

THE FIRST WORLD WAR THROUGH THE EFG 1914 PROJECT

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On the occasion of the centenary of the First World War, various initiatives have been launched to give 21st-century viewers online access to films made during the war that determined the view that the public had of the conflict. This view was not unaffected by different strategies that replaced information with propaganda, which achieved a high level of sophistication especially among the Allies, whose propaganda system was more refined (GUERRA AND TAJAHUERCE, 1995: 51). On the other hand, from very early on the filming of current events by Pathé Frères and Gaumont, which would subsequently give rise to *Pathé Journal* and *Actualités Gaumont* in 1909 and 1910, respectively, confirmed the importance of capturing reality on film, and began a process of expansion that would culminate with the “outbreak of the First World War, considered the first major war in which the media image would begin to play a major role” (QUINTANA, 2012: 29-30).

During the 1910s a considerable number of films focusing on the events of the war were made. However, it is now estimated that only around 20% of silent film production has been preserved, a fact that underscores the importance of the films that remain as valuable first-hand documentation on the war. To facilitate wider public access to images of the First World War, stored away until now in archives and film libraries in different parts of the world and ranging from documentaries and newsreels to propaganda films, from fiction to non-fiction, film digitisation and restoration projects have been launched to make these images available online; notable among these projects for its significance and magnitude is the European Film Gateway’s EFG1914 project, whose “sheer abundance of available historical film documents provides a huge opportunity for comparative research” (PITASSIO, 2014: 179), as some research projects have already undertaken to demonstrate (AMY, 2015).

THE EFG 1914 PROJECT

EFG1914 is a project to digitise audiovisual materials related directly or indirectly to the First World War. Established on the *European Film Gateway* website, the project provides access to thousands of digitised documents held in European film libraries and audiovisual archives, such as Deutsche Kinemathek, Cineteca di Bologna, the Imperial War Museum, Archives Françaises du Film and Filmoteca Española, among others. The result is more than 700 hours of digital video and around 7,100 document records with complete descriptions and metadata, as well as the possibility of viewing all of the films online. These films cover a wide range of genres and sub-genres: newsreels, documentaries, fiction and propaganda. EFG1914 also “gives access to anti-war films that were mainly produced after 1918 and which reflect the tragedies of the 1910s.”¹

EFG 1914 IS A PROJECT TO DIGITISE AUDIOVISUAL MATERIALS RELATED TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

A number of these films have been used to produce a virtual exhibition that explores different aspects of the Great War. The selection includes “exceptional material that provides a deeper insight into the events of the First World War, the film industry and its audience at that time” (HERTL, 2013: 287). Several of the films included in the exhibition will thus be used to offer a glimpse of the thousands of film documents contained in the EFG1914 project. The exhibition is organised in seven rooms with different types of material (films, photographs, posters and texts) to offer a kind of thematic tour. Due to space limitations, it will not be possible to give every

section the focus it deserves; nevertheless, the film documents featured will offer a general idea of the multifaceted nature of the EFG1914 project, whose objective is to bring the people of our century closer to the background and the battleground, the use of propaganda, the innovations in the manufacture of war materials, the human suffering, the production of fiction films during the war years, the cinema of the neutral nations and the commemorations of the Great War.

ON THE BATTLEFIELD

The first room takes us onto the battlefield, with material originally filmed on the frontline, along with reconstructions due to the restrictions imposed by the military Chiefs of Staff on reporter access to the front (PAZ AND MONTERO, 2002: 53-54). On the one hand, during the first years of the war and in view of the possibility that it would not last long, “the cinema did not mobilise its resources around the conflict, beyond sending cameramen to the front to obtain visual content for propaganda and newsreel programs” (LORENTE, 2015: 132). On the other, the considerable size and weight of a film camera and tripod constituted another obstacle. For example, the *Präzisionskamera Modell XIV*, manufactured by Oskar Messter since 1914 and used extensively on the battlefields, weighed at least 14 kilos.² In 1915, Walter Filzinger, a cameraman on the German front, gave an account in *Lichtbild-Bühne* of the difficulties he faced in his work, commenting that “[t]he apparatus must always be completely assembled, equipped and adjusted, for it to work at any second. In order to shoot in a trench, you have to be familiar with the conditions therein. It is not easy to find a suitable spot in a trench. It is best to film through an embrasure or from an observation stand. The cranking of the camera is a dangerous business, as it can easily happen that one is hit by shrapnel when shells detonate nearby” (WELTER, 2014). With difficulties like

these, cameramen in war time became important as documenters of the battle front, “acting as genuine government delegates entrusted with the production of a patriotic image favourable to the war effort” (LORENTE, 2015: 132).

A result of this set of circumstances is a common aesthetic marked by the predominant use of open and wide shots, with a fixed point of view and shots of the action from a distance, without any camera movements. This was a choice of many cameramen in the field, who preferred to film with wider angles in order to capture all of the action and due to the unpredictable nature of

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the events unfolding in front of the camera. There was another more technical reason behind this choice: emulsions with low levels of sensitivity and poorly lit scenes resulted in a limited depth of field in wide shots, with a blurring of background details. A representative example of this is *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* [Our Heroes of the Somme] (1917), a German documentary made in response to what has been considered the first war film in history, the British film *The Battle of the Somme* (1916). The Somme offensive was one of the foundational moments of First World War propaganda cinema, which is expressed “in contemporary terms, as the systematic use of the film medium for strategic purposes” (NEPOTI, 1998: 226). This particular example is a production that combines images actually taken on the frontline with others that reconstruct it. The documentary begins with a wide shot of a wooded area where several soldiers are advan-

cing, taking cover behind fallen branches and tree trunks. This shot continues for a few minutes, and then we see mines exploding and grenades being thrown, along with closer shots of German troops using portable walkways to cross the Somme. In contrast, the images in *Isonzói-csata* [Battle in the Isonzo] (1917) show the cameraman inside the trenches, accompanying the Kaiser’s infantry as it advances its position and weaves through barbed wire, taking very close and vivid shots of everything happening on the battlefield, combined with pans and other wider shots when the soldiers disappear in the distance amid the smoke of the explosions. At the same time, *Isonzói-csata* is a compilation of different film shoots on the Isonzo front between the spring and autumn of 1917; compilations, archive footage and anthologies became a common practice to meet a series of commercial and cultural needs in the decades immediately after the war, especially for the purposes of celebrations and anniversaries (FACCIOLI, 2015: 42-43).

Either due to the restrictions imposed by the military high command or the difficulties associated with filming on the battlefield, or even the manipulation of the shots in the editing room, these productions distort and twist reality in ways that the viewers of their day were unaware of. In addition to the “high degree of falseness in the representation of the war, [...] a rather profitable business arose out of the falsification of war films, so that in many documentaries, especially in the first years of the war, what they show are really an assembly of staged scenes” (GUERRA AND TAJAHUERCE, 1995: 52), the kind of reality reconstructions that cinema has been known for since its birth (TRANCHE, 2012: 40-43). Falling into this category are two short documentaries that share the same aesthetic: *Sur la route de Cernay (près Reims)* [On the Road to Cernay (near Reims)] (1915); and *Dans le ajoncs du Vardar* [Among the Reeds of the Vardar] (1916). The production plan, far from the improvisation typical of real

war scenes, resulted in a number of substantial differences from the examples cited above, reflected in meticulous compositions with a predominance of full shots and medium shots; added to this effect is the advance of the squadron through trenches and ruins in *Sur la route de Cernay (près Reims)* which is presented in a series of shots and reverse shots. The soldiers are never shown in combat; rather, they are shown fixing a telephone line, for example, or engaging in more mundane actions like playing cards or keeping warm beside a fire. The camera is freed from a fixed point of view for filming and moves along the flow of the waters of the Vardar in *Dans le ajoncs du Vardar*, in a tracking shot taken from the boats of the convoy. The film has also been coloured using the *Pathé Color* system, making this documentary different and considerably more attractive than the others featured in this section.

PROPAGANDA IMAGES

Perhaps one of the more outstanding aspects of the First World War is that it was a war of images waged by all of the countries involved (LASSWELL, 1971). In this context, it also becomes difficult to distinguish between information and propaganda, as “all media forms –especially the cinema due to its huge social impact– were absorbed into the different government propaganda networks” (PAZ AND MONTERO, 2002: 22). The capacity of cinema to mobilise public opinion and disseminate propaganda, which was already well-known by this time, now became a tool for raising awareness and persuading all levels of society to join in and support the war effort. The propaganda did not leave out neutral countries, which were targeted to counteract information from the enemy nations (CHATTERJEE, 2015). The collection of donations and the sale of war bonds became an important aim of propaganda films, with cases where fictitious images are alternated

with allegories, as in the rhetorical device employed in the Italian film *Befana di guerra* [Epiphany of War] (1915). In this film, a child asks the Befana³ not for gifts, but for her father’s return from the war; the Befana wanders through different civilian environments like streets, factories, wealthy homes and farms, collecting money in a sock. The image of the sock filled with donations dissolves into an image of the Italian peninsula using a kind of match cut for metaphorical purposes. The film ends with the homecoming of the soldier and the embrace with his loved ones, while the allegorical figure of Italy guides the troops to victory, represented by insignia, signs and emblems of the Roman Empire. In this way, *Befana di guerra* takes a line adopted by other Italian films in which the war is shown through the eyes of children (ALOVISIO AND MAZZEI, 2015). Based on a similar premise, the German medium-length film *Der Feldgraue Groschen* [The Field-Grey Penny] (Georg Jacoby, 1917) promotes the idea of the nationwide importance of buying war bonds through the story of an old woman who sends a penny to her son at the front, believing that the coin will bring him good luck. After his squadron is attacked, the coin passes from one hand to another until it is returned to the old woman.

PERHAPS ONE OF THE MORE OUTSTANDING ASPECTS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR IS THAT IT WAS A WAR OF IMAGES WAGED BY ALL OF THE COUNTRIES INVOLVED (LASSWELL, 1971)

The propaganda strategies employed to promote the purchase of bonds were aimed at reviling the enemy, inspiring sympathy for the soldiers and lauding heroic deeds on the battlefield in order to convey a sense of assurance of victory to the public and also to encourage young men to

THE PROPAGANDA STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO PROMOTE THE PURCHASE OF BONDS WERE AIMED AT REVILING THE ENEMY, INSPIRING SYMPATHY FOR THE SOLDIERS AND LAUDING HEROIC DEEDS ON THE BATTLEFIELD IN ORDER TO CONVEY A SENSE OF ASSURANCE OF VICTORY TO THE PUBLIC AND ALSO TO ENCOURAGE YOUNG MEN TO ENLIST

enlist. The first of these techniques can be found in the German animated film *Das Säugetier* [The Mammal] (1916), which uses caricature to ridicule British colonisation. The common personification of Great Britain in political comics, John Bull, is the central figure. This caricature, seated on the British Isles, peers through a telescope at different colonial territories like South Africa, Jamaica, Ceylon and Egypt, whose riches he extracts. John Bull progressively transforms into an octopus that spreads its tentacles over a map of the world, which are then broken by German submarines, planes and a zeppelin. The second of the strategies is perfectly depicted in *For the Empire* (1916), a short production by British Gaumont that persuades through the depiction of a twofold loss: human and material. The film focuses on an idea expressed in one of its initial intertitles: “what others are doing for us”, the others being the French and the Belgians, who were suffering terrible losses at the front. To illustrate this, *For the Empire* makes use of real images taken at the front and in hospitals crowded with wounded soldiers, interspersed with scenes of different families facing the loss of a loved one: an elderly couple on a farm, a wealthy urban couple, and a young widow with three small children, among others. After this comes the material loss: French and Belgian cities destroyed, with images of bombed buildings in Arras, Amiens and Ypres.

Meanwhile, London remains immune to such destruction thanks to the fleet of British battleships and soldiers, which represent significant costs that are reported in minute detail, before concluding with the images of a man buying war bonds in a post office. And the last of the aims of war propaganda mentioned above, the encouragement of enlistments, is reflected in *Resistere!* [Resist!] (Luca Comerio, 1918). This film invokes a patriotic duty to Italy as its argument with an array of images of marching soldiers, tanks on the battlefield and a direct appeal to old fighters for the nation (alluded to as “fathers”). In technical terms, it is worth noting the use of toning, on the one hand, and of masks on the other to create symbolic compositions.

ANTI-WAR STATEMENTS ON CELLULOID

Just as there are propaganda films that support the war and the actions associated with it, there are also films with the opposite intention, taking a staunch position against war, often underpinned by intellectual perspectives. The need to work for peace is at the heart of *Ned Med Vaabnene!* [Lay Down Your Arms] (1915), a Danish production with Carl Theodor Dreyer as script supervisor, in which a couple's quest to be reunited (a husband wounded on the front and his wife searching for him) ends with a cholera epidemic that also affects other members of their family. Collateral victims of war are the lovers in *Maudite soit la guerre* [War Be Damned] (Alfred Machin, 1914), in which the outbreak of the First World War places the protagonists on opposite sides, making their love impossible when the young German goes into battle and kills his Belgian friend, who is also his lover's brother. This film is highly representative of the patriotic productions made by Pathé Frères in these years (PAZ AND MONTERO, 2002: 53). The anti-war message stands out clearly in *Pax æterna* [Eternal Peace] (1917), whose protagonist is a king who dedicates

his life to keeping peace between nations; however, a neighbouring country thinks otherwise and promotes the benefits of a fast war. The idea is also explicit in *Himmelskibet* [A Trip to Mars] (1918), although in this case it is presented in the form of science fiction; the protagonists travel to Mars, where they find a civilisation that has done away with disease, sadness, violence and sexual desire, among other things. The captain of the expedition and his love interest, the Martian daughter of the prince of wisdom, decide to return to Earth together to spread the news of the Martian civilisation.

THE WAR INDUSTRY

Another room is dedicated to innovations in weaponry and technology, a key aspect of a global conflict like the First World War. Developments in this area were often kept secret for reasons of espionage; however, they were sometimes presented before the cameras for the purpose of publicising the innovative capacity of the nation in question. The collection at this virtual exhibition focuses on the manufacture of the shells for heavy weaponry, as can be seen in the documentary *Fabrik Poldihütte* [The Poldihütte Factory] (1914-1918) showing a steel factory in Vienna, and Austrian troops loading a cannon with mortar fire in an excerpt from the newsreel *Messter-Woche 1915, no. 15* [Messter Weekly 1915, No. 15] (1915). The images in French films are more innovative, with shots taken inside a workshop for the production of camouflage objects (false tree trunks and cannons, as well as hidden doors for trenches) in *Les surprises du camouflage* [The Surprises of Camouflage] (1916) made by the Section Cinématographique de l'Armée (SCA), or strength testing of manganese helmets, which are subjected to gunshots and hammering with nails in *Casques du Docteur Pollack en acier dur au manganèse* [Dr. Pollack's Manganese Steel Helmets] (1917).

THE FEMALE WORKFORCE EMPLOYED IN ARMAMENTS FACTORIES IS ALSO FEATURED IN SEVERAL DOCUMENTARIES

The female workforce employed in armaments factories is also featured in several documentaries, such as the German films *Herstellung von Granatzündern* [Grenade Production] (1918), which shows in detail, in two close shots, the work of a female operator on shift during the process of making the detonator head for a grenade, and *Der eiserne Film: Bilder aus Deutschlands Kriegsschmiede* [The Iron Film: Images from Germany's War Machine] (1917), which also presents the grenade manufacture process. The Allies also made films showing women working in their war factories. The facilities and the female workers at the British Vickers Ltd. factory are featured in *Fabrication des munitions et du matériel de guerre* [Manufacture of Munitions and War Material] (1916); using wide shots, the camera enters a calibration workshop with several workers at their machines, and then passes onto the assembly of pieces and the filling of the shells manufactured with gunpowder. *La Main d'œuvre féminine dans les usines de guerre* [The Female Hand in the War Factories] (1916) is another film in this category; here, the Gaumont film company shows how its own studio in Lyon has been turned into a munitions factory, with a series of shots presenting the assembly of plane engines by female workers.

WAR WOUNDS

With casualties totalling more than 31 million civilians and soldiers, the direct consequences of the war in terms of human suffering are also a major focus of many films of the period. Soldiers and the wounded at the front are the focus of

attention in a film whose source is unidentified, exhibited virtually under the title *Wounded and Prisoners Behind the Lines on the Western Front* (1917), which shows British soldiers wandering behind the lines, some injured, others carrying stretchers and still others leading German prisoners. Newsreel images tend to leave out pictures of human suffering, as is the case of *Vojenská nemocnice* [Military Hospital] (1917), filmed at the doors of an Austro-Hungarian hospital where we see a throng of nurses tending to the wounded and Red Cross volunteers giving presents to soldiers. The capacity for reintegrating wounded soldiers into the workforce is the theme of *Im Lazarett Assfeld in Sedan* [In the Assfeld Hospital in Sedan] (1917); different shots show us French soldiers, taken prisoner by the Germans, during their rehabilitation exercises on different equipment. War wounds are given a more direct focus in the form of maiming in two short documentaries. The first of these, *Reeducation professionnelle des mutilés de la guerre en France* [Professional Re-education of Maimed Soldiers in France] (Edmond Dronsart, 1917), follows the reintegration into the workforce of soldiers who lost limbs on the battlefield, showing several of them in close-ups performing manual tasks in workshops and factories. The second, *La rééducation de nos grands blessés* [The Re-education of Our Wounded Heroes] (1916-1919), is a Belgian compilation of images of maimed soldiers performing different rehabilitation exercises with and without their prosthetic legs and hands, which help them to do carpentry work, play football or paint on a canvas.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The selection and overview presented by the virtual exhibition makes it clear that the EFG1914 project offers a kaleidoscope of different images and stories of the First World War which, without attempting to be a comprehensive portrait,

gives us an insight into the cinematic reality of the war through the preservation and digitisation of documents produced according to different ideologies and with different perspectives on the conflict even when they touch on the same themes. It is a vast repertoire of images of the Great War that contributed to the creation of an image of the front and its immediate consequences. ■

NOTES

- 1 EFG1914 Project Website. *Digitising Film From and About the First World War*. Retrieved from <<http://project.efg1914.eu/>> [10/02/2015].
- 2 *Messter's Präzisionskamera Modell XIV*. Retrieved from <<http://exhibition.europeanfilmgateway.eu/efg1914/theme?id=At-the-front-1#Messter-Pr%C3%A4zisionskamera-Modell-XIV>> [10/02/2015].
- 3 In Italian tradition, the Befana is the mythical figure who brings gifts to children at Epiphany.

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THE FIRST WORLD WAR THROUGH THE EFG 1914 PROJECT

Abstract

The First World War was a war of images. Its first century has given several projects to approach citizens of 21st century to them. Because of its magnitude EFG1914 stands out, an initiative by European Film Gateway to digitize audiovisual documents related to the war. The virtual exhibition has been the start point to be closer to over seven hundred hours in moving pictures, which explore many aspects of the Great War; from this huge group has been chosen the most relevant films shot at the front, others with propaganda purpose, anti-war concept, about technical innovation and the suffering in the war. The proposed journey doesn't expect to be exhaustive but giving a kaleidoscopic view of the preserved war film production, thoroughly unknown, and characteristic of the different ideologies that inspired them.

Key words

EFG1914; European Film Gateway; Noticiero; Propaganda; Documental; Archivos digitales; Primera Guerra Mundial; Cine bélico.

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LA PRIMERA GUERRA MUNDIAL A TRAVÉS DEL PROYECTO EFG 1914

Resumen

La Primera Guerra Mundial fue una guerra de imágenes. Su primer centenario ha propiciado varios proyectos de aproximación de las mismas a los ciudadanos del siglo XXI. Por su envergadura destaca EFG1914, iniciativa del portal European Film Gateway con la que se han digitalizado miles de documentos audiovisuales relacionados con la guerra. Para aproximarse a las más de setecientas horas de imágenes en movimiento, se ha partido de la exposición virtual que explora varios aspectos de la Gran Guerra, de cuyos films se han seleccionado los más significativos sobre las filmaciones en el campo de batalla, la propaganda, el antibelicismo, la innovación tecnológica y armamentística, así como el sufrimiento. El viaje propuesto no busca ser exhaustivo sino proporcionar una visión caleidoscópica de la producción bélica conservada, ampliamente desconocida, y representativa de las diferentes ideologías que las impulsaron.

Palabras clave

EFG1914; European Film Gateway; Noticiero; Propaganda; Documental; Archivos digitales; Primera Guerra Mundial; Cine bélico.

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