

Film texts

War and Propaganda 14/18

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Film Propaganda

At the outbreak of war, the film medium has not even reached the age of twenty. Nevertheless, cinema is already a mass cultural phenomenon and accordingly employed as an innovative propaganda medium. Films of the time are silent, but usually screened with musical accompaniment. Linguistic elements are conveyed by intertitles that often contribute decisively to the cohesiveness of the filmic narrative. Cinema serves as an agent of patriotic experience and a source of information and entertainment in one. From the fictitious feature film to documentary and promotional productions, a wide range of film genres compete for the interpretational sovereignty of the moving picture and the manipulation of the mass public.

The Battle of the Somme: *The Battle of the Somme* is considered the first feature-length documentary in the history of film. It presents a chronological narrative, from the preparations for battle through the attack itself to the victims. The sequence depicting the assault marks the dramatic climax: it shows, for the first time, purportedly authentic images of an “over-the-top” attack, in the course of which soldiers appear to fall dead to the ground. Even if these images prompt questions about the authenticity of the reporting of the war, owing to the material filmed directly in war zones the film was able to make a trustworthy impression. That was due in large part to the authentic, unflinching pictures of the dead, which were more graphic than anything the public had seen before. | *The Battle of the Somme*, GB 1916, 73 min (Clip 7 min), Kamera: Geoffrey H. Malins, John B. McDowell, Produktion: British War Office, © Imperial War Museums, London

Bei unseren Helden an der Somme: This work, the first to be produced by the Bild- und Filmamt in Berlin, was made in direct response to the British film about the Somme, but comes across as indecisive and fragmentary. In its first section the film attempts to undermine the enemy’s propaganda and arouse sympathies in neutral countries. The second section shows a skirmish in a forest set in a landscape that appears largely unscathed, and the sequences identified as representing trench warfare do not look like authentic pictures of the battle because of the unrealistic camera positions and angles. The soldiers, in newly constructed trenches, are very obviously facing the camera, while the scenes of combat look like staged manoeuvres. The film also avoids depicting dead men: a soldiers’ cemetery at some distance from the front is the only sign of the victims of war. | *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme (With our Heroes at the Somme)*, D 1917, 33 min (Clip 6 min), Produktion: Bild- und Filmamt, © Filмотeca Española, Madrid

Britain’s Effort: The opening scene of *Britain’s Effort* presents a caricatured image of Wilhelm II. With the globe in view the Kaiser sharpens his knife, and the sparks form the digits of the date 1914, symbolizing Germany’s desire for war. This is made clearer still soon afterwards, when Wilhelm II and the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, together forming a double-headed monster, greedily stretch out their claws to grasp Serbia. This demonizing sequence reaches its climax in the portrayal of Wilhelm as a winged chimera that subjugates defenceless Belgium. This atrocity rouses John Bull, the British national personification, from his sleep and leads to Britain’s entry into the war. After this the film adopts the approach of “fact-based propaganda”, clearly setting out the efforts made by the Empire in fighting the war. Using the devices available in animated film, abstract issues are schematically simplified and given rhetorical force. | *Britain’s Effort*, GB 1918, 17 min (Clip 4 min), Regie: Lancelot Speed, Produktion: Lancelot Speed Films, © Imperial War Museums, London

Das Säugetier: This early German animated film mocks British colonial politics with the caricatural metamorphosis of the national figure John Bull into a parasitic polyp. By way of its tentacles, its craving for power extends across the colonies in

Africa, India and Jamaica to the rest of the globe, stoppable only by German military invention. The film's title is a derisive word play on the mutation of Great Britain's personification; right at the beginning it changes from Säugetier (German for mammal; literally: suckling animal) to "Saugetier" (literally: sucking animal). The film, which makes use of the cutout animation technique, is a rare example of aggressive defamation of the enemy in German film propaganda. | *Das Säugetier (The Mammal)*, D 1917, 8 min (Clip 4 min), Animation: Robert L. Leonhard, Text: Hans Brennert, Produktion: Union-Film für Bild- und Filmamt, © Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin

Self-Justification Propaganda: Der magische Gürtel / Wie Frankreich das Elsaß besaß: The film title of *Der Magische Gürtel* (The Magic Belt) refers to Germany's response to the British naval blockade, namely the all-out submarine campaign against commercial vessels in British waters. As a demonstration of military strength, the U 35 submarine is shown destroying a total of ten ships. Dynamic pictures convey maritime combat with great immediacy, while it is chiefly the intertitles that are used to justify Germany's actions in the eyes of other, neutral countries. A different kind of propaganda aimed at self-justification can be seen in *Wie Frankreich das Elsaß befreit* (How France Liberates the Alsace). Criticism of the devastation wrought by the Germans is countered with footage of the collateral damage inflicted by the French military. The type of argumentation used here exhibits strong parallels to present-day propaganda strategies: in this film as well, the shelling of a hospital symbolizes enemy atrocities and thus provokes outrage in the audience. | *Der magische Gürtel (The Magic Belt)*, D 1917, 45 min (Clip 4 min), Regie: Hans Brennert, Produktion: Flora-Film für das Bild- und Filmamt, © Imperial War Museums, London; *Wie Frankreich das Elsaß befreit (How France Liberates the Alsace)*, D 1917, 13 min (Clip 4 min), Produktion: Flora-Film für das Bild- und Filmamt, © Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, Berlin

For the Empire: This British film promoting war bonds argues its case on a broad front. By focusing on the contribution made by soldiers and their families to the war, with its heavy toll of casualties, the film aims to awaken a sense of responsibility in all social classes, while footage of destroyed towns in Belgium and France emphasizes the looming threat. Britain is spared such calamity because of its naval superiority, but that security is achieved at enormous expense. These scenes with their strong emotional appeal are followed by a calculation of different methods of financing weapons; the arms themselves are depicted in a manner very effective for promotional purposes. Turning, lastly, to the actual purchase of the bonds, the film concludes with a direct instruction of the audience. | *For the Empire*, GB 1916, 8 min (Clip 4 min), Produktion: Gaumont für Wellington House / War Propaganda Bureau, © Imperial War Museums, London

Le Noël du poilu: The theme of this French film is the celebration of Christmas between two poles – war and the home front. A key role is played by communication through letters, conveyed by the army postal service, and gift parcels. Moral support is illustrated with reference to "wartime godmothers" (f. marraines de guerre), and proclaimed in terms of a mutually supportive community embracing all levels of society. This sentimental film has a remarkable conclusion for a silent film: in an affirmative scene, the family, happily gathered together, sings the song *Le Petit Quinquin*, which had been popular among French soldiers at the time of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71. The length of the singing scene suggests that the song did not remain within the confines of the film but, in line with the conventions followed by cinemas at the time – which were anything but silent –, was directly aimed at encouraging audience participation. | *Le Noël du poilu (A Soldier's Christmas)*, F 1915, 39 min (Clip 6 min), Regie: Louis Feuillade, Produktion: Gaumont, © Gaumont Pathé, Paris

Shoulder Arms: Charlie Chaplin's satire on the war approaches the subject of warfare in comedic fashion, offering the public a way of dealing with its horrors. For him comedy and tragedy were never far apart, and the film combines the absurdities of militarism with the portrayal of trench warfare. While to begin with it focuses mainly on the everyday hardships experienced by the ordinary soldier, the plot takes on increasingly grotesque traits. For example, the protagonist uses a Limburger cheese as a projectile, or ventures stealthily behind enemy lines disguised as a tree. When he finally succeeds in capturing the Kaiser and bringing the war to an end, film as an entertainment medium triumphs symbolically over reality. | *Shoulder Arms*, USA 1918, 45 min (Clip 6 min), Regie: Charles Chaplin, Produktion: Charles Chaplin Productions, © Roy Export S.A.S., Paris

Sturmzeichen: The film's setting, Upper Alsace, had only become German territory after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870/71. This circumstance plays a major role in the film's threat motif, in which the image of the French enemy is still depicted quite harmlessly in 1914, the year of the film's production. In the dynamic plot, bibulous soldiers occupy an inn but also avail themselves of subtle means of espionage. Taking the courageous innkeeper's daughter as an example, *Sturmzeichen* appeals to the civilian population's sense of responsibility. In the context of mobilization and patriotic euphoria at the beginning of

the war, a reversal of the facts is used to caution Germans against French aggression. | *Sturmzeichen (Sign of the Storm)*, D 1914, 20 min (Clip 7 min), Regie: Willy Zeyn sen., Produktion: Projektions-AG Union, © Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin

Der Heimat Schützengraben: In an effort to convince his brother-in-law Kramer of the necessity of buying war bonds, Janssen tells an exemplary tale featuring a graphically hostile image of the Russian enemy. Like the Hun in British propaganda, the Cossack is portrayed as a threat, one who does not shrink from murdering innocent women and children. The only protection is German military strength, which all generations – from the little old lady to small children – must help to finance. This promotional film in the guise of entertainment enunciates its appeal clearly in the last section, where it refers to contemporary public announcements about bonds and thus makes a connection between the film's message and the real life experiences of the audience. | *Der Heimat Schützengraben (Our Homeland's Trench)*, D 1916, 8 min (Clip 6 min), Produktion: Imperator-Film-Co. für Reichsbank Berlin, © Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin

Feind hört mit: By opening with a documentary sequence of Hindenburg at the map table, this fictional film underlines the relevance of its didactic message for real life. The action that then unfolds gives a detailed portrayal of the chain of command and the enemy's eavesdropping operations in order to make soldiers more aware of the need to keep information confidential. The story of the careless wireless operator Krause, with its spectacular scenes of fighting, shows what devastating consequences espionage can have. The film narrates this very much in the manner of present-day "edutainment", personalizing the subject-matter and presenting it in a visually attractive form – the original material in black and white was tinted, using the process then current, by soaking it in baths of dye. The didactic message is conveyed using the methods of an entertainment film, which suggests that it was to be shown, amongst other places, in some of the nine hundred cinemas set up for soldiers behind the front. | *Feind hört mit (The Enemy is Listening)*, D 1918, 18 min (Clip 8 min), Produktion: Bild- und Filmamt, © Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin

The Leopard's Spots: "A leopard cannot change its spots": In its title the film refers to the notion that things cannot change their innate nature. The film proves that wartime propaganda persists beyond the end of the armed conflict. Established negative concepts of the enemy, like that of the child-murdering, drunken barbarian, are activated and presented as immutable natural laws in order to warn the public against buying German products. A dissolve shows the transformation of soldiers into civilians: in this way the creative techniques of the film medium are used to emphasize the unchanging, evil nature of the adversary. | *The Leopard's Spots*, GB 1918, 3 min, Regie: Cecil M. Hepworth, Produktion: Hepworth Manufacturing Company für Ministry of Information, © British Film Institute, London

Newsreels: The newsreel was a vehicle for information in wide use around the world, a compilation shown in cinemas before the main feature film. As with present-day news programmes, the intention was to inform the members of the public about current events and give them a means of sharing in world affairs – though this aim was hampered by technical limitations and political censorship. While in 1914 the newsreels were enthusiastically received as authentic reports on the war, their reception progressively changed. The pictures, advertised as being genuine and up to date, could not ultimately fulfil their promise and often in fact showed stereotyped scenes staged behind the lines, shot in the context of exercises and only described in the intertitles as actual combat operations. Besides the lack of credibility, there was no coherence between the (often very uneventful) segments, as the topics covered in the newsreels were too fragmentary and too temporally disparate. | *Messter Woche 12*, D 1915, 7 min (Clip 3 min), Produktion: Messter Film GmbH, © Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, Berlin; *Semana Messter 47 (Messter Woche 47)*, D 1915, 8 min (Clip 4 min), Produktion: Messter Film GmbH, © Imperial War Museums, London; *Annales de la Guerre 11*, F 1917, 11 min (Clip 6 min), Produktion: Section Cinématographique de l'Armée Française, © Imperial War Museums, London

Commercials: Julius Pinschewer was an early producer of German commercials and in this capacity took an active part in several campaigns for war bonds. In *Jung-Siegfried (Young Siegfried)*, a heroic line of ancestors with a mythical champion is brought into play for this purpose. The war bond is equated with the hero's sword, which has the power to slay the dragon. A similar approach is adopted in an example of propaganda with well-known people that introduces General Hindenburg, and in which a text bearing his signature gives a clear message: "The German people will defeat its enemies not only with the sword but also with money. The war bonds will demonstrate this." Animation and factual reasoning about the bonds as a capital investment complement the promotional message. The same message is also clearly conveyed in *Worauf wir vertrauen (What We Trust In)*, using the stop trick technique. | *Jung-Siegfried (Young Siegfried)*; *Ein Wort Hindenburgs*

über die Kriegsanleihe (A Word from Hindenburg on War Bonds); Worauf wir vertrauen (What We Trust In), D 1917/18, jeweils 2 min, Regie: Julius Pinschewer, Produktion: Werbefilm GmbH für Reichsbank Berlin, © AG Loiperdinger + Pinschewer

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Museum opening times: Tues –Sun 10a.m. – 6 p.m., Thurs 10 a.m. – 9 p.m.

Entrance: 10 € / 7 €, Thurs after 5 p.m. 7 €, up to age 17 free
