

HATS

Sylvie Lindeperg – Here is a story about hats, to illustrate the links between cinema and history. In 1897, in Saint-Petersburg, Félix Faure reviewed the imperial guard. Following the ceremony, he was attacked by Bismarck, who accused him of a breach of protocol for not having removed his hat. The controversy ended with a screening at the Élysée. Faure's visit had in fact been filmed by a cameraman, Boleslaw Matuszewski. As was written in *Le Figaro*, “everyone could see the president walking slowly, suddenly doffing his hat with the correct flourish”. And, “history will now be written by the cinematographer”.

As it turns out, Matuszewski was no mere cameraman: he was the first to realise that cinema represented “a new source of history”, the title of a brochure he published in 1898. The cameraman was thinking of the Saint-Petersburg incident when he wrote that “if human witnesses contradict one another on a fact”, film can “make them agree by silencing the liars”. Less convincingly, he adds that pictures will remove “the need to investigate” by establishing facts once and for all.

Matuszewski's contemporaries jumped on the bandwagon. *Le Petit Moniteur* compared film with “bottled slices of the past” that simply needed to be left to age “like fine vintage wines”. Pictures were seen not as traces but as canned facts, delivering a complete truth. At the time, nobody paid any attention to Matuszewski's other comment, which was that cameras can also record what eyewitnesses have missed.

Here is another hat story: still in Saint-Petersburg, this time in 1913, a cameraman filmed the Romanov's tercentenary celebrations. The footage features in many documentaries, often for illustrative purposes. In *The Last Bolshevik*, Chris Marker changes the focus of these pictures, by drawing our attention to a micro-event: a portly general walks across the scene and takes the spectators to task, striking his forehead. Marker is saying to us: “He's telling them to remove their caps” and sees this as a metaphor for the mighty humiliating the poor. Yet his film only shows a fraction of the shot which Esfir Shub showed in its entirety, in 1927, in *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. As noted by François Albéra, this long shot reveals a new detail: a spectator who has removed his cocked hat at the first summons nevertheless gives the camera a scared look. This can be seen as the metaphor for an autocratic power that generates anxiety even in an innocent person, believing themselves at fault. In editing the shot, Shub was probably thinking of Vera Zasulich, a revolutionary tried for the attempted murder of the Saint Petersburg governor, who had had a prisoner whipped for failing to remove his hat.

The moral of the story is that, first, a shot is a framed portion of reality, formatted according to a point of view. And second, the machine records details in that frame, which the cameraman might not have seen. Cinema is the art of testimony: rather than a proof establishing facts once and for all, pictures are sources, which constantly need interpreting and scripting.

3min 38sec