Short summary

In this thesis I present the first detailed treatment of war and early cinema, describing the representation of conflicts in film from the Greco-Turkish War of 1897 through the Spanish-American War, Boer War, and others to about 1902. I show that in attempting to cover these events, early filmmakers faced a challenge, for warfare at the end of the nineteenth century was changing, relying more on defence and concealment and less on highly visible offensives; there was also increasing regulation and censorship. Surprisingly, in just half a decade, filmmakers found ways to cope, by developing new 'genres' such as acted fakes and films of 'related events', and new exhibition strategies. However, much of what they presented in these ways was, effectively, militarist propaganda.

Executive summary

War was one of the main subjects of early films, yet, while several scholars have noticed this preoccupation, there has as yet been no systematic examination of it. In this thesis I aim to write this history for the first time, describing the cinematic coverage of conflicts from the Greco-Turkish War of 1897 through the Spanish-American War, Boer War, and other conflicts up to about 1902. I show that in attempting to cover these events, early filmmakers had a difficult task, for warfare at the end of the nineteenth century was changing, relying more on defence and concealment and less on highly visible offensives such as cavalry charges; and furthermore, there was increasing official regulation and censorship of reporting. All this posed a challenge for filmmakers. These wars had to be represented, being, as all wars are, the biggest news stories of their day. Yet, with the new tactics making battle less visible, and with increasing official controls, how could wars be put on film? Surprisingly, in just half a decade, filmmakers found ways to cope, 'representing' war on screen by developing new 'genres' of films and novel exhibition strategies.

One solution appeared in the form of collusion with the military, whereby the cameraman would 'arrange' to film the troops in the war zone in apparently genuine military activity. Another strategy was to film 'war-related' actualities: views of people and places connected with the war. Thirdly, producers made staged films away from the front, such as 'fakes' (realistic or otherwise), or scale-model re-enactments, or allegorical scenes of imperial triumph. A fourth solution involved exhibitors putting together mixed programmes of war-related films, and in the process creating some of the longest film shows seen to date.

Thus, in grappling with this problem of 'how to represent war', filmmakers made genuine cinematic innovations. However, though the resulting films and shows were formally inventive, the subject matter was often little more than sensational demonisation of the other side. These early filmmakers, therefore, while being genuine innovators, also laid the groundwork for film propaganda through the twentieth century.