

Introduction

The aim of the contribution „From Russian Film Pioneers of the 1920s to German Post-war Newsreels and Television“, is to introduce the cinema newsreels as a unique example of media archaeology and media evolution. I argue that the elements of the communication strategy of post-war newsreels can be traced from the Russian film pioneers, directors of nature film of the 1930s and newsreel cinematographers in war times. In the 1950s, the strategies of the post-war newsreels were also transferred to film journalism of television. In my contribution, examples of the ‘Bergfilm’ genre (mountain film) and Leni Riefenstahl’s films, of *Ufa-Tonwoche* (Ufa sound newsreel) from 1939 as well as *Ufa-Wochenschau* from 1961¹ will support the claim of the aesthetic evolution.

The History of Newsreels

The history of the newsreel is directly connected to the history of film and cinema. It begins at the end of 19th century with short films on incidents, glued together to a programme, presented in vaudeville theatres and in the first purpose-built cinemas from 1910. The German newsreel market was dominated by French newsreels, for example the *Pathé Journal*, which was founded in 1906. The First World War encouraged the newsreel market, as each nation aimed to present its achievements and military successes. After the First World War, the newsreels contained mixed topics, e.g. cityscapes, sport, fashion, current affairs and royals. The newsreel reports followed a documentary mode, but techniques and staged scenes were not uncommon.

As newsreels also belonged to the new medium ‘film’, and in order to explain some principles of filmmaking in the 1920s it has to be referred to the Russian formalists. From 1916 to 1930 a literary-critical movement spread from St. Petersburg in Russia, which became the impetus for narratology and was transferred to film. The important principles of formalism included alienation (Ostranenie, Verfremdung), the dichotomy of Syuzhet (Sujet) and Fabula,² audience orientation and the transfer of meaning through montage. Russian montage strategies and techniques spread quickly to filmmakers in Europe.³ Especially Russian filmmakers, however, associated socially critical and revolutionary ideas with film and encouraged viewers to reflect. For example, Dziga Vertov’s film *Der Mann mit der Kamera* (*The Man with the Movie Camera*) (1927) shows his principles of film making: movement through images, cross-fades (Überblendungen), pictures of machines combined with images of social contrasts. It was the time of so called “Querschnittsfilme” (cross-sectional films) and symphonic concepts, for example Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin – Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (*Berlin-Symphony of the Metropolis*) (1927) which uses similar cinematic elements and montage.

At the end of the 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s, another important filmic movement existed in Germany: The fictional genre of ‘Bergfilm’ was established – it was a mixture of documentary and nature and sports films. In those films, not only the shots (under extreme conditions at the film set), perspectives, but also the editing with close-ups and panorama shots were impressive. The geologist, photographer, director and author Dr. Arnold Fanck was founder of the Berg- und Sport-Film

¹ *The blue Light* (*Das blaue Licht*, 1932, directed by Leni Riefenstahl), *Ufa-Tonwoche* (UTW) No. 451 /1939 about Hitler’s 50th anniversary and *Ufa-Wochenschau* No. 261 /1961 among others with a report on the visit of US Vice President Johnson after the erection of the Berlin Wall.

² Viktor Sklovskij introduced the dichotomy of “fabula” and “syuzhet”, which became significant for narratology. He called the plot in its chronological sequence fabula and the syuzhet the alienating procedures applied to the fabula.

³ Russian filmmakers and filmmakers of Weimar Expressionism (e.g. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau) were proven to be in professional exchange.

GmbH, where cinematographers were trained, and which was therefore called *Freiburger Schule* (Freiburg School). Most of them were talented sportsmen and cinematographers at the same time. In the early 1920s, Leni Riefenstahl was a dancer and became an actress at the end of the decade. She received female main roles in mountain films, such as in *Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü* (*The white Hell of Piz Palü*) (1929). The directors of the film, Georg Wilhelm Pabst and Arnold Fanck, became her mentors.

‘Filmischer Film’ (Cinematic Film)

For her debut as a director of the mountain and fairy tale film *Das blaue Licht* (1932) (*The blue light* from 1932), Leni Riefenstahl worked with the cinematographers who she had been acquainted with through her staging in Fanck’s Bergfilms – for example Hans Schneeberger, Walter Riml and Heinz von Jaworsky. Later on, she also supported talents, such as Walter Frentz,⁴ who admired her work on *Das blaue Licht*. Walter Frentz was a sportsman, who practiced kayaking and white-water paddling, and directed sports films and nature films. From 1933 he worked for Riefenstahl and her Parteitag-filme (Party conference films) of NSDAP⁵ and *Olympia* in 1936⁶. From 1939 he was at Hitler’s Führer headquarters and filmed until 1945 for *Die Deutsche Wochenschau* as a member of the propaganda company. He mentioned the work of Sergej Eisenstein and the Russian film of the 1920s as well as cultural films by Willy Zielke as his role models (Zielke’s work, for example, was particularly characterised by crossfades).⁷

Walter Frentz propagated the term and concept of the “Filmischer Film” (Cinematic Film),⁸ which contained:

- Priority of the image, named as “Primat des Bildes”, what meant that the music and especially the text were subordinate to the images.
- Creating movement either through the movement of objects in the pictures or through the moving camera
- Creating dynamic scenes by using intercuts (e.g. shots from the audience for shot-counter-shot-dialogues)
- Considering and designing film as a coherent whole
- Application of unusual and subjective perspectives (depending on context and use, e.g. sports)

One of his most important films in which he followed his principles was *Hände am Werk – ein Lied von deutscher Arbeit* from 1935 (*Hands at Work - A Song of German Work*). He was convinced that film can be compared with an orchestral score. He agreed with Leni Riefenstahl on the principle of “Primat des Bildes” and thus always sought out unusual perspectives and the special shot.⁹

⁴ Walter Frentz was introduced to Leni Riefenstahl by Albert Speer, a sports mate of his.

⁵ *Der Sieg des Glaubens* (1933), *Triumph des Willens* (1935), *Tag der Freiheit! - unsere Wehrmacht* (1935).

⁶ *Olympia* film in two parts: *Fest der Völker* and *Fest der Schönheit* (1938).

⁷ Struch, M. (2007): Walter Frentz – der Kameramann des Führers. In: Hiller von Gaertringen, G. (Hrsg.): *Das Auge des Dritten Reiches. Walter Frentz – Hitlers Kameramann und Fotograf*. Augsburg: Weltbild, pp. 15-42, here p. 36.

⁸ Stamm, K. (2007): *Avantgarde und Propaganda. Der Film „Hände am Werk – Ein Lied von deutscher Arbeit“ (1935)*. In: Hiller von Gaertringen, G. (Hrsg.): *Das Auge des Dritten Reiches. Walter Frentz – Hitlers Kameramann und Fotograf*. Augsburg: Weltbild, S. 51-61, here p. 54.

⁹ Struch 2007, p. 36.

'Heroischer Reportagefilm' (Heroic Reportage Film)

The style of Leni Riefenstahl's documentary films about the party conferences of the NSDAP and about the Olympic games in 1936 were described as "Heroischer Reportagefilm" ("heroic reportage film").¹⁰ Crucial to her films' success was the shooting quality of the cameramen she was able to hire and her editing style of making each scene interesting. The images expressed movement that was enhanced by the pace of the editing. The heroic music by well-known composers, e.g. Herbert Windt, fits perfectly with the rhythm of the images. The result was not just a factual report, but a subjective and suggestive reportage. The order, in which the events took place in reality was irrelevant – instead, the heroic effect was important. The effect was created by changing perspectives and shot sizes, as well as shot-counter-shot techniques. This generates a dialogue between the protagonists, for example Hitler and the people or Hitler and the athletes at the Olympia stadium. In *Triumph des Willens* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938) (two parts), a spoken commentary was almost unnecessary, because the images spoke for themselves.

Apparently, 'Filmischer Film' (cinematic film) and 'Heroischer Reportagefilm' (heroic reportage film) followed more or less the same principles.

The 'Artistic' Newsreel

In the 1920s, four newsreels competed on the newsreel market. By the early 1930s, the newsreel had been criticised for being "unfilmisch" – the scenes seemed to be stiff and were not impressive enough.¹¹ To increase the propaganda effect, the reportage style became the role model for the newsreel. The renewal of the newsreels was promoted by the founding of the newsreel office under the direction of Hans Weidemann. Above all, each report as well as a newsreel edition was to become a 'coherent whole'. The newsreel films should be dynamic, show movement, have a dramaturgy and build up excitement and suspense. The viewer should be involved, which was also supported by the protagonist's point of view and the background music.

From 1938/1939 onwards, the Wochenschauzentrale (newsreel office) was in total control of and consolidated the newsreels (*Ufa-Tonwoche*, *Deulig*, *Fox tönende Wochenschau*, *Emelka*) which ran under the label *Die Deutsche Wochenschau* (The German Newsreel) from June 1940 onwards. This newsreel became the most important instrument for propaganda and war reporting. It was produced by the UFA. Fritz Hippler, head of the film department at the Ministry of Propaganda in 1939, wrote about the newsreel:

*„Compared with other media [newspaper, radio] the newsreel conveys a lively and direct experience as a result of the design of moving images and sound. Pictures of buildings, launching of ships, parades, German work and community are the most impressive documents of our time. Because of their simplicity, design and purpose they present a distinctive artificial attraction.“*¹²

¹⁰ „Gibt es einen deutschen Kamerastil?“, in: *Der Deutsche Film* 3 (1938/39), Nr. 7, January 1939, p. 176.

¹¹ Bartels, U. (2004): *Die Wochenschau im Dritten Reich. Entwicklung und Funktion eines Massenmediums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung völkisch-nationaler Inhalte*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, p. 77.

¹² Hippler, Fritz (1939): *Wochenschau und Aktualität. Der Filmbericht, Dokument und Gestalter unserer Zeit*. In: *Ufa-Lehrschau* (ed.): *25 Jahre Wochenschau der Ufa. Filmschaffen – Filmforschung* (Schriften der Ufa-Lehrschau Band I). Berlin: Illustr. Filmwoche, pp. 8-9.

Heinrich Roellenbleg, head of the newsreel department of the UFA (Universum Film AG, the most important film production company) said in the same year:

„Today's newsreel is intended to be a document of time and also a small work of art. Today, it is not just about the outer appearance of an object – it is rather about its atmosphere and the mental content at the same time. This work starts with the cinematographer and ends with the editor, who is in charge of arranging the film material in a certain rhythm so that a coherent whole emerges from the great number of single frames. The spirit and the atmosphere have to become perceptible through the whole design from the editing to the background music. The sequence has to be dramatic to achieve the best effect.“¹³

An example for demonstrating the renewal is the edition of the *Ufa-Tonwoche* No. 451 from 25 April 1939 which covers the activities for Hitler's 50th anniversary. For this, the editor Georg Santé at the UFA exactly planned the locations of the twelve newsreel cameramen for taking different perspectives.¹⁴ In the film the editing of shot-counter-shot-principles and all scenes result in storytelling on the preparations for the anniversary, opening of the so called East-West-axis in Berlin, playing military bands, congratulations of the guests, people at the streets, Hitler's drive through Berlin passing the marched up battalions and the largest army show of the Third Reich, which lasted four hours, as the speaker said. The whole film is of course accompanied by marching music.

The Wartime Newsreel

Many cameramen of the mountain film and the newsreels became soldiers in the propaganda companies and worked for *Die Deutsche Wochenschau*. In addition, film editors and music editors from the UFA also worked for *Die Deutsche Wochenschau*. For making sports films as well as in war settings, a cinematographer needed the instinct for the right image and a distinct ability to react quickly. The aesthetic of the wartime newsreel consisted of:¹⁵

- Technically perfect shots by good camera equipment: essential perspectives and intercuts (picture-filling with close-ups)
- Selecting the most effective images for a 'coherent whole' and adding intercut images
- Creating suspense with e.g. a dramatic finale
- Heroic music and the addition of sound (the audience should get to know what war sounds like), pithy voice of always the same speaker
- Strategic compilation of reports in an edition and logical transitions between them.

Manipulations were accepted (e.g. through tricks and models) and the order of the events in reality was not important – the order in the film could be different, as long as propaganda and the motivation of the will to persevere were focussed on.

¹³ Roellenbleg, H. (1939): Ziele der Wochenschau unserer Zeit. In: Ufa-Lehrschau (Hrsg.): 25 Jahre Wochenschau der Ufa. Filmschaffen – Filmforschung (Schriften der Ufa-Lehrschau Band I). Berlin: Illustr. Filmwoche, pp. 33-34.

¹⁴ C.f. Stamm, K. (2006): Ästhetisierung im Nationalsozialismus. Die Ufa-Tonwoche 451/1939 als Fallbeispiel. In: Böhnigk, V. & Stamp, J. (Hrsg.): Die Moderne im Nationalsozialismus. Bonn: University Press, pp. 41-53.

¹⁵ Stamm, K. (1979): Das „Erlebnis“ des Krieges in der Deutschen Wochenschau. Zur Ästhetisierung der Politik im „Dritten Reich“. In: Hinz et al. (Hrsg.): „Die Dekoration der Gewalt“. Kunst und Medien im Faschismus. Gießen: Anabas-Verlag, pp. 115-122.

Post-war Newsreels

Since professional staff was scarce after the Second World War – only half of the cinematographers of the propaganda companies had survived – there was some continuity in personnel: cameramen from the propaganda companies, editors and music editors, who had worked for *Die Deutsche Wochenschau*, continued to work at the West and East German newsreels. They even worked for the occupation newsreels, the British-American Co-Production *Welt im Film (World in Film)* and the French influenced *Blick in die Welt (View of the World)*. The instinct and flexibility of the cinematographers were in demand, because of insecure and volatile situations after the war. The aesthetic principles of the ‘cinematic film’ and ‘heroic reportage’ were also transferred to the post-war newsreels – as well as all the technical developments from the war newsreel period. There again was a mixture of topics (as it was the case in the Weimar Republic newsreels) with 8-15 reports, but in particular the strategic structure was taken over from the war newsreel, so that the viewers were stimulated to make associations.

At the end of 1949, the *Neue Deutsche Wochenschau (NDW)* [new German newsreel] was founded in Hamburg.¹⁶ At the same time, not only the *Welt im Film* and *Blick in die Welt* (in the former French occupation zone) were spread throughout West Germany, but also the private American Production *Fox tönende Wochenschau*.

The archive for music and sound for the NDW had to be rebuilt, and in lack of music some UFA-tapes from the old newsreel (*Die Deutsche Wochenschau* produced by the UFA) were taken over, but a new speaker was hired from the radio. Staged scenes were also possible in the post-war newsreel, but not for intentional distortion, but to make scenes interesting. In the 1950s, the production was still under the influence of the Allies for a long time and was subsidised by the Federal Government in the West, while in the East the newsreel was affiliated with the state film production DEFA. The newsreel companies started a worldwide exchange of newsreel reports.

Over time, the newsreels were renamed: In 1952, the *Welt im Film* became the *Welt im Bild* (also produced in Hamburg) and in 1956 it turned to the ‘new’ *Ufa-Wochenschau (Ufa newsreel)*. Whereas several newsreel productions existed on a competitive market in West Germany, in East Germany, only *Der Augenzeuge (The Eyewitness)* was produced by the state production company Deutsche Film AG (DEFA). From 1957 to 1960, the DEFA produced two editions per week (Version A and B). The producers wanted the newsreel to be an educator for the people. One of the specialties of *Der Augenzeuge* were well-designed political reports (“gestaltete politische Sujets”),¹⁷ which were used to make political statements – be it directly or indirectly.

A report in the edition No. 265 of the *Ufa-Wochenschau* from 23 August 1961 shows the visit of US Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lucius Clay (organiser of the Airlift of 1948/1949) to Berlin – shortly after the construction of the Berlin Wall. The entire design corresponds to the reportage style and the ‘cinematic film’.

From Newsreels to Television

After television became more widespread, some newsreel cameramen changed jobs to the new medium television. In the beginning, newsreel films were also shown on television news and some

¹⁶ In the 1950s, NDW was played in about 1400 cinemas in FRG and West Berlin.

¹⁷ Jordan, G. (1990) DEFA-Wochenschau und Dokumentarfilm 1946-1949. Berlin: Humboldt-Universität (unpublished dissertation), p. 93.

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newsreel cameramen filmed reports for television. Today, newsreel films or individual images are used for TV history formats.¹⁸ Moreover, the way of giving scenes different perspectives as well as changing shots and intercuts, remains unchanged.

Conclusion: Evolution of the Cinematic Medium

The newsreel stands as an 'archetype' of media history between television and film. The example of the newsreel shows: What has been tested and considered to be effective has been preserved in media history. The political messages of course change, and the content is interchangeable, but successful aesthetics and structures remain. Music and sound contributed to the habitual patterns of the viewers' perception at any times. In the case of the newsreels, a highly formalised media format emerged. The approach of Neoformalism (by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson) borrows the terms from Formalism: *syuzhet* (also called plot) and *fabula* (also called story) are given a slightly different meaning. In addition, Bordwell introduced 'style', which is directly linked to the medium – whereas *syuzhet* is not. Music, sound and voice continuously contributed to build up schemes and patterns of perception. Strategic storytelling and framing by a strategic structure remain important, as well as transmediality (transfer to another medium) and transnationality (transfer and connecting with stories in other nations) – all of which are still relevant in television today.

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¹⁸ The history report on the fall of the Berlin Wall of ZDFinfo is an example: [Mauerfall 1989: Das Ende der DDR. Warum die Berliner Mauer fallen musste | ZDFinfo Doku - YouTube](https://www.zdfinfo.de/mauerfall-1989)

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