

## NOTES ON THE CLASS STRUGGLE IN NEWSREELS

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*I have my eyes closed so as not to see the darkness.*

Pavlina Autor Oberstar

As a rule, newsreels were shown before feature films as an addition to the “real” film, usually fictional. Newsreels never attained the status and dignity of a film deemed worthy of being screened in its own right. The thing itself (what people were prepared to buy a ticket for) was screened after them. Newsreels were merely curtain-raisers. It thus seems that the taste of the audience has always been more inclined to documentary films of wish fulfilment (fictional films) than films of social representation, as Bill Nichols defines documentaries.

There is something very unfilmic about the newsreel as a film genre, especially in the predominant, classic form that entered the cinemas in around 1910. It is stained by the original sin of adapting the journalistic method, which is visible in its organisation of content, which is modelled on the press. A typical newsreel is composed of unrelated segments from various fields of society. Reports on socio-political, economic, cultural and sports events in the style of newspaper headlines are interrupted by intertitles announcing the next topic. Most often, they were interlinked by the omniscient voice of the narrator explaining the images, imparting content to them and assigning the footage its place within the whole. The *voice of God* as the American contemporaries of early newsreels named it. Dziga Vertov disparagingly characterised this type of newsreel as journalistic. Béla Balázs contemptuously named them pictorial reporting. Unlike André Bazin, they were both advocates of film purity.

At the same time, the newsreel is historically marked by its role as intermediary, as a simple vehicle for providing information. During both World Wars and the interwar period, it came very close to usurping the primacy of the press in informing the public about current events. Although it offered more than the printed word (it did not merely describe the events, but also showed them), it turned out that with the help of the telegraph and the telephone words covered the same distances more quickly than film reels shot at distant locations. After World War II, when the technology for transmitting images and sound long distances rapidly advanced, the new medium – television – proved to be a decidedly more suitable form for visually informing the public than the newsreel. As television spread, newsreels became socially unnecessarily, turning into a superfluous film genre.

Despite the above, history has shown that the newsreel is a distinctly resilient film genre. Although all the objective conditions for its extinction have been provided, newsreels are still being filmed. This resilience should perhaps be ascribed to its filmic impurity, its contamination with social and political reality, which invades it through its journalistic form, and also perhaps to its susceptibility to political intervention and even propaganda. In any case, the newsreel has proven to be one of the privileged film sites of class and social struggles. Paradoxically, it is precisely the ‘extra-filmic’ reality of social struggles that constantly revolutionises the

newsreel and keeps it alive. This is why the periods of innovation in the newsreel form often coincide with the periods of political and social crises when reality itself is divided and when the dominant ideology of society is called into question. At such moments, individual filmmakers and filmmakers' collectives have repeatedly managed to reinvent the film language of newsreels, even though they had to force it by introducing technological innovations in production, distribution and film equipment. Dziga Vertov's technological breakthroughs are a case in point here. In his notes on shooting *Symphony of the Donbas (Enthusiasm)*, he immodestly wrote that it was the members of his collective – the Kinoki – who first “made both camera and microphone ‘walk’ and ‘run’”.<sup>1</sup>

The characterisation of newsreels as the sites of class struggles applies in particular to the typical and the most widespread form of the newsreel. Film theoretician and practitioner Béla Balázs claimed that they seemed like “an innocent form of pictorial reporting”, but immediately added that they were in fact “the most dangerous instruments of propaganda” and that they were “put together” in keeping with “the intentions of the interests and power groups who pay for them”.<sup>2</sup> The same author provided an account of the production methods of the workers' anti-newsreels edited and screened in the 1920s in the Weimar Republic. They were made by members of the Volksfilmverband, a workers' film society whose newsreel activities were constantly thwarted by government censorship bodies, which banned their films. The society therefore abandoned their own production and started acquiring the commercial UFA newsreels already approved by the censors. The society's film workers then re-edited the scenes, and, when needed, added their own footage, thus releasing their repressed class component. To the footage taken at a dogs' beauty contest in which “overwhelmingly glamorous ladies held expensive lap-dogs in their arms” they added a scene of “one who did not take part in the contest: a blind beggar and his ‘seeing eye’ dog, watching over his miserable master in the cold of winter”. In order to sharpen class antagonisms, the excerpts from a commercial newsreel report from St Moritz showing “skating rinks and the guests on the terrace of a luxury hotel” were followed by scenes of “ragged, hungry snow-shovellers and rink-sweepers”<sup>3</sup> from the same newsreel.

A report on a similar practice of screening anti-newsreels comes from a Dutch organisation named Association for Popular Culture, which was very similar to the German one, and in particular Joris Ivens, a member of the time and an established international documentary innovator. Ivens relates that on Friday nights they would borrow a number of commercial newsreels that had already been approved for public screening by the censors. On Saturday mornings they would watch and study them. In the afternoon, they would cut the film and re-edit it. Sunday mornings were reserved for screenings at the association's meetings. In the afternoon, they would take them apart again and restore their original form, and on Monday return them to the company that had lent them. They thanked them for their cooperation, and repeated

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<sup>1</sup> Vertov, D. *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984 (p. 107).

<sup>2</sup> Balázs, B. *Theory of the Film*, Dennis Dobson, London, 1931 (p. 165).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.165–166.

the entire process the following week with another newsreel.<sup>4</sup>

By means of this method, the workers' newsreel associations between the two World Wars systematically deconstructed the idyllic self-image that the society at the time put on display in commercial newsreels. Sam Brody, one of the members of the Workers Film and Photo League, which was emerged as a response to the Great Depression in the US, pointedly described the manipulation performed by the authorities at the time through the representation of society in films: "Films are being used against the workers like police clubs, only more subtly."<sup>5</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, a time when Europe was drifting towards fascism and when the economic crisis in the US was sharpening class antagonisms and deepening social inequality, newsreels became a means of struggle in the field of the filmic representation of social reality.

Without knowing about this forgotten history of newsreel movements from the first half of the 20th century, the generation of activist filmmakers at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s took up the newsreel as a weapon in the struggle against the dominant ideology. The images of street fighting, and the workers' and student uprisings in May 1968 in Paris were preserved in a series of 41 newsreels lasting three to four minutes entitled *ciné-tracts*. The filmmakers who made them, including Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, invented not only a new newsreel language, but also an entire social context of film circulation with which they bypassed the commercial distribution channels. They used 16mm film cameras because this was the format that could be easily screened or adapted to the projection capabilities of the epicentres of resistance at the time (occupied faculties and occupied factories). It enabled quick copying and cheap distribution. The prescribed production method of making *ciné-tracts* was quite simple: the directors were supposed to produce, shoot and edit the film themselves in one day. If possible, the editing was supposed to be done in the camera with minimal external editing interventions. Despite the simplifications, the prescribed method of work permitted extraordinary authorial films (the authorship of individual films was anonymous). Above all it made possible the quick production demanded by the up-to-date coverage of events in May 1968.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Newsreel collective paid similar attention to the distribution channels and conditions of dissemination, allowing their newsreels to be screened only if adequately contextualised through political discussion. But the prescribed participation of the audience was defined as merely the minimum of activist documentary work. Newsreel's film workers aimed at participatory documentary films and newsreels in which the filmed groups or individuals would also be the film's creators, not just guests on the screen. The democratisation of newsreel production, the decommodification of distribution, the politicisation of dissemination and experimentation with the newsreel form are characteristic also of

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<sup>4</sup> See *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, Thomas Waugh (ed.), Scarecrow Press, London, 1984 (p. 54).

<sup>5</sup> In *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, Thomas Waugh (ed.), Scarecrow Press, London, 1984 (p. 71).

the abundance of newsreel movements in Third World countries that emerged during struggles for independence and socialist revolutions in the long period after World War II.

The history of film language used in the newsreel genre is closely related to the history of 20th-century social struggles. Even though all the conditions for the extinction of the newsreel as a film genre have objectively been in place since the 1960s, it seems that the extra-filmic reality of social struggles is the main reason that newsreels keep being made. The classic, journalistic newsreels have not been made for a long time. But again and again activist filmmakers and filmmakers' collectives can be found, prompted to take up this socially outmoded film genre and to make it into a first-rate filmic expression of social struggle due to the lack of coverage or poor coverage of social contradictions in the media.

It seems that, during periods of split reality, the newsreel, which is supposed to represent society as directly as possible, is faced with the dilemma of how to represent a social reality that is becoming increasingly unreal. In this dilemma, Nichols's double definition of cinema's ethical mission is conceived anew. It may well be true that in periods of non-crisis "fiction may be content to suspend disbelief (to accept its world as plausible), but non-fiction often wants to instil belief (to accept its world as actual),"<sup>6</sup> as Nichols says. But it seems that, in times of crisis, a different ethical demand is imposed on the makers of newsreels. If in view of society becoming unreal they wish to remain true to their documentary ethics, their films have to instil disbelief (they have to film the world as not actual) and be satisfied only with suspending belief (showing the world as implausible). It is perhaps also for this reason that the newsreels of the second half of the 20th century are becoming borderline film creations, which, precisely insofar as they are documentary (a representation of society), are at the same time also fictional (wish fulfilments).

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<sup>6</sup> Nichols, B. *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001 (p. 2).