FILMING THE GREAT WAR: INFORMATION, PROPAGANDA AND HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION

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The First World War was the first major conflict to be widely represented in visual media. All sides involved made considerable use of photography and cinema, which since then have become cornerstones of what could be called "a visual culture of war". Indeed, these two media perform a two-fold mission, as sources of both daily information and historical documentation. Hence the existence today, in France and elsewhere, of various centres of archives and private collections containing countless still images and moving pictures taken between 1914 and 1918. These diverse collections offer rich and exciting documentary material for researchers, and for filmmakers as well. However, as interesting or striking as they may be, these images—like all documents of another time—are bearers of the real, of the forgotten and of the spurious which we must be able to decode.

NEWSREELS AND WAR DOCUMENTARIES

When war broke out, cinema was still seen as a mechanical tool for recording real events. Created in 1908 in France, newsreels, or *les bandes d'actualité filmées*, opened a window onto the world and attracted curious crowds. Yet neither professionals of the image nor military and political authorities had any clear idea of what a cinema of information and propaganda could offer.[1] As they gradually became aware of the social power of images, both sought to use them. As with the illustrated press, images of the war were of great interest to commercial companies, which saw them as a way of appealing to the public at home, who were hungry for knowledge and insight as to what was happening at the front. Initially cameramen were not authorised to enter combat zones;

but finally, under pressure from cinema personalities like Léon Gaumont and Charles Pathé, who insisted that film constituted the most appropriate medium to reach a mass public, in early 1915 the French Minister for War, Alexandre Millerand, together with the military authorities, decided to establish two bodies: the *Section Photographique de l'Armée* (SPA), and the *Section Cinématographique de l'Armée* (SCA). An agreement was signed between the Ministry for War and the federation of film industry professionals to meet demands for information at home and propaganda abroad, and to create archival records of the war. Jean-Louis Croze, who had been a playwright, theatre critic and later a film critic for the magazine *Comoedia*, became Director of the SCA, which brought together numerous camera operators working for the four major companies of the time: Pathé, Gaumont, Éclair and Éclipse.

INITIALLY CAMERAMEN WERE NOT AUTHORISED TO ENTER COMBAT ZONES

When a camera operator was appointed by the SCA's Bureau for Military Information (*Bureau des informations militaires*, BIM) to film at a specific location at the front, he was met by a staff officer whose task was to *guide* him in the selection of his reports, as there were certain subjects that were better kept secret. But these officers, knowing that all the images would be inspected and sifted later, could be relatively accommodating, as they were aware of the need for archive footage for future posterity. This twofold mission was something that Pierre Marcel, who was in command of both sections, summarised in the following terms in September 1915: "The SPCA [*Section Photographique et cinématographique de l'Armée*] must ensure loyal propaganda when authenticating documents, and establish archives whose authenticity will be irrefutable by the scrupulous author of an impartial history."

The footage taken at the front was sent to one of the major film studios to be developed. The films were then edited, and titles, sub-titles and inter-titles (captions) were written and inserted between the images to comment on them. The final versions varied from five to fifteen minutes for newsreels,[2] and up to an hour for documentaries. For films to be put on sale, it was important that the images should give a "strong impression of the material or moral power of the French army and its discipline."[3] In the case of films for export to neutral countries, it was essential to create an effective counterbalance to enemy propaganda, and to "make known everywhere the effort exerted by France since the outbreak of the war."[4] To do this, it was deemed advisable to take shots of weapons, of soldiers parading and of artillery firing, and to include plenty of scenes showing the positive role played by officers, the good condition and organisation of the troops, the abundance of their equipment and munitions, and the efficient functioning of quartermaster and medical services.

In general, there had to be plenty of reassuring images that would reinforce the *Union Sacrée* that supported the French war effort. In the words of Georges Dureau, editor of the magazine *Ciné-Journal*, in June 1915, "cinema, precisely because it enjoys public popularity, is surely a wonderful way to support morale" (Dureau, 1915). From that time on, in film after film all the scenes were alike. In this early phase of the war, all combatants used film images to prove the superiority of their soldiers and their equipment. Industrial weaponry, which caused total carnage on the battlefield, was shown in images that revealed only the collateral damage. Depictions on film screens in France and abroad of the ravages to French territory were seen regularly throughout the war. Shots of ruins, particularly of churches, represented as true tests of suffering for the French people, underscored the "savagery of German aggression". In

the words of the editor-in-chief of the magazine *Hebdo-Film*, these images were necessary to "sustain within us the healthy hatred of the barbaric killer." The finest example of the genre is undoubtedly *Les monuments historiques d'Arras victimes de la barbarie allemande* (Pathé, June 1915). Also noteworthy is the film *Éclipse*, devoted to the emblematic Reims Cathedral, which was regularly shelled by artillery or aircraft, shown in a clear silhouette in the final image of the film with the caption: "*Ils ne l'auront pas!*" ("They will not take it!").

CENSORSHIP

Whether newsreels, documentaries or fiction films, the cinema did not escape the censor's scrutiny. In France, censorship was first introduced—in the case of newsreels—by local authorities (governors and mayors). Then, between April 1915 and March 1917, it was the Press Bureau created at the beginning of the conflict by the Ministry for War to check all press articles and film images before their release. Every week the Bureau was given previews of all films made by Pathé, Gaumont, Éclair and Éclipse, and had the power not only to approve or deny the permit necessary to screen the films publicly, but also to cut out images and change the content of the films. The Bureau's decisions were based on two criteria: not to alarm the public, and not to give information to the enemy. To meet the first objective, all necessary precautions had to be taken to reassure families by considerably toning down any distressing scenes (almost all shots of dying wounded men and corpses were eliminated, especially if they were French). For the second criterion, care was taken to eliminate any military information that could be useful to the enemy (this applied especially to films that were to be distributed abroad that might be seen by German spies). The Bureau thus required the deletion from the intertitles of all regiment numbers and names of officers or locations. It was also forbidden to show certain equipment (the first tanks, for example) or, at least in the early stages of the war, to screen films depicting the use of flammable liquids or tear gas by French troops. Obviously, many of the corrections imposed by the censors, particularly those related to intertitles, aimed at tempering the often gratuitous sensationalism of the film studios. The films that were banned were not destroyed, but put in archives for distribution after the war. The authorities were convinced that they must not fear any indiscretion, as made evident in a letter, dating from 1917, from General Lyautey, then Minister for War: "I have taken the strictest measures to establish a meticulous selection between documents that could be shown to the public, both in France and abroad, and those that will be kept exclusively as archive pieces, to be preserved with the utmost secrecy."[5]

FROM MARCH 1917 ON, NEWSREELS WERE OVERSEEN BY A NEW COMMISSION MADE UP OF CIVILIANS AND MILITARY OFFICERS FROM THE SCA, AND THE MINISTRIES FOR WAR, FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND FINE ARTS. THESE NEW CENSORS WERE SOMEWHAT LESS SEVERE THAN THOSE OF THE PRESS BUREAU, AND AS A RESULT MANY BANS WERE LIFTED

From March 1917 on, newsreels were overseen by a new commission made up of civilians and military officers from the SCA, and the Ministries for War, Foreign Affairs and Fine Arts. These new censors were somewhat less severe than those of the Press Bureau, and as a result many bans were lifted. The agreement between the authorities and the filmmakers' federation remained in effect until January 1917, when the SCA distanced itself from the private studios. Following this separation (which was not a total break as the Chambre Syndicale continued to collaborate considerably

in the distribution of films), the SCA was merged with the SPA to create the SPCA. Placed under the joint supervision of the Ministries for War and Fine Arts, its objectives were similar to those of the two former services. However, its administrative approach was characterised by an extreme concern with production. From March 1917, various ambitious projects were developed, such as the full-length documentary *La puissance militaire de la France* by Henri Desfontaines. Structured in five parts ("La France en armes", "La France entière mobilisée", "Aviation et aerostation", "La bataille" and "Après la bataille") the film offers a highly didactic overview, through a statement by General Joffre addressed to General Pershing and the American people, of "what France has had to do, for three years, to improvise a war for which it had the honour not to prepare." The film had a considerable impact not only in France, but in the United States as well. In a letter to the filmmaker André Antoine, creator of Théâtre Libre (where Desfontaines was a student and later an assistant before making his own films), Desfontaines explained that the demands of producing propaganda abroad (specifically, in relation to a film targeting an American audience) had compelled him to make a film which was very simple, and not at all an artistic venture: "Our particular purpose must not be to consider cinema from a general point of view (…) It is a matter of sustaining morale, of exposing culpability, the crimes of the Germans (…) The future for our cinematographic art is not uncertain but, for the present, propaganda is and must be done with postcards and not with works of art (…) Otherwise it would not achieve the purpose, which is to reach the common people… We will educate them bit by bit, in small doses."[6]

In 1917 a new weekly newsreel appeared, around fifteen minutes long, named *Les annales de la guerre*. Around a hundred of them were screened from 1917 to January 1919. Worthy of special mention is Number 13 in the series, a report from June 1917 featuring an interesting visit to an army camp by General Pétain. This sequence is unique for various reasons, firstly because it is here we find the famous scene, cited by many authors, showing the general sampling soup and wine, during which, according to the authors, he deliberately made the expression of the "Lion of Verdun", thinking that the images would never reach the screen.[7] The suggestion is very probably a myth: the actual shots in question (not a single shot as commonly believed, but two, one for each liquid tasted) show no sign of Pétain contorting his face, and they were widely distributed at the time. But that is not the point: if we are to believe the statement made after the war by the former head of the SCA (Croze, 1927: 20), this footage would have been prepared by him in collaboration with the general's official assistant, and every move and gesture that Pétain had to make in front of the camera would have been meticulously prepared to establish a narrative that could best capture the attention of the audience. This claim is confirmed by the editing of the sequence into nine carefully composed shots in perfect continuity. The film was shot barely a month after the general's appointment as head of the French army, replacing Nivelle following the fatal Chemin des Dames offensive, and therefore at the very moment when serious acts of disobedience were occurring in some regiments (the infamous French Army Mutinies), which were kept secret by the High Command. From this perspective, it becomes clear why in these scenes the General is shown taking part in the conflict, deeply concerned over the fate of his soldiers. Indeed, it was important to show that the leader had re-established contact with his troops

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and had restored their confidence in him. This personal involvement reveals the extent to which Pétain, more than any other officer, realised the importance of cinema as a means of communication. This enabled him to enhance his image and to cultivate the myth of the national hero and saviour of the nation, which had already been established in the press since his decisive role in the Battle of Verdun.

CINEMA: A MODERN TOOL AT THE SERVICE OF THE MODERNITY OF WAR

It would seem logical that, in the context of a technological and industrial war, the use of the cinema as a modern piece of equipment would take many forms. As a writer for the newspaper *L'Excelsior* pointed out in 1915, "[t]he cinema occupies too great a place in modern society for it not to play a big role in modern warfare." Thus, films were used in the United Kingdom from the outbreak of the hostilities to encourage voluntary enlistment before conscription was introduced in 1916. Film was also used in the instruction of combatants, for medical studies, for the analysis of ballistics and for aerial observation. In France, since the creation of the SCA in 1915, animated images were used to create records of the conflict. This a new kind of documentation (indeed this was the first appearance of the concept of "archive images"), which, it was believed, would form the memory of this human catastrophe for future generations. Camera operators therefore had to film the sites and monuments that were damaged in order to document the different stages of their destruction, and thus to facilitate their reconstruction once the war was over.

Every government used films in the context of campaigns to secure domestic loans (national bonds) to support the war effort. These films were also shown to the general public to encourage spectators to buy war bonds. One such film, *Pour la victoire* (1916) offered an original blend of several cinematic forms, using fiction, documentary, animation, poster photography, engravings, and texts from official speeches. In two parts the film articulates a series of sentimental, moral and economic arguments to ensure the success of the national mobilisation needed to hasten the final victory. The first part, "*Par les armes*" [Under Arms], associates the soldier's actions with those of the bond purchaser by juxtaposing images of the front (with an animated map of the battlefield showing the movements of the armies and the changes in the front line to illustrate the strategic effects more clearly) with the (fictional) story of a schoolboy whose father is called up, who breaks open his piggy-bank to buy a war bond. The second part, "*La bataille à l'arrière*" [The Battle at the Home Front], compares buying bonds to the activity of the war industry that was supporting the country, while at the same time showing that it represented an excellent financial investment. It is clear that the intention behind this hybrid form of filmed propaganda was to reach as wide a public as possible. Any means were acceptable in the efforts to raise funds. In both Germany and France, diverse narrative forms were used to achieve this aim. In Germany such films were known as *Kriegsanleihe-Werbefilm, der Reichsbank*. Although in 1918 an appeal was made to the celebrated hero of national mythology *Jung Siegfried*, in most cases the films played on the fear of the invasion of Germany. For example, *Der Heimat Schikengrab* [The Trenches of Home], a blend of fiction and documentary, tells the story of Russian troops pillaging a village on the eastern front. Humour was also sometimes used: *Rentier Kulickes Flug zur Front* [Prosperous Mr. Kulicke is Flown to the Front] shows a businessman who refuses to invest a penny in war bonds until he dreams he is transported against his will in a plane to the Western Front. There he sees a stretch of French territory entirely destroyed (using authentic aerial views of the ruins of Péronne and Saint-Quentin). When he awakes, he recognises how grateful

the country should be to the army for having protected Germany in the war beyond the Rhine. He then hurries to a Berlin bank to buy some national defence bonds.

Stars of the silver screen were also in great demand. The actress Henny Porten, considered the leading star of the German cinema,[8] played herself in *Hann, Hein und Henny* (Rudolf Biebrach, 1917), a short film in which she meets with submariners to encourage the public to subscribe to the Seventh War Loan. In England, along with slogans like "Save your Money and Save the World!", films or newsreel sequences about war loans also showed personalities taking part in the war effort. For example, the well-known writer Hall Caine was filmed at his desk writing a script for the official services (*Pictorial News*, No. 327). We can also find comparable propaganda in the United States following its entry on the Allied side in April 1917, featuring Geraldine Farr, who had enjoyed huge success as Joan of Arc in *Joan the Woman* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1916), and Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford also acted in several films in support of Liberty Bonds.

IMAGES OF WOMEN'S WORK

In a long, deadly, total war, where the role of civilians was as important as that of combatants, women took on professional activities until then reserved for males. In both town and countryside, the *substitutes* for enlisted husbands or sons assumed new responsibilities. By 1916, filming women's work in factories and fields became commonplace. These were propaganda films that extolled the place of French women within the *Union Sacrée*. They also sought to glorify the work of women while blurring its harshness. Mainly aimed at neutral countries, these films were part of the prolific production of images ordered and controlled by the Bureau of Information, whose instructions to the press were very clear: to make known everywhere and by all means the extraordinary efforts of France to win the war. Commercial enterprises, as noted above, in disseminating propaganda abroad, sought to present an image of strength and power, notably by showing the imposing metallurgical factories where military equipment was manufactured, mainly the ones in Creusot and Saint-Chamond. This explains the interest in portraying the Frenchwomen whose everyday lives were being rocked by the war: active women who were fine specimens of patriotic feeling. The films about them portray them as modern women, reflecting their new place in society in the absence of men, their substantial contribution to every professional activity, their sense of sacrifice and their dedication. This intention is clear in *Fabrication des bombes Wanderen (torpilles) aux usines Niclausse* (undated) and *La main d'oeuvre féminine dans les usines de guerre* (1916), which show workshops almost entirely run by female workers. Regular exchanges of images between the Allied nations allowed the French public to see how English women were replacing the men who had been called up to fight. We can see an example of this in a scene from *Les Annales de la guerre n°29* (dated 27 September 1917), which shows women in the countryside driving tractors for harvesting or ploughing, in the factory doing welding work, and in the army marching through the streets of London as uniformed volunteers in the Women's Legion.

But the most characteristic example is without doubt the documentary *La femme française pendant la guerre* (Alexandre Devarenne, 1918), a montage film made up of news footage shot during the war, introduced by a simple story and re-organised in relation to each other. The film exemplifies the new place of women in the war, and their dedication to their country. In the city, they work as station cleaners, truck drivers or servants. In the factory, a worker assigned to different tasks stops only to breastfeed her baby. On the farm, she drives the plough, sows and reaps the harvest. The film also exalts the importance and heroism

of women, and shows the compensation given to widows, nurses or female workers wounded by enemy bombs. In all of these cases, whether peasant or *munitionette*,[9] mother, wife or nurse, the woman played an essential role. These images are extremely common in the propaganda, but historical research in the context of gender studies demonstrate that the emancipation of women through work was often seen by men as a threat.[10] It was feared that women would be defeminised, and there were claims that such blurring of gender roles was dangerous. From this perspective, the analysis of newsreels and documentaries is significant. Some appraise the important social changes associated with the activities of women, but at the same time, in each film the maternal metaphors proliferated, feminine qualities were emphasised and, even when women were dressed and working like men, an effort was made to feminise them and to remind the viewer that above all they were still women whose essential task, in the context of a deadly war, was to repopulate the nation. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that in a context of massive death, the birth rate was an absolute priority.

FROM REALITY TO RECONSTRUCTION

All images construct realities and produce meaning. One only needs to think of the fundamental notion of point of view on which the composition of any shot depends. The intention of the camera operator was not limited merely to the circumstances of the shot, or to the official instructions they received or the technical requirements; they were also linked to their professional training and the influence that the cinematic medium itself had on them. This explains the frequent detours taken in the interests of a certain staging of reality. From that point, the frontier between the "real" and the *mise en scène* is often blurred. *L'Aide des colonies à la France* (Henri Desfontaines, 1917) is a good example of this. In this documentary showing France receiving supplies of goods and troops from its colonial Empire (Morocco, Senegal, Indochina, etc.), we witness an imaginary exchange of correspondence between a father and his son, a Senegalese rifleman, intended to illustrate the devotion of the colonies to the "mother country". This story of a written testimony to the zeal and courage of the Africans is in reality in line with opinion in the French command concerning *la force noire* ("black force", according to General Magin's theory) and their supposed capacity to excel in the "*coups dours*", i.e., that harshest moments on the front.

SUCH SCENES WERE USED AS A SARCASTIC CRITICISM OF THE ALLIES' CLAIM TO BE DEFENDING CULTURE AND CIVILISATION WITH COLOURED TROOPS. THIS FORM OF OBVIOUS RACISM WOULD BE INTENSIFIED AFTER THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

These increasingly common images were also picked up by German counter-propaganda; indeed, newsreels and documentary films on the war often showed shots of French colonial troops taken as prisoners, assembled together to pose for the camera (for example, in a sequence in *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme*, 1917). Such scenes were used as a sarcastic criticism of the Allies' claim to be defending culture and civilisation with coloured troops. This form of obvious racism would be intensified after the Treaty of Versailles. At the time of the French occupation of the Rhineland, there arose the notion of the "black shame", with the dissemination of horrifying stories of rapes and murders committed by soldiers of the foreign legion. This conditioning of German public opinion during the Great War no doubt facilitated the acceptance, after 1933, of the Nazi propaganda that took up this kind of image to demonstrate the supremacy of the Aryan race in Europe.

The nature of the images filmed on the battlefield can be classified in three ways: "fictional images", "codified real images" and "barely codified real images". In the first case, the camera operator had considerable freedom of action to organise his subject, invent a story, or put it in a scene to make it clearer or give it more dramatic force. In the second case, he witnessed an event in which he could not intervene directly, except to choose a point of view through the frames. Finally, in the third category, the operator was faced with a dangerous situation which he could not control and had to be content with filming whatever he could see as best he could. The resulting image reflected the vagaries of the shoot. For both technical and safety reasons, there was no filming in the line of fire. We therefore see no battles, but only shelling and explosions in the distance, cannons firing, or the range of weapons used. The most common images were of the "sideshows" of the war: parades, visits by generals or politicians to the front, the daily life of the soldiers in the trenches and rest camps. Scenes showing men engaged in different leisure activities (handicrafts, gardening, games, etc.) can be seen in the Pathé film titled *Après 305 jours guerre, le moral du soldat français au front*. Away from the front line, it was said, "we rightly find the most vivid evidence of the army's excellent state of morale."[11] These situations are not false, as the soldiers did indeed spend a lot of time in the rest camps when they were not stationed on the front line. However, they did not rest often, as they were required to perform all kinds of duties. It could thus be said that such newsreels lied mainly by omission of certain images; there was a total ban on any image of the death of French soldiers, and the complete dehumanisation of the battlefield only appeared by implication. In short, there was what could be called a denial linked to a certain sense of obscenity associated with death. If images of corpses were unacceptable, it was because they would have permitted an unbearable process of identification, and in consequence they could "shock the families", not to mention the ethical concerns of certain camera operators, which would sometimes have functioned as a kind of self-censorship. Hence the multiplicity of shots of dead animals or devastated landscapes as a metaphor for human death.

It was at the Somme offensive that camera operators on both sides of the front were authorised to go up to the front line. Until then, in order to give a plausible appearance of the war they could not see up close, they had been compelled to resort to various forms of subterfuge. The most common was the use, with the complicity of the soldiers, of simulations of offensive or defensive actions. As an example, the Gaumont film *En Artois la défense de nos lignes* (1915), which reconstructs, in about thirty shots, the different stages between an alert raised by an observation point and the response by the anti-aircraft artillery. Similarly, an Éclair film[12] begins with a wide shot of a troop of *Chasseurs Alpins* lying on the ground along a path beside a forest, who are supposedly about to open fire on the German position. An intertitle announces: "The enemy responds with small-calibre shells. Two explode less than 40 metres from the French machine guns." And indeed, in the next shot, identical to the previous one, we see two small explosions in front of the soldiers, who have ceased fire in order to take cover. Considering the position of the camera (the operator is filming from a higher angle) and the attitude of the soldiers (one of them, as if by luck, takes cover at the moment of the explosions), this is no doubt a reconstruction during which, very probably, other soldiers positioned nearby threw the grenades. These images, shot in training areas or in relatively calm sectors, even if they are identifiable as staged scenes, could nevertheless appear believable because they portrayed a plausible reality. In this way, they establish a relationship of credibility accepted by a public already used to such practices, which had been used in reconstructed newsreels since 1897[13] as an extension of

the prints used widely in the nineteenth century portraying reconstructions of major events that were impossible to shoot on location, summarizing, embellishing or dramatising them. In the period 1914-18, although camera operators created reconstructions on location and with the participation of the real protagonists, without seeking to denaturalise the reality filmed (situations in which the soldiers were imitating, in some way, their own actions for the needs of the camera), none of these reproductions presented any actual combat.

THE SOMME: A BATTLE ON CAMERA

The great inadequacy of the documentary gaze lies in its inability to show the violence of the conflict, rendering the battle invisible. However, some genuine skirmishes were successfully filmed. It was on 1 July 1916, in the offensive on the Somme outside the village of Dompierre, that cameramen were permitted to move up to the lines of fire to film the beginning of an attack. The resulting film shows soldiers in a trench, fitting their bayonets to their rifles, then launching themselves in successive waves over the embankment, before disappearing at a run into no man's land. Other images of this kind were shot later, in April 1917, during the Chemin des Dames offensive in front of the Godat farm. But the technical conditions (the constant need to stand upright to film, the weight and encumbrance of the equipment, etc.) were a real handicap. It was therefore impossible for the operator to follow the soldiers after the beginning of the attack. Since that decisive date, it became evident that the battle itself would remain invisible.

For both the English and the French, the Somme was a key moment for battle filming. Because they had taken command of operations and expected the offensive would create a decisive breakthrough to move on from the war of attri-

IT WAS ON 1 JULY 1916, IN THE OFFENSIVE ON THE SOMME OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE OF DOMPIERRE, THAT CAMERAMEN WERE PERMITTED TO MOVE UP TO THE LINES OF FIRE TO FILM THE BEGINNING OF AN ATTACK

tion, the British took care to set up what would today be called exceptional "media coverage". In this context, as Nicholas Hiley notes, the cameramen, like their photographer colleagues, benefited from special authorisation to move (relatively) freely and were invited to take extensive footage (Hiley, 1994: 194). The films of Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell were used to create a full-length documentary entitled *The Battle of the Somme*, which showed the preparations for the British offensive, a very impressive explosion, on the first day of the attack, of a Hawthorn Ridge mine beneath the German lines at Beaumont Hamel, an attack (actually a reconstruction from some ten shots filmed in a training area, with two soldiers pretending to be killed) and especially the return of the wounded and the prisoners after the battle (including a horrific shot of a Tommy carrying the body of one of his comrades on his back) and, finally, the burial of the dead. This production was inspiring and patriotic, but at the same time harsh and realistic. For the first time, civilian audiences were witness to violent images of the war. The film was an immense success, its impact enormous. It has been estimated that nearly a million Londoners saw it during the first series of showings in the autumn of 1916, and that it was seen by 20 million people throughout the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. After attending a showing, the cameraman Geoffrey Malins made the following statement: "I really thought that some of the dead scenes would offend the British public. And yet why should they? It is only a very mild touch of what is happening day after day, week after

week, on the bloody plains of France and Belgium" (Malins, 1920: 183). In response to the British documentary, which was shown in neutral countries, the Germans decided at the end of 1916 to produce a similar film. This montage of disparate elements, bringing together authentic images and reconstructions of assaults, was called *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* [With our Heroes on the Somme]. Produced by the very new cinematic propaganda service Bild und Filmart (BUFA) (Rother, 1995: 525-542), it was structured in three parts: "The Situation behind the Front", "The Advance through the Forest of Saint-Pierre-Vaast", and "The Advance near Bouchavesnes". A critic for *Der Kinematograph* wrote: "We must acknowledge the immense victory that the filmmaker has achieved with this film. It records world history, fulfilling its greatest mission." A journalist for the *Berliner Tageblatt* gave a similar verdict, emphasising the sequence showing the beginning of the attack, which, he argues, succeeded in suggesting the intensity of the action:

> Finally, the attack, at the same time as the mine explosion. Black smoke everywhere, white clouds of steam, strips of earth, torn up sections: then, the assault troops go mad out of the trenches, German soldiers appear everywhere, in the red brilliance of the fire, until they disappear in the enemy trench. Even the weariest imagination is aroused and with the uproar of battle completes this description of reality. All the viewers are silent. No one thinks of applauding these scenes. But no one remains indifferent. Respect for the cinema, so disparaged previously. There, it is making History.

The fact that the Viennese polemicist-turned-playwright Karl Kraus recognized the importance of *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* in *The Last Days of Mankind* (Act IV, Scene 14 of the stage version established by the author)[14] underlines the significance of this propaganda documentary, whose influence has clearly been considerable since its premiere in the film theatres of the Central Powers in 1917. On the other hand, in neutral countries it was not very successful compared to the productions by the Allies.

Although the choices made by camera operators were limited by the instructions they received, the use of the camera, within the frame of investigation authorised to them, allowed them on occasions to capture the unexpected, the unusual. Moreover, the suggestive power of certain shots was far from negligible. Some escaped the censors' scissors to show apocalyptic images of the front, of devastated villages, which gave clear glimpses of the horrors of war.[15] The presence of such visual references evokes events off-screen, in the space not visible to the viewers, the tragedy of war with its great chain of suffering. Furthermore, many images are vested with an incomparable expressive force and a genuine emotional dimension. This is particularly true of shots of wounded or maimed soldiers. Their faces, their bodies, their gaze inhabited by an unspeakable horror, are the most powerful visible indicators of the extreme violence suffered by the combatants. These images appear as the most evocative revelations of the war. Indeed, these bodies cannot be reduced merely to emblematic figures at the service of propaganda. They are men with a history that reaches far beyond the frame of the event for which they were filmed. The power of certain shots lies partly in the fact that they evoke sympathy and create a connection with the public. As the great film critic Émile Vuillermoz remarked in 1917 in his column for the newspaper *Le Temps*, it was thanks to newsreels that "the whole of France was able to crowd round the screen, as if the rectangular white cloth was the reflection of a mysterious periscope where the eye looked out on the battlefield. It was the true agent of connection between the people at the front and those back home" (Vuillermoz, 1917).

It is very difficult to judge the degree to which the newsreels influenced public opinion. But in view of the context, we may suppose that it was not far from what the viewers (most of whom

had a family member in conflict and felt a sense of anxious anticipation over a war they believed could only bring bad news) wanted to see. And it is clear that neither the authorities nor the production companies were interested, based on a political or commercial logic, in going beyond what the public could stomach.

PROPAGANDA THROUGH IMAGE: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Even within the context of controlled propaganda, certain images can put off their users. In this respect, it is worth considering the question of the depiction of the enemy. On the map of military operations, the Germans were initially positioned as aggressors, while France was merely defending itself. The theme of the enemy's barbarity thus became ubiquitous in the press. There was a political use of anti-German discourse, but the authorities by no means held all the levers of propaganda. In newsreels and war documentaries, the intention behind showing prisoners was to demonstrate the effectiveness of the offensives. And yet, watching these images, the viewer is struck by their meaninglessness, as they have the effect of blurring the agreed view of the era, of exploding the established clichés. These Germans did not fit into the gallery of caricatures familiar to the audience. Clearly, these were defeated enemies being paraded before the camera like military trophies, but they did not resemble the "bloodthirsty monsters" that a certain type of propaganda presented throughout the war with a wealth of disturbing details. It is also worth noting that, except for the first films made in early 1915, the terminology chosen to refer to them was not pejorative. They are described as Germans, German prisoners, opponents, enemies. The usage, until then commonplace, of terms like *Fritz* or Huns or *Boches* were practically absent from the French newsreels (we do find them, however, in the British *Pictorial News*). The camera shows the Other in flesh and blood, without engaging in the cheap trick of disdaining him. There is even enough ambiguity to make an emotional reading possible. The recognisable expression of the faces filmed goes beyond the Germanophobic discourse of the era, and offers a disturbing piece of evidence: the enemy, in his physical appearance, is not so different.

Other emblematic examples of propaganda images could provoke the opposite effect, such as the scientific and medical films commissioned by the Health Service for surgical operations, experiments and special clinical cases. Some were intended for strictly internal use by specialists, while others were shown to the public. This last category, close to scientific dissemination, are along the lines of the famous films made by Doctor Doyen (from 1897) and Doctor Commandon (from 1904). Among the different examples, the most effective were those related to restorative therapy for maimed and traumatised men. One example is *Traitement des troubles nerveux fonctionnels dans le service du docteur Clovis Vincent* (probably dating from 1916), which was shown to the public under a more explicit title: *Progrès de la science française au profit des victimes de la guerre: une grande découverte du docteur Vincent*. [Progress of French Science for the Benefit of the Victims of War: A Great Discovery by Dr. Vincent]. It is worth noting that this film was characteristic of the polysemic ambiguity of certain works of propaganda. But what does it show? In the Descartes Hospital in Tours we see a succession of shell-shocked men in a corridor while a doctor applies an electrode to their spines. The patients writhe with pain under the effect of the electric shocks. The film, like all propaganda films, functions according to the logic of proof: seeing is believing; the truth of the image confirms the phenomenon and is intended to prove the efficacy of the therapeutic procedure. But at the same time these images of neurosis[16] associated with the traumas caused by combat reveal the mark of

war on the body. Their violence makes all of the monstrousness of modern conflict more convincing. From this perspective, there is no reluctance to show the consequences of the extreme brutality of war (it is undeniable that the films produced by the health service often approach the limits of the watchable) simply because they are related to the pretext of scientific study, of the medical document. "The wonderful electrophysiological method of Doctor Vincent", as one intertitle says, would be even capable of straightening up the maimed, healing the shell-shocked, the traumatised (or those who were pretending to be so, as was a common belief at the time) so that they can return to the fight on the front. In this respect, the final frame of the film could not be more significant: "The admirable results rewarded by the research of Doctor Vincent, and the efforts of his collaborators, give the nation healthy men capable of returning to war."

Although the content of certain images was not easy to control, the significance of a declaration could be enough to alter its meaning radically and skew its perception. An excellent example is one of the numerous propaganda films made by the Germans in 1917 on the submarine war they were waging in an effort to break the blockade that deprived the country of vital imports to feed its population.[17] The status of this film was effectively inverted. Initially viewed as proof of the heroism of the Reich's submariners, after the Armistice it became, according to the Allied version, a damning indictment of the crimes perpetrated by the Germans. Initially shown by the British Admiralty under the title *The Exploits of a German Submarine U-35*, the film was subsequently shown in the United States, while Gaumont acquired the rights for France in January 1920 and distributed it under the title *La croisière de l'U-35*. A publicity poster in the corporate magazine *Hebdo-Film* at the time of its premiere on Parisian screens reveals how easily the meaning of this propaganda film was altered:

> The self-confessed crime; the gratuitous attack, recounted in detail by its own perpetrator with the utmost cynicism (...) An archive item from that museum of horrors that makes up Teutonic history of the twentieth century (...) It is a duty for every Frenchman who possesses a screen to see this crushing evidence of the savagery of our former enemies, for it is a duty of every Frenchman with a heart never to forget, even at the moment when all hatred may cease.[17]

ESTABLISHING ARCHIVES OF THE WAR

One of the priorities of the main belligerent countries that we tend to forget is to establish visual archives of the war. It is worth clarifying, however, that this interest in collecting images of the war for their preservation, along with the methods used to do so, are inscribed in the line of photographic archive procedures employed in the previous century.

This project has a special dimension in modern war, where all matters concerning the conflict are systematically recorded for the purposes of registering the magnitude of the disaster. The most emblematic example is, without question, *En dirigeable sur les champs de bataille* (1919). The images, taken from a Zodiac air balloon flying at low altitude, were taken over the course of an hour by Lucien Le Saint,[19] a camera operator with the Photographic and Cinematographic section of the French Army. Positioned in the back of the balloon's basket, the operator filmed the terrain (in certain moments with the cables of the balloon in the foreground), the control panel and the pilot. As a result, we can see the front line as it was at the beginning of 1919, in a sort of almost uninterrupted movement of long sequence shots from the North Sea to Alsace, passing over Belgian or French villages that have been completely destroyed, where the gaze slips until we lose it. The objective was to establish an archive of the battlefield after the end of the war, a visual testimony before reconstruction began. The

result is a unique record, from a bird's eye view, of the annihilation caused by modern war. In this vast, gloomy expanse nothing has survived, except for ruins and shrapnel. It seems certain that for contemporary viewers this view was probably a shock, because what it shows is an immense cemetery. It is, in effect, a vast landscape that served as a grave (half of the fatalities in the First World War had no burial, and this film, a cinematographic symbol of an absent presence, is in a certain way the only trace of their disappearance). Here, over this bleak but now amazingly quiet terrain, is the sum of European history for those four long years. A material, total image of the emptiness of war that is represented here as no other form of expression known at the time could do.

HERE, OVER THIS BLEAK BUT NOW AMAZINGLY QUIET TERRAIN, IS THE SUM OF EUROPEAN HISTORY FOR THOSE FOUR LONG YEARS. A MATERIAL, TOTAL IMAGE OF THE EMPTINESS OF WAR THAT IS REPRESENTED HERE AS NO OTHER FORM OF EXPRESSION KNOWN AT THE TIME COULD DO

For their emotional charge, the images of the war have, since the end of the conflict, come to be considered relics, the only traces of all those loved ones, all those anonymous combatants who fell on the "field of honour", as it was called in those days. In 1919, the moment of the disappearance of the SPCA, the question arose of how all the images filmed were to be managed. To ensure their preservation, the government established a corporation: *les Archives photographiques d'Art et d'Histoire* (Photographic Archives of Art and History). Created with the approval of the Ministry for War and the Ministry for Public Instruction and for Fine Arts, they put at its disposal the facilities in the basement of the Royal Palace. This organisation was not really a commercial enterprise, although it could sell copies of the documents it preserved.[20] Successively directed by fine arts officials, it was the holder of a valuable collection of 2,000 films (i.e., almost 250,000 metres of film) and 120,000 photographs considered "an historical testimony of the greatest importance"[21] (hence the name of the corporation). On 26 February 1920, the journal *Sciences et Voyages* published an important dossier entitled "Cinema and History", where we can read: "In ten centuries, posterity will witness the great war that has just ended. It will see our soldiers and generals live and grow. Who does not understand that these moving pictures will always be worth more than any other history written by the most important historian?"[22] Turned in time into documents, the newsreel images will be used in every film about the Great War, as an indispensable historical endorsement. They will be edited regularly for memorials, to the point of becoming a regular piece of television recycling at times of commemoration. As if the look back to 1914-18 would not be possible without them. However, we can lament the fact that, beyond their illustrative capacity, we rarely ask ourselves about their real value as testimony or about their inherent characteristics. ■

NOTES

1 On the conditions of production, distribution and reception of newsreels in France, see Véray, Laurent (1995). *Les films d'actualité français de la Grande Guerre*. Paris: AFRHC/SIRPA.

2 In 1915, the SCA offered spectators 156 newsreels, and 400 in 1916, with an average in this second year of thirty newsreels per month.

3 Instruction relating to the choice of films and shots from the Press Information Bureau (Bureau des Informations á la Presse), 1 November 1915, Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes, 5N 550.

4 Summary of a report on the creation and functioning of the SCA, October 1917, documentation of the Éta-

blissement de conception et de production audiovisuelles de la Défense (ECPAD), no catalogue number.

5 Letter from General Lyautey to General Nivelle, 6 February 1917, SHAT 5N 346.

6 Letter from Henri Desfontaines to André Antoine, 6 June 1918, BnF collection, Performing Arts archive.

7 Marcel Lapierre quoted by Georges Sadoul in Sadoul, Georges (1975). Le cinéma devient un art (1909-1920). In *Histoire générale du cinéma* (vol. 4, p. 40). Paris: Denoël.

8 The Danish actress Asta Nielsen was also very popular in Germany at this time.

9 Translator's Note: In France, female munitions workers were known as *munitionnettes*.

10 On this question, and on the role of women in the Great War in general see Morin-Rotureau, Évelyne (2004). *Combats de femmes 1914-1918. Les femmes piliers de l'effort de guerre*. Paris: Éditions Autrement.

11 Note relating to the selection of films by the Bureau des information à la presse; 1 November 1915, SHAT, Vincennes, 5N 550

12 *Devant Metzeral: un épisode de la guerre de montagne* (1915).

13 The first series of newsreel reconstructions made by Georges Méliès consists of four films on the Greco-Turkish War. See Malthète, Jacques (1989). Les actualités reconstituées de Georges Méliès. *Archives*, 21.

14 Kraus, Karl (2003). Les Derniers jours de l'humanité, p. 154. Marseille: Agone. For further details on this exceptional text, see Besson, Jean-Louis (2011). Les Derniers jours de l'humanité. Un théâtre martien. In David Lescot and Laurent Véray, *Les mises en scène de la guerre au XXe siècle. Théâtre et cinema*, pp. 39-46. Paris: Nouveau Monde.

15 Numerous photographs were also published in the illustrated press over the course of the conflict and include violent images due to the fact that the instructions of the censors were even less respected by French journalists than they were by filmmakers. See, for example, Beurier, Joëlle (2007). *Images et violence. 1914-1918. Quand le miroir racontait la Grande Guerre,* París: Nouveau Monde. Besides, there are also photographs taken by the soldiers and intended for private use, which effectively lift the veil on certain realities.

16 This was one of the most usual, yet less known pathologies of the war. On the general subject of war wounds, see Delaporte, Sophie (2003). *Les Médecins dans la Grande Guerre - 1914-1918*. Paris: Bayard-Centurion.

17 Made in May 1917 on board the submarine U-35, this film shows the action of the German U-boat operating in the Mediterranean for a week, beginning with its departure from the naval base at Kotor. The cameraman on board filmed the entire surface mission of this warship. We see it board and sink six British, Italian and American merchant ships.

18 Un document formidable: la croisière de l'U-35 (17 January 1920). *Hebdo-Film*.

19 Lucien Le Saint (1881-1931), photographer and operator, worked for Gaumont before 1914 (recording Émile Cohl's films). He subsequently worked for SPAC between May 1917 and March 1918. He participated in Albert Kahn's *Archives de la Planète* from 1918 to 1923. He ended his career at Pathé from 1925 to 1919.

20 It also offered service to members of the public, who could obtain the positives for 1.35 francs per metre.

21 Les films français de guerre. Nous avons interviewé les Archives photographiques d'Art et d'Histoire (10 December 1927). *La Cinématographie française*, 475.

22 Le cinématographe et l'histoire (26 February 1920). *Sciences et Voyages*, 26, 401.

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FILMING THE GREAT WAR: INFORMATION, PROPAGANDA AND HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION

Abstract

The First World War was the first major conflict to be widely represented in visual media. All sides involved made considerable use of photography and cinema, which since then have become cornerstones of what could be called "a visual culture of war". Indeed, these two media perform a twofold mission, as sources of both daily information and historical documentation. Hence the existence today, in France and elsewhere, of various centres of archives and private collections containing countless still images and moving pictures taken between 1914 and 1918. These diverse collections offer rich and exciting documentary material for researchers, and for filmmakers as well. However, as interesting or striking as they may be, these images—like all documents of another time—are bearers of the real, of the forgotten and of the spurious which we must be able to decode. This paper analyses the key issues related to these images under various headings: newsreels and war documentaries, censorship, cinema as a modern tool at the service of the modernity of war, the image of the women's work, the process from reality to reconstruction, the Somme as an example of an on-screen battle, propaganda through image as a double-edged sword and the establishment of war archives.

Key words

First World War; Cinematograph; Historical documentation; Archive images; Censorship; Newsreels; Documentaries; Propaganda.

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FILMAR LA GRAN GUERRA: ENTRE INFORMACIÓN, PROPAGANDA Y DOCUMENTACIÓN HISTÓRICA

Resumen

La Primera Guerra Mundial es el primer conflicto ampliamente representado. Todas las partes beligerantes recurrieron notablemente a la fotografía y al cinematógrafo, que ocupan desde entonces un puesto central para constituir eso que podríamos llamar «una cultura visual de guerra». En efecto, los dos medios realizan una doble misión: la de información cotidiana y la de documentación histórica. De ahí la existencia hoy en día, en Francia y en el extranjero, en diversos centros de archivo o colecciones privadas, de innumerables imágenes fijas o en movimiento registradas entre 1914 y 1918. Este conjunto heterogéneo constituye para los investigadores, pero también para los realizadores, un material documental rico y apasionante. Sin embargo, aun siendo interesantes e impactantes, esas imágenes —como todos los documentos de época— son portadoras de lo real, de olvido y de mentiras que hace falta ser capaz de desencriptar. En este artículo se analizan los temas clave relacionados con dicho conjunto de imágenes a través de diversos epígrafes: los noticiarios y los documentales de guerra, la censura, el cine como una herramienta moderna al servicio de la modernidad de la guerra, la imagen del trabajo de las mujeres, el proceso de la realidad a la reconstrucción, El Somme como caso de batalla mediatizada, la propaganda a través de la imagen como un arma de doble filo y la constitución de los archivos del conflicto.

Palabras clave

Primera Guerra Mundial; cinematógrafo; documentación histórica; imágenes de archivo; censura; noticiarios; documentales; propaganda.

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