Frank Kessler

›Fake‹ in Early Non-Fiction

2006

https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/16038

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

FRANK KESSLER

›Fake‹ in Early Non-fiction

»It would be anachronistic to consider these films as ›fakes‹.« This is what I stated in my entry on »*actualité*« in the *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, referring to re-enactments of topical events such as, for instance, Georges Méliès's films about the Dreyfus affair.[1] This, however, is a statement that only is valid as far as it refers to a notion of ›fake‹ which, in itself, is anachronistic. The type of film I had in mind when writing this were the so-called »fake documentaries«, or »mockumentaries«, films, in other words, which foreground stylistic devices that trick the viewer into believing that she or he is watching a non-fictional film, whereas in fact everything is pure invention, and all of the actions and events are staged. The filmmakers playfully, although in some cases with more serious intentions, use the conventions of documentary in order to subvert the viewer's blind faith in non-fictional media formats, often provoking amusement, but sometimes also indignation, and even scandal and violent rejection. Peter Jackson's and Costa Botes's FORGOTTEN SILVER (1996) about the fictive New Zealand film pioneer Colin McKenzie triggered a whole range of reactions, from praise for the subtle parody to protests by viewers who felt that they had been duped and ridiculed. The film FORD TRANSIT by Dutch-Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad (2002), which was presented as a documentary, but in fact had been entirely staged, caused a genuine scandal and got shelved by the Dutch television channel VPRO which had commissioned it. What these films have in common, however, is that they consciously use formal conventions of documentary filmmaking in order to play a game with the viewer. This also makes them differ radically from the case of a German TV journalist, Michael Born, who sold staged footage of a Ku Klux Klan meeting in Germany, Kurdish terrorists building a bomb, a hunter shooting cats, and other fabricated stories to a German television channel. Here the fakery is indeed an act of criminal fraud, and, consequently, Born was sentenced to four years of prison.[2]

None of the cases mentioned above is comparable to what could be considered a ›fake‹ with regard to early cinema. First of all, in opposition to »fake documentaries«, the term refers exclusively to films about topical events, and secondly, contrary to what Michael Born did, these did not aim at creating a sensation by presenting a completely made-up news item. In other words, when contemporary film historians use the term »fake«, they need to make sure not to project its present-day meaning onto a practice of the past.

The 1906 article »Fake and 'Frisco – Ominous Facts«[3] is an interesting document, indeed, because it offers a contemporary view on ›fake‹ practices. The

Fake and 'Frisco – Ominous Facts

Unless our memory plays us false, we believe it was Abraham Lincoln who said that you could fool some of the people all the time, or all of the people some of the time, but that you could not fool all the people all the time. There is, unquestionably, a large amount of truth in this trite remark, but how utterly it is ignored by certain members of the cinematograph trade may be gleaned from the following ominous *facts*.

The way in which some makers have recently endeavoured to foist upon the public *faked* films of incidents that have profoundly affected the sympathetic imagination of the world is not only a scandal to human intelligence, but it is a policy which is hateful to every true British heart. Let it be understood at the outset that we have no grudge against any individual, nor have we any complaint to make against the products of any manufacturer, in so far as technique is concerned. What we do attack is the evident policy in some quarters of thinking that anything is good enough for a British audience, that deceit can be practised *ad nauseam*, and that anything and everything can be faked, and yet passed of as the genuine article. We have had such an audacious example of this kind of thing in some of the published and exhibited films purporting to represent the sad calamity at San Francisco, that we cannot, in the interests of cinematography, allow such flagrant examples of deceit to pass without comment, and without giving a word of warning to the trade.

One firm has raked up some fire or another from the dust heap of almost forgotten things, and with some perfect *sang-froid* offers it as representing the appalling catastrophe at San Francisco. This particular film shows the firemen busy at work deluging the burning debris with water, whereas every school-child knows, that at San Francisco, the ruins blazed for three days, simply because the earthquake had broken the water mains, and it was, in consequence, impossible to fight the flames. Whole streets had to be literally blown down in order to isolate the fire-stricken districts. And yet, even amidst this dreadful calamity, there are some who appear to be so hard of heart that they can treat it as if it were an everyday occurrence. We do not know, even in this age of charlatanry, of a more barefaced attempt of imposture on the simplicity of the public, than the publication of faked films of such events as the San Francisco disaster. In one or two instances they have met with the success they deserve, namely, that showmen who have exhibited them have been compelled to withdraw them.

Is this kind of thing, we ask, beneficial to cinematography? Does it not, on the other hand, tend to lower animated picture exhibitions in public estimation, *facilis decensus Averno*? This kind of thing may answer in other countries, but it will not answer here. The public hate to be deceived without knowing it; deception will only be tolerated when there is no attempt to hide it. It will be a sorry day when our film makers' powers of invention become exhausted, and when they are at last incapable of equalling themselves. But we ask – do faked films, using the word »faked« at any attempt of deception – do faked films of such awe-inspiring events as San Francisco, prove that they are doing so?

Another firm, with the most unaffected simplicity, announces that their film is »a wonderfully realistic picture of the terrible catastrophe«, and yet in the last scene we are told, »the devil suddenly appears over the wrecked city, gloating over the terrible disaster which has befallen it«. Could this, we ask, not well have been dispensed with; it may be pre-eminently dramatic, but would not pathos have been more seemly? May there not be behind all this apparent caprice of forces some meaning and purpose in it all? At all events, a shock of three minutes duration which can lay the heart of a great city in ruins, is too awful to sport with. Such scenes, as the one mentioned above,

we do not look upon as even »playing to the gallery«; they are inhuman, debasing and intolerable. On the morning of the announcement of the disaster, one of the leading London dailies said, »We are all here under such uncertain tolerance, we are all here for such a little space, we are so utterly helpless to shelter or to aid when the earth plays havoc with the operations of men; that is the one undeniable fact of such a disaster, in which all the ancient feuds and jealousies for a moment vanish in a kind of ecumenical apprehension of sorrow and pity.« How absolutely true, but even here, it seems there must be the exceptions to prove the rule.

Cinematography & Bioscope Magazine, published by the Warwick Trading Company, no. 3, June 1906, pp. 37-41.

one criticised here concerns the re-use of material filmed earlier and elsewhere as images of a topical event, in this case the San Francisco earthquake: »One firm has raked up some fire or another from the dust heap of almost forgotten things, and with perfect *sang-froid* offers it as representing the appalling catastrophe at San Francisco.« According to the author of the article, the deception is plainly visible because »this particular film shows the firemen busy at work deluging the burning debris with water, whereas every school-child knows, that at San Francisco, the ruins blazed for three days, simply because the earthquake had broken the water mains, and it was, in consequence, impossible to fight the flames«.

This practice is known to have existed since at least 1898, when the Lumière cameraman Francis Doublier, touring Jewish districts in Southern Russia, used the material at hand pretending to show to his audience authentic images of episodes related to the Dreyfus affair. He only stopped doing this when someone mentioned the fact that the events in question had occurred in 1894 already, and thus before the Lumière *Cinématographe* was available.[4] This practice continued into the 1910s, for instance in connection with the *Titanic* shipwreck in 1912, when hardly any original footage of the boat existed, and of course there were no images of the catastrophe itself.[5]

Interestingly, the term »fake« is used here not with regard to films produced specifically in order to trick audiences into believing they see an authentic depiction of a given subject, filmed on the spot, but rather to designate a practice consisting in re-using and re-labelling existing footage. Obviously, at a time when prints were sold rather than rented, this could have been done by production companies as well as by exhibitors. And even though the Warwick Trading Company here blames a competing firm for selling a ›fake‹, the Doublier example, and also several cases mentioned by Stephen Bottomore in connection with the *Titanic* catastrophe, demonstrate that exhibitors, too, were prone to adopt such a strategy. This raises an important question, indeed: in how far are the complaints about ›fakes‹ the result of fraudulent practices by producers or distributors and in how far did exhibitors try to deceive their audiences?

Georges Sadoul, in the second volume of his *Histoire générale du cinéma*, quotes an article published on June 23rd, 1902 in the French journal *Petit Bleu*, ›revealing‹ to its readers that the film LE COURONNEMENT D'EDOUARD VII (Georges Méliès, 1902) shows a »fake coronation«, the ›King‹ working in a butcher's shop in Kremlin-Bicêtre and the ›Queen‹ being an actress at the Châtelet theatre.[6] The 1902 Warwick Catalogue, however, quite clearly states that the film is not a record of the actual event:

> Owing to the light in the Abbey not admitting of the taking of Animated Photographs of the Crowning of the Sovereigns, and in order to afford the multitudes an opportunity of gaining an idea of this grand ceremony, as enacted at Westminster Abbey, we have produced, at great expense, a representation of a rehearsal of the Coronation of their Majesties King Edward VIII and Queen Alexandra. Produced under the direction of Messrs. C. Urban, London, and G. Méliès, Paris.[7]

The producers here are extremely cautious not to cause any confusion. The expression »a representation of a rehearsal« removes the film, as it were, doubly from the actual event: not only is this explicitly not a depiction of the Coronation itself, but of a rehearsal, and it shows in fact only a representation of it, an enactment.

Similarly, and again concerning a production the Warwick Trading Co. acquired from another firm, the February 1905 catalogue features a series of films referring to the fall of Port Arthur, a decisive event in the Russo-Japanese war which had occurred earlier that year:

> A wonderful representation of the bombardment of Port Arthur and landing of Marines and Guns while under fire from shore batteries.
> Manoeuvres by British Bluejackets Afloat and Ashore during the »Attack and Defence of Whale Island.«
> This grand Series of Pictures were photographed for us by West's »Our Navy«, Ltd., and are, without exception, the most vivid realization of Naval and Land Warfare yet reproduced by Animated Photography.[8]

In this case, too, the term »representation« seems to function as an indicator of a staged action, which raises the interesting question to what extent it, indeed, was read as such by the Warwick Trading Co.'s customers. Obviously – given also the fact that West's »Our Navy« was a rather well-known producer and exhibitor of multi-media Navy propaganda shows – this film was made for a different purpose altogether, and re-contextualised in order to serve a different function. Originally, it appears to have been a record of British marines' actions during a manoeuvre, which now is turned into the »representation« of a topical incident opposing Russian and Japanese forces. Rather curiously, one and the same advertisement presents a ›genuine‹ record of a more or less arranged event – the manoeuvres of the British Bluejackets at Whale Island – as a »wonderful representation« of an entirely unrelated news item.

Elsewhere, the Warwick Trading Co. is rather less straightforward, sometimes even suggesting that their product is indeed depicting actual events, when this is evidently not the case. The February 1905 catalogue also contains three films about the Macedonian insurgence against the Turks, A MACEDONIAN INSURGENT BAND ON THE MARCH; A SKIRMISH WITH THE TURKS IN THE BALKANS; MACEDONIAN INSURGENTS' FIGHT WITH THE TURKS.[9] Even though a critical reading of the description must come to the conclusion that these have to be staged scenes of military action, the catalogue text boasts that they are »[...] the only Genuine Animated Pictures in existence of Macedonian Insurgent Bands operating in hostile territory«.[10]

Even more complicated are cases where actuality footage is combined with staged action. The article »Fake and 'Frisco – Ominous Facts« in the *Cinematography and Bioscope Magazine* is followed by a text in the »Latest Films« section announcing the release of two topical films by the Warwick Trading Co. depicting San Francisco after the earthquake.[11] Given the rather self-righteous way in which the firm criticises competitors for selling »fakes«, one might expect their own films to consist of purely documentary footage. The first film starts indeed with a series of views showing various parts of the devastated city. But then it shifts to a different type of scene:

> These panoramic shots are followed by a looter being chased by the sentry. For a time, looting was rampant, until the military authorities took charge of the ruins. These vagabonds were not content with looting, but many attempts were made to rob the refugees, whilst in camp at Golden Gate Park. The next scene gives a representation of one such villain at work, but he is eventually seized by the sentry.[12]

Again, the term »representation« is used as an indicator of staging an action which, in this case, is described as characteristic for the situation.

The question of what counts as a »fake« in early non-fiction is thus a rather complex one. The article in the Warwick Trading Co.'s *Cinematography and Bioscope Magazine* concentrates on one particular form of deception, namely the selling of images filmed in a different context as a genuine record of a given situation. A seemingly similar case – the film about the bombardment of Port Arthur, which actually shows British Bluejackets during a manoeuvre – is quite different, at least from the Warwick Trading Co.'s point of view, as the firm explicitly states that this is a »representation« and also gives information about the origins of the images. An exhibitor, on the other hand, may present that film as a genuine record of the event (running the risk, however, that members of the audience might recognise the British uniforms).

The term »representation« thus serves in many cases as a disclaimer, but is not used systematically by the firm. The three films about the Macedonian uprising, for instance, are offered as »the only genuine animated pictures in existence« of such military actions. If »fake« is indeed to be used in relation to »any attempt of deception«, as the anonymous author of »Fake and 'Frisco«

declares, then the Warwick Trading Co. clearly should not point the finger at others.

Film historians thus ought to be very careful when using the term »fake« and make sure to explicitly state what exactly they wish to refer to. The connotation of »fraudulent intention to deceive« that it carries with it, is certainly inappropriate when a staged scene is labelled as a »representation«. Consequently, from the simple fact that an action is staged, one cannot deduce that it was meant to trick audiences into believing they see an authentic record of an event. Here exhibition practice comes into play, too, as one and the same film may have been labelled differently, depending on the context in which it was screened. And finally, almost any non-fictional view could have been relabelled by producers, distributors or exhibitors, either as a »representation« or as a »genuine picture« of another event.

The central question, of course, is to what extent audiences actually were deceived. In 1900 Maurice Normand published a short story »Devant le cinématographe« in the French weekly *L'Illustration*. An Irish girl, who is working in a Paris hotel, goes to a variety theatre to watch films about the war in South Africa where her fiancé's regiment has been sent. In one of the pictures she believes to see him being shot, and she faints. A gentleman in the audience, however, points out to her that these were staged scenes, filmed in Paris, and that there was no need to worry.[13] Maurice Normand thus suggests that there were two kinds of spectators, ›naïve‹ ones, who took everything they saw as an authentic record, and ›enlightened‹ ones, who were capable of distinguishing between staged scenes and documentary views.

The analysis of the terminology used in contemporary materials such as the »Fake and 'Frisco« article and catalogue texts cannot provide answers to the question of how the films were experienced by audiences. But using these sources in order to see how and in what contexts different terms functioned, can help to better understand the complex, and sometimes contradictory, discourses and practices in early cinema.

1 Richard Abel (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*. Routledge, London, New York 2005, p.6.

2 On the Michael Born affair see Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ed.), *Bilder, die lügen*, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung / Bouvier Verlag, Bonn 2003, pp. 24-27.

3 *Cinematography & Bioscope Magazine*, published by the Warwick Trading Company, no. 3, June 1906, pp. 37-41, reprinted in this article.

4 See Stephen Bottomore, »›Zischen und Murren‹. Die Dreyfus-Affäre und das frühe Kino«, *KINtop* 2 (1993), p. 71.

5 See Stephen Bottomore, *The Titanic and Silent Cinema*, The Projection Box, Hastings 2000.

6 Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma 2. Les pionniers du cinéma 1897-1909*, Denoël, Paris 1973 [1st edition 1948], pp. 212-213. For a more detailed and much better documented account of this affair see Jacques Deslandes, Jacques Richard, *Histoire comparé du cinema. II. Du cinématographe au cinema 1896-1906*, Casterman, Tournai 1968, pp. 453-462. According to the transcription of the *Petit Bleu* article here, the actor representing the King worked in a brewery.

7 *Blue Book of »Warwick« and »Star« Selected Film Subjects*, London 1902, p. 138.

8 *Revised List of High-class Original Copyrighted Bioscope Films*, February 1905, p. 108, cat. no. 1265.

9 Ibid., p. 161; catalogue nos. 1229, 1230, 1231.

10 Ibid.

11 »Topical. San Francisco Disaster. Two Films«, *Cinematography & Bioscope Magazine*, no. 3, June 1906, pp. 41-43.

12 Ibid., p. 43.

13 See »Delia im Kinematographen und der Burenkrieg. Ein Text zur Wahrnehmung des Films um 1900. Mit einer Vorbemerkung und Annotationen von Roland Cosandey«, *KINtop* 6 (1997), pp. 11-27.