The March of Time: News Documentaries and The Dramaturgy of Modern History as it Happens

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The news documentary series *The March of Time* was a major undertaking in fact-based filmmaking before the arrival of television; its format anticipating many of the later conventions of factual and news programmes and historical documentaries. *The March of Time*'s rhetoric sought to present the world as a given, making historical forces and actors easily grasped, and provoking emotional responses towards its subjects. Issues were released monthly between 1935 and 1951 and there were English, French and Spanish versions. *The March of Time* was backed by Time Inc., the media empire led by Henry Luce, and was closely intertwined with the radio and print enterprises of the latter. Its formula offered longer in-depth treatments and analysis of current social and political events in a manner closer to news features in print and radio. Thus, the series marks a shift in the development of political audiovisual media culture. Time Inc.'s backing meant that the production of *The March of Time* had the budget and research resources to go where the news where and expand on them by using of archival footage from various libraries. Actual footage was mixed with purpose-made re-enactments and dramatisations performed by actors and real characters. Moving away from the short and soft-content of earlier newsreels, it was indeed an original approach to the news format with closer attention to editing, sourcing of images and creation of narrative arcs. *The March of Time* was a defining influence in the way that historical events were mediated for mass audiences as they happened.

The English language version of *The March of Time* had three different editions: the American, the Canadian and the British, where the latter differed not just to adapt to the British dialect but also produced episodes exclusively for British audiences, which speaks of the finely tuned targeting of this mass media commodity. Somewhere else I have examined the production of the British edition of *The March of Time* at its London office (Ramírez 2020), which had John Grierson as special consultant, and some notable filmmakers associated with the General Post Office Film Unit. That study demonstrated the importance of this international connection for the establishment of a distinctive documentary film language in the 1930s marked by didacticism and a liberal view of news media as mediating between citizenship and the state. In the present article, I further this empirical research with an in-depth elaboration on the dramatic and narrative conventions of *The March of Time* and their intertwining with popular forms of modern historical representation (Koselleck 2002), which in turn reveal the character of liberal mass media's engagement with political culture. The focus will be on the iconic representation of political personalities as embodiments of nations and the identification of historical forces in emotionally-driven dramatic structures. Thus, I will argue on the importance of a dramaturgy that emphasises political personalities and disruption in the rhetorical construction of history in news documentaries.

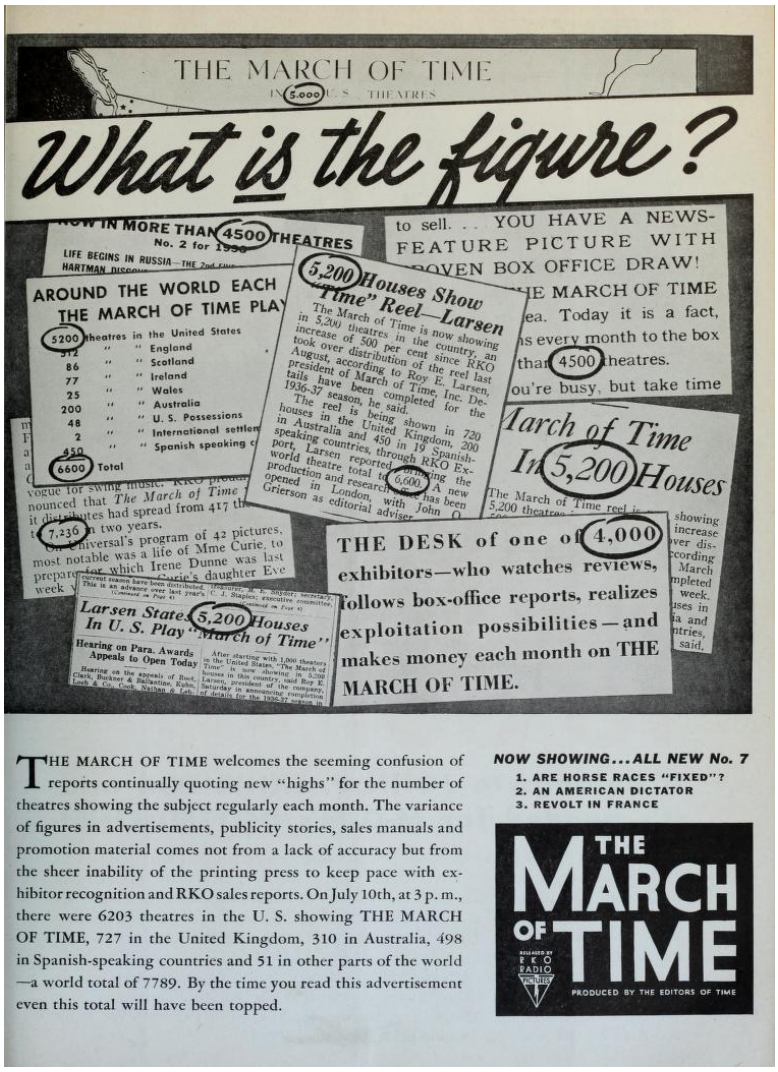

Fig. 1. Publicity for The March of Time in Film Daily, March 1937. Image Courtesy of Media History Digital Library

Newsfilms and Political Personalities as Celebrities

According to Bell (1991), the treatment of the newsworthy in different media depends on the journalistic practices of the deadline and the scoop, as well as on the possibilities and constraints of different technological formats. In the first decades of cinema, newsreels covered current events in short films that accompanied the main feature or were screened in specialised theatres. But newsreels were slow competitors to the hungry news-issuing media of radio and print, as film could not keep up with pressure of constantly streamlining news due

to the more time consuming, cumbersome and expensive aspects of film production, distribution and exhibition at that time. As a result, newsreels tended to cover staged events such as ceremonies, press conferences and social events with long shelf-value. Despite the technological hindrances, the irruption of film in the journalistic realm enabled original approaches to interweaving past and present events into news stories by editing together various footages, using intertitles and adding voice over narration with the arrival of sound. Additionally, newsreels were experienced by collective audiences, as opposed to individual reading practices, offering opportunities for shared simultaneous experiences. In newsreels, audiences saw political figures' appearance, as well as their gestures and actions, and eventually could hear their speech. Such features of the individual became trademarks of the political personality through the magnifying powers of technological mediation (Conner 2003). Modern news' attention to political figures started a symbiotic relationship between political culture and media culture. Even if political leaders have long courted populations and voters through public appearances, the development of mass communication increased the role that the politician's image would play in shaping the political cultural sphere. The distinctiveness of the radio programme *The March of Time,* the predecessor of the film series, was based on the vocal re-enactments and dramatisations provided by voice actors. One of its most popular radio stars was Art Carney, the impersonator of Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose performance could forsake the visual iconicity of the president and concentrate on the vocal aspects. Roosevelt himself had thrived in the presentation of his political persona as close and amenable through his fireside chats, which, Boorstin (1992, 11) defined as 'pseudo-events', situations 'planned, planted or incited', devised only to be

recorded to exhibit the desirable characteristics of the leader. Nevertheless, Roosevelt's advisors complained to the radio programme that people were making him accountable for things they have heard on the radio (Fielding 1978), which speaks of rather blurred lines when it comes to audiences' perception of authenticity. When *The March of Time* film series began, it used filmic re-enactments to visualise private and subjective elements of public events. Roosevelt agreed to occasionally dramatise a political statement for the cameras and lent footage of his fireside chats to the producers but warned against having actors impersonate him, thus keeping in control of how he was represented. There

were other cases where permission was not sought as in the case of Adolf Hitler, even if producing and reproducing his image at that time proved controversial.

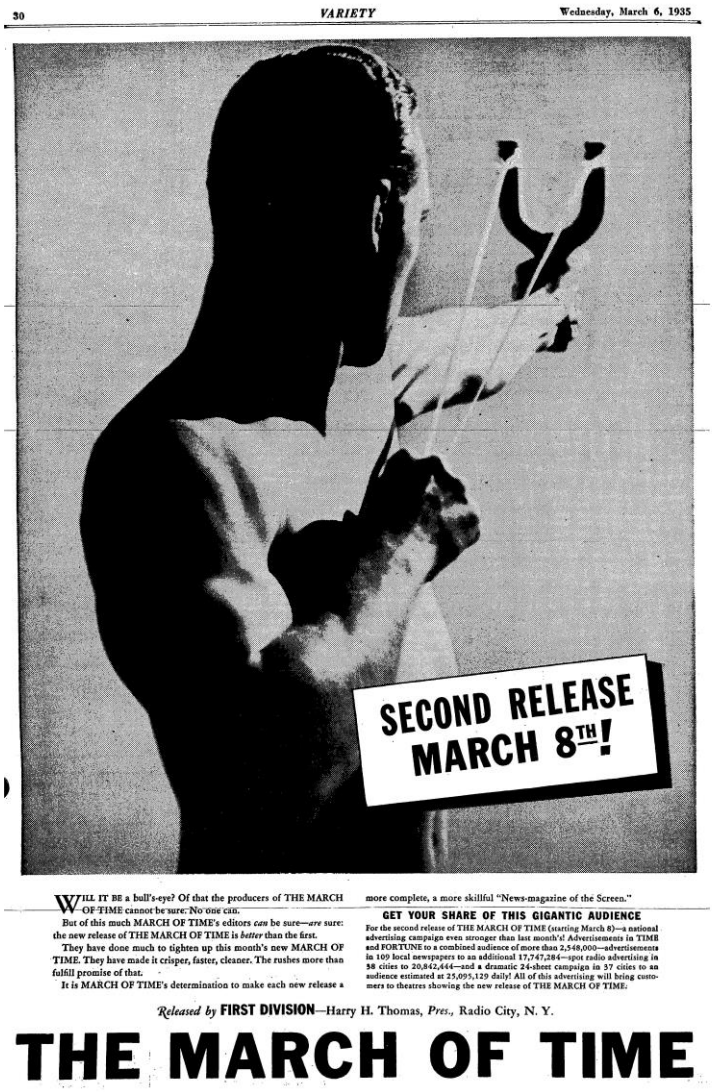

Fig. 2. Publicity for the second release of *The March of Time*. Variety, March 6, 1935.

In March 23, 1935, in preparation for the series' second issue release where one of the stories dealt with Germany, *The March of Time* sent a press note to *The Motion Picture Herald* claiming that there was a ban on using Hitler's image in newsreels, even though this was something denied by other producers, who declared that some might have been cautious when reproducing antisemitic propaganda but that they would rather leave exhibitors to do the censoring. *The*

March of Time press note banked on controversy and avowed to give 'never-before-seen pictures of Hitler as an actor, as a diplomat, as a leader of the Reich.' The episode indeed shows *The March of Time*'s bold approach to re-enactment and the weight that characterising Hitler's personality as embodiment of the German nation at that point in time played in mediating the understanding of historical events. The story starts with a bird's eye shot of a snowcapped mountain. The title card exclaims 'Berchtesgaden, Bavaria!' rousing the audience's interest as being a distant witness to the news events. Next, a shot of a fireplace in dark room quickly cuts to a back shot of man looking downwards in chiaroscuro lighting. The character is in military uniform, wearing a distinctive haircut short on the sides. The authoritative tone of the narrator, also known as the Voice of Time, says with characteristic backwards syntax 'to a mountain retreat in the Bavarian Alps, an ultimatum from the great powers of Europe sends a lone, strange man, to brood over a bitter fact. He's thus been forced to realise that he is the most suspected, most distrusted ruler in the world today.' The superlative adjectives resonate over the three-quarters medium shot of the man sitting, pondering, with a prominent forehead framed by black hair and eyes darkened. The Voice follows: 'in two short years, Adolf Hitler has lost for his country what Germany had nearly regained, the world's sympathy.' This gives a strong verbal depiction of the German leader, which audiences identify with Hitler because of the iconic resemblance with the actor, performing in a set of the Fox Movietone studios in New York. The introduction also presents an issue or problem: Hitler brooding over the ultimatum sent to Germany by the League of Nations.

The introduction is followed by a quick-paced sequence where the Voice speaks over archival images explaining the origins of the ultimatum. This

background accounts for Hitler's rise to power, the friends and foes he has made with other European leaders, which are named and given an image through actual footage from public appearances. Hitler is not the only one given a ponderous personality description. The narration strongly characterises others and how their temperament and physical disposition motivate their corresponding places in the political game, underlining how the perception of the individual's character becomes a historical force in itself. It starts from 'revered Paul von Hindenburg' who appears next to a child, evoking the figure of a trusted old man, but this image is disturbed, as noted by the Voice, when Hitler stands next to Hindenburg as Chancellor, which appears in contrast with the previous grandfatherly representation. Next, Benito Mussolini appears proudly introducing Hitler to masses of Italians in Venice, his hands firmly placed on his waist with open legs, a power pose cutting a X-cross silhouette. The German-Italian alliance is disturbed, nevertheless, when the Nazis assassin 'Mussolini's friend, cheery little Chancellor Dollfuss.' The killing of the Austrian Chancellor leads Mussolini to swear revenge, a promise visualized through a slowed down medium close-up of Mussolini speaking aggressively and gesturing with his pointed finger and then clasping his fist. Here, *The March of Time* editors exaggerate the Italian leader's fierce personality through the slow-motion technique, exploiting his iconicity and kineticism to make him look like a hyperbolic political creature. The fascist's aestheticization of politics that Benjamin (1992) called attention to, here is amplified and ridiculed for purportedly liberal aims, but as shown next, liberal politicians are also aestheticized, demonstrating what Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) viewed a consequence of larger processes of mass mediatisation. The Nazi's attack on Italy's ally explains the approximation between Mussolini and

‘France’s swarthy little Pierre Laval’, the latter appearing dwarfed by Mussolini’s blocky figure. The following run of images amounts to the third part and narrative complication. Footage taken by Fox Movietone cameras in Berlin shows the power of Hitler over the masses, the electoral victory in the Saar and his success at rearming Germany under the leadership of whom is called ‘Hitler’s understudy: Airmen Minister Goering, even more distrusted than Hitler!’ This sentence is underscored by the image of a large Goering seating at an outdoors table, eating, drinking a beer and toasting to an offscreen audience, an image of controlled excess, but marking the ordinariness of the political figure, the private collapsing into the public. The fourth and last part, in a short but effective way, notes that Britain’s reluctance to believe in Germany’s rearmament has finally been shattered. Towards the end of the story, the narration makes a loop in the chronology going back to Hitler at the fireplace and the League’s ultimatum.

News and the Order of Narration

The March of Time followed a format developed in the U.S. journalism in the late nineteenth century, what Schudson (2003) calls the inverted-pyramid style where the news starts with a summary lead. Accordingly, the narrative does not follow the chronological order of events but first establishes what is more important about the news item. By starting from the lead, journalists are not just reporting but analysing and editorialising and, depending on existing consensus on a given topic, these will be done more or less moderately. Nevertheless, whereas print news follows the lead with a more fragmented and often inconclusive narrative structure, Schudson notes that in audiovisual news stories, process, mood and story are more important and thus require stronger connections among existing

narrative strands and more closure or pointing forward. Drawing from multiple storytelling and pictorial conventions, *The March of Time* adopted the inverted-pyramid formula while emphasising mood, tone and a stronger closure, which influenced the development of the problem-solution format which became a staple of later documentary practices (Nichols 1992).

Contemporary critics of the series sometimes noted the lack of "disclaimers" on re-enacted or dramatised sequences, such as the one of Hitler by the fireplace. To the reproach that the series were 'presented as a news photograph only, and nowhere is it captioned as news with editorial interpretation' *The Motion Picture Herald* responded that newspapers often editorialise without saying so, as in the time of the Spanish-American War and World War I, and questioned whether the difference was much bigger when done with a camera instead of a linocut (March 2, 1935). The response thus established that journalistic impartiality is only a problem when there is no consensus about the issue in question.

The image of Hitler pondering over the ultimatum acquires a different tone when the background on rearmament and expansionism is stated. The fireplace now evokes another conflagration, the destruction of war. The story reaches its conclusion noting the unlikeliness of Germany returning to the League to sit next to 'England's smiling Sir Anthony Eden', presenting the physical image of the British politician to connote the country's superficial diplomacy. There is a note of gravity too, saying that only Germany knows how it will respond, so the solution to the problem raised by this story remains open. Despite this openness, the episode finishes by asserting Europe's strength against fascism through an energetic montage s of military troops on parade and images of European leaders

marked with a reassuring final statement: ‘Europe is on guard... Time marches on!’

The March of Time’s used re-enactments and dramatisations for their iconic and kinetic powers of representation while forsaking claims on full objectivity. As noted by Steven Lipkin (2002), indexically iconic representations such as the actor’s physical resemblance to Hitler are key to filmed re-enactments, where most of the information is relayed in indexical form. For Lipkin, iconicity is a warrant that grounds the claims this interpretation of events is making, for in filmed re-enactments the aim is to persuade audiences that events develop the way they are being presented. Re-enactments and dramatisations bring the historical to a personal level, connecting the emotion produced by the re-enacted actions to the experience of history. The screenwriters wanted to persuade audiences that no one knows what Hitler would do, and this is warranted by the performance of the actor pondering alone instead of surrounded by advisors. Visualising this private aspect of Hitler, in both his uniqueness and ordinariness, emphasises his personality and implies the unpredictability of the statesman, thus engaging with the narrative on the incapacity of the League of Nations to hold Germany off, and inscribing the news item into the larger historical temporality of progression towards war. With its emphasis on dramatic conflict explained by an intersection between personalities and external factors, ***The March of Time*** paints a picture of the current state of affairs and historical developments that could be read in a moral way by audiences, thus this instance of mass media ideologically aligns viewers to suspect of the Nazis’ intentions. Audiences in 1935 would have expected this news to return, because news are serial narratives with various long running strands where the development of events it is not in the imagination of writers but

on various temporal courses and historical forces (Kelleter 2016). In lacking the possibility of real-time actualisation, *The March of Time* shifts the emphasis in the storytelling from the novelty of the newsworthy to that of what is 'know-worthy', which sets off to provide a persuasive account of the characters' motivations and their stakes in history.

"Soaping" Politics and the Emotional Public Sphere

There is another implication to how the series used emotions and character to communicate about historical events; its value for engaging with politics. Van Zoonen (2003) speaks about how media's emphasis on personal and emotional conflict has often been denigrated as a feminisation of politics and a sign of crisis; politics becoming like 'soap operas.' This perception results from the modernist discourse on politics and media, which passes through Habermas' notion of the public sphere (1989). Habermas presupposed that rational analysis and discussion of news' information is a prerequisite for political participation. However, Habermas excluded from his consideration the voices of the working classes and other marginalised groups, what Negt and Kluge (1993) called the counterpublics. Emotional actions and judgements, or questions related to the private realm are typically associated to women, and therefore undervalued and underrepresented in dominant political discourse. Van Zoonen argues, however, that media representations emphasising private and emotional aspects create more relatable political characters and actions, which might result in wider citizen engagement with politics. While empirical evidence is still necessary to ground claims such as these (McKernan 2011), the case of the popular series *The March of Time* demonstrates that the "soaping" of politics was part of the early development of the

news documentary format. Despite the complex chronologies implied in its order of narration - complexities that would be more easily understood by middle-class educated audiences used to reading the inverted pyramid structure of print news, its visual language and focus on the emotional aspects of news stories could make the news more relatable to audiences less acquainted with such complex journalistic formats.

Fig. 3: Publicity of The March of Time from Motion Picture Herald, May 1937. (Image courtesy of the Media History Digital Library)

From the above discussion some conclusions can be drawn. First, the politician embodies the state not in a quasi- eternal or essential way like monarchs

or dynasties, but in a more transient way since a politician's representativeness is subject to their individual career's rise and fall. Second, the idiosyncratic qualities of the state at a certain point in history are made legible through the mediation of the leader's body and character, which in the case of Hitler collapses the real one and the actor through shared iconicity and kinetic performance. Finally, supporting *The March of Time*'s own publicity claims, current statistics show that after Hitler's rise to power, U.S. newsreels producers moved away from giving coverage to Hitler. Bradshaw (2005) notes that forty-five percent of all U.S. newsreels editions in 1932 dealt with Germany, dropping to a seven percent in 1937. *The March of Time* invited controversy and pressed to take sides against inertia and silent consensus compared to other newsreel producers (Fielding, 1974; Doherty, 2013). However, the question remains as to whether more newsfilm coverage of fascism would have changed the perception and subsequent actions against its threats, especially considering the complexities of historical causation.

Poland and the Life of a Nation

An episode released in June 1937 titled 'Poland and War' also appeals to the value of personality in politics. In this case, the central figure is the Polish General Józef Klemens Pilsudski who is characterized as a strong grandfatherly character, a source of authority and direction in the life of Poland. Importantly too, this episode trac the history of the modern Polish nation-state and, as explained in detail below, contains a re-enactment of a pogrom against Polish Jews, but this representation was subdued in the British edition of the series. Predictably, the story followed the four-part structure. First, in the lead, contemporary Poland

appears threatened by the imperial ambitions of surrounding powers, especially Germany. The free city of Danzig is introduced with an image of the old port with the distinctive silhouette of its medieval crane and is noted as having a key role to play in the impending war. The image, as well as others included in the background segment which explains Poland's history and its achieving of nationhood after World War I, were shot by freelance travelling cameraman Julien Bryan, who frequently sold his footage to *The March of Time*. From Bryan's 1936 visit to Poland, there also appears footage of churches, Catholic processions, peasants working the land, factories and modern buildings. This segment establishes the narrative of the nation achieving its current statehood where traditional economic and religious practices co-exist with modern industry and civilian institutions. The Poland that comes across is a nation trying to achieve freedom yet likely to have a convulsed future. Engaging with typical ways of depicting nation-state, maps and territory appear to ground the abstract idea of the nation on to something with a physical substrate, the territory. Furthermore, the animated maps that show the changes in the area named Poland across time spatialise what is a temporal development. Here, the news documentary is engaging with its didactic, liberal aim, that of educating the public about the Polish nation and to legitimate state institutions such as the army, as noted next.

The maker of the modern nation is "hard bitten" General Pilsudski. Introduced with triumphant trumpets, through his military rank and authority he made the Polish army the backbone of the nation-state. The segment celebrates Pilsudski for driving Bolsheviks off the new Poland, building up an army drawing from peasants, abolishing serfdom, and giving Jews relief from Czarist persecution. This last assertion is illustrated with Bryan's footage of Jews in the

street, old and young people, some of them aware of and smiling to Bryan's camera. The narration continues with another strategic achievement: Pilsudski has built the modern port of Gdynia so not to rely on German Danzig. This last sequence is accompanied by animated violins, highlighting a major accomplishment of Pilsudski. But the music changes and the pace slows down. The Voice speaks with somber tone over images of Pilsudski lying dead surrounded by flowers. 'Before beloved Grandpa Pilsudski's work is done, he lies dead. And in his funeral procession, among all his generals, marches no man hard-bitten enough, profane enough, big enough, to fill his shoes.' This assertion contains elements of intonation, alliteration and rhyme creating positive affect for the lost character and an effect of gravitas hovering over the following images of uniformed army men marching solemnly at the funeral procession. The next intertitle appears in contrast, as with trumpet fanfare announces: 'As new leader, Pilsudski's followers pick from among themselves a mild-mannered army general - well-schooled Edward Smigly Rydz.' Smigly Rydz appears smiling but he is assessed as a lesser personality in comparison to his predecessor, the Voice lacking the enthusiasm with which it previously described Pilsudski's leadership. Smigly Rydz's overall friendliness and ambivalence towards other countries is noted with scepticism. As in the story on Germany, the narrative on the potential course of events passes through the personality of the leaders.

The image of Joseph Goebbels doing the Nazi salute as he walks across Danzig covered in Nazi banners introduces the complication in the last part of this issue. He is described as 'clubfooted Chief of Hitler's propaganda machine, Dr. Joseph Goebbels.' The voice warns that, covered in swastikas, Danzig does not seem a Polish city anymore. These images are propaganda footage supplied by the

Nazis themselves, as it was common practice but not unproblematic among newsreels producers (Doherty 2013). A more acute problem comes next. Accelerated violin music accompanies the frontpage of a newspaper in Yiddish with the image of an elderly Jewish man injured in the head. The Voice speaks alarmedly: 'And to Europe from Poland itself comes more disquieting news.' The melodramatic music increases in intensity followed by an establishing shot of a dimly-lit market square where people run from side to side in agitation. This quickly cuts to a medium close-up of an old woman being attacked and then screaming and running scared. The narrator states: 'in the ghettos, for the first time in many years, pogroms are breaking out.' Images succeed each other in a phrenetic sequence: a tilted low angle shows a cart transporting cabbages being tossed aside and its humiliated owner being attacked with a torch by a large man with a prominent moustache. The market square appears again in a long shot. People with large, rounded hats and long beards run away from dark figures carrying torches in a scene of chaos and violence. This market scene is a re-enactment but its factuality is validated from the start with the appearance of the Yiddish newspaper. The exaggerated dramatism of the images and accompanying music slows down and the Voice says 'in the repeated attacks on Jews are seen the workings of Hitler's machines' while displaying a set of obituaries and the real footage of Jewish people transporting a coffin in the street and looking directly at the camera. The sequence's emotional impact operates through empathy - vulnerable people being attacked, and generalisation - it mentions "the ghettos"

instead of being specific about Danzig, despite pogroms having been reported in the city already in 1936 (Echt 1972).

Two points can be noted on this sequence. First, about censorship during this time. The release of *The March of Time* in the U.S. fell on a grey line between traditional journalism and dramatic features. Despite it being released in commercial venues it was dubbed 'pictorial journalism' so it was not overseen by the Breen Office. The producers took advantage of this, and the series thrived on courting controversies and agitating public opinion. *The March of Time* could also mount its defence on free speech in the press, since Luce's emporium had their back and when local boards attempted to censor it, the debates sparked editorials on the need to denounce the dangers of fascism, as noted above. In Britain, however, *The March of Time* had to be sanctioned by the British Board of Film Classification. Accordingly, the 'clubfooted' adjective that first introduced Goebbels was deleted, as well as the press clip and the narration explicitly mentioning the return of pogroms behind which were the Nazis. What British audiences saw was only the re-enacted market sequence accompanied by the melodramatic music. This and other instances of censoring of *The March of Time*'s treatments of Nazi-related matters demonstrate again the British authorities' stance towards Nazi Germany at that time, where negative publicity was best avoided (Ramírez 2020; Low 1979).

The second point is about the value of re-enactments as interpretations of subjective experiences and how these interpretations are codified and become part of news narratives engaging with history. Lipkin argues that by performing the past, re-enactments 'offer us a performance of memory' (2011, 1) whereby personal memories become public memories. The pogrom sequence is situated in

a typified yet concrete space of the market, the actors exhibiting iconic gestures of fear, pain and confusion. The duration of the sequence focuses on the violence of the pogrom, calling audiences to relive and mourn the trauma of the aggression, addressing audiences as social and moral subjects who must know, not just about facts and events, but about how these feel. What is worth knowing is imbued with a persuasive emotional charge. While the re-enactment provided audiences with a point of access to the historical events: the Nazis' targeted violence against Jews, how this knowledge translated in some form of participation in the public sphere is limited, for one, *The March of Time* was a minority in terms of representation of these events, and two, the public of liberal news was assumed to be a homogeneous one, the default white middle class educated man, and news consumption can be a civically-minded yet sterile effort not necessarily linked to further action. *The March of Time* can be considered what Jill Godmilow calls 'the liberal documentary' which relies on the creation of a safe and distanced feeling of empathy through which the audience feels they are 'caring citizens' (2022, xi).

Considering the aesthetic qualities of the pogrom, this is a fast sequence, quickly increasing in dramatic tension and culminating in the tragic image of people carrying a coffin. Following Nichols's typology of re-enactments (2008), the pogrom scene would be a case of realist dramatisation, which aims for a verisimilar, almost transparent representation. The chiaroscuro lighting, however, not only disguises flaws in the production but also fits the darkness of the subject matter, so there are some elements of stylisation in this case, but overall, *The March of Time*'s re-enactments tended to have rather stilted performances and standard camerawork and editing. Additionally, there is a clear contrast between

the aesthetic quality of the re-enactment and the archival footage of the funeral procession, the latter showing different stock quality, shot in natural light, and having the subjects looking directly at the camera. The contrast between the appearance of the melodramatic pogrom and the actuality of the pallbearers could have been apparent to viewers, something that can be thought through Jaimie Baron's notion of the archive effect (2014). Baron's idea seems well suited to understand what *The March of Time* was doing and its effects on audiences. The series collapsed the distinctions between the indexical document and the iconic re-enacted footage because what was important was the selection and order that underpinned the dramatic moments to be experienced by audiences and so to be persuaded by its claims. The episode 'Poland and War' finished with an implied vote of no confidence for Smigly Rydz, leaving 'embattled Poland the last question mark in European politics.'

News Reports, Novelties, and the Fate of Nations

Audiences in 1937 would have expected this news to return, not only because of the convulsive mood of inter-war Europe but also because, news are serial narratives assembled as commodities which, in capitalist culture, are to be consumed periodically (Kelleter 2016). However, the packaging of reality as news often favours shock at the expense of transparent sourcing or self-reference. Poland appears again in *The March of Time* in 1940, in an episode titled "On Foreign Newsfronts", which frames the beginning of World War II through the news that arrive to the U.S. from different countries. The issue starts by noting the value of the U.S. press and the public service it does for the 'best informed public in the world today are the millions of US citizens who look with confidence to

their favourite news sources for the truth and all the truth as American journalism sees it.' Such a statement puts the stress on the independence of news as an institution, which in the U.S. liberal media system does not rely on state subsidies even through it can be questioned to what extent its commercialism can favour the interests of specific commercial interest groups (Hallin and Mancini 2003). The statement also emphasises the need to accurately represent reality, yet it introduces an element of subjectivity in recognising the particular perspective U.S. journalists on it. This extolling of the U.S. press is followed by a background on its correspondents in different European countries and their reporting on the growing confrontation. News offices and their correspondents in London are introduced by their name and affiliation. Here there is no mention of state censorship, only notes on the resistance of Britain to become involved in the war. The narration then moves to Berlin where the Ministry of Propaganda not only controls domestic information but has also clamped down on the foreign press, this represented through stilted re-enactments of the journalists William Stoneman and Otto Tolischus themselves, who were expelled from the country. The illustration of the Nazi's unyielding attitude towards journalists is followed by news from Berlin on the signing of the Treaty of Non-Aggression with Soviet Russia, a defiance to Britain and France that signalled that 'the invasion of Poland was under way.'

So far, the episode has only claimed the legitimacy of U.S. journalism as a mediation between publics and politics, but at this point, the music irrupts with accelerated piano and drumming over the image of a warship firing bombs. The narrator speaks urgently with ever increasing sense of drama: 'reporting the first battle of the Second World War, newsmen saw the Westerplatte Fortress in

Danzig hold out for seven days against the combined German attack by land, sea, and air.' The narrator presents the images as if they were from news cameras, but they were taken by the Germans for propaganda purposes, including shots filmed from the German battleship SMS Schleswig-Holstein itself. The story of the attack on the Polish garrison in the Westerplatte does not occupy long in this story, with the narration moving quickly to images of German tanks advancing on the ground and a low angle close-up of Hitler doing the Nazi salute. The narration swiftly links the Polish defeat at Westerplatte with the simultaneous advance to Warsaw. The change of location also brings other concerns: 'from the plains of Poland came the first accounts of a new method of warfare: the attack that strikes like lighting, the Nazi Blitzkrieg.' The narration emphasises the novelty of the event, the unexpected use of lighting strike methods which packages these events with an aura of dramatic unprecedentedness and technological sophistication, a truly modern, even if destructive, achievement. Nevertheless, the sense of novelty and disruption is rhetorically inflated for shock value.

Just as much as the images of the Schleswig-Holstein were not taken by news cameras, the lighting war was not the first time that was reported in the news, including *The March of Time*'s own coverage. In August 1937, a few months after the German bombing of the Basque town of Guernica, it released 'Rehearsal for War' an episode dealing with the then one-year long Spanish Civil War, which had seen German air raids from the start. The story of 'Rehearsal for War' is presented from the perspective of the U.S. military strategists distantly studying the lighting strike methods used by the Germans and Italians in aid of the Rebel Nationalist Band. The Voice insists on 'U.S. military experts are watching embattled Spain where the theory of war by quick annihilation is having its first

dreadful trial.' sentencing that such is 'a preview of wars to come.' From these inaccuracies and lack of self-reference, *The March of Time*'s reporting comes across as fast recounting and connecting of historical events which is less concerned with precision or authenticity and more with dramatic, sensational effects.

Figure 4. Publicity for The March of Time in Motion Picture Daily, January 1935. Image Courtesy of Media History Digital Library

As in most modern historical narratives, in the episode 'On Foreign Newsfronts' there are two schemes or sets of interrelated abstract concepts that

underpin the drama of the stories and drive them forward: progress and liberty (Koselleck 2002). *The March of Time*'s fascination with the role of warfare, its technological sophistication and possibilities as historical force, responds to the modern scheme of progress. Its very name and graphic imagery creates a strong link between the course of history and military power, betraying a fascination with military aesthetics, order and authority which is not unique to fascism. Meanwhile, the narrative on Poland's role in World War II can be clearly seen through the conceptual structure of liberty. This is patent at the end of the sequence, after recounting the Soviet advances on the Polish Eastern Front, the narrator concludes 'in less than a month, free Poland had ceased to exist and reporting the fall of Warsaw, newsmen wrote the ending to the first chapter of the unfolding history of the Second World War.' While this episode followed with the news from other war fronts, the closure of the sub-story on Poland exemplifies *The March of Time*'s engagement with historical narratives while maintaining a degree of openness characteristic of serial narratives, which in the case of news is constricted by the boundaries of the unfolding real. The story of Poland is left on a cliffhanger of emotional intensity, the drama of having lost its freedom, but there

is an implicit trust on future times bringing something new, leaving a space open for change and hope.

Figure 5. Publicity for The March of Time in the Motion Picture Daily Yearbook, 1937. Image Courtesy of the Media History Digital Library

The Many Legacies of *The March of Time*

Exploring the dramaturgy of *The March of Time* through the representation of historical agents and narrative structure, I have considered three key conventions or formal elements of in the construction of history in these news documentaries. One, the importance of private and personality aspects of political figures to form an understanding of their role as historical agents and how these are imbued by affect. Political leaders appeared as embodiments of the nation and their personalities and actions are their nation's temporary proxies. These dramatic emphases could facilitate a wider range of audiences to engage with political stories and became important elements in political media culture. Two, the introduction of iconic re-enactments and dramatisations,not only underlined the emotional and moral dimensions of a story, but also weaved different temporalities such as the individual's and the social group's into the news story which contributed to the formation of public memories and understanding historical events. Three, the similarities and differences between these news documentaries and modern historical thinking. News shares with historical thinking its use of agents such as the nation, the army and the political leader to sustain cause and effect relationships. In the historical and political context here analysed, stories subscribed to larger narrative schemes such as the search for liberty or the drive towards progress. Characteristic of *The March of Time* was a strong historical background which assimilated current events and individual stories into the larger temporalities of historical narratives but maintained an open even if less cohesive narrative scope because the selection of the newsworthy passed through values such as shock, sensation and moral import. Historical events seem thus malleable, manyfold and polysemic. These three aspects present in *The March of Time* in the mid-1930s mediated the experience of the historical moment and marked a substantial entrance of film in political mass media culture

The March of Time was very influential to contemporary and subsequent film and television formats. While the sequence of *News on the March* in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) is a well-known parody of the series' trademark style, already in 1936, the influential left-wing documentary group Nykino took notice of *The March of Time*'s re-enactment and dramatisation techniques to produce its own news documentary series: *The World Today* (Alexander 1977). More than a mere copy, Nykino's was a critical response, since *The World Today* was to focus more squarely on labour issues and aimed to involve real subjects closely in the script and re-enactments. Nykino also wanted the idiosyncrasy of each story to shape creative direction and editing, instead of imposing an overall trademark format, thus moving away from trying to fit reality into a prescribed sterile format and instead have people actively participating in the constructions of their representations. Even if Nykino only produced two episodes of its series, the drive to respond to *The March of Time*'s dramatic treatment of the news influenced later Frontier Films productions such as *Native Land* (Leo Hurtwitz, 1942) and shows that the series' influence was not a linear force subsequently replicated but rather shapeshifting..

As well as Grierson's attempts to replicate the series in Canada during the war and in the U.S. (Ramírez 2020), there were other successful developments of news documentary series like *This Modern Age* (1946-1951) and *Look at Life* (1959-1969) produced by the Rank Corporation in Britain. The conventions and purposes developed by the series have endured throughout different technological changes and sociopolitical contexts. In today's age of constant news cycles, user-generated content, fragmented audiences and echo chambers, where access to the news is dependent on individually tailored algorithms and databases of all sorts of scales, news documentaries series could be seen outdated but the reality is that the format endures. Audiences are still drawn to

television news features and news magazines, as well as historical documentaries, political biopics and docudramas available through cinemas, television channels and platforms. Attraction to these formats rests on knowing how something happened, seeing that historical figures are relatable, and provoking certain feelings and moral judgements on the course of events represented. These formats make truth claims about the world and seek to occupy institutional spaces, whether it is in the traditional news media or in the spaces for counterpublics opened in the digital sphere, where they can do so. Their relevance is not predicated on the evidentiary value of images but on telling a story about current events that, because of its emotional import, will be salient and remembered. Concerns on provenance and authority of images are still present today and these become pressing when there is no consensus on a topic and quick digital dissemination allow for fake news stories to spread unchecked and persuade people to act upon the basis of misleading information.

The March of Time is now available in digital form for renewed inspection. The many failures and omissions of the project of modernity call into question the schemes of progress and liberty so prevalent in its engagement with historical narratives, today we can still identify successors, critical responses and developments from *The March of Time*'s conventions in subsequent approaches to the mediation of historical experience.

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