

Masha Shpolberg

The din of gunfire: Rethinking the role of sound in World War II newsreels

2014

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15152>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Shpolberg, Masha: The din of gunfire: Rethinking the role of sound in World War II newsreels. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 3 (2014), Nr. 2, S. 113–129. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15152>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2014.2.SHPO>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0 Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0 License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

The din of gunfire: Rethinking the role of sound in World War II newsreels

Masha Shpolberg

NECSUS 3 (2): 113–129

DOI: 10.1557/NECSUS2014.2.SHPO

Abstract

French film historian Laurent Véray has famously called World War I ‘the first media war of the twentieth century’. Newsreels, which first appeared in 1910, brought the war to movie theaters across Europe and the U.S., screening combat for those on the ‘home front’. However, while the audience could see the action it could not hear it – sometimes only live music would accompany the movements of the troops. The arrival of sound newsreels in 1929 radically transformed moviegoers’ experiences of the news, and, by necessity, of armed conflict. Drawing on examples of World War II newsreels from British Pathé’s archive that was recently made available online, this article seeks to delineate the logic governing the combination of voice-over commentary, music, sound effects, and field-recorded sound, and argues that it can be traced directly to the treatment of sound in the ‘Great War’ fiction films of the preceding decade.

Keywords: World War II, British Pathé, newsreels, sound technologies

1 Introduction

French film historian Laurent Véray has famously called World War I ‘the first media war of the twentieth century’.¹ The centenary has brought global attention to the vast media resources available to scholars interested in rethinking the legacy of that conflict, and, by extension, of the one that sprung from its ashes. On 17 April 2014 British Pathé uploaded the entirety of its digitised archive – over 85,000 ‘news items’, or 3,500 hours’ worth of footage – onto its YouTube channel, including newsreel footage of both

World Wars presented in the form of the official bi-weekly *Pathé Animated Gazette* issues and discarded outtakes. Though not the first war to be filmed (that credit goes to the Boer War), newsreels, which first appeared in France in 1908 and in the U.S. and U.K. in 1910, brought the Great War to the home front. Although many commended British Pathé for this move, critics such as David Thomson of the *New Republic* criticised it for encouraging facile consumption:

[i]t amounts to 85,000 filmed items, which can seem like our past being free for inspection. The truth is not quite that exciting. Many of these items have been available for years, and the whole collection has been organized for modern consumption ... So raw footage – using the word raw to mean both untreated and a source of pain – has been dressed up as history that we can read as trouble-free.²

Thomson seems to be unaware that there was hardly any ‘raw footage’ to begin with. For as long as they were around newsreels mixed the authentic and the crafted, the event and re-enactment. As social observer Len England keenly noted in the early days of World War II, ‘in none of the action shots (except those at sea taken by naval officers) has the camera jolted or been out of focus’.³ Voice-of-God commentary or intertitles, as well as dramatic music, only added further layers of mediation.

Previous studies of wartime newsreels have been primarily concerned with their ideological function – their status as vehicles of propaganda. Consequently, in examining newsreel sound, they have tended to focus on the ways in which voice-over and music manipulate the viewer, all but ignoring the presence of sound effects. My aim in this article is to extend the kind of attention already directed to documentary sound conventions, particularly in the postwar period, to this material.⁴ I argue that fiction films about the ‘Great War’ ultimately determined the sound aesthetics of World War II newsreels. Raw combat noise did not burst upon WWII newsreel audiences: combinations of voice-over, musical score, and combat noise had evolved through landmark aviation films such as *Wings* (William Wellman, 1927), *Hell’s Angels* (Howard Hughes, 1930), and *Dawn Patrol* (Howard Hawks/Edmund Goulding, 1930/1938). Ultimately, this article questions the use of highly conventionalised sound effects to make graphic images more intelligible and vivid, reinforcing their claim to realism at the expense of ‘authentic’ reality.

My analysis of WWII newsreels will be confined to footage shot by British Pathé, keeping in mind that wartime rota-pools, heavy government

ensorship, and raw stock shortages led to the vast homogenisation of product amongst the five major British (as well as the five major American) newsreel companies between 1940 and 1945. As newsreel historians Nicholas Hiley and Luke McKernan point out, even before World War II ‘each newsreel imitated the others to a considerable degree, through a mixture of financial caution, suspicion and an implicit acknowledgement that the newsreels thrived through their very homogeneity’.⁵

The first section on WWI newsreels provides an important starting point for this survey of the evolving aesthetic of sound effects. It examines the challenges inherent in obtaining combat footage, briefly considers the precedent set by intertitles in authenticating the images and stimulating the viewers’ auditory imagination, and attempts to reformulate the silence accompanying those images as a kind of presence, rather than the absence of sound. The three films discussed in the second section on fictional accounts of the Great War were chosen for their importance at critical junctures in the development of sound-editing protocols, while the newsreels cited as examples in the third section were chosen either for their self-reflexive qualities or for their clear illustration of particular sound-editing principles.

2 Setting the precedent: World War I newsreels and questions of authenticity

The hardest aspect of thinking about how audiences may have been primed to imagine the sounds of World War I by newsreels is the sheer scarcity of authentic combat footage. Though there had been attempts by the British to record moments of the Boer War using motion picture cameras (and by Americans of the Spanish-American War), neither the risks nor the repercussions had been thought through on a national scale. With instinctive caution newsreel cameramen were consistently, and often rather violently, shooed away from the front lines. As one British cameraman complained,

[i]t is impossible to get from England to the Continent with a motion picture camera. ... Not only is it out of the question to get a motion picture camera out of England in the direction of any of the belligerent countries, but likewise it is not possible to get a motion picture camera into England and retain possession of it.⁶

The reasons given ranged from the practical (fear cameramen might give away troops positions or draw artillery fire) to the political (fear of losing

public support for the war and weakening the nation's morale).⁷ The United States' late entry into the war on 6 April 1917 also ensured that the subject 'seemed little more than a curiosity to most U.S. audiences' before then.⁸ Finally, whatever footage the more daring cameramen did manage to secure was subject to strict censorship by the Ministry of Information in the U.K. and the Committee on Public Information (also known as the 'Creel Committee' after its chairman George Creel) in the U.S.

Consequently, much of the footage shown in the newsreels which had become a staple in many movie theatres by 1914 was faked. In 1915 an anonymous article in *The Literary Digest* published a detailed account of how images of fighting on the Continent were produced in British fields. 'So excellent are the pictures of modern "warfare" thus obtained by producers in rural Britain that the motion-picture theatre patrons cannot realize that motion picture men are not allowed near the firing-line in the theatres of war', it explained.⁹ Yet the abundance of staged material seems only to have whetted viewers' appetites for images of authentic combat. Upon its release in Britain over two million people turned out to see *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), a 73-minute documentary produced by the British government from front line footage.¹⁰

Combat intertitles in this film, like the majority of those introducing regular newsreel stories, are sparse and factual. Their primary functions are to authenticate (naming the locations, dates, and type of unit involved) and explicate (summarising the sequence to follow, providing background context, or explaining the purpose of the action shown). Only rarely are they used to narrate, linking disparate scenes or suggesting simultaneous action in sentences such as 'meanwhile the 4-7 inch guns were giving the enemy no rest...'. As Hiley and McKernan point out, though 'each newsreel in the silent era [was] described by intertitles, the emphasis was very much on the pictures telling the story'.¹¹ Intertitles thus 'structured vision', to borrow a phrase from sound theorist Michel Chion, but they did not consistently engage hearing.¹² An auditory landscape is only occasionally hinted at by titles evoking explosions, shots, and 'the din of gunfire'.

Early cinema historian Stephen Bottomore points out that the use of 'live' sound effects had largely died down before the war. *The Battle of the Somme*, then, would have been accompanied only by the pregnant silence described below by World War I historian Jay Winter:

[a] line of soldiers in a trench crawl up to its lip, then stand and proceed through smoke and fire to engage the enemy. One man is 'hit' and slides down the trench. Entirely silent, without any musical accompaniment, the scene had

a staggering effect on the audience, many of whom had relatives serving in the war at that very moment. Women fainted; others cried out and had to be escorted from the cinema. Silence provided the visceral punch.¹³

For some, the uncanny nature of the scene might be tied to the camera's seeming indifference, its incapacity to register the human meaning of what is happening in front of it. For Winter, however, the 'punch' of the scene is indelibly linked to silent cinema's tendency toward abstraction and stylisation. 'The films' technological weakness was their strength', he goes on to argue. 'They gestured toward images of battles rather than pretending to show war "as it really was".'¹⁴ Simultaneously concrete and ephemeral, the scene portrayed the death of a soldier as well as death on the battlefield as such.

3 Establishing early sound priorities in the Great War aviation film

The advent of the 'talkie' coincided with a renewed interest in the Great War, partially thanks to the development of mutually-reinforcing technologies. The success of King Vidor's *The Great Parade* (1925) is credited with showing studios that the moment of mourning following the Treaty of Versailles had passed and that combat was again a suitable subject. Then, on 20 May 1927 – six months before the first official talkie – Fox Movietone Corporation and its optical soundtrack lured over 6,000 patrons to New York's Roxy Theatre. They came to see motion pictures of Charles Lindbergh and to hear his airplane rumble off on the first nonstop solo flight to Paris. On 3 December 1927 the first weekly sound newsreel debuted in select New York theatres; by June 1929 British Movietone News (a Fox subsidiary) had brought the technology to the United Kingdom, and by 1932 all British newsreels featured a sound-track.¹⁵

A series of Great War films would follow, many of them aviation films dedicated to the exploits of Allied pilots. As early as 1926 ex-aviator turned screenwriter John Monk Saunders convinced Paramount's Jesse Lasky that a film about war-time aviators could have the same financial returns as Vidor's 1925 hit.¹⁶ To minimise expenses the studio turned to the Department of War, which had just passed The Air Corps Act of 1926 – a five-year expansion program intended to enlarge the Army's flying force by 16,000 men. 'Undoubtedly the Air Corps saw the film as positive propaganda which would enhance the reputation of the air service and stimulate re-

cruitment', explains aviation film historian Stephen Pendo.¹⁷ In this unprecedented collaboration the Army agreed to supply all the manpower, equipment, and technical advice necessary for the realisation of the film.

Opening on 12 August 1927, *Wings* came to be recognised as the most true-to-life representation of wartime flying Hollywood had ever seen – not least because it featured an extensive array of sound effects. 'Each time an airplane hurtled in flames to the earth, there was a doleful hooting behind the screen', wrote *New York Times* reviewer Mordaunt Hall. 'When the aviators are about to take-off and the propellers are set in motion, the sound of whirling motors makes these stretches all the more vivid.'¹⁸ How these sound effects were produced remains debated today, with some historians citing evidence of a synchronised sound-on-disk system and others evoking more complicated live effects machinery.¹⁹ However, for our purposes, what matters in the case of *Wings* is the initial treatment of sound as spectacle, not altogether different from the treatment of color – every explosion in the film was meticulously hand-painted to dazzle the viewer. Sound effects were likewise employed to stimulate the moviegoer's senses, not to communicate information or advance the plot.

The commercialisation of optical sound technology allowed the human voice to enter the cinematic soundscape. Consequently, the Great War films that followed *Wings* elaborated a system of sound priorities, conventionalising the treatment of voice, noise, and silence. Building on Rick Altman's study of 1930s sound recording and representation, James Lastra describes this process as a transition from a phonographic model, which aimed to imitate 'a particular real act of audition', to a telegraphic one which privileged intelligibility 'at the expense of material specificity'.²⁰ If the former treated sound 'as *event*', Lastra explains, the latter treated it 'as *structure*', layering sounds carefully to match the desired effect.²¹ Steve Wurtzler similarly characterises this moment in terms of a paradigmatic shift from '*transcription*' to '*signification*'.²² Neither suggests that the switch-over was ever complete, but rather that, with time, one model came to be preferred to the other.

We can trace this shift at work in the next two great aviation films to follow *Wings*, both released in 1930: Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels* and Howard Hawks' *Dawn Patrol* (remade in 1938 using the original's battle footage). Though Hughes initially imagined *Hell's Angels* as a sound effects-only epic in the style of *Wings*, the premiere of *The Jazz Singer* in October 1927 forced him to reconsider sound. Realising that 'battle scenes do not need to be in exact sync to be perceived as such', Hughes overlaid them with authentic recordings of gunfire, explosions, and planes zooming

past one another, and also reshot the dialogue scenes from scratch with more phonogenic actors.²³ *Hell's Angels* finally premiered at Grauman's Chinese Theater in June 1930 using a complex projection system to mix multiple sound tracks. Historian Donald Crafton explains:

[t]here were two banks of three machines each. One ran the picture only. A second interlocked projector ran the normal sound track, and the third ran a supplementary effects track. These sound effects were literally added on, playing over the regular sound track through high-powered amplifiers and a dozen mighty loudspeakers. They blasted the audience with roaring propellers, exploding ammo dumps, and a crashing zeppelin.²⁴

Hell's Angels may thus be considered as one of the earliest instances of what would later become known as sound mixing, pre-figuring the advent of re-recording just a few years later.

The use of two separate sound-tracks, though purely a technical solution, posited voice as independent of, if not superior to, the other sounds in the film's sonic landscape. In fact, one can hear the difference: the spoken word is as rare during the battle scenes as the sonic proof of objects' materiality (the clink of a cup against the saucer, a door being slammed) during the dialogue scenes. A kind of 'division of labour' is at work: just as the rare colour stock is reserved for the peacetime scenes depicting the British aristocracy, so too are sounds reserved for combat. From here it is not difficult to imagine the passage toward standardised newsreel sound, described by a newsreel editor in 1946 as 'commentary mixed with music and sound effects, and an occasional interpolation of natural sound'.²⁵

Howard Hawks' *Dawn Patrol* was intended as a sound film from the start, unlike *Wings* and *Hell's Angels*. Yet, despite the more sophisticated technical means at its disposal, it has nothing of the earlier two films' spectacularity. Bent on delivering a sober anti-war message, Hawks privileged dialogue over spectacular displays of sound. The roar of airplane engines is still there but voice dominates the sound-track and transforms all the other noises into clues, indices, and signs to be interpreted by the main characters. Sounds in *Dawn Patrol* not only draw attention to their on-screen source, they also indicate distance and direction and inform both characters and viewer about off-screen events.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the scene which opens the film: Brand (Neil Hamilton), the commanding officer, and his elderly assistant listen to the sound of planes coming in after the eponymous 'dawn patrol'. Slowly they count the engines on their fingers, practicing what Chion calls causal

listening: ‘two...’, ‘three...’, ‘five out of seven’, Brand finally declares. He does not need to go outside to know that he has lost two men. The evolution of protocols for dealing with sound in Great War films may thus be described as a ‘reigning in’ of sound-as-excess and the instrumentalisation of spectacle for affective engagement. René Clair’s 1929 plea, ‘we must draw a distinction here between those sound effects which are amusing only by virtue of their novelty (which soon wears off), and those that help one to understand the action, and which excite emotions which could not have been roused by the sight of the pictures alone’, seemed by 1938 to have been heard and answered.

4 Realism vs. reality: Drawing on fictional paradigms in World War II newsreel sound

The surge of Great War films was paralleled by an increasing militarisation of American newsreels. ‘The fear of the return of total war is evident in 1930s cinema’, remarks Jay Winter. Period sources concur. Oswald Villard, editor of *The Nation*, opined in December 1934: ‘I do not go to the movies very often, but not in a year have I seen a newsreel which did not play up the military or the navy.’²⁶ In October 1935 Selden Menefee of *The New Republic* even calculates that

[m]ilitaristic scenes make up 10.4 percent of all items shown. In forty-five newsreels there were thirty-two shots of such fascinating subjects as military reviews, naval manoeuvres and bombing planes. Twelve more shots of civil aviation contain military implications.²⁷

Moreover, starting in 1933 previously censored newsreel material was made available for documentary and compilation films such as *The Big Drive*, *This Is America*, *Hell’s Holiday*, and *World in Revolt*.²⁸ The 1934 film *The First World War* was so successful that it was re-released with additional material five years later. ‘*The First World War* is about to be reissued’, announced an editorial in *Hollywood* magazine in 1939.

It is a collection of newsreel shots, many of which were suppressed during the actual conduct of the war. It was released some years ago, but was not given so wide a circulation as it deserved. ... All of us do well to demand uncensored newsreels.²⁹

As for British newsreels at this time, historian Arthur Marwick concludes that ‘they were without doubt implicitly Conservative in tone’.³⁰

Though the constant presence of military imagery in movie theatres seems to have met with little enthusiasm from most moviegoers, it ensured that when World War II erupted neither the newsreel companies nor the states on either side of the Atlantic were again caught unawares. As the historian David Culbert writes,

[n]obody has a problem locating footage for World War II. Indeed, we first recall that war from film images.³¹

In Britain the newsreel companies (as well as the BBC) remained independent of the state but actively shared footage amongst themselves. In the U.S., once it entered the war, all commercial and Armed Forces footage was pooled, reviewed by the censors, and shared with all five newsreel companies.³² War subjects dominated newsreel coverage in both countries. An editor at British Movietone News later explained: '[i]t became accepted by the public that the news-reels' function was to report the war, and as the war became world-wide, the stream of other items dried up.'³³

Images of the conflict were more than merely present – they sought to engage the spectator's senses as fully as possible. 'World War II was the best reported event in world history', wrote British documentary filmmaker, critic, and historian Paul Rotha in 1960.

The radio and press made everyone who could read, and some who could not, aware at least in part of the sight, sound, smell, and feel of war. The widespread sense of the reality of combat penetrated even the studios' golden gates. ... It is significant that these [fiction] films employed newsreel and documentary story-construction when they could.³⁴

Rotha goes on to praise William Wellman's *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945).

To an audience desperate to know about their loved ones on the front, newsreels promised to deliver 'authentic' see-it-as-it-happened footage. As early as 1940 one can witness narrational strategies intended to draw attention to a number of 'reality effects'. In 'Air Drama Off the Coast', a 1940 British Pathé piece shot from the White Cliffs of Dover, Nazi bombers are seen attacking British patrol ships. With omniscient bravado the narrator introduces the segment as a 'peaceful scene soon to be shattered by the roar of planes bent on death and destruction', claiming that 'the God of War is abroad'. Throughout what follows the narrator's voice shifts back and forth, speaking at times from the position of a distant and wise observer and at times from the position of a first-hand witness caught in the midst of the action:

Nazi bombers dive to attack our patrol! As you watch these stirring

scenes, bear in mind that the cameraman stood his ground through terribly dangerous conditions risking his life – look, look, it's a hit! – risking his life to bring to the screen dramatic evidence of our defence's ability to drive Hitler's scourge from our shores. ... No Hollywood fake pictures these! Just plain stark reality.

This monologue encapsulates the essence of many World War II newsreels to follow: it claims to present untampered imagery ('No Hollywood fake pictures these!') while openly tampering with the sound, leading the viewer to believe that the narrator's speech was recorded on the spot instead of in a studio ('Look, look, it's a hit!').

In 'The New Hurricane' (1941) the same process is at work. 'And now we bring you official pictures taken during actual operations', the narrator announces.

A camera records a miniature cinefilm every time the gun buttons are pressed. Naturally, the quality of the enlarged film suffers a little. But it's the real thing on the screen without trimmings!

It is at this time that imperfections and lower quality images begin to be recognised as so many signs of 'authenticity'. Writing in the *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* in 1944, Air Force Lieutenant and First Motion Picture Unit cameraman Walter McGee seemingly naively and inadvertently provides readers with an example of this principle at work:

I might add that flak (anti-aircraft explosions) is the cameraman's nemesis. Its concussions bounce the ship so that the resulting films are jerky. ... Sometimes these concussions result in 'jump'. An excellent example of this appeared in *The Battle of Midway* film, which was released to the public. You may recall one scene in which the film jumped an entire frame. This was probably caused by flak.³⁵

The 'official' pictures of 'actual' operations in 'The New Hurricane' are marked not only by the more grainy texture the narrator apologetically points out, but also by the introduction of an additional frame within the shot. Its effect is to add a layer of mediation while insisting on the mechanic, automatic nature of the recording equipment. Yet the narrator makes no reference whatsoever to the sounds accompanying the segment. The hum of the motor, the whistling noise that signals the release of the bombs, the sound of distant explosions, are all there to be heard but not listened to.

Two problems arise here. First, unlike the images, these sounds are rarely authenticated as field recordings of the object pictured (which, of course, they most often were not). Only in segments shot on training grounds and home bases, such as the 1941 'A.T.S. Girls With the Guns'

<<http://www.britishpathe.com/video/ats-girls-with-the-guns/query/wild-card>>, does the presence of dialogue (and therefore of a synchronised sound track) speak to the legitimacy of stray noises picked up in the background. Occasionally, in segments like ‘The Flying Bomb, 1944’, the voice-over and music may also die down briefly in order to familiarise spectators with a new weapon or piece of technology. In such cases the experience is usually framed as an instructional one, which assumes that all facts presented are ‘real’: ‘many people not in the South of England have yet to see and hear one of these missiles’, the narrator explains as the newsreel offers them that ‘opportunity’.

The reason for this disparity in claims to authenticity made by sound and image is, of course, primarily technical: heavy and unwieldy sound recording equipment made it virtually impossible to record sound on the front lines. In the early days of sound, cameraman Walter McInnis recalled, ‘it soon became apparent that many newsreel shots could be covered “MOS” – or in newsreel parlance, “mitout sound” – and joyfully, cameramen rushed to their respective attics and reverently dusted off the old silent cameras’.³⁶ In wartime this practice became a necessity. ‘For most of the war, the additional burden in equipment and the concomitant danger of exposure made forfeiture of on-the-spot sound recording the better part of valour’, writes cultural historian Thomas Doherty. ‘Though a meticulous and time-consuming intermediary step, the process of dubbing in sound effects, mixing in appropriate commentative music, and recording the voice-over narration was more wisely done in the newsreels’ New York offices.’³⁷

Yet with newsreels, perception of public taste also played a role. In a 1946 issue of the *Journal* devoted to ‘The Newsreel – Its Production and Significance’, Fox Movietone editor Warren McGrath explained that at a certain point

[m]otion pictures with sound were no longer newsworthy *just because they had sound*. Now, the sound had to be justified, and thus the newsreel commentator was born. ... Since 1932, the commentary type of newsreel story has increased in popularity until today it is accepted as the most lucid manner in which to present current events. This, of course, has resulted in a steady decrease in the amount of natural sound recorded in the field.³⁸

Authentic recorded sound was thus not simply unattainable, it was seen as potentially disorienting – desirable as a nice detail, but in small doses. It is in this dependence on the human voice, this ‘linguistic imperialism’ which ‘subordinates the sonic to semiotic registers’ as Steve Godman puts it, that

the newsreel seems to have followed in the footsteps of fictional war films the most. Hiley and McKernan point out that later in the war some of the British newsreel companies simply provided cameramen with a list of shots needed to illustrate a particular story.³⁹

The second problem is the redundancy of sound and image. 'We have a sound library containing every conceivable sound or a good facsimile of any sound', boasted Fox Movietone librarian Bert Holst in the same 1946 issue of the *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*. 'This is also catalogued in our simplified system and before you could say "Jack Robinson" we could give you anything from an artillery barrage to a Bronx cheer.'⁴⁰ If field-recorded sound was often unavailable and occasionally even undesirable, why were substitute sounds taken off the shelves of newsreel libraries? As an element always 'added on' to the picture, could such sounds ever be anything but illustrative? Finally, did the 'pleasing composite sound track ... constant throughout the reel and unvarying from week to week' evoked by McGrath work against the sensationalism of the news, dulling instead of stimulating the viewers' senses?

It seems that the vice of automatically pairing images with 'matching' sounds was also borrowed from fiction film. In his 1939 reflections on film sound, Cavalcanti noted the following:

[i]t must be confessed that practically all natural [i] sound used in films has been in synchronization: that is to say, the appropriate accompaniment of the thing seen. The door bang, the telephone bell, the roar of the aero engine, the wheels of the train, the rushing of the waterfall. Such obvious sound images pass practically unnoticed. By now they are quite banal.⁴¹

As in the case of *Wings*, the job of such sounds was to render the images more vivid, creating touches of local colour. 'Whatever virtues sound brings to the film are largely perceived and appreciated by the audience in visual terms – the better the sound, the better the image', concludes Chion.⁴² However, the result is an oft sloppy soundtrack, like that covering the Allies' preparations for the invasion of Italy. In 'On to Italy, 1943' the basic rules of sound perspective, painstakingly elaborated in films like *Hell's Angels* and *Dawn Patrol*, seem to have been tossed aside as the whistling of bomb releases and subsequent explosions are repeated *ad infinitum* at the same volume to impress upon the viewer the importance of the occasion. If the sound mixer's intention had been to evoke the sound of other planes next to the one carrying the camera, it does not register. 'Shells whistle and whine across the straits in another of those classic barrages

which have announced our coming in the past', the narrator smugly comments, introducing an epic montage sequence in which each explosion is all too neatly timed to coincide with picture cuts.

5 Conclusion

World War II presented newsreel companies with the greatest demand yet for authentic combat footage. Lighter, more portable cameras and reduced censorship (quite unlike that which hindered cameramen during World War I) allowed them to meet that need. Every week newsreel companies such as British Pathé brought images of the front lines to movie theatres across the U.K. and the U.S. However, heavy and unwieldy sound recording equipment made it virtually impossible for them to record sound directly in the field. Nevertheless, combat noises abound in World War II newsreels. Taken from sound libraries and arranged using sound-editing techniques first developed in fictional Great War films of the preceding decade, combat noises punctuate the otherwise seamless blend of dramatic music and voice-over narration. The latter, in turn, 'tames' the sound of war with discourse, ensuring that it does not surpass human scale (the dominance of the voice-over doubtless served other purposes as well – as a propaganda procedure for tightly controlling meaning, both performing and symbolising the state's control over the anarchic situation).

The Great War films had primed audiences for what war was supposed to sound like, and the newsreels modelled their own soundtracks to satisfy those expectations. The result was a positive re-appraisal of the value of newsreels after nearly a decade of criticism and contempt. For instance, Newton Meltzer wrote in 1947 that 'during the late war, the newsreel won for itself a wider, more attentive audience; no longer is its appearance on the screen considered an opportune time to visit the lavatory or discuss the merits of the feature picture'. He stressed in particular the emotional impact made possible by the presence of sound:

it [the newsreel] is a medium of public information to be reckoned with. Its high-tension sound track reaches most members of the family in two out of three American homes. And as it unreels before them, they laugh, weep, are angered, ennobled, or bored.⁴³

The emotional force of newsreels also raised ethical questions that are still relevant today, when the sights and sounds of war are more widely avail-

able than ever before.⁴⁴ In a 24 June 1944 review of the Iwo Jima invasion films for *The Nation*, James Agee admitted, very uneasily: 'I am beginning to believe that, for all that may be said in favour of our seeing these terrible records of war, we have no business seeing this sort of experience except through our presence and participation.' He further explains with a striking analogy:

Perhaps I can briefly suggest what I mean by this rough parallel: whatever other effects it may or may not have, pornography is invariably degrading to anyone who looks at or reads it. If at an incurable distance from participation, hopelessly incapable of reactions adequate to the event, we watch men killing each other, we may be quite as profoundly degrading ourselves ... none the less because we tell ourselves sincerely that we sit in comfort and watch carnage in order to nurture our patriotism, our conscience, our understanding, and our sympathies.⁴⁵

If we apply Agee's critique specifically to the use of sound effects in World War II newsreels, we must contend with the ever-receding horizon of realism. The use of library sounds sacrifices fidelity not for the sake of greater intelligibility (Lastra) but, rather, for the sake of a better show. In other words, the added effects do not contribute to the viewer's understanding of the action – they are simply there to enhance sensual experience. The result is a newsreel tradition that never quite seems to abandon the logic of spectacle. Instead, the British Pathé archives point us toward contemporary war films in their relentless pursuit of immediacy through sound.

Notes

1. Véray 2010.
2. Thomson 2014.
3. England 1940.
4. For a detailed survey of sound practices in postwar documentary see Ruoff 1992.
5. Hiley & McKernan 2001, p. 186.
6. Rosher 1914.
7. Fielding 2006, pp. 115-116.
8. Culbert 1999, p. 264.
9. 'Fake War Movies' as cited in Fielding 2006, p. 117.
10. Winter 2011, p. 104.
11. Hiley & McKernan 2001, p. 189.
12. Chion 1994, pp. 5-6.
13. Smither 1993, pp. 149-168, cited in Winter 2011, p. 104.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
15. McKernan 2002, p. 139.
16. Paris 1995, p. 35.

17. Pendo 1985, p. 74.
18. Hall 1927.
19. Pendo 1985, p. 79. For a description of the two systems see also Farmer 1984, p. 190 and DeBauche 1997, p. 186.
20. Altman 1992, p. 29; Lastra 2012, p. 249.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
22. Wurtzler 2007, p. 231.
23. Pendo 1985, p. 72.
24. Crafton 1999, pp. 349-350.
25. McGrath 1946.
26. Villard 1934, cited in Fielding 2006, p. 265.
27. Menefee 1935, cited in Fielding 2006, p. 266.
28. Doherty 1999, p. 205.
29. 'The Show Goes On', *Hollywood*, 1939.
30. Marwick 1982, p. 139.
31. Culbert 1999, p. 265.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 265.
33. Gerald Sanger, 'We Lived in the Presence of History: The Story of British Movietone News in the War Years', unpublished manuscript for a talk delivered c. 1946, quoted in McKernan 2002, p. 170.
34. Rotha 1960, p. 466.
35. McGee 1944.
36. 'Production and Significance of Newsreels', *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, 1946.
37. Doherty 1999, p. 270.
38. McGrath 1946.
39. Steve Goodman, 'The Ontology of the Vibrational Force' in Hiley & McKernan 2001, op.cit., p. 189.
40. Holst 1946.
41. Cavalcanti 1939, op. cit., p. 28.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 221
43. Meltzer 1947, op. cit., p. 272.
44. For a discussion of some of the ethical questions involved in documentary sound editing today and the addition of sound in post-production see Murray 2010.
45. James Agee, 'Films', *Nation*, 1944, quoted in Davis 2008, pp. 206-207.

References

- Altman, R. 'Introduction: sound's dark corners' in *Sound theory/sound practice*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Altman, R. *Silent film sound*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Bottomore, S. 'An international survey of sound effects in early cinema', *Film History*, Vol. 11, No. 4. Special domitor issue: 'Global experiments in early synchronous sounds', 1999: 485-498. Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815249>>.
- Cavalcanti, A. 'Sound in films', *Films*, Vol. 1, No. 1, November 1939: 25-39. Stable URL: <<https://>

- web.archive.org/web/20120406054050/http://lavender.fortunecity.com/hawkslane/575/sound-in-films.htm>.
- Chion, M. *Audio-vision: Sound on screen*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Clair, R. 'Film sound' in *Film sound: Theory and practice*, edited by E. Weis and J. Belton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985 (orig. in 1929).
- Crafton, D. *The talkies: American cinema's transition to sound, 1926-1931*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Culbert, D. 'Film, war and the military in: newsfilms and documentaries' in *The Oxford companion to American military history*, edited by J. Whiteclay Chambers and F. Anderson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Davis, H. *The making of James Agee*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008.
- DeBauche, L. *Reel patriotism: The movies and World War I*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Doherty, T. *Projections of war: Hollywood, American culture, and World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- England, L. 'The Faking of Newsreels', *Mass-observation File Report no. 16*, 7 January 1940, reproduced in *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council, 2002.
- 'Fake War Movies', *Literary Digest*, 13 November 1915: 1079.
- Farmer, J. *Celluloid wings*. Blue Ridge Summit: Tab Books, 1984.
- Fielding, R. *The American newsreel: A complete history, 1911-1967*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2006.
- Hall, M. 'The screen; the flying fighters', *The New York Times*, 13 August 1927.
- Hiley, N. and McKernan, L. 'Reconstructing the news: British newsreel documentation and the British universities newsreel project', *Film History*, Vol. 13, No. 2, Non-Fiction Film, 2001: 185-199. Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3815425>>.
- Holst, B. 'The Film Library', *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, Vol. 47, No. 3, November 1946: 365.
- Lastra, J. *Sound technology and the American cinema: Perception, representation, modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Lastra, J. 'Fidelity versus intelligibility' in *The sound studies reader*, edited by J. Sterne. London-New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Marwick, A. 'Print, pictures and sound: the Second World War and the British experience', *Daedalus*, Vol. 111, No. 4, Print Culture and Video Vulture, Fall 1982: 135-155. Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024821>>.
- McGee, W. 'Cinematography Goes to War', *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, Feb 1944, Vol. 42, No. 1, Jan-Jul 1944: 107. URL: <http://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/journalofsociety42socirich_019>.
- McGrath, W. 'Newsreel Sound', *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, Vol. 47, No. 3, November 1946: 372.
- McKernan, L. (ed.). *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*. London: British Universities Film & Video Council, 2002.
- Meltzer, N. 'Are newsreels news?', *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1947: 270-272. Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1209414>>.
- Menefee, S. 'The Movies Join Hearst', *New Republic*, 9 October 1935.
- Murray, L. 'Authenticity and realism in documentary sound', *The Soundtrack*, Vol. 3, No. 2, December 2010: 131-137.
- Paris, M. *From the Wright brothers to Top Gun: Aviation, nationalism and popular cinema*. Manchester-New York: Manchester University Press, 1995.

- Pendo, S. *Aviation in the cinema*. Metuchen-London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1985.
- 'Production and significance of newsreels', *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*, Vol. 47, No. 3, November 1946. URL: <http://archive.org/stream/journalofsociety47socirich#page/372/mode/2up>.
- Rosher, C. 'No Cameras Going to the Front', *Motion Picture World*, 3 October 1914: 1487.
- Rotha, P. *The film till now: A survey of world cinema*. Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1960.
- Ruoff, J. 'Conventions of sound in documentary' in *Sound theory, sound practice*, edited by R. Altman. New York: Routledge, 1992: 217-234.
- Smither, R. 'A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting: The Question of Fakes in *The Battle of the Somme*', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1993: 149-168.
- 'The Show Goes On', *Hollywood*, Vol. 2, No. 8, January-December 1939. URL: http://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/hollywood28fawc_0787.
- Thomson, D. 'These newsreels tell the history of the 20th century', *The New Republic*, 23 April 2014. Stable URL: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117480/pathe-newsreels-tell-history-20th-century>.
- Véray, L. '1914–1918: The first media war of the twentieth century: the example of French newsreels', *Film History*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 'Cinema during the Great War', 1 December 2010: 408-425. Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/filmhistory.2010.22.4.408>.
- Villard, O. 'Issues and Men, Propaganda in the Movies', *Nation*, 12 December 1934: 665.
- Winter, J. 'Filming war', *Daedalus*, Vol.140, No. 3, Summer 2011: 100-112. PDF available at: http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/DAED_a_00101#.U2vCir9RHww.
- Wurtzler, S. *Electric sounds: Technological change and the rise of corporate mass media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

About the author

Masha Shpolberg is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Film & Media Studies in 'cotutelle' at Yale University and the Ecole Normale Supérieure. After earning her B.A. from Princeton in 2010 she studied at the ENS and the Université de Paris III. Her Master's thesis, defended in 2012, focused on audiovisual strategies employed by Polish documentary filmmakers to circumvent censorship after 1956. She has also worked on archival film projects related to documentary and early silent film at the Fondation Cinéma Vérité and the Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé.

