LUMIÈRE'S REVENGE
RON BURNETT
The notion of the second-hand implies a separation between Lanzmann's fascination with the period and his desire to generate new truths from his research. Irrespective of whether it is first-hand or second-hand, whether it is oral history or legend, text or image, the shape and form he gives to his research cannot avoid the mingling of fiction and fact. The arbiter here is not truth but the context within which assertions are made about truth or, put another way, the context within which the second-hand is adjudged or interpreted to be truthful. Of equal concern is how his fascination will shape not only the history he chooses to investigate, but the very act of historical interpretation itself.

Lanzmann goes on to explain the way in which he extricated himself from the vise of second-hand knowledge. First he tried to find out as much as he could from the survivors of the concentration camps. He didn't want just ordinary information or even ordinary witnesses, he wanted people who had been close, very close to the killing and death.

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"I was like someone who takes dancing lessons, but never really learns how to dance. I found that the gap between what I had learned via books and what the people told me was so large that all of my earlier work seemed to be irrelevant."

"I knew then that the only way I could proceed was by going to the actual sites — the concentration camps — and seeing them for myself. I realized that knowledge was without value if it wasn't combined with experience. To know and understand I had to see. In order to see I had to know."

Thus before he actually made the film Lanzmann encountered a fundamental problem. He wanted to experience history, experience the holocaust and then reconstruct both his experience and the event. He wanted to be part of a process which would join historical enquiry with reproduction, which would link the past with the present, which would transform the past into a 'living' event for the viewer. The film continually uses the recollections of its interviewees as a pivot for this desire, as if their discourse, its intensity, its power, will overshadow the fact that he cannot "show" what they are talking about. How does that link up with his assertion that knowledge of the holocaust is inevitably second-hand? In some senses he is trying to produce an empirical history, one which will reflect reality and where reality in turn will be reflected through the image. His film will not only explore death by extermination but will illustrate its very processes. But note that his illustrations will be unique, will show that which has not been seen before, an iconography which will join data, reconstruction and the imaginary. The data, the reconstruction, and the image, will all be joined to make the experience of the past as real as possible.

His search for primary sources puts to the side the very difficult problem that no event is outside of the sign systems which are used to communicate what has in 'fact' happened. Thus the event itself is suffused with layers of meaning which have become textual and which cannot be foregrounded unless they are rewritten, retold, or reconstructed. With that, a measure of indeterminacy is introduced, something which, as we shall see, Lanzmann is desperate to avoid.

In the film, Lanzmann combines his images of concentration camp locations with scale models of gas chambers. For him, this combination reflects an internal pressure or urgency to understand an incomprehensible event and to reproduce in great detail that which the imaginary and images cannot fully reveal. He did this because he could find no archival images or photographs to show him what had happened. "There were two distinct periods: from 1933-39 we found photos and films of book burnings, news footage of Jews being chased in the streets and persecuted, Kristallnacht in 1938, etc. Suddenly the war came. The people and countries controlled by the Germans were cut off from the world. From that period we have a few rather inconsequential propaganda films shot by the Nazis, including a grotesque one from the Warsaw ghetto showing Jews singing in fake cabarets, Jewish

Still from the Lumière brothers' first programme, 1895, where the first representation of a moving train frightened audiences.
terms of images, because what is important is the way in which Lanmann conceptualizes the relationship of history and the image as a strategy of explanation. His search for that which has been lost is not in and of itself unusual, examples abound from historical and ethnographic literature, but his emphasis on confronting his own imaginary is, and what it points out is the rather difficult problem of living the past through the present tense of images. This problem is compounded even further when that past is supposed to be brought to life by images which are not only meant to reveal the past but to exemplify it. Exemplification and veritification clearly throw those archival images which Lanmann found and which he decided were of no value say something not only about history but also about the history of images. How could, how can the Holocaust ever be pictured?

In one sense the Holocaust exists as a frozen sign of human brutality— as in other sense it lives through its survivors, in the and the children of those survivors and their felt need to keep the memories alive as a warning for the future. But there is a distinct difference between trying to convert the image of a historical event into an authoritative one, and confronting the rather delicate question of the boundary between fascination and the grotesque.

Lanmann says, "to argue that the past does not exist until the historian makes the story by calling the relationship of history and the image as a strategy of explanation. His search for that which has been lost is not in and of itself unusual, examples abound from historical and ethnographic literature, but his emphasis on confronting his own imaginary is, and what it points out is the rather difficult problem of living the past through the present tense of images. This problem is compounded even further when that past is supposed to be brought to life by images which are not only meant to reveal the past but to exemplify it. Exemplification and veritification clearly throw those archival images which Lanmann found and which he decided were of no value say something not only about history but also about the history of images. How could, how can the Holocaust ever be pictured?

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Lanmann's assertion that the film is both fiction and fact flounders because it is precisely the setting out of the difference between fact and fiction which needs to be argued. The various elements of that argument will inevitably be at the centre of the cinematic strategy which he will choose. If history, to be relevant, to be understood, must be brought "to life," then a special kind of illusion has to be created. To work, the illusion must carefully recontextualize and draw upon the very historical disasters which Lanmann feels are absent. Ironically, the representation which Lanmann wants to find cannot be easily "pictures." The blame for this lies not with the event nor with the discussions which have followed it but with a strategy which assumes that the past can ever be relived.

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on precisely the kind of absolute qualities which would preclude any rewriting.

Lanzmann's fascination is as much with his own past as it is with Nazism. He is honest about that. Less obvious though is the way in which Shaw is an exercise of a pain which Lanzmann feels guilty about not feeling. For irrespective of the power of the image, they remain just that, images. Their hold is found precisely in their aesthetic impact, a point well-made by Susan Sontag in her article about Syberberg's Hitler, a Film From Germany. Images offer horror in much the same way as they offer pleasure. In a repetitive fashion, that horror and pleasure can be denied because viewing never simply replicates what has been represented.

This gap is at the heart of a dilemma for Shaw, which wants to make an impact upon history and thus to change the way history has been seen. It simultaneously wants to invite the spectator into the gas chamber in order to be more than a wit- ness, in order to become the victim, to feel that which we cannot feel, that they城市发展 when life and death are indistin- guishable and crucially when language means nothing and is emptied of all possi- bility of meaning. This problem, that images cannot simply transcend their own limitations, is responded to by Lanzmann at the level of editing. The film is nine hours long. He shot well over 200. This is a ratio of 20 to one. A ratio about which he was not happy, but which of necessity, he had to face if he was to transform his film from a mere mass of images into a presentable theatrical show. This is exactly the problem. Irrespective of his intentions and honesty, the exigencies of the medium are not simply a hurdle to overcome, they are at the centre of the question of how processes of representation work. The exigencies of the medium and the form and the way history can be seen and understood and thus Lanzmann must bear some responsibility for producing a his- torical spectacle, a responsibility which he would prefer to avoid given his desire to produce "truth.”

Furthermore, given that so much of what we have of the Holocaust is framed by the relationship between language, analysis and image, the balancing act between images and what is understood to be the empirical reproduction of an event will always be open to debate. Which set of hurdles is Lanzmann really trying to overcome? He says that only traces remain of the extermination, but he himself found many witnesses to it. He says that his film is about the traces of traces, yet he ended up reducing what he had filmed to the broad outlines of an argument condi- tioned by the performative demands of the cinema. I am not suggesting here that he should not have done that. Rather, the more fundamental question is whether the cinema can ever do more than just perform the histories it so willingly appropri- ate.

At one and the same time Lanzmann wants to find facts and reshape them. Yet that reshaping is as much a re-imagining as it is a retrieval. Ultimately his faith in the image is what betrays him since what he is recreating cannot on its own reveal the imaginary at work, cannot sustain the rather intense connection between truth and representation. Thus he never really lived the past as much as he made the past sig- nificant for the present. In so doing he simply filled the hole of history with the cinematic equivalent of a phantasm, the imaginary became the real, for him, and in a strangely paradoxical way he repeated one of the crucial characteristics of the adherence that so many Germans had for fascism.

It is precisely the phantom of power, the power to control events, to transform history into a performance which ac- counts for the enormous popularity of a film like Heinmat, by Edgar Reitz, which is less of a film about the story of the finale but of a film in which the production designer plays himself. The film focuses on the task of putting together a film festival and the frustration, and the viewer so that both can grasp hold of a set of events other- wise governed by rules which seem to be images offer horror in much the same way as they offer pleasure. In a repetitive fashion, that horror and pleasure can be denied because viewing never simply replicates what has been represented.

Filmmaker, arranged for a former Nazi to be interviewed during the shooting of his own film, Felbert, it turns out, was a brutal mass murderer who felt little in the way of guilt or repentance. This infuriated Harlan who saw in Felbert not only a representa- tion of his father, but also the problem of guilt not being felt. Harlan is plagued throughout Emser Nazi by the pain of not being able to get Felbert to feel guilt. Finally, he physically assaults Felbert and even then can feel no satisfaction. The bind here is that the present has made possible an image of the past without the past itself tearing its head and producing a real enemy. Thus Felbert cannot be killed by Harlan and yet that is clearly what Har- lan wants to do.

Images in films lead towards a past they can conveniently picture and it is the picture which becomes the threat. Yet changing the picture won’t necessarily change the past. What is more the past as picture may paradoxically map the ground upon which signifying systems can replace that which they were intending to reveal. This led Foucault to say: “...how could Nazism, which was represented by lamen- table, shabby, puritan young men, by a species of Victorian splinters, have be- come everywhere today — in France, in Germany, in the United States — in all the pornographic literature of the whole world, the absolute reference of eroticism? All the shuddiest aspects of the erotic imagination are now put under the sign of Nazism...?!” However, in a context where replacement and substitution are the nec- essary conditions upon which the Nazi era can be conceptualized, no amount of the- atre, no aesthetic perfect representa- tion can ever face the substance of that historical moment. Why is it then that the image seems to carry the burden of strate- gically accounting for the horrors of that period?

Thomas Elsaesser tries to answer this question in the following way: "Syberberg made Our Hitler, against and in anticipa- tion of Joachim Fest's Hitler — A Career as well as NBC's Holocaust. By structuring his own film so much in terms of a critique of showing and seeing, he indicates that Hitler had already, in his appropriation and use of the media, anticipated his own
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etc... What is important for our purposes here is the notion of the audience and the rather extraordinary victory claimed for propaganda by the Nazis. Thus it was a case of the German people merging with a collective self defined in national terms by the images and sounds of Nazi ideology. As Kris points out later, the bombing of Germany reminded the people of a possible gap between the message and the truth and as this gap grew, as hardship increased, the propaganda became more intense and more idealized. He chooses an example: "Over there is a woman worker; her eyes are still red and full of tears; her voice trembled, but on she went with her work... A boy of sixteen was wounded; his arm is bandaged; his head is bleeding under his steel hat. Düsseldorf stood up to it. Every one of its citizens is a hero." But this is precisely the clearest indication of the failure of the message. In any case, the message and the way it is comprehended can never simply be identified with the messenger, though it might be the desire of the propagandists to confer that power on themselves. The question is far more complex than that. From our point of view what is important is the perspective from which truth as such can be ascertained.

Now it is clear that, for Lanzmann, truth will surface through the imagery, through the power of the message to disturb the viewer, to alter the viewer's own self-image and definition of history. But this assumption depends on whether the viewer is willing to accept the claim that the image can speak in truthful terms. The problem is, that to believe a cry has come from a gas chamber in a film transforms what "really happened" to the imaginary of what really happened and paradoxically, that is a condition, a fundamental condition of historical imagery, of historical cinema. The collapse of the distinction is exactly a victory for the propagandist which is why in Unser Nazi the construction of a narrative around Nazism is shown to be a struggle with the paradygm gravitated by the distance which has to be taken from the historical in order to produce it. This distance is on the one hand frightening because it suggests that evil cannot be immediately pictured and thus understood, and on the other hand it suggests that distance must be the fundamental ground upon which the message has to be constructed. Thus the message has to co-exist with its impossibility (and this does not mean that nothing can be said) and with the difficulty that the past can never be relived in the present.

In one sense, this is precisely the source of our fascination with historical imagery, linking what remains of the past with the present. The filmmaker as historian realizes the past through his or her phantasm, a relation between observation, exploration, explanation and the imaginary. The same can be said for the historian as filmmaker. Claims of truth, reality, authenticity, set these phantasms apart from their progenitors and presuppose a kind of collective fantasy which we all share. The significance of the effort to picture the Holocaust is the manner in which we have to come to stand for a story which must be repeated by every generation in order to believe it, in order that is to attach the truth values of the present to it. Yet this only further reconstructs the gallery of significations which mediate the distance we have to take from it. The result is more and more levels of aestheticization till we finally reach realism, that is, if the metaphor can be stretched, until we finally find ourselves in the comfort of our homes watching a televised reconstruction of the fundamentals of kitsch. Here is a contradictory middle ground where art and history conjoint, and where the poetics of historical writing, historical filmmaking, reveals a radical discontinuity between events and the way that they can be illustrated. That discontinuity, however, is one of the reasons why images can appear to be historical since what they name, what they give meaning to, are the phantasms which separate them from the past. At the same time, as the mediations grow it becomes more and more difficult to date them which all image for.
to distinguish between the various levels which might differentiate the role of the image from the event.

Lumière then, properly speaking, has had his revenge, for he was truly one of the first filmmakers to try and record historical events with precision. History is judged by its communicability and by the effectiveness of those signifying systems most closely linked to the actualization, the virtual reproduction of the past as past. I am not suggesting however, that this particular contradiction can be avoided, merely that it be recognized precisely as one of the signs where history is produced. What we understand to be second-hand both as knowledge and as image — Shosha marks out the terrain of our fascination with the imaginary as a tool for making history real. This is the case even when historical discourse must be rewritten and even when images can do no more than hint at the memories upon which they are based. The paradox is an exquisite one because for every film which attempts to assert historical truth another can use the same techniques to turn the truth upside down. Shosha is caught by all of the phantasmagoria which it is trying to unmask and would have perhaps been more significant as a film if it had confronted the way those phantasmagoria govern historical discourse rather than trying to reveal how they must be eliminated.

Jon Burnett is the founder of Cine-Tracts magazine. He is an associate professor of film at McGill University and senior lecturer at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. He is currently completing Parts.

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