

Witnessing the Past

by Luke McKernan

What makes a newsfilm ‘news’? News, so the dictionary says, is a report of a recent event. A newsfilm is such a report on film, but Nicholas Pronay has pointed out the importance of considering the audience for this news.¹ What is of news interest to one group is not to another; certain news stories address a wider public than others. A newsfilm has to interest its target audience as *news*. This is partly a question of how it is filmed, but rather more a question of how it is packaged and presented. A newsfilm must be seen in its fullest context: who made it, who did they make it for, how did those people see it.

The newsfilm of today, that is television news, is addressed to a living room audience aware of stories on both a local and a worldwide scale. It is generally the setter of the news agenda; it reports the news first and to the widest audience. This is of course in relation to newspapers. With the newsreels of the cinema era the converse was true; newspapers came out first and determined news stories and news trends. Newsreels followed in their wake, supplying the moving pictures to an audience already informed of the subject matter. The news is made by who gets in first.

It follows that a newsfilm that outlives its story is no longer news. It becomes archive film, the stuff of documentaries and compilations, an illustration of the past. But what I want to argue is that it can still be news, that it takes only a little understanding and research to restore these films to their true life.

Film, of itself, is meaningless. It is the expectations and experience that we bring to it that makes it communicate with us. A fiction film, of whatever age, will always hold a basic appeal: who are these people, where are they, what are they doing, what will happen to them? We will identify with anyone so long as we recognise a situation or a predicament. For a newsfilm we must be similarly informed. And it is this lack of information that so bedevils the presentation of news footage on television, where most people are likely to encounter it. The black and white ‘archive’ shot in documentaries and news reports exists chiefly as a decoration to the commentary rather than anything that actually draws attention to itself as having once been ‘real’ for people. The additional vices of films run at the wrong speed, picture cropping and soundtracks added to silent footage all rob the original material of its full message and integrity. The situation is not quite so bad with the sound newsreels, where the commentary is frequently retained both for its information and its ability to pinpoint a period. The image is still subordinate to the commentary, but this is inherent in the sound newsreels anyway. To hear Bob Danvers Walker or Leslie Mitchell is to conjure up instantly a time and an attitude. Silent newsreels, by their very silence, have been the more blatantly manipulated, are all the more misunderstood or not even considered at all.

The period suffering the greatest abuse is probably the First World War. The lack of drama in so much of the surviving footage, or the lack of any footage at

all for some periods (particularly 1914-15) leads to false close-ups of explosions actually filmed a mile away, scenes from fiction films presented as actuality, scenes of evident fakery (just consider where the cameraman was standing and what danger he would have been in if such scenes were genuine) and, overall, shots from a wide number of sources of differing dates edited into a hodgepodge montage falsely representing any one place or time. The use of background noises, people chattering, cars driving, bombs exploding, all indicate that the producers found the material inadequate or ineloquent. Radio broadcasts are run alongside 1920s newsreel footage to give them the appearance of sound newsreels; comic piano music is considered the only suitable accompaniment when a silent newsreel is at least presented as such, with main title and intertitles. Perhaps worst of all is the deliberate playing of silent film at the wrong speed, making the subjects look ridiculous and all the more at a remove from ourselves. The excuses are that people are used to seeing such speeded-up images, and that they take up less of the costly production time. Given that the results can look so foolish, one may wonder why they bothered to track down the material at all.

Obviously producers have an overall duty to create an effective programme and use the materials to hand as they best see fit. No producer of a historical programme would think to falsify paper evidence, but perhaps the newsreel industry's own cavalier attitude towards its holdings is merely being carried on. Moreover, a few do credit their source material with the ability to communicate and not just decorate. What a delight when in an intelligently made series such as *OUT OF THE DOLL'S HOUSE* the commentary draws attention to the images from the past, tells us what it is that we are looking at, what inference may be drawn from it, what it might mean. Quite simply, this brings the images back to life. We are informed, as the original audience was informed before it went into the cinema. We know what it is that we are looking at; it has all the more to say.

To appreciate fully a piece of newsreel film, or any actuality footage from the past, it is surely necessary to understand the context in which it was made. Who filmed it, why, how, for whom, under what constraints, with what skill? All these considerations, asked even if not answered, increase this vital awareness of the material as a medium of information. One first needs a basic grasp of newsfilm history: the simple actualities of the 1890s, the 'topicals' up to 1910, the establishment of the newsreels in 1910, the introduction of sound in 1929, the period of dominance in the 30s and 40s, the arrival of television in the 1950s. Differing conditions affected what was filmed, and what was recorded in one decade can differ greatly from the next.

Consider the options and outlook of a newsreel editor in the 1920s. A newsreel came out twice a week, usually covering five stories per issue. He would have half a dozen cameramen at his disposal, plus freelancers available for major stories. Established conventions dictated that most stories were covered by the one cameraman. A completed newsreel lasted for 300 ft (35mm) or five minutes: hence the individual stories had to be encapsulated in one minute each, inclusive of titles. This was another inherited convention. Newsfilms before the newsreel era, known as 'topicals', had been around 300ft in length, and newsreels, in supplanting them in the market, first copied their length and then stayed that way. The succession of short stories was their way of imitating newspapers. Newspapers, of course, dictated the pattern. They determined what was news, and more importantly what was *visual* news. As photo-illustrated newspapers became increasingly popular, and as even *The Times*

developed its page devoted to photographs, a consensus grew up about which stories were suitable to be illustrated. Fashions, parades, society gatherings, animals, sports: these were the stories that people accepted as pictures. Serious news could still only be properly discussed in print. Accepting this status quo, as they were to do in all other matters, the newsreel editors took their place in the news chain at the back, supplying moving pictures for that week's stories.

Other factors also dictated what the news should be before the editor had to make any decisions. Primarily there was the weather. A crucial point too easily missed is just how many newsreel stories from this period were filmed out of doors. It was essential. With slow film-stock and only awkward lighting equipment available (and few opportunities to use it) the newsreels were almost bound to film using natural light. Being London-based and London being chronically prone to fog, the search for good lighting conditions and the question of how to get through the winter months were prime considerations. It became essential to have a store of back-up stories, often American material, which helps explain the light-hearted stories which proliferated around the Christmas period.

From this it follows that a library of material was an essential asset, and its lack could be a disincentive to any new company wishing to break into the market. Old shots were re-used, sometimes whole stories, and of particular value was a collection of 'portrait' shots of personalities. This too helped to determine the nature of the news, which became not just personality-led (which it always had been) but favoured those personalities with the best camera manner. The great popularity of Lloyd George, Stanley Baldwin and King George V has to be seen in part as a result of their successful performances in front of the camera. Likewise, an earlier generation of politicians and personalities (Asquith, Curzon) fell out of favour partly because they made no concessions to the newsreels. Being in the public eye now meant being seen.

Everything about the newsreel world worked to a formula; news had to be planned as much as possible. The newsreels liked to boast of the speed with which they could get some stories onto the screen, but this was itself a tacit admission that they were usually late with the news, as was forced on them by the necessities of film processing and a bi-weekly release pattern. Today's notions of scoops, revelations, of headline stories and instant coverage, were largely impossible. A passive situation gave rise to passive news coverage, where it could be defined as news at all. Newsreel editors even possessed a calendar of reliable news events: horse races, annual ceremonies, festivals and the like. With so much of the newsreel's year catered for in advance, one has to be wary of using the word news at all. Of course, they did cover genuine news stories as they arose, but it was coverage in terms of picture material, not analysis.

Yet it was news to those who saw it, when taken into consideration with all other sources of news information, and the formula for news coverage devised by the newsreels still governs to some extent the television news coverage of today. News is a package of varied stories of a certain length, varied in import and locale, to a pre-set time slot which shapes and paces the overall news package into something with which we can be comfortable. The news itself is always subject to form and habit.

The newsreels developed over the years, of course, most significantly with the arrival of sound, and the familiar, longer (850ft, 35mm, 10 mins) sound

newsreels that flourished from the 30s to the 50s became far more persuasive as setters of news. This was due to increased expenditure, more cameramen, improvements in coverage, increased strength in the exhibition sector (to the extent of there being cinemas devoted to newsfilm alone), but chiefly on account of the commentary. The word, and its emphatic delivery, makes the sound newsreels a rich source of material for anyone seeking to interpret the values and attitudes of the period. But what is increasingly lost is the value of the image. At its simplest, this can be seen in the reduced shot lengths, the increased number of shots from a variety of angles, deemed necessary to cover the story. Improvements in film stock meant a sharper image, but one that seems often buried in music, commentary and the urgent need to cut to the next shot.

What may distinguish the silent newsreel style above all else is its lengthier shots, and thus by implication its greater faith in the information, the special eloquence, presented by the image alone. The silent newsreel possessed intertitles, of course, and one may note an increased use of these titles from the First World War onwards, where they start to comment and not merely describe. Yet the image itself is paramount and certain kinds of images predominate. Kevin Brownlow has written that "Silent newsreels tend to show history as the movement of crowds".² This is certainly so, but I would say that the dominant newsreel *image*, however, certainly for the silent era and the reason for the silent newsreels' great success, was the human face, looking at the camera. View any number of silent newsreels, not just the major stories but the run-of-the-mill staple items as well, and this comes over again and again: people staring at the camera, at the audience then and us now. Not just the famous, the subjects of the films, but ordinary people greeting the camera. This may be noticed in soldiers marching off to the front, protestors taking part in a march, a fashion parade, a football team lined up before the match, but also in incidental shots which form no part of the story as such. The cameramen seem often to have filmed people simply for the delight of it. It is this delight that is lost when a piece of silent newsreel footage is edited to conform to televisual standards. Running it at its correct length of shot and correct speed is only giving the image and its subject their true worth.

It may be argued that communing with the faces of the past has little to do with news, and this is to some degree so. It helps to explain the appeal of these images at the time and their continued appeal now, and shows how news was primarily an entertainment medium, but for a full appreciation of their news value one needs to be informed of the background to the story. The researcher seeking out news footage will be so informed, one hopes, but the viewer has to be helped along as well. The image must be pinpointed in time, must be presented as a medium of information and not merely decoration. The film was produced under set conditions, by certain people working to established rules, it has a date. It shows something that really happened, someone who really existed, for although newsfilm lies in many ways, this is always so.

So just what is the special appeal of the newsreels? The fascination for newsreel footage, and particularly silent footage without the dominating commentaries and more rapid editing styles of the sound era, I find considerable. To put a name to it, however, is difficult. There was a little art to newsreel filming, some skilful editing, some may be even considered beautiful, but this is not really part of the news message. It may just simply be, as it has always been, the wonder of the moving image. To see footage of Charlie

Chaplin on a boat in 1921 may be fine in itself,³ but if one knows that the newsreel filming him had an exclusive on the subject, that Chaplin wrote about being pestered incessantly by the cameraman and refusing to co-operate, while on screen he clearly co-operated and exploited the camera a great deal; that events shown really occurred in known places on known dates, if one considers where the cameraman was in any one shot, how and why he positioned himself there, if one looks into the background and picks out the incidental, unintended action, or if one considers the skilful mixture of movement, close-ups, crowd shots and main subject, if one knows just a little about this record of a phenomenon, one is so much the richer. It is real life that has been recorded; we have only to witness it.

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Notes

1. See Nicholas Pronay's essay 'The newsreels: the illusion of actuality' in Paul Smith (ed.), *The Historian and Film* (Cambridge, 1976), p.97.
2. Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (London, 1990), p. 498.
3. I have in mind 'CHARLIE' ON THE OCEAN (*Topical Budget*, Issue number 524-2, release date 12 September 1921).