

## HISTORY IN MOTION

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*"We are all part of history. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, world events shape our memories. And the most of the 20.th century, those events were filmed and explained by Pathe. Pathe News captured history in motion, creating a living chronicle of a turbulent century."*

(The title voice over of the British Pathe News video series)

This announcement celebrates the meeting of all the "fames" (people, events, phenomena) of the world in a mixture of newsreels, television news and blockbuster videos. When you watch the video series of original British Pathe News, you feel as if you are capturing the world history. It is an interesting material for media studies because of its multi dimensional research possibilities, as I will attempt to explain below.

### THE PRESENTATION

The British Pathe News/A Year to Remember/1930-1969 video series include 40 video cassettes(1). The original newsreel material within the original commentator soundtrack (which is itself a dominant part for those who used to watch the newsreels in the cinemas in their time) was rearranged by Parksfield company in 1991. As it is written on the cover of the cassettes ("A Year to Remember" brings memories to life.Which was your special year?), the marketing of the video series is addressed to the customer who is looking

for a special gift. Just like it happens on the ready message greeting cards, a video cassette of a particular year becomes a very personal gift.

Each cassette is approximately 60 minutes and has the presentation of the whole series, to support marketing also in the sense of an encyclopedia promotion.

The redundancy of the newsreels roughly matches to usual television news programmes: there is a hierarchy of news values; commentator/narrators; a variety of subjects, etc.

The selection of the subjects-as it is claimed in the marketing- depends on popularity of the past events in "public memory"; for those who are in the "recollecting the history" business. I share the opinion of John Lerone and Ellen Wartella on social memory is created partly by media and to study on social memory needs some emphasize on media as a body of available materials(2). The more an event becomes to find a place in wide range public memory of the media, the more it becomes easy to be recognised in personal memories.

Forty cassettes are arranged in four decades of 1930-1969 period; giving a special name for each decade:

1930 - THE RAGING THIRTIES

1940 - THE COURAGEOUS FORTIES

1950 - THE REBELLIOUS FIFTIES

1960 - THE SWINGING SIXTIES

Although the back and front covers differ from each other, inside covers of the cassettes imply the presentation of whole series, to give some idea about the content material.

Today's television audience can find no difficulty in following the content by the help of the well organised editing. The original material is preserved without interruption yet the framed and new-titled summaries clearly remind the viewer that he/she is watching a reorganised documentary. These framings gives us (in media studies) a clear example for the critics of postmo-

dermism discussions using mass media as a powerful indicator of postmodernism. As Harvey summarizes; Lyotard's and Baudrillard's emphasis on media in postmodern era; fails to see the mosaic or even amorphi appearance of postmodernism is not available to hide the "frames" of some meta-languages or meta-narratives(3). The framed summary parts are narrated by a different voice which sounds less identical than the original commentator's. It is easy to distinguish the change in the rhetorical style while the same voice narrates the presentation of forty series that takes place at the beginnings and the endings of each cassette.

## **SEARCHING FOR METHOD**

The newsreels has been subject to film studies in the frame of "documentary-historical films", especially as propaganda/political films during the II.World war. A great number of material on newsreels is available in British documentary film studies(4). On the other hand, video found a special area on contemporary media studies as a personalised use of medium or even a creative medium(5). The newsreels which was once a medium itself, now becomes the subject material in a new medium: video. This transformation allows us to look at different aspects such as:

a. THE REPRODUCTION PROCESS IN FILM INDUSTRY (economical aspect of the industry in using the most of its "left-overs"/ film archive process/ relations with global video market, etc.)

b. THE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS (on a particular subject or on the total discourse)

c. AUDIENCE RESEARCH (especially in connection with the similar productions of local video companies)

d. COMPARATIVE RESEARCH (with television news language/ the origins of broadcasting journalism/ other newsreel videos/ the original newsreel films/ the presentation of the reality comparing press + other historical records)

e. CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE CONCEPTS LIKE "recycled

history"/"popular culture hits"/ "popular memory"/ "gender presentation"/"propaganda"/ "personalised mass production" and so on.

## **INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION**

The historical background of newsreels has a great deal of material in film history studies; including the industrial investigation; also the film journals of the time have a rich source both with statistical data and personal memories/ interviews. Authentic material is reserved in an established library of British Pathe News-Parkfield company. Reasonable commercial purpose turns the left-overs of old films to new profits; the archive material is no more secret for public use. The reproduction by reediting and recording into video cassettes does not give any physical damage to authentic material yet it is not the same with the new production any more.

Basically this reproduction follows the line below:

EVENT > FILMING > SCREENING (at the cinemas as newsreels) > ARCHIVE > SELECTING/REEDITING (as video cassettes) > MARKETING > PERSONAL USE(which allows to say : "this is my special year")

The policy behind this technical process needs a market research.

## **TEXT ANALYSIS**

Content analysis has been criticised of taking the media programs as structured wholes as the presentation of the broadcasting(6). The quantitative find outs give the main importance to the frequency of content in the text; however the exceptional emphasis can be dominant in some content analysis.

The structure of the videos gives a remarkable opportunity to scholars who wish to analyze the moving image as the text. In my case; the video version of the newsreels; the visual images, the soundtrack and the titles are clearly fragmented to distinguish the old and the new editing.

Main subjects can be held in catalogue lists are separately drawn in media-news analysis studies(7) such as:

POLITICS (national/ international)

CURRENT AFFAIRS (natural disasters/ weather/ local events/ etc.)

HUMAN INTEREST (environment/ law/ local events/ etc.)

SPORTS (events/ sportsmen-as popular figures)

TECHNOLOGY (developments/ results/ etc.)

FASHION (women/ men/ children)

ENTERTAINMENT (music/ art/ surprises/ comedy items)

The list is open to rearrangement. I think the interrelations of the subjects are more interesting than these functional distinctions. For instance; the commentator's description of the Queen's dress at the Royal Ascot occasion is flexible to be held in both politics + sports + fashions; so to say Royalty & gender distinction here, just like the other distinctions is collapsed by cross-cutting meanings of the presentation as a "spectacle" (8).

### **AUDIENCE RESEARCH**

"Needs and Gratifications" approach in audience studies has developed various techniques of survey research to find out "how" and "why" the audience use the media(9). Mostly combined with "escapist" theories, conclusions show that the identification process via media gives a conformist relaxation to the audience who is stressed by the mundanity of everyday life.

In my opinion, rather than a large scale survey; audience research method can be useful for the examples of "local history" video series which are produced by small local video companies and work like a "public house photo-album". Those videos use the old newsreels in connection with local people and edit the interviews of the living ones. So the marketing addresses to the direct personal memories by using the mass production techniques.

### **COMPARATIVE RESEARCH**

The transformation process in film production can give chance to search for "the presentation of reality" problem in film studies. At the first stage;

one has to decide which material to be chosen for the reality base as a starting point. It may be the historical events or the authentic newsreels as screened, or the other newsreel productions or videos. Furthermore, the presentation of some particular subjects can be held in time as a subject of social change; e.g. Royal visits to diseased areas became more professional in Queen Elizabeth's footages than Queen Mother's smiling faced elegant visits; or the rhetorical difference between the old and the new narrators's voice seems to be effected by a less dominant (apparently at least) television news presentators's style. The dynamics of popularity is comparable in different types of audience use in time; the moviegoers's perception and reaction to the newsreels in the cinemas are definitely open to a more authoritarian personality then the video customers or even the television audience of today who may accompany the Queen's coronation with a pint of cider and pyjamas! In brief, comparative research is available both in text biased or audience biased studies.

### **RECYCLED HISTORY**

The reuse of the historical material has a realistic documentary effect besides the references to contemporary television patterns. The new broadcast titles name the current affairs for instance like "THE WORLD IN 1966" or "THE SWINGING SIXTIES" while the authentic title names the same part as "THE NEWS IN NUTSHELL". Identically, new narrator voice reminds audiences of the political progress of actor Ronald Reagan or the future popularity of the Beatles. Those kind of framings help the viewer to situate the "fame" in a place that would not confuse the minds.

Captured in video cassettes, news are not ephemera any more, but the fames are, no doubt. The imprisonment of presence gives to the past events a "not alive but still existent" identification. Having the newsreels in videos as a property, has a sense of having an overpopulated family photo-album. As Ewen(10) indicates; "only extreme wealth can afford to own the past...(they are) reminders of the disposable culture. Those that can keep the old "new" have beaten the system that the rest of humanity inhabits... To own history, they believe is to possess a deed on the future."

The continuity of the past in the form of the present allows ahistorical look to the world events. Television proofs like "You've been framed" encou-

rages these quick hunts for quick consumerist purposes. The classical understanding of photography that "the photographer/hunter has to hide at the proper edge for him to see the hunt yet not to be seen" needs reevaluation. The hunter/hunted dichotomy is not clear enough for today as it was before the post-modernism discussions mostly because of the frame lines are not underlined in some cases which refer to consumers as large as possible.

The ability of the media to exaggerate experiences and to make the frames hardly visible yet recognizable (in our material) supports the memories of the viewer on all-recognizable/ everready popular images. The parade of well known people reminds that all those were the performers, once upon a time. Maybe it is easy to have clear comments on the past rather than to explain the complexity of the present. Nostalgic touch of the past era takes the viewer to a pseudo micro-Odyssey; a conformist leisure adventure you may say; while the insurance company advertisements scream on television : "I wanna be an individual". We can still identify the popular culture products by their non-unique characteristics and distinguish the persuasive messages by their apparent addressing to the individual in the masses.

## REFERENCES

- (1) The material which this article is based, had been used in the Templeman Library of the University of Kent, during my visiting year of 1992-1993. There are three sets from a large number of newsreel-video series in the library of the University of Kent :

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**A Year in Your Life: 1970 - 1989** ; Newsbrief International (BBC licensed) **Memories of 70 - 89** ; RCA / Columbia Pictures Company.

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