

1998

## American Newsreels of the 1930s

Dennis Marklin Gephardt

*College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences*

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### Recommended Citation

Gephardt, Dennis Marklin, "American Newsreels of the 1930s" (1998). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. William & Mary. Paper 1539626183.

<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-ta3x-4w17>

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AMERICAN NEWSREELS OF THE 1930S

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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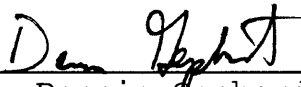
Dennis Gephardt

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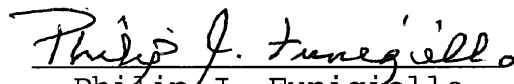
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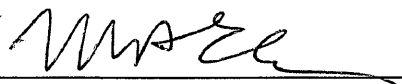
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of


Master of Art

  
Dennis Gephardt

Approved, May 1998

  
Philip J. Funigiello

  
Melvin P. Ely

  
H. Cam Walker

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer wishes to express his appreciation to Professor Philip J. Funigiello, who helped guide this project, for his constructive suggestions, patience and insight. The writer is also indebted to Professors Melvin P. Ely and H. Cam Walker for their close reading and helpful criticism.

## ABSTRACT

For more than half a century the American movie-going public saw newsreels along with feature attractions. The American newsreel survived from 1910 until 1967 as a vital component of America's news diet. From the Stock Market Crash of 1929 until the entry of the United States into the Second World War the form of the sound newsreel became established. Introduced in 1927, sound technology remade newsreels by 1930. No longer relying solely on the alleged objectivity of the camera, this remarkable technology opened newsreels to a barrage of criticism. This process help define an American style of motion picture journalism which would evolve into television news. Newsreels were created, controlled and distributed by well-financed motion picture studios. They existed as part of an entertainment industry and this fact continually shaped what newsreels viewers saw. This form of motion picture journalism had the power to influence the opinions of millions of Americans. Sensing this ability to mold opinion, a wide variety of critics made scathing reviews and humorous attacks of newsreels. Others chose to censor the newsreels, sometimes removing offensive footage from the films.

AMERICAN NEWSREELS OF THE 1930S

## INTRODUCTION

Newsreels were wonderful things. They presented a potpourri of subjects: the newsworthy, the visually spectacular, the strange-but-true, and the downright silly. In order to maintain topicality, newsreel producers released their footage on a fixed schedule--usually once or twice a week in the United States. The overall length of most newsreels hovered between ten and fifteen minutes. Journalistically, newsreels tended to shy away from contentious issues. Instead, they stuck to ostensibly objective motion picture coverage of recent events. Nevertheless, they managed to ignite the passions of their viewers and critics at times.<sup>1</sup>

For more than half a century the American movie-going public saw newsreels along with feature attractions. The American newsreel survived from 1910 until 1967 as a vital component of America's news diet. During this period, newsreel cameramen shot some five hundred million feet of film at a variety of locations around the world. This footage remains an important yet under-used historical resource. Producers of historical documentaries have made use of only a tiny fraction of this material. Newsreels as a historical phenomenon have also received scant attention. Raymond Fielding, a professor of communications at the University of Houston, has published the bulk of the work in



this field: two books and one article.<sup>2</sup> Another type of scholarship making use of newsreels concerns itself with how single issues were treated. For example, John B. Romeiser screened all Fox Movietone news segments from 1936 to 1939 to learn how the Spanish Civil War was presented to the viewing public.<sup>3</sup> These works, plus only a few others, form the bulk of newsreel scholarship.

Historians have neglected the American newsreel. In a small way this paper seeks to correct this situation by examining the newsreels of the 1930s. From the Stock Market Crash of 1929 until the entry of the United States into the Second World War the form of the sound newsreel became established, so established in fact, that by the end of the 1930s its style seemed fossilized. The dramatic flux of Depression era America provided visually exciting material for motion picture journalism. Newsreel cameramen aimed their cameras at happenings in the United States and around the world. Some estimates place the number of free lance cameramen across the globe at five thousand. The newsreels became an important window to the world for movie audiences.

If for no other reason, newsreels deserve attention simply because they were seen by so many. In 1929 some seventy-seven million people viewed newsreels.<sup>4</sup> This form of motion picture journalism, then, had the power to influence the opinions of millions of Americans. A discussion of the

form of the newsreel, the industries which created and screened them, and the criticism that erupted in the 1930s will provide some understanding of the newsreel's importance to a society that chose to produce and "consume" them. In addition, this discussion will hopefully illustrate the value of newsreels to students of history. Contemporary documentary filmmakers make good use of newsreel footage, relying on its largely unselfconscious quality to mark time, to visually transport viewers through time.

This study will explore the newsreel phenomenon of the 1930s. It will seek to learn how the nature of the industry which created newsreels altered their form. Newsreels existed within the context of an entertainment industry in which profits were more important than truth or integrity. This concern for the bottom line led to a largely self-imposed censorship, sensitive to the marketplace and eager not to upset viewers. Other forms of censorship, such as those imposed by state film review boards, will also be treated as well. This project will consider how technological changes, notably the introduction of sound film, changed motion picture journalism.

It will also seek to understand newsreels of the era within a cultural framework. From motion picture dramas which treated newsreel cameramen to novels informed by the structure of the newsreels, Americans gained a sense of

their age through a shared idea of the newsreel. This shared idea evolved throughout the period, echoing changes in the newsreels themselves.

These questions are important because newsreels informed viewers about their world and provided the format and structure of later visual news media, such as local television news shows and cable television's Headline News network. During the tremendous flux of the Great Depression, newsreels provided Americans with a sense of their world and they provide the student of history a powerful glimpse within that world.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Liz-Anne Bawden, ed., The Oxford Companion to Film (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 501.

<sup>2</sup> See Raymond Fielding, "Mirror of Discontent: The March of Time and its Politically Controversial Film Issues," Western Political Quarterly, 12 (1959), 145-52; Raymond Fielding, The American Newsreel, 1911-1967 (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1972); and Raymond Fielding, The March of Time, 1935-1951 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> John B. Romeiser, "The Spanish Civil War and Fox Movietonews, 1936-1939," New Orleans Review, 14 (Winter

1987), 25-30.

<sup>4</sup> Edgar Dale, The Content of Motion Pictures (1935; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1970), p. 227.

CHAPTER I  
NEWSREELS OF THE 1930S

Oscar Levant, the American humorist, once described the format of newsreels as "a series of catastrophes followed by a fashion show."<sup>1</sup> While this characterization holds some credence, the form actually resembled more of a newspaper of the screen. From the early 1910s, many American newsreel producers were men and women who had been trained in the newspaper business. This crossover affected the style of newsreels: a fragmented succession of often unrelated events. The structure also resembled newspapers in that they usually began with the most newsworthy of stories followed by successively less "important" ones. Raymond Fielding treats this copycat approach as a historical accident. Newsreels, he posits, could have been more dramatic and stylistic; their structure could have been cinematic as the German National Socialist newsreels of this era were.<sup>2</sup> The borrowed format of newsreels, however, was less an accident than a natural pattern for pictorial journalism.

In the 1930s all substantial newsreels included sound. This remarkable and expensive technology remade the industry in only three years; 1927 witnessed the first sound newsreel and by 1930 all producers had switched to the

audio-visual format. During the first years of sound production, quality was relatively low and editing techniques remained primitive. The high cost of recording sound on site led most newsreel production companies to rely on mixing and editing audio signals in the studio. Sound cameras were reserved for celebrity interviews, speeches, and like matter. Studios kept a variety of sound effects and musical scores to add to silent footage.<sup>3</sup>

Sound technology also ushered in one of the more memorable features of 1930s newsreels: the narrator. Newsreels had to compete with the radio and film industries for the best announcers. During the early 1930s, newsreels did not always get high quality narrators. In a 1933 American Mercury article, Robert Littell found much to dislike in the announcer: his "voice (grade C radio in diction) seems to come from under a sofa." When the subject was appropriate, the script writers were incurable punsters.

Littell suspected the one who uses the "worst puns. . . in the oiliest bedtime manner is probably the one who draws the highest salary."<sup>4</sup> In another American Mercury article of 1935, John Erskine found the jokes and puns of the announcer a form of "mental torture." The article, "Newsreels Should Be Seen and Not Heard," called for sparser and more careful use of narration. The announcer feigned humor, excitement, and drama most ineffectively for Erskine. The narrator had

"forgotten that an actor can't make an audience cry by shedding his own tears."<sup>5</sup>

By the close of the 1930s the narration had changed. The quality had improved. The voices became more ominous and disembodied. Cultured and precise, the voice guided the audience; it directed their attention to matters on and off the screen. When the situation called for nervous excitement, the narrator would take on a **vox e sepulchro** strained with alarm.<sup>6</sup> Some even said the voice of Westbrook Van Voorhis, narrator for the March of Time newsreel, was as widely known as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's.<sup>7</sup>

An understanding of the distribution of motion pictures is required in order to comprehend the newsreel industry of the 1930s. Theater owners, or exhibitors, normally showed a package of films. This package contained a feature film, a cartoon, a newsreel, and perhaps a preview or travelogue. The producer-exhibitor needed to supply all the components of that package to keep the independent exhibitor from seeking a portion of it from another company. It was an economy of exclusivity. In other words, the film industry considered it good business to block-book a complete program package.<sup>8</sup> In order to distribute complete and unique packages, each of the major feature-film producers needed its own newsreel production company. Partially in response to the rising cost of sound production as well as heightened

competition, some called for combined newsreel production in the late 1920s. Educational Pictures, producer of the Kinogram newsreel, proposed a cooperative plan for Associated Newsreels. The proposal never got very far, however, and the newsreel business remained competitive and unconsolidated throughout the 1930s.<sup>9</sup> Six major newsreel producers operated in the thirties: Fox Movietone, Pathé, Hearst Metrotone, Paramount, Universal and the March of Time. The producers exhibited a variety of newsreels. Each company differed from the others in structure, production budget, and specialty.

Fox Movietone enjoyed the advantage of being the largest of the newsreel organizations. It was particularly good at world coverage; by 1940 Fox had cameramen in fifty-one countries and had nine production centers. Fox also had the largest amount of equipment for on-the-spot sound recording. Organizationally, Fox created departments for each type of category treated: news, sports, fashion, and novelties. Because of this, the Movietone newsreel was structured quite rigidly.

Pathé, the oldest newsreel organization, merged with RKO Pictures in 1931 for the purposes of block-booking. The newsreels always had a sports section, but the rest of their structure was determined by the "newsworthy" events of the week. Pathé aggressively sought exclusive newsreel rights



to stories. For example, in 1934 the organization bought the sole rights for coverage of a group of well-publicized Canadian quintuplets, the Dionne Quints, from their parents. Pathé relied on exchanges for coverage of foreign events. Its strong point remained domestic news.

The Hearst Metrotone News served as the newsreel voice of William Randolph Hearst's media empire. It was later renamed News of the Day to make Hearst's control somewhat less obvious. This series was packaged with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer features. The News of the Day had a structure determined not by departments, but by the availability of stories.

Paramount News billed itself as "The Eyes and Ears of the World." Its production policies encouraged ethnological news: the "quaint" habits of peoples around the world. Paramount screened the first German war films, obtained directly from the German Ministry of Propaganda. Paramount was well-financed and sought exclusive and costly stories.

Universal ran a thrifty, low-budget newsreel operation. Universal had only four on-site sound cameras and therefore relied on sound effects, music, and narration from its studio. Because of its frugality, Universal came to be known as "The Five-Cent Weekly." Universal was litigant in an interesting legal case in 1935: it was sued by Mrs. Doris Preisler for \$4,150,000. According to Mrs. Preisler,

the mere sight of gangster "Baby Face" Nelson's corpse caused her to miscarry an expected child. Boosting the free speech rights of newsreels, the judge dismissed the case, pointing to the ample warnings of the newsreel's gruesome contents in promotional posters and advertisements.<sup>10</sup>

In 1935 a new breed of newsreel hit the screens of America. The March of Time, produced by publisher Henry Luce's Time empire, differed from more conventional newsreels in several ways: each issue was longer, lasting between twenty and thirty minutes; only a few topics were discussed in each, and, after 1937, each film dealt with only one subject; issues came out only once per month; and most interestingly, dramatic reenactments were used to portray events. Louis De Rochemont, a veteran newsreelman, headed up March of Time production. He led the organization's effort into politically-sensitive areas. This new entry tackled political topics which were ignored or handled gingerly by other newsreel companies. Because of its bold vision and ethical quandaries of reenactments in journalism, the March of Time has received more attention from scholars than any other newsreel company.<sup>11</sup> The newsreel was both a journalistic and financial success for the Luce empire. Aided by a massive publicity campaign, the March of Time was being shown by some five thousand theaters by 1937.

As an independent trying to enter a market dominated by major studios, the March of Time penetrated deeper than several other, short-lived attempts. These ill-fated attempts deserve mention for their effort to carve out a niche: The Selznick News, The [Henry] Ford Animated Weekly, The American Newsreel which highlighted news of interest to African-Americans, The Junior Newsreel for children, and Eve's Film Pictorial for women. Two local reels met with limited success within their markets: Iowa News Flashes and The Chicago Daily News Newsreel.<sup>12</sup>

The Communist Party's Film and Photo League also produced a newsreel. With a haphazard production schedule, these reels were shown in only a few theaters. They were more commonly shown to invigorate striking workers. Leo Seltzer, a member of the League, characterized their subjects: "We filmed and photographed the breadlines, the Hoovervilles, evictions, longshoremen, taxi-drivers, ex-servicemen and others in their daily existence and activities."<sup>13</sup> The 1970s rediscovery of the Film and Photo League's work invigorated social documentarians and cultural activists on the American New Left.<sup>14</sup>

In an article appearing in The Public Opinion Quarterly, Edgar Dale pointed out in 1937 the need to study how the ownership of newsreel production companies affected

their output. The article, entitled "Need for Study of Newsreels," suggested an approach focusing on:

those influences which shape news, those factors that are at work in causing the acceptance or rejection of such items, the length of footage, type of treatment, or nature of the running commentary. Here we would be especially concerned with the ownership of the various newsreel companies, their relationship to major industries such as automobile manufacturing, munition making, their political affiliations, and the like.<sup>15</sup>

Robert Stebbins and Peter Ellis, writing for the left-leaning New Theatre and Film, had just made such a study in 1937. They concluded that:

The newsreel never really had a chance. By its very nature, it required the investment of large-scale finance in order to obtain commercial distribution. It was inevitable that like the motion picture in general, the newsreels should become the mouthpiece of monopoly capital. . . . In all questions that vitally affect the interests of the ruling classes in America, or abroad (sit-down strikes, industrial disputes of all sorts, the united front movement, the C.I.O., the Spanish Civil War, revolution in general, imperialism, militarism), the newsreels unerringly take sides against the broad masses of people, in other words, the vast majority of their audience.<sup>16</sup>

While opinionated, the attack of Stebbins and Ellis was warranted by the commercial ties of newsreels companies. An exhaustive and relatively objective study of the effects of ownership on newsreel production has yet to be made. These two examples show, however, that critics and scholars in the 1930s often believed that newsreel production reflected the interests of the owners.

One interesting yet short-lived institution evolved in

the 1930s which stood outside of the block-booking arrangements: the newsreel theater. These theaters showed only newsreels. Usually, they showed the current issues from several different producers. While they never enjoyed the popularity Europe afforded newsreel theaters, several made their appearance in the United States. In 1937 there were three in New York City; one in Newark, New Jersey; one in Boston; and one in Philadelphia.<sup>17</sup> Prices were kept low at these theatres, each show ran around forty-five minutes, and the shows were run continuously. The newsreel theater served the interests of both the inveterate newsreel enthusiast and the more moderate fan who attended occasionally.<sup>18</sup>

An important component of how the newsreel operated within the motion picture industry centers on the local theater owner. In the early 1910s newsreel producers had to give their issues away to a generally reluctant body of exhibitors. In the words of journalist Thomas Sugrue, "Exhibitors have never cared a tinker's dam about reels."<sup>19</sup> Even exhibitors who were relatively open-minded about newsreels viewed them as what Americans today have come to refer to as infotainment, that is, mass media designed to offer relevant information in an entertaining way. Martin Quigley, editor of the Motion Picture Herald, reflected a common attitude of the industry his journal served:

Newsreels have no social obligation beyond those

of the amusement industry and the theatres they are supposed to serve. Newsreels have an obligation, if they are to be purveyed as entertainment in theatres, to be entertaining. They have no obligation to be important, informative.<sup>20</sup>

In 1939 Quigley refined his opinion after the March of Time released one of its more controversial issues on labor strife:

We hold that the motion picture theatre is and should remain devoted to the mission of entertainment. Entertainment in the sense used here must of course be accorded a latitudinous [sic] definition but certainly not one that may be stretched to include controversial political material. . . .

The Exhibitors of the country ought to tell "The March of Time" that it is welcome when it behaves itself but only then.

. . . They do not want controversial political material which is calculated to destroy the theatre as the public's escape from the bitter realities, the anguishes and the turmoil of life.<sup>21</sup>

Quigley sounded a call to arms for the exhibitors' interests.

According to Fielding, "Theater owners generally viewed the newsreel as nothing more than a convenient house-clearing device to be inserted between feature attractions."<sup>22</sup> But this assessment is unfair to the exhibitors' views of the reels. Owners were not against newsreels, they were against what they deemed inappropriate content in newsreels. Audiences and owners alike appreciated the newsreel. The booking arrangement between exhibitor and newsreel producer was, in many ways, similar

to the relationship of today's television network and local affiliate. Exhibitors could screen the reels before they were shown and cut out any material they found offensive. They had the right to do this, and they exercised that right. It is difficult, however, to determine just how often this form of censorship was practiced. In addition, self-censorship occurred from above; newsreel producers eager to retain their contracts with exhibitors did not want to barrage them with unacceptable material. In 1931, Twentieth Century-Fox ordered that its theaters could not show newsreels of an objectionable nature.<sup>23</sup> The marketplace evolved a loose but widely shared sense (amongst producers and exhibitors) of just what was objectionable: scenes of police crackdowns on organized labor, lurid violence, corpses, etc.

Several opportunities existed for a newsreel to be censored, thus challenging the First Amendment rights of newsreel producers, who rarely fought back. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America's Hays Commission reviewed feature films for objectionable material but did not screen newsreels. Several states had censorship boards which could order the deletion of scenes on moral or political grounds. One case in 1937 raised the specter of loss of free speech for newsreel producers. The Kansas Board of Review ordered the deletion of footage in which

Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana voiced opposition to President Roosevelt's Supreme Court reorganization plan. What individual audiences saw depended on many intermediaries. At times theater owners would cut footage based on their political bias. New York Times film critic Frank Nugent explained that post-distribution editing could endanger the "fine objectivity" of newsreels. He wrote, "During the Presidential campaign... certain exhibitors deleted the speeches and appearances of one candidate or another for personal reasons."<sup>24</sup>

Local government joined the censorial ranks as well. Police boards in urban areas, notably Boston and Chicago, asserted the right to judge and edit scenes which could threaten public safety. Unlike newspapers, or in later years, television news, newsreels could easily be edited; anyone with access to the film could simply remove select footage and splice the film back together. Thus, theater owners and state and local government officials could easily impose their editorial judgments.

For the first decades of the motion picture industry, the courts generally considered films a business enterprise and not an organ of public opinion protected by the First Amendment. This attitude changed in 1948 in the Supreme Court case *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.* The court stated it had "no doubt that moving pictures, like



newspapers and radio, are included in the press whose freedom is guaranteed by the First Amendment." Four years later the Court held that prescreening and censorship by government "is a form of infringement upon freedom of expression to be especially condemned." In the 1930s, however, motion picture journalists and their audiences did not enjoy free speech protection.<sup>25</sup>

Newsreels were much more than a "house-clearing device," but they often took a back seat to the feature presentation, which was more expensive and considerably more risky to produce. To borrow from Thomas Sugrue, newsreels were the "ill-used stepchildren of Hollywood's household, distributed as lollipops along with the supersmash productions of their owners."<sup>26</sup> Estimates place the portion of the admission price which went toward the newsreel at between two and three per cent. The economics of the situation required that newsreels not ruffle many feathers.

The consumers of motion pictures formed the audiences for newsreel screenings. Hollywood executives closely followed their box office results and activities. The previously discussed exhibitors' views led much of industry thinking concerning newsreels. Gilbert Seldes, writing for Scribner's in 1937, grudgingly admitted what the exhibitors knew: "I know perfectly well that the man or woman who goes to see a romantic feature film does not particularly want

the newsreel to alarm or disturb him."<sup>27</sup> From the audience's point of view, this sentiment was best expressed in a 1930 poem written by one Mary Carolyn Davies and published in the Saturday Evening Post:

Please don't uplift me when I go  
To see a moving-picture show.  
I don't pay cash, or chisel passes,  
To hear about the toiling masses.  
I sort of think the world's O.K.  
If there is something, as you say,  
Rotten in Denmark--then just bury it.  
Don't tell me of the proletariat,  
Or Russian peasants buying tractors.  
I want to watch the movie actors.  
I want to see the villain get  
His just deserts. The Soviet  
Is something that I'd rather miss,  
Of evenings, than the fade out kiss!<sup>28</sup>

It is safe to assume that the majority of audience members paid to see the feature and not the newsreel. Newsreel producers had to be sensitive to the movie-going public's sensibilities. This sensitivity led to further constraints on the newsreel business. It should also be remembered that the public did not always remain quiescent. In August of 1935, six-hundred protesters assembled outside of Loew's Oriental Theatre in New York City. These members of the League Against War and Fascism were protesting the showing of a Hearst newsreel for its alleged pro-war bias. The scene ended with a police scuffle and some negative publicity for Loew's.<sup>29</sup>

In order to get feedback on their product, newsreel producers could step into a theater showing it and watch and

listen to the reaction of the audience. Exhibitor Emanuel Cohen used this method to gauge audience reaction. According to his observation, his most successful story presented a Robersonville, North Carolina, family with thirty-four children. Among other things, the issue showed how they used a tub for a butter plate.<sup>30</sup>

Much of the public did find dramatic tales of newsreel production interesting in the 1930s. This interest found expression in several forms. Nineteen thirty-five saw the release of a feature film melodramatically treating the newsreel business, Ladies Crave Excitement. The movie told of a company engaged in producing a newsreel entitled the March of Events. Two rival news camerapersons--Norman Foster and Evelyn Knapp--find a romance building between them as they track down newsworthy events.<sup>31</sup> Books also exploited Americans' new-found interest in the newsreel. In 1932 Doubleday released Charles Peden's Newsreel Men. Peden chronicled the "adventures and exploits" of newsreel photographers. In 1936 Irving Crump's The Boy's Book of Newsreel Hunters was published.<sup>32</sup>

As may be evidenced by the preceding examples, a new American hero arose during the Thirties: the newsreel cameraman. The public found that the adventurous exploits of dashing cameramen made for thrilling reading. The account by Movietone's Al Gold of how he filmed the

Hindenburg disaster was reported in the popular press:

When the explosion occurred I was shooting the ground crew grappling with the ropes. Instinctively, without a thought, I panned up to the silver bag looking into my finder to see what was happening. From then on what happened to me or my camera is a confused memory.

It only took about thirty seconds for the big bag to strike the ground after the explosion. But if the Board of Investigation calls me, I could never swear to that, It seemed an age or a moment....

I could only hear the grinding of my camera. That there must have been hollering and screeching and the roar of flames I know, but I didn't hear them.

The film was unwinding before my lens. "I've got everything I can from this angle," I thought....<sup>33</sup>

The newsreel cameraman's mission was to get his picture at whatever cost. Publicized life insurance rates for these cameramen were skyrocketing, only adding to the aura of danger and excitement around the vocation. Newspapers and magazines loved to take a "behind-the-scenes" look at the lives of newsreel photographers. An article in the New York Times spoke of the Fox Movietone office as "the hangout for as reckless and hardy a gang of adventurers as ever stirred the heart of any red-blooded or even slightly anemic male." Carrying the circulatory imagery even further, the article described the cameramen as "simply men of a reasonably low systolic pressure who have drifted into a job as far-flung and, intermittently at least, as risky as any the age affords." War assignments were, of course, among the most dangerous as well as the most exciting for cameramen. When

the Fox cameramen headed to Ethiopia to cover the impending war with Italy, they were curiously excited to get to film such a gruesome event. The newsreel cameraman thought of himself as a swashbuckling adventurer.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the fascination with the cameramen, newsreels became subject to a deluge of criticism during the 1930s. Articles in popular periodicals, trade magazines, scholarly journals, and newspapers voiced a variety of complaints. A few common strands did, however, appear in these texts. First, and most important, there was an almost universal agreement about the potential power of newsreels. In the words of Gilbert Seldes: "the newsreel is a social power of the first order."<sup>35</sup> During this same period neighborhood theaters were losing their local character, and movie viewing became more of a mass experience; no matter where one saw a film the experience would be similar. Chain theatres with major investments in the sound technology sought to control the experience of which newsreels were a part. As Elizabeth Cohen explains in her study of working class neighborhoods in Chicago in that era, Making a New Deal, "Sound also helped chains banish the live entertainment that had previously framed feature films. Taped shorts distributed nationally replaced ethnic troops and amateur talent shows in neighborhood theaters and even eliminated stage shows at all but the largest picture

palaces."<sup>36</sup> These losses promoted the relative importance of motion picture journalism; as Thomas Sugrue explained at the time: "Newsreels have done more to acquaint Americans with the world in which they live than all the other beneficent agencies of modern civilization combined."<sup>37</sup>

While not as pervasive, a second idea showed up in many articles: there was real hope for improvement in content. Seldes wrote, "The integrity of the newsreel itself demands that it should not sidestep its own virtues. It has the capacity to be much more than just filler."<sup>38</sup> Seldes even made suggestions for how this might happen; audiences, he stated, must demand substantial, well-balanced newsreels for every picture program. Neither of these sentiments found widespread expression in the criticism of the 1920s or the 1940s; in the 1920s the power of the medium was not appreciated, and in the 1940s the hopes for it had just about run dry.

Period writers discussing newsreels took malicious delight in criticizing the often banal content of newsreels. The producers gave the audience escapism, whereas these critics wanted hard news. Seldes found "monotonous trivialities."<sup>39</sup> The editors of The Catholic World saw a "hodge-podge of politics, babies, animals and accidents."<sup>40</sup> Robert Littell's 1933 catalog of newsreel content constituted a scathing attack:

A parade of babies, some of them dressed as

butterflies.

Several hundred adolescents in white uniforms throwing their visored caps in the air.

A man in tights, leaping feet foremost at another man, also in tights.

Three dozen girls in bathing suits, sliding down a snow slope on their tails.

A very ordinary looking young man, playing the piano with mittens on his hands.

Several polar bears, breaking cakes of ice inside of which are frozen fish.

Automobiles going around and around an inclined track.

Horses running around and around and around a track which is not inclined.

A pair of midgets, one male, one female, dressed as bride and groom.

A middle-aged citizen in horn-rimmed glasses, talking haltingly about some unintelligible aspect of government.

A small and rather frightened boy, with a crown on his head.

Two dozen girls in rompers high-kicking on the deck of a battleship.

Thousands of sad, ugly people holding hands and hopping down a narrow, rainy street.<sup>41</sup>

Littell expressed dismay that newsreels had "largely abandoned the service of history and set up shop as entertainers, with the result that the bulk of their offerings is no longer news."<sup>42</sup> The "service of history," in Littell's view, was the audio-visual chronicling of important events. He wanted treaty signings, not fashion shows. The audience-pleasing yet ludicrous content of newsreels arose from their role within the motion picture industry of providing cheap, mass entertainment. David Mould found that "news cannot exist in an entertainment milieu without being influenced by the drama about it."<sup>43</sup>

Sociologist Edgar Dale performed a study of the content

of motion pictures in general and newsreels in particular. He examined the synopsis sheets of two competing newsreels for a roughly one-year period starting in April 1931. Dale began with several assumptions. First, he believed newsreels to be powerful means for producers to distribute information. Second, newsreels affected public opinion. Third, newsreels could be used to promote what he deemed as positive values. He divided the subjects treated by his sample into twenty-five categories, including "sports," "animals," "economic conditions," and "curiosities and freaks." Although his methods were somewhat limited by the synopses, his results proved informative. He found a one to twelve ratio in the number of stories dealing with peace as opposed to war. With a sample pool dating before the repeal of Prohibition, he found a ratio of one to four in "dry" items to "wet" items. Dale was not pleased with his results. He proposed the inclusion of more wholesome topics: health, psychological and vocational guidance, and engineering. Dale expressed his middle-class values when making a further suggestion:

Another area which is wholly undeveloped would be short shots of tastefully decorated homes. These might be in color and give to the millions of movie-goers a glimpse into the homes of persons who evince good taste in the selection of furniture and other items of home decoration.<sup>44</sup>

While critics agreed that the content of motion pictures should change, then, they desired a wide variety of



improvements.

Those who argue that the televised John F. Kennedy-Richard Nixon debate ushered in a new era in which politicians are judged by their screen presence as opposed to their views, might be surprised to find that newsreel critics of the 1930s observed the same phenomenon in their day. In a 1936 Reader's Digest article, Littell compared the screen presence of several well-known men: he found that Adolf Hitler and Charles Lindbergh screened quite well. The newsreels could also be unflattering: "When the camera catches Gandhi, one completely forgets that this monkey on a stick, all bones and spectacles, is a great spiritual leader."<sup>45</sup> President Roosevelt had a superb presence and voice in newsreels. He cooperated with cameramen. At his 1936 inauguration, "Roosevelt literally toed a chalk line for the boys, and stayed within a small square marked out for him by the cameramen."<sup>46</sup> The cameras were located on a tower which the newsreels had erected at a cost of two thousand dollars. Littell also wrote of recent footage showing a group testifying before Congress: "the earnestness of their argument was completely nullified by their faces, which were mean, pinched, obstinate and rodent-like beyond the wildest hopes of the most unfriendly caricature."<sup>47</sup> The newsreels could raise or lower an individual's fortunes depending on his or her screen

presence.

With debates on the proper amount for naval appropriations fueling perennial battles, Americans were quick to notice any bias on this issue in the newsreels. Pare Lorentz, critic and documentary film producer, asked "Who puts the Navy in every newsreel?" Lorentz had seen

bow and stern, port and starboard of every cruiser, battleship, and sub-chaser in the service going through what the newsreels claim are maneuvers. I have seen ten thousand five hundred and ninety pursuit planes lay smoke screens for these same ships--another maneuver which puzzles me, because a small boy with a pea gun should be able to shut his eyes, aim at the smoke screen and hit one of the ships.<sup>48</sup>

Lorentz, like sociologist Dale, suspected that the Navy might be responsible for this pictorial promotion. Littell doubted that this high rate of inclusion amounted to "Big Navy propaganda--more likely it is merely filler."<sup>49</sup> Thomas Sugrue stressed the visual drama of naval vessels. Put simply, "battleships make beautiful pictures."<sup>50</sup>

Among other issues, positions on the abundance of Navy shots allowed partisan viewers to read into newsreels what they wanted to see. Newsreel releases could serve as, in Fielding's words, "a kind of cinematic Rorschach test."<sup>51</sup> William Alexander, in an article appearing in the American Quarterly, discusses the overall reaction of left-wing critics to the March of Time. Alexander argues that these critics incorrectly viewed the March of Time's political

tendency as fascistic. Rather, the skilled journalists of the newsreel "were drawn to exciting topics, which they enhanced with dramatic arrangements, charged voice, and hints of still more excitement to come." The form of the March of Time did not inspire viewers to consider thoughtfully the issues presented; rather, the principal communication was "the eager anticipation of, the pleasure in, and the desire for more drama, more riots, more power struggles."<sup>52</sup>

Critics found a fascination with conflict and demagoguery present in March of Time issues. While critics from the left found a "militantly alert capitalism" in the newsreel series, that tone could be more easily blamed for failing to adopt views which could be analyzed and discussed. Newsreels presented the illusion of information, the illusion of unbiased facts. This presentation frustrated critics who sought to uncover any biases.

A 1935 editorial in the Nation discussed the visually structured reality presented by newsreels:

Theoretically there is, of course, no reason why an editorial on celluloid is not as legitimate as one on newsprint. The danger lies in the fact that every effort is made to convey the suggestion that no editorializing is intended. The editorials are sandwiched in between items of merely curious interest and the impression given is that everything has been caught by the indiscriminating eye of the camera.<sup>53</sup>

When critics found that newsreels manipulated the truth, the

manipulation seemed all the more dangerous because it was presented with an illusion of reality. Much of this illusion depended on the motion picture camera: "The camera seems almost moronically incapable of interpreting or revising. It seems to give events without even the degree of coloration inevitable when they are passed through the mind of the most factual reporter."<sup>54</sup>

Notably absent from newsreels is the now omnipresent reporter. In televised news reports the commentator appears on the screen; in the 1930s an unseen cameraman called the shots. This difference explains the heightened visual primacy of the subject without an on-screen journalist, which was sensed by newsreel critics of the era.<sup>55</sup> Despite their seemingly objective formats, newsreels of the 1930s--like all visual news--were not mirrors to reality. Through techniques of camera angles, shot selection, and framing, cameramen served on the newsreels' front line of creating a structured reality.

The forces of an unappreciative motion-picture industry, a fairly docile audience, self-censorship, and an inherited structure stopped the newsreel from reaching its fullest documentary potential in the 1930s. Wallowing in a stodgy format during the 1940s and facing increased competition from television journalism in the coming decades, the American newsreel died a slow death. History

has often been hard on the newsreel. Writing in 1973, Richard Barsam, a scholar of non-fiction film, described the by then extinct newsreel as having had "a naive, almost innocent approach."<sup>56</sup> Others have found important beginnings in the newsreel. David Mould, for example, offered that "television news saw its antecedents. . . in an older tradition of screen reporting--the motion picture newsreel."<sup>57</sup> Robert Musburger argued that newsreel reenactments--used occasionally by all newsreel companies, but most often by the March of Time--helped to set the stage for the emergence of the television docudramas of the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>58</sup>

Newsreels reached their zenith during the 1930s. Newsreels informed and entertained the movie-going public of that decade with their strange mix of news, sports, parades, and dancing girls. An instrument of popular culture, they had to fit within the entertainment field and not jar the audience's yearning to escape at the cinema. Nevertheless, within these constraints newsreels served as a vital source of information for mass audiences of the 1930s.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fielding, Newsreel, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Fielding, March of Time, p. 5; Fielding, Newsreel, pp. 135-36.

<sup>3</sup> Fielding, Newsreel, pp. 159-88.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Littell, "A Glance at the Newsreels," American Mercury, 30 (1933), 266.

<sup>5</sup> John Erskine, "Newsreels Should Be Seen and Not Heard," American Mercury, 35 (1935), 220-21.

<sup>6</sup> Fielding, "Mirror of Discontent," 146.

<sup>7</sup> Fielding, March of Time, pp. 202-03.

<sup>8</sup> Fielding, American Newsreel, p. 224.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-58.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 189-97.

<sup>11</sup> William Alexander, "The March of Time and the World Today," American Quarterly, 29 (Summer 1977), 183-90; Fielding, March of Time, pp. 73-78, 84.

<sup>12</sup> Fielding, American Newsreel, p. 187.

<sup>13</sup> Leo Seltzer, "Documenting the Depression of the 1930s," Film Library Quarterly, 13 (January 1980), 20.

<sup>14</sup> Russell Campbell, "Radical Documentary in the United States," in "Show Us Life": Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary, ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen,

New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1984), p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> Edgar Dale, "Need for Study of the Newsreels," Public Opinion Quarterly, 1 (1937), 122.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Stebbins and Peter Ellis, "Are Newsreels News?" New Theatre and Film, 4 (April 1937), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Sugrue, "The Newsreels," Scribner's, 51 (April 1937), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Fielding, American Newsreel, pp. 203-04.

<sup>19</sup> Sugrue, "The Newsreels," 10.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Quigley, "The Exhibitor's Screen: How Shall It Be Used?" Motion Picture Herald, 5 (February 1938), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Quigley, "The Exhibitor's Screen--How Shall It Be Used?" Motion Picture Herald, 6 (February 1939), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Fielding, American Newsreel, p. 220.

<sup>23</sup> David H. Mould, "Historical Trends in the Criticism of the Newsreel and Television News: 1930-1955," Journal of Popular Film and Television, 12 (Fall 1984), p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Frank S. Nugent, "Postscript to a Career and a Riot," New York Times, June 13, 1936, A:12.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey A. Jacobs, "Comparing Regulatory Models - Self-Regulation vs. Government Regulation," Journal of Technology Law & Policy, 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> Sugrue, "The Newsreels," 10.

<sup>27</sup> Gilbert Seldes, "Screen and Radio," Scribner's, 102 (July 1937), 58.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Carolyn Davies, "These Russian Films," Saturday Evening Post, 202 (15 November 1930), 23.

<sup>29</sup> "Anti-Fascists Fight Police in Brooklyn," New York Times, August 11, 1935, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Fielding, American Newsreel, p. 227.

<sup>31</sup> Jay Robert Nash and Stanley Ralph Ross, The Motion Picture Guide (Chicago: Cinebooks, 1986), p. 1572.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Peden, Newsreel Men (New York: Doubleday, 1932), p. 3 and Irving Crump, The Boy's Books of Newsreel Hunters (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1933), passim.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Fielding, American Newsreel, p. 218.

<sup>34</sup> "Making the Newsreels," New York Times, January 19, 1936, X:4.

<sup>35</sup> Seldes, "Screen and Radio", 56.

<sup>36</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 128-29.

<sup>37</sup> Sugrue, "The Newsreels," 9.

<sup>38</sup> Seldes, "Screen and Radio," 58.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 56.



<sup>40</sup> "The March of Time," The Catholic World 143 (1936), 602.

<sup>41</sup> Littell, "A Glance," 264.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 264-65.

<sup>43</sup> Mould, "Historical Trends," 123.

<sup>44</sup> Dale, Content of Motion Pictures, pp. 189-223, p. 221.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Littell, "Hard on Heroes," Reader's Digest, 29 (July 1936), 89.

<sup>46</sup> Sugrue, "The Newsreels," 10.

<sup>47</sup> Littell, "A Glance," 271.

<sup>48</sup> Pare Lorentz, Lorentz on Film: Movies from 1927 to 1941 (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1975), p. 82.

<sup>49</sup> Littell, "A Glance," 267.

<sup>50</sup> Sugrue, "The Newsreels," 13.

<sup>51</sup> Fielding, March of Time, p. 64.

<sup>52</sup> Alexander, "The March of Time," 186.

<sup>53</sup> "Are Newsreels News?" Nation, 141 (October 2, 1935), 370.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 370.

<sup>55</sup> Romeiser, "Spanish Civil War," 27.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Meran Barsam, Nonfiction Film: A Critical History (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973), p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> Mould, "Historical Trends," 118.

<sup>58</sup> Robert B. Musburger, "Setting the Stage for the Television Docudrama," Journal of Popular Film and Television, 13 (Summer 1985), 92-98.

## CHAPTER II

### THE INDUSTRY WHICH PRODUCED THEM

In order to understand newsreels of the 1930s one must examine the industry which produced them. These nationally distributed films averaging around ten minutes per issue met two fundamental demands: the audience's desire to 'see life as it is' and the desire for profit on the part of producers. Industry polls of the period repeatedly confirmed that theater patrons preferred cinematic experiences that included newsreels. At the same time, newsreel production allowed motion picture industry investors to earn profits and protect markets. The industry as a whole held tremendous power through the newsreels. Because newsreels existed as a mass medium they possessed the ability to set the national agenda on everything from New Deal politics to fall fashions. At times, audiences reacted negatively to this power and sought to restrict owners, producers, and exhibitors.<sup>1</sup>

Historians of the motion picture industry must overcome the commonly held misimpressions associated with it. For example, "Hollywood" conjures up images of movie stars lounging by swimming pools, as opposed to notions of a California city equipped to produce motion pictures. The glamour of that "tinsel town" seems far removed from the business of a simple movie house in some American hamlet, yet these two different sites are joined as a part of the industry. Film historians have chiefly focused on the

production side of the industry, with the personalities and the output--films--involved. They have generally ignored both exhibition and the even more elusive systems of distribution.<sup>2</sup>

In order to place the motion picture industry of the 1930s within some proper frame of reference, one can compare its attributes with those of other industries. Motion picture corporations earned \$818 million in 1937. Ranked with other industries for that year, Hollywood stood at forty-fifth, behind, for example, life insurance and bituminous coal companies. Indeed, the film industry has never produced a tremendous well-spring of economic activity.

In terms of employment the industry workforce stayed somewhat under 200,000 persons in the 1930s. Yet the industry was important. As a portion of the entertainment field, the industry fared quite well; in 1937 it accounted for 78 per cent of the gross income of that sector.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the industry did offer a fairly lucrative field for investors: in terms of average profit per \$100 of invested capital in 1937, the motion picture industry ranked tenth with \$10.63.<sup>4</sup>

Three distinct functions come together to form the triptych of the motion picture industry: production, distribution, exhibition. Producers create films. Distributors wholesale films to exhibitors who, in turn, present the films to paying customers. In terms of capital

investment, production accounted for only 5 per cent of total assets during the 1930s. Not indicative of its power, distribution engaged only 1 per cent of that total. The vast majority of capital in the industry, some 94 per cent, was utilized in exhibition.<sup>5</sup> The costs of production and distribution could be spread out amongst the roughly 18,000 theaters across the United States, which represented the great bulk of the industry's investments.<sup>6</sup>

The introduction of sound-on-film technology in the mid-1920s greatly altered the motion picture industry. Conversion to "talkies" required numerous physical changes: studios, theatres, and laboratories had to be transformed and costly soundproof stages constructed. In 1929, to convert a theater for sound cost between \$5000 and \$7000. Developers of this machinery (Radio Corporation of America and American Telephone and Telegraph) fought to hold control of the technology and keep their profits high. The viewing public found that the addition of audio tracks made films more engaging. Audiences supported the more realistic films by their votes at the box offices; sound films, clearly, amounted to much more than a temporary novelty. In addition to enormous start-up costs, sound equipment was continually updated throughout the 1930s to meet higher standards of reproduction, requiring further outlays of capital.<sup>7</sup>

Because conversion to sound was expensive, bankers and other financiers increased their involvement in the industry.

Some investors had long felt an almost irresistible attraction to the production of movies, but not until the 1920s did major investment banks begin to extend credit to the industry.<sup>8</sup> When audiences flocked to sound films, the investments in sound paid off. The Great Depression provided further inroads for financiers, amongst whom the lucky, e.g., studio executive Louis B. Mayer, reaped profits during Hollywood's "Golden Era."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the 1930s eight corporations dominated the motion picture industry. This oligopoly generated enormous profits for the industry and effectively kept potential competitors out. Five of these corporations of the "Studio Era" were fully integrated vertically, that is, they engaged in production, distribution, and exhibition. Loew's Inc. (parent company of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Fox (Twentieth Century-Fox after 1936), Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures, and Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) made up the "majors." The so-called "minors" included Universal, Columbia, and United Artists; Universal and Columbia specialized in production and distribution, while United Artists provided distribution for independent producers. A high degree of vertical integration, or "trustification" in the parlance of the era, defined the industry during its studio era. These sprawling firms also operated or owned other concerns such as film-processing laboratories, music-publishing houses, radio stations, stage production companies, and domestic as well as

foreign theater chains.<sup>10</sup>

Much of the ownership and control of the industry rested in the hands of investment bankers. Chase Bank held majority interest in Twentieth Century-Fox. The banking house of Lehman Bros. held major interests in two of the majors: Paramount and RKO. Goldman, Sachs and Company held an interest in Warner Bros. Hemphill, Noyes; Bancamerica-Blair; Eastmen, Dillon & Co.; and Goldman, Sachs and Werthheim & Co. underwrote much of Columbia's activity. Apart from the claims of anti-Semitic critics of the industry who saw conspiracy lurking, some more reasonable charges were leveled against the ownership of the industry.

Film scholar Lewis Jacobs states that investment bankers saw the motion picture industry as relatively safe, depression-proof, and--if patents for sound equipment could be held--fairly lucrative. Writing in 1938, Lewis saw that

Competition in the motion picture industry today has narrowed down to a fight between the two major financial interests of the country for the balance of power within the eight major studios and their affiliated theatre and distribution channels.... The advent of sound put the motion picture industry, after a long and bitter battle, under the indirect control of the two dominating financial groups in the United States today--the Morgan Group (telephone interests) and the Rockefeller group (radio interests). Between these two financial powers now rests the control of the motion picture industry.<sup>11</sup>

Lewis's concept of financial control has long been used by film historians, especially those of the **auteur** school who use it to paint a picture of artistic film producers vying

against cigar-chomping owners insensitive to the creative process of film making. Because the industry required vast amounts of expensive technology and thousands of theaters across the country, financial interests held considerable power. In order to protect their interests, the major studios devised several strategies to increase profits, control the market, and block the entry of new competitors.

One of the strategies implemented by the "Big Eight" studios aimed to generate larger revenues by allowing for discrimination in admission prices. Based on the assumption that some consumers within a market would want to see a feature attraction soon after its release and were willing to pay for that privilege, and that others would want to wait and pay less, the industry powers devised a most effective method to separate markets both temporally and spatially. The majors cooperated to create a system of runs, zones, and clearances for every city in the United States. After the first run, which lasted for a set period of time (the clearance), a release could become second-run within the geographical limits of its zone. Under this system every theater had a fixed run-zone-clearance status used by distributors to determine when and where a feature film would play. While the system rationalized a complex process, it remained quite Byzantine itself: the largest cities could support markets with as many as eleven runs taking more than a year to complete; clearances could last anywhere from seven



to thirty days; each run had its own admission price ranging between a dollar and a dime. The run-zone-clearance system allowed the Big Eight to maximize their profits through price discrimination.<sup>12</sup>

Under this system the bulk of earnings occurred during the first run of a release. The vertically integrated majors, then, could milk the most out of their theater dollars by owning choice property: first-run movie houses with large seating capacities in the biggest cities. This strategy worked perfectly; the majors could receive the bulk of the earnings by controlling only a fraction of theaters. Of the total 11 million theater seats in the United States in 1938, the Big Five owned only 22 per cent--not just any 22 per cent, of course, but the 22 percent with the best run-zone-clearance status. Through this strategy the majors could claim more than one-half of the box-office earnings with less than one-quarter of the actual seats. The grip of the Five Majors companies remained so tight that only 37 first-run theaters in the whole country remained independently owned and operated by the close of the 1930s.<sup>13</sup>

The Five Majors and the Three Minors also controlled, via their distribution channels, how features, newsreels, trailers, and short subject films were released. Through the mechanism of block-booking, distributors offered their studio's films to independent exhibitors only as a seasonal block including feature attractions along with other films

for an entire season. Theater operators could not, therefore, choose to exhibit only certain films. For advocates of community control of moral standards for films, block booking represented a tremendous evil. Neighborhood exhibitors had few options: they could decide not to screen a film, but only at great loss. Groups concerned with how films affected morality, such as the Legion of Decency--a Catholic reform group--called for a ban on block booking. For the majors, however, the strategy allowed the risk of a "flop" film to be placed on the shoulders of the independent exhibitor. All films block booked (booking took place even before filming was completed) would be guaranteed a minimum of leasing fees, thereby giving security to producers and distributors.<sup>14</sup>

Independent theater operators faced many difficulties during the 1930s. Reliant on the output of major producers to attract audiences, and dependent on affiliated distributors who usually only served them cinematic leftovers, these operators developed a variety of methods to increase business and entice patrons. Wide-scale refreshment sales in exhibition houses began during the depression decade. Salty popcorn and cold drinks became the cornerstones of the refreshment operations, replacing candy which had been sold as early as the 1920s.<sup>15</sup> Others tried to lure customers by offering a "giveaway" to patrons. A theater might, for example, give a piece of chinaware free to

every female patron on one designated night a week. The enticement might even reduce the importance of the film shown; some houses advertised "'Tonight Is Dish Night--Also a Feature.'" <sup>16</sup>

The small exhibitors also held lotteries. Affiliated Enterprises, Inc. franchised the most popular theater lottery of the era. Cleverly designed to avoid running afoul of state lottery laws, Bank Night enjoyed great popularity--some 4,300 theaters employed it during 1936. An often last-ditch effort to revive a theater's sagging business, the double feature began to appear in the 1930s.<sup>17</sup> Scorned by many within the industry because it doubled the demand for films and yielded narrower profits, showing two feature-length film for one admission price offered struggling independents a chance.

The small, unaffiliated exhibitors provided the only resistance against the entrenched oligopoly of the Big Five and the Little Three when the Code of Fair Practice for the Motion Picture Industry under the National Recovery Administration was written in 1933. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 created the NRA to establish codes of fair competition to bring the United States out of the depression. Industries that cooperated would be exempted from anti-trust action on the part of the federal government.

The small exhibitors spoke through their Allied States Association of Motion Picture Exhibitors (Allied States) and

the larger interests through the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA).

The Allied States lost out to the MPPDA on several key issues. First, the code forbade many of the coping mechanisms small exhibitors had developed, that is, non-price competition became illegal. No more give-aways, bank nights or bingo games. These enticements, the MPPDA argued, amounted to unfair competition; the code even prohibited free parking given as a premium. This, it should be noted, disproportionately aided large, downtown theaters--the very ones the studios commonly owned. The bulk of the NRA Motion Picture Code codified the run-zone-clearance system, legitimated block-booking through which distributors could control what independent theaters screened, and accepted the vertical integration of the majors.

The Supreme Court declared the National Industrial Recovery Act unconstitutional in May 1935, thereby invalidating the Motion Picture Code. Yet the code had little effect on the industry; the oligopolists controlled the industry and effectively excluded entry before, during, and after the NRA. The code's greatest long-lived effect in the industry was adoption of the double feature by independents, the only form of non-price competition the code permitted. Because the code represents the first time majors openly and explicitly detailed their collusion, film industry historians--Douglas Gomery and Michael Conant, for example--

have been too eager to attribute the oligopolistic state of the industry to the NRA. The Act simply made visible how a few key studios controlled the industry, a condition that had been in place for a decade. Apart from the rise of the double feature, little else changed.<sup>18</sup>

Newsreels operated within this system during the 1930s. The Motion Picture Code mentioned newsreels directly only twice. First, the code excluded "employees engaged directly in newsreels production work in the following classifications: editors and sub-editors; film cutters and film joiners; camera men, sound men and type setters" from regulations governing number of hours worked per week. During a week with a big news event, or when a cameraman spent days on assignment, hours per week could quickly surpass the 36-hour or 40-hour maximums that applied to other workers. Second, the code openly allowed for the continuation of the practice through which distributors required exhibitors to contract for newsreels when they contracted for features. This allowance, in Article XXII of the code, allowed the industry to market a producer's feature films along with the newsreel associated with that producer.<sup>19</sup>

That five of the majors distributed their own exclusive newsreels points to some economic function which they performed. The studios correctly sensed that audiences and exhibitors liked newsreels. As Frank H. Ricketson, Jr., a theater operator, wrote in 1938, "The newsreel should be a

part of every program. It has a standard value to the house and is the most valuable single subject."<sup>20</sup> When media magnate Henry Luce founded the March of Time newsreel, he had distributed it chiefly through RKO networks. The Hollywood oligopoly did little to prevent competition on the input side of the industry, as this example demonstrates. The rental fees charged for newsreels often represented a fraction of their value. The chief value of reels to the studio system came from the news film's role in a package of block-booked entertainment, thereby supplying exhibitors with this desired component without another studio's line of products getting its foot through the independent theater's doors.<sup>21</sup> Newsreels could also disseminate public relations for the parent company. For example a Universal newsreel of 1933 showed that company's President, Carl Laemmle, greeting guests on the occasion of Universal's twentieth anniversary of moving to Universal City, California. Studio-contracted stars could also be shown to increase publicity for upcoming films.<sup>22</sup>

Critics of the newsreels perceived them as propaganda vehicles for their owners. For example, the "merchants of death" mindset embodied in the Nye Committee reports on World War I armament suppliers seemed to bleed over into the thinking of others. Edgar Dale, arguing for the need to study newsreels stated, "We would be especially interested [in] the ownership of the various newsreel companies, their relationship to major industries such as automobile

manufacturing, munition making, their political affiliations and the like."<sup>23</sup> In some cases members of the public expressed the sentiment that ownership mattered. After several events such as the Brooklyn, New York demonstration against the "pro-war" Hearst News of the Day newsreel, Loew's and MGM decided to drop William Randolph Hearst's name from the title.<sup>24</sup>

In the solar system of the American motion picture industry, newsreels represented only one planet. The system, well-ordered and controlled by owners, valued newsreels, but only as one cog of its profit-making machine. Newsreels reflected the conservative values of their owners. And regardless of the position of Stebbins and Ellis, the reels tended to be only slightly more conservative than their audiences on many issues. Fundamentally, the newsreel existed within an entertainment milieu. This subordinate role held it back from becoming hard-hitting motion picture journalism. The industry leaders could not have tolerated disruptive, controversy; the profitability of an industry could be threatened. Owners, producers, distributors, and theater operators combined to keep newsreels interesting yet not inflammatory.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frank H. Ricketson, Jr., The Management of Motion Picture Theatres (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1938), pp. 120-21.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the historiography of the film industry see Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery Film History: Theory and Practice (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 131-51.

<sup>3</sup> Mae D. Huettig, Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry: A Study in Industrial Organization (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), pp. 54-58.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-100.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Gomery, The Hollywood Studio System (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 1, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Huettig, Economic Control, pp. 74-75.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Vaughn, "Financiers, Movie Producers, and the Church: Economic Origins of the Production Code," in Current Research in Film: Audiences, Economics, and Law, Vol. 4, ed. Bruce A. Austin (Norwood, New Jersey: Apex Publishing, 1988), pp. 202-04; and "Newsreels Adopt New Standard Reproduction to Improve Sound," Motion Picture Herald, February 23, 1935, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Alan Nelson, "Stock Failures and Con Men: A Neglected Economic Aspect of America's Early Motion Picture Industry," Journal of Popular Film and Television, 11 (Spring 1983), 12-23.



<sup>9</sup> Vaughn, "Financiers," p. 202; Gomery, Studio System, pp. 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Conant, Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry: Economic and Legal Analysis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 21-27.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1939), pp. 421, 419.

<sup>12</sup> Gomery, Studio System, pp. 15-17.

<sup>13</sup> Huettig, Economic Control, pp. 74-84.

<sup>14</sup> For examples of how morality-minded groups reacted to this mechanism see Fred Eastmen, "Who Controls the Movies?", Christian Century 47 (February 5, 1930), 173; "Block-Booking Must Go!" ibid., 50 (December 20, 1933), 1600-01.

<sup>15</sup> Between 1920 and 1948 US acreage devoted to popcorn jumped from 60,000 to 300,000 acres, largely to meet the demands of theater refreshment stands. Gomery, Studio System, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> H. O. Kussell, "Bank Night," New Republic, 186 (May 6, 1936), 363.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 363-64.

<sup>18</sup> "Industry Sends Codes to Capital; NRA Sets Public Hearing Sept. 12," Motion Picture Herald (August 26, 1933), 9-10, *et passim*; "Groups Strengthen Forces for Public Hearing on Code Tuesday," Motion Picture Herald (September 9, 1933), 9; Douglas Gomery "Rethinking U.S. Film History: the Depression Decade and Monopoly Control," Film and History, 10 (May 1980), 32-38; Gomery Studio System, p. 22; and Conant, p. 32; John Izod, Hollywood and the Box Office, 1895-1986 (New York:

Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 108-10. Also see Conant for a discussion of how the industry changed after forced vertical disintegration resulting from the landmark anti-trust case, U.S. vs. Paramount Pictures.

<sup>19</sup> "Text of Code," Motion Picture Herald (August 26, 1933), 55-61.

<sup>20</sup> Ricketson, Theatres, p. 120.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Fielding, The American Newsreel, 1911-1967 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), pp. 189-204.

<sup>22</sup> Universal Newsreel Newspaper, 6 (March 19, 1932), 233 item 4.

<sup>23</sup> Edgar Dale, "Need for the Study of Newsreels," Public Opinion Quarterly, 1 (July 1937), 122-25.

<sup>24</sup> "Anti-Fascists Fight Police in Brooklyn," New York Times, August 11, 1935, page 3, col. 1.

### Chapter III

#### CULTURAL DEPICTIONS OF NEWSREELS

In 1936, The New Yorker ran a Peter Arno cartoon which illustrated a number of widely held assumptions about motion picture newsreels. In it, two well-dressed couples have stopped at the home of some socialites enjoying after-dinner coffee. A woman, standing outside their open window, calls to them, "Come along. We're going to the Trans-Lux to hiss Roosevelt."<sup>1</sup> The Trans-Lux movie theater in New York sometimes exhibited a compendium of various newsreels for those who wanted just news without a feature film.

This famous cartoon captures several salient points about the cultural understanding of newsreels in 1930s America. First, audience members actively responded to the content of newsreels. They were not passive drones absorbing material but, rather, brought with them experience and opinions through which they interpreted the news. In the cartoon, the audience planned to respond by hissing, making clear that sometimes the opinions of the audience members were audible in exhibition venues.

Second, the cartoon points out that economic and social elites derided newsreels. Some lambasted their content, tone, or style. Others found them simply humorous. Third, the cartoon exhibits an evolving sense of newsreels as a mass medium, a format that despite its shortcomings held

tremendous power to sway opinion and mold public dialogue. The New Yorkers cared about the content of motion picture journalism. During the 1930s, artists and commentators actively engaged the idea of the newsreel, using it in a variety of ways. Two great works, John Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy and Orson Welles's Citizen Kane, marking the beginning and end of the decade, serve as vital examples of what newsreels meant to Americans.

Born in Chicago, Dos Passos graduated from Harvard University in 1916. He championed a number of social struggles during his life, most famously coming to the assistance of Sacco and Vanzetti. As social commentator and novelist he proved visionary. Orson Welles's career peaked early. Born in 1915, he was in his mid twenties when he began work on Citizen Kane and had already enjoyed success as a stage actor and producer.<sup>2</sup>

Newsreels inform the content and structure of John Dos Passos' U.S.A. trilogy. Composed of three novels, The 42nd Parallel, Nineteen Nineteen, and The Big Money the ambitious series painted a vivid portrait of American life as the 1930s opened. U.S.A. is a work full of despair. Literary critic Alfred Kazin labeled it "one of the saddest books ever written by an American" and "a history of failure that is irrevocable."<sup>3</sup> The unique structure of the trilogy helped Dos Passos create this degree of sadness. The work relies on four modes of interspersed thought: twelve narratives of

fictional characters, twenty-seven biographical sketches, subjective "Camera Eye" sections, and sixty-eight "Newsreels." Dos Passos intended the "Newsreels to give an inkling of the common mind of the epoch." He interlaces the events in the characters' lives with actual events (some famous, others obscure) to situate the characters in time. Recording events provided a sort of justification for his art. In 1928, he wrote, "the only excuse for a novelist aside from the entertainment and vicarious living his books give the people who read them, is as a sort of second-class historian of the age he lives in." The Newsreels locate the action physically and temporally; they provide atmosphere; they propel the story through time.<sup>4</sup>

To establish the "clamor, the sound of daily life," Dos Passos filled U.S.A. with Newsreels, as if the reader were periodically visiting a theater as history unfolded. Some deal with famous events of historical interest such as presidential elections and pioneering aviator Charles Lindbergh's crossing of the Atlantic, or the Paris Peace conference, but most are true miscellanies. Each Newsreel takes up roughly one page of the book, and tells ten to twenty unrelated stories or enigmatic shards of stories. Like actual newsreels, Dos Passos's reels mixed the significant with the trivial. Through studied juxtaposition, the material becomes rich with ironic potential. As Donald Pizer wrote in his critical study of the trilogy, "The effect

is therefore much like that of a surreal collage in which discernible 'meaning' is mixed with material that is present principally to startle or amuse."<sup>5</sup>

To capture a temporal spirit Dos Passos prepared the Newsreel segments by making extensive notes from newspapers for periods ranging from a few days to several weeks. For The 42nd Parallel he used the Chicago Tribune and for the latter two novels the New York World. Using his notes, he composed the Newsreels by carefully cutting and arranging the text. He also added the lyrics, indicated through italics, of songs popular in the particular period being treated. He went to great lengths to insure that the lyrics were recorded accurately. This device situated the newsreels within the entertainment industry and capitalized on the power of music to evoke an age. The newsreels spread out on the page like a concrete poem with considerable amounts of white space surrounding the text. The disjointed selections buffet the reader. The first half Newsreel LXIII (they are all given sequential Roman numerals) gives some sense of their character:

but a few minutes later this false land  
disappeared as quickly and as mysteriously as it  
had come and I found before me the long stretch of  
the silent sea with not a single sign of life in  
sight

*Whipporwills call  
And evening is nigh  
I hurry to . . . my blue heaven*

LINDBERGH IN PERIL AS WAVE TRAPS HIM IN CRUISER'S  
BOW

*Down in the Tennessee mountains  
Away from the sins of the world  
Old Dan Kelley's son there he leaned on his gun  
Athinkin' of Zeb Turney's girl*

ACCLAIMED BY HUGE CROWDS IN THE STREETS

Snaps Pictures From Dizzy Yardarm

*Dan was a hotblooded youngster  
His Dad raised him up sturdy an' right*

ENTHRALLED BY DARING DEED CITY CHEERS FROM THE  
DEPTHS OF ITS HEART

FLYER SPORTS IN AIR<sup>6</sup>

With such amalgamated pastiche, shattered structure and interspersed music, Dos Passos captured the spirit of the early twentieth century newsreel.

Dos Passos' use of the Newsreel segments in the U.S.A. trilogy stemmed from a source of anxiety for many thinkers of his age: how would mass media change the political world? Reporting for the New Republic, Dos Passos attended the 1932 Republican Party national convention in Chicago. He found that the motion picture cameramen, light crews, and radio technicians were creating an event for a mass audience far beyond the walls of the convention hall. The "rumble and chaos" of the newsreel cameramen and others gave him pause:

We do not appreciate yet how enormously the whole technique and machinery of politics has been changed by the mechanics of communication; the architecture of stadiums, klieg lights, radio and the imminent danger of fairly perfected television are as important a factor in future political life as committees, votes, resolutions, theories, vested interests.<sup>7</sup>

Speculating about the role of new media in the "socialization" of the mass mind, Dos Passos found the possibility of centralized control "hair raising."<sup>8</sup> Created in the 1920s, the trilogy contains a striking cultural criticism of new media that is full of foresight. As cultural historian Richard King has noted, Dos Passos was amongst a group of "left wing intellectuals [who] analysed and attacked mass culture in the 1930s. . . . They were concerned with a quite real problem - the politics of culture." Dos Passos saw that newsreels, as cultural goods, produced and distributed for mass consumption, could and did serve political and economic goals.<sup>9</sup>

Dos Passos made a frontal assault on the lack of substantive content in the newsreels of his day. In the words of Donald Pizer, Dos Passos used the newsreels in the trilogy as "sardonic documentation of the vacuousness of popular belief and expression in America."<sup>10</sup> Like actual newsreels, Dos Passos' segments left the reader/viewer wanting more. The style of the Newsreels prevents the reader from making much sense of the stories described. The insufficiency estranges the reader. Motion picture journalism, according to Dos Passos, did little to elucidate the concerns of the day or raise the tenor of public debate.

As a novelist and chronicler, Dos Passos called into question the supposed objectivity of newsreels. His



Newsreels deliver not reality itself but an obvious impression of reality. The style is often brutal, the irony grotesque. For example, he juxtaposed "MACHINE-GUNS MOW DOWN MOBS IN KNOXVILLE" with the lyrics "*America I Love You*."<sup>11</sup> In an ironic turn he followed news of the 1928 hurricane that devastated south Florida with the jargon-filled promotional text of the real estate promoters of the state's land boom: "The climate breeds optimism and it is hard for pessimism to survive the bright sunshine and balmy breezes that blow from the Gulf and the Atlantic." Violence is reported with an objectivity so inhumane, that the disinterestedness of the account becomes suspect, such as when the death of soldiers is reported as a statistical tabulation, not a tragedy. As a technology, newsreels suffered from a spiritual erosion, leaving the mass audience with a dehumanized form of communication.

In a 1931 article, Dos Passos expressed anxiety about the voice of individual chroniclers being drowned out by centralization and the "profusion of wealth" in the media industry. He wrote: "Newspapers, advertising offices, moving picture studios, political propaganda agencies, news magazines produce the collective type of writing where individual work is indistinguishable in the traditional synthesis." The tenor of the Newsreels reflects the same concern. Throughout U.S.A. press barons and publicity agents

thwart the honest and well-meaning attempts of lone journalists.<sup>12</sup>

The Newsreels also offer a sharp critique of public rhetoric in early twentieth-century America. Impersonal verb constructions are used throughout, i.e., "the opinion prevails" and "it is declared." These passive constructions emphasize the hidden production of newsreels. The public dialogue presented is one of cliché and formula. The world is one of strangers, devoid of intimacy, even though individuals were sometimes thrust onto the silver screen. As Dos Passos scholar Charles Marz has suggested, "In a world in which private voices give way to public noise, all private experience soon becomes public knowledge." The newsreels' camera, on the scene of an individual crime, or a tragedy affecting many, conflates the public and the private. As Dos Passos gathered information for the Newsreels, he portrayed an increasingly fractured and chaotic national life.<sup>13</sup>

Like others in his day, Dos Passos knew newsreels were part of the entertainment industry. He used the Newsreels to depict, in his words, "the common mind." He later wrote that he hoped to correct "the idiotic schism between Highbrow and Lowbrow." Dos Passos trusted the American audience to make sense of motion picture journalism, to take away from the experience of seeing a newsreel their own meaning. By making obvious the medium's faults, he engaged the reader in an exercise of figuring out the truth. Clearly, the Newsreels

indicate his disdain for the centralization of discourse in American capitalism. In Camera Eye 41 in The Big Money he observed an anarchist picnic in Paris, France. One of the picnickers declares: "But godamnit they've got all the machineguns in the world all the printing presses linotypes tickerribbon. . . . and we you and I? barehands a few songs not very good songs."<sup>14</sup> There is at least a glimmer of hope for Dos Passos in the culture that viewers and citizens make for themselves in response to major media.

At the end of the thirties, actor Orson Welles and newspaperman Herman Mankiewicz began the script of what many hold to be the greatest American movie of the sound era, Citizen Kane. Though released in 1941, this motion picture is a product of the 1930s and bears the stamp and stylistic marks of Depression America. Widely acknowledged as a thinly veiled fictional account of the life of media tycoon William Randolph Hearst, the motion picture uses newsreels for structure and content. Citizen Kane offers a unique view into the world of motion picture journalism and how different Americans understood its traditions and directions. A carefully produced parody of a newsreel practically begins the story; the only word spoken before the unmistakable newsreel narrator's voice begins is Charles Foster Kane's (the fictionalized Hearst) last word: "Rosebud." After the newsreel is shown the action cuts to a screening room, where motion picture journalists are gathered with their editor.

The editor sends one of them, Thompson, out to learn more about Kane. As Editor Rawlston explains: "You see, Thompson, it isn't enough to show what a man did--you've got to tell us who he was."<sup>15</sup> At the end of the scene the shooting script reads: "Now begins the story proper - the search by Thompson for the facts about Kane." The movie, then, is based on a newsreel man on assignment to uncover the truth after the death of an American media tycoon.

Though he co-wrote the script for Citizen Kane with Mankiewicz, the more famous Welles (he starred and directed in the film, which was produced outside of usual studio control) likely came up with the idea of the newsreel. It is really classic Welles, similar, in fact, to his famous radio-bulletin style reportage of H. G. Wells' Martian landing story. The footage referred to as "News on the March" also reflects Welles time spent with Henry Luce's "March of Time" radio program before it went onto the silver screen. It is also the sort of technique Welles would have responded to, the kind being tried out by writers for the Federal Theatre Project, a public works program for which Welles had written and directed. He staged, for example, a social documentary series called "The Living Newspaper." The device had been used before in 1939's Confessions of a Nazi Spy to set the time, provide content, and let the audience know this was a story as fresh as today's news.

Welles brought special touches to his spoof of newsreels. The narration, sounding ominous, is even more fanciful than that of most news magazines of the day. "News on the March" has a smug tone that some audience members found memorable. Film critic Pauline Kael remembered seeing newsreels in the late 1930s when she was a student at the University of Berkeley in California. She wrote, "There was always laughter in the theaters when 'The March of Time' came on, with its racy neo-conservatism and its ritual pomposity - with that impersonal tone, as if God above were narrating."<sup>16</sup> Many contemporaries found newsreels a subject ripe for satire. Writing for the industry organ Motion Picture Herald early in the decade, Terry Ramsaye explained:

[Newsreels] were considerably more important to the more intelligent and influential fraction of the audience than the buyers of film were aware. With the coming of sound and talk an opportunity presented itself to reestablish newsreels on a new basis in the industry and it placed them in an enhanced position with the public. Nothing of the kind happened.

The zest has gone out of the newsreel. . . because the fate of the product is being decided not by performances in the field of adventure and on the screen, but around the tables in sales conferences and trade-offs of playing time. <sup>17</sup>

In this climate, Welles and Mankiewicz carefully crafted a parody on the current state of newsreels.

Welles' editor for the RKO project, Robert Wise, added immensely to the overdone, gritty reality of the look of the "News on the March" sequence. Welles gave him direction as to the look he wanted and Wise made it concrete. Wise gained

the cooperation of RKO Studio's own newsreel production unit. He carefully meshed 127 pieces of film to give the choppy feel of a newsreel. Because it was to be a retrospective spanning several decades he wanted some of the earlier pieces to appear older. He and his assistant, Mark Robson, developed unique techniques to distress the film, dragging it across a concrete floor to damage the negative, for example. He later remembered: "Mark and I would be in our cutting room, running pieces of film through cheesecloth filled with sand to age it for the newsreel. People who didn't know what was going on would see us at work and say 'these guys are crazy.'" He skillfully evoked the character of newsreels. It was perhaps too realistic for some. When Citizen Kane was exhibited in Italy following World War II, Welles recalled that some patrons jeered because they thought the newsreel's character resulted from poor photography.<sup>18</sup> Running just over eight minutes in length, the "News on the March" proves an astonishing simulacrum of 1930s newsreels.

Mankiewicz added another convincing touch to the production: he scripted the narrator's words in what he regarded as "Time-ese" — the overwrought style used by new journalists for Time magazine and throughout Henry Luce's empire, including his March of Time motion picture magazine. In 1936 Wolcott Gibbs, drama critic for The New Yorker, published a notable profile of Luce entitled "Time - Fortune - Life - Luce." The entire sketch was composed in an

hyperbolic version of the Time idiom. Gibbs wrote, for example, "Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind" and "Where it all ends, knows God!" Mankiewicz was familiar with the story and used the style in the "News on the March" segment. For the narrator, he wrote: "For forty years appeared in Kane newsprint no public issue on which Kane papers took no stand. No public man whom Kane himself did not support or denounce - often support, then denounce."<sup>19</sup>

Why did Citizen Kane take great inspiration from the life of media tycoon William Randolph Hearst? John Houseman, who helped produce the film, explained Mankiewicz's fascination with the scandal monger:

as a former newspaper man and an avid reader of history Mank had long been fascinated by the American phenomenon of William Randolph Hearst. Unlike his friends on the left, to whom he was now an arch enemy, fascist isolationist and a red baiter, Mankiewicz remembered the years when Hearst had been regarded as the working man's friend and a political progressive. He had observed him later as a member of the film colony - grandiose, aging and vulnerable to the immensity of his reconstructed palace at San Simeon.<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes he drew material almost verbatim from Hearst's life. Prior to the beginning of the Spanish American War, Hearst, in an infamous episode, sent journalist Richard Harding Davis and artist Frederic Remington to Havana to write about Spanish atrocities on the island. Growing restless there, Remington sent a telegram: "Everything Quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war." Hearst replied: "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish

the war." In the movie a reporter named Wheeler wires a similar message to Kane who replies: "You provide the prose poem, I'll provide the war."<sup>21</sup> To audiences in 1941 the many connections between Hearst and Kane would have been even more obvious than they are today.

In a form of poetic justice, Citizen Kane treats Hearst through the lens of the new journalism of Henry Luce. The "News on the March" segment bridges the gap between the Hearst school of reporting and Luce's new journalistic style. Hearst shook up the practice of an old style, upper-class journalism, injecting in its place a brassy penny-dreadful style designed to attract readers. He added puzzles, sheet music and contests to build circulation. His papers filed phony lawsuits to attract attention. He hired writers from the muckraking school. He championed Americanism and personified an age in which a rich young man could inherit the economic resources to make public opinion his personal plaything. This is subtly countered with the new style of journalism brought to the fore by Henry Luce. Because Welles drew on the peculiar style of Time, viewers clearly understood this as a new style, full of self-importance but created by replaceable bureaucrats instead of writers with independence of thought.

As one might expect, Hearst despised the film as much as Luce loved it. Indeed, Hearst tried valiantly to stop the release of the movie. While on the east coast [sic] to screen the film for the board of directors of RKO, Welles also showed it to Henry Luce and some of his editors. Luce



thoroughly enjoyed the film and appreciated the "News on the March" parody of his own production. He unleashed his machinery to help promote the film. His Life magazine featured it as a "Movie of the Week." Time called it "the most sensational product of the US movie industry."<sup>22</sup>

Even the film's cinematography which Welles inventively described as "deep focus," seemed to parallel the photographic style of Luce's print media with its glossy feel and resolution.

Both U.S.A and Citizen Kane displayed and relied on Americans' interest in and concerns about motion picture journalism. Both commented on William Randolph Hearst, displaying a shared anxiety about who owned and controlled the mass media. Both pointed out the newsreels' phenomenal ability to capture time, to record the "noise of history." The two also pointed to the shortcomings of newsreels: to their existence as part of an entertainment industry anxious not to offend customers, censors or exhibitors; to their sometimes silly "human interest" stories and time constraints; to their self-important tone so easily mocked in Citizen Kane; and to their failure to capitalize substantially on the introduction of sound to movies. The two intrinsically American works, though, show that newsreels informed the thought of the time and provided many with their main audio-visual source of news.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The New Yorker Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Album (New York: Harper & Brother's, 1950), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> John Dos Passos, U.S.A. (New York: Random House, 1930).

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature (Garden City, New York, 1956), p. 276.

<sup>4</sup> Townsend Luddington, John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1980), p. 257, and Charles Marz, "Dos Passos's Newsreels: The Noise of History", Studies in the Novel, 11 (Summer 1979), 194.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Pizer, Dos Passos' "U.S.A.": A Critical Study (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), pp. 81-3. For a discussion of montage in Dos Passos' work see Gretchen Foster, "Dos Passos Use of Film Technique in Manhattan Transfer and The 42nd Parallel," Literature Film Quarterly, 14 (1986), 186-94.

<sup>6</sup> Dos Passos, The Big Money, p. 426. The song in this case is "Zeb Turney's Girl," an old Tennessee murder ballad.

<sup>7</sup> Dos Passos, "Washington and Chicago II: Spotlights and Microphones," New Republic, 71 (June 29, 1932), 179.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 179. See also David Seed, "Media and Newsreels in Dos Passos' U.S.A.," The Journal of Narrative Technique, 13 (Fall 1984), 182-192.

<sup>9</sup> Richard H. King, "Modernism and Mass Culture: The Origins of the Debate," in The Thirties: Politics and Culture in a Time of Broken Dreams, ed. Heinz Ickstadt and Rob Krues (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1987), pp 120-42.

- <sup>10</sup> Pizer, Dos Passos' "U.S.A.", p. 80.
- <sup>11</sup> Nineteen Nineteen, p. 462.
- <sup>12</sup> Quoted in Seed, "Media," 189.
- <sup>13</sup> Marz, "Noise of History," 194-96.
- <sup>14</sup> See John Trombold, "Popular Songs as Revolutionary Culture in John Dos Passos' "U.S.A." and other Early Works," Journal of Modern Literature, 19 (April 1995), 289-316.
- <sup>15</sup> Pauline Kael et. al., The Citizen Kane Book (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 123, and Laura Mulven, Citizen Kane (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1992), pp. 3-6.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 56.
- <sup>17</sup> Terry Ramsey, Motion Picture Herald, November 14, 1931, 23.
- <sup>18</sup> Harlan Lebo, Citizen Kane (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 122.
- <sup>19</sup> Kael, Kane Book, pp. 56, 102-103.
- <sup>20</sup> John Houseman, Unfinished Business (London: Chett and Wirdus, 1986), p. 223.
- <sup>21</sup> Kael, Kane Book, pp. 63-64.
- <sup>22</sup> Quoted in Lebo, Citizen Kane, p. 151.

## CONCLUSION

Newsreels changed the world and how Americans perceived it. Writing in 1937 media critic Thomas Sugrue declared, "The newsreels have done more to acquaint Americans with the world in which they live than all of the other beneficent agencies of modern civilization combined."<sup>1</sup> In 1997, for the first time, the Library of Congress placed specific newsreel footage on its National Film Registry, a project begun in 1989 to ensure the preservation of significant American films. Two listings of raw newsreel footage joined the list, both from 1937: "Hindenberg Disaster Newsreel Footage" and "Republican Steel Strike Riots Newsreel Footage." Six decades after these infamous events, the film archivists have declared them an indelible part of our story. These memorable episodes highlighted the ability of motion picture journalism to capture a moment.

Sugrue, along with millions of Americans was convinced of the importance of newsreels. He further explained the acceptance of "the motion picture camera as an eliminator of space, as a means of teleportation, whereby there is catapulted to any designated place any part or portion of the earth and the events transpiring thereon." The generation of Americans that grew up with automobiles, radios, and airplanes did not consider it remarkable "that it can see

with its own eyes, while sitting in its neighborhood theater, events that transpired in the far places of the world only a few days before."<sup>2</sup> That audiences accepted this incredible technology so readily made it that much easier for the next generation to accept instant television news, not within the public arena of the theater, but inside their living rooms.

Television news had little to do of the uneasy precedent setting work of newsreel journalism.<sup>3</sup> Newsreels set the cultural code through which events would be interpreted and presented with moving pictures. The most important trait the two forms of journalism share fundamentally alters their perspectives: they owe their existence to entertainment industries, to media used primarily to amuse. This affected what Americans saw and continue to see.

Both technologies required large amounts of capital, and the owners were eager not to upset viewers--to provide dramatic events, yes, but not to inflame or incite viewers. The producers also felt pressure from theater owners in the case of newsreels and from advertisers in the case of network news. In the 1930s getting a news story meant rushing to shoot an event on film, getting that film processed and edited into a bi-weekly reel, and distributing that around the country. In the 1990s a scoop relies on a worldwide network of camera operators and satellites with their near-instantaneous results. The thirst of producers to get a

story first remains unchanged, as does the desire of viewers to be as up to date as possible on events of perceived importance.

Like television news, newsreels easily mixed the political and human interest stories, presenting momentous undertakings alongside fashion pieces. Both also possess a powerful evocation of their age which makes their footage, whether film or video, of value to future historians.

As cultural critics turned their attention to newsreels in the 1930s, so too, have later critics fired volleys at the television medium. One need not look far to find parallels to Dos Passos's masterly use of newsreels in U.S.A. and Orson Welles critique of motion picture journalism in Citizen Kane. Network (1976), a film directed by Sidney Lumet, and Broadcast News (1987), written and directed by James Brooks, serve as two excellent and critical popular engagements of television news.

Despite these similarities, several crucial differences between the media emphasize their unique forms. First, newsreels were seen in theaters alongside friends and neighbors; television news is seen within the home alone or with a small cadre of family and friends. Newsreel viewing brought people together while television news isolates them. Second, newsreels, through block booking, were sold as a package of entertainment to exhibitors and had little

particular drawing power or loyal following.

Television news on the other hand usually goes head to head with competitors at the same time slot, vying for viewership amongst an audience not afraid to change channels. Television news also has advertisers to answer to and has to intersperse its stories with commercial spots. Another difference revolves around the ubiquitous news anchors and reporters shown on the personality-driven television screen. This simply was not done on newsreels. The narration was as invisible as it was self-important and, while on location, cameramen, not assignment reporters, called the shots. Broadcast from satellites and transmitters and meant to fit within 30-minute time slots, network television news is also impossible to edit locally in the easy way that theater owners of the 1930s could cut out offending portions or even create a unique newsreel out of two different companies' offerings. Both forms, however, suffer from a self-censoring designed not to offend the viewing public and ownership. The marketplace proves a more powerful censor than a government board, though later television journalists are guided more strongly by a sense of free speech than were earlier newsreel makers.

Newsreels of the 1930s matter because they informed a generation about their world. The audience became accustomed to being visually transported to far-flung locales, to

learning with both sound and moving image. This new institution paved the way for television broadcast news and elicited a response from critics and artists alike. A handful of production companies distributed bi-weekly newsreels seen by millions of movie-going Americans throughout the 1930s offering the viewers a window onto their changing world.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Sugrue, "The Newsreels," Scribner's 51 (April 1937), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> For a history of television news see Robert J. Donovan, Unsilent Revolution: Television News and American Public Life, 1948-1991 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, News that Matters: Television and American Opinion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).



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## VITA

Dennis Marklin Gephardt

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, March 30, 1966.

Graduated from Northeast Senior High School in North Little Rock, Arkansas, May 1984, and with a B.A. from New College of the University of South Florida in Sarasota in May 1989 with History as Area of Concentration. In September 1989, the author entered the joint History and Museum Management program offered by the College of William and Mary and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.