

FORUM

◀ For me, they're very political films. There was the banking crisis – I was shooting right around then – and then there were two marches against the cuts. They were the three main events. And what's interesting is asking what the zeitgeist is; what's the feeling on the street? And then, how do you communicate that feeling in a way other than via a voiceover? Newsreels are beautiful: they can be quite poetic and it's a way of putting process on screen. And it really is the news, but it's a different kind of news to how we normally see events portrayed.

In terms of the politics, there's a small 'p' and a big 'P'. The big 'P' would be the definite presence of the protests, the banners and all these things. Then there's a small 'p', which is about individual expression – and which, for me, is especially about dance and music and movement. There is a structure to *Newsreel*, but it's maybe more to do with movement. I don't want to make it appear like it's thrown together; there is a sense of rhythm and

People are moved by these films. It's to do with seeing ourselves on the streets, how people walk. That's the story of our lives

progression. There's no point just putting three protests next to each other because people are going to get bored. The editing process is long and hard – hours and hours and hours finding how these things work together. I could have had a lot more protest in there. I took some violence out, for example. I tried to communicate the emotion of ordinary people marching, which is what it was about for me, not a few people fighting or causing trouble.

People have been moved, with *Routes* and now with *Newsreel*. And this is odd. Because if you say to someone after they've seen a film where there's a lot of talking, "Why were you moved?", they can say, "Oh, when so-and-so lost his wife, or when she lost her child." They can't do that for my films. So then you have this really interesting conversation where people struggle to articulate it. But we get there, because I've done so many Q&As. It's to do with the fact that they are narrative films and the narrative is this cumulative sense of emotion that comes through from bodies and movement and events. But it's especially to do with body language and sound and music. Most people don't see that consciously – I know what they are, but when people watch the film they don't. And in *Newsreel* it's also to do with seeing ourselves on the streets, just seeing how people walk and express body language in normal situations. That's the story of our lives. These things are more important than words, and I guess I take words out because there's a lot of bullshit about. People are less likely to lie with their bodies. ⓘ

i Alex Reuben's 'Newsreel' screens at the ICA Cinema, London, on 15 January, followed by a Q&A. 'Vers Madrid' and Jem Cohen's newsreels will screen at the same venue later in the month

NEWSREEL HISTORY

WINDOWS ON THE WORLD

Almost as old as cinema itself, newsreels were for decades the newspapers of the film world

By Rebecca Vick

A pulsing vein of information, current affairs and entertainment marked by clipped-voice commentaries, dramatic music and rapid editing, newsreel was cinema's most iconic form of factual filmmaking. A forerunner of today's news on demand, it offered cinemagoers a unique window on their world: whether showing a speech by Churchill, the activities of the royal family or the suffragettes, a cricket match at Lord's or an eyewitness account from the front, newsreel kept a nation's heart racing.

French-based Gaumont and Eclair were the earliest known sources of this new mass-produced form. Cheap to reproduce, newsreels were simultaneously screened in multiple venues. They eventually averaged five minutes and contained five or six stories.

The first successful British reel was Pathé's *Animated Gazette*, starting in June 1910. Pathé, along with Gaumont and Topical Budget, dominated the silent era but there were numerous other newsreel production companies, including Warwick Bioscope Chronicle and Williamson's *Animated News*. In the sound era, single reels doubled in length and each issue included eight or more items.

Their birth coinciding with the newspaper revolution, as 'animated newspapers' or 'topicals' borrowed from print formats, referring to themselves as the 'picture papers' of the moving-picture world. Two editions were released weekly, on Mondays and Thursdays, an integral part of the balanced diet of the full cinema bill; the title of cameraman Paul Wyand's autobiography reminds us that newsreels were 'Useless, If Delayed'. But they often weren't quite on the pulse for practical reasons: the heavy equipment restricted cameramen's ability to cover stories, image quality varied with weather conditions, and slow processing and budget limitations prompted heavy reliance on stock footage.

The silent newsreel lacked the broadsheets' context, immediacy and analytical content but its intertitles – headlines – were easily translated into many languages and they reached a broader audience than the printed word. Sometimes incorporating up to 70 per cent foreign content, newsreels remain compelling partly for their internationalism.

Many companies fell in the transition from silence to sound, but Pathé and Gaumont persisted, alongside new entrants such as British Paramount News, Universal News and British Movietone News, whose film of the Epsom Derby was the subject of Britain's first sound newsreel in June 1929. Between them, these five organisations developed the now-familiar newsreel form.

In the shift from silence to sound, some companies initially produced both versions; others incorporated background noises while continuing to deploy captions. Commentaries



Making the news: a Gaumont British team at work

efficiently conveyed information in the limited time available, sometimes galloping along at three times the average speed of speech. Pathé's Bob Danvers-Walker, Universal's R.E. Jeffrey and Movietone's Leslie Mitchell became familiar voices, while Ted Emmett's authoritative voiceovers for Gaumont became so iconic that one journalist described him as "just about the only star name the newsreels ever made".

Historian Nicholas Pronay argues that soundtracks gave newsreels access to the "life-blood of journalism": politics and especially politicians' speeches. Editors could use this tool to address and persuade the audience; the absence of a politician from a report could be as telling as their presence. Different ideological slants have been discerned in different outputs, Pathé leaning slightly left, Movietone right.

Historian Anthony Aldgate wrote of newsreel companies being "permeated by ways of seeing and thinking which belonged to the dominant structures of power... which supported the dominant political consensus of the day". Newsreels were uniquely exempt from the censorship imposed on other parts of the film industry – a freedom that led in turn to criticism and questioning of their motives. Producers trod carefully, balancing editorial independence with sensitivities of exhibitors and audiences, though more frivolous items added to entertain crowds and appease renters were widely disparaged.

In times of threat, an umbrella organisation, the Newsreel Association of Great Britain and Ireland, worked to resolve industry-wide problems and promote and protect shared interests. During the war, producers were integrated into national power structures, harnessed for propaganda and morale-boosting. The companies joined forces in a rota system, allowing them all to cover agreed stories without duplication. Live events were planned, rehearsed and re-enacted and stock footage re-used; Pronay has argued that newsreels therefore created the "illusion of actuality".

In the 1950s, tastes changed, audiences became more questioning, production costs rose and editors' fingers slipped from the pulse. Cinemas ceased taking newsreels as they were overtaken by television, whose less heavy cameras caught more interesting stories. Most newsreels disappeared by the end of the 1960s, though Movietone held out until 1979. Yet even at this distance, the look, sound and feel of newsreel remain instantly recognisable to the public, and continue to resonate with some of today's filmmakers. ⓘ

© NATIONAL ARCHIVE (2)