89. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 9 December 1923, 2.12; 12 October 1924, 2.7; 2 November 1924, 2.9; and 16 November 1924, 2.6.
90. See the numbered stories, 2.15, 2.16, and 2.22, on the Wayne State University Library website.
91. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 18 November 1923, 2.7, and 19 October 1924, 2.7. See also the newsreel stories, 3R1.6 and 3R1.27 on the Wayne State University Library website.
92. *Detroit News Pictorial* ad, *DN*, 10 September 1925, n.p.
93. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 28 October 1923, 7, 2 November 1924, 2.9, 9 November 1924, 2.7, 23 November 1924, 2.5, and 20 November 1924, n.p.
94. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 16 December 1923, 2.12; 19 January 1924, 3.12; and 19 October 1924, 2.7. See also the newsreel stories, 2.12 and 3R1.19, on the Wayne State University Library website.
95. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 18 November 1923, 2.7; 9 December 1923, 2.12; and 2 July 1925, 37. See also the newsreel story, 2.10, on the Wayne State University Library website.
96. See the football games featured in the *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, from 11 November 1923, 2.7 to 20 November 1925, n.p.
97. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 4 November 1923, 2.7; 11 November 1923, 2.7, 25 November 1923, 2.7; 16 December 1923, 2.12; 1 May 1924, n.p.; 21 March 1925, n.p.; and 5 July 1925, 37. See also newsreel stories, 3R1.5, 3R1.12, 3R1.20 and 3R1.32, on the Wayne State University Library website.
98. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 2 December 1923, 2.7; and 1 September 1925, n.p. See also the newsreel story, 2.20, on the Wayne State University Library website.
99. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 18 November 1923, 2.7; 26 November 1924, 2.7; and 1 May 1924, n.p. See also the newsreel story, 3R2.2, on the Wayne State University Library website.
100. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 11 November 1923, 2.7; and 26 October 1924, 2.7. See also the newsreel stories, 2.8 and 2.17, on the Wayne State University Library website.
101. *Detroit News Pictorial* ad, *DN*, 30 December 1923, 2.7; and the newsreel story, 3R1.25, on the Wayne State University Library website.
102. *Detroit News Pictorial* ad, *DN*, 11 May 1924, n.p.
103. For the full story of the Purple Gang, see Paul R. Kavieff, *The Purple Gang: Organized Crime in Detroit, 1910–1945* (Fort Lee: Barricade Books, 2000).
104. *Detroit News Pictorial* ads, *DN*, 14 October 1923, 7; and 18 November 1923, 2.7.
105. *Detroit News Pictorial* ad, *DN*, 2 December 1923, 2.7.
106. "Troops Escorting Custer Band in Parade," *DN*, 10 March 1918, 1.2; "Whelan Funeral Conducted by K.T," *DN*, 12 March 1918, 5; and "Lillian Russell Heads Noted Cast," *DN*, 15 March 1918, 15.
107. "160 Girls Enroll in New Branch of Detroit Red Cross," *DN*, 10 March 1918, 1.11; "Red Cross Meetings," *DN*, 12 March 1918, 6; and "Polish Countess Tells of Country," *DN*, 14 March 1918, 6.
108. "Fire Destroys Steel Foundry," *DN*, 10 March 1918, 1.2.
109. "Ypsilanti Bridge and Dam Swept Away by Flooded Huron," *DN*, 15 March 1918, 2. This story included two photos.
110. Bell & Howell Col. ad, *Motion Picture News*, 18 September 1926, 1069.
111. Sometime in the summer of 1918, the *Plain Dealer* changed the newsreel's title to Screen Magazine.
112. Gaumont ad, *Moving Picture World*, 4 January 1919, 38.



nine

# technologies of place in the early sound newsreel

## the aerial view

jennifer peterson

> The earth seen from an airplane is something else.
>
> —Gertrude Stein, 1938[1]

Newsreels are not the only nonfiction film genre to have emerged from the early cinema period, but they are one of the most resilient. Together with travelogues, newsreels were among the most powerful visualizations of the modern world in the early twentieth century. As this chapter aims to show, newsreels shared many of the travelogue's techniques for depicting the world's geography. Travelogues spatialized concepts of national identity, and newsreels portrayed the geography of current events with urgent immediacy. Together, these nonfiction shorts portrayed a world that was knowable, understandable, and newly accessible through the wonders of modern technology.

Although the travelogue and the news film both emerged in the silent era, the twenty-year gap between their moments of generic consolidation had important consequences for the way the two genres visualized space and place. Travelogues were a major cinematic genre from the

start of cinema in the 1890s, whereas newsreels did not appear in what was to become their signature form—a branded film series presenting weekly news in a condensed magazine format—until the 1910s. The two genres' mutual concern to depict geography is refracted through the different transportation technologies that were dominant at the moments of their historical emergence. To put it simply: travelogues represent places through perspectives emblematic of the railroad, a quintessential nineteenth-century technology, while newsreels present places through the new perspectives of twentieth-century transportation technologies, in particular the airplane. Upping the ante of the travelogue's head-on moving landscapes, by the 1920s and '30s newsreels regularly presented landscapes through the bird's-eye view of the airplane. By looking at the visualization of place in newsreels and travelogues of the silent and early sound periods, we can begin to understand how technology mediated geography in modernity. These films seem to conquer space as they move through it, envisioning places as territories vanquished by the machines that traverse and depict them.

These technologies of visualization (cinema, railroad, airplane) are symptomatic of the massive economic and geopolitical changes of the early twentieth century, in which rapid urbanization and industrialization took shape against a backdrop of expanded European imperialism, the First World War, and the Great Depression. By the time sound newsreels emerged in the late 1920s, the cinema had become one of the main expressions of the increasing mechanization of modern life. In the early sound era (roughly 1927–34), newsreels presented a progressively technologized view of the world in which aerial views (in stories such as "Aerial Views of Rio" [1930], "Autogiro Sightseeing" [1932], and "Parachute Jumping" [1929]), news stories centered on vehicles (record-setting airplane trips, spectacular automobile races, military ocean maneuvers, etc.), and footage about sound itself, such as "New York Street Scenes and Noises" (1929), documented the world as remade by new technologies.[2]

It is important to consider newsreels (and travelogues) as part of an increasingly complex intermedial network of information in the silent and early sound eras. Films were not the only media to report on news and geography, of course. Radio, newspapers, magazines, and books also competed for the attention of potential movie spectators, and each medium shaped its content in specific and sometimes overlapping ways. Indeed, the Hearst Corporation began collaborating with the Selig Company to develop the *Hearst-Selig News Pictorial* in 1914 primarily as a scheme to expand the circulation of its newspapers.[3] Yet as film expanded its audience share in the 1920s, cinema reached a sizeable mass audience, defining the news for millions of spectators through a powerfully affecting multimedia format. The addition of sync-sound contributed an important new dimension to the cinematic visualization of place.



Building upon my long-term research on travelogue films, this chapter considers how newsreels borrowed from the travelogue's spatialization techniques to create a powerful sense of cinematic geography in the early twentieth century.[4] I argue that the travelogue's particular visualization of place as conquered and commodified territory was a significant influence on the early newsreel. Travelogues and newsreels remained distinct genres that diverged in many of their generic conventions, but they shared a sense of place as something that can be made visually graspable and consumed. Geography functions as territory in both genres, but each inflects this visual regime in different ways. Newsreels often literally documented imperialistic political and military exploits. Ultimately, newsreels took the travelogue's logic of territorialization one step further, using new aerial perspectives to produce new aesthetic and political effects.

Air travel was a topic of unceasing interest in the 1920s, with numerous films made about airplanes, autogyros, and dirigibles as well as famous aviators and their increasingly lengthy journeys; indeed, Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight to Paris was one of the first newsreel hits, having been extensively covered by competing newsreels in 1927. As newsreels depicted geography through aerial views, actually existing places began to appear increasingly abstract. Aerial landscapes lack the depth cues and horizon lines of traditional landscapes and instead flatten out space like a map, but with a constantly moving frame. This is the perspective of aerial bombardment, one of the major new tactics of World War I. Aerial footage in this period not only territorialized but did so from a newly normalized militaristic point of view. While geography and place are important components of almost all films shot on location (this is true of both fiction and nonfiction), early sound newsreels produced a sense of place generated by and through modern technology.

## travelogues and newsreels: the cinema's geographical genres

One of the most significant roles for cinema in the early twentieth century was to present distant lands and different life stories to a public that mostly did not travel (except perhaps for migration). Films shot on location—predominantly nonfiction but also some fiction—excelled in the presentation of geographical places, whether in another continent or in the town over the hill. The news film was one of several genres to foreground the presentation of geography in the silent era, a period in which nonfiction genres flourished. Before World War I, travelogues, news films, nature films, and science films were praised for their educational power and championed by the visual education movement, which argued that "education through the eye" was more powerful than written or spoken lessons.[5] Travelogues and newsreels bear a close generic relationship, and it is worth sketching out the intertwined history of these two genres. The

generative importance of short-format nonfiction films without stars and without narratives was diminished by historians when they identified the film industry with the predominantly narrative and star-driven films of the so-called classical era. But for the first three decades of film history, these types of films excelled in bringing the world's geographies and stories before the eyes of the growing motion picture audience.

Although they were not labeled as such, news films appeared at the dawn of cinema and continued to be a crucial component of cinema in its first decade. Films about the Spanish-American War by Edison, Biograph, and other companies were hugely successful in 1898, and the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 spawned a flurry of current events films, including the noteworthy *Execution of Czolgosz with Panorama of Auburn Prison* (Porter, 1901), which included footage of the actual prison's exterior but dramatized a reenactment of the execution itself.[6] Indeed, a surprisingly wide range of nonfiction genres proliferated in the 1890s and early 1900s such as industrials, nature films, and scenic films, whereas subjects that might be considered news were often classified under micro-genres such as "sports," "parades," "war films," "notable personages," or "topical" films before the mid-1910s.[7] All these categories lived on as individual stories within complete newsreel issues once the regularly released name-brand newsreel emerged in the early 1910s. But the format of a weekly film news magazine composed of individual stories did not appear in the United States until 1911, with the release of the first American-produced issue of the Pathé newsreel on 8 August of that year.[8] The *Pathé Weekly* and Vitagraph's monthly *Current Events* debuted (in the U.S.) in August 1911, but in that same month the trade journal *Motography* could still write, "Some day we may confidently expect to see on the screen a full pictorial newspaper, with all the day's events re-enacted before our eyes."[9] The newsreel, then, might best be seen as a kind of omnibus concept, characterized as much by its number and variety of stories as by its timeliness.

Travel films developed a set of clear syntactic and semantic conventions before the newsreel started to gain ground in the mid-1910s. Once both genres were established, they persisted throughout much of the twentieth century alongside the feature-length fiction films that would come to dominate spectator attention. While there are many differences between the two genres, travelogues and newsreels together present a consistent and coherent alternative to feature-length fiction films. Travelogues and newsreels share formal principles of noncontinuity and fragmentation, emphasizing spectacle as the primary contrivance through which to sustain the viewer's interest. Both attempt to capture and explain the actually existing world with remarkable confidence and brevity, as though it were possible in ten minutes to authoritatively sum up an entire country or a week's worth of the world's current events. Although many travelogues feature current events and many newsreels contain travel stories, however, the genres remained distinct. Travel films and newsreels project slightly different visions of place: the first is more nostalgic and the second more militaristic.

Like travelogues, newsreels alternate between extreme long shots of geographical locations and tighter shots of people facing the camera. These are, after all, the commonsense framing distances of landscape and figure. But it is worth pointing out that fiction films focus almost exclusively on shots of actors, and fiction film camerawork resides mostly in the medium shot/medium long shot realm, punctuated occasionally by an establishing shot taken from an extreme distance. Travelogues and newsreels, in contrast, feature a higher percentage of long shots. Like travelogues, newsreels are characterized by a high degree of movement in most shots, as the dramatic tension resides in the image more than any (mostly absent) character development or narrative. In short, both genres concentrate the viewer's attention not by drawing her into a dramatic story that unfolds over a span of time, but by grabbing her attention with a succession of visual spectacles. This is a world away from narrative suture; rather it is cinema as a succession of dazzling images. However, while the two genres share a relationship to space, they have a different relationship to time. Travelogues have places to show: they work in the realm of timeless mythology and tend to have a languorous, nostalgic tone. This is part of the travelogue's imperialistic imperative, smoothing over territorial conflicts and local histories with the appearance of picturesque tranquility.[10] On the other hand, newsreels have something to report: they are timely, modern, urgent. This temporal difference accentuates the contrast between the genres' styles of territorialization. Whereas the travelogue's train often passed through a landscape that seemed itself unchanging, the newsreel's aerial view often appeared to have the force of military surveillance.

Newsreels came into their own during World War I, but travelogues continued to be popular: Paramount released a weekly series of Burton Holmes–produced travelogues between 1915 and 1921. Indeed, the long-term viability of nonfiction shorts was enabled by the development of films in a series—branding a newsreel or travelogue series with a renowned public personality such as Holmes or Hearst helped nonfiction shorts fit into the film industry's increasingly important star system. When commercially viable synch-sound systems emerged in the mid-1920s, newsreels were one of the first genres in which the technology was successfully exploited. Fox's first sound *Movietone* newsreels, released in 1927, were a great success, and a travel story about Niagara Falls was included in the first all-sound *Movietone* newsreel on 28 October 1927.[11] Sound travelogues followed about three years later with MGM's series *Around the World with Burton Holmes*, which it began releasing in fall 1930 with titles such as *China's Old Man River* (released 1 October 1930) and *Modern Madrid* (released 17 November 1930).[12]

By the 1930s, newsreels were just one of several kinds of short subjects audiences saw in movie theaters. Shorts were regularly exhibited before

the feature film or between two features on a double bill; they constituted a significant part of the moviegoing experience in the classical Hollywood era. For MGM, which distributed the Hearst-produced *Metrotone* series, newsreels were just one of over a dozen shorts series, most of which were produced in-house by the studio's large Shorts Department, including cartoons; comedies such as *Our Gang, Laurel and Hardy* and the *Dogville* series; *John Nesbitt's Passing Parade, Crime Does Not Pay*, and *Fitzpatrick's Traveltalks*. Trade


*Figure 9.1* Cross-media promotion: Advertisement for the Hearst newsreel "Globe Trotter," narrated by radio announcer Edwin C. Hill (*Motion Picture Herald*, 15 July 1933). Hill wrote a regular "Globe Trotter" column for Hearst newspapers and radio programs at this time



paper advertisements demonstrate that newsreels were marketed as just one component of the studio's larger slate of short subjects.[13] In the studio business structure, *Hearst Metrotone* was just one of many series designed to lift the status of MGM and promote the studio brand above all else. Newsreels were unique, however, in that no other short film genre garnered its own dedicated movie theaters, as newsreels did in the 1930s and '40s. Their success as perhaps the most prominent short genre of the classical era is due to their connection to the larger discourse of the news.

A *Motion Picture Herald* advertisement from 1933 illustrates the way newsreels were used for cross-media promotion by the Hearst Corporation: the ad promotes *Hearst Metrotone*'s tie-in with "The Globe Trotter," a section of the newsreel narrated by prominent radio announcer Edwin C. Hill, whose column also appeared in Hearst newspapers and radio programs at the time.[14] The advertisement prominently features an airplane to signify the newsreel's global scope, and significantly, the pilot of the airplane is not "The Globe Trotter" himself but the MGM lion, a symbolic switch that foregrounds the connection between the MGM and Hearst brands. So while newsreels and travelogues both continued to flourish throughout the classical era and into the 1960s, and while both genres—as shorts—occupied a structurally marginalized position, shown in a rotating slot for short-format added attractions alongside the main feature, the newsreel arguably overtook the travelogue in popularity and cultural significance due to its status as part of the larger news media.

## newsreel aesthetics

Though the cinema's geography lessons were articulated mostly in the service of imperialism (a praiseworthy ideology for Progressive Era reformers), a cohort of modernist writers and artists in the 1920s discovered a utopian dimension in such armchair travel, arguing that genres such as travelogues and newsreels could produce empathy across national and cultural divides. In a 1934 article about newsreels, filmmaker and writer Germaine Dulac wrote:

> In the case of the news-reel, the spectator who has paid for his seat in the picture palace is in direct relations with the events, beings, ideas and objects of the whole world, with universal ideas. His relationship is so direct that often the anonymous spectator is inclined to manifest his approval or disapproval in the face of certain happenings or events. He feels that he is part of the events himself, since it is the whole life of the world which passes across the motion picture screen in the brief quarter of an hour reserved to the news-reels. Regular currents of sympathy and antipathy are formed in this way.[15]

According to Dulac, when audiences watch newsreels, "the walls of ignorance and hatred fall."[16] Other critics such as Vachel Lindsay, Louis Delluc, and Béla Balázs claimed that not just newsreels but film in general contained a utopian element, functioning as a kind of new universal language.[17] Dulac's celebration of newsreels must be positioned in the context of a time in which cinema was derided by many as lacking artistic and cultural legitimacy.

While film seemed, for better or worse, to function as the quintessential modern technology, it was one of several key cultural forms, including literature and painting, that informed how technology would be understood and imagined in the 1920s and '30s. I will not rehearse the story here of modernist art's turn toward a machine aesthetic. Let me simply point out that the cinema, with its multimachine components of production and exhibition, was perhaps the medium best suited to capture modernity's technological explosion, and many artists and writers (such as Gertrude Stein) took notice. Perhaps nothing typifies the cinema's technologized understanding of location so much as the aerial view. Characterized by speed, motion, canted angles, absent boundaries, clanging music, and jabbering voice-overs, these aerial views, embedded into a larger compilation newsfilm, give the viewer a breathtaking perceptual experience of speeding across the globe, floating above political boundaries and natural disasters, and spying out critical events in the nick of time.

Criticisms of cinema as a form of distraction persisted across the twentieth century, and as the sound newsreel grew into its role as a familiar and formulaic presence on movie screens, a set of objections to the genre began to emerge. Critics such as Siegfried Kracauer and Joseph Lyford derided newsreels for their "eternal mixture of disasters and silly jokes," complaining that "The customer who really expects to see news in the newsreels is a naïve character."[18] Yet as this critique itself makes plain, newsreels are perhaps better thought of not as news-bearing films, but as something else entirely. The question of the newsreel's cultural function would seem to turn on the balance between the newsreel's educational value and its aesthetic qualities. The genre's relationship to tabloid journalism was plain. But if they were disappointing as an educational genre, did they perhaps fulfill some other cultural function? Perhaps they might be understood as experiential rather than informational, adding aesthetic and phenomenological dimensions to "the news" and to the feature film program.

In 1971, Raymond Fielding could still explain with disparagement that "the newsreel was considered merely an entertainment component in the block-booked program."[19] Within the studio system, the profit motive of MGM and Hearst should come as no surprise, however. It is more interesting to consider the stylistic and political effects of short films within the larger cinema program. In fact, new attention to the newsreel has enabled a more subtle understanding of the genre's informational and aesthetic dimensions,



as in the work of Thomas Doherty and Sara Beth Levavy.[20] Shorts presented a consistent set of alternatives to the hegemony of narrative continuity-based feature films, and newsreels in particular injected highly edited slices of "reality" into the space of the cinema. Through their radically truncated and disjunctive form, a case can be made that newsreels opened up a space for a different kind of viewer experience, cultivating a spectator who was anxious, excited, distracted, or possibly even critical—anything but the lulled and sutured spectator of the feature-length narrative film.

In sketching out some of the ways in which newsreels visualize space and place, I want to make a case for the importance of the newsreel's aesthetic dimension. For while newsreels are typically thought of simply as informational, news-bearing films, they also delineate a strong formal and stylistic system that is entirely distinct from that of the narrative feature films that dominate our cultural imagination of cinema. My intention is not to oversimplify the complex workings of classical narrative cinema, but rather to explore one of its most important historical alternatives. Newsreels are not necessarily (or not only) the "banal and repetitive" informational films they are thought to be. Rather, I agree with a growing number of historians that "the news picture has a great deal to offer art history."[21]

The newsreel's magazine or compilation format, in which up to ten different "newsworthy" subjects were combined into a short running time of about ten minutes, is the genre's distinguishing formal feature. As a randomly chosen example, the *Hearst Metrotone News* issue from 27 May 1931 includes seven different stories, each preceded by a textual intertitle featuring a newspaper-style headline in all caps and a brief textual explanation:

MAHATMA GANDHI MAKES FIRST TALK FOR METROTONE
India's renowned leader gives film interview at home in Borsad.
JUMPING FROGS LEAP FOR TITLE
Mark Twain's famous story is recalled as big field of croakers match hops at Angel's Camp, California.
RURAL GUARDIANS RIDE LIKE ARABS
Star horsemen of Troop G, N.Y. State Police, give you a real exhibition at Sydney headquarters.
MASSING THE COLORS HONORS HEROES
Capital notables attend impressive ceremony for America's war dead at Washington Cathedral.
THIS MAN TEACHES BEES TO BEHAVE
Introducing Geo. Biggers, of Altadena, Cal., whose power over stingers is almost uncanny.
JAPANESE KIDS TO MASS DRILL
School children of Beppu perform flag exercise in sections—first come the girls and then the boys.

U.S. ARMY'S AIR ARMADA THRILLS N.Y.

Remarkable pictures of the greatest sky maneuvers in American history photographed from every conceivable angle by an army of Metrotone cameramen.[22]

Such a quick succession of apparently unrelated topics washes over the viewer too quickly for contemplation. Certain images stand out: the bee-man covered with a swarm of bees, the Japanese boys and girls filing past each other in precision formation. Certain sounds also stand out: Gandhi's extremely quiet voice, a member of the crowd at the airshow remarking from off-screen, "What a beautiful sight. Look at that, isn't that beautiful!" The airshow in this issue demonstrates the era's fetish for aviation in all its forms. But most of all, newsreel issues such as this present a cacophony of images, sounds, novelties, and events. A quick and loud scan of current goings-on, the newsreel experience emphasizes spectacle, discontinuity, and bombardment. It can feel exhausting or exhilarating, depending on the mood of the spectator.

Newsreels were criticized both for their perceived avoidance of controversial subjects and for their "fragmented, sometimes incoherent structure."[23] Although the newspaper's concatenation of stories provided a prototype for this form of presentation, the newsreel's extremely truncated structure—as many as ten individual stories of sixty seconds or less crowded into a ten-minute short—combined with the time-based nature of the medium—there was no stopping the flow for a sip of coffee—provide an experience quite distinct from newspaper reading. In this way, completed newsreel issues feel supplemental to the newspapers that were such a dominant part of daily life in this period: a few moving images to pique the viewer's interest in a novel news item, or a few moving images to bring life to an already known current event.

The newsreel's rushed, fragmented style was prefigured by some of the stylistic elements of travelogue films. And yet, for all their fragmentation, travelogues tend to move at a more leisurely pace than newsreels. *Rio the Magnificent* (Fitzpatrick's Traveltalks, 1932), for example, contains a series of straight-on shots along the coastline taken from a moving boat. Horizon lines are clear, and the city—along with Sugarloaf Mountain—appears monumental. Footage taken on the beach and around town shows local people playing, walking, and looking at the camera, mostly in extreme long shots. Occasionally there is a cut to a tighter medium shot in which facial expressions can be discerned, including one moment of cross-cutting between a monkey and a young black girl that draws a racist parallel between animal and child only moments after the bellicose narrator has proclaimed that "the racial color line seems to be so thinly drawn here that it has become a haven of toleration for all races."

A *Hearst Metrotone* story from 1930, "Aerial Views of Rio," portrays the same city in a different manner, using only extreme long shots taken from a moving airplane. The long shots are so distant here they create a sense of Rio not as a habitable or intimate place but as a space for piloting into and out of, or as a site for military exercises. No human figures are visible at this range, only landforms and the cityscape, visualized as if by an alien outsider, or from a God's-eye perspective. The airplane's engine can be heard on the soundtrack throughout, and the plane's wings are visible in several shots, adding to the mechanical instrumentality of the footage.

The editing of travelogues can be understood as a holdover from the illustrated travel lecture tradition, in which individual images follow one another like a "string of pearls" or a succession of spectacular views. The travelogue's non-continuity editing style follows a logic of collection, regulated by stereotypes and visual spectacle.[24] Newsreel editing uses this same collection principle, but raises its effects exponentially. Sara Beth Levavy has argued that newsreels can be understood as "unclosed narratives," functioning as "a collection of episodes that do not necessarily resolve into a story."[25] Rather than a collection of spectacular travel views, newsreels present a collection of spectacular current events. These events may or may not be considered "hard" news, but they were always current.

In a fascinating 1935 survey of newsreel stories, a group of college sociology students watched forty-five complete newsreel issues from five of the major newsreel brands. According to their findings, individual stories within complete newsreel issues break down into the following thirteen categories:

CONTENTS OF 45 NEWSREELS[26]

| Classification | Percent |
|---|---|
| Sports | 24.8 |
| Human interest | 23.1 |
| Militarism | 10.4 |
| Disasters | 8.2 |
| Imperialism, fascism | 5.9 |
| The New Deal | 5.9 |
| Other politics | 5.5 |
| Aviation | 3.9 |
| Educational | 3.6 |
| Antimilitarism | 3.3 |
| Charity | 3 |
| Crime | 1.6 |
| Religion | 1 |

The newsreel's radically disjunctive structural logic centered on joining together this disparate group of stories under one banner. This is not just a collection of views, but a collection of views inside a collection of subgenres. Moreover, many of these stories would have contained place-images, and the aviation films and disaster films in particular would have likely contained aerial footage. Fragments of place-images scattered across a chaotic jumble of story types; this image of the world was technological, jarring, and in its own way, a form of modernist abstraction.

According to the logic of continuity editing, what I am calling the "collection" principle of editing is a flaw. Indeed, Fielding approvingly quotes a critic who disparages newsreels as "jumpy little postcard collections."[27] This critique might have been better applied to travelogues, which are literally like postcard collections. But I am suggesting that what seemed stylistically misguided to some was at the time actually a coherent alternative aesthetic system, and that it had the potential to produce a different set of effects than classical continuity editing. The "collection" principle of editing could hardly be more different than the continuity system of classical narrative films, which worked to create the illusion of a unified diegetic space. In travelogues and newsreels, the "diegesis" is literally the real world, and the sense of space is fragmented, operating on the logic of synecdoche, or showing a part to evoke a whole. Ultimately, newsreels went on to have greater presence on cinema screens and arguably made a greater cultural impact than other early nonfiction genres, including travelogues. But their shared non-continuity style has not previously been appreciated for the kind of vernacular modernism it represented.[28]

For Kracauer and Lyford, the newsreel's chaotic structure was an impediment to true understanding of current events.

> The emotions of the newsreel fans are made to bob up and down like a yo-yo, and the effect of this jerky, kaleidoscopic attack on his eyes and ears is to induce a state of near brain paralysis. When he finally emerges from the theatre, his memory is a hodgepodge of noises, faces, catastrophes and shifting backgrounds.[29]

While in this article Kracauer and Lyford highlight such effects as cause for disdain, in other moments some critics including Kracauer himself could find in such cinematic disjunctions a precise working-through of modernity's "new sensorium."[30] Indeed, while the newsreel's bellicose, disjointed style and militaristic perspective can feel terrifying and fatiguing even today, this melding of technology and geography also seems prophetic, anticipating the heightened pace of messages and disjunctive images that would only accumulate as the century wore on.



## aerial views

Air travel had been an object of fascination for the news film since 1909, when the first international air meet held at Reims, France, was documented by news cameras. From the 1910s on, newsreels were filled with images of air vehicles framed in long shots on the ground attempting to alight, landing, or crash landing. But these images of air vehicles shot from outside became transformed into a phenomenological experience during World War I, when the aerial view emerged as a new camera perspective for news films. In a discussion of an aerial view series produced by the French military in 1918 entitled *En dirigeable sur les champs de bataille*, Teresa Castro argues that this footage fit into a belief in the objectivity of the photographic image, in which "indexical images obtained from the air [were seen as] the natural replacement for cartographic images."

> Located halfway between the "primitivism" of the forms that distinguish pre-1914 cinema, and the veritable avant-garde revolution that was gathering, this film "without author" beautifully expresses the consciousness of cinematographic language's potential. These shots carry with them a "cine-sensation" of the world, founded in a doubly machinic vision here expressed through the camera-aircraft couple.[31]

Aerial views make abstractions out of real places, flattening space and doing away with the horizon line of straight-on landscapes. Aerial views extend past the edges of the frame, and in black-and-white film resemble shapes, lines, and patches of light and dark: abstract spaces, not places with a located and rich history. This is not just a cartographic perspective, but a quintessentially modern point of view. The abstraction of the aerial view would soon become a hallmark of modernist art in the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock or later in the monumental perspectives of land art such as Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. But the newsreel aerial view is a moving atlas, not a static image, thus its abstraction of place is even more radical, with constantly shifting angles and nonstop movement of the frame.

Paul Virilio has connected the airplane to the cinema, arguing that World War I was a turning point. He writes

> At the turn of the century, cinema and aviation seemed to form a single movement. By 1914, aviation was ceasing to be strictly a means of flying and breaking records . . . it was becoming one way, or perhaps even the ultimate way, of seeing.[32]

Shifting from its early status as a centuries-old dream of inventors and engineers, the airplane found its first "practical" application by the military

when it became a conveyance for destruction through the strategic bombing raids of WWI. The camera then replaced the bombsight as an instrument of surveillance. The cinema's speed and detachment are increased exponentially when the camera is placed in an airplane and pointed down at the ground. This new multimachine vision made possible a new form of perception, and it was a vision that was particularly well suited for capturing disasters and destruction.

Disasters were one of the staple stories of the early sound newsreel, and issue after issue features aerial footage of some recent calamity. A particularly breathtaking example is "Tri-State Tornado Aftermath—outtakes" (1925), aerial footage that moves with such unrelenting speed (and at a few points, comes frighteningly close to the ground) that it feels like a dizzying amusement park ride.[33] As a perceptual experience, the film matches or even overshadows the documentation of disaster and human devastation on the ground.[34] The sensationalism here is twofold, located both in the terrible images of disaster and in the hair-raising perspective of the moving aerial view.

Certainly, it makes sense that airplanes would have been used to capture images of natural disasters. But as much as such footage captures the scope of the disaster, it also creates a distance between the viewer and the devastation being reported. *Fox Metrotone News* showed aerial footage of flooding in the Ohio Valley in several issues from 1933. In the March 25 issue, a story titled "RISING FLOOD Takes Heavy Toll in Ohio Valley" features aerial footage accompanied by a voice-over narrator attempting some misplaced humor, breezily stating that the footage "presents a regular Venetian panorama" while half-submerged houses scroll by on the screen. Jason Weems connects the aerial view to Michel Foucault's notion of the panopticon, demonstrating how "it was often co-opted by those who sought to exercise authority."[35] Aerial disaster footage does just that, putting the spectator into a position of authority over the disaster on the ground, emphasizing spectacle rather than empathy.

A search for "aerial" in the digitized Fox Movietone News Collection online database at the University of South Carolina yields 254 results.[36] Many of these are incomplete stories that lack voice-over narration, but all reproduce the alienated extreme long shot perspective of the airplane. Titles include "Aerial Views of New York," "Canada," "Eastern Beaches," "Rio," "Mexico City," "Beijing," "Pasadena," "Coney Island," "Crater Lake," and so on. "Anghor Wat" (filmed 23 June 1930) is one of the rare fully edited newsreel stories in the Fox Movietone News Collection. As we watch a series of fast-moving aerial views of Angkor Wat, a voice-over describes how fast air travel is, how modern Phnom Penh is, and how Angkor Wat was unearthed from the jungle "a comparatively few years ago." As is typical with aerial newsreel footage, the whole time we can hear the airplane engine on the soundtrack, making it impossible to forget about



*Figure 9.2* Aerial footage in *Hearst Metrotone News*, 25 March 1933: "RISING FLOOD Takes Heavy Toll in Ohio Valley"

Courtesy UCLA Film and Television Archive

the extremely mechanized nature of this imagery. Newsreels did not typically make any effort to hide the mechanics of their filming, but rather emphasize the act of traveling and filming in a self-referential manner. This self-referentiality works in tandem with the genre's disjunctive editing and fragmented presentation of information to create a contradictory aesthetic of abstracted reportage.

In addition to comparing the spatialization techniques of newsreels and travelogues, this chapter argues that the newsreel contained aesthetic and perceptual dimensions that are not only symptomatic of modernity, but also should be seen in the context of modernist art. In their disjunctive refraction of the world's weekly events, early sound newsreels resemble coterminous modernist art practices such as collage and photomontage. As newsreels took on the military-inflected perspective of the aerial view in the 1920s and '30s, they incorporated the technological unconscious of a culture between two terrible world wars. The extreme abstraction and distancing of the aerial point of view is both an aesthetic response to mechanization and a kind of visual training for spectators to adopt this perspective for themselves. From our perspective some eighty years later, the early sound newsreel seems to depict a mechanized world on the cusp of

World War II that would prove spectacularly capable of destroying itself.[37] Gertrude Stein's description of Picasso's abstraction (cited in the epigram to this chapter) nicely describes the abstraction of landscape in the early sound newsreel:

> [A]s the twentieth century is a century which sees the earth as no one has ever seen it, the earth has a splendor that it never has had, and as everything destroys itself in the twentieth century and nothing continues, so then the twentieth century has a splendor which is its own.[38]

As we have seen, "modernist splendor" often took the form of an aerial view.

## acknowledgment

I am grateful to Blaine Bartell and Mark Quigley at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Film & Television Archive and Greg Wilsbacher of the Moving Image Research Collections at the University of South Carolina (USC) for their help providing access to research materials for this chapter.

## notes

1. Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1938), 49.
2. These Fox Movietone News films may be seen online: "Moving Image Research Collections Digital Video Repository," USC, http://mirc.sc.edu, accessed 15 February 2017.
3. Andrea Marin Kalas, "Hearst Metrotone News 1929–1934: A History of the American Early Sound Newsreel" (M.A. thesis, UCLA, 1990), 14–15.
4. For my research on this chapter, I viewed three different groups of films: complete newsreel issues held in the Hearst Metrotone News Collection at UCLA, outtakes and individual news stories held by the Fox Movietone News Collection at USC, and a set of Fitzpatrick's Traveltalks from the 1930s currently available for streaming via the Travel Film Archive's YouTube page at www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL53EE433D99C5546D.
5. Jennifer Lynn Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 101.
6. For an overview of the Spanish-American war films see Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 240–61. For an account of the execution of Czolgosz in the context of the development of location shooting in the silent era, see Jennifer Peterson, "Location Shooting in the Silent Era: 1895–1927," in *Hollywood on Location: An Industry History*, Josh Gleich and Lawrence Webb, ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, forthcoming 2019).
7. See for example the variety of nonfiction genres listed in the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, Picture Catalogue (New York: AM&B, 1902).
8. Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: 1911–1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Pres, 1971), 71–4.
9. "Periodical Topicals," *Motography*, August 1911, 57.
10. See Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams*, especially chapter 4, "'Atop of the World in Motion': Visualizing the Pleasures of Empire" and chapter 5, "Scenic Films and the Cinematic Picturesque."
11. Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 163.
12. Library of Congress, Catalogue of Copyright Entries, Part 1, group 3, vol. 3, no. 10 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 30), 366; Library of Congress, Catalogue of Copyright Entries, Part 1, vol. 3, no. 11, 402.
13. See for example the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer short subjects advertisement in the *Motion Picture Herald*, 9 January 1932, 44.
14. Louis Pizzitola, *Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 315.
15. Germaine Dulac, "The Educational and Social Value of the News-Reel" (1934), in *Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writings on the First Fifty Years of Cinema*, Antonia Lant with Ingrid Periz, eds. (London: Verso, 2006), 337. At the time she wrote this article, Dulac was directing newsreels for Gaumont-Franco-Films-Aubert.
16. Dulac, "Educational," 336.
17. See Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). For a revisionist argument about the universal language thesis see Mattias Frey, "Cultural Problems of Classical Film Theory: Béla Balázs, Universal Language, and the Birth of National Cinema," *Screen* 51, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 324–40.
18. Siegfried Kracauer and Joseph Lyford, "A Duck Crosses Main Street," *New Republic*, 13 December 1948, 15, 13.
19. Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 234.
20. See Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930–1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) and Sara Beth Levavy, "Immediate Mediation: A Narrative of the Newsreel and the Film" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2013).
21. Jason E. Hill and Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Getting the Picture: The Visual Culture of the News* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 3–4.
22. This Hearst Metrotone issue, like the other complete issues held at the UCLA Film & Television Archive, has been restored based on surviving Hearst descriptions.
23. Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 229.
24. See Peterson, *Education in the School of Dreams*, 149, 199.
25. Levavy, *Immediate Mediation*, 148.
26. Selden C. Menefee, "The Movies Join Hearst," *New Republic*, 9 October 1935, 241.
27. Andrew Buchanan, *The Art of Film Production* (London: Pitman and Sons, 1936), 72, quoted in Fielding, *American Newsreel*, 229.
28. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (April 1999): 59–77.
29. Kracauer and Lyford, "A Duck," 15.
30. Hansen, "Mass Production," 71.
31. Teresa Castro, "Aerial Views and Cinematism, 1898–1939," in *Seeing from Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 123, 125.

32. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), 17.
33. "Tri-State Tornado Aftermath—Outtakes," *Fox News* A6109, 22 March 1925, https://mirc.sc.edu/islandora/search/catch_all_txt%3A%28tri-state%20tornado%29.
34. Additional Fox aerial footage of disasters (both natural and human-made) in USC's Digital Video Repository includes "Eruption of Mount Vesuvius—outtakes" (1925), "Seaplanes Wrecked—outtakes" (1925), "Navy Arsenal Hit by Lightning—outtakes" (1926), "Floods Sweep Southern States—outtakes" (1929), "Prisoners Riot and Set Fire to Factories—outtakes" (1931), "Coney Island Fire—outtakes" (1932), "Sailor Drop to Death Mooring USS *Akron*—outtakes" (1932), "Brownsea Island Fire Burns for Three Days—outtakes" (1934), "Coal Mine Disaster—outtakes" (1934), "Famed Monastery Wrecked by Fire—outtakes" (1934), and "Mississippi and Missouri Rivers Flood—outtakes" (1944).
35. Jason Weems, *Barnstorming the Prairies: How Aerial Vision Shaped the Southwest* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xiv.
36. "Moving Image Research Collections Digital Video Repository," http://mirc.sc.edu, accessed 15 February 2017,.
37. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), which makes a case that the spectacular destruction of the twentieth century started with the onset of gas warfare in WWI.
38. Stein, *Picasso*, 49.



ten

# from canada and back again

## roy tash, montreal's associated screen news, and the u.s. newsreel's transnational flows before world war II

joseph clark

In the summer of 1934, cameraman Roy Tash shot some of the most anticipated newsreel pictures of the decade. Tash, a staff cameraman for Montreal's Associated Screen News and working on exclusive assignment for Pathé News, drove to tiny Corbeil, Ontario, to film the first images of the Dionne Quintuplets. The "Quints," as they were known, were born on 29 May 1934, and quickly became front-page news throughout the world. The five girls were the first set of quintuplets on record to survive more than an hour past their birth, and people were fascinated by the story.[1] Shortly after the Quints' births, Pathé negotiated the exclusive film rights to their story and for several years Tash acted as their official photographer.[2] Returning frequently to their remote northern Ontario home, Tash shot many thousands of feet of film, recording the girls as they grew up as medical marvels, international celebrities, and—after the Ontario government moved the girls to a specially built compound featuring a viewing platform where the sisters made public appearances twice daily—tourist attractions. Over the next several years, Pathé released exclusive newsreel stories devoted to the growing sisters and even produced a two-reel special on their fifth