



Pitched Battles: Music and Sound in Anglo-American and German Newsreels of World War II

James Deaville

Carleton University

ABSTRACT

The observation by Siegfried Kracauer, one of the leading sociologists of the twentieth century, that the Nazis were more skilled than the Americans and British in the use of cinematic devices in newsreels for war propaganda purposes was thought-provoking in its day. It still prompts critical engagement with the texts under consideration, even as recent scholarship has adopted a more nuanced position with regard to the Nazi use of persuasive media. A comparative study of Anglo-American and German newsreels produced during the Second World War, with an emphasis on their use of music and sound, both questions and extends Kracauer's hypotheses within the sonic realm. Music continues to serve the function of adding an affective voice to images in news media, which still count war reportage as one of their primary audiovisual vehicles for persuasive purposes.

The Nazis know how to arrange the propaganda content in a compelling way, and also they excel in persuasive cinematic devices The typical American—and English—procedure ... makes spectators uncertain whether they should follow the pictorial development or the verbal narration.... Their attention is divided, thus weakening the effect.¹

These observations by one of the leading sociologists of the 20th century—Siegfried Kracauer—were thought-provoking in their day and still prompt critical engagement with the texts under consideration. Indeed, according to Robert Herzstein's controversial 1978 text *The War that Hitler Won: The Most Infamous Propaganda Campaign in History*, the Nazis actually won the “propaganda” war by virtue of the words, images, and sounds that were effectively mobilized to saturate the German media with the wartime message.²

¹Siegfried Kracauer, “The Conquest of Europe on the Screen: The Nazi Newsreel, 1939–40,” *Social Research* 10, no. 1 (1943): 337.

²Robert Herzstein, *The War That Hitler Won: Goebbels and the Nazi Media Campaign* (New York: G.P. Putnam, Sons, 1977). While this study will apply the term “propaganda” when citing Kracauer and more recent authors who use it, the designation is not free from controversy, especially considering the pejorative connotations attached to propaganda. Writing in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017), Thomas M. Steinfatt defines the term as referring “to a form of persuasion usually distinguished by a mass persuasion campaign, often one-sided and fear-based” (1341), and thus—despite current debates over its designatory usefulness—“propaganda” remains the best umbrella term for the media-based public information campaigns waged by the Axis and the Allies during the Second World War. A foundational text in the area is Jacques Ellul's *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, translated by Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

Recent scholarship has adopted a more nuanced position with regard to the Nazi use of persuasive media that 1) accounts for the struggles between Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels and Führer Hitler over content,³ 2) recognizes the German public's diminishing interest in propagandizing media,⁴ and 3) generally challenges the persuasive power of indoctrinary print and audiovisual sources.⁵ As Ian Kershaw has argued in relation to the Nazi attempts at propaganda, it is considerably harder to convince people of new attitudes and ideas than it is to reinforce prevailing opinions that base themselves on existing values.⁶

This article comparatively studies the Anglo-American and German newsreels produced during the Second World War, with an emphasis on their use of music and sound, thereby questioning and extending Kracauer's hypotheses within the sonic realm. After a brief consideration of the theory and background, components and stages of production for the newsreel, we will survey the pre-World War Two history of American and German newsreels as commercial products and politically charged persuasive media. The final section will concentrate on how music is deployed in the "warring" newsreels, leading to a close comparison of examples.

Sounding the world

The newsreel's status within the world of audiovisual media is not without its complications, for though various film historians position it as a sub-genre of the documentary,⁷ some scholars have situated the newsreel as a realistic form of film in comparison with the constructedness of the documentary.⁸ The definitive text on documentaries, Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary*, is all but silent on the topic of the newsreel, yet his descriptions for documentary film can apply to both at least in broad strokes. Newsreels also "bear a highly indexical relationship to the events they represent,"⁹ while they likewise "tell an engaging story, make a compelling case, or convey a fresh, poetic perspective that promises information and knowledge, insight and awareness."¹⁰ Still, the newsreel adheres to certain structural and aesthetic principles—especially its episodic nature that

³Felix Moeller, *The Film Minister: Goebbels and the Cinema in the Third Reich* (Fellbach, DE: Edition Axel Menges, 2000), 154–56.

⁴Helmut Sündermann, *Tagesparolen: Deutsche Presseweisungen 1939–1945, Hitlers Propaganda und Kriegsführung*, vol. 1 (Gilching, DE: Druffel-Verlag, 1973).

⁵See above all Jacques Ellul, *Propagandes* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1962); Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014); Noam Chomsky and Herman Edward, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Randal Marlin, *Propaganda and The Ethics of Persuasion* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2002).

⁶Ian Kershaw, "How Effective Was Nazi Propaganda?" in *Nazi Propaganda*, edited by David Welch (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 183–84.

⁷For example, Yingchi Chu, *Chinese Documentaries: From Dogma to Polyphony* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 69–70.

⁸Clifford M. Kuhn, "A Historian's Perspective on Archives and the Documentary Process," *American Archivist* 59, no. 3 (1996): 314.

⁹Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 26.

¹⁰Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 27.

precludes a unifying narrative—that remove it from the umbrella of documentary film.¹¹

This is not to argue that newsreels presented events more accurately, reliably, or truthfully than documentary films. While they may have consisted of filmic material ostensibly taken from real life, the newsreel was fashioned as a media form that relied upon the work of editors, who sifted and arranged the raw footage, added graphics and music, and shaped it all into a believable narrative.¹² The edited factuality of the newsreel product becomes a major issue during times of political instability and armed conflict, for as we shall observe, the mediated news and its audiovisual frame can serve as a leading vehicle for propaganda.¹³

Throughout its history, the newsreel consisted of a series of individual items that were compiled into one continuous audiovisual text of variable length.¹⁴ Normally theatrically exhibited on a weekly basis, the newsreel presented a wide range of current events, opening with the most prominent story and progressing through a series of items about (among others) politics, technological developments, and sports. Film would be shot by a mobile camera/sound team and sent to a studio, where the raw footage would be edited and—during the sound era—an appropriate underscore, archival sound effects, and authoritative narration added. The resulting newsreel would be packaged with a feature film and distributed to theaters throughout a target market, which may or may not coincide with national boundaries.¹⁵

News from a war or war zone typically occupied the leading position in the newsreel. War and armed conflict have always been deemed newsworthy, but the moving images of news items, as captured in late 19th-century “actualities” (*actualités*), made the scenes from the Boer War and the Spanish-American War seem to come alive for the public, despite (or because of) deceptive practices.¹⁶ According to newsreel specialist Raymond Fielding,

¹¹It could be argued that the newsreel is more akin to the news magazines of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

¹²Since much newsreel footage involved stock tracks, it is quite difficult to obtain to an accurate assignment of the composer for the music for any one newsreel.

¹³In an article for the *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* from 1944, Lieutenant William McGee (Army Air Force, First Motion Picture Unit) explains the rationale for the censorship of wartime newsreel footage: “Some of our films taken in combat are extremely confidential ... Certain news shots brought back from the fronts are released through the newsreels ... Whatever news can be given them [i.e., the public], without endangering the war effort, is being given them by our High Command.” William R. McGee, “Cinematography Goes to War,” *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 44, no. 2 (1944): 104.

¹⁴For a description and history see Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: A Complete History, 1911–1967*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006). Despite Fielding’s biases, especially towards the silent newsreel, the book remains the definitive study for the North American newsreel. The present author’s chapter “Sounding the World: The Role of Music and Sound in Early ‘Talking’ Newsreels,” in Holly Rogers’ anthology, *Music and Sound in Documentary Film* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 41–55, considers the changing definition and function of the newsreel after the introduction of sound film.

¹⁵The article “A Newsreel of Our Own’: The Culture and Commerce of Local Filmed News” by Daniel Biltreyst, Brett Bowles, and Roel Vande Winkel, published in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 32, no. 3 (2012): 355–60, sheds light on the complex distribution policies and practices.

¹⁶Fielding devotes an entire chapter (pp. 25–31) to newsreel recreations of historical events, which audiences appear to have accepted despite their occasionally obvious subterfuge.

early silent footage of war (accompanied by live music) had a “spectacular” effect upon American audiences, whereby at Tony Pastor’s Theater in New York in early 1898, for example, they greeted the film of one regiment’s departure for Cuba “with cheers and applause.”¹⁷ The first newsreel, as a weekly exhibited “magazine” of news events, appeared in 1910 in Paris as the work of Charles Pathé, whose company also was responsible for the first newsreel edited and released in the United States on August 8, 1911.¹⁸ Afterwards Pathé produced newsreels on a weekly basis, with competitors not far behind, the most ambitious of which was the News Pictorial of Hearst beginning in 1914.

The First World War brought the first major test to the newsreel’s ability to cover war; however, it did not succeed because of the many restrictions placed upon camera work, editing, and distribution, not least through censorship.¹⁹ Yet the American public showed great interest in seeing the battles from the war, so as a result, “much of the newsreel coverage of World War I was faked by film studios,” according to Fielding.²⁰ Whatever the authenticity of the footage, music was present in the theatre, lending its voice to help establish the believability of the moving images.²¹

After the war, American newsreel companies established international offices to help record the sights of breaking news, recent sporting events, the latest fashions, and the like. Meanwhile the industry increased efficiency to reduce the time lag between the actual event and its presentation in the local theater. It became customary to ship negatives of footage by air, allowing the newsreel to compete with the print media. Throughout these years, the newsreel continued to rely upon the same theater musicians and—depending on the mood of the item—the photoplay cues that Rick Altman calls “descriptive music.”²²

With the advent of the “talking” newsreel in late 1927 (just weeks after the release of the *Jazz Singer*), the sounds of the world became increasingly familiar to film audiences, as sound technology spread among

¹⁷Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 19.

¹⁸Betsy A. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2012), 11. About Pathé’s early newsreels, see Marina Dahlquist, “Becoming American in 1910?: Pathé Frères’ Settlement in New Jersey,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, no. 3 (2005): 251–62.

¹⁹In his broader study of military censorship, “Consistent with Security ... A History of American Military Press Censorship,” *Communications and the Law* 5 (1983): 35–52, Jack Gottschalk positions the restrictive practices from the First World War within the context of historical military censorship in the United States.

²⁰Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 69.

²¹Regarding the music for silent newsreels, Fielding has contributed a list of selections from volume 2 of the *Sam Fox Moving Picture Music Catalogue* of 1914, including “European army maneuvers,” “funeral march,” “Paris fashions,” etc. (81).

²²Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 362. Beyond Altman, a considerable literature exists regarding the photoplay music of silent cinema, including Gillian Anderson, *Music for Silent Films, 1894–1929: A Guide* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1988), Martin Marks, *Music and the Silent Film: Contexts and Case Studies, 1895–1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Claus Tieber and Anna Katharina Windisch, *The Sounds of Silent Films: New Perspectives on History, Theory and Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

theaters.²³ The enthusiastic response of the movie-goers to the sound newsreel is amply documented in sources from the late 1920s and early 1930s,²⁴ where press reports observe above all the effectiveness of the “impression of being-there-ness.”²⁵ As Movietone cinematographer Walter McInnis recalled, “Fox Movietone News ... was instantly popular and the public who had become sound conscious overnight, received it with great acclaim. Before long the silent-type newsreel became antedated.”²⁶ One sound engineer of a later generation went so far as to suggest that “the wedding of sight and sound in motion pictures was pioneered in no small extent by newsreel soundmen and engineers.”²⁷

Technical advances in microphones, the improvement of transportation for sound reels, and the training of recordists for field operations all meant that the sounds of war could fill theaters around the globe, so World War II was documented on both sides of the conflict. Their technologies and practices were refined by coverage of such armed conflicts as the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–36) and the Chinese-Japanese War (1937–45) as well as by the disaster of the Hindenburg dirigible on May 6, 1937.²⁸ Once the United States entered the war effort in 1941, American newsreel companies increasingly offered its sights and sounds to news-hungry citizens, accounting for 77% of *Paramount News* content by 1944.²⁹

Five companies dominated the American newsreel market through the war years: Paramount, Pathé, Fox Movietone, Universal, and News of the Day (MGM). They vied for the eyes and ears of movie-goers, and not only showed their product at the corner Odeon; the leading newsreel companies opened their own theaters that were “patronized by a large number of faithful, enthusiastic viewers,” according to Fielding.³⁰ Thus Americans had a choice of venues for learning about the latest developments in the war: through newsreels exhibited either before a feature film in a cinema or as a stand-alone item in a newsreel theater.

Even though German newsreels adopted sound technology at a later date than their American counterparts (April 1, 1930, with Josef von Sternberg’s *Der blaue Engel*),³¹ they quickly developed into an important

²³For a detailed account of the impact of the new sound technologies upon the cinematic newsreel, see Deaville, “Sounding the World.”

²⁴See Deaville, “Sounding the World,” especially 46–47.

²⁵Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema’s Transition to Sound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 100.

²⁶William McInnis, “The Newsreel Cameraman,” *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 47, no. 5 (1946): 368–69.

²⁷Warren McGrath, “Newsreel Sound,” *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 47, no. 5 (1946): 371.

²⁸The dramatic Hindenburg Disaster was captured on film by the major newsreel companies: Fox Movietone, Hearst News of the Day, Pathé, Paramount, and NBC.

²⁹Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 289.

³⁰Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 123.

³¹Stephen Brookmann, *A Critical History of German Film* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 97.

arm of the film industry in Germany, with four dominant newsreel products: *Ufa-Tonwoche*, *Deulig-Tonwoche*, *Emelka/Tobis-Tonwoche*, and *Fox Tönende Wochenschau*.³² As Hilmar Hoffmann, among others, has argued, Goebbels realized the tremendous propaganda potential of the newsreel and as a result, the German state supported the companies after the Nazi *Machtergreifung* (“taking power”) in 1933,³³ with the advantages and disadvantages of such subvention. On the one hand, significant financial and artistic resources were available to producers (well beyond what the American companies could muster), while on the other, the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda supervised and censored the productions.³⁴ Upon the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Nazi authorities merged the four German newsreels into one, the *Deutsche Wochenschau* of Universum Film in Berlin, which remained the sole series of German newsreels through the end of the war.³⁵ Although Fritz Hippler ostensibly controlled the newsreels from 1935 onwards,³⁶ Goebbels took an active role in supervising their production and Hitler approved the final cut, at least until 1942.³⁷ And after 1938, theaters in Germany and in German-occupied states were required to screen the newsreels produced by the Ministry, so they were assured of large if not always sympathetic audiences.³⁸

Still, the principles on which Nazi newsreels rested were at once solid and innovative. Organized into “propaganda companies” (*Propaganda-Kompanien*), German journalists received basic military training and then were deployed at the front, in order to obtain realistic footage of combat.³⁹ This was quite different from the coverage allowed by the US military, which either restricted the involvement of professional journalists or presented the camera work of amateurs, recruited from the ranks of the armed forces.⁴⁰ The *Deutsche Wochenschau* often featured dynamic

³²Jürgen Voigt, *Die Kino-Wochenschau: Medium eines bewegten Jahrhunderts* (Gelsenkirchen/Schwelm, Germany: Archaea, 2004).

³³Hilmar Hoffmann, *The Triumph of Propaganda: Film and National Socialism, 1933–1945*, translated by John A. Broadwin and V.R. Berghahn, vol. 1 (Oxford: Berghahn, 1996), 108.

³⁴Peter Bucher, “Goebbels und die *Deutsche Wochenschau*: Nationalsozialistische Filmpropaganda im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939–1945,” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 2 (1986): 53–69.

³⁵The *Wochenschau* has been the subject of various studies, the most definitive being the study by Ulrike Bartels, *Die Wochenschau im Dritten Reich: Entwicklung und Funktion eines Massenmediums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung völkisch-nationaler Inhalte* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004).

³⁶Nazi Germany’s Fritz Hippler (1909–2002) headed the *Deutsche Wochenschau* GmbH from 1939 to the war’s end. About Hippler’s role in German wartime newsreel production, see Roel Vande Winkel, “Nazi Germany’s Fritz Hippler, 1909–2002,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 23, no. 2 (2003): 91–99.

³⁷Kay Hoffmann, “Propagandistic Problems of German Newsreels in World War II,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 1 (2004): 135.

³⁸Hoffmann, “Propagandistic Problems,” 133.

³⁹Daniel Uziel, *The Propaganda Warriors: The Wehrmacht and the Consolidation of the German Home Front* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁴⁰When professional photographers were assigned to a unit, they “found themselves treated as outsiders.” George H. Roeder, *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 92.

shots of warfare, for example from moving vehicles, which according to unofficial policy was supposed to enhance the viewer's experience of battle.⁴¹ The use of handheld cameras by German journalists enabled such travelling shots, their shakiness at once authenticating the moving images and further suturing the spectator into the drama.⁴² In contrast, the Allied cameramen favored using tripod-mounted cameras for the sake of greater documentary detail,⁴³ capturing the phenomenal event rather than its ethos.

These divergent cinematographic practices reflect the fundamental differences between American and German newsreels during World War II, which was already identified in 1943 by a member of the academic community, the exiled sociologist and film theorist Siegfried Kracauer. He published the study "The Conquest of Europe on the Screen: The Nazi Newsreel, 1939–40" in the journal *Social Research*, in which Kracauer subjected the early wartime newsreel to closer analysis.⁴⁴ The year before, he had produced a longer study for the Museum of Modern Art Film Library: *Propaganda and the Nazi War Film*, dedicated to uncovering the Nazi propaganda machine in their war films,⁴⁵ which he then appended to his major study in 1947, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. While the 1942 study lays out principles for examining propaganda films, "The Conquest of Europe" bases itself on close readings of eighteen Nazi newsreels from 1939–40.⁴⁶

Kracauer found that "the Nazis know how to arrange the propaganda content in a compelling way, and also they excel in persuasive cinematic devices."⁴⁷ In *Propaganda and the Nazi War Film*, Kracauer presents three principles behind German war newsreels: They must be "true to reality" (so that "it gives audiences the impression of being an eye-witness to the battle scene"); they have to possess an adequate length to allow for effects stemming from such devices as repetition in speeches; and they must be quick to appear (to illustrate reality as soon as possible).⁴⁸

⁴¹Hoffmann, "Propagandistic Problems," 134.

⁴²Regarding the use of cameras by the German forces, see the articles in *Die Kamera als Waffe: Propagandabilder des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, edited by Rainer Rother and Judith Prokasky (Munich: Edition text + kritik, 2010).

⁴³Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 72. See also Jean Rouch, "The Camera and Man," in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, edited by Paul Hockings, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1995), 88–89.

⁴⁴Regarding film, Kracauer also published the important monographs *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), and *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

⁴⁵Siegfried Kracauer, *Propaganda and the Nazi War Film*, in Museum of Modern Art Film Library (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1942).

⁴⁶In *Propaganda and the Nazi War Film*, Kracauer offers this footnote: "Since the two elaborate Campaign films [*Baptism of Fire* and *Campaign in the West*] reveal, through their content as well as through their structure, a maximum of propagandistic functions, they are given the most attention here. The composition of the weekly newsreel records will be studied in detail separately" (v).

⁴⁷Kracauer, "The Conquest of Europe on the Screen," 338.

⁴⁸Kracauer, *Propaganda and the Nazi War Film*, 1–3.

In contrast, the newsreels of the Anglo-Saxon Allies do not exploit the medium in its persuasive capacities, above all with their emphasis on words—that is, commentary—over images. Kracauer extols at considerable length the technical and aesthetic merits of the Nazi product, which he historically grounds in the “cinematic realism deeply rooted in [Germans’] particular experiences,”⁴⁹ and in doing so suggests that German audiences actively participated in the construction of audiovisual meaning. This bore comparison with the customarily passive American who wanted to be entertained and unambiguously informed about the news of the day.⁵⁰

This last point regarding audience expectations merits elaboration, for it reflects one of the more basic differences between the German and Anglo-American newsreel, yet one that Kracauer does not make explicit: namely the contrast in their lengths. The war-related news items of the Allies tended towards brevity and informational content, whereas the Nazis created theirs more for dramatic effect. As a result, the typical Anglo-American wartime news report ranged from two-and-a-half to four minutes, with the German product often twice that length (if not even more extended).

While Kracauer recognizes the value of music and sound for the newsreel’s impact upon its audiences, he nevertheless foregoes any close analysis of the music, preferring to engage in technical discussion of the visual narrative. Thus he addresses for example the relationship between the images and the commentary, the use of camera to cover troop movements, and pictorial transitions. His few observations on the sonic components nevertheless are of interest and value: for example, when he asserts the superiority of the German product because it “shorten[ed] the way from the visual to the senses.” Kracauer justifies his statement with the following explanation: “Nazi newsreel music makes the motor nerves vibrate; it works directly upon the bodily feelings. Like a fifth column these themes penetrate the spectator’s subconscious and soften it up for an eventual invasion by pictorial suggestions.”⁵¹ In *Propaganda and the Nazi War Film*, he postulates that “through this active contribution of the music the visuals affect the sense with intensified strength.”⁵² This argument for music’s role in audiovisual media is a familiar one and harkens back to the claims made in the folios of photoplay music for silent film.⁵³

There can be no question that the propaganda arm of the Third Reich mobilized music to its fullest suasive potential, especially in its early

⁴⁹Kracauer, “The Conquest of Europe on the Screen,” 341.

⁵⁰Kracauer, “The Conquest of Europe on the Screen,” 345–46.

⁵¹Kracauer, “The Conquest of Europe on the Screen,” 343.

⁵²Kracauer, *Propaganda and the Nazi War Film*, 9.

⁵³For samples of the sheet music that was performed as accompaniment for silent film, see Daniel Goldmark’s anthology, *Sounds for the Silents: Photoplay Music from the Days of Early Cinema* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2013).

newsreels as covered by Kracauer.⁵⁴ It accomplishes more than the background and coloristic uses to which the Allies consigned it.⁵⁵ While the Anglo-American newsreel provided appropriate illustrative music for a given scene, the speaking voice providing the commentary nevertheless tended to dominate the soundtrack, which—as Kracauer observed—“makes spectators uncertain whether they should follow the pictorial development or the verbal narration. And since they are not able to do both at the same time, their attention is divided, thus weakening the effect.”⁵⁶ His statistics reveal a dense web of words in the Anglo-American newsreel: The narration covers 80–90% of the shots, in comparison with just over 30% for the German product.⁵⁷ Under such circumstances music could only hope to add picturesque coloration rather than furnishing a spectacle for the ear and eye and viscerally drawing the theater-goer into the visual diegesis, as was characteristic of music in the Nazi newsreels. There the music functions as a type of commentary on the images, an active partner in the production of meanings and interpretations, both on the conscious and subconscious levels.

A comparison of coverage for one of the most important events of the early war, the successful evacuation of Allied troops from Dunkirk, May 26 to June 4, 1940 (Operation Dynamo), reveals some of the persuasive strategies of the two sides, also regarding the deployment of music.⁵⁸ Kracauer’s article does not mention these particular news reports in his selective assessment of the body of newsreels available at the time because he had to obtain the Nazi items through the limited Museum of Modern Art Film Library.⁵⁹ Still, his theses about the relative qualities and merits of Allied and Nazi newsreels seem to hold up in the cases of the British Pathé and Metrotone and the Ufa-Tonwoche reportage of the event.⁶⁰

⁵⁴Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) provides an especially significant precedent, for it uses no narrator but rather allows the music to function as another voice.

⁵⁵With regard to the reliance on music, it should be noted that Goebbels became increasingly distrustful of absolute music (*ernste Musik*) as the war progressed because of the slipperiness of its signification. However, Kracauer was analyzing newsreels from early in the war, while German battles still had successful outcomes and before Goebbels turned to lightweight texted music (*Unterhaltungsmusik*). And the music in the newsreels in question was anything but absolute, with the congruence between sound and image one of their most characteristically identifying features. For more information on Goebbels’ (changing) views on music, see Michael Meyer, *The Politics of Music in the Third Reich* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

⁵⁶Kracauer, “The Conquest of Europe on the Screen,” 345–46.

⁵⁷Kracauer, “The Conquest of Europe on the Screen,” 339.

⁵⁸Kracauer himself did not include coverage of the Dunkirk evacuation among the newsreels he subjected to closer examination.

⁵⁹A broad, quantitative analysis of Anglo-American and German newsreel coverage of the war would assist in addressing topics such as the relative length of war-related news items, the amount of music in the reports, and the frequency of musical quotations from the folksong and patriotic repertoires.

⁶⁰Despite their administrative merger in September 1939, the German newsreels maintained their opening titles until June 1940, after which “the merger was made public by the use of a single new opening title *Die Deutsche Wochenschau*.” See Roel Vande Winkel, “Nazi Newsreels in Europe, 1939–1945: The Many Faces of Ufa’s Foreign Weekly Newsreel (*Auslandstonwoche*) versus German’s Weekly Newsreel (*Deutsche Wochenschau*),” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24 no. 1, (2004): 7.

Like all of the news videos, the titles for the British Movietone newsreel, called “Epic of Dunkirk,”⁶¹ are accompanied by an attention-catching, authoritative brass fanfare, after which the narration unfolds. The announcer speaks almost continuously for the entire two minutes and fifteen seconds, with a succession of cheerful march themes in the background and moving images from the evacuation itself. The most extended break in the ongoing narration occurs after the voice says, “Here, in these scenes off the beaches of Dunkirk, you have one of the dramatic pictures of the war, men wading out to a vessel, beached at low tide, its crew waiting to haul them aboard” (1:44–1:54). There follow four seconds during which the narrator is silent, the symphonic underscore coming to the fore. Throughout the narrative portion of the newsreel there is no attempt to synchronize the music to the moving images, to coordinate sound with sight other than through a loose coincidence of onscreen action and active music and the final seconds where music, speaking voice, and moving images all come to an end. The newsreel editor(s) did not allow either the image or the music to tell the story without the direction of the voice, which vitiated the impact of the newsreel’s narrative.

The British Pathé newsreel (segment) for Dunkirk, under the title “Pathé Gazette Special: The War—Latest,” displays a greater awareness of affect achieved visually and sonorously in its four-and-a-half minutes.⁶² We hear dark, dramatic music over the title cards for this (special) newsreel, after which begins the narration and images about the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF) marching to Dunkirk. The opening *agitato* continues through a series of brief statements punctuated by the on- and offscreen sounds of artillery fire, during which the narration ceases. It is as if the newsreel producer wished to sonically illustrate the text, especially lines like “the BEF is grateful to the Royal Air Force” (1:47–1:49), followed by the sights and sounds of battle. Just before the 3:00 mark, the narration disappears for longer periods, allowing the now march-like score and shots of the returning soldiers to tell the story. At the end, close-ups of the soldiers become patriotic as the softly intoning Pomp and Circumstance March #2 accompanies the words, “This is the most magnificent sight of a generation. This is the army ...” After 3:30, we see images of the soldiers on the trains taking them home, even as the march intensifies in volume and we hear the narrator state, “While these men live and breathe, Britain is safe. The enemy will never pass” (4:07–4:13). A final commanding statement of the march with *ritardando* takes us through staged scenes of casual soldier groupings, the flying Union Jack (4:37–4:41), and at the final cadence, the logo of Pathé Gazette over a globe with projecting rays. By inserting the patriotic march at this

⁶¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsMsOIHxm9Y> (accessed December 30, 2018).

⁶²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtAmggOrkY> (accessed December 30, 2018).

culminating point in the newsreel narrative, the editors at Pathé seem to be asking audiences to read the newsreels intertextually, in light of the music's relation to the wartime national imaginary. The affective congruence of moving image, narration, and music at the end of this newsreel calls to mind what Kracauer regarded as the goal of such persuasive media: for the spectator's subconscious to be softened "for an eventual invasion by pictorial suggestions."⁶³

The Ufa-Tonwoche audiovisual representation of the event (released June 12, 1940) stresses its spectacle, but not from a ground or sea prospect of the assembled British flotilla, rather from the air, which enables the construction of a visually and sonically effective narrative of victory.⁶⁴ After the obligatory opening fanfare, the audience reads the title card "Reports of the Propaganda Companies from the Front,"⁶⁵ against a serious, busy string accompaniment; the narrator provides the most concise possible summation of the state of war plans, followed by the sight and sound of war planes "ready to fly against Dunkirk." At this point, the diegetic sounds of propellers overwhelm the orchestral underscore, which only re-emerges at: 45, just after the narrator announces the fighters' objectives: "to soften the enemy from the air and at the same time to use bombs to close its escape path over the channel."⁶⁶ It is no coincidence that we hear a descending chromatic line in the upper winds after the word "bomb," even as the planes are taking off.

The music—without verbal commentary—becomes ever more dramatic until the planes reach their objective and drop the bombs, after which the audience member takes the point-of-view of the dive bomber pilot, witnessing the rapidly approaching ground and hearing the descending scream of the engines. Needless to say, all other (nondiegetic) music has ceased and the commentary is kept to a minimum, in order to let the suturing "you-are-there" sound do its work. The tense music returns and accompanies further dive-bombing attacks until the sphere of action shifts to the ground, where the German forces fight their way to Dunkirk against brave French partisans. No word about the successful evacuation; instead, wrecked unmarked ships on the beach to imply a German victory to newsreel consumers on the homefront. As Kracauer remarked, "The Nazis know how to arrange the propaganda content in a compelling way."⁶⁷

⁶³Kracauer, "The Conquest of Europe on the Screen," 343.

⁶⁴<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-s65eEwjlk> (accessed December 30, 2018). It is significant that Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* opens with its own aerial sequence, but accompanied by a very different underscore. A comparison of the scoring for aerial sequences in National Socialist propaganda would make for an interesting study.

⁶⁵"Front-Berichte der Propaganda-Kompanien."

⁶⁶"Soll der Feind ... von der Luft aus zu mürgen und zugleich den Fluchtweg über den Kanal mit ihren Bomben zu sperren."

⁶⁷Kracauer, "The Conquest of Europe on the Screen," 338.

For Kracauer's one detailed example, Hitler's visit to the Strassburg Cathedral on June 28, 1940, the newsreel audience need not possess aesthetic refinement to appreciate the deployment of the German folk song "O Strassburg, O Strassburg, du wunderschöne Stadt" as soundtrack.⁶⁸ The song placement "not only interprets Hitler's Strassburg excursion as a symbolic reannexation of former German territory, but also drags the audience ... into a sentimental mood."⁶⁹ No narration is required; in fact, it would distract from the important work of identification that is taking place, even as the audience member respectfully walks with the Führer through the cathedral, which with one song has been secularized into what Hitler envisioned as a "national sanctuary of the German people." The music performs beyond its immediate context, however, to the extent that it intertextually binds nostalgia for the song with the German national cause represented by the Führer. He may overly simplify audience response to the audiovisual text, but Kracauer well captures the driving Nazi ideology behind this and similar affective appeals when he observes that "the emotions [that the song] arouses in listeners are likely to be identified with the accompanying pictures."

As a reflection of the value assigned to newsreel music by the Nazis, Goebbels himself recorded an observation in a diary entry from July 14, 1941: "I feel bound to make cuts, to strengthen the commentary and make it more propagandistic and to make sure that music is added, which makes up for the power that the images are lacking."⁷⁰ Music continues to serve the function of adding an affective voice to images in news media, which still count war reportage as one of their primary audiovisual vehicles for persuasive purposes.⁷¹ Indeed, as long as moving images persist in telling stories, real or fictional, music will be there as well, trying to convince the public of their message.

Acknowledgments

For assistance in the preparation of this article I extend my gratitude to Michael Saffle of Virginia Tech.

⁶⁸An anonymous German-language folksong from the 18th century.

⁶⁹Kracauer, "The Conquest of Europe on the Screen," 363.

⁷⁰Cited in Hoffmann, "Propagandistic Problems," 136–37.

⁷¹See James Deaville, "Selling War: Television News Music and the Shaping of American Public Opinion," *Echo: A Music Centered Journal* 8, no. 1 (2006), <http://www.echo.ucla.edu/Volume8-Issue1/roundtable/deaville.html>, for a discussion of music's deployment in reporting on one particular war.

Copyright of Journal of Musicological Research is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.