War and the apocalypse it brings are at the heart of a decisive new reevaluation of documentary reporting. The reason is that, during a war, facts have an exceptional amplitude and importance. They constitute a colossal mise en scène compared with which that of Caesar and Cleopatra (Gabriel Pascal, J. Arthur Rank; GB, 1945) or Intolerance (D. W. Griffith, Wark; US, 1916) looks as though it were the set for a small show touring the provinces. But these facts also constitute a real mise en scène, which is used only once. The drama also takes place “for real,” for the protagonists have agreed to die at the same time as they are shot by the camera, like enslaved gladiators in the circus arena. Thanks to film, the world is cleverly saving money on the cost of its wars, since the latter are used for two purposes, history and cinema, thus reminding us of those less-than-conscientious producers who shoot a second film on the overpriced set of the first one. In this case, however, the world is right. War, with its harvest of dead bodies, its immense destruction, its countless migrations, its concentration camps, and its atomic bombs, leaves far behind the creative art that aims at reconstituting it.

The craze for war reports seems to me to derive from a series of psychological and perhaps also moral exigencies. Nothing suits us better than the unique event, shot on the spot, at the very moment of its creation. Such a theater of operations, when compared with the other one, has the invaluable dramatic superiority of inventing the play as it spontaneously unfolds. It is a kind of commedia dell’arte in which the scenario itself is always being reworked. As far as the technical means are concerned, there is no need to insist on their unerring efficiency. I would simply like to underline the fact that these means reach a cosmic scale and that they need fear only earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tidal waves, and the Apocalypse itself. I say this without irony, because I think that the number one broadcast in the series News from Heaven will certainly be devoted to a lengthy report on the Last Judgment, compared to which the report on the Nuremberg trials will somehow look like the Lumière’s Workers Leaving the Factory (France, 1895). If I were pessimistic, I would add a slightly Freudian psychological factor that I would call the “Nero complex” and define as the pleasure experienced at the sight of urban destruction. If I were optimistic, I would allude to the aforementioned moral factor and say that the cruelty and violence of war have taught us to respect—almost to make a cult of—actual facts, in comparison with which any reconstitution, even made in good faith, seems dubious, indecent, and sacrilegious.

But the war report above all fulfills another need, which explains its extreme popularity. The taste for such documentary news, combined with that for the cinema, reflects nothing if not modern man’s will to be there, his need to observe history-in-the-making, not only because of political evolution, but also because of the evolution as well as irremediable intermingling of the technological means of communication and destruction. The days of total war are fatally matched by those of total history. The governments of the world have understood this very well; this is why they try to show us film reports of all their historical acts, such as the signing of treaties or the meetings of the various superpowers. As history is not at all a ballet that is fixed in advance, it is necessary to plant along the way as many cameras as possible so as to be able to film it in the act (in the historical act, of course). Thus nations at war have made provisions for the cinematic equipment of their armies, just as they have made provisions for the truly military equipment of those armies. The camera operator accompanies the bomber on its mission or the infantrymen during their landing. The armament of the fighter-bomber contains an automatic camera placed between its two machine guns. The cameraman runs as many risks as the soldier, whose death he is supposed to film even at the cost of his own life (but who cares, as long as the footage is saved!).

Most military operations now include a detailed filmic preparation. Who, then, is able to say to what extent strictly military efficiency differs from the cinematically effective spectacle that we expect from it? In a lecture on the art of the documentary, the French film critic and director Roger Leenhardt imagined that, next time, Commander Humphrey Bogart or Sergeant Spencer Tracy, playing the parts we have come to expect of them, would be the protagonists of some grand semi-fictional
...they are the result of the search for people and events, which more and more has become an official institution. To make these films, an enormous selection of newsreels from international archives was necessary, and these archives had to be complete enough to contain an event as intimate in its historical nature as Hitler’s war dance at the Rethondes Crossroads (in northern France). One can conclude from this that Dziga Vertov’s theory of the Cine-Eye is beginning to be confirmed in a sense that even the Soviet theoretician had not foreseen. But the camera, unique as it is among the picture hunters of the world, could not have reached this omnipresence in space and time by itself—an omnipresence that today permits us to catch in our nets an enormous number of documentary images. Naturally, human intervention was necessary.

It has been said how good these films are as much from a strictly cinematic point of view as from a political one. However, it turns out that probably not enough time has been spent on an analysis of the intellectual and psychological mechanism to which they owe their pedagogical efficiency. This mechanism is well worth examining, though, because its main force seems to me to be particularly dangerous for the future of the human spirit and should therefore not be excluded from any careful study of the rape of the masses.

The principle behind this type of documentary essentially consists in giving to the images the logical structure of language, and in giving to language itself the credibility and proof of photographic images. The viewer has the illusion of watching a visual demonstration, whereas this demonstration is in reality only a succession of equivocal facts held together merely by the cement of the words that accompany them. The essential part of the film is not in its projection but in the soundtrack. Shall we say that this is nothing new and that every single elucidation of a visual text, every single pedagogical documentary, does the same? I don’t think so, because, in the case of the pedagogical documentary, preeminence is give either to the pictures or to the language. By contrast, a documentary on trawl fishing or on the building of a bridge shows and explains. There isn’t any intellectual deception in the process; the intrinsic and distinct values of the words and of the pictures are preserved. Here, however, the film rests on the absolute opposite: the subordination of the events pictured on screen. Please, understand me well: I am not posing the problem of content but of form. I am denying neither the rightness of the arguments not that the right people have to try to convince us, but solely the honesty of the method used. These films, which start with a favorable a priori, that of using logic, reason, and the evidence of the facts, in actuality rest on a grave confusion of values, on the manipulation of psychology, credulity, and perception.

We live more and more in a world stripped bare by film, a world that tends to peel off its own image. Hundreds of thousands of screens make us watch, during the news broadcasts, the extraordinary shedding performed each day by tens of thousands of cameras. As soon as it forms, history’s skin peels off again. Before the war a filmed news report used to be called “the eye of the world.” Today this title is hardly pretentious as countless Bell-and-Howell lenses, placed all over the world where important events take place, play on the picturesque, bizarre, or terrible signs of our destiny.

Among the American films released in France right after the Liberation, the only ones that have elicited unanimous approval and inspired a boundless admiration are those in the series Why We Fight. They had the merit not only of introducing a new tone into the art of propaganda, a measured tone that convinced without violence, at once didactic and pleasant; but also, although they consisted only of newsreels, they knew how to capture attention like a detective novel. I think that, for the film historian, Why We Fight has created a new genre: the edited ideological documentary. I don’t mean that such a use of editing is new. The great German or Soviet editors have long since demonstrated the use one could make of it in documentaries, but the Capra films display a new originality: none of the images of which they are composed (except for a few connecting shots) were photographed for these films. The editing thus aims not so much at showing as at making a point. These are abstract, purely logical films that paradoxically use the most historical and the most concrete kind of document: the newsreel. They have established for good, with a perfection that will probably never be surpassed, that the a posteriori editing of film shot for other purposes can achieve the flexibility and precision of language. The best-edited documentaries up to now have been only narratives; those under consideration are speeches.

The films in the series Why We Fight (along with a few other American and Russian documentaries) have been made possible only by the enormous accumulation of documentary footage from the war;
One could closely analyze a scene like the battle before Moscow (the fifth film in the series) for evidence of what I am saying. The comments on the soundtrack clearly explain the facts: the retreat of the Russians, German offensive, Russian resistance, stabilization of the front line around the latest lines of retreat, Russian counteroffensive. It is evident that a battle of this size could not be filmed in toto. One could pull from it only extremely fragmentary shots. The work of the editor has been essentially to choose shots from German newsreels, which supposedly had been taken right outside Moscow and which gave the impression of a victorious German offensive: rapid movement of soldiers, tank attacks, and Russian corpses in the snow. Then, in the Russian counteroffensive, the editor found impressive scenes of soldiers rushing forward, being careful, of course, to position them on screen in the opposite direction from the Nazi infantrymen in the preceding shots. The mind makes of these apparently concrete elements an abstract outline and reconstitutes an ideal battle, since it has the indubitable illusion of seeing this battle as a kind of duel. I have chosen on purpose a sequence in which such a concrete schematization was inevitable and in this case completely justified, since the Germans did indeed lose the battle. But if we extrapolate this device, we understand that we can thus be convinced we are watching events whose outcome and meaning have been completely invented. Shall we say, then, that we should have at the very least a guarantee of the filmmaker’s moral honesty? In any event, this honesty can bear only on the ends, since the very structure of the means renders them illusory.

The shots used in these films are in a way straight historical facts. We spontaneously believe in facts, but modern criticism has sufficiently established that in the end they have only the meaning that the human mind gives to them. Up to the discovery of photography, the “historical fact” was reconstituted from written documents; the mind and human language came into play twice in such reconstitutions: in the reconstruction of the event and in the historical thesis it was adduced to support. With film, we can refer to the facts in flesh and blood, so to speak. Could they bear witness to something else other than themselves? To something else other than the narrative of which they form a part? I think that, far from moving the historical sciences toward more objectivity, the cinema paradoxically gives them the additional power of illusion by its very realism. The invisible commentator, whom the viewer forgets while watching Capra’s marvelously edited films, is tomorrow’s historian of the masses, the ventriloquist of this extraordinary prosopopeia that is being prepared in all the film archives of the world and that wills the men and the events of another time back to life.

Notes

This article was first published in French in Esprit (1946), then reprinted in Vol. I (“Ontologie et language”) of Bazin’s four-volume Qu’est-ce que le cinéma? (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958-1962), pp. 31-36. It is translated into English here for the first time with the permission of Madame Janine Bazin.

1 Editor’s note: Why We Fight series, U.S. War Office, 1942-1945:
1. Prelude to War, dir. Frank Capra.
2. The Nazis Strike, dir. Frank Capra.
3. Divide and Conquer, dir. Frank Capra.
4. The Battle of Britain, dir. Anthony Veiller.
5. The Battle of Russia, dir. Anatole Litvak.
7. The War Comes to America, dir. Anatole Litvak. (All the films had editing by William Hornbeck, music by Dimitri Tiomkin, and commentary by Walter Huston.)

2 Bazin’s note: Even more than that! An H-bomb today is equivalent to a hundred big earthquakes.

3 Editor’s note: This atoll in the Marshall Islands was the site of atomic bomb tests in 1946.

4 Editor’s note: In 1919 Vertov (1986-1954) published the Kino-Revolution manifesto, the first of several position papers in which he attacked the “impotence” and “backwardness” of fiction films and called for a new style of film reportage taken from real life. He expanded on these ideas in a 1922 magazine article, in which he introduced his theory of Kino-Glaz, or Kino-Oki (Cine-Eye or Kino-Eye). He spoke of the camera as an eye, more perfect than the human eye in its ability to move in time and space and perceive and record impressions: “I am eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, am showing you a world the likes of which only I can see. I free myself from today and forever from human immobility . . . I am an apparatus, maneuvering in the chaos of movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combination . . . My road is towards the creation of a fresh perspective of the world. Thus I decipher in a new way the world unknown to you.”

5 Bazin’s note: But then again, with a very British sort of humor John Grierson has just revealed (in the newspapers of October 13, 1958) that he was the creator of Hitler’s war dance at the Rethondes Crossroads. Hitler was simply lifting his leg. By redoubling the shot, as in the anti-Nazi burlesque titled The Lambeth Walk (Albert de Courville, CAPAD/Pinebrook; GB, 1939), the famous English documentarian made Hitler dance his now famous Satanic jig, which has thus become “historical.” (Editor’s note: Bazin added this note to his 1946 article when he collected it in the first volume of his Qu’est-ce que le cinéma [1958].)

Film critic, founder of the influential journal Cahiers du cinéma, and spiritual father of the French New Wave as well as the creator of the auteur theory, André Bazin (1918-1958) almost singlehandedly established the study of movies as an accepted intellectual pursuit. Although his career was brief, his impact on film is widely considered to be greater than that of any single director, actor, or producer.

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