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Art Exhibitions through Newsreels

An Avatar for Identity Politics (1945-1960)

CATALINA RAVESSOUD AND GIANNI HAVER

The purpose of this article is to address the subject of art exhibitions as presented in cinema newsreels in different European countries. The subject is therefore not art in its broadest sense, but representations of art exhibitions in cinema newsreels. Despite the many sources referenced, the aim is however not to retrace the history of exhibitions in the post-war period but to reflect on the relationship between the art exhibitions and the construction and maintenance of a national identity.

The reference period for this study runs from the first newsreels produced in the aftermath of the conflict in Europe until the beginning of the 1960s. Although the newsreel format was still active at this point in time, it was already in competition with television, which fast became more popular than the films that preceded it. During these fifteen years, newsreels produced a large number of images on art exhibitions, not all of which can be addressed within the scope of this article. For this reason, we will make use of examples which seem significant through comparison between different national productions. This qualitative strategy—prioritized over a systematic and quantitative analysis—is also made necessary by the relatively uneven availability of sources depending on the countries involved. Even though some online databases of newsreels have recently been established, there remain gaps in their content, as is the case with all archives.

Certain NO-DO newsreels from Spain¹ have no sound; while some issues or titles from different European countries are not available. In addition, archiving by subject—particularly in France—obscures the original composition of the newsreel, while converting to digital formats suitable for publishing online also alters the viewing experience.

CULTURAL IDENTITY, NATIONAL IDENTITY

When analyzing newsreels and artistic events represented through them, two forms of mediated communication come into focus: the act of showing and displaying art generally inherent to exhibiting gestures, and, in a broader sense, the news coverage reporting on an exhibition and thus appropriating and restaging the aforementioned act of showing art. These two forms of mediated communication, though proceeding from a resembling gesture, might use different approaches and references, while sometimes finding themselves within a process of establishing a cultural or national identity.

Beyond the act of showing of an exhibit as opposed to its media coverage, the metonymy of relations between art and human beings contained in the exhibit itself remains. In our case, this metonymy is constructed in the context of relations between the State—embodied in its institutions or its official representatives—and artistic production. However, the art exhibition, like any public event, only gains meaning through a certain set of circumstances which constitute the cultural context in which the latter takes place. Accordingly, society is expressed symbolically through an event experienced by the individual.

While the relations between the public and art might take different forms, newsreels retain their role as a carrier of official discourse, and even of propaganda—the latter being a legacy of wartime politics and the decade preceding the conflict. Despite a desire to depart from this role during the post-war period, the newsreels' function as an official government channel remains almost constant even in spite of the variety of configurations in the relationship between political power and the media.

1 NO-DO is the colloquial name for NOTICIARIOS Y DOCUMENTALES, [NEWS AND DOCUMENTARIES], the only cinema newsreel produced in Spain from 1943 to 1981.

In Europe, different forms of newsreel coexist: those produced independently; those co-funded by the government, or else entirely dependent on the state apparatus; and, in the case of the defeated countries, newsreels produced by the occupying forces. David Gargani and Antonella Pagliarulo showed a continuity in the editorial policy aimed at conveying and promoting an official image of the country in their cross-analysis of *GIORNALE LUCE*, an Italian newsreel produced during the fascist period, and of the main post-war publication, *la SETTIMANA INCOM* (a private production which benefitted from state funding)².

Similarly, during the Cold War, the Swiss newsreel perpetuated a policy of promoting national values, as was the case during the creation of this tool in the context of a larger-scale project called *Défense Spirituelle* [Spiritual Defense].

When it comes to exhibitions, the media coverage practiced derives from a different approach. While the subject of an exhibition is art, the subject of the newsreel is the exhibition. Whether or not the newsreel takes the event into account, the exhibit is created by a process of selection, assembling and staging of an artistic production. From this perspective, it appears that the exhibition works as part of—or even claims a role in—the effort of defining the artistic practice, while the newsreel presents itself as a seemingly neutral observer. An enunciation of discourses on national identity can be seen at all three levels of the relationship between the artistic practice, the exhibition, and the newsreel. Nevertheless, it is within the newsreel that this discourse appears most explicitly. The anchoring of the newsreel in national practices is readily observable, if only by the fact that it is produced within a country, destined for its cinemas and sometimes under the supervision of a state body. However, art, through a discourse that is part of a form of internationality, appears to be free from a national affiliation if one considers the abandonment of such terminologies that suggest the existence of a truly national art. More recently, in a debate organized in 2004 around the *Shake* exhibition at the Villa Arson in Nice, Henri Giordan, said: “We often support the following position: Contemporary art is first of all international. The universal dimension of art is paramount. Its logic is opposed to any location” (Giordan 2004). However, it is precisely this per-

2 For further details on the Italian newsreels cf. Sainati 2001; Mazzarelli 2010; and Frabotta 2001.

ceived ‘universal’ character of the art which allows the production of a national identity discourse, because it is built on a relationship to ‘otherness’ established between the component entities of this so-called ‘universal’ character. On the one hand, in the major manifestations of art, the national origin of works is rarely forgotten, as in the pavilions of the *Venice Biennale*. On the other hand, this idea of the ‘universality’ of art is tinged by the fact that the event is hosted in a given national territory. Consequently, it is the host country which collects the symbolic benefits of this ‘universal’ character. This recourse to the ‘universal’ is all the more powerful in that it allows the cultural policy of a State to be enhanced without presenting it as inherently part of a national, or even nationalist identity discourse, which was obviously problematic at the end of the Second World War.

This ambivalence recalls the links that the philosopher Etienne Balibar established between cultural identity and national identity and the slippage that occurs equally between these two concepts. According to Balibar, cultural identity is the very expression of the singularity of the individual which allows him not to be confused in uniformity and not to erase the borders that separate one person from another. However, Balibar (cf. 1994) adds that we do not cease to protect ourselves against the reduction of cultural identity in the “national character” or against the normative traits conferred by the institutions of the nation state. According to the philosopher, culture is the name given to the “essential nation”, an entity that can be distinguished from any state but that works as the ultimate goal of its constitution. Continuing this analysis, Balibar (cf. *ibid.*, translated by the authors) invites us to reflect on the question “what if the notion of cultural identity was today nothing other than the metaphor of national identity?”

THE NEWSREEL AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH ART

Art exhibitions are present already in the news filmed before World War I. The Gaumont archives keep reels of this type dating from 1910.³ The pres-

3 Particular examples include: *The exhibition of French artists at the Petit-Palais: statues* (1911), *Paris: cubist exhibition at the autumn fair* (1912), *Vienna: exhibition of Fine Arts* (1912), *Berlin: opening of the art exhibition by the Emperor Guillaume II* (1913).

ence of art exhibition reports from abroad tells us that the newsreel production companies from other countries with which Gaumont maintained an arrangement of purchase or exchange also paid attention to this type of event.

In accordance with the technical capabilities of the time, and notably due to the low sensitivity of film, indoor shots which would allow the exhibition itself to be viewed are rare. In contrast, the newsreels mainly show political and cultural authorities or the local sovereigns entering or exiting the building, thereby underlining the importance of the event but not reporting on the actual content of the exhibition. In the interwar period, art exhibitions begin to be regularly covered by the news, and by this time technological advances allow to walk among the exhibition rooms and record the interior as well. The novelty of and interest in this new perspective is supported by the significant number of shots present in the archives of various newsreels' titles.

In the ideologically-charged environment of the 1930s and World War II, the newsreels become an important tool in the propaganda policies of countries. At the end of the conflict, a logic of radical reorganization primarily in the defeated countries took over, particularly in Italy and Germany. These two countries were moving from a state monopoly of filmed information to a more competitive environment with different commercial titles. After the occupation, during which Germany, and to a lesser extent the Vichy regime, had a stronghold on this media, France found from 1946 onward a situation similar to that of pre-war times with the presence of five competitive titles (cf. Huret 1984). In Switzerland or in Spain, the situation changed relatively little; the Franco regime continued to produce the *NO-DO* that it had started to publish in 1943 and the Confederation continued to co-finance the *SCHWEIZER FILMWOCHENSCHAU* the diffusion of which was no longer obligatory from 1946 (cf. Gasser 1978/1979). There was also little change among the victors of the conflict, with the exception of the production of newsreels for the occupied regions.

The newsreels during the first years of peace addressed art exhibitions from an angle which still appeared to be extremely influenced by the conflict. Thus, one of the first subjects dealing with art in the French News shows the restitution of paintings to the various national museums from the Château de Chambord where they had been stored. In presenting the works being returned to their places, the narrator emphasizes the return to "normal", ending his commentary by saying that "despite these six years that

have marked us all, no one has aged [meaning the works]” (ACTUALITÉS FRANÇAISES, August 31 1945). Likewise, the GAUMONT-JOURNAL⁴ devoted an issue to the painting exhibition *Art et Résistance* which took place in the Palace of Tokyo between February and March 1946 and was inaugurated by a minister formerly belonging to the Resistance.⁵ Testifying to this focus on political issues, this 33 second-long segment granted only three seconds to the exhibition itself, devoting the remaining sequences to the officials visiting it. A few months later, marking France’s pre-eminence in the former capitals of the axis, the PATHÉ-JOURNAL reported on two exhibitions of French art. The first took place in Rome (PATHÉ-JOURNAL 31, July 7 1946) and the second in a Berlin Palace⁶ still showing damage from bombs.

There was a comparable situation in Germany, where during the first few years after the war, the news was controlled by the occupants under the title of WELT IM FILM [THE WORLD IN FILM]. Very quickly after the conflict, news was devoted to the recovery of works of art stolen by the Nazis from various German and European collections. One particular news report (WELT IM FILM 7, June 29 1946) includes a scene which mimics a rudimentary exhibition set-up put in place for the needs of the camera. A few months later, still on the theme of the restitution of the artwork, the news broadcasts in Germany takes up the aforementioned French topic (cf. Huret 1984). In 1947, another similar topic is proposed by the German news, but this time concerning a painting of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, sheltered during the war (WELT IM FILM 94, March 14 1947). The art and the exhibitions seem to serve as a marker of normalization accompanying the reconstruction of the country.

Spain, despite not having taken part in the conflict, was nevertheless isolated in the immediate post-war period because of the proximity of the Franco regime to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. In particular the country found itself hit by a diplomatic boycott of the United Nations from 1946

4 The issue and the date of the newsreel are not listed by the Gaumont archives.

5 Charles Tillon who was the founder of the Parisian Francs-Tireurs and Minister for Armaments chaired the opening of this exhibition which would later be moved to London and New York.

6 PATHÉ-JOURNAL 49, 11 December 1946. It should be noted that the same subject had already been included in the news WELT IM FILM (Anglo-American news destined for Germany) 77, 15 November of the same year.

and sought external rehabilitation by any means, also by its cultural policy. Financial investments outside of the country⁷ in the development of art-related events in the NO-DO—especially when Spain and the victor countries are considered in relation to one another—was a strategy used to give a positive image of Spain. Thus, although most of the artistic subjects of the NO-DO between the end of the war and the entire year of 1946 were devoted to national artistic events⁸ both in terms of their content and their location; the few exhibitions not covered by this rule stand out. In this way, a modest event, such as the exhibition of English and Spanish artists in the British Institute of Madrid, is integrated in the national newsreel (NO-DO 160a, January 28 1946). In Spain the use of art as a means of breaking down international barriers culminates with the Hispano-American art exhibition of 1951.

MAKING AN EVENT AROUND ART

An exhibition, linked to a state event such as a national day or an anniversary, allows to create a community around certain values. For example, this was the case in Spain where the anniversary of the tercentenary of the death of Velasquez gave rise to a series of events that were inaugurated and widely relayed by the NO-DO.⁹ More generally, when an exhibition is presented as national and more so as international, and when it clocks the calendar of events by virtue of its periodicity, it imposes itself on the media as an event which cannot be ignored and becomes a theater for the representation of identity issues. Thus the major artistic events as well as their media coverage can be analyzed in this perspective. Furthermore, the filtering process executed both through exposing and rebroadcasting such events in the newsreel allows this cross-analysis. In this way, the presentation by Renato

7 Notably in Latin America (cf. Bonardi 2004).

8 National artists as well as national events were highlighted.

9 NO-DO 637a, December 19 1960; NO-DO 939b, January 2 1961; NO-DO 949a, March 13 1961; NO-DO 962a, June 12 1961. Besides the exhibitions, the commemoration covers multiple aspects such as, for example, sets of stamps with paintings.

Guttuso¹⁰ of paintings by Picasso at the first *Venice Biennale* of the post-war period can be read as a concession of the Christian democracy in power to the communist party.¹¹ This major event in the history of the Venetian exhibition (this was the first time that Picasso was exhibited there), widely relayed by the written press (cf. Budillon 1978), is yet completely ignored by the Italian newsreel, *la SETTIMANA INCOM*¹², which was close to the government and therefore reflected the policy of the Christian Democracy. Here the filtering done by the newsreel redefined the event in the way desired by the official government policy.

The exhibition itself establishes its official nature by the presence of representatives of the political authorities and its cultural value through the participation of recognized players in the art world. The newsreels on their side insist on the presence of political authorities to validate the exhibition as an event worthy of being reported to the public. As for the political authorities, they reclaim the symbolic benefits of the event through their presence. Thus a triangulation is built between media, politics and art where everyone gains legitimacy from a transfer of symbolic capital.

A notable example of this tripartite relationship is given by the first edition of the *Bienal Hispano-Americana de Arte*, inaugurated in Madrid in 1951, which is one of the fruits of what is termed the “*política de la Hispanidad*”, during which Franco's Spain tried to break out of its international isolation by relying on the countries of Latin America. The NO-DO gives an importance to this event and thus extends the artistic policy promoted by the government to the national level. Two subjects are produced the same week, inserted in editions “A” and “B” and distributed simultaneously. These two films are very similar but with no joint plans, everything is fo-

10 Guttuso joined the Italian Communist Party in 1940 and then took part in the Italian Resistance from 1943.

11 The tensions between the Communist Party and the Christian Democracy are expressed in the organization of the Biennale. It is rapidly converted to “a site of Christian Democracy’s struggle against Communism”, itself encouraged by the decisive victory of the Christian Democracy (CD) in the elections of 18 April 1948 (cf. Jachec 2005: 202).

12 Gargani and Pagliarulo consider the strategy and the editorial policy of *SETTIMANA INCOM* very similar to that of the newsreel *LUCE* produced by the government during the Fascism (cf. Gargani/Pagliarulo 2011).

cused on the presence of Franco in uniform inaugurating the event.¹³ Note that this exhibition, intended primarily to have an impact abroad, implies a radical change in the artistic policy of the regime that until then had prized religious and traditional art.¹⁴ Indeed, modern art that was until this time “simply regarded as a heresy” (Bonet 2002: 131) saw its destiny become more favorable because it allowed the promotion of the image of a modern Spain inserted into international artistic trends. The *Bienal Hispano-Americana de Arte* therefore integrated artists including Tapies and Millares from a vanguard which was then—in Spain—reborn from its own ashes (cf. *ibid.*).

Returning to the ties that bound political authorities to exhibitions, in post-war Italy the *Venice Biennale* brings forth important identity issues. Created at the end of the nineteenth century and then incorporated in the artistic and cultural policy of the fascist regime, the Biennale enabled the young republic to revive the pre-fascist tradition while marking a clean break with the Mussolini regime,¹⁵ making the presence of the highest authority of the new State essential. Thus, after a break of six years the *Venice Biennale* is held in 1948, the same year as the proclamation of the Republic, therefore becoming not just a “super-exhibit for the Italian State internally but also an instrument of its propaganda toward other nations” (Monnier 1994: 12) Indicative of the importance of the event, the main national news, *SETTIMANA INCOM*, produces four reports on the event. Its first story focuses on the inauguration and on the presence of the president of the Einaudi Republic and then shifts attention to Venice and its architectural beauties, concluding with the proclamation that “[t]oday Italy rejoices that its president is re-establishing the indomitable tradition of art, as witnessed by these palaces” (*SETTIMANA INCOM* 162, June 10 1948).

The second story (*SETTIMANA INCOM* 165, June 23 1948), entirely devoted to the Italian pavilion, reviews the artists through their works com-

13 The sound from these two subjects of 1951 is lost, therefore we do not know the commentary that accompanied these images.

14 The main artistic subjects of the NO-DO during the 1950s and 60s also cover this type of art.

15 This is however difficult because in the immediate post-war period the very idea of ‘Italian culture’ was linked to fascism and therefore treated with suspicion (cf. Corgnati 2011).

mentated rapidly. The third (SETTIMANA INCOM 166, June 24 1948) is devoted entirely to the retrospective of expressionist painters. Finally, the fourth newsreel (SETTIMANA INCOM 167, June 30 1948) focuses on the exhibited works of Braque and Kokoschka and offers a didactic and explanatory commentary. The duration of these four newsreels is relatively long, sometimes with reports of more than two minutes, which emphasizes the importance which is given to the event even stronger.

It goes without saying that in this mechanism to recover symbolic capital by the state, the anchoring on national territory of an international event fills an important role. In this sense, the coverage by the NO-DO of the *Biennial Hispano-Americana de arte* presented a paradigmatic situation. While the event always is held in Spain and in a Latin American country, the NO-DO reports only what took place in Madrid in 1951 and Barcelona in 1955 and ignores events in Havana in 1954 (cf. Bravo 1996). Generally, it seems that the organization favors the artistic and cultural news unfolding in its national territory. According to a statement made in 1955 by Rafael R. Tranche, it follows that the theme of ‘industry’ is represented by 17 Spanish and 17 foreign reports; the theme of ‘cinema’ by six Spanish and three foreign subjects; and the theme of ‘attractions’ by eight Spanish and 30 foreign reports. In contrast, the theme of ‘Art and Crafts’ scores largely in favor of national events—twelve Spanish to only two foreign reports— while the theme of ‘Culture’ totals thirteen national and two foreign reports (cf. Sánchez-Biosca/Tranche 2000: 109).

Within the logic of presenting Spain then as modern and open to the world—and assisted in this endeavor by an improving international situation¹⁶—the NO-DO relays the third *Biennale* in Barcelona 1955 by lingering on the American presence at the event and concludes with the comprehensive representation of all the artistic trends, from the realist school to “more modern manifestations of painting”.¹⁷ Following the same logic of openness to the modern world, the newsreel deals simultaneously with the

16 In 1953 an agreement was signed with the USA for the stationing of American troops in Spain and in 1955 Spain joined the UN.

17 NO-DO 667, October 17 1955. The construction of the subject is similar to that of 1951 but it only exists in edition “A”. Also noteworthy is the fact that Franco is in civilian clothes this time.

inauguration by Franco of the SEAT factory, and publishes these two stories under the single title “*Industria y Arte*” [Industry and Art].

FROM PEDAGOGICAL ACTION TO SHARED EXPERIENCE

Through the media, events covered become popular symbols because they enter the framework of common referents. This process also allows the creation of a specific form of sociability around the event in question, while being outside of the latter. The newsreels, by virtue of the national value given to them and their way of presenting themselves as being politically neutral, grant an additional form of legitimacy to the events that they portray. In the immediate post-war period in Europe, this power was shared only with the radio, and would be shared with television some years later.

Beyond the media coverage on art news that they offered, the newsreels also took part in the very inclusive activity of cultural mediation in enabling the public to better ‘meet’ the art. Indeed, by the choices that they make and especially by the comments that they include, the newsreels assume a role of ombudsman as well as the aura of neutrality which usually accompanies such activity (cf. Caune 1995: 18). This aspect of ‘mediation’ is also perceptible in the newsreels of different European countries during the 1940s and 1950s. Although the newsreels devoted a significant share to the official and social sides of the demonstration, they include almost systematically a section devoted to the exhibited works. This section takes the form of a quick review which is always accompanied by an explanatory commentary.

The principle of the exhibition itself offered a defined arrangement, perhaps designed for a certain purpose, but the effects of which cannot be totally predictable. Unlike the newsreel which offers a ‘closed’ reading away from any contingency,¹⁸ the exhibition remained a space where meanings were subject to a wide spectrum of interpretations.

Beyond this focus and the invariable approach proposed by the media, the exhibits themselves experienced a redefinition of their function with an emphasis on the interpretation of works. In this perspective, there are at-

18 The concept of contingency in an exhibition context refers to the infinite possible interpretations of the subjects presented (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962: 39-47).

tempts to represent the exhibition space as a place where the meanings are not pre-established and where the contingency can operate. This position corresponds with the willingness to rethink the cultural policies in 1960s Europe, particularly in France. In fact, André Malraux, then France's Minister of Culture, proposed a new policy based more on the artistic experience than on an educational position,¹⁹ by focusing on the personal and subjective perception and by the renunciation of a unilateral reading given by the institutional context. Among the foundations of this policy reside positions such as "we do not educate a man eager to grow" (Pierre Moinot quoted in Urfalino 2004: 88). This focus on experience is based on the idea that art is able to transcend itself to transmit its meaning to the public.

A sign of this change in relation to art may also be perceived in the newsreels. For example, the German newsreels treat the *documenta II* in 1959²⁰ in a manner which seems to appear to break with the strict pedagogical directions towards a homogenous interpretation given before. In the UFA WOCHENSCHAU²¹ the pedagogic discourse and the presence of officials disappeared in favor of a report showing the public 'experimenting' with the exhibition: a young man scrutinizes a statue while a woman plays with an abstract structure. In Italy, this change is also visible in the coverage of the *Venice Biennale* in SETTIMANA INCOM. While it dealt with this topic in a very educational manner in 1958 (SETTIMANA INCOM 1666, June 19 1958), during coverage of the next *Biennale* in 1960 (SETTIMANA INCOM 1936, June 22 1960), this changed radically. Far from the official tone used previously, the newsreel becomes more ironic and leaves room to experiment by moving away from the educational principles used previously.

19 Cf. Services of studies and research of the Department of Cultural Affairs (1970): Aspects of French Political Culture, UNESCO, Cultural policy: studies and documents, Paris, p. 12.

20 The *documenta I* has not been addressed at all by the German newsreels.

21 UFA-WOCHENSCHAU 155, July 14, 1959. This title succeeds WELT IM BILD in August 1956.

INTERNATIONALITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

As specified at the outset, the newsreels showing art exhibitions do not reproduce the exhibition itself but propose a kind of derivative of it. With their specific format, their own editing and their national broadcasting, the newsreels offer avatars of exhibitions at the same time as they report on them. Without acknowledging that the press behind the newsreel entirely reorders the event, the news items it produces cannot be understood and analyzed only as sources simply restituting the event. Coming back to this practice, the newsreels appear sometimes to have very close links with the State, and for this reason were unlikely to deviate from the official discourse. For this reason, the newsreels must be considered to be independent research subjects rather than adequate sources to write the history of art exhibitions.

For the period taken into consideration, this principle appears to provide an appropriate tool for analysis. On the one hand, considering the tendency to refer to national values—exhibitions are protected with their artistic content by the banner of internationality—the newsreels can release a discourse favorable to the state protected from accusations of nationalism. On the other hand, the avatar resulting from the convergence of newsreels and exhibitions allows both, to report and interpret the exhibition, all the while integrating a broader discourse of identity politics.

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