

Inside Nazi Germany and PR war films in America

Ramon Girona^{a*}, Jordi Xifra^{b**}

^a Department of Linguistics and Communication, University of Girona, Spain

^b Department of Communication, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, Spain

* Tel: + 34 972 41 89 68; e-mail: ramon.girona@udg.edu

** Tel.: + 34 935 42 14 84; e-mail: jordi.xifra@upf.edu

Abstract.

This article analyzes Jack Glenn and Louis de Rochemont's *Inside Nazi Germany* (1938), a screen magazine from *The March of Time*. The aim of this paper is to analyze *Inside Nazi Germany* as a public relations war effort of the 20th century. Arising from the informative and propagandistic strategy of late 1930s newsreels, this documentary was made using very appropriate narrative techniques to award it the dimension of objectivity and truthfulness characteristic of public relations messages, without losing sight of its educational and persuasive function. From this standpoint, *Inside Nazi Germany* constituted one of the clearest precedents of public relations war films in America.

Keywords: Propaganda; Screen Magazine; Louis de Rochemont; Public Relations War Films; Documentary Films

Introduction

Documentaries have traditionally only been considered of secondary importance in the commercial strategy employed by large Hollywood producers, a fact that can be confirmed by a look at the billboards of the 1930s and 40s. At that time, the presence of documentary images in US cinemas was restricted to the weekly screening of news bulletins prior to fictional movies. An *ad hoc* cinema bill of the age would include these newsreels, a short cartoon, commercials and charity appeals, the full length A movie and the complementary B movie. However, as Doherty (1997) pointed out, screening times were advertised on the basis of the start of the A movie and not the newsreel beginning the session.

All of the large film production companies of the age ended up allocating a –small– part of their budget to producing news bulletins and created units responsible for the basic function of gathering news items which were then produced for screening in cinemas. Among these documentary units were *Paramount News*, *20th Century Fox's Movietone News*, *RKO-Pathé News*, *MGM's News of the Day*, and *Universal Newsreel*. The two basic formats under which documentary images were distributed were the *newsreel* and the *screen magazine*.

The newsreel tended to be shown in cinemas twice a week and lasted from eight to ten minutes. It offered a panoramic view of current events in a compact format: home and foreign news, parades and foreign shows, images of celebrities, pin-ups, children and animals in unusual situations, sports, etc.; in short: a potpourri of images and news which by no means offered a critical view of reality.

During the Thirties, however, and with the gathering pace of world events, newsreels covered happenings like the bombing of Shanghai during the Sino-Japanese war, the bombing of the American ship Panay during the same war, and the assassination of the king of Yugoslavia. At the beginning of the Forties, with the world at war and issues related to external affairs and defense of the nation taking priority in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's policies, newsreels allocated more minutes to these issues accordingly. In 1939, foreign news and images of the war in Europe occupied almost 30% of their content. Although by 1940–41 the projection of images related to the world war had been reduced, news related to national defense policies had increased considerably (Steele, 1985; Fielding, 1972). According to Schatz(1997), over 20 newsreels covered the war from September 1939 to December 1941, informing Americans of the events taking place in Europe and the Far East.

As Steele (1985) pointed out, newsreels tended to align themselves, via images, with the interventionist and pro-Allied theories of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration. However, a reluctance to show overly explicit images and the superficiality with which the news was treated –mostly due its inherent brevity– were principal characteristics of the format (Girona, 2009).

Screen magazines, on the other hand,were considered to take a more in-depth approach to issues. If newsreels basically functioned as a headline service, screen magazines could be compared to an in-depth article in a weekly magazine (Fielding, 1978). Although initially including three news items in their monthly screening, from 1938 onwards they were dedicated to one single issue and ran for fifteen or twenty minutes.

There were two screen magazines of note at the time: *The March of Time* (1935–1951) and *This is America* (1942–1951), the former being the more popular. This screen magazine was created by Henry Luce at the end of 1934. It was directed by Louis de Rochemont and by 1936 had achieved an audience of 12 million viewers.

The screen magazines and public relations documentary discourse

The producers of *The March of Time* treated the selected news items extensively, contextualizing them with archive images, scenes dramatized expressly for the occasion, explanatory captions, maps and a strong narrative voice that would soon become characteristic of the genre.

Fielding pointed out that the film had a clear didactic purpose. In the name of this didacticism, the editors did not hesitate to commit themselves to the reality they were attempting to describe: “The intention of *The March of Time* was to create and exploit controversy and to provoke discussion of politically, economically, racially, socially, and militarily touchy subjects” (Fielding, 1978, p. 76).

Adopting a vague political position, *The March of Time*’s editors proclaimed themselves defenders of what they called *American liberalism* (Fielding, 1978) and defined themselves above all by their opposition to the large-scale totalitarian political systems –fascism and communism– present in various European countries at the time. They generally opposed all forms of political movement founded, in their words, on

demagogy, considering it alien to what they defined as *American ethics* (Fielding, 1978).

In the face of the slow but inexorable increase in international tension throughout the Thirties, the editors of *The March of Time* had sufficient opportunity to publicize their ideological viewpoint. From this perspective, in 1938 and 1940 Rochemont produced two fairly explicit screen magazines as part of the series *The March of Time: Inside Nazi Germany* (1938) and *The Ramparts We Watch* (1940). He and his collaborators used these films to propose two critical views of the Third Reich and to insist on the need for vigilance with regard to Hitler's expansionist ambitions.

This awareness of the importance of the mass media —and particularly cinema— in the expansionist strategy adopted by European dictatorships, highlighted by Rochemont and his collaborators in 1938 with the first cinema screening of *Inside Nazi Germany*, went one step further two years later with the conclusion of *The Ramparts We Watch*.

The role played by documentary cinema in the construction of audiovisual messages for public relations purposes has been emphasized by different authors. L'Etang (2000) stated, "public relations and documentary shared similar aspirations to objectivity and truthfulness while at the same time trying to encompass an educational and sometimes overtly persuasive role" (p. 90). On the other hand, Kilborn (2006) pointed out that documentaries are one of the few audiovisual genres to reach a better understanding of how institutions operate, stressing the full public relations potential of the genre. American filmmaker W. Van Dike's definition of a documentary is useful in this respect: "a film in which elements of dramatic conflict represent social or political

forces rather than individual ones” (cited by Fielding, 1978, p. 70). This provides a good verbal definition of the kind of films made for public relations purposes, and especially those made by John Grierson and Rochemont (Fielding, 1978).

Inside Nazi Germany and *The Ramparts We Watch* are good examples of the above quotations, especially with regard to its “aspirations to objectivity”; that is, revealing the truth of what had happened in Nazi Germany, and during the First World War to persuade Americans of the dangers of the present (the Second World War).

Public relations activities to generate concerns about Nazis activities

Inside Nazi Germany is also a good example of the use of cinema for public relations purposes in order to educate and raise American’s awareness of Nazi activities and their consequences. Although Rochemont was not following guidelines from any public agency, it is nevertheless true to say that both *Inside Nazi Germany* and *The Ramparts We Watch* are consistent with a government policy of public information mangagment.

This policy started with the setting up of the Committee for a National Morale, a think tank made up of a number of specialists from the fields of psychology, sociology, political science, mass media editors, writers and military experts. On the 21st Februrary 1941, this committee submitted the document entitled A Plan for a National Morale Service, in which they stated the urgent need – in the face of the critical international situation—for the creation of a government agency which would manage all issues related to information and propaganda. This document was signed by such personalities as Georges Gallup, director of the American Institute of Public Opinion, Elmer Davis,

future director of the Office of War Information, or Edward L. Mulson, military expert and head of the Morale Division in the first world war (Girona, 2009).

The document posed a fundamental question for the understanding of the parameters within which information was managed during those years when the United States was not yet involved in the war – A Plan for a National Morale Service made the distinction between morale and propaganda. As Girona (2009) argues, when establishing this distinction, the members of the Committee for a National Morale claimed to distance themselves from the information and propaganda practices of the Axis countries. Furthermore, the document also wanted to serve as a wake-up call in the face of the international situation and, above all, it wanted to place on record the need for the creation of a government agency – with power and resources – which would deal with the questions that other countries referred to as propaganda but which the Americans had, significantly, termed morale.

Without *A plan For a National Morale Service* being binding, it could be considered to be the origin for the setting up – in October 1941 – of the first government agency which claimed to deal, in a centralised manner, with the issues related to information and propaganda: the Office of Facts and Figures (Girona & Xifra, 2009).

This agency was directed by Archibald MacLeish, a prominent member of the intellectual circle closest to President Roosevelt (Lee, 2008). MacLeish put forward the concept of “strategy of truth” as the principle which should govern both governmental information activities as well as the activities of the country’s private mass media. (Girona & Xifra, 2009, 2010).

According to Girona and Xifra (2009), the “strategy of truth and other subsequent efforts, such as those of General George C. Marshall or the production of the documentary series *Why we fight* by Frank Capra (1942–1945) demonstrate the ethical contribution of propaganda to facilitate the dialogue and debate which are necessary in democratic societies” (p. 290). This point reflects the distinction between propaganda and morality that the authors of *A Plan for a National Morale Service* alleged and which, in the field of the cinema industry, was also reflected in another document, the *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*, published in June 1942 by the Bureau of Motion Pictures. This document is one of such efforts cited by Girona and Xifra (2009).

If the Manual, in principle, was meant for feature films, the truth is that, within the context of the time —a period when television hardly existed— it found a more effective place in documentary films.

The American government itself participated in the production of documentary films through an agency created for the occasion: the U.S. Film Service, which produced such diverse documentaries as *The Plow that Broken the Plains* (1936), *The River* (1938), *Power and Land* (1940) and *The Land* (1942). Nevertheless, the influence of this policy on the uses of cinema as a medium of information, public relations and propaganda is to be found in the series by Frank Capra *Why We Fight* (1942-1945) and in newsreels and screen magazines.

It is in this context of politics and information that we should place the production of *Inside Nazi Germany*. Similar in form and substance to *Why We Fight*, *Inside Nazi Germany* is a direct antecedent to the series by Frank Capra, and thus it links to the general line of thought suggested by the Committee for a National Morale, the Office of Facts and Figures, and the *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry*. From this standpoint, *Inside Nazi Germany* could be considered a forerunner of public relations documentary film discourse within the contest of international war and, consequently, as an example of ethical propaganda (Girona & Xifra, 2009).

Inside Nazi Germany

Released on 20 January 1938, *Inside Nazi Germany* was also the film chosen by the editors of *The March of Time* to implement a strategic change, from addressing three different themes in each monthly edition to only one. Slightly longer—at 16 minutes—than other screen magazines, *Inside Nazi Germany* was directed by Jack Glenn, but with the attentive supervision of Louis de Rochemont, who was responsible for giving the movie its final form (Fielding, 1978). The significant impact it made on its premiere was due to the fact that, at a time when war was still to break out, no American documentary production or fictional film had yet been so explicitly contrary to the policies of Nazi Germany.

As Welch (1986) argues, the Nazis were well aware of the usefulness of film propaganda to achieve their goals, and in particular, newsreels became a key part of this strategy.

“After 1933 the aim of newsreel was to create mass intoxication and to obtain mass approval for the projected deeds of the regime in both domestic and foreign affairs. As a result of this, a special style appeared in both structure and documentary sequences which had little connection with objective reporting. Increasingly, then, German newsreel became a formalistic, carefully planned artistic transformation of reality in an attempt to achieve the propaganda intentions of the Nazi regime” (Welch, 1986, p. 202).

In an attempt to present Hitler’s new Germany to the world, the Nazis invited international journalists to organized press visits. Among them was Julien Bryan, a freelance cameraman, who took the opportunity to film inside the Nazi regime. After the filming, Bryan offered Rochemont the images. Despite the expectations created, Bryan’s material was fairly inexplicit regarding some of the most controversial issues of Nazi policy; according to Rochemont, it lacked explicit evidence of the propaganda strategy that had been launched by the German ministry for propaganda. The fact that it was the Germans who had invited Bryan inevitably conditioned the reporter’s freedom of movement and the final images he managed to obtain of Germany’s Third Reich. However, Bryan did provide film material which depicted to some extent the racial persecution suffered by the Jews: shops identified with the name and the Star of David, benches in public spaces where only Jews sat, exhibitions which sought to stigmatize them. He also managed to film some images referring to the persecution of communists, the control of churches and national pride being stimulated by evoking glories of the imperial past and the need to restore the African German colonies lost after World War I.

In the end, Rochemont acquired the images and began working with the material with the aim of turning it into a narrative film report on the Third Reich. A feature also typical of *The March of Time*, Rochemont mixed documentary footage with images recreated for the occasion in order to make the message more explicit, relying on the voice of the narrator to provide this cluster of images with its ultimate meaning (Fielding, 1978). From this point of view, *Inside Nazi Germany* became one of the clearest examples of the use of analepsis (flashback) as a rhetorical resource for persuasive ends.

As a narrative, the voiceover of *Inside Nazi Germany* interpreted and described the process Germany had followed under Hitler in general terms and in an openly critical way. Nazi ideologues being effective creators and exporters of images and zealous guardians of their own reality, Rochemont and his team were challenging, particularly through the narrator's voice, images that for the most part were still fairly innocuous. Some of the images available to the team of *Inside Nazi Germany* could be disturbing, perhaps premonitory, especially those showing the large military and public gatherings in Nuremberg and other venues, and those which depicted discrimination against the Jews, but they were not explicit enough; certainly not as explicit as they would become shortly afterwards, when the aggressive policy of the Third Reich became an international reality and not only a threat limited to Germany itself.

Aware that their goal lay in creating discourse in the field of propaganda and counter-propaganda, the makers of *Inside Nazi Germany* tried to combat the image of the Third Reich exported by Germany; they did so in the knowledge that their product—a *screen magazine* of *The March of Time*—was aimed at large film audiences, at the general

public, who most likely viewed the reality of Hitler's Germany as something distant, and even through uncritical eyes; an audience which, in some cases, might even feel attracted by the more striking manifestations of the social and economic achievements of Hitler's government in the early years –let us not forget that America was still trying to overcome the effects of the Great Depression.

Therefore, with the aim of looking beyond the image projected by Nazi Germany and locate itself, as the title of the screen magazine suggests, *inside* the country so as to show its internal workings and uncover its propaganda tactics, Rochemont and his colleagues divided the film into three parts. The first part was intended to describe German reality, the second documented Nazi expansionist desire and techniques, especially with regard to the U.S., and the third functioned as a kind of epilogue — intended as a warning— under the heading: “*While Democracy talks, Fascism acts.*”

The film begins with a series of shots documenting the prosperity of Nazi Germany, images of Germans enjoying their free time. It includes initial flashbacks depicting images of plenitude and bonhomie: images of Germans walking around the Brandenburg Gate, in the bars, waiting waitresses arriving with trays full of drinks, or sitting on the grass of large parks, in the shadow of trees, having their picnics, or even visiting theme parks. Only the swastikas hanging discreetly in the background of some of these images seem to suggest to the viewer a different reality. This other reality is revealed through the face of Goebbels (Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda), who appears in a close-up, ending abruptly at the images above, to make way for a map of Germany with the surface progressively obscured by a swastika and a

picture of the annual congress of the Nazis in Nuremberg with thousands and thousands of hands giving the Nazi salute.

The narrator's voice then assures us that the German people have paid a high price to achieve such wealth. Prosperity has been attained at the expense of losing individual freedoms. The map of Germany with its territorial divisions, its regional diversity, transforms into a solid black mass, from which only the swastika emerges, thus reflecting the reality of Hitler's government's dictatorial policies: April 7, 1933 witnessed the passing of the Law on Unification, which led to the *Länder*parliaments being eliminated (30 January 1934) and the *Reichstag* being dissolved (17 February 1934).

Images of the annual Nuremberg rallies at the Nazi Party Conference —again presented as flashbacks— are presented to provide documentary evidence of the aforementioned compact black mass covering all, a graphic interpretation of Germany's leaders desire for unification.

From this point onward, then, with a clearly didactic aim, this first part of *Inside Nazi Germany* becomes a description of the mechanisms of German propaganda. Later images in the film show the process of imposing a unified ideology: the discrediting and persecution of communism, the stigmatization of the Jews, and the persecution, also, of religious leaders who did not obey government orders. The image of Hitler emerges as the apex of a political, economic and social system based on propaganda, censorship, media control, deceit and submission to the leader.

Converted into a demigod —the very word used by the film’s narrator— Hitler *had taken possession* of the inhabitants of the German nation; in an almost Mephistophelian interpretation, the people of Germany had sold their independence, their true self, in exchange for this physical and economic well-being, in exchange for this initial victory over depression. Significantly, Rochemont and his colleagues inserted a fragment of a speech by Hitler from which could be heard —only in German—the part where the Nazi leader, in his characteristic fiery tone, says: “This is what I want from you, my German people (“*meindeutsches Volk*”).”

The second installment of *Inside Nazi Germany* was intended to be interpreted as affecting national concerns. The makers of the screen magazine focused on Nazi expansion strategies around the world and particularly in the United States. Rochemont and his colleagues highlighted the activities, on U.S. territory, of the German-American Bund, an organization led by Fritz Kuhn. Through careful editing, this group, its activities, which reproduced the military machinations of the Third Reich, and its seemingly peaceful expansion throughout the U.S., were contrasted with a meeting of a group of American citizens in a church.

An insert reveals this to be the Congregational Church, and its members therefore descendants of a group of Puritans who, having left Europe, reached the shores of the American continent and settled in the colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay in New England. These men and women are, then, as the makers of *Inside Nazi Germany* wished to emphasize, the descendants of the first Americans, the founding fathers of the homeland.

In addition to this, the meeting at the church becomes, for the documentary makers and probably for most of the country's population, an example of American heritage, the original town meetings still alive in New England; meetings held by settlers to address problems afflicting the community and seek solutions through consensus. Those early forms of self-government, when the country was still a colony of Great Britain, had become, with the passage of time and above and beyond their historical reality, one of the political and moral symbols of the United States.

At the meeting, which those responsible for *Inside Nazi Germany* probably staged for the film, a man rises and, taking the floor, claims to have information regarding the true activities hidden behind a seemingly harmless summer camp planned by Kuhn and his followers. The children's camp was to become, according to the man, a place of indoctrination, and on the drawing of the hypothetical camp, shown in detail at the beginning of the sequence, a flag with the Nazi swastika appears in full view next to the American flag.

The second intervention is even more significant. After the man, a woman stands up and speaks of her ancestors who fought for freedom on American soil; then, in close-up, she demands that on behalf of these ancestors any expression of Nazi ideology be eliminated from the United States.

In this second segment, the will to denounce, to show the American people the real objectives of organizations like the one headed by Kuhn, becomes even more evident. The brief sequence is also designed to award primary importance to the power of the word and the mechanisms with which a democratic society like the U.S. had equipped

itself, to allow average citizens to express themselves and consolidate their identity by means of this action, freedom.

In order to view the images from the other side of the mirror, *Inside Nazi Germany* ends with an epilogue denouncing the paralysis of democracies in the face of intense activity by dictatorial countries. Depicting images of Hitler and Mussolini in the midst of large crowds, the voice of the narrator lists some of the actions that have taken place in recent times: the Germans' recovery of the Saarland and occupation of the Rhineland, a demilitarized zone since the end of the First World War; the Italians waging war on and conquering Ethiopia; both countries' participation in the Spanish Civil War; the establishing of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis. In the light of these actions, the narrator says, the ultimate goal of these countries is to destroy democracy.

To accompany these words, Rochemont and his colleagues insert two final shots (Figures 1 & 2).

These two shots are an effective summary of what the makers of *Inside Nazi Germany* wished to express. As at the beginning of the screen magazine, where spring images of Germans enjoying their leisure time are discreetly punctuated by swastikas, this short final sequence, seemingly harmless, also hides a much darker reality. The testimony of a family member (Figure 1), the almost sanctification of two soldiers killed in action, visually evokes another war for the viewer —World War I— (Figure 2) in a very explicit message: just as Rochemont and his colleagues had evoked American heritage as a legacy of democracy and peace, they now evoked German heritage, a military

heritage of war and destruction. This final insert warns the U.S. audience that what had happened two decades ago was about to repeat itself.

Conclusions

With these two final images, which condensed the message of the entire screen magazine, it was implicitly stated that seeing only the surface of the images coming out of Germany was not enough, that it was necessary to go further; that Americans needed to be able to interpret these images correctly and overcome their apparently harmless nature, even the attractiveness of their familiarity, to discover their true essence. It was, therefore, the confrontation of these images, the powerful vision offered by the Nazis, that Rochemont and his colleagues sought with their film.

Implicitly, therefore, *Inside Nazi Germany* warned the American audience regarding the false innocence of the images—some of the images—being emitted by dictatorial countries, of their apparent familiarity. In doing so, Rochemont and his colleagues gave testimony of the importance awarded to propaganda in the conflict developing at that time between democracies, especially the United States, and the emerging dictatorships.

Inside Nazi Germany is a clear exponent of how audiovisual persuasive discourse uses its own grammar to achieve its rhetorical objectives. A grammar which it articulates through editing and on the basis of which the audiovisual discourse is constructed. Editing consists in ordering the shots of a film to form a series of sequences, some of which may be, as is the case with Rochemont's film, anachronistic (Chatman, 1978).

One of the technical procedures in the anachronistic sequence is analepsis (flashback). As Xifra and Girona (2012) have suggested, analepsis plays a central role in public relations documentary discourse. The result of analepsis is the sensation of reliving moments without losing the feeling of now in the story being told (Halloway, 1979). Analepsis means subjecting one's heart once again to past experiences. The time-image (Deleuze, 1989) betrays the storyline and history itself, representing the future as a flux of the present into the past. All in all, analepsis reveals and emphasizes the results of awareness being associated with memory.

In times of war or pre-war, this association is one of the most effective discursive mechanisms in managing the tension among explanation, interpretation, information and persuasion, and addressing the challenges of transparency and authenticity – the two activities shared by documentarists and public relations practitioners alike (L'Etang, 2000). This was very evident to British directors like Michael Powell, who used flashback in his propaganda films, thereby transferring “the aesthetic purity of the documentary to fiction” (Esteve, 2002, p. 133). Consequently, for filmmakers like Rochemont, Powell or others who have offered their talent in the service of public information and ethical propaganda, analepsis was not simply a formal issue, but rather a moral one.

Louise Rochemont should rightly be awarded a place as one of a group of filmmakers who, like John Grierson, Alberto Cavalcanti, Humphrey Jennings or Paul Rotha, have played an important role in creating a rhetorical and audiovisual dimension to public relations, and particularly in the production of educational films and documentaries like

Inside Nazi Germany and *The Ramparts We Watch*. Certainly, as L'Etang (2006) pointed out, Grierson saw educational films as an instrument of social action and a key source of social change: "If you can't teach the citizenry to know everything all the time, you can give them comprehension of the dramatic patterns within a living society" (Grierson, cited by L'Etang, 2006, p. 32), a statement that would seem to have served as an inspiration to Rochemont.

To sum up, during the second world war and the years leading up to it, documentary film – including screen magazines and newsreels— represented an important technique of public relations with the aim of informing and raising american's awareness of the activities of Hitler's regime and its ability to put world peace into danger. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this new mass media, cinema, served the propaganda aims of the new totalitarian regimes, especially during the Russian revolution and the following years. This article has shown how the popularity of cinema converted it into the most effective tool of expression for information, ethical propaganda and public relations in order to fight against the negative propaganda of the totalitarian countries. In fact, the truth-telling strategy that dominated the government news bulletins found in cinema —particularly documentary cinema— the main channel through which it conducted its public relations function, and *Inside Nazi Germany* is to be found in the line of an audiovisual language which inspired future war public relations efforts to generate concern about the dangers and risks of the political situation in Europe.

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