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The March of Time in Britain and the International History of Documentary Film

ABSTRACT: This article explores the historical formation of news cinemagazines through the international production of the US series *The March of Time*. Established in 1935, the series quickly achieved success by dealing with current affairs through a blend of actual footage plus reenacted and dramatized scenes. The American producers set up an office in London with which John Grierson and other British filmmakers from the General Post Office (GPO) film unit were associated. To date, this key relationship in the history of documentary film remains underexplored. Here, I trace US and UK interactions between 1935 and 1946 in order to illuminate the institutionalization of documentary filmmaking across countries during a critical period.

KEYWORDS: documentary, newsreels, international production, John Grierson, dramatization, censorship

"A NEW KIND OF PICTORIAL JOURNALISM"

The US series *The March of Time* is often acknowledged for opening a new pathway between newsreel and documentary film in the mid-1930s and influencing later television news, magazines, and docudramas.[1] The original format was produced by Time Inc. and came to be known as "news cinemagazines." It transposed to the big screen the successful homonymous *The March of Time* radio formula, which aired on NBC and CBS networks.[2] For the broadcast, actors imitated news protagonists including politicians, celebrities, and sports figures. They used transcripts of real statements and comments mixed with narrations of factual events. When transcripts of actual speech were not available, the series' writers had license to create dialogue and scenarios that seemed akin to the real characters and situations.[3] The film version of *The March of Time* followed a similar approach: it brought together stock footage, direct statements, interviews, and scenes involving public and nonpublic figures. It also

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included scenes that were staged or reconstructed for the camera by real characters or actors, depending on goodwill and availability. *The March of Time* is an early instance of what John Conner defines as *dramatized documentary*, which "begins with a documentary base or core and uses dramatization to overcome certain limitations to achieve a more broadly popular and imaginatively powerful effect."[4] The main producer of the series, Louis de Rochemont, defended the use of reenactment and staging by arguing that it was not intended to mislead but to explain complex issues and bring "emotional authenticity" to current affairs.[5] It was a distinctive form of journalism that satisfied a desire for news coverage while appearing closer to the dramatic experience of fictional narrative. The novelty of this approach required some form of introduction, and the opening credits did so by announcing Time Inc.'s presentation of "A New Kind of Pictorial Journalism."

Raymond Fielding's comprehensive study of the series dealt with the long history of its production.[6] Although Fielding commented on the films produced for *The March of Time* in Britain, much more can be said about this key moment in the institutionalization of documentary filmmaking. First, it is necessary to discern *The March of Time*'s status as news and what made it distinct from existing newsreels.[7] Typical newsreels edited together a variety of stylistically and thematically incongruous hard and soft news items that appeared weekly. In contrast, *The March of Time* was longer, more tightly structured, and appeared monthly. *The March of Time* offered opinion and in-depth treatments covering a small selection of news items. Each episode lasted approximately twenty minutes and contained three news stories of seven minutes each, often two of hard character such as political and international affairs, and one lighthearted, such as current customs, culture, and society. The three-part format carried on until 1938, when it changed to single-story twenty-minute episodes.[8] Backed by Time Inc. staff and infrastructures, episodes were thoroughly researched, taking time and money and several stages of editing to be finalized.

Like other newsreels, *The March of Time* privileged the visual presence of events as a way to substantiate facts, but it also openly staged and reenacted some scenes for the camera. For increased realism, the crews often used sound-on-film equipment. The series' persuasive intent was not only realized through film's seemingly privileged capacity to capture reality. Graphical elements like maps, diagrams, and intertitles summarized and highlighted information, while dramatic structure, music, and voice-over narration created emotional climaxes and qualified the images, thus providing a rhetorical effect without which the images could not achieve the desired result. Additionally, Time Inc.'s production byline on the introductory title card positioned *The March of Time* as a journalistic venture, different from government or commercially sponsored

films, such as Pare Lorentz's for the Roosevelt administration or John Grierson's for the Empire Marketing Board.

A single story had a clear four-part structure, which resembled the dramatic arcs of documentaries and fiction films: it started by establishing the magnitude and urgency of a problem, followed by a second section that presented a historical survey of its origins. The third section returned to the present, exposing the immediate complications resulting from the news event and confirming its newsworthiness. The fourth and final part pointed to the future, noting the problem as a matter of such continuous and serious concern that an update might appear in due time. With regard to editing, background sequences tended to have very short shot length. These sequences were often punctuated by music or the nondiegetic voice-over commentary of "the Voice of Time," the ominous narration performed by Westbrook Van Voorhis. In a characteristic explanatory mode, it organized the logic of the film, ordering its fragments and representing an authoritative perspective.[9] This was a very theatrical voice, which Raymond Fielding describes as "the vox ex sepulchre strained with alarm, the posture of omniscience, and the calculated air of fearlessness."[10] The voice contrasted with the more static and stilted and less crisp sound of statements and reenactments where diegetic voices had been recorded by sound-on-film cameras. *The March of Time*'s predictable narrative structure and style made it easily anticipated and even parodied, as with the oft-referenced segment of "News on the March" in *Citizen Kane* (1941). Beyond the Wellesian acknowledgment, the success of *The March of Time* is better understood in light of the debates surrounding aesthetics and politics of documentary film in the 1930s.

DOCUMENTARY EVOLUTION AND THE POLITICS OF *THE MARCH OF TIME*

Jack C. Ellis notes resemblances between the rhythm and editing of *The March of Time* and earlier Soviet avant-garde newsreel films and the American Left's "synthetic documentaries" of the early 1930s, which edited newsreel footage for their own propaganda purposes.[11] This argument agrees with Bill Nichols's view on the impact of modernist and avant-garde practices in the formation of documentary film in the 1930s.[12] Nichols points to three preconditions for the definition of documentary in the late 1920s: (1) photographic realism; (2) modernist juxtaposition and fragmentation—as exemplarily practiced by the Soviet constructivists to challenge existing subjectivities; and (3) narrative structure. These three elements instilled documentary with the modernist ethos of bringing people closer to new ways of seeing and engaging with reality, which informed John Grierson's famous definition of documentary in 1925 as "the creative treatment of actuality."[13] Yet, Nichols adds a later defining element:

(4) the rhetorical strategies that sought to persuade audiences about particular political stances and/or the value of certain commercial products and companies, an increasingly relevant element in the 1930s.

Within the political polarizations and institutional complexity of the 1930s, the alignment between populations and state powers fluctuated, and sometimes the differences between government and commercial productions became blurred. Nichols argues that the disruptive potential of avant-garde forms, particularly modernist juxtaposition and fragmentation, was suppressed in Grierson's criticism of Soviet film's formal excesses and radical politics in the 1930s. Along these lines, Ian Aitken identifies two stages in Grierson's thought about documentary realism.[14] The first stage, where we can locate the famous definition, is imbued with German philosophical idealism, Walter Lippman's view on the necessary role of experts in mass communications, Soviet montage, and Weimar film theory. The second, after 1936, much more pragmatic and philosophically limited, was "based around issues of propaganda and instrumental 'civic education.'"[15] It is significant that this same year Grierson and his protégés at the General Post Office (GPO) film unit started to collaborate with the new—it had only been launched in February 1935—but already successful *The March of Time* (fig. 1).

As mentioned above, *The March of Time* developed its own approach to cinematic realism as emotional authenticity within the rhetorical mission of news to inform public opinion. It offered a picture of the world reverberating with appeals to government authority and industrial and military values. It frequently evoked these values using the tropes of mechanical movement: recurrent images of working machines, human labor, military displays, and marches. Similarly, the Voice of Time spoke quickly and authoritatively over images, commanding meaning over them, sometimes didactically, as it used images to literally illustrate a word or sentence. In this respect, the voice offered an accessible and coherent perspective that contained the potential fragmentation and excess of the edited parts while simultaneously dispelling doubts on the meaning and authenticity of the footage, thus enacting a vision of documentary that exalted the authority of the expert. There is a notable resemblance between *The March of Time*'s focus on military and industrial aesthetics and those found in fascist works of the same period. Fascist aesthetics, as Susan Sontag observed, betrayed a fascination with movement formally arranged in grandiose, precise, and rigid patterns.[16] Such similarity between *The March of Time* and the authoritarian stance of fascism draws attention to the pervasive use of modernist aesthetics in mass communications during the 1930s, but we still need to be alert to ideological distinctions.

Fig. 1: Publicity for the first issue of *The March of Time*, from *Motion Picture Herald*, January 1935. (Image courtesy of the Media History Digital Library)

Fig. 2: Advertisement simultaneously promoting *Life*, *Time* and *The March of Time* On Air and Screen Series, from *Motion Picture Herald*, January 1938. (Image courtesy of the Media History Digital Library)

The March of Time's success was definitively built on Time Inc.'s powerful media empire and reputed middle-ground journalism. Based in New York, Time Inc. published popular magazines such as *Time*, *Fortune*, and *Life*. These visually driven periodicals examined themes such as poverty and wealth, the domestic and the public, the rural and the urban, the regional and the national, and the national and the international.[17] These publications were key to disseminating ideas about technological modernity, social reform, and current affairs to large audiences. Time Inc.'s distinctive modernist visual style juxtaposed media techniques and designs, connecting typography, photography, and illustration in original ways. When the company ventured into film with the release of *The March of Time*, the producers approached the audiovisual medium boldly, mixing journalistic and literary genres and pushing them in new directions (fig. 2).

The political influence of Time Inc. through *The March of Time* has been discussed by Jonathan Setliff, who examines to what extent the series represented Henry Luce's idea of the "American Century."[18] Luce, one of Time Inc.'s cofounders, was a strong advocate of American liberalism, industrialization, and US intervention in international affairs since the 1930s and before they became fundamental tenets of American policy after World War II, during the Cold War. Setliff follows Theodor Adorno's hypothesis on the culture industries and sees the film series as "a logical step forward in the mechanization of the spread of ideology and information."[19] Nevertheless, he finds points of divergence between Luce's ideology and the series' own producers. For instance, Luce was not keen on the social democratic policies of Roosevelt, but Louis de Rochemont was. When *The March of Time* dealt with the New Deal, both sides of an argument could be heard, thus giving it the appearance of balanced treatment. Nevertheless, the film ultimately sided with federal government relief programs. Keeping in mind the degree of autonomy that characterized the production of the series within Time Inc.'s purview, the remainder of this article looks at the history of *The March of Time* in Britain (and sometimes beyond, as I will briefly touch upon Canada) through the period between 1935 and 1946, bringing to the fore the interaction between the editorial line of the American series and its encounter with the British filmmakers in their social and political context.

THE MARCH OF TIME'S LONDON OFFICE

While based in Paris, Richard de Rochemont, brother of Louis, worked as European manager of *The March of Time*, at the same time that he was *Life*'s French editor. While making an early issue of *The March of Time* on London's pedestrian crossing lights, also known as the "Belisha Beacons" (1935), he felt he was constantly shuffling back and forth between Paris and London and began to

consider having a permanent production crew based in London and distributing in the UK.[20] UK distribution was soon realized when *The March of Time* was launched in Britain in November 1935 and was shown in 190 theaters. Its next British edition, in January 1936, played in 450 theaters.[21] The worldwide distribution of the series was growing fast, and as the year progressed, Time Inc. used its own publicity apparatus to claim that *The March of Time* was being exhibited in five thousand commercial theaters to a monthly audience of fifteen million people in the US.[22] It also boasted that the series was being shown in Latin America, Australia, and Europe. No documentary film had commanded such a big audience to that date. In Britain, it played in 709 houses from Penzance to Aberdeen, and after the US, the UK had quickly become its most lucrative market. Richard de Rochemont had effectively moved the European management of the series to London in late 1935. *The March of Time*'s opening of its London office could be seen as a move to build up the US company's hegemonic position. To explore this, it is necessary to consider the role of different actors, including producers, filmmakers, editors, and censors, and their interactions and negotiations during the production of the series.

Richard de Rochemont acknowledged that by opening business in London, the series' producers were stepping into unknown territory.[23] They hired Grierson as a consultant and paid him a minimum fee. For de Rochemont, Grierson's main asset was that "he knew all the ropes of British officialdom" as he had many contacts among government and filmmakers.[24] Based in Soho, at 2–4 Dean Street, *The March of Time*'s London office shared space with other Time Inc. European enterprises. It was at the back of Soho Square where the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) and the GPO film unit were also located. *The March of Time*'s strategic connection with the GPO enabled a formal and informal exchange of people and expertise between the two organizations as I show below. In general terms, the two organizations shared values such as a commitment to industrial capitalism, and both advocated for the role of large infrastructures and modern communications for national integration and cultural influence. Still, the GPO people saw *The March of Time*'s work as merely journalistic as opposed to the more poetic and politically committed aspirations claimed by the GPO filmmakers, who had been nurtured in discussions at the London Film Society.[25]

The first filmmaker Grierson recommended to *The March of Time* was Harry Watt. In his memoirs, Watt talks about getting eight pounds a week from the Americans, a fortune in comparison with what he was paid at GPO, which was between three and four pounds per week.[26] He could hire cars, stay at decent hotels, and have regular meals. Watt also talked about learning the trick of working for *The March of Time*: "having found, or been given a subject,

you wrote the commentary only in your version of Timese."[27] This *Timese* or *Timespeak*, as it was also called, consisted of "short, sharp, inverted sentences" read out loud by a voice as if through a megaphone.[28] All footage was edited in the US and the voice-over and musical accompaniment added.

Watt's first film for *The March of Time* was "England's Tithe War" (1936), about farmers still having to pay a medieval tax to the Church of England. This was the first film the London office made to be distributed in the US. It had many picturesque shots of English churches and tranquil farming landscapes. However, this site, far from being a bucolic idyll, was marked by social discontent since, as the narration claimed, England's archaic taxation system perpetuated old privilege and impeded state modernization. To enhance the drama, Watt employed a professional actor who delivered a hammy performance of a recreated farm raid. He claimed that "luckily the Americans knew nothing of English country types," an interesting remark about how he thought the British filmmakers were managing authenticity for a foreign audience (fig. 3).[29]

Watt's next film, "The Highlands," was issued in 1937 only for the British market. Grierson advised on this topic, as Richard de Rochemont admitted, "I didn't know a damn thing about the clearances."[30] The issue addressed a British audience without presupposing any prior knowledge of the situation in Scotland. A contextual section explained why large areas in Scotland were forgotten and destitute. Through rather artificial historical re-creations by actors with strong Scottish accents and tartans, it illustrated the clan system and the establishment of crofting communities in the nineteenth century that had subsequently become impoverished. The film made a case for Westminster to intervene and support the industrialization of the region, pointing to its suitability for the munitions industry and the construction of dams. It concluded by posing the question: would the already hardened Scottish character be able to adapt to the new ways?

A third film by Watt on football pools betting, "Britain's Gambling Fever" (1937), demonstrates an exchange between the GPO and *The March of Time* and the latter's approach to validating text with images. In this case, the betting promoters did not allow Watt to shoot the girls who handled the bets, so instead he used footage from *6.30 Collection* (1934), a film he had made with Edgar Anstey for the GPO on mail-sorting methods. The shots concentrated on the movements of hands. About this reuse, Watt noted "we never heard a cheep from the Post Office, the pools people, or even the girls."[31] Watt's permanent base was the GPO, as Grierson preferred to keep him close instead of recommending him for a more stable position at *The March of Time*. At GPO, Watt made several films like the much-lauded *Night Mail* (1936) and then the innovative *The Saving of Bill Blewitt* (1937), which, perhaps taking inspiration from the American series,

Fig. 3: Publicity of *The March of Time*'s American edition including "England's Tithe War," from *Variety*, October 1936. (Image courtesy of the Media History Digital Library)

used a real-life character and real settings in Cornwall to substantiate a scripted story that promoted post-office savings.

THE MEANS AND ENDS OF REENACTMENT

Meanwhile, another of Grierson's acquaintances, Edgar Anstey, built a more stable relationship with the Americans based on Grierson's recommendation. Anstey had been involved in *Enough to Eat?* (1936), a documentary for the Gas, Light and Coke Company that engaged in contemporary discussions on malnutrition by debating whether ignorance or poverty was its root cause. The film included sequences with scientists such as John Orr and Julian Huxley and ordinary people talking about their eating and buying habits. This was combined with footage of undernourished families, animated graphs, and examples of official policies to tackle this issue. Looking back onto the innovative approach of the film, Anstey claimed that visual evidence was not strong, so the film was constructed with more attention to dramatic aspects through scripting and character development.[32]

Combining expert opinion with ordinary people in *Enough to Eat?* in order to take a critical look at policy caught *The March of Time* producers' attention. They asked Anstey to do a short version of it, which resulted in "Britain's Food Defences" (1937). This film, which was shown in the US, shifted focus to an underfed British army and the country's overall physical health and nutrition policies. Anstey reused Huxley's footage and included original sequences on the pioneering nutrition programs of Peckham's Health Centre. This episode sided with the argument on education as the solution to malnutrition, with Huxley noting that the animals at London's zoo were better fed than the inhabitants of the country. It amplified the drama by framing it within patriotic and militaristic agendas and finished by noting that the future of the empire's army depended on the success of these health programs.

In "Coal Industry in Britain" (1937), Anstey tackled striking Welsh coal miners. For this subject, he staged an address by the leader of the miners, framing this speech from a magnifying low camera angle, very much as in the Soviet style. Anstey also asked demonstrators around Trafalgar Square to reenact some scenes he had missed. When accused of falsifying the scene, he claimed that his goal was "to give an idea of the spirit and the militancy of the miners," and so the ends justified the means.[33]

Reenactments could be formally agreed upon with the real protagonists via payment of twenty pounds. The payment authorized *The March of Time* "to produce a picture which will purport to portray certain events in our lives, and to employ actors to impersonate us in the production of the said picture. We further agree that the March of Time Limited shall have complete

discretion as to the events portrayed and the manner of production."[34] In this way the producers gained editorial control over the portrayal of people and events. Grierson did not view staging and reenactment as reprehensible, and he welcomed *The March of Time*'s interpretative view of current affairs. He hailed the series as having brought into film the press tradition of "free-born comment."[35] At the same time he cautioned against "irresponsible comment, when circulations like *The March of Time*'s may run to nine thousand theatres across an explosive world."[36] Certainly, Grierson saw a danger in film's capacity to reach illiterate people in a world increasingly rife with international tensions. Nevertheless, what was deemed a danger depended on specific political positions on certain issues, which Anstey's subsequent cases demonstrate.

Anstey went to New York as *The March of Time*'s foreign editor, returning to Britain in 1938 to work as head of the London office until 1939. Overall, he wrote and directed ten films in London.[37] Knowing that editors would do the final cut in New York, he recollected that in order to preserve the films' integrity he would shoot in such a way that they could not later be reedited.[38] He stated that although producers in New York often wanted lighthearted subjects, there were ways to turn them into more socially engaged items. Along these lines, Anstey directed "Britons on Holidays" (1938). The episode starts cheerfully enough, with Britons enjoying leisure time at holiday camps and popular beach resorts before pointing out that holidays remain a "prohibitive luxury to nearly 60% of Britain's working classes." Running over shots of roller coasters, cotton candy, and other joys of mass-produced entertainment at a fun fair, the Voice of Time proclaimed that businesses should know that the "British holiday maker is ready to pay." In one sequence showing a staged boardroom discussion, employers talk about the advantages and disadvantages of paid leave, with one arguing that it increases efficiency and another that it was nonsense to pay workers while unemployed, and when they find jobs "pay them to build sandcastles." The argument against paid holidays sounds slightly exaggerated, as if not to be taken seriously, and the film ends optimistically regarding the likely passing of the statutory holiday bill. Ultimately, the episode defends social democratic values as advantageous to capitalism: holiday makers are conspicuous consumers and rested workers are more productive and value their companies more, an argument whereby the welfare state provides remedies for the excesses of capitalism while strengthening it. The political leanings of this episode can be understood as specific to the British vision of welfare capitalism.

POLITICAL CONTROVERSIES IN THE LATE 1930S

On other occasions, Anstey faced challenges from the British authorities, most notably with the overtly political story on the policy of appeasement, "Arms and the League" (1938), which never saw the light of a projector in Britain. Other *March of Time* stories on related topics had been partly censored before. These cases give us a sense of the series' early positioning against fascism and the difference between the US and the UK contexts. Rachael Low notes that instances of newsreel censorship in Britain before World War II tended to be informal rather than formal. *The March of Time*, however, had to be certified by the BBFC because it was categorized as a commercial short film.[39] The second issue, released in the US in October 1935, concerned the seven-minute-long "East of Suez," which started with a presentation of thriving Jewish settlements in Palestine, Britain's promise to safeguard these lands for the Jews after taking them from the Turks, and Woodrow Wilson's endorsement of the Balfour declaration. Barely a minute into the story, the Voice of Time detailed that "paradoxically, Adolf Hitler has helped the growth of the new Palestine. Hitler who has wrought upon Jews more evil than any man of his generation. Fanned by the oratory of Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels, anti-Semitism has swept Germany in fire and pillage. All books of Jewish authors are ordered burned in the public squares. Authors, scientists, artists are driven from Germany. Bands of loud Nazi youths in storm trooper uniforms conduct terrorizing raids on Jewish citizens throughout the land, to the rest of the world's shocked amazement."[40] This commentary was illustrated with footage of Hitler and Goebbels delivering speeches and was followed by scenes of Nazis looting Jewish shops and entering houses, these last sections having been staged in New London, Connecticut.[41] There followed images of the Reichstag fire and the laws of racial purification. The sequence finished with a map giving numbers of Jews leaving Europe and the United States to settle in Palestine.

In Britain, the BBFC considered the film pro-Zionist and the two-and-a-half-minute sequence summarized above was edited out when the film was released in November 1935. The censored film jumped rather abruptly from the Balfour declaration fixing "the policy later endorsed by Woodrow Wilson and executed by his League of Nations" to an intertitle that declared "the land which God promised to Abraham" before a long shot of two male figures in the desert and the Voice of Time calmly narrating "only yesterday, silent Arabs looking out across the sands to Jerusalem would watch a scene unchanged in centuries." Besides the odd sequencing and abrupt change in tone, one might wonder if pro-Zionist claims were eliminated by censoring the part that explicitly accounted for the flight to Palestine. The resulting film seems to celebrate

the arrival of Jews to Palestine as a move toward the supposedly more desirable Western standards of industrial and economic progress.

Writing years later, film and TV critic Hugh Hebert discussed the case of "East of Suez" in terms of the partisan aims of *The March of Time*, pitting the ethics of reenacting against those of censoring. Hebert noted that the US version used "very stagey looking scenes of actors playing Hitler's thugs . . . But the British version, in those years of dodged issues, cut those scenes out, together with some real Nazi footage, leaving a travelogue that would persuade you to book your passage to Haifa tomorrow. And this is the problem—which is the more honest picture?"[42] Many of the official arguments for censorship at the time concerned protecting the public from deleterious influence, fearing audiences could replicate the behavior seen onscreen or react to it in incendiary ways. These claims were used when violence was shown onscreen, but in the case of *The March of Time* in Britain, censorship had to do with sparking controversies around British political positions. In May 1936, "The League of Nations Union," which dealt with the ballot to keep Britain in the union, questioned the current efficacy of the league, mentioning the failure of economic sanctions to Italy after the invasion of Ethiopia. The leniency of France and Britain toward fascist Italy was pointed out by the voice at the start of the episode, stating that "Mussolini had had an understanding with his friend, Pierre Laval of France, who had looked for no interference from his English friends." *Sight and Sound* reported that the BBFC deleted sixty-one feet of the film, including shots of Ramsay MacDonald and Pierre Laval with Benito Mussolini in Stressa.[43] According to Low, the attitude of the British toward Italy was commonly debated in the radio and press, but the film took an openly controversial stance that sought validation with vivid images, and thus it did not escape the censors' cut (fig. 4).[44]

As Thomas Doherty has demonstrated in the context of the US, *The March of Time* benefitted from the publicity of courting controversies with state censors and even with the protagonists of the stories.[45] Its hybrid status made *The March of Time* difficult to classify, its dramatizations and commercial distribution suggesting it should be subject to the Production Code, but its journalistic content made the Breen office dismiss the idea in the end, leaving state censorship boards to deal with the series. In January 1938, *The March of Time* released its most controversial film: "Inside Nazi Germany."[46] This was the first issue on a single subject allowing for more in-depth treatment. Lasting for about seventeen minutes, this approach distinguished Time Inc.'s production from competitors such as Hearst's *News of the Day*. The storm caused by this film not only had to do with its portrayal of Germany but also with the provenance of the materials. "Inside Nazi Germany" used film shot by a freelance cameraman, Julien Bryan, who had entered Germany with an authorized press visa. It also used film stock

Fig. 4: Publicity for *The March of Time* showing a screenwriter dealing with political personalities, from *Motion Picture Herald*, May 1937. (Image courtesy of the Media History Digital Library)

from German newsreels, provided by Fox Movietone News, and reenactments made in Hoboken, New Jersey, in a colony of anti-Nazi Germans who performed the part of Nazis in realistic sceneries. The film started by showing a prosperous and leisure-filled Berlin before moving into details of the Nazi program, its regimentation of German people, control and consolidation of nationalist allegiances, policies of racial purification, and preparations for future expansion. The second part of the issue presented the German-American Bund, a Nazi organization, as a threat to the United States and its liberties. It finished with a note on the worldwide challenge to democracy posed by the Axis and invoked the ghosts of the previous world war.[47] Fielding noted that even if the images were neither excessively violent nor dramatic, the voice-over commentary served as a counterpoint to them, emphasizing the one-dimensional nature of the Germans living under the Nazi regime and presenting Nazi Germany as a unified force relentlessly parading toward war.[48]

In New York, Louis de Rochemont invited Fritz Kuhn, the head of the German-American Bund for a private screening, which finished with Kuhn complaining that he had collaborated with them only to see his image vilified. RKO, which distributed the film, sent a press release that took a clear anti-Nazi stance and hyped it up by saying that the materials had been smuggled out of Germany by Bryan, which was a fabrication. Bryan had shot with permission from the German authorities, but the producers knew that the hullabaloo would aid them in publicity terms. What they were not willing to admit was that some of the German propaganda footage had been acquired, perhaps illicitly, through Fox Movietone.

The German consulate was quite irate and accused *The March of Time* of having stolen the footage from German newsreels, and Louis de Rochemont and Henry Luce had to defend themselves. In a later account, Richard de Rochemont stated that Grierson suggested "that my brother tell them the film had been seized by the British authority and that *The March of Time* had obtained it from the Canadian Film Board. As far as I recall it was a complete fiction but that was the story and they stuck to it."[49] In this case, Grierson's knowledge of "the ropes of British officialdom" was fundamental in providing a believable account that would validate the stories that best suited *The March of Time* producers. The key was, as de Rochemont recalled, that whether the footage was smuggled or authorized "there was nothing much the Germans could do. It was out."[50] Once again, the ends justified the means.

Indeed, the film's publicity benefitted from rounds of controversies, validations, and invalidations. In Britain, where Hitler's expansionist policies were "pragmatically" tolerated, the vice president of the BBFC said that "the public exhibition of this picture in England would give grave offence to a nation with

whom we are on terms of friendship and which it would be impolite to offend."[51] The British authorities' assessment that some of that content was inappropriate to their specific context is a recognition of its relevance, even if not of its truth value, of at least the consequences that the content would have if taken as true. This underlines the trust audiences and censors endowed to a source like *The March of Time* for its potential to influence a vision of the political situation of the moment.

These cases of censorship and diplomatic incidents preceded Anstey's "Arms and the League" (1938), a story personally written by Louis de Rochemont. In an unusually cheery tone, the Voice of Time opened the episode stating that the arms trade had brought prosperity to many countries as weapons were currently being shipped to Spain and the Orient. The voice ran over a dynamic sequence of images that included a silhouette of a factory with smoking chimneys, and close-up shots of the transportation, unloading, and storage of munition and dynamite boxes. The energy of this sequence suddenly drops with a shot of British newspapers announcing an increase in Britain's arms expenditure, while the narrator points out that despite this rise, the country still lags behind in the international arms race. This sequence contextualized the actual news event: foreign minister Anthony Eden's "dramatic resignation" after facing opposition from Neville Chamberlain in his attempt to take a stronger stance against fascist Italy in the League of Nations. A background sequence on the League of Nations and its peace aims follows: its hopeful first ten years come to an end with Japan's attack on Manchuria and its subsequent withdrawal. Germany's rearmament and Italy's invasion of Ethiopia complete the triptych of challenges to peace posed by the Axis. This downward spiral of events culminates in Hailie Selassie's frustrated address at the League of Nations in 1937.

The film included reenacted footage of protests against Chamberlain in defense of the league. Anstey was aware of building workers taking part in antiappeasement demonstrations in Grosvenor Square and went there and asked to reenact them.[52] The workers called up an "extraordinary" meeting in the afternoon and marched around the square again. Anstey shot the protesters putting up posters with mottoes like "Stop the Betrayal of Peace" and "Stand by the League." During the shooting Anstey was arrested and had to appear in court. His role in arranging the march's reenactment was considered "conduct calculated to cause a breach of the peace."[53] When the film was finally edited and sent to the BBFC, it was denied a certificate because again it was "unfriendly to a friendly power." [54] Anstey spoke to the foreign secretary and understood that the censors had shown it to the Foreign Office, who gave orders to ban it.

Perhaps what the Foreign Office found unflattering was a piece of Timese voiced on top of some of the images shot by Anstey: "In England, crowds are

dismayed as Prime Minister Chamberlain, in order to be free to bargain for Britain with the fascist nations who smashed the League's powers, drops his foreign secretary Anthony Eden, champion of the League of Nations." This failed to portray Chamberlain in a favorable light. The film took sides with Eden, presenting him as an idealist and true defender of peace, like Woodrow Wilson before him. Seeking help to release the film, Anstey appealed to Winston Churchill through his journalist son Randolph, but Churchill replied that he could not help. Years later Anstey said that although history had sided with Eden, for pragmatic reasons, it was too early for Britain to have gone to war. The film was never shown in Britain. *Life* covered the events, nevertheless, with a provocative spread titled "Britain Tries Making Friends with the Dictators," which explained Eden's and Chamberlain's different strategies followed by their corresponding personal profiles, including, in *Life*'s characteristic lighthearted tone, a comparison between their moustaches.[55]

Some months later, another *March of Time* story covered the Munich Crisis. "British Dilemmas" appeared in the US in September 1938 but was severely edited in Britain, being released only later in the year under the more restrained title "Britain and Peace" that dealt with Britain's preparedness for war. These examples illustrate the frictions between the US editorial line and the politics of the context of reception, where decisions of UK regulatory institutions like the BBFC were final.

THE INFLUENCE OF *THE MARCH OF TIME* ON GRIERSON'S PRODUCTIONS

Meanwhile, Grierson had gone to Canada where he was appointed film commissioner in 1939. In an address on the National Film Board of Canada's (NFBC) mission, he noted the importance of *The March of Time* in reaching out to millions and mentioned how he had welcomed their cameramen to shoot a film there.[56] Indeed, Grierson was then collaborating with the American series but also taking inspiration from them to begin work on a short news documentary series *Canada Carries On* (1940) and then later on *World in Action* (1942). Joseph Clark notes that these series evolved from a vibrant nonfiction film culture of Canadian producers partnering with international companies to offer newsreels of local interest.[57] While it is necessary to acknowledge Canada's existing ground for talent, concerns, and expertise, these conditions need to be considered alongside Grierson's impetus to develop something similar to *The March of Time* and the pressing political and institutional context of the war. Taking this into consideration results in a more comprehensive view of the origins and existence of the Canadian series beyond Grierson's personal involvement.

Grierson's relationship with *The March of Time* while in Canada, however, was embroiled in controversies regarding the reuse of footage from earlier films. He requested *The March of Time* make an episode on Canada, possibly in deference to his previous support and collaboration with the producers. This request resulted in "Canada at War" (1940), which discussed Canada's preparedness for involvement in the war effort. During production, the NFBC and *The March of Time* cooperated closely, as Grierson believed that coverage of Canada's involvement would be beneficial to inform public opinion across the world. Except for Russia, Germany, and Ontario, the film was shown widely. In Ontario local elections were looming and the film's positive stance on war appeared to support the prowar candidate.

In gratitude for its cooperation, *The March of Time* gave a master positive copy of the episode to NFBC and verbally agreed that they could use any footage in their productions.[58] Some footage was included in the *Canada Carries On* story "War Clouds in the Pacific" (1941), which was distributed in the US and released shortly before the Pearl Harbor attack. But Louis de Rochemont claimed that the NFBC was using too much of the original footage from *The March of Time*. Tom Daly, head of studio at NFBC, thought *The March of Time*'s rescinding its previous agreement to use the footage was evidence of the limit to their cooperation when it entailed competition, as *Canada Carries On* was beginning to be known internationally.[59] The dispute was resolved with the NFBC having to acknowledge *The March of Time* as a source when it used the footage, which is striking, considering that the US producers never made clear the origin of their materials. It is also worth noting that, despite Daly's contention that the Canadian documentaries were competing with *The March of Time*, the series had neither the material support nor the research capacity and distribution of the Americans throughout the sixteen years of its existence.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE COLD WAR

For Grierson, the potential international success of news cinemagazines was possible only through private enterprise. He knew that state funds for documentary filmmaking were limited and would not reach large audiences across nations in a competitive market. Looking back on the development of documentary film in the US, he saw *The March of Time* as being "incidentally related to the British approach," noting that the Americans were journalists and not really "concerned with the aesthetic or educational theory, or with social or international problems, except as materials for journalistic features."[60] For him, neither *The March of Time* nor Hollywood had "the educational mind" that would fulfill his idea of documentary in the United States. After the

war, he sought to realize his ambition and started planning to make a news cinemagazine series, *The World Today*, in 1946. In New York he joined forces with Mary Losey, who had worked for the research department and schools program of *The March of Time*. They started to seek funding, and the Rockefeller Foundation, a long-standing supporter of Grierson's career, aided with money for renting an office in New York and hiring personnel.[61] They also garnered economic support from independent producers and distributors Louis B. Mayer and William O. Field, and from United Artists for distribution.[62] Nevertheless, this venture was cut short when the US authorities accused Grierson of being a spy for the Canadian government and revoked his visa. He abandoned the project and the people supporting it, who were also affected by the round of red-baiting and accusations that followed. Grierson went back to London and took a job at the United Nations film office. *The World Today*'s single episode was "Round Trip: USA in World Trade" (1947), directed by Raymond Spottiswoode and produced with money from the liberal think tank the 20th Century Fund.

While the London office had closed in 1939 due to the impending war, Maurice Lancaster, who had been the office's contact man and production manager, became the series' European manager. The connections with Grierson and his network of documentary filmmakers continued, and people like Len Lye joined the series, first as a freelancer in 1941 before moving to New York in 1944 on a visa sponsored by Time Inc. to continue a long-lasting involvement with the company.[63] Another London-based filmmaker, Peter Hopkinson, who had been a cameraman during the war, was recommended by Grierson to shoot a film on Belorussia and Ukraine for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) Mission. Hopkinson's initial outline for the project indicated that he wanted to show a Russia that had emerged both "victor and wrecked by the war."[64] He travelled there between November and December 1946 with Bryan, the same maverick cameraman who provided the authorized footage for "Inside Nazi Germany." Nevertheless, by the time they finished shooting, the UNRRA had wound up its operations in Europe and Hopkinson found himself with a large amount of unprocessed footage of Russia.[65]

In its correspondence with Hopkinson, the UNRRA had stressed the importance of controlling the materials so that they would not be edited and used against the mission's best intentions, which were to strengthen the diplomatic ties between the United States and the Soviet Union.[66] Shot in 35mm, the UNRRA film was meant for theatrical release in order to reach large audiences. Anstey was then head of *This Modern Age*, the British version of *The March of Time* started by the Rank Corporation in 1946. He wanted to acquire the film

materials to distribute them in the Commonwealth. But Hopkinson objected because he did not want to see the film edited down.[67] Through Bryan's involvement, UNRRA accepted giving the footage to *The March of Time* provided that the mission approved the commentary, as the aim was that the Russians developed an awareness of the UNRRA help, whose money came mainly from the United States.

The March of Time gained exclusive rights over six months and planned saturation showing across many theaters in the world. Yet, the producers overlooked that the Russians would have to approve the final version of film, which caused diplomatic resentment and went down through the pages of history years later in East Berlin when Khrushchev said that Americans did not give them a cent after the war. Hopkinson felt personally betrayed, and to compensate, Lancaster was instructed to place him under contract for *The March of Time* with plans to go to New York to shoot a prologue to the episode and meet the producers. Eventually, the prologue, which focused on Hopkinson's individual journey as a filmmaker, was shot in London. The resulting episode was called "The Russians Nobody Knows" (1947) and went beyond the image publicized by Moscow's official propaganda by taking an unrestricted look at Belorussia and Ukraine. The episode often shows self-reflexive shots of Hopkinson with his camera documenting the UNRRA goodwill efforts, which identifies the perspective of the film as that of an individual journalist witnessing the conditions under which the Soviets lived. The film also details how food and all kinds of industrial materials were supplied by the mission and distributed and manufactured under communist principles. While noting that in a recent election voters could choose only one candidate on the ballots—Joseph Stalin—the documentary offers a compassionate look at people striving to resurrect the country after the destruction of war.

The original negative remained with the UNRRA, but *The March of Time* kept a copy for itself when they edited it. Later, as the Cold War animosities grew stronger, the US editors reused some of the footage from "The Russians Nobody Knows" to unfavorably compare Russian and American schools. "Schools March On" (1950) praises the glory of American education and then makes a comparison by introducing shots of Russian kids pulling out books from shelves. While Hopkinson's footage showed conventional English books, in "Schools March On" the later shot is substituted for a close-up of a Marxist textbook, picture of Lenin included, thus fabricating a sequence that would underscore the American propaganda message of strict ideological indoctrination under the Soviet regime (fig. 5).

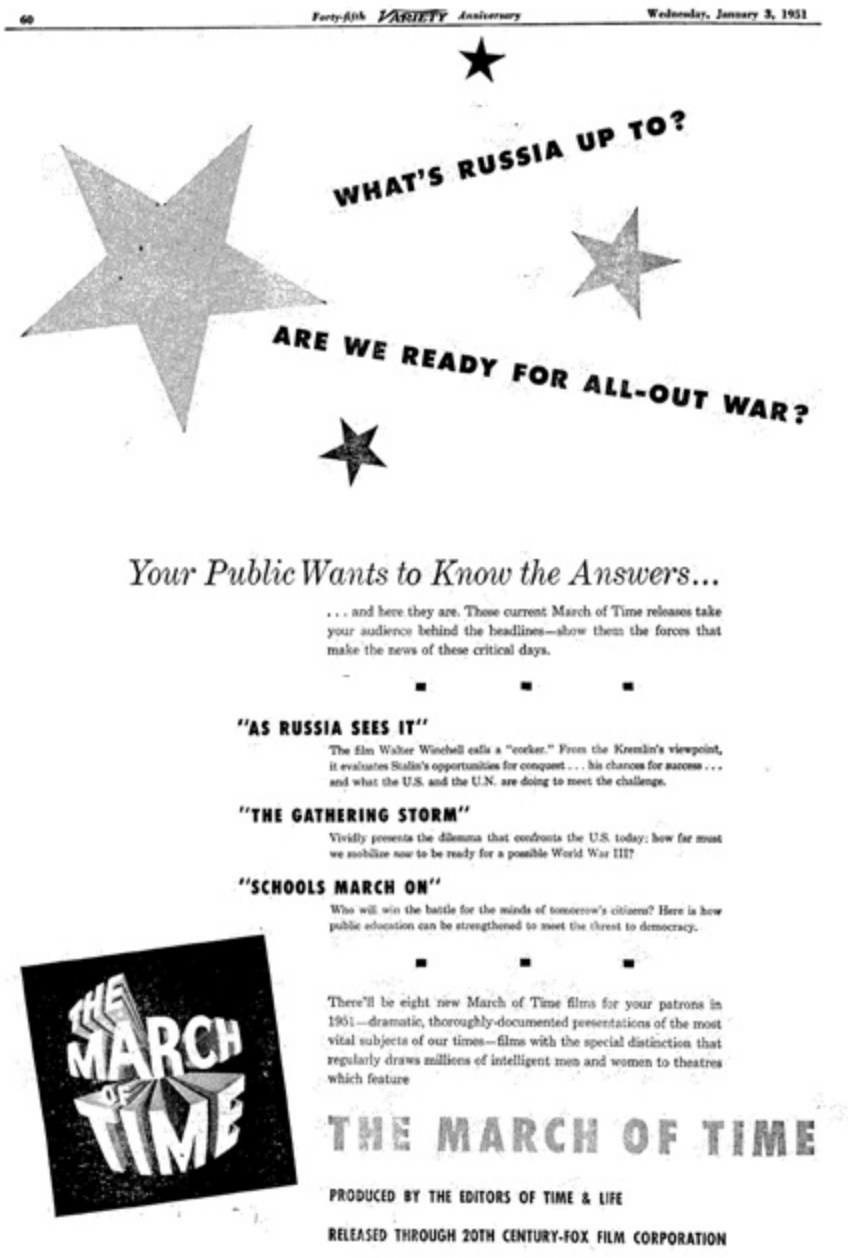

Fig. 5: Publicity for "School Marches On." The new *March of Time* logo was designed by Len Lye; from *Variety*, January 1951. (Image Courtesy of the Media History Digital Library)

CONCLUSION

Backed by the authority and assets of large multimedia conglomerate Time Inc., *The March of Time* survived until 1951. It was expensive to produce and never made money. It was popular and appealed to an international audience with an identifiable format that struck a balance between repetition and variation, between predictability and receptivity to local specifications. The history of *The March of Time*'s work in Britain during the period between 1935 and 1946 reveals a complex network of international production and circulation of documentary films before and directly after World War II. The decisions of different commissioners, consultants, writers, filmmakers, editors, and censors, across the US and the UK, bring into sharp relief the power relationships during the period.

Key to the success of the international production was its engagement with local talent and its degree of creative autonomy, which allowed British filmmakers, for example, to attend to local issues. Some stories sided with Time Inc.'s editorial line, such as proindustrialization in "The Highlands," and the need for the separation of church and state power in "The Tithes War." Other stories introduced social democratic concerns like paid leave in "Britons on Holidays," which differed from Luce's stance toward the welfare state but could be accepted by Richard de Rochemont. International affairs stories proved more problematic, as was the case of "Arms and the League," which was censored by British authorities. The cases of censorship in Britain, which resulted in radically different versions of "East of Suez" and "British Dilemmas / Britain and Peace," reveal these films as characteristically unstable, contingently defined by sets of interactions that varied across time and place and require us to pay attention to power relations in the contexts of their circulation.

Furthermore, *The March of Time*'s combination of news with dramatism led to the establishment of news cinemagazines as a subgenre of documentary in the second part of the 1930s, which influenced later formats like the story documentary and dramatized documentary. Aesthetically, producers and filmmakers at *The March of Time* and the GPO reciprocally influenced each other. The London Office employed already developed talent with their own approaches to characterization and treatment, while the American series encouraged a more relaxed approach to dramatization and reenactment, which resonates in Harry Watt's later work at the GPO under Alberto Cavalcanti and Anstey's heading of *This Modern Age*. Additionally, the journalistic bent of the American series can also be seen in the career of Peter Hopkinson. The influence of the American series is evident as well in Grierson's establishment of news documentary series at the NFBC and beyond.

This is a first approximation to studying *The March of Time* in Britain. A firmer conclusion concerning the relationship between the treatment of local issues and international affairs would require content and textual analysis of all episodes released in Britain. Moreover, to gain a greater understanding of *The March of Time* as an international production, it would be necessary to look at the editorial approach taken in other language editions: French, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Notes

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2. Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time: 1935–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
3. Actors from Orson Welles's Mercury Theater often played parts in *The March of Time* radio series. Interestingly, Wells used the techniques of the radio series in his broadcast of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* and later mocked them in *Citizen Kane* (1941).
4. John Corner, "British TV Drama Documentary: Origins and Developments," in Rosenthal, *Why Docudrama?*, 35.
5. Fielding, *The March of Time*.
6. Fielding.
7. To draw some of the following insights on news' temporality, rhetoric, seriality, and reflexivity, I have followed Frank Kelleter, "Four Theses on the News," *Knowledge Landscapes North America* 273 (Winter 2016): 211–27.
8. Records on items' titles are inconsistent, as before the arrival of single-item issues in 1938, writers and the press sometimes identified them by the title card that introduced the item in the issue—often the name of a geographical location where the narration started—but these were not the actual titles of the individual items. Here I am following the names set when HBO bought the rights from Time-Life, digitized the whole American edition of the series, and made them available through Alexander Street. When I deal with the British items, I am following the collection available at the British Film Institute's National Archive, to which Time-Life donated the extant British episodes, and made freely available on the BFI's online player, accessed September 24, 2019, https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/the-march-of-time. Production records of the series are kept in the US and to these I did not have access. The following research focuses instead on extant materials and documents related to individuals that can be found in Britain.
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16. Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975.
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18. Jonathan Stuart Setliff, "*The March of Time* and the American Century" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2007).
19. Setliff, "*The March of Time*," 3.
20. Interview with Richard de Rochemont, New York, March 11, 1976, C36, John Grierson Archive, University of Stirling, Stirling, Scotland, UK
21. *On the March*, episode 4, "Extra! New British Edition," directed by Orly Bat Carmel, featuring Edgar Anstey, Lothar Wolff, and Rita Andre Vandivert, aired October 30, 1985, on Channel 4 (UK), BFI National Film Archive.
22. "Four Hours a Year: A Picture Book Story of Time Inc. Third Major Publishing Venture, The March of Time," in *The History of Cinema 1895–1940* (Alexandria, VA: Chadwick and Healy, 1987), 1–69.
23. Interview with Richard de Rochemont.
24. Interview with Richard de Rochemont, 3. See also, Forsyth Hardy, *John Grierson: A Documentary Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).
25. Amy Sargeant, "Harry Watt: On Land, at Sea and in the Air," in *The Projection of Britain: A History of the GPO Film Unit*, ed. Scott Anthony and James G. Mansell (London: BFI, 2011), 53–61.
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27. Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera*, 75.
28. Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary: The Story of the Movement Founded by Grierson* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 89.
29. Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera*, 77.
30. Interview with Richard de Rochemont, 3.
31. Watt, *Don't Look at the Camera*, 76.
32. Edgar Anstey, "Some Origins of Cinema Verité," 3, AA: 7: 1, John Grierson Collection, University of Stirling.
33. Edgar Anstey quoted in Robin Shenfield, "When Reel Life Makes News," *Guardian* (UK), October 7, 1985.
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36. Grierson, "The Course of Realism," 202.
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38. *On the March*, episode 9, "British Dilemmas," directed by Orly Bat Carmel, featuring Lothar Wolff and Edgar Anstey, aired December 5, 1985, on Channel 4 (UK), BFI National Film Archive.
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49. Interview with Richard de Rochemont, 4.
50. Interview with Richard de Rochemont, 4.
51. Peter Hopkinson, *The Screen of Change: Lives Made Over by the Moving Image* (London: UKA Press, 2008), 125.
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53. Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary*, 104. Even if less programmatic, the consequences of Anstey's intervention are reminiscent of approaches of later filmmakers like Peter Watkins and Jeremy Deller, who use reenactments to raise historical consciousness and to provoke empathy and personal reflections on social and political issues.
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55. "Britain Tries Making Friends with the Dictators," *Life*, March 7, 1938.
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67. Hopkinson, *Split Focus*.

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