STAGE
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# Sermon Silver

The newsreel encourages a keener sense of the present and imprisons it for history

By LAURENCE STALLINGS

Both the Hapsburgs and the Hohenzollerns appreciated the value of the cine-camera, and their court photographers have left us striking, informal histories; though neither house foresaw the last reel of their collections. There are excellent pictures of the murdered Ferdinand, whose death at Serajevo ultimately brought both royal houses low. Indeed, one of the great misses in newsreel history occurred at Serajevo; for some unlucky cameraman filmed Ferdinand's arrival there, but failed to ascertain the change in the procession's route, and only a still camera registered the aftermath of Princip's grievous martyrdom. A cine-camera would have imprisoned history that day.

The Czar of Russia also deigned to accept the camera eye for truth, leaving extant all manner of records of that tragic family. (There is also an excellent subject on Lenin, in lodgings, stroking a cat's back with the same hand that mastered a continent.) Curiously enough, mainly the Czar's cine-records are informal. I like best the sequence wherein the Czar, who was inordinately fond of playing Russian tag, runs down several billowy ladies in a wheatfield to the accompaniment of squeaks from assembled royalty.

King Edward VII shunned films—possibly because of his embonpoint—and there is little worthwhile of his image in newsreel vaults. His son, George V, was shrewdly interested in camera, made collections of "stolen" pictures and complimented errant cineasts for their stealthy skill, frequently asking after the use of film in foreign newsreels. Notably the subject he liked best was his birthday Trooping of the Color, which is a state ballet done always with great fidelity. George V was photographed informally but once by cine-cameras, and that once when he, with Haig, and President Poincaré, with Foch, met and pooled their armies. Edward VIII, though handsome, is not as good a camera subject; for his best attributes are color, and even the best of panchromatic films cannot yet hold back the blue of his eyes, the tawny shades of hair; and thus his eyes are burned too deep by film so sensitive to the blue end of the spectrum.

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# *Newsreels*

The Kaiser and his eldest son are never good subjects; Wilhelm has the dignity, but is too much in relief about the hips, while his son shares the royal father's nervousness and self-conscious efforts when under the guns of film. They are not at their best, even when informal; they know where the camera points, and cannot rid themselves of its searching exposé. Old Franz Josef of Austria was a royal gaffer.

Of American presidents, since McKinley—the films go back no further—Roosevelt II is by all odds the best. The great T. R. was filmed when cameras turned at "65" and was himself so lively that, when projected nowadays, he seems as antic, almost, as Leon Trotzky (this latter genius seems positively a trick on films).

Few voices anywhere record so well as the present chief executive's, and his poise before the lens turrets is perfection. However, Coolidge made the best of visual pictures; he was genre in his nature, and the camera found his pinched face a triumph of Puritanism, profoundly recording this for history. Coolidge knew more, too, about technique, and was rarely photographed when he did not call the exposure and the aperture, and indeed the effect of background employed. Hoover, among moderns, was ineffectual, the camera foreshortening that face which nature had been at some pains to flatten. Little Dollfuss, for all his having turned artillery upon workers, was a hit.

*A moment of defiance caught by a newsreel camera during an uprising in Madrid.*

Perhaps the most powerful face just now is Stalin's: for he owns within himself great force, and is never photographed but that he is above the crowd, sky-bounded over guns and trumpets, the harsh planes of his face excellent matter for tripods gunning upward. Mussolini has worn us out.

One regrets the lack of names for common

subjects. One hears, of course, that there are few; but this, like most criticisms of newsreels, is unjust and untrue. There were heroes in last month's demonstrations for political amnesty in Madrid, after the election had gone their way and radicals demanded release of friends for liberal mercies. The radicals demonstrated; one chiefly thinks of the chap, about thirty and in a gray lounge suit, who stands in the Puerto del Sol shaking his upraised arms against injustice. He will not be squelched, this man of thirty in careless gray, though he is not anxious for martyrdom. He is too much concerned with getting home his argument; for a brief instant one sees him gesturing forcefully, oblivious to the automatic his suppressor points at the heart. Four police surround him; he is ignorant of them, not truculent. Police cannot hush him. They must lead him away none too delicately. (There was no clubbing.) He leaves the scene of the camera unsquelched. One wishes he had a long piece on film of this man.

What was he? Artisan? Editor? Agitator? I should like to see his family, and the children who missed him the night of his arrest. Unfortunately, camera has no second sight, and cannot make, as historians can, lives fitting for heroes. For me this man holds, in a month of film from everywhere, the interest of the weeks gone by in celluloid. The night I watched him gesticulate, heedless of the cocked pistol, I also watched the Third Infantry division march from barracks at Osaka arsenal. They were lively troops, for *jeunesse dorée* serves its time in the Third in Japan, and our cameraman had filmed them a month before they captured Tokyo. (Why had he made them? That, as he would say, is his affair.)


*A Theater patron buys a ticket to see a "March of Time" newsreel*

When word came by wire that the Third had assassinated five dignitaries, straightway their soldiers marched across our screen, wheeling in column of squads, taut as a *corps d'elite* should be, as if on the way to their rebellion. Then came reams of film for scanning from the vaults of silver history—where there are sermons in silver panchromatic stored. It was a sorrowing walk among the shades with Okada's cabinet; for some of these men were even then among the shades, yet there with us within the projection room, nervous and alive. One thought of Ulysses when he found Achilles and sought to com-

fort him for an heroic death. "O Ulysses," said Achilles, "rather had I be a slave in the house of a tenant-farmer, than to be king among these dead."

Sermons in silver bromine are never long; like those in stones, they are elusive, and need some philosophical approach. The willingness to submit to informality by George V? The cheery grin of happiness at that council when he was even then sorrowing for a million dead? Let historians puzzle over reasons for giving Foch, not Haig, the plume. One believes there was sensible thanksgiving on the King's part, after three years of honest cavalrymen who had not won an inch from Hindenburg's defenses. There is a great sigh, as well as a smile, in silver history. Grains of bromined silver, oxidizing under light rays and migrating to small archipelagoes upon celluloid, preserve all such trifles for future Plutarchs.


Alexander of Jugoslavia left the world sighing. He was given perhaps two seconds of consciousness afterwards. There had been a girl upon a balcony that grievous day in Marseille; he had waved to her and then he stared ahead, loosing his smile, sighing deeply, his breast stiffening the tunic of blue and gold. Death yearned nearby from the barrel of an automatic pistol, though Alexander did not see. Yet he sighed as though he, too, might wish to be a Balkan shepherd serving in the house of one who owned no land, as Achilles had wished, and would trade all rank to live again while living still.

It is this lively quality which I like best in that Spaniard. He has his say, in a parlous time, and with a gun in his face. There is no sigh about him, and he survives. It is often said that newsreels look too much upon horror; but this is said mainly by those who look for horror and then are racked by it. For every frame of death there are ten thousand images teeming on the screen of actuality.

That Third Japanese infantry division, those murdered savants—these could not affect me like the man of thirty in the gray suit, having his say in the square at the Puerto del Sol while looking down the barrel of a gun. Perhaps his friend was in prison, else he was staking his heart's shattering upon a stark principle. At any rate, he left the field of camera vivid and living, rife with a Pentacostal clamor, nothing self-seeking. Of such nameless men is history made—and for such, the film of actuality is most grateful.

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# *Newsreels*

## *EDITORIAL NOTE*

Laurence Stallings knows more about newsreels than anyone else today. He has been columnist, playwright, novelist, scenarist, reporter, but he has come to believe that the compilation and editing of pictorial news events is the most interesting and exciting of all. That is why the Fox-Movietone newsreels, edited by Mr. Stallings, are the stimulating features that they are. That is why *The First World War* (photographic history) and *The First World War* (screen drama compiled from newsreels) are two significant news forms. Mr. Stallings is too wise in current events not to know a vital social force and a vigorous vocation when he sees one. The article on this page is the first in a series of behind-the-front stories on the editing of newsreels.

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*1894 - 1968*