

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.<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> and to the malleable quality of things — including images — in that process.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory*,<sup>5</sup> Janice Tanaka's *Who's Gonna Pay for These Doughnuts, Anyway?*<sup>6</sup> and Lise Yasui's *Family Gathering*<sup>7</sup> 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*<sup>8</sup> — 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*<sup>9</sup> and Mira Reym Binford's *Diamonds in the Snow*.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> The culture of exile has also created a cinema of displacement, evidenced by work such as Palestinian Michel Khleifi's *Canticle of the Stone*.<sup>12</sup> 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*,<sup>13</sup> 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.

Overlaying the visual pastiche is an aural pastiche of family voices, offering conflicting views of the man and, in the process, a collage-portrait of a family tragically battered by post-war trade winds.

Displacement can be internal as well, as many Latin Americans can attest. The poignant *How Nice to See You Alive*,<sup>14</sup> a Brazilian amalgam of documentary and fiction, features interviews with several Brazilian women who had been active in armed movements against the Brazilian military in the 1960s and '70s and who survived torture. Their testimonies, along with the monologue of a fictional character who says what the real-life figures apparently cannot, describe memories and realities methodically denied by Brazil's civil society.

Film and videomakers in the international African intelligentsia are also producing works that recover personal and public memories of traumatic wartime events and consequences.<sup>15</sup> These films join personal questions about identity with pointed questions about the political fate of post-colonial national. Two recent examples are *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* by Raoul Peck,<sup>16</sup> a Haitian raised in what was then the Congo (now Zaire), and *Allah Tantou*, by Guinean David Achkar.<sup>17</sup> Filmmaker Raoul Peck, whose Haitian father was hired by the newly independent Congo as an agricultural expert, links Lumumba's decline and fall — alluded to with fragments of newsreel footage, home movies, old photographs and audio tape — with the young boy's confusions over his own status and place, and his anxieties over the fate of his own parents. *Allah Tantou* recreates the story of David Achkar's father, a Guinean diplomat who fell from favour and died in prison.

In these films visual evidence is often used to demonstrate absence — what is not, or cannot be known, what has been lost, what cannot be said, what needs to be discovered — as much as to illustrate or document what did happen. Gaps of knowledge or memory are correlated to lack of connections or relationships. "I've been trying to evoke a whole family I've never seen from just this one picture," says Ilan Ziv as the images on the one photograph that survives from his extended family slowly emerge in developing fluid. Images of empty rooms, empty movie-theater chairs swept by fog, and masked actors performing the title tango all comment on the absence of imagery and amplify the filmmaker's frustration with a search for visual memory. *Diamonds in the Snow* strategically, and in a tradition among

Holocaust documentaries, uses the very abandonment and emptiness of present-day places, once sites of horror or protection to evoke a sense of loss. Binford's voice-over telling of a desperate attempted escape across a field, for instance, covers an image of the placid field today, seemingly belying its bloody past. In *Who's Gonna Pay*, Tanaka fades to white and blurs the screen to emphasize blank spots in personal memory and family history. She blanches at an old family photo of the relocation camp, signifying a fading memory. This technique is also used repeatedly by Rea Tajiri, who in *History and Memory* isolates family photos and talismanic artifacts between patches of white or dark, and also fades the images.

*Lumumba* uses many techniques to boldly remind the viewer that the Zairian dictator Mobutu has suppressed the memory of the man he displaced and destroyed (and to cope with the fact that there is almost no extant imagery of Lumumba), including a segment in Belgium showing the filmmaker as unwilling tourist, unable to return to Zaire. The final image in *Allah Tantou*, as Lawrence Daressa of California Newsreel wrote, "of an anonymous road on a memoryless morning, a truck bouncing into the future, does not just express the irrevocable absence of his father. It denotes all the 'disappeared,' the insignificant and unsignified, the unrecorded and immemorial millions of Africans and others who have been edited out of history."<sup>18</sup> In *How Nice to See You Alive*, the suffocated voices of the survivors of torture alternate with the extravagant emotionality of the actress, each highlighting differently what is not or cannot be expressed.

There is often a deliberate probing of the way in which home movies and personal photographs do *not* reveal the traumatic stresses that wartime and other forces of history exert. The films and videos implicitly ask questions about why we record what we record. In *Intimate Stranger*, photographs and images from family movies are shown again and again, sometimes in slow motion, sometimes probingly examined ever more closely by the camera, becoming more and more open to the interpretations put on them by Cassuto's children and son-in-law, often in contradiction to what the picture shows. In *Allah Tantou*, David Achkar composes an idyllic vision by mixing his family's home movies — kids around a Christmas tree, dad in the driveway — with newsreel and film images of the public Achkar at the U.N. His father's subsequent imprisonment unto death after a coup, seen in re-enactment and heard in

excerpts from letters he wrote, contrasts bitterly with these tender and optimistic images, making a kind of critique of revolutionary idealism as well as of the ruthless regime that destroyed his father. The commonplace, and frequently used, photo of the Japanese-American mother proudly showing off her baby on the steps of the relocation camp becomes, in retrospect, an image of a valiant, poignant figure.

Official images also reveal re-interpretations, which not only call into question particular versions of history but the very authenticity of visual artifacts. In *Tango of Slaves*, Ziv deconstructs a scene of a restaurant in a Nazi-made film of the Warsaw ghetto, with the help of one of the unwilling actors in it; he then records his father's reaction, as the man breaks down in tears recalling the starvation of the time.

Documenting the brutality of the moment in war, persecution, coup and upheaval is not at issue in such films. Rather it is the erasure of this history, or the burying of its role in the consequences, that is under scrutiny. In such documentaries, historical artifacts cease to be evidence in the way they are, for instance, in a Ken Burns documentary like *The Civil War*<sup>19</sup> or *Baseball*,<sup>20</sup> or in the recent historical documentary *Out of Ireland*,<sup>21</sup> by Paul Wagner. In these documentaries, experts — not just the talking heads but also the filmmakers — implicitly and explicitly reassure the viewer of the legitimacy of the interpretation given to the data.

In personal documentaries built around wartime trauma, frequently disparate images, sounds, object and fragments — the detritus of a historical moment — are made into unstable collages or even left isolated and uninterpretable. They function not merely as documents but as questions and problems. Each item, each image, conditioned by others, loses its independent authority as historical proof and becomes part of a search for meaning, integrity and identity. Each testifies to the need to establish a memory where it has been suppressed by others, or conveniently forgotten.

The assemblage of artifacts thus becomes a concrete representation of the act of making meaning. Tanaka says in concluding voice-over in *Who's Gonna Pay for These Doughnuts, Anyway?*, "if you have a past with this insight one may begin to look to the future with hope." Ziv expresses a darker vision at the conclusion of a film that has documented his search for visual documentation: "How will you be able to understand your past," he asks his daughters, "when all you have is photographs?" The photographs reference an obliterated world.

This kind of work is also, inevitably, more than personal. It is a challenge to what Michael Frisch calls a public culture "characterized by a broad and seemingly willful disengagement from the past" (p. 19). It is a refusal to accept erasure, at the same time acknowledging the lack of existing frameworks to contain the assertion of a personal experience of history.

#### NOTES

1. See J. Sternburg, *Long Exposures: A Poetics of Film and History* (Encino, CA: Author — 16065 Royal Oak Rd., Encino, CA 91436, February 1993). Adapted from author's talk at the Whitney Museum, May 1992, as part of the exhibition *Re-Mapping Culture[s]: Film and the Media Arts*, co-curated by John Hanhardt and Sternburg.
2. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
3. A. Radley, "Artefacts, Memory and a Sense of the Past," in D. Middleton and D. Edward (eds.), *Collective Remembering*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1990), 46–59.
4. S. Higashi, "History and Memory"; "Memories from the Department of Amnesia"; "Who's Gonna Pay for These Doughnuts, Anyway?"; "Days of Waiting". *American Historical Review* (October 1993): 1181–1184.
5. Rea Tajiri, *History and Memory* (New York: Women Make Movies, 1992).
6. Janice Tanaka, *Who's Gonna Pay for These Doughnuts, Anyway?* (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 1992).
7. Lise Yasui, *Family Gathering* (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1989).
8. A. Resnais, *Night and Fog*. Film. (Chicago: Films, Inc., 1956).
9. Ilan Ziv, *Tango of Slaves* (New York: Tamouz Media, 1993).
10. Mira Binford, *Diamonds in the Snow* (New Haven, CT: Author — 548 Orange St., #406, New Haven, CT 06511, 1994).
11. H. Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
12. Michel Khleifi, *Canticle of the Stones* (Seattle, WA: Arab Film Distribution, 1991).
13. Alan Berliner, *Intimate Stranger* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991).
14. L. Murat, *How Nice to See You Alive* (New York: Women Make Movies, 1989).
15. Patricia Aufderheide, "Memory and History in Sub-Saharan African Cinema." *Visual Anthropology Review* 9 no. 2 (Fall 1993): 107–113.

16. Raoul Peck, *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1992).
17. David Achkar, *Allah Tantou* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1991).
18. Anonymous (Daressa, L.), *Allah Tantou* (film notes) (San Francisco: California Newsreel, n.d.).
19. Ken Burns, *The Civil War*. (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1990).
20. Ken Burns, *Baseball*. (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1994).
21. Paul Wagner, *Out of Ireland* (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1995).

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