

Information, persuasion,  
propaganda. Medical and public  
health film as a means of  
communication between science,  
medicine, public and society in  
France, 1900-1960

Information, persuasion, propaganda. Medical and public health film as a means of communication between science, medicine, public and society in France, 1900-1960

Organisatoren	Christian Bonah/ Joel Danet/ Tricia Close-Koenig, SAGE UMR 7363, Université de Strasbourg
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Url der Konferenzwebsite	

Von

**Alexis Zimmer, SAGE UMR 7363, Université de Strasbourg**

On June 20th and 21st 2014, over two dozen scholars from France, Germany, Great Britain and North America met to enrich the budding history of medical and public health film. The meeting was the culmination of the four-year research project, Medfilm, funded by the French *Agence Nationale de la Recherche* (ANR).

The overall aim of the Medfilm project has been to clarify, through historical analysis, the modes of communication, past and present, of preventative health, and to analyse the outcome, the persistence and the transformation of the motives of communication in medical and public health films. Herein, research objectives focused on several points, including locating, collecting, inventorying, screening, making available and analysing a corpus of medical and public health films four years ago largely unknown and inaccessible.

In order to carry out this project, the role of medical and public health films – utilitary and non-commercial films – was considered to be important in producing and diffusing representations. The array of questions addressed through the project were vast: what representations, what images of disease, of health, of medical intervention, of prevention, of doctor-patient relations, etc. are produced, diffused, promoted or criticised in these films? What public did they address? What institutions promoted the productions? And with what means, what dispositifs and what know-how? What was the relation between these films and “facts” and, more generally, with knowledge produced by the scientists? What place did these films and this knowledge occupy in the broader cinematographic field, for example, alongside commercial films? To examine these questions, diverse disciplinary approaches were crossed, affiliating history, history of science and technology (and science studies), film history and audio-visual studies, communication and information sciences.

In addition to numerous workshops and publications over the four years, this research allowed a digital Medfilm platform to be established to present the inventory and database and where over three hundred films can presently be viewed and over a hundred descriptive records consulted.<sup>1</sup>

The specific aim of the June 2014 conference was to examine the essential characteristics of French production in medical films between 1900 and 1960, as examined by the project researchers, and to further compare them to other national productions. These two objectives structured the framework of the conference program.

## Redaktion

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### Autor(en)

Alexis Zimmer

### Beiträger

Alexis Zimmer

### Zitation ↓

In the introductory talk, CHRISTIAN BONAHE (Strasbourg) revisited the Franco-German origins of the Medfilm project and the difficulties encountered in commencing the research. These included material difficulties: locating the documents, negotiating with institutions to put them online and to obtain copyrights, as well as epistemological difficulties related to the delimitation of the corpus and of the films sought (what exactly is a medical or public health film?), films of a “utilitary”, orphan and often ephemeral nature. He further recalled another facet of the project, the pedagogical use of the films and the preparation of “pedagogical kits” available on the digital platform.

After this brief review of the various facets of the project, Christian Bonah presented one of the leading figures of French and international medical and health films, Jean Benoit-Lévy. Focusing particularly on a fine reading of Benoit-Lévy’s major book, “Les grandes missions du cinéma”<sup>2</sup>, Christian Bonah underlined the difficulty in attributing a unique authorship to the films. This is testified when considering the multiple actors in the group that participated in the elaboration of the films, that fed the inspiration that crystallised onto film, as well as the complex relation between the producers of “facts” (scientists) and producers of films.

The presentations that followed raised other recurring topics of the cinematographic corpus according to their subject, their producer, their vocation or their type of diffusion.

Through an analysis of six interwar films on the care of newborns and on domestic work, ANNE MASSERAN (Lorraine / Strasbourg) demonstrated that they all carried the mark of a capture of women’s knowledge for the benefit of expert and male knowledge, conveying the female figure as ignorant and as protector of the nation. “Science”, in this case, guaranteed the knowledge to be promoted.

JOËL DANET (Strasbourg) presented an analysis of medical and health films produced by the cinematographic services of the French army. The masculinity of the figures presented, the hierarchical tone of the commentator’s voice, the recurring themes (rescue equipment, protection from poison gas, etc.), distinguishes these films from the precedent corpus. Here, another guarantor of truth is presented: the military.

In a more “technical” presentation, SERGE KORNMANN (Strasbourg) described the role of animated images in interwar medical films, the effects sought by using them and the diverse techniques used.

PASCAL LABORDERIE (Reims), in his presentation, discussed the “ideological value” of French “laic educational cinema” in the 1920s. Contrary to Alison Murray-Levine’s thesis (“Framing the Nation: Documentary film in interwar France”)<sup>3</sup>, according to which documentaries produced under Vichy borrowed form and content from the 3rd Republic, Pascal Laborderie considered the complexity of ideology of this cinema, at times at antipodes to Vichy ideology.

LAURENT GARREAU (Paris) introduced the emergence of health shows and series within educational television in the late 1950s; an emergence subtle and notable for the resounding absence of certain themes, like cancer.

Then SUZANNE LANGLOIS (Toronto) spoke of the professional American career of Jean Benoit-Lévy within the United Nations’ Division of Films and Visual Information. And through his career there, she spoke of the internationalisation of the use of medical and public health films and the motivations of its use (the modernisation of the South, the correlation of Imperial knowledge and power, and the broader definition of health issues) in the specific context of the post-World War Two era and the depreciation of propaganda.

This last presentation prepared the transition toward the second day of the conference consecrated to medical and health film in other national contexts, in Soviet Russia, Germany, Canada, the United States and Italy.

ALEXANDRE SUMPF (Strasbourg) analysed the Russian case and DAVID CANTOR (Bethesda) the specific works of Adolf Nichtenhauser, an Austrian-born American and author of an important, albeit unpublished, history of medical film. In these presentations, the characteristics of the films were described: the overshadowing figure of Pavlov in Russian film, the crucial role of the First World War for American film. But the question of the writing of their history was also addressed through discussion of the problem of accessing sources, of their conservation, as well as the corpus of documents that accompanies them (newspapers, flyers, and the historical work of a medical doctor).

Two presentations, that of PHILIPP OSTEN (Heidelberg) and that of ALEXANDER FRIEDLAND (Berlin), portrayed the particular importance of medical and health films in Germany. The figure of Oskar Messter, German film inventor, supplier of optical instruments to the Berlin medical school and producer of medical films, alongside the organisation of the KulturFilm department of the UFA (the largest film producing enterprise in Europe), the

existence of a medical cinematography institute in Berlin in the 1920s explain and attest an original intersection of film and medical film. These two studies dispel the idea of a strict dichotomy between “utilitary” and “commercial” films.

The following two presentations explored the use of film in psychiatry. ZOE DRUICK (Burnaby, BC) presented the Canadian case and BREGT LAMERIS (St Andrews) that of the United Kingdom, France and Italy. They questioned the particular status of cinematographic archives (with collections of symptoms, archives of the body and of medical practices, but also of the war such as the case of films dedicated to the study of shell-shock) and their use in producing knowledge, producing new social representations and elements of a broader governance of behaviour.

Along these lines, GUDRUN LOEHRER (Köln) analysed the manner that the films produced by the American army participated in a form of governance of behaviour and the manner that the films sought to produce new conducts in preventative health.

This conference herein resulted in providing an important assessment of medical and health film collections in a number of countries, in highlighting recurring themes and their rationale, and constituting a new research community focusing on the study of these films. In the final discussion, the need on one hand to further analyse the circulation of the films, the means of producing them, and the motivations driving them, and on the other hand to adopt conceptual and methodological tools better adapted to the understanding of projection spaces and dispositifs were broached. However, having largely opened and rendered the medical and public health film archives available to university and academic research, we are pleased with how on-going research will now continue to extend innovative methods of science studies and visual studies in order to further specify the particular effectiveness of this type of cinema.

#### **Conference overview:**

*French medical movies production between 1900 – 1960: Subjects – distribution – figures.*

Christian Bonah (Université de Strasbourg, France), Jean-Benoit-Lévy, the ‘Edition Cinématographique Française’ and medical / health education film in the interwar period

Anne Masseran (Université de Lorraine and Université de Strasbourg, France), Progress, the new mother’s guide: Caring of newborns and domestic work in Jean Benoit-Lévy films

Joël Danet (Université de Strasbourg, France), Hygiene educational films by the Service Cinématographique des Armées: The ECPAD holdings

Serge Kornmann (Independent scholar, France), Animation and animation techniques in French interwar health and medical films

Pascal Laborderie (Université de Reims, France), Educational film in interwar France viewed through an international lens

Laurent Garreau (Canopé, Paris, France), Health programs at the dawn of French educational television

Suzanne Langlois (York University, Toronto, Canada), Jean Benoit-Lévy and public health propaganda in international context (1935-1949)

Vincent Lowy (Université de Lorraine, France), Commentary

*An international perspective on medical and sanitary film production, 1900 – 1950*

Alexandre Sumpf (Université de Strasbourg, France), Soviet medical films: From an interwar “Russian film school” to a WWII military and health education films

Philipp Osten (Universität Heidelberg, Germany), Medical film in Germany; 1900-1950. An overview

Zoe Druick (Simon Fraser University, Canada), ‘Mental Mechanisms’ and ‘Mental Symptoms’: Two mental health series of the National Film Board of Canada compared

David Cantor (NIH-NLM, Bethesda, USA), Adolf Nichtenhauser and the history of medical film in the United States, 1900-1950

*Towards an internationalization of medical and sanitary film?*

Bregt Lameris (University of St Andrews, Great Britain), Imaging shell-shock: Medical film and the discursive construction of a mental disorder

Alexander Friedland (Charité-Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Germany), Scientific film production and the Medico-cinematographic Institute at Berlin University in the 1920s

Gudrun Loehrer (Universität zu Köln, Germany), Fit to Fight? – Audiovisual malaria prevention in the US military

*Final commentary & round table*

Philip Stiasny (Universität Heidelberg, Germany) / Anja Laukötter (Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung, Berlin, Germany) / Christian Bonah

Notes :

1 Medfilm project platform : <<http://medfilm.unistra.fr>>, (31.7.2014).

2 Jean Benoit-Lévy, Les grandes missions du cinema, Montréal 1945 (Translation: The art of the motion picture, New York 1946).

3 Alison Murray-Levine, Framing the Nation: Documentary film in interwar France, New York 2010.

## **Zitation**

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Nach oben ↑

/ Tagungsberichte