

Film and Video Reviews

Comptes rendus de films et vidéos

Picturing World War II: The Visual Record and Its Legacies

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The 1995 meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA) marked the 50th anniversary of World War II by focussing on war and its aftermath. One important theme was public memory; how it is shaped and the role it plays in ongoing political and social life.

In the United States, World War II is often considered to be an almost mythical time of social harmony and common purpose, when a diverse population pulled together in the service of democratic ideals. Memories of that war are cast largely in terms of images circulated in the mass media, from the pages of *Life* magazine to Hollywood films. The visual record of the war is a particularly compelling subject for historians, not only because of the familiarity of those images, but for their continuing resonance, even iconic status, in the culture.

Historians, whose practices are grounded in the written word, are beginning to grapple with films, photographs and videotapes as rich and complex historical materials. While it is now generally acknowledged that visual images constitute significant historical evidence, there is less agreement about just what they are evidence of and how they should best be interpreted and evaluated. This article reports on one panel session at the 1995 AHA meeting, "Picturing World War II: The Visual Record and its Legacies," which highlighted three research approaches.

Panel members discussed how the body of visual imagery seen by the American public during World War II was shaped, why it was shaped that way, and what some of its long-term effects were. Bringing their perspectives as historians to bear on visual records, they read photographs and film both for the meanings they reveal and those they conceal. They also suggest the degree to which lived experiences are inseparable from mediated ones, and

examine the increasing role that mediated images play in constituting social experience.

In his paper on images that were *not* seen by the American public, George H. Roeder, Jr looks at shifting government censorship policies. By bringing forbidden photographs into view, he shows how the pool of shared social imagery seen during the war was limited, and how this has influenced the terms of public discourse. Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall discuss Joe Rosenthal's photograph of the Iwo Jima flag-raising, which passed from photojournalism into legend. They shed light on how a patriotic wartime image came to be used in the 1960s to cast doubt on patriotic claims. Sumiko Higashi deals with a wartime newsreel compilation film and an Office of War Information film — documentaries claiming the truth of objective, factual reports. Professor Higashi interprets these films as subjective constructions that reproduce long-standing racist discourses. She then examines five recent films by Japanese-American women who are creating new representational strategies for personal and social histories, in order to challenge and transcend entrenched ideologies as they rewrite history.

The Panel Presentations

Professor George H. Roeder, Jr, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, focusses on unseen images: photographs that were censored by the U.S. government. In "Censoring Disorder: American Visual Imagery of World War Two," Roeder draws upon his research in visual archives (including the so-called "Chamber of Horrors" that was secretly maintained by the Pentagon during the war) to analyze government censorship policies aimed at containing evidence of "confusion, disruption, and disorder."

Predictably, images of battlefield carnage and chaos were censored. The first photographs of dead U.S. soldiers were not released until 1943, when homefront war efforts appeared to be flagging, but scenes of dismemberment, decapitation and agony remained taboo, as did pictures of psychologically traumatized American soldiers. These policies reflected standards of propriety at the time, according to Roeder, but they also shielded citizens from the unpredictable, transformative powers of war. Other proscribed subjects included racial mixing, G.I. sexuality, military inefficiency and certain examples of heroism on the part of African-American soldiers. (This last was justified in one case on grounds that there was a "tendency on the part of the Negro press to unduly emphasize" the achievements of the black 92nd Division.)

The government deployed photographs in order to counter uncertainty. The line between friend and foe, for instance, was clearly drawn. The homefront never saw atrocities committed by G.I.s, nor did they see enemy soldiers in situations that might provoke empathy. According to the pictures, U.S. bombs hit only intended targets, causing no harm to friendly civilian populations, and certainly not to women, children or the elderly. Even when the realities of massive danger, death and disorder were acknowledged — which became increasingly necessary as the war continued — the public was assured that matters were under control and that, once victory was in hand, there would be no interruption of pre-war family values, social hierarchies or race relations. At the same time, in order to encourage full participation in the war effort, the government issued posters and photographs that blurred class, gender and racial boundaries. There were inherent contradictions in the promise of a return to a pre-war *status quo* at a time when government propaganda, Hollywood films and newspapers were featuring images of social equality and camaraderie that crossed traditional boundaries. Women, African-Americans and people of diverse ethnicities were shown working together for the war: housewives working in shipyards; African-American G.I.s; and Irish, Jews, Italians and WASPs teamed up in ethnic harmony. While it was implied that these were exceptional and temporary circumstances, expectations were raised that would have long-term consequences.

Roeder, whose analysis is fully presented in *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven: Yale

University Press, 1993), asks us to reflect on the dangers of remembering a war in terms of a skewed picture that minimized the chaos and unpredictability of war, our own capacities for error, brutality and internal dissension, and pervasive social inequities.

Karal Ann Marling, Professor of Art History and American Studies at the University of Minnesota, and John T. Wetenhall, Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Birmingham Museum of Art, are the authors of *Iwo Jima: Monuments Memories and the American Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), which traces one of the most famous photographs of the Second World War from the moment of its creation, publication and circulation, to its later manifestations on a postage stamp, as a public sculpture, in a Hollywood film and as kitsch.

Six men raised the flag on Mt Suribachi on 23 February 1945. Three were killed in action shortly afterward. Wetenhall and Marling follow the men who were identified as the three surviving members of the group, and examine how the photograph affected their lives. They describe how the men were brought from the battlefield to the U.S., where they were put on display as heroes and featured on war-bond tours that were closer to show business than to war. One of those men, Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian who died in tragic circumstances in 1955, was the subject of three films made in the 1960s, in which he was portrayed as a victim of racism and exploitation.

In their paper, "Iwo Jima: The Mutation of Wartime Facts into Myths and Legends in Post-war America," Marling and Wetenhall describe their research on documents at the Federal Record Center of New York, where they found the details of a controversy over one of those films, *The American*, an early NBC television drama that was aired in 1960. The film implied that the Iwo Jima photograph was staged for military propaganda, and that the government's consequent cynical manipulation of Hayes caused his descent into alcoholism. He is shown at the end of his life, inebriated, raising the American flag at the (entirely fictitious) "Iwo Jima Trading Post" on the Pima Reservation.

The film was plagued by disputes. Photographer Joe Rosenthal sued NBC for suggesting that the photograph was somehow fraudulent. (See Marling and Wetenhall's book for a full account of the circumstances in which the photograph was taken.) Pima tribal leaders denounced the stereotyped and denigrating portrayal of Hayes. Finally, the author of "The

Hero of Iwo Jima," a short story based on Hayes' letters to his mother, claimed copyright infringement. The film was broadcast and forgotten, but according to Wetenhall and Marling, it left a lingering suspicion about the photograph in the public mind. They discuss the Ira Hayes portrayed in the 1960s films as a symbolic figure, shaped to suit a time when concern over racial inequities and distrust of government were rising. They agree that despite all that has been written and said, Ira Hayes himself remains an unknown person.

Marling and Wetenhall describe the relationship between the photographic image, the reality it portrays and its meanings and uses over time. They ask us to consider the implications of the fact that since the 1960s television has become a primary source of historical information for the public. They also ask us to reflect on the story of *The American*, and how it demonstrates the limited ways in which American media will acknowledge and represent American heroes of colour.

Many historians consider documentary films to be more akin to their own work than, for instance, Hollywood films and television dramas. Photographs, with their indexical relationship to reality, have the appearance of objective evidence. And documentary style, like news reportage, promises an authoritative account of "what actually happened." Professor Sumiko Higashi, who teaches American History, film studies and women's studies at the State University of New York at Brockport, challenges the truth claims of documentary films. In her paper, "Double Vision: Documentaries in Drag vs Independent Filmmakers on World War II," Higashi analyzes two films: a wartime newsreel, *Paramount News Presents*; and an Office of War Information film, *Japanese Relocation*. Higashi identifies these as examples of documentaries that assume the style of factual investigative reporting, thereby masking the creation of an essentially fictional construct for patriotic purposes. Despite their documentary status, Higashi sees them as subjective constructions, reproducing long-standing Orientalist discourse in the way they frame, demonize and conflate Japanese nationals and Japanese-American citizens. Higashi demonstrates the tenuousness of the line between so-called fiction and non-fiction film by applying principles of criticism normally reserved for commercial feature films to documentaries in order to decode their inner meanings.

In the annual compilation newsreels, *Paramount News Presents*, the European war

receives noticeably less coverage than the Pacific war, which is treated with almost obsessive attention. While the German enemy is referred to as a "logical creature," the Japanese are "the yellow peril," associated with monkeys and other animals. It is consistent with the character of these newsreels that the 1946 *Paramount News Presents* refers to Japan's fanatic barbarism, while making no reference to German concentration camps.

Commenting on *Wartime Relocation* (1943), in which the government describes and justifies the internment of Japanese-Americans, Higashi notes the irrationality of a story that promises assimilation to all "loyal Americans" while it simultaneously shows citizens who have been forcibly stripped of property and rights. As the narrator claims that Japanese-Americans enthusiastically cooperated in internment, the film shows their hastily abandoned businesses and homes. At no point is there a Japanese-American voice or point of view. Nor is it every suggested that they had violated any laws.

She contrasts these films, which have become part of the social memory of World War II, with the recent work of five Japanese-American women who are recasting autobiography, family history and social history in their films. They bring to public view and public voice formerly invisible events, experiences and individuals to rewrite the history of internment and its human costs. Choosing to address themselves to both Asian and broader audiences, these filmmakers attempt to correct the record by introducing new information, new perspectives and unheard voices. They challenge official stories (including newsreels and propaganda films like *War Relocation*) and popular culture to reveal the deep racism that characterizes portrayals of Asians in the U.S. The experiment with new narrative strategies designed to subvert and transform old patterns of Orientalist thought to more fully express the lived realities of Asian people. But, Higashi warns, while these films provide an important counterpoint, they also illustrate how difficult it is for an ethnically marginalized group in the United States to succeed in fundamentally changing the terms of the story.

Conclusions

In mythologized national memory, World War II was a time of social harmony and democratic ideals. These memories are, to a large extent, embodied in widely seen films and

photographic images that obscured and concealed political contradictions and social conflicts that persist to this day. These papers invite us look further into the archives, to

better understand visual artifacts for what they show and what they repress, for how they come to acquire meanings, and for the roles they play in constituting shared social realities.

Personal Documentary: War and Memory

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Documentaries recalling the trauma and disruption of war on personal, domestic and family life often employ a creative mix of archival film and personal memorabilia. The documents and objects used frequently signify absence, loss and ambiguity, and their intermixture evokes the process of constructing meaning rather than the establishment of fact.

Internationally, film and video makers have been experimenting with archival film and video in combination with personal memorabilia, as an aid not merely to memory but to the construction of memory and out of that, of identity.¹ They attest, in this endeavour, to a need to locate their personal story within history, a need expressed elsewhere in efforts such as oral history and reflexive anthropology,² and to the malleable quality of things — including images — in that process.³

Some of these filmmakers return to wartime events and experiences, either their own or those of their relatives, as a dramatic intersection between public history and private life. They use the audio-visual material they collect as evidence for what is known and also as a marker for what is not or perhaps cannot be known. Their films become self-aware testimonials to the manipulation of documents and artifacts in the construction of one's own sense of self and context, as well as statements about the location of individuals within history.

One may point to a variety of personal works dramatically driven by wartime trauma. There is, for instance, in the U.S. work by Japanese-Americans, some of it spurred by the movement for restitution for internment during World War II.⁴ Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory*,⁵ Janice Tanaka's *Who's Gonna Pay for These Doughnuts, Anyway?*⁶ and Lise Yasui's *Family Gathering*⁷ all reconstruct family histories and the filmmakers' place in it, referring centrally to the internment experience with old photographs, home movies and news footage. In each film, the filmmaker pursues long-suppressed family memories. Tajiri reassembles memory

from artifacts. Tanaka recounts the rediscovery of her father, who after the war had become mentally ill and disappeared. Yasui conducts oral histories with her family, who had erased the episode from their family story.

The Holocaust has also long been a subject for meditative documentary work, as Resnais' celebrated *Night and Fog*⁸ — which eloquently uses absence, emptiness and silence to testify of unspeakable acts — attests. In the U.S., recent examples include Ilan Ziv's *Tango of Slaves*⁹ and Mira Reym Binford's *Diamonds in the Snow*.¹⁰ In *Tango*, Ziv, the child of a Holocaust survivor, chronicles the failures and frustrations of his search for images that would connect his family's past and present, including the record of a voyage back to Warsaw, where every trace of his father's ghetto experience has been expunged. In *Diamonds*, Binford returns to the Polish home where she was hidden from the Nazis as a child. The complexity of her experiences, and those of two other young girls, are gradually revealed through recollection, testimony and archival imagery. Each Polish Christian family had in some way abused as well as protected the children; each child had come to terms with despair as well as hope.

Exile as a result of wartime conflict and war-at-home situations brought about by repressive governments has now become a cultural fact, marked by documentarists and others.¹¹ The culture of exile has also created a cinema of displacement, evidenced by work such as Palestinian Michel Khleifi's *Canticle of the Stone*.¹² In that film, documentary images from the Intifadah are interpolated pointedly with scripted scenes between two actors who play differently exiled Palestinians returning to a reality they no longer understand. In the U.S., Alan Berliner's *Intimate Stranger*,¹³ a bitter-sweet portrait of his Egyptian grandfather turned international trader as a result of World War II politics, is an arch pastiche of old photographs and films, both personal and public.