Films of Memory

David MacDougall

The Mind's Eye

Films have a disconcerting resemblance to memory. They register images with lens and emulsion in a process better understood but often no less astonishing than the physiological processes of eye and brain. Sometimes film seems even more astonishing than memory, an intimation of memory perfected. Two of the journalists present at the Lumière brothers' "Salon Indien" screening of 1895 wrote that motion pictures bestowed a kind of immortality upon their subjects (Jeanne 1965: 10-12). But for many of the first viewers of films, what struck the imagination even more forcefully than the images of living people (who were regarded in the same light as performers) was the participation of the inanimate world in recording its own traces — the evocative minutiae of experience which the mind could only roughly register. It was such ephemeral images as the steam from a locomotive, the brick dust from a demolished wall, and the shimmering of leaves that seemed the real miracles of filmic representation (Sadoul 1962: 24; Vaughan 1981: 126-7).

And yet memory offers film its ultimate problem: how to represent the mind's landscape, whose images and sequential logic are always hidden from view. In the 19th century C.S. Sherrington described a sixth sense which he called "proprioception," that consciousness of our own body which confirms our physical identity (Sacks 1984: 46; 1985: 42). We might well consider memory our seventh sense, that record of an antecedent existence upon which our intellectual identity precariously rests.

Memory is often apparently incoherent, and a strange mixture of the sensory and the verbal. It offers us the past in flashes and fragments, and in what seems a hodgepodge of mental "media." We seem to glimpse images, hear sounds, use unspoken words and reexperience such physical sensations as pressure and movement. It is in this multidimensionality that memory perhaps finds its closest counterpart in the varied and intersecting representational systems of film. But given this complexity, and equally the aura of insubstantiality and dreaming which frequently surrounds memory, we may ask whether in trying to represent memory in film we do something significantly different from other kinds of visual and textual representation. We create signs for things seen only in the mind's eye. Are these nevertheless signs like any other?

The Translation of Memory

Films which focus on memory do not of course record memory itself, but its referents, its secondary representations (in speech, for example) and its correlatives. In films, objects survive from the past, people reminisce, and certain objects evoke or resemble those of memory. We end by filming something far removed from memory as it is experienced, but instead a mixture of dubious testimony, flawed evidence and invention. Films of memory could thus be said to represent only the external signs of remembering.

How then are these signs to be read? For the
Filmmaker, how audiences read them is largely a matter of trial and guesswork, since the minds of viewers are as closed to direct inspection as those of the people filmed. Nor do films, once made, communicate an unequivocal message. They produce different readings in different viewers, and as time passes are open to continual re-reading. If memory itself is selective and ideological, films of memory redouble this and add further codes of cultural convention.

Physical objects might be thought to be least subject to such vagaries, providing films with a kind of independent baseline for memory. This indeed is the rationale of many museums. But objects which survive from the past are not the same objects that they were in the past, and they can thus stand for the memory of themselves only obliquely. Unlike an object seen in a photograph, which bears a parallel relation to other objects around it in a specific past context, the patina of age on an old object tends to exaggerate its status as a sign. This sign is often confused with authenticity. But the least authentic thing about museum reconstructions of the past is that the authentic objects displayed in them are too old. At the time represented, many of them would have been new. Thus, whether displayed in museums or filmed in the recent past, the actual objects of memory are unreliable as expressions of memory. They can only be touchstones for its retrieval or construction.

Despite this, many films equate memory with surviving objects, including photographic images of the past. With the original sources of memory forever beyond reach, filmmakers are tempted to use the surviving photographic record as if this were memory itself. Thus documentary films and television programs persistently link interviews with photographs and newsreels, which are presented quite illegitimately as the memories of the speakers.

Such images nevertheless play an important part in our own memories, influencing how we think about the past. They take their place in our culture as physical artifacts, not mere media "messages." Many public figures whom we see on television are as substantial to us as the images of people we see in daily life. And as Frank Tillman has argued (1987), exposure to photographic images has altered the way recent generations imagine the world. We have always been able to think visually, but until photography we were unable to think photographically. As for most recent historical events, we remember not the events themselves (we were not present at them) but the films and photographs we have seen of them. But these may create a commonality of experience more powerful and consistent as social memory than the experiences of many of the actual participants. As Edmund Carpenter has commented, modern media, and particularly television, extend the images of our dream world (1976:58).

These public images can serve society at large in the way that family photographs serve smaller communities — as emblems of significant events and transitions, constructing a concept of the past but also providing ways of overcoming it. They may assist in what Yannick Geffroy (using Freud’s term Trauerarbeit) describes as the “work of mourning” the lost past (1990:396ff). They do so through repetition and reduction, for representation usually entails both of these. Television news (like its predecessor, the newsreel) rings changes on an essentially unchanging catalogue of disasters, political meetings, sports events, and wars, and it is this limited set of themes, with minor variations, which reassures us that the world goes on as before. But the process is not without emotional cost: like all mourning, viewing the recent past, particularly its horrors, includes a measure of guilty relief at our own survival.

In films of memory, however, there is a frequent collapsing of memory and its sources. The distinction between photographic records and photography’s place in people’s minds is rarely made. Thus, among the variety of signs that films employ for the objects of memory, photographs and archival footage tend to be used the least critically and most misleadingly.

**The Signs of Memory**

Films of memory draw upon a distinctive repertoire of signs. Perhaps most common, and what might be termed signs of survival, are images of objects which have a physical link with the remembered past. These memorabilia serve half as symbols of experiences, half as phys-

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cal proof that they occurred, and like Kane’s “Rosebud” they often turn up amidst a clutter of other, less familiar objects. They are “astonishing” and precious not so much for their visual resemblance to remembered objects as for the fact that they are perceived, like Proust’s planted of dried lime blossoms, as the “very same” objects.

These objects are remnants of a larger whole, sometimes declaring their connection to it only by the damage they have sustained: a tree whose broken branches tell of a storm, or a bullet-riddled helmet, or the wrinkles on the face of a person being interviewed. Old photographs and films belong to this group of signs not only as historical objects which bear the marks of handling, foxing and projection, but also (though more loosely) through the direct indexical link which their imagery — their photographic “marking” — bears to past events.

If objects do not survive to be filmed, films of memory often resort to signs of replacement — similar objects and sounds and, at the furthest extent, reconstructions and reenactments, such as those of docudramas. If pressed lime blossoms are unavailable, new lime blossoms will do. In this way, a train rumbling through a modern railway yard becomes a 1940s train to London or Auschwitz. Journeys and the retracing of steps are especially favored by films of memory because revisiting places — like viewing photographs — produces emotions of both retrieval and loss.

At one remove from replacements in kind are replacements in form: what we might call signs of resemblance. These offer a looser, iconic link with their objects, filling in the missing pattern of the past by analogy — not, as it were, by striking the missing note, but by supplying its harmonic. They make possible major shifts of magnitude: a day’s work or a short trip can now speak of a life’s journey. This principle can be seen in Roman Kroiter’s films Paul Tomkowicz: Street-Railway Switch Man (1953) and Strawinsky (1965), which “frame” life histories in a man’s last day’s work and an Atlantic crossing, and Renata and Hannes Lintrop’s Cogito, Ergo Sum (1989), in which an elderly Estonian’s daily physical struggle becomes a metaphor for his long resistance to Soviet rule. Resemblance, on any of several metaphorical and metonymic levels, allows a broad range of associative imagery to be brought into play. A cut to an eagle or seagull, for example, is rarely simply an evocative touch. In films, birds singled out for attention seem inevitably to carry an extra burden of aspiration, loneliness, hope or despair.

Among signs of resemblance, music is the analogue par excellence for emotion, and not surprisingly films of memory are choked with it. In these films music serves doubly for emotions imputed to the subject and meant to be aroused in the viewer. In addition, music is used by films of memory for its historical associations. Because musical styles “date” and are culturally specific they make ideal aural icons. A piece of music can almost always be found to fit a particular historical and social milieu. In the past, ethnographic films seemed invariably to use gratuitous (although culturally accurate) indigenous music for this single validating purpose. In mainstream documentary films, accordions, charleston orchestras and honky-tonk pianos become the equivalent cliché accompaniments for archival footage of villages, nightclubs and working-class neighborhoods.

The conventions of film music persist despite their naïveté and the obviousness with which they are used to manipulate audiences. Even in Ken Burns’ recent and carefully-wrought American television series, The Civil War (1990), period music is marshalled throughout as though better to authenticate photographs and quotations from the period. Although the music in the series has been defended as adding textual complexity, it has also been criticized for conditioning the audience to view history with a simplistic melancholia (Henderson 1991). By contrast, the British series, The Great Depression (1981), sometimes uses only the sound of a projector over compilations of archival footage. This device may be equally artificial, since even silent films were originally accompanied by music, but at least it has the merit of drawing attention to the contingent physical qualities of the film materials rather than cloaking them in an aura of fateful grandeur.

Although music is generally employed to “double” a specific historical setting, it can sometimes be cast against type, as Humphrey Jennings demonstrated in Listen to Britain (1942), when he juxtaposed Dame Myra Hess playing Mozart at a wartime London concert with the effects of Hitler’s bombing. A more common alternative is to seek out music which is culturally and historically as neutral as possible, representing (it is hoped) nothing so much as pure emotion. Music may function in this fashion if it is new or has lost its original connotations through re-use. Electronic music is often chosen because
it is cheap and anonymous, while Andean flutes and pan pipes have been used so typically to evoke memory that they are now part of an international style, stripped of other cultural meanings.

THE SENSE OF ABSENCE

The signs we have considered so far are those most often found in conventional films of historical remembrance. They bolster the illusion of a recoverable past. They have coalesced to produce a cinematic sub-genre whose ritual ingredients are aging faces (usually of interviewees), fetish-objects from the past, old photographs, archival footage and music. This formula is used with equal impartiality in everything from brief television items to twelve-part series and documentary features. It is a sub-genre which purports to tell us our “true,” unwritten history through the testimony of both ordinary people and famous eye-witnesses. It has a tendency to be elegiac, as though remembering were in itself a virtue. The age of a speaker is an important index of authority: the increasing reverence with which historical events are viewed as they recede into the past is transferred to those who remember them. Few films of this genre ask children what they remember about last week or last year, and few admit that the old may be forgetful or devious. Indeed, reminiscence is seen as a burgeoning richness which, if only it could be gathered up quickly enough, could tell us everything worth knowing about the past. Although such an approach acknowledges that memory is cultural, it tends to surround its own interviewees with a spurious neutrality (Nichols 1983).

A few films of memory employ one further class of signs, which we may call signs of absence. These provide a way of confronting the problems of forgetting and wilful distortion, as well as the larger abyss between experience and memory. Although films of memory often claim legitimacy as a way of salvaging first-person experience, they rarely address slippage in the memories of their informants. At the very least, signs of absence place memory in the context of forgetting, and define the past by its irreducible distance from the present.

Signs of absence often make ironic use of objects and testimony, positioning the audience uncomfortably by asking them to make judgements and comparisons, to search for and interject meanings. Here the sign for a lost object becomes not its surrogate but what has displaced it. These signs define memory by its true opposite, an embodied absence. An empty factory thus represents a fully operating one. A market square teems not with peasants and bullocks but with youths on motorbikes. In another variation, first-person testimony is challenged (and reversed) by its positioning in a film — Nixon’s air of ingenuousness, for example, in The Trials of Alger His. Or it may be offset by the internal evidence of a shot (what Walter Benjamin called “dialectical” images), as in the presence of an overseer with interviewed workers in Amos Gitai’s film Ananas, or signs of duress in televised statements by hostages and prisoners of war.

Some films go further still. Beyond the carefully counterpoised “now” and “then” of Resnais’ Nuit et Brouillard (1955) or the verbal and visual evidence of Erwin Leiser’s Mein Kampf(1960), Claude Lantzmann’s Shoah (1985) not only asks us to query first-person testimony but to look at empty roads and fields where atrocities took place and search them for what happened there. We look in vain for the signified in the sign. In this constant reiteration of absence we are brought to the threshold of one kind of knowledge about history. In the failure of the sign we acknowledge a history beyond representation.

THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MIND

If memory forms an aspect of thought, it is possible to regard films of memory as efforts to approximate the processes by which the mind represents experience to itself. These films harness the memories of the film subjects, the filmmakers and, more indirectly, the film viewers. In a discussion of photographic imagery, Victor Burgin (1982: 194-8) has referred to M.J. Horowitz’s classification of thought into “image,” “lexical” and “enactive” categories (1970: 69-82). Horowitz based his tripartite structure on Jerome S. Bruner’s “three systems for processing information and constructing inner models of the external world” — what Bruner called the “iconic,” “symbolic” and “enactive” (1964). Both systems resemble, whether directly or indirectly, the sign classifications developed by C. S. Peirce and Roman Jakobson, and seem elaborations on them. Although these modalities of mental representation are usually intermingled in actual thought, they correspond very
well to the strategies by which films render memory in images, words and physical behavior. Indeed, we may not fully understand how films use these elements, and how they ultimately affect us, until we have a better understanding of the processes of mind.

By “image” Horowitz means not only visual imagery, but the ability to recall sensory experience generally. It is possible to remember a specific smell or sound, or even “hear” in silence an entire Mozart symphony. Thus, although in films we are limited to sounds and visual images (forays into odorama and smellavision notwithstanding), Horowitz’s concept of “image” is best understood as sensory thought.

The visual imagery of the mind appears to be both more complex and less systematic than the visual imagery of cinema. We might compare two of its operations to those of the voluntary and involuntary muscles of the body. Some images come to us unbidden, the material of dreams and daydreams. They are specific and sharply defined: a face, perhaps never consciously noted before, has the living detail of a face actually seen, or viewed on a movie screen. But images recalled through conscious effort are more often indistinct and elusive. It is a common experience to find the faces of loved ones the most difficult to recall. The more actively one pursues them the more effectively they sidestep the mind’s gaze, as though long familiarity had rendered their object too complex and heterogeneous for a single image to suffice. Films condense such multidimensional thinking into concrete imagery, stripping the representation of memory of much of its breadth and ambiguity.

The counterpart of Horowitz’s “lexical” thought is amply represented in films, although usually in a more studied form (such as commentary) than in the scribbled demotic of daily experience. Actual thought more typically consists of broken fragments of language and a sense of meanings hovering between the verbal and preverbal. Among the few films which attempt to duplicate this is Clément Perron’s Day After Day (1962), which departs from conventional film writing to give us muttered pieces of nursery rhymes and sudden announcements (“The departure has been delayed indefinitely”) as the accompaniment to monotonous piece-work in a paper mill. There is also something rather like it in the headlong rush of notions and placenames in Auden’s poetry for the film Night Mail (1936).

In representing sensory and lexical thought, films might be thought to have encompassed the essential elements of memory, for images, sounds and words tend to dominate our conceptions of our own consciousness. This assumption appears to be endorsed by many current social and political documentaries, which reduce these two categories to a simple format of archival footage (the sensory) and interviews (the lexical). It seems taken for granted that this not only represents memory adequately but also, quintessentially, history.

However, Horowitz’s third mode of thought, the “enactive”, is neither image nor word, but gesture — experience recalled, one might say, in the muscles. We imagine an action through the feel of it — for example, the sense of moving a hand in a familiar motion, such as stirring coffee. One might call this the kinaesthetic dimension of thought, familiar to ourselves but only observable in others when it is translated into actual physical movement, just as lexical thought is only observable when translated into speech. That the images of words on a page are translated into an enactive version of sound production is perhaps well demonstrated by Edmund Carpenter’s observation that throat surgery patients are forbidden to read because “there is a natural tendency for a reader to evoke absent sounds, and the throat muscles work silently as the reader scans the page” (1980: 74).

Enactive memory finds its primary filmic counterpart in images of physical behavior, especially behavior of an habitual kind. Of the three categories, the enactive is perhaps the mode of memory closest to the indexical sign, for its form is that of an imprint or direct extension of previous experience. It is evident in certain gestures — when, for example, artisans are at work and the memory of their craft seems to reside “in their hands.” Such gestures can express not only the memory of an habitual activity but an attitude towards it, as when a cook breaks eggs with a flourish that combines both pride and expertise.

Enactive memory may take precedence over visual or lexical memory. In a French television report a man descends a stairway in a building in which he was imprisoned in total darkness for over a month. Although he can tell us in words the exact number of steps (there are thirty-one) and we can see the steps ourselves, it is in fact the movement of his feet which tells us most convincingly that he knows when he has reached the bottom.

We may postulate that of all the modalities of
thought, the enactive is most closely associated with emotion: that, for example, the memory of shame or triumph is largely an enactive, physiological response, although linked to a visual memory of the situation in which it arose. The dynamics of film editing may constitute, after the portrayal of "habitual" gesture, a second level on which films reproduce the qualities of enactive thought, although precisely how this operates deserves further investigation. Eisenstein characterized the effects of montage as "psycho-physiological" phenomena, and described how in the film *The General Line* (or *Old and New*, 1929) a series of increasingly short shots of farmers mowing with scythes caused members of the audience to rock from side to side (1929: 80). At their junctions, film shots produce kinaesthetic responses in the viewer; and much film editing may represent a translation of movement and gesture from enactive thought into a succession of juxtaposed images. Editing also creates imaginary geographies — cinematic landscapes of the mind in which we as spectators walk and take our bearings. It is one of the objectives of films of memory to create such spaces, as analogues of the spatial dimensions of memory. Other aspects of enactive memory may be represented in films through the synesthetic effects of movement, light, color and texture.

Horowitz's three modes of mental representation can thus help us to identify correspondences between the processes of memory and filmic representation. To these should perhaps be added a fourth category — that of narrative thought. More than simply a property of the other modes, narrative has, it seems to me, good reason to be considered a further primary constituent of thought. Time, which provides the continuum on which memory is registered, here underpins the arrangement of the sensory, lexical and enactive into sequences. Narrative governs the disposal of objects and actions in time, without which most memory, and even language, would be impossible. Although a certain part of thought is apparently incoherent (even if, perhaps, the product of a deeper logic) there is little we can think of without assigning it a narrative history or potential. We think within a set of narrative paradigms in which objects have origins and futures, and in which even simple actions are constructed out of a succession of lesser ones. This hierarchy of mental structures is reflected in the syntagmatic structures of many popular cultural products, from folktales to films.

It is often asserted that the conditions of film-viewing induce a dreamlike state in which the self is stripped of its defenses. Films seem like dreams because we watch them helplessly, deprived of our volition. However, another explanation for this effect may be that films create a synthesis of varied modes of representation which closely mimic the modes of mental representation. Although films are visual, they are also aural, verbal, narrative and enactive. They slide through different cognitive registers in a way that we find strikingly familiar, so that even people who have never seen films before quickly find them comprehensible, despite culturally-specific codes of narration and editing. One may speculate that although experiments in artificial intelligence are widely based on linguistic and mathematical models, film may well offer a more convincing simulation of mind and memory than either of them.

The connections between cognition and film underlie many of the conventions of the cinema (as in the "psychological" editing of Fritz Lang or Alfred Hitchcock) but without, it seems, often being explicitly acknowledged as such. The reluctance to identify narrativity closely with actual processes of thought produces an ambiguity in the point of view of many films, as though films could somehow think themselves without reference to an identifiable consciousness. Films of memory, particularly documentaries, often seem uneasy about their own narrativity. Fiction films seem less troubled. Some, like Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963), clearly seek to reproduce certain processes of thought through visual imagery and interior monologue. Others do so more obliquely, through strategies of identification with third-person characters, who recite or reenact their memories, as in *Citizen Kane* (1941) or — extraordinarily, since the narrator is supposed to be dead — *Sunset Boulevard* (1950).

Non-fiction films of memory more often seek to stand outside the narratives provided by their human subjects. Instead, they situate these stories in a structure which at times relies on them for narrative impetus but otherwise seeks to create its own narrative about an historical period or political issue. There is a general presumption of interest on the part of the audience, but precisely why they should be interested (or why the filmmakers are) is often never made clear.
There is a certain amount of journalist hubris in such a position. Frequently the presence of testimony itself is taken as its own sufficient justification. This approach dominates film portraits of famous people, such as Portrait of Nehru (1965), in which an interview was virtually forced upon Nehru, and John Else’s study of Robert Oppenheimer, The Day After Trinity (1980), in which the film’s authority and that of its subject seem curiously undifferentiated. Memory is used, but the fundamental link between constructing the past through reminiscence and constructing the audience’s present experience through film is never made. We may thus conclude that many films of memory are uncertain about their own discursive status: in making the assumption that their subjects’ reminiscences are worth knowing they somehow dispose of having to define, or speak from, their own particular interests. There is thus a certain emptiness at the heart of such authorship, a fundamental lack of conviction. It may well be that the common tendency to adopt a celebratory stance towards memory is a symptom, and a masking, of that uncertainty.

Processes of thought and memory are generally approached more directly in autobiographical documentaries, which constitute a rapidly growing sub-genre of filmmaking. From the early work of Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage to later films such as Chris Marker’s Sans Soleil (1982), these films show a concern for the workings of memory and the problem of how film can represent it. However self-absorbed and self-serving they may be, they are explicit about their uses of the past. Reminiscence is rarely treated as omniscient or transparent, and when photographs are used, as in such films as Corinne Cantrell’s In This Life’s Body (1984) and Antti Peippo’s Sijainen (1989), they are presented as fragmentary documents, to be interrogated and filled with meaning.

These filmmakers are often dubious about the translation of memory, just as anthropologists have become more cautious about the possibility of cultural translation. They confront in the most personal way the “crime” of representation, the gap between signs and their objects. Most makers of films of memory confront the same problem, but often (it appears) in a different spirit. If they regret the sparseness of detail or the inarticulateness of filmed first-person testimony, their response is not to indicate the significance of this gap but to try to improve upon it. The unattainable richness trapped inside their subjects’ memories is supplanted by the addition of much illustrative material. The viewer is drawn into a collusion in which the varied signs of memory are brought into play. These are not the abstract and regenerative symbols of literature, but images from the physical world. In fiction films (Robert Bresson’s, for example) such representation is sometimes saved from the literalness of its images by a kind of minimalism, an exclusion of the too-explicit. In documentary the closest equivalent of this is perhaps the use of the single, mute object saved from childhood, or the perfectly enigmatic photograph, like that which Antti Peippo shows us of his apparently happy family in Sijainen. But at this point we must ask whether films of memory are really engaged in representing memory at all. They may instead have moved outside the more verifiable significations of other documentary film texts and into a domain of evocation. Here film could be said to leave representation behind and to confront the viewer once again with the primary stimuli of physical experience.

**Film, Ritual & Social Memory**

Social memory in small communities is a matter of consensus, a version of the past accepted by various groups for reasons of convenience and solidarity. The particularities of social life prevent any one person from sharing precisely the same perspective or experience as others. Social memory is thus “social” in an active sense: negotiated, provisional, and indicative of relationships. But increasingly, access to common experiences and sources of information in modern society tends to create a monolexical culture, condensing useful fictions like social memory into realities. When momentous events occur it is quite common the next day for people hardly to speak of them, for by then they are already public icons and “news” to no one. This instantaneous production of social memory creates public perceptions which are widespread and seemingly unassailable, but also, because of their very rigidity, brittle and subject to sudden reversals. As the Iraq-Iran and Iraq-Kuwait wars show, the victims of today easily become the villains of tomorrow.

The images of film and television combine the durability of artifacts with the force of oral tradition. They are concrete reports from the physical world. In a preliterate society these reports are conveyed by art, ritual
and word of mouth (all ephemeral) and become a constantly revised "tradition." With the advent of writing, printing, photography, and electronics they become fixed, even petrified points of reference. As Walter Benjamin (1936) observed, they also take on more explicitly political functions. Yet as film and television endlessly recapitulate past events they also regain some of the functions of ritual. Certain images of the past keep recurring and, like famous still photographs (the napalmmed Vietnamese girl; the Andean flute-player in The Family of Man) lose their historicity (their status as photography) and become cultural symbols.

Marc Piault has noted that the controllers of ritual use it to inculcate an orthodox "tradition" which reinforces their own power, but in the process of constructing such a tradition ritual simultaneously makes possible its transformation by creating a stage for the confrontation of conflicting interests (1989). One might suppose that "fixed" media representations, which share with ritual the power of authority and repetition without offering such a stage, might avoid such a challenge. Indeed this seems to be widely assumed by their "controllers." From early in this century governments have seen film and other mechanically reproduced images as a safe means of inculcating patriotism and historical orthodoxy. In 1917 General Ludendorff wrote to the Imperial Ministry of War praising the superiority of photography and film as "a means of information and persuasion," an action which eventually led to the founding of the giant UFA studio (Furhammar & Isaksson 1971:111-12). And in his well-known statement of 1922, Lenin told his Education Commissar, Lunacharsky, "Of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important" (Leyda 1960: 161).

This trust in photographic iconography is in some measure confirmed by the way in which modern conceptions of the October Revolution are still defined and contained by Eisenstein's images of it. It is quite common for compilation documentaries dealing with the period to mix indiscriminately newsreel footage with scenes from the film October (1927). Such uses of fictional footage have occurred often, perhaps most notably in the American wartime film series, Why We Fight. The logical extension of using film to construct history is to tailor history to its filmic representation, as was done in 1934 in Nuremberg for Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will (1936), perhaps the world's first great "media event" and the outgrowth of such propaganda exercises as the manipulation of the Reichstag fire and the mythologizing of the story of the Hitler Youth hero, Herbert Norkus (notably, through the film Hitlerjunge Quex (1933)). But in doing so the creators of an orthodoxy also created a tool for its destruction. Here film images, despite their apparent permanency and consecrated meaning, have proven as open to challenge as earlier forms of ritualized persuasion.

In 1942, after viewing Triumph of the Will, Frank Capra (soon to be the producer of the Why We Fight series) decided to "use the enemy's own films to expose their enslaving ends" (1971: 332). He realized that by altering the context in which the footage appeared its meaning could be reversed. He thus began exploiting the "stage" which the original producers had created. Since then scenes from Riefenstahl's film have been endlessly repeated, but they have in effect become part of a transfigured view of German history, imbued with quite different ritual significance.

Thus, like ritual, the focal narratives of history provide a medium for political contestation and change. Social memory, although it may be powerfully shaped by film and television, is clearly as vulnerable to revision as the traditions of earlier times. In a description which interestingly parallels Piault's, Edward Bruner and Phyllis Gorfain (1984: 56) assert that such narratives "and similar cultural texts...are frequently national stories and rarely remain monologic. They do serve to integrate society, encapsulate ideology, and create social order; indeed, the story may become a metaphor for the state, and poetic means may be used for political purposes. But because these narratives are replete with ambiguity and paradox, an inherent versatility in interpretation arises that allows for conflicting readings and dissident, challenging voices."

Yet a residue of a clearly physical nature remains in film images which is not available in verbal narratives, and its importance should not be underestimated. Film images may be reinterpreted in a variety of new contexts, but the unalterable record of appearance and place contained in them may ultimately prove to have a more profound effect upon our "memory" of history than the interpretations we attach to them.
NOTE

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Henderson, Brian


Horowitz, Mardi Jon


Jeanne, René


Leyda, Jay


Nichols, Bill


Piault, Marc


Sacks, Oliver


Sadoul, Georges


Tillman, Frank


Vaughan, Dai