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LEA JACOBS

## actualités

A word of French origin, *actualités* can refer to different types of films. In its most general meaning it can be seen as synonymous with “factual film.” The French term quite often takes this sense in Anglo-American writings, probably because of its consonance with the English word “actuality,” commonly used as a synonym for “reality.” Consequently, all sorts of non-fiction pictures such as **travelogues, industrial films, scientific films, sports films, boxing films**, etc. can be considered *actualités*. In the light of this broad conception of *actualités* as early non-fiction films, John Grierson’s famous definition of the documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality” has been understood by several historians as an attempt to distinguish films like those made by Robert Flaherty from the earlier practice of factual filmmaking.

The original French term, however, clearly implies a temporal reference: an *actualité* is a current event or something which happened relatively recently. In this narrower sense, commonly used on the European continent, *actualités* are topical films and can be seen as an early form of **news event films** and **newsreels**. *Actualités* defined as pictures presenting topical events can in fact be found among the earliest films: a considerable part of the **Lumière** production consists of views depicting state visits, inaugurations of monuments, parades, processions or other affairs that were of interest to the public and treated by other media as well. These were sold not only as single views but as series of views that exhibitors could arrange in their programs in different ways.

Yet another important sense of the term came from the French company **Pathé-Frères**, who wrote in their 1904 catalogue: “By this we mean scenes of general and international interest, which are so important that they will be able to thrill the



Figure 1 Frame still from *Sortie d'usine* (Lumière, 1895).

masses.” In short, the subject matter of *actualités* had to be sensational enough to attract audiences.

These two characteristics—the reference to current events and the search for the sensational—were indeed the main ingredients of *actualités*, at least when defined according to the European use of the term. In late 19th-century France, the word also appeared in advertisements for other forms of visual entertainment, such as **dioramas and panoramas** or the displays of **wax museums** presenting recent events or the celebrities of the day. Thus *actualités* contributed to the emerging modern media landscape, adding moving pictures as a means to record or represent current political and social affairs.

In contemporary catalogues both “actuality” films (for instance, pictures taken while the event occurred) and **re-enactments** appear as *actualités*. Sometimes these are clearly separated as in a 1903 R. W. **Paul** catalogue distinguishing between “Pictures of the Transval War” and “Reproductions of Incidents of the Boer War.” In other cases staged and unstaged *actualités* appear under the same heading. Battle scenes in war films, for instance, almost always were re-enactments since it was hardly possible for cameramen to capture any of the fighting except from a very great distance. Georges **Méliès** filmed a number of well-known re-creations of topical events such as his series of films on the “Maine” incident (1898) during the Spanish–American War, on the Dreyfus affair (1899), and on the coronation of King Edward VII (1902).

It would be anachronistic to consider these films as “fakes.” There is hardly any evidence that contemporary audiences distinguished factual views from staged ones, at least in the way they might acknowledge the difference between a drawing and a **photograph** illustrating an article in a newspaper. In a short story published in *L'Illustration*, in 1900, and translated into German the same year, Maurice Normand has a young Irish maid watch pictures of the Boer War in a Paris theater. Believing she has witnessed her fiancé being shot in one of the films, she faints away. Later a Parisian gentleman assures her that these battle scenes were staged. This very interesting source suggests that an educated, urban (male) spectator could recognize a staged view, whereas a naïve and credulous (female) spectator could not. However, after 1907–1908, re-enactments sharply decline and *actualités* generally use “documentary” footage recorded at the scene.

During the early years of cinema, especially once the novelty effect of the moving picture machine had worn off, *actualités* contributed to building an **audience** for moving picture shows, sustaining their interest and attracting new groups of spectators. In the Netherlands, the **British Mutoscope and Biograph's** pictures of the 1898 coronation of Queen Wilhelmina were immensely popular: they were screened throughout the country for many weeks. About the same time, in the United States, images of the Spanish–American War, which were shown mainly in **vaudeville** theaters, had a similar effect. In Germany, before the coming of permanent cinemas, variety theaters catering to the middle and upper classes differentiated films from the rest of the program by focusing on *actualités* which appeared on the bill as *Optische Berichterstattung* or “optical reports.” In this context, even a film like Edwin S. **Porter's** *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) could be presented as an “optical report,” giving a true-to-life account of a train hold-up in the United States. As early as 1901 the Musée Grévin in Paris organized special programs with *actualités* presented first as *Journal lumineux* and then, from 1904 on, as *L'actualité par le cinématographe*. From 1906 on, the Kinéma-Théâtre Gab-Ka in Paris also specialized in *actualités*, showing new programs every Friday. Others followed this model all over the world.

In the following years, *actualités* continued to draw audiences and were often highlighted on the programs. Public events such as coronations, jubilees, visits of state, and other ceremonies, natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions or floods, but also the exploits of daring criminals—such as the rise and fall of the French automobile gang of Jules Bonnot in 1911–1912—were extensively covered, both through actuality footage and re-enactments. In Germany, images of the Kaiser were so popular that the monarch and his family could even be considered to have been the first German film **stars**.

In 1909 Pathé launched its first newsreel series, *Pathé faits divers*, which then became *Pathé Journal* (*Pathé Weekly* in the USA). Other companies soon followed suit. These newsreels consisted of about eight to twelve different items presenting a broad range of subjects from political events to crime, sports, fashion, and beauty contests. However, individual *actualités* continued to exist alongside newsreels, now more often than not as news event films.

### Further reading

- Kessler, Frank, Sabine, Lenk, and Martin, Loiperdinger, (eds.) (1997) *KINtop. Jahrbuch zur Erforschung des frühen Films—6: Aktualitäten*, Basel/Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern.
- Malthête, Jacques (1989) *Les actualités reconstituées de Georges Méliès (Archives #21)*, Perpignan: Institut Jean Vigo/Cinémathèque de Toulouse.
- Musser, Charles (1990) *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, New York: Scribner's.

FRANK KESSLER

## Addams, Jane

b. 1860; d. 1935

reformer, USA

Jane Addams, a major figure during the Progressive era, worked for legal reforms to ameliorate social conditions associated with industrialization, **migration/immigration**, and **urbanization**, held key positions in trade-union (see **labor movement**),