section it dissolves out, as Shirley and Pemberton venture off to the hole in search of the treasure.

*'Editing contributes to a great deal to a film's organization and its effects on spectators.'* (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001, p.249).

All of these different elements of film making form *Passport to Pimlico* into what is it, a quintessentially Ealing piece of cinema history.

*'Reflecting postwar Britain? The bomb-site of Passport to Pimlico: communal feeding, communal benevolence.'* (Barr, 1998, p.9).