

A new source of history

Boleslas Matuszewski

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Sir,

Allow me to call your attention to a project, an outline of which follows, which is ready to be executed and in which I hope to interest you. It is a question of giving a location of general interest to a collection of cinematographic documents, collected under very particular circumstances, which have been most favourably received in the select circles in which I had the opportunity to show them.

I would be very grateful if you would communicate to me, through your newspaper or otherwise, any criticisms or new suggestions that this project might suggest to you, and I am at your disposal with any supplementary information that you may desire.

B.M.

Place of animated photography among the sources of history

It is wrong to believe that all the various kinds of *illustrated documents* that come to the aid of History have a place in Museums and Libraries. Next to prints, medals, figured pottery, sculpture, etc., etc., which are collected and classified, photography, for example, does not have a special department. Truly, the documents furnished by photography are only rarely of noteworthy historical interest, and above all *there are too many of them!* Someday, however, portraits of men who have had a marked influence on their times will be classed by series. But this will be only a backward move, because from this point it is a question of moving even further in this direction;

and, in official spheres, the idea has been welcomed to create in Paris a *Cinematographic Museum or Depository*.

This collection, of necessity restricted in the beginning, will expand more and more, in the measure that cinematographic photographers' curiosity moves from merely entertaining or whimsical scenes to actions and spectacles of a documentary interest, and from *humorous slices of life to slices of public and national life*. From simple pastime, animated photography will thus become an agreeable method for studying the past; or rather, since it will give a direct view of the past, it will eliminate, at least on certain points of some importance, the necessity of investigation and study.

Moreover, animated photography could become a singularly efficacious teaching process. How many lines of vague description in books intended for young people will be rendered unnecessary, the day we unroll in front of a classroom in a precise, moving picture the more or less agitated aspect of a deliberative assembly; the meeting of Heads of State about to ratify an alliance; a departure of troops or squadrons; or even the changing, mobile physiognomy of the city! But necessarily a good deal of time must pass before we can have recourse to this resource for teaching History. In order to unfold graphic, external history before the eyes of those who did not witness it, it is necessary first to store it.

One difficulty might briefly give us pause, namely, that a historical event does not always appear where one expects it. It is far from the case that History is composed solely of scheduled solemnities, organized in advance and ready to pose before the lenses. It is the beginnings, initial movements, unattended facts that avoid capture by the

photographic camera ... just as they escape inquiry.

Without doubt historical effects are always easier to seize than causes. But the two shed light upon each other; these effects brought into the broad daylight of cinematography will cast bright flashes of light upon causes lying in their shadow. And to secure not all there is, but all that *can* be secured, is already an excellent result for any type of inquiry, scientific or historical. Even oral accounts and written documents do not deliver to us all the class of facts to which they correspond, and nevertheless History exists, true after all in its broad outlines, even if its details are distorted. And then, the cinematographic photographer is indiscreet by profession; always lying in wait, his instinct very often enables him to divine where those events will pass that will become historical causes. It is necessary more often to check his excesses of zeal than to deplore his timidity! Sometimes the natural curiosity of the human spirit, sometimes the lure of profit, often the two sentiments combined make him inventive and daring. Authorized in somewhat official circumstances, he will contrive to slip unauthorized into others, and most often will know how to find the occasions and places where the history of tomorrow is unfolding. A popular movement, the start of a riot does not scare him, and even in a war one can well imagine him aiming his lens in the same way a soldier does his gun, and seizing at least a piece of the battle. Everywhere a ray of light gleams, the photographer goes as well ... If, for the First Empire and the Revolution, for example, we only had reproductions of scenes that animated photography could easily bring to life, imagine what useless torrents of ink could have been saved with regard to questions that, though perhaps secondary, are nevertheless interesting, even thrilling!

Thus the cinematographic print, in which a thousand negatives make up a scene, and which, controlled between a light source and a white sheet, makes the dead and gone get up and walk, this simple ribbon of imprinted celluloid constitutes not only a historic document, but a piece of history, a memory that has not vanished and needs no genie to materialize it. It is there, scarcely sleeping, and – like those elementary organisms that, living in a dormant state, revive after years given a bit of heat and moisture – it only requires, to reawaken it and

relive those hours of the past, a little light passing through a lens in the darkness!

Particular character of the cinematographic document

Perhaps the cinematograph does not give history in its entirety, but at least what it does deliver is incontestable and of an absolute truth. Ordinary photography admits of *retouching*, to the point of transformation. But try to retouch, in an identical way for each figure, these thousand or twelve hundred, almost microscopic negatives ... ! One could say that animated photography has a character of authenticity, accuracy and precision that belongs to it alone. It is the ocular evidence that is truthful and infallible *par excellence*. It can verify oral tradition, and, if human witnesses contradict each other on some matter, it can bring them to accord, shutting the mouth of whoever would dispute it. Suppose a discussion began about a military or naval manoeuvre whose steps had been recorded by the cinematograph; it would soon be settled ... It can give with mathematical exactitude the distance between points in the scenes it has fixed. Most often it attests with very clear signs the time of day, season, and climactic conditions in which the event took place. Even what escapes the eyes – the imperceptible progress of moving objects – the lens seizes, from their distant beginnings on the horizon to the point closest to the fore-plane of the screen. In short, one wishes that other historic documents had the same degree of certitude and clarity.

Establishment of the depository of historical cinematography

We need to accord this perhaps privileged source of History the same authority, the same official existence, the same access that already established archives have. This is a concern in the highest spheres of the State, and moreover the ways and means do not seem hard to find. It would suffice to assign to cinematographic prints that have a historical character a section of the Museum, a shelf in the Library, a cabinet in the Archives. The official depository would be installed either at the Bibliothèque Nationale or that of the Institut [National],

in the keeping of one of the Academies concerned with History, or at the Archives, or, again, at the Musée de Versailles. We will choose among these and decide. Once the foundation is established, consignments will not fail to arrive, as free donations or even from interested parties. The price of the cinematographic camera, like that of film stock, very high in the early days, decreases rapidly and will tend to come within the reach of simple amateur photographers. Many among them, not including professionals, will begin to take an interest in the cinematographic application of this art and would like nothing better than to contribute to the making of History. Those who do not supply their collections now will gladly make a bequest of them. A competent committee will accept or discard the proposed documents after having appraised their historic value. The rolls of *negatives* that are accepted will be sealed in cases, labelled and catalogued; these will be the *standards* that will remain untouched. The same committee will determine the conditions under which the *positives* will be presented and will place in reserve those which, for certain reasons of propriety, cannot be released until after a certain number of years have elapsed. The same is done at other archives. A curator from the chosen establishment will care for this new collection, small to begin with, and a future institution will be founded. Paris will have its *Depository of Historical Cinematography*.

First bases of the projected foundation

This is an establishment that is absolutely essential, and it will take place sooner or later in some large European city. I would like to contribute to its endowment in this city where I have been received with such good grace. And here I ask modestly to enter the picture.

As photographer to the Emperor of Russia, I was able, on the express orders of His Majesty himself, to capture with the cinematograph as they happened, among other curious views, important scenes and intimate events of the visit to Petersburg by the President of the French Republic in September 1897¹.

These negatives, which an initiative from on high gave me permission to take, were projected

for his eyes; after which I was able, in some sixty consecutive sessions, to offer the same spectacle to soldiers in the Paris barracks. I was surprised and charmed by the effect produced upon these simple souls, to whom I gave the opportunity to learn about the physiognomy of a foreign people and country, about the organization of official events so new to them, and finally about a great national spectacle.

I propose this uncommon first series of cinematographic negatives as the base for the establishment of the new Museum. I was fortunate to win to my point of view some persons of considerable authority, and, with their influence, I may soon be able to see this new kind of archive founded in Paris.

I have stated why I predict an easy and rapid development for these archives. I will contribute to them myself. Other than the scenes I have mentioned, I already have by my account many more to offer, relating to the coronation of HM Nicholas II, the travels in Russia of two other emperors, the Jubilee of the Queen of England. In recent times I have been able to capture portions of events in Paris that were most unexpected and breathtaking. I intend to gather throughout Europe and send to the future Depository reproductions of all scenes that seem to me to be of historical interest.

My example will be imitated ... if you would like to encourage this very simple but novel idea, suggest it to others who will carry it through, and above all liberally give the publicity necessary for it to be lively and fruitful.

Translated by Laura U. Marks and Diane Koszarski

Notes

1. The projection of one of these films was found indisputably to refute a false assertion from abroad touching on a misconduct that was supposedly perpetrated during that juncture. Doubtless the event has its little importance, but ultimately it is an example of the services that animated photography can render to the truth, verifying human testimony. This is a whole anecdotal side of History that until now has escaped the imagination of narrators.

An outline of a project for founding the film library of the Museum of Modern Art

Prepared by: JOHN E. ABBOTT
Secretary,
Motion Picture Department
IRIS BARRY
Librarian

Approved by: ALFRED H. BARR Jr
Director
THOMAS D. MABRY Jr
Executive Director

Dated: 17 April 1935

Summary

The necessity for the development of this Department of the Museum of Modern Art, whose activities will rightly and needfully be international in scope, lies in the already expressed demand for a more comprehensive knowledge of all types of film. The peculiar problem of meeting this demand can only be

solved by a centralized and coordinated film library of the films themselves, augmented by a library of books and other material as well as a clearing house of reference and service. While there do exist, both nationally and internationally, many non-commercial organizations interested in the film as art, no central organization is primarily interested in this aspect of cinematography and none exists for furthering the study of the film or for making accessible to student groups the material for study. *The Film Library, representing the combined demand of many small groups throughout the country, hopes to secure and make easily available those films which the individual groups everywhere have found difficult to obtain.*

General statement

This report embodies a project for making possible for the first time a comprehensive study of the film as a living art. There exists a widespread demand on the part of colleges and museums for the means and material for such study, which are now lacking.