



**HBO'S RE-INTRODUCTION
OF
THE MARCH OF TIME**

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In the spring of 1935 a remarkable short subject series called *The March of Time* appeared on American motion picture screens, startling journalists and filmmakers alike. Released every four weeks to a monthly audience which, by 1938, totaled more than twenty million people in the United States and millions more abroad, its twenty-minute episodes addressed political, military, social, economic and racial issues never before touched in the American cinema. A cross between confrontational journalism and docudrama, it was provocative, amusing, irreverent and sometimes outrageous, and critics didn't always know what to make of it. Miraculously, it survived in American theaters for sixteen years, from 1935 through 1951, the only film series in the history of the American film industry to regularly explore controversial issues of the day.

Illuminating the twilight zone between journalism and propaganda, *The March of Time* was consistently anti-totalitarian also at a time in the 1930's when film industry leaders eschewed controversial subject matter. Long before the Hollywood film industry treated the rise of Adolf Hitler and the doctrine of "racial purification" in Germany, Japanese militarism and the international ambitions of the Soviet Union, *The March of Time* did so. It was banned outright in Nazi Germany, communist Russia and the fascist states of Italy and Japan. It was also censored frequently in democratic western countries, and occasionally even in the United States.

The film was a product of Time, Inc., publisher of *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune* magazines. It had first appeared as a popular CBS radio series in March of 1931, in which the news of the day was dramatized using professional New York actors. Regulars included Art Carney, who imitated Franklin Roosevelt, Agnes Moorehead, who played Eleanor Roosevelt, Dwight Weist, who played Hitler and Orson Welles, who performed from time to time in a variety of parts.

The creator of the show was Roy Larsen, originally circulation manager of *Time*, later publisher of *Life*, and, after Henry Luce, arguably the single most influential person in the long life of the publishing empire. Larsen decided to adapt the radio series for motion picture production, and in 1934 hired Louis de Rochemont, a veteran newsreel cameraman and producer, to do so. With Larsen's support and Time's financial backing, de Rochemont introduced the first monthly issue of *The March of Time* on February 1, 1935.

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The film's most unusual feature was its re-creation or staging of events that had taken place but which had not been photographed by newsreel cameras. De Rochemont argued that he had the same right to interpret and clarify news events with staged scenes as a re-write man on a newspaper had with words to make sense out of a reporter's notes. He used both professional and amateur actors to impersonate famous people on the screen, and then blended the staged scenes with real newsreel footage. In time, the series became so celebrated that real celebrities were persuaded to play themselves, re-enacting events in which they had participated.

For its production of the "Atomic Power" episode in 1946, for example, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Albert Einstein, Enrico Fermi and other leading scientists re-enacted the roles they had played in the Manhattan Project. In one scene, James Conant and Vannevar Bush are shown lying on the sand in New Mexico, shaking hands after the successful explosion of the first atomic bomb. In reality, they had been photographed lying on the floor of a garage in Boston. The staging of scenes was never acknowledged on the screen although, of course, professional journalists and filmmakers were well aware of the techniques employed. By 1940 the series was so well known that it was parodied by Orson Welles in his production of *CITIZEN KANE*, including an imitation of the voice of Westbrook Van Voorhis, "The Voice of Time."

De Rochemont took special delight in attacking pomposity and demagoguery among political leaders and managed at one time or another to offend almost everyone in both national and international political arenas. Frequent American targets included members of what Time termed "the lunatic fringe," including Huey Long, Gerald L.K. Smith, Father Coughlin, and Francis Townsend.

In 1938, The March of Time released a sixteen-minute issue entitled "Inside Nazi Germany," one of the most controversial films ever released into American theaters. Other cinematically taboo subjects of the day that it dealt with included venereal disease, public health, widespread poverty, religious cults, the death penalty and the dynamics of racial relations in America.

As for film industry leaders, they were divided in their opinions. In 1937 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded the March of Time a special Oscar for having revolutionized the newsreel. The following year, however, Martin Quigley, owner and editor in chief of the exhibitor's trade paper, Motion Picture Herald, attacked the series for its journalistically confrontational behavior: "The exhibitors of the country ought to tell The March of Time that it is welcomed when it behaves itself but only then. . . They should tell it . . . that they do not want controversial material which is calculated to destroy the theatre as the public's escape from the bitter realities, the anguishes and the turmoil of life."

The films' theatrical release ended in August of 1951, sixteen years and 290 episodes after its introduction. Louis de Rochemont had already left for Hollywood in 1943 where he produced several feature-length semi-documentary dramas, including *LOST BOUNDARIES*, one of the first American theatrical films to deal with racism and the role of black citizens in America.