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# LUMIÈRE'S REVENGE

RON BURNETT

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*Shoah*, by Claude Lanzmann, more than any other film since World War II, has fully justified Auguste Lumière's early hopes for the cinema. *Shoah's* power as a representation of the holocaust has been equated by commentators and viewers to the events of history itself. In fact, all of its very extensive footage, up to 100 hours worth, is going to be housed in a special archive at Yale University. The film's outtakes will thus become another source of historical information on the holocaust. It is rare for a film to be taken this seriously and the act of converting the film into an archival document is a fascinating one, conflating as it does the differences between history, representation and the image. It was Auguste Lumière who launched, though by no means sustained, the idea that images were mimetically dependent upon their referent, thus promoting the supposition that history could be "pictured" if not reproduced through the medium of film. It is one of the purposes of this article to explore *Shoah's* impact precisely as historical reconstruction, as image, as picture, and to more clearly situate its role in relation to the cinema as an institution. The film's role as a historical document also raises other questions about the history of the documentary cinema.

Lanzmann initially approached his research on the holocaust and the Nazi era in what he described as a traditional way. "For over a year I read every history book that I could find on the subject. I went through all of the written archives to which I could gain access."<sup>1</sup> This preliminary comment reveals the strong fascination which he had with Nazism. It is this fascination which provoked the following comment. "As the research developed I was asked by the people financing me to explain what I was doing, to explain the direction which I was taking. But to me those questions were absurd. I didn't have a clear conceptual framework for what I was doing. I had a few personal obsessions and I knew that I had set myself a rather difficult task, but the whole question of concept was a difficult one for me. I would characterize my knowledge at that stage as theoretical, almost wholly derived from my reading of books, a clearer way of saying that would be that my knowledge was essentially second-hand."<sup>2</sup>

Lanzmann was faced with a series of contradictory problems. In relation to the holocaust, in particular the extermination camps, knowledge as such can only be second-hand. Yet his way of characterizing the problem points to a possible solution, as if the history of that period has a large hole in it which he will fill by a process of substitution. In effect he has undertaken his historical research with the film in mind. As I hope will become clear, this has more than just a passing relevance for the final product. There are important differences between the activity of research per se, that is, the investigation and exploration of a particular period of history, and undertaking that research with the intention of transforming essentially discursive materials into images.

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 to be so large that all of my earlier work seemed to be irrelevant."<sup>4</sup>

"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."<sup>5</sup>

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.

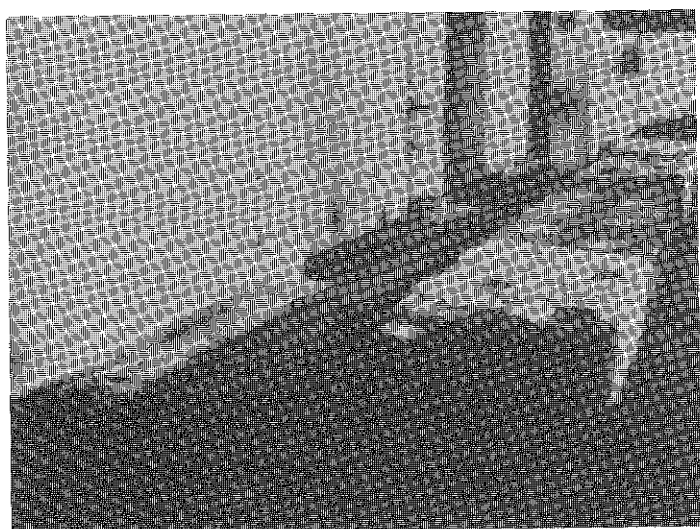
His search for primary sources puts to the side the very difficult problem that no event is outside of the sign systems which are used to communicate what has in 'fact' happened. Thus the event itself is suffused with layers of meaning which have become textual and which cannot be foregrounded unless 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.



border/lines fall 1989



Camp latrines, empty in 1955. Still from *Nuit et Jour*, Alain Resnais's 1955 attempt to convey the reality of the German death camps.

women parading the streets wearing expensive clothes etc., all designed to show the Jews as hedonists. As far as the process of extermination goes, nothing — and there was a rather simple reason for this — the Nazis formally prohibited any filming of the extermination in order to keep it a secret."<sup>6</sup>

Lanzmann goes on to describe the monumental effort of the Nazis, Himmler and others, to avoid leaving any traces of the atrocities they were committing. It is Lanzmann's effort to confront this absence which interests me, because what shocked him about the response of audiences to his film was the way in which his efforts at reconstruction were taken at face value. The assumption was that archival footage was being used and one viewer said, "That was the first time I had heard the cry of a child in the gas chamber."<sup>7</sup>

Aside from the reconstructions, he set about interviewing people who lived in the town of Treblinka. He even found the conductor of one of the trains which had been used to bring Jews to the concentration camps. "After I had talked to him, I found the locomotive which he had used. I told him, 'Get on the locomotive and we'll film an arrival at Treblinka.' I didn't say anything else. We arrived at the station and he made this incredible gesture staring back towards an imaginary chain of boxcars. He made as if he was going to cut his own throat. To me that was an image of truth which made the archival photos which we had seen completely irrelevant. After that I made all of the peasants repeat the same motion and it became what it had always been, a sadistic gesture directed towards their victims."<sup>8</sup>

For Lanzmann, *Shoah* is both a fictional film and a fiction of the real. Those people he interviewed became actors, not only telling their stories, but reconstructing their own memories, in a sense redefining their imaginary of history at both a personal and social level. "This film was not about memories as such, I knew that right away. Memories scare me. They're just too weak. The film abolishes the past and present. I relived the past as if it were in the present."<sup>9</sup>

Let me deal in the first instance here with the question of past and present in

terms of images, because what is important is the way in which Lanzmann conceptualizes the relationship of history to 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 films, 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 verification — clearly those few archival images which Lanzmann 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 — in another sense it lives through its survivors 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

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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. Lanzmann'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 discourses which Lanzmann feels are absent. Ironically, the representations which Lanzmann wants to find cannot be easily "pictured." The blame for that lies not with the event nor with the discourses which have followed it but with a strategy which assumes that the past can ever be relived.

In a superb article entitled, "What has History to do with the Semiotic?" Brooke

Williams says, "to argue that the past does not exist until the historian makes the shots by calling them, that is, to argue that the historian creates the past simply by his or her construction of it, sinks history into a kind of linguistic quicksand which loses all ground upon which to base a semiotically objective inquiry. On the other hand to fail to recognize the power of the word, or power of naming, in the shaping of a thought about the object — in establishing the object's signification — is to fail to recognize the presuppositions built into the naming process itself, and thus to fail to recognize any difference between what really happened and what we call history."<sup>10</sup> I would characterize the crisis which Lanzmann faced as a crisis of the image, a crisis of finding an image and crucially naming, representing, conferring meaning through images. His desire to somehow make 'memory' concrete is a contradictory one because memories, even those spoken by participants in historical events, are a site of meaning without the specificity which he so desperately seeks.

No event has so fully occupied modern literature, modern historiography and modern research as the holocaust and the Third Reich. Few men have had as much written about them as Hitler. Few events can claim as many films, as many documentaries, as many cinematic re-interpretations, as many grotesque attempts to aestheticize the horror of mass extermination, as the holocaust. Lanzmann clearly does not want to duplicate that history.

What discursive hole is Lanzmann trying to fill? It might be useful to contrast a recent film by Robert Kramer, *Unser Nazi* (*Our Nazi*), which tries to explore many of the same problems except that Kramer set about videotaping a film being made by Thomas Harlan entitled *Wundkanal: Execution for Four Voices*, also about the Nazi period. I cannot summarize *Unser Nazi* here, suffice to say that it is as much about history as it is about producing a videotape to explore the effects of history on one's own psyche and imaginary. It is about what happens when the image is inadequate, when it inadequately portrays human conflict, when historical images fail, when sight and the activity of seeing provide no base upon which to analyse what one has felt or understood in viewing a film based on a historical event. As the set in which *Unser Nazi* was filmed turns into a place of inquisition, Thomas Harlan (filmmaker, actor, victim) traces his own past, his Nazi father, through a former Nazi and what comes out, as Harlan says, is the Nazi in all of us. This theme has been dealt with in great detail by other West German filmmakers like Syberberg, Fassbinder, Sanders-Brahms, Von Trotta and Schlöndorff. For our purposes, Kramer's film explores many of the contradictions which *Shoah* leaves out. Throughout *Unser Nazi* Kramer worries about discourse, precisely about the fictions of those whose recounting of memory relies on a careful selection of facts, a careful selection of truths. After all, were it not for that selectivity most historical discourse would take



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 *Shoah* is an exorcism of a pain which Lanzmann feels guilty about not feeling. For irrespective of the power of the images, 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 *Shoah*, 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 witness, in order to become the victim, to feel that which we cannot feel, the very moment when life and death are indistinguishable and crucially when language means nothing and is emptied of all possibility 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 form and reform the way history can be seen and understood and thus Lanzmann must bear some responsibility for producing a historical 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 conditioned 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 appropriates.

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

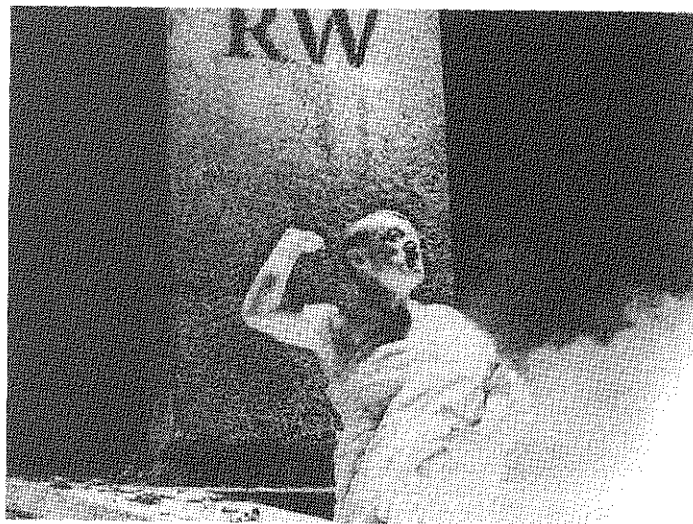
the image is what betrays him since what he is recreating cannot on its own reveal the imaginary at work, cannot sustain the rather intense contradiction between truth and representation. Thus he never re-lived the past as much as he made the past significant for the present. In so doing he simply filled 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 phantasm of power, the power to control events, to transform history into a performance which accounts for the enormous popularity of a film like *Heimat*, by Edgar Reitz, (which like *Shoah* is meant to bring history to life) for it recovers that set of sequential movements in time without which the history of Nazism seems inexplicable. At the same time, it is that recovery which reshapes the fascination, conferring power onto both the filmmaker and the viewer so that both can grasp hold of a set of events otherwise governed by rules which seem to be

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disconnected from the presumed logic of historical rationality. Foucault has put it quite clearly, "Nazism never gave a pound of butter to the people, it never gave anything but power. Nevertheless, one has to ask oneself why, if the regime was nothing else but this bloody dictatorship, there were Germans up to May 8, 1945, who fought to the last drop of blood, unless there had been some kind of attachment to the people in power."<sup>11</sup>

This raises a further question. Does a film like *Shoah* threaten the historical moment of which it is a part? Put another way, is the film merely one of many, many films, particularly those of Germany in the seventies which ostensibly concern themselves with history, the history of the thirties and forties, in order to recover not only the past (which will to some degree always remain outside of their grasp), but the binds produced by the way the present inevitably recasts and reconstructs the signifying properties of history? *Unser Nazi* is confronted by the same problem. One of the characters in Kramer's film, Thomas Harlan, himself a documentary

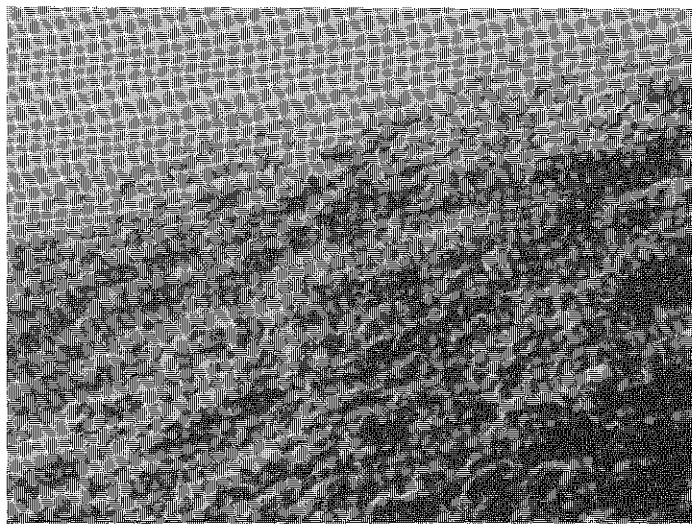


Still from Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler, A Film from Germany*, 1977.

filmmaker, arranged for a former Nazi to be interviewed during the shooting of his own film. Filbert, it turns out, was a brutal mass murderer who felt little in the way of guilt or repentance. This infuriated Harlan who saw in Filbert not only a representation of his father, but also the problem of guilt not being felt. Harlan is plagued throughout *Unser Nazi* by the pain of not being able to get Filbert to feel guilt. Finally, he physically assaults Filbert 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 rearing its head and producing a real enemy. Thus Filbert cannot be killed by Harlan and yet that is clearly what Harlan 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 lamentable, shabby, puritan young men, by a species of Victorian spinsters, have become 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 shoddiest aspects of the erotic imagination are now put under the sign of Nazism...."<sup>12</sup> However, in a context where replacement and substitution are the necessary conditions upon which the Nazi era can be conceptualized, no amount of theatre, no aesthetically perfect representation can ever face the substance of that historical moment. Why is it then that the image seems to carry the burden of strategically 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 anticipation 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



A mountain of women's hair. Still from Alain Resnais's *Nuit et Brouillard*.

revival and survival as spectacle. The physical destruction of history and of Germany is redeemed by 'Hitler's heirs' through the historically new category of the show — the democratic leveller, according to Syberberg — as we know it from television and advertising, sublating both history and personal experience. In the age of the mass-media, the past itself becomes a commodity, and historical experience cannot be transmitted in any form other than as an object for consumption, as a visual system of identification, projection, mirroring and doubling, which is to say, by short-circuiting the very possibilities of understanding, knowledge and the social processes of passing them on."<sup>13</sup>

I do not fully agree with Elsaesser's characterization of the mass media in part because he describes a level of instrumentality which mirrors the desire for control which the media have, but which they can never exercise unless that is, they "colonize the imaginary" — a phrase which I have borrowed from *Kings of the Road* by Wim Wenders because it so aptly describes the once again easy enemy which the media can come to stand for. However, it is quite clear that commodification alters the meaning of history if only by suggesting that the past can be shown through visual systems. The problem is that media like film provide a mode of explanation replete with a quite specific impact as if for example, the empty hallways of a faded Aushwitz in *Night and Fog* (by Alain Resnais) can be explained through the voice-over, as if image and word, image and speech can conjoin to reveal a pain both real and metaphorical, both reconstructed and imagined. Is it then an accident that most efforts to deal with Nazism through the cinema, like *Lili Marleen* and *The Tin Drum*, turn towards the metaphorical as a way of rediscovering the imaginary of the event? If our language is so woefully inadequate how can our images escape that inadequacy? In part they try to escape by elevating evil to an extreme level and thus by exclusion try to prove the point that even our imaginaries have not gotten away from the instrumental effects of the images which surround us. But this notion of instrumentality — the desire to effectively produce an audience which mirrors the messages sculpted into language or

film — is not all that different from the way the Nazis themselves saw their own propaganda machine.

In a quite extraordinary book by the psychoanalyst Ernest Kris, entitled *German Radio Propaganda* we are given the following explanation: "Since the Nazis believe that the immediate sensory experience that participation provides exerts a more powerful influence on man's attitudes than arguments do, they use every verbal propaganda technique that fosters the illusion of immediacy and concreteness. Hence their preference for the spoken rather than the written word, for eye-witness reports rather than summary accounts, for a personalized presentation of the news rather than sober, impersonalized discussion, for illustration rather than explanation."<sup>14</sup>

The German listening audience was to be molded into one by the listening experience, by nine news bulletins a day, by the regularity and seeming normality of that everyday experience. If you didn't own a radio then provisions were made to listen in public squares and in factories,

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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. Duesseldorf stood up to it. Every one of its citizens is a hero."<sup>15</sup> 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 paralysis generated 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.

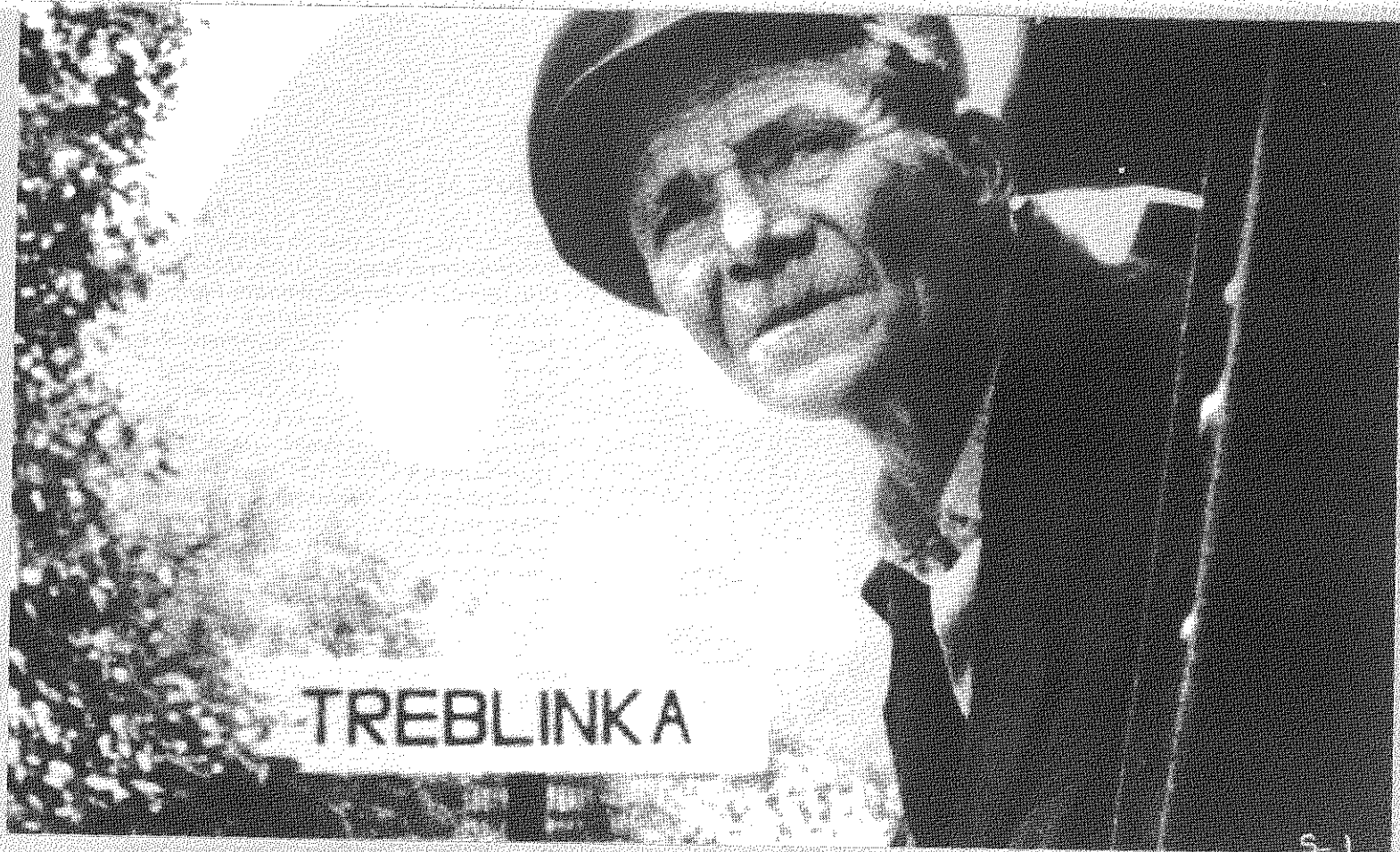
In one sense, this is precisely the source of our fascination with historical imagery, linking what remains of the past with the present. The filmmaker as historian realizes the past through his or her phantasms, a relation between observation, exploration, explanation and the imaginary. The same can be said for the historian as filmmaker. Claims of truth, reality, authenticity, set those 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 it has 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 Heimat, 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 conjoin, and where the poetics of historical writing, historical filmmaking, reveal 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

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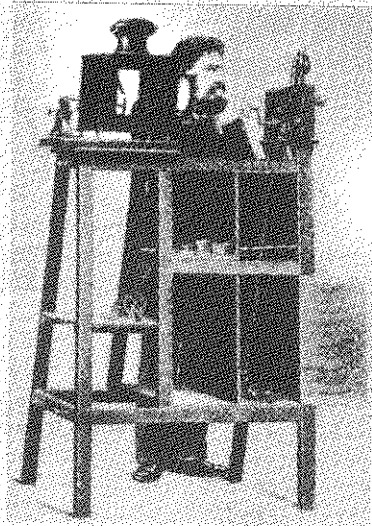
to distinguish between the various levels which might differentiate the role of the image from the event.

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 sites where history is produced. What we understand to be second-hand both as knowledge and as image — *Shoah* — 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. *Shoah* is caught by all of the phantasms which it is trying to unmask and would have perhaps been more significant as a film if it had confronted the way those phantasms govern historical discourse rather than trying to reveal how they must be eliminated.

Ron 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 *Plenty to See Everywhere: Reflections on Film Theory* (Indiana University Press).

#### NOTES

1. Interview with Claude Lanzmann, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 374, July-August, 1985, p.18. (All translations mine.)
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, pp.19-20.
7. *Ibid.*, pp.19-20.
8. *Ibid.*, p.20.
9. *Ibid.*, p.21.
10. Brooke Williams, "What Has History To Do with Semiotics?," *Semiotica* 54, 3/4 (1985) pp. 291-292.
11. Interview with Michel Foucault, *Cahiers du cinéma*, nos. 251-252, July-August 1974, p. 10. Quoted in *Reflections of Nazism* by Saul Friedlander, (London: Harper and Row, 1984), p.74.
12. *Ibid.*, p.74.
13. Thomas Elsaesser, "Syberberg, Cinema and Representation," *New German Critique*, nos. 24/25, Fall-Winter 81-82, p.144.
14. Ernest Kris and Hans Speier, *German Radio Propaganda*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p.12.
15. *Ibid.*, p.192.



One of the Lumière brothers with their invention, the first motion picture projector and developer.