World History

Seeing War at the Picture Show

The Age of Imperialism brought with it many violent conflicts, and, by 1898, some of these conflicts were being recorded using the new technology of film. Noting the public’s interest in battle footage, film companies sent reports around the world.

 Unlike today’s hand-held video cameras and the ability to record via a cell phone, early silent film cameras were bulky, mounted on tripods, required plentiful lighting, and took time to set up. With all these complications it is surprising that any films were made. However, the warring factions were sometimes surprisingly accommodating to the struggling filmmakers.

W.K.L. Dickson, filming the Anglo-Boer War in Africa, was given almost unlimited access to the battlefield, which even included secret plans for military engagements so he could have sufficient time to set up and film the event! During the Mexican Revolution, the Mutual Film Corporation signed a contract with Pancho Villa, agreeing to pay the rebel leader $25,000 and a 50 percent royalty of earnings from the films in exchange for Villa’s guarantee not to let any other film company’s employees on the field during battles. In addition, Villa agreed to try to stage battles during the daylight hours and at times convenient for the cameraman!

Filming foreign wars was costly and time consuming. Newspapers using telegraph communication could report on events much faster than film reels could travel back by boat from the battlefield. In many cases, film companies faked news footage and substituted dramatic reenactments for the real events. For the “The Battle of Santiago Bay”, the filmmakers re-created the event by floating photographed cutouts of American and Spanish warships in a tub of water. Three pinches of gunpowder and a combination of cigarette and cigar smoke helped create the battle of effects.

Today, video, satellite, digital, and internet technology allow for instant recording and transmission of war events. On the evening in 1991 and again in 2003, when the U.S. began to bomb Iraq, American television stations were broadcasting live from Saudi Arabia and Americans were glued to their television sets. The coverage continued daily throughout both wars. The U.S. government set up a ‘pool system’ in which a group of selected reporters and photographers, accompanied by military escorts, were permitted to visit only specified areas. All written stories, photographs, and video footage were subject to government censorship.

**Answer the following questions.**

1. How had media technology changed since the first news films about war were made?

2. Often during war, heated debates arise regarding the flow of information. Journalists insist that the public has a right to know what is happening, but governments argue that they have a right to restrict information or give disinformation to the press in the interests of security. With which side do you agree? Explain.

3. Media and video coverage of the Iraqi and Afghanistan Wars focused on ‘smart bombs’ and other modern technologies of warfare. Some media critics argue its focus distracts viewers from the violent consequences of war. For instance, aerial footage of bomb targets made the war seem like a video game. How do you think/feel televised images affect people’s feelings about war?

4. With 24 hour news coverage/television stations presenting real time information and stories, how accurate or relevant do you think that information is?

5. Are media outlets in the business of presenting information or making money? How would this affect its information?