

Mass-Observation File Report 16

FAKING OF NEWSREELS

LE 7.1.40

The impression created by any film upon an audience is the result both of the actual photographs and of the sound and commentary. Both of these elements can be made misleading. In the question of newsreels, where a great deal of the sound is added from material in their libraries a completely false interpretation of the evidence can be conveyed. A picture of a burning building, for instance, may be accompanied by the sound of bombs exploding and by the commentator saying 'This is but one of many buildings which have suffered'. A further false impression may be gained if the building is photographed from many different angles with the result that it seems on first sight as if the shots are all of different buildings. The audience cannot concentrate at the same time on both commentary and pictures and the tendency is to merge the two together, believing the evidence of the eyes and therefore of the ears.

In this direction nothing can be proved as the details of how a newsreel is made are the closed secret of the newsreel companies. There are examples, however. The Gaumont British news (18.1.40, seen LE, Gaumont, Streatham) contained a shot of Indian troops in France and prefaced it with the words 'India stands with Britain to a man'. The Pathe Gazette (21.12.39, seen LE, Regal, Streatham) contained shots of a destroyer in action; obviously here there could have been no sound equipment and all the explosions and so on had been added later. The newsreel men in Finland naturally wish to travel light and carry no sound equipment (evidence: Ralph Bond) and so all the sound of these shots is superimposed. Some houses in Finland have been photographed from several angles to give the impression of several houses (evidence: Sidney Cole). Commentary gave the impression that a whole train load of Swedish volunteers was leaving for Finland; but an observer noticed women and children also in train and volunteers only in one part of it (Sidney Cole). One sequence of a burning Finnish village was syndicated to the newsreels and Pathe said that it had been fired by a retreating Red Army and Paramount that it had been set alight by the retreating Finnish army (evidence: Christopher Brunel).

In some cases the sequences show signs of being 'prepared'. A cameraman told an observer (LE, before special study) that a regiment of soldiers had been marched backwards and forwards over a hill for a whole morning for the benefit of a newsreel; on another occasion a tank was shot being loaded on to a ship for France, but as soon as the cameras had stopped it was taken off again as the ship was never able to carry such cargo. The evacuation of Dulwich College was taken; one boy walked in and out of a house many times before the newsreels were satisfied that the shots were sufficiently 'natural' (evidence: LE from boy at the school). An appeal by Madame Gripenburg contained the story of a woman in a fur coat coming to the door of the Embassy and handing in some money (Sidney Cole). The newsreels showed this scene meaning either that they knew before that the woman was coming or that they reconstructed it afterwards. Many of the shots of the Finns sniping released to all reels have been taken from a position in front of the Finns so that the cameraman must have been standing with his back to the enemy. G.B. (13.12.39, seen LE, Academy) showed shots of air raid havoc including women sheltering under a wall; some of them, however, were laughing and there were 'feet' walking about on top of the wall quite unconcerned; the shots in Pathe (8.1.40, seen LE, Brixton Pavilion) on the other hand showed the children crying as they went into shelters. In shots of action on the front (Paramount 30.11.40, seen LE,

Astoria, Streatham) a cameraman focused the camera on a spot and a second later a shell burst right in the middle of the section covered. And finally in none of the action shots (except those at sea taken by naval officers) has the camera jolted or been out of focus.

A third method has been to 'reconstruct' events. British Paramount News (20.11.40) cut shots of crashed bombers with violent action pictures prefaced with some remarks such as 'this is what it would have looked like'; at Eros News Theatre, Piccadilly Circus, an observer heard one man say 'of course this isn't real' and at the Paramount, Tottenham Court Road the next day, some laughed at the sequence. The Cameo News (G.B. and Paramount) on 4.12.39 contained a sequence of a submarine being sunk after a depth charge had hit it. A G.B. news early in the war (seen LE privately) contained a shot of the Kiel ships being bombed before THE LION HAS WINGS did the same. G.B. News (1.2.40, seen LE, Gaumont, Streatham) contained description of patrol; only scenery was a tree, barbed wire and snow and the camera accompanied the patrol even when it inspected a blockhouse, presumably in enemy lines. The whole action took place in broad daylight. The commentary gave the impression by inference that this patrol was the actual one on which the first DSO (?) was awarded; it ran something like 'this is a patrol of one officer and three NCOs; Captain — won DSO on patrol'. Obs. knows this deceived at least one person.

It must be re-emphasised that nothing can be proved conclusively unless one of the newsreels makes a big mistake. All of the 'editing' is done by the newsreels in secret, and there can be no proof that sound track was added afterwards, that commentary was intentionally misleading, or that actions were posed or reconstructed.

Those mentioned in report:

Sidney Cole; editor of The Cine Technician.

Ralph Bond; of Realist Films.

Christopher Brunel; son of Adrian Brunel, very interested in the propaganda value of film.

Leonard England; Mass observer doing special films work since early November, including reports on 26 news reels.