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“News in a Nutshell”: Representations of Tennis and Culture in Early 20th-Century British Cinema Newsreels



Aims

- Cinema newsreels – an introduction
- Ownership, influence, and control
- Broad representations:
 - Social class, gender, the British nation, royalty, conservative politics
- Newsreels as ideological propaganda?
- Considerations as primary source material

Cinema Newsreels: An Introduction

- Heyday between the wars
 - In 1934, average weekly admission of 18.5 million (including some who went more than once a week) – roughly half of the population of Britain
- Cinema viewership demographics: A very broad spread but...
 - Predominantly young vs old
 - Predominantly women vs men (est. 60-75% female)
 - Predominantly lower, socio-economic or educational groups (esp. manual workers)
 - Mostly in urban industrialized cities (e.g. London and industrial north)
- 'Oral evidence suggests that many cinema-goers were not particularly concerned about what films they saw. Almost a third of correspondents ... remembered going regularly no matter what was on' (Huggins 2007a, 84)



Newsreels: Some examples...

- 5-15 minute segments shown before movies
- Released approx. every 2 weeks
 - Sometimes stand-alone (lengthier) segments
 - Often included several short (e.g. 1 min) clips cut together
 - No commentary/sound until late-1920s – and only occasionally thereafter



Tennis as an interesting context...

- In contrast to newsreel viewers, tennis players were predominantly:
 - Mixed gender (but skewed male);
 - Middle and upper-middle class;
 - Southern (England – Home Counties); suburban rather than urban
- Correspondingly, they were often young
- So, how newsreel coverage represented aspects such as class, gender, national identity, and regionality were important
 - As were representations of consumerism, capitalism, celebrity culture – all burgeoning in the 1920s



Questions that arise...

- Do the newsreels reveal social or cultural aspects of tennis that are new or unique, or that have not shown themselves elsewhere?
 - What aspects do they reinforce, replicate, or challenge?
- Is it possible to understand newsreels depicting tennis as socio-cultural or political propaganda in the context of interwar Britain?
 - Socio-cultural: egalitarian, emancipatory (for women), nationalistic (banal)
 - Political: Pro-monarchy; imperialist; Conservative
- Did newsreels depicting tennis serve purposes or functions other than to entertain and inform? Ideological perhaps?
 - A means of reforming or otherwise influencing the urban working classes?

Ownership...

- Five major players survived in the UK to WWII:
 - Pathé's Animated Gazette(1910)/Pathé Gazette(1910)/Pathé Super Sound Gazette (1930)
 - Gaumont (1910)/Gaumont Sound News (1929)/Gaumont British News (1933)
 - Topical Budget (1911-31)
 - British Movietone Gazette (subsidiary of Fox Movietone - US) – first to offer sound in late 20s
 - Empire News Bulletin (1926)/Universal News (1930) – the leading British newsreel company
 - British Paramount News (subsidiary of Paramount Company – US)
- Most owned at least in part by US corporations: First National; Warner Bros; Paramount; 20th Century Fox; Universal Studios



Influence ...

- Owners and production teams (camera operators, narrators, editors, producers) were overwhelmingly male, and 'heavily masculine ... participating in a culture defined by hard drinking and courting danger' (Rutherford 2021, 443)
 - Narrators were male and spoke with accent described as 'Oxford English' or 'Received Pronunciation'



... & Control

- Little indication that owners used their platforms to (explicitly) control narratives, but this requires further analysis
- 'Newsreels were carefully neutral' (Huggins 2007a, 91). They avoided political controversy
 - Editor of *British Paramount News* (1934): focus on the 'largest majority' of viewers; 'nothing must be included that the average man will not like' (cited in Huggins 2007a, 85)
- Forcing bias toward conservative politics to appeal to popular tastes and attitudes:
 - 'Newsreels emphasized the fundamental orderliness and rule-governed nature of British society, and stressed the way politicians and the ruling classes shares points of interest and outlook with regular cinema attenders. They portrayed a world governed by consensus, not conflict. Newsreels did not threaten the settled order of society. Problems, they implied, should be met with humour, a belief in the good intentions of their rulers, with a sense of pride in country, and without despair' (Huggins 2007a, 92)

Representations of...

Social class

- Democratization of tennis
 - Accessibility as recreation
- Playing etiquette
 - Visual displays of proper dress, form, behaviour, and tone
- Some coverage of (burgeoning) professional tennis in the 1920s/30s

Gender

- Support for inclusion – women should be present and admired
- But emphasis on appearances (objects of male gaze)
- Footage and commentary tinged with:
 - Surprise?
 - Humour / playful mocking / lack of seriousness
 - Infantilization

Representations of...

Consumerism and Celebrity Culture

- Wimbledon coverage was extensive – players on/off-court and crowds (incl. royalty)
- Presence of royalty was overplayed and exaggerated
 - Patronage, in attendance, or as players
- Celebrity focus as players/observers
 - Huge focus on Suzanne Lenglen, Bill Tilden, and Fred Perry
 - Celebrity influences (e.g. film stars)

Initial Thoughts on Representations

- Reinforcing tennis as a middle-class game inclusive of women
 - But with important classed/gendered customs to follow
- Reinforcing tennis as symbolic of elite tastes and therefore status enhancing
- Reinforcing tennis as symbolic of (southern English) national culture

Newsreels as Political Propaganda?

- Newsreels were 'doing ideological work' (Rutherford 2021, 451)
 - 'Pageantry, ceremonies, invented traditions, and popular imperialism' – seen in Wimbledon coverage especially.
- Much as British tabloids began operating in the 1930s, similarly newsreels began to appeal to the masses through human interest stories – does this mean they became less conservative over time?
- But not to be duped: the English as 'savvy consumers of media' (Rutherford 2021, 457)

Primary Source Material: Considerations

Generally...

- Newsreels are now mostly digitized and available freely through websites
 - Searching can be tough – e.g. Youtube
- Questions of bias and influence
 - Politically neutral but ideological in emphasis or reformist in intent?

Of tennis specifically...

- Over 1000 newsreels identified using the keyword “tennis” from 1918-1939 – a huge amount of research remaining
- Represents an untapped source of information given – to my knowledge – no tennis historians have ever looked at newsreels, and no newsreel historians have ever looked at tennis



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Thanks for listening...

