

Silent Films from Expeditions to the North and the South Pole

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The Heroic Era in Polar Exploration happened at the same time as the silent film developed from actuality films to documentary films. A few years after we got the first film cameras, Carsten Borchgrevink brought one along on his expedition in 1898 to Antarctica, but the techniques were not developed enough to able him to get any living images from the polar region. We only got one scene from when the expedition was leaving London. A few years later William Bruce on the Scotia-expedition was the first to managed to film scenes from Antarctica.

I have studied the films made on expeditions lead by Fiala, Wellman, Wilkins, Amundsen, Scott, Mawson, Shirase and Shackleton from the heroic era. These are films made by both amateurs and professionals. Mostly the films were made to illustrate landscapes and animal life for the explorers to use on their lecture tours, but some of the expedition films also turned up in cinema theatres in ordinary film programmes.

After WW1 things changed; in the Technical Era airships, aeroplanes, telegraph and modern equipment made expedition to the poles more safe. The film making also changed. Professional photographers played a more important role on the expeditions, and the films could tell about the expedition without a lecturer explaining what people saw. Newsreel photographers also fought to get polar stories to the film theatres. Amundsen, Byrd, Wilkins and Nobile financed parts of their expeditions by selling film rights and brought along the best film photographers they could find. My presentation ends with admiral Byrd's memorable documentary film about the first flight to the South Pole in 1929. Byrd brought along two Hollywood photographers and a film script showing how to make a dramatic story. When the expedition left the US the silent film era was at the end, and the last part of the film was made into a talkie when it was released at the cinemas.