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Editorial Note

Visual History

Gabriele Biotti

This issue of 'IDEA-Interdisciplinary Discourses, Education and Analysis' is dedicated to Visual History. History has been widely represented by visual arts and this fact has changed, from multiple points of view, our approach to the past, to historical facts and to historical knowledge. Cinema, photography, television, the media, but also painting and comics, have read, interpreted and told history in many different ways and styles, according to various social and cultural instances. If their nature of incontrovertible truths remains absolutely central, historical facts, and different historical periods, have been perceived differently after becoming objects of visual or audiovisual representation. On one side, historical facts, periods, characters, social changes, but also visions of history and of historical truth, have been elaborated in visual forms, becoming relevant historical narrations; on the other, often images of history have strongly contributed to a more articulated knowledge of different moments of a distant past, but also of a more recent history. Visual history interacts today in productive ways with different elaborations in historiographical research and with the work of approaching memories of events. Representing the past in visual and audiovisual forms deals with different aims: popularizing historical knowledge, narrating history, elaborating forms of public history, sharing artistic reinterpretations of the past and of memories, and building processes and strategies of remembrance. Visual history was developed in recent years as a discipline encompassing a wide range of protagonists: artists, social groups, institutions. The field of the audiovisual representations of history allows more than a passing relation with research developments such as cultural history, cultural memory, the anthropology of representations, and the history of cinema. Different interdisciplinary developments in visualizing history show how the past can be experienced, shaped, narrativized, and shared to audiences.

The encounters between historical facts and the possibilities of creating narratives on the past, or on different memories, raise some important methodological and epistemological questions, that the articles gathered in this issue approach. What are the tensions between historical reconstruction and evocation of history through visual means? How do they define the interdisciplinary space of interaction, between creation and reconstruction, between imagination and fact, between art and

science? What type of scientific operation is defined by different forms of visual history? Is there a common space of work between storytelling and history narrating?

Various forms and experiences of visual history can be acknowledged as scientific spaces of elaboration. They describe operations of imaginary work on the past and, at the same time, they develop new conceptions of historical sources and of different possibilities of scientific focus on past events. These questions are inherent to scholarly fields such as film studies, media studies, memory studies, and art history, and contribute to shape important chapters in a history of representations, where the stages of a history of the sensibilities about the past can also be detected.

Our critical attention can focus on the multiple ways in which historical moments have been chosen by visual arts such as film, photography, television, or other intermedia practices. This issue aims to develop new interdisciplinary scholarly itineraries and strategies by gathering together contributions from a range of research fields such as film and media studies, memory studies, art history, and the anthropology of representations. The authors of articles explore, from their specific perspectives, many possible exchanges between the arts of vision and history, always crossing a theoretical approach and a critical evaluation of the interdisciplinary space that the field of visual history can open. Some basic questions emerge: how are mediations of history shaped? Which narrations of the past are provided in visual forms? Who are they for? How is historical truth maintained as an unavoidable reference in research? How is the past mediated and reformulated? For what purposes? Visual history can be defined as a space of constant mediations between historical facts, the experience of the past, the understanding of change, in a constant dialogue between narrativization and facts. This issue intends to question the disciplinary boundaries between some scholarly areas and to shape new research perspectives.

By approaching the shared, ubiquitous, networked memory beyond its digital quality, Florian Brody's article explores how digital media have changed our perception of and interaction with history, giving us access to new media-based memory domains that constitute a key development in contemporary world. Brody's article stresses the fact that digital media provide the possibility of remembering everything but at the same time forgetting by making archives inaccessible, an important challenge we have yet to address, set between technology and the development of a history of recording and representations.

By crossing productively an anthropological focus and the reference to a past black history of colonialism, slavery and violence, by analysing the television series *Them* (2021) by Little Marvin, Maria Duarte Furtado Marques and Elena-Larisa Stanciu depict how a popular medium has recently depicted black bodies and experiences of suffering, death, and being terrorized, applied to a particular cultural product. The authors explore how such visual history narrative, as an example of

contemporary visual culture, question the subversive and decolonial potential of visual representations of Blackness and embodiment, when employed as sites where imagination recasts and redefines history.

Louise Francezon investigates how two films from post-Second World War English cinema developed specific narratives in the representation of women's war memories. By analysing *Odette* (1950) by Herbert Wilcox and *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958) by Lewis Gilbert, Francezon highlights the variety of cultural codes having shaped a project of appropriation of Second World War memories, with a focus on the roles played during the war by Odette Samson and Violette Szabo, female agents integrated into the Special Operations Executive as war fighters. The article analyses how two biopics used visual strategies and codes of representation to create two historical narratives and to perpetuate memory of women's heroism, between the imaginary visual representation of women and the clichés of war cinema.

Elisa Oliver and Jonathan Whitehall researched on the work of film director Derek Jarman, analysing how the cinematographic work of the English author finds a position between dream and personal elaboration of the past: they stress the fact that the role of the psychic life, and how it interacts with our concrete lived realities, is something that Jarman's work evokes in new, original and experimental ways. History and mythology are stylistically elaborated by Jarman for the role they played in the psychic and social life of communities. Film art shows how it has been possible to invent new ways of representing the complex relationship between the past and the present, by exploring how history still inhabits the present.

Steve Ostovich's article deals on a point of reference in the history of documentary cinema, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), to reflect upon some major questions in the contemporary debate on the representation of a tragic and traumatic past event such as the Holocaust. Testimony and the process of recovering memories of historical trauma are at the core of Ostovich's research: Lanzmann's film, an accomplished audiovisual work avoiding the aestheticization of the past, and turning this trauma into a collection of beautiful images and stories, meets the challenge of making us think about the trauma of the Holocaust, as the memories recounted in the film are not sources for strict historical information but dangerous and often disturbing visitants from the past asking us to think about the complex relation between cinema, memory, the past, historical representation, and traumatic experience narratives.

Stefania Guglielmo, Tiziana Lentini and Barbara Priolo focus on two strategies of representing the contemporary tragedy of human migrations. By focusing on Ai Weiwei's *Human Flow* (2017) and Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare* (2016), the authors analyse two different aesthetic-narrative solutions, one more focused on a provocative visual evocation of dramatic facts, the other one more

based on the history's reconstruction. Through their comparison, the authors highlight the tension between historical reconstruction and visual evocation of history. The article shows that is in the coexistence of these alternatives that lies the potentiality of historical narration through visual or cinematic representations, between recording and transfiguration of a tragic present time.

The work of Pier Paolo Pasolini, and particularly his film *La ricotta* (1963), is the subject of Edoardo Rugo's article, focusing on how the Italian film director deals in his work with past and present. Rugo stresses the importance of the use of allegory by Pasolini, to relate past historical moments and make a critical reference to the social and political situation of his country, in a radical act of 'reterritorialising' history. By analysing *La ricotta*, Rugo shows how Pasolini depicted his peculiar conception of history and the analysis of his present, one in which modernity and progress were causing the imminent disappearance of archaic culture and a progressive homologation of Italian society.

Aurélia Gafsi's research is centred on the graphic representation of Argentinian military dictatorship (1976-1983): the author analyses a graphic novel, *ESMA* (2019), by Juan Carrá and Iñaki Echeverría, in its contribution to the construction of a visual representation of dramatic historical facts and of a written and drawn memory of the recent and traumatic Argentinian past. Gafsi focuses on how the two authors, with their pages, mark a pedagogical rupture, by putting forward their will to represent and transmit the past with fiction: this comic about very recent history demonstrates its relevant function as it shares individual memories to produce a better knowledge of the past and elaborate a public history.

Ewa Grajber's article studies the many ways in which meaningful episodes of history of Spain were represented in pictorial works to promote and make last the glory and the greatness of the Spanish crown. The author proposes to read paintings as tools to provide information not only on historical contents, but also on the different strategies and interests used in representing history; art works become texts to be read and interpreted as historical sources and as results of the aesthetic organization of cultural codes, leading to an understanding of the past.

Antonella Sbrilli approaches the confrontation between the individual and history, by analysing *It was me. Diary 1900-1999*, a work by the Italian, Berlin based artist, Daniela Comani. This art work recounts the 20th century by concentrating a selection of epochal events in a virtual year of 366 days, without chronological order. The peculiarity of Comani's work residing in the fact that all the events reported are told by the author in the first person female, the artist expresses herself as if everything - two world wars, the fall of secular empires, Holocaust, dictatorial regimes, weapons of mass destruction, colonialism, capitalism, feminism, protest - had happened to her, as if she were Hirohito or Einstein or an anonymous survivor to terroristic attacks. A short-circuit is triggered between the

enormity of the facts and the individual, who assumes responsibility and - by means of artistic impact – is led to reflect on crucial issues in history.

In the issue's second part, a special section presented with a specific editorial note, two authors, Chiara Corazza and Wolfgang Büchel, propose the results of their scholarly work on the subject of life narration, an interdisciplinary field between narrative, literary theory, contemporary thought, memory writing, and autobiography. For what concerns the main theoretical points related to this section, readers can refer to the editorial note in the journal's second part.

The Digital Penumbra of Memory

Florian Brody

Memory defines who we are who we think we are. It allows us to put our thoughts and actions into perspective and reliable ways to store memory in an individual and communal way are essential to language and the semiotic aspect of our being with ourselves and each other. The written, the printed word has been the trusted foundation we could rely on for thousands of years to guide us and provide a sense of safety and belonging as digital media create a shadow over traditional memories. Joseph Weizenbaum¹, AI pioneer turned one of his leading critics, shared with me in a personal conversation: “My father used to say, ‘it is written in the holy books,’ today it’s ‘the computer said.’”² This unique position of the automated message is fundamental to digital memory. Digital memories created on the Web are unique as they cannot be erased. They create a rhizome across networked machines. At the same time, all digital memories are prone to loss in an instant when a machine fails or – more likely – when their document format becomes unreadable. The shadows of digital memory may change how we perceive ourselves and our shared history. Will there be a post-digital age? How will people access digital memory then? Or will the digital age be perceived as an a-historic time between the printed word and the next memory type? Beyond the written word, images have maintained our understanding of the past. Cave paintings are still visible; what will happen to 3-D VR experiences?

Make an Image – Take an Image

Paintings have always been with humans, made by humans. With the daguerreotype, imaging unknowingly entered a new era from making an image to taking an image. This shift changed how the creator interacts with the semiotic relationship between the significant and *signifié*. The creator becomes an operator (Benjamin, 1973) and introduces a machine in the process that creates the image. From the daguerreotype to the collodion wet plate, the negative film, all the way to the Polaroid, the intervention changed, but the relationship between object – camera – substrate and operator was maintained. While the collodion process requires the plate to be wet and the operator has only about 15 minutes to create the image after the plate has been sensitized, film can be kept for years. The

collodion image appears within minutes after being made; the Polaroid process takes a minute depending on temperature, film development takes a few hours. How did the process evolve into the digital realm? There is extensive literature on digital photography, and while tempting to develop the proliferation of digital memory from a historical or longitudinal perspective, a networked approach may provide more insights. In this approach, the –memory represented by the medium becomes the central focus.

Are Goldfish Happier as They Only Have a Three-second Memory?

Memory impacts life in every way. While memory loss is considered a significant limitation of human life quality, being able to forget what we want to forget is a powerful capability.³ Goldfish seem to be at a perfect place. Apart from research (Katie, 2015; Baker, 2021) that Goldfish have a much longer memory than three seconds, the meme of the goldfish memory exemplifies the notion that happiness depends on how much you remember or do not remember: Ted Lasso⁴ – “Be a goldfish [...] the happiest animal on earth”. (Jacoby, 2021). The ability to create external memories may not be uniquely human but has served us well over the millennia to develop art, science, and social structures. In their semiotic quality, external memory serves both the creator and communicative function of anyone who received the message and can decode it. To decode a memory item, we need to understand the symbolic system, relate to the context, and actualize the content. At the same time, a visual impression may be an image or a text. As Roland Barthes points out in his seminal work *Empire of Signs*, the vague delineation between image and writing has an entirely different quality in Japanese than in English. “Where does writing begin? Where does painting begin?” (Barthes, 1983: 19) Digital Media find themselves on an orthogonal plane as they are neither writing nor painting but inherit qualities from both.

Artificial Memory

The transmigration from oral history to the written word had an impact much more far-reaching than Socrates, Theuth, or Thamus may have anticipated. (Plato, 370 bc: Phaedrus 274e). The written word gained power fast, and its objectification became the foundation for human

development for over 5000 years. The memory in your head is no longer the only way to recall a conversation: “Whereas memory was once the only way to recall speech materials, it was all but forgotten near the end of the classical period when, as Roland Barthes put it, “the dominant medium of rhetoric changed from speech to writing.” (Frentz, 2006: 243) The art of memory was considered part of rhetoric and allowed the orator to deliver long speeches from memory precisely. (Yates, 1978: 18). The practice of the *ars memorativa* to rely on ‘rules for places’ and ‘rules for images’ in the discourse of ‘memory for things and memory for words’ (ibid.: 19) as it is explored by Frances Yates in minute detail through the works of Renaissance philosophers finds a reflection in the way memory is created and stored in the digital realm. The early memory machines of the Dominican friar Giordano Bruno in his work *De umbris idearum* (Bruno, 1582) are attempts to mechanize memory without the power of digital circuits using rotating wheels with a memory address structure similar to digital data storage. The interdependency of two systems of representation is at the core of the digital memory. Ludwig Volkmann (1929) emphasizes the prevalence of visual impressions for the formation of artificial memory and refers to Kekinowin, the “ideographic script of the Ojibwa Indians” (Second Wiki, 2020) a symbolic notation serving as a memory help (“Gedächtnishilfe”) for the initiated. (Volkmann, 1929: 113). In his analysis of images of the evangelists in Codex 5393 (Austrian National Library, 1st half of 15th.c.) Volkmann refers to a “*Tractatus de arte memorativa*” that commences with “Iste ymagines sunt posite...” a visual reference to the messages in the included eleven images of monks. (ibid.: 124; Rischpler, 2004) Memory representations remained visual as images and as texts. Stones provide the oldest recording, but paper, vellum in the form of scrolls and folios survived centuries. The mechanical reproduction of images created by hand, together with the proliferation of the movable type, had changed the distribution of information and knowledge, libraries became accessible even to commoners, and the daguerreotype and other early photographic technologies opened up the ability to mechanically record an image, especially the human image. Athanasius Kircher, the German Jesuit polymath, and many after him experimented with the impression of moving images (Kircher, 1646); the Zoetrope was the first device making use of visual latency to create the effect of a moving image. Retrospectively you could equal it to animated GIFs. Projecting images at a frequency beyond what the eye and the brain could discern and perceive as moving opened up a new dimension of visual storytelling, both in line with theater and the profession of the showman. While the silent movie was never without sound is accompanied by some form of music, it still evolved from the visual tradition of the *ars memorativa*.

Over the millennia, humans developed several types of memory extension. Remembering and thus creating history is directly connected to the development of consciousness. The classical *ars*

memorativa (Yates, 1978) and the wide range of oral history, storytelling, songs, rites, and traditions all rely on the biological memory and its ability to store and recall facts and events. External memories create tangible memory artifacts. Their permanence depended mainly on the substrate of the storage medium as it was a time-consuming and expensive process to copy the content. A copy rarely maintained the qualities of the original, even with the abilities of technical reproduction. With the loss of its physicality and the “destruction of the aura” (Benjamin, 1973) memory items become fungible assets, no longer bound to a single instantiation of a medium, no longer in a stable condition.

You Press the Button

“You press the button, we do the rest,” was the promise by Eastman Kodak in 1888, announcing their first consumer camera. To allow anyone to create visual memories, and within a short time, the temptation to create images of experiences rather than experiencing at the moment overtook the world. Seeing the Acropolis for the first time induced one thought: f8, 1/60 sec. and with the arrival of the smartphone not even that. Taking the image home no longer required us to rely on our head. While permanently recorded, the memory may not be accessible in an analytical way. Photos of old relatives, places visited, lose their memory quality without proper meta data as contextual reference: “You only see what you know” (J. W. v. Goethe)⁵ Dispensing with old photos while plowing through personal storage or an inheritance of visual memories, old photos that lost their reference is easier than weeding out digital photos that accumulate in the cloud. Until now, digital storage seemed to grow exponentially from the IBM350 disk storage with a capacity of 5 MB, to be leased for just under \$30,000 per month⁶, at a weight of about one ton in 1957 to the weightless, unlimited, free cloud storage in 2022, storage habits adapted. Why delete when digital storage is untouchable and limitless? The era of unlimited private data storage seems to end and a recent Wired article (Austin, 2022) discusses the benefits of memory limitation: “By fostering the sense that our wells of personal information were bottomless, Google turned us all into information hoarders. [...] Many of us wouldn’t know how to decide which photos are worth keeping and which to delete, having always assumed that we could just keep them all. These are not mere habits. They are fundamental expressions of our evolving relationship with information.” (ibid.) Austin points out that the “infrastructure for public knowledge that has atrophied alongside the rise of private archiving” (ibid.) will need to be rebuilt, an effort similar to the opening of private collections by aristocratic collectors and academic institutions to the public.

With the availability of color slides for the general public, a new form of informational entertainment evolved. Friends and neighbors were subjected to evenings in a dark living room, seeing hundreds of mediocre slides, memories of events they could not relate to. Digital media reduced the time-consuming and costly processing of film to immediate gratification and a globally shared memory, grounded in the same hope not to forget the moment. The online platform Snapchat⁷ takes this to an extreme, encouraging participants to send each other at least one image every 24 hours in order not to break their “streak” of many days of continuous exchange.

One of the tenets of external memory was its physicality and the integration of form and content. This allowed ownership. Digital information is never owned, always borrowed. Academic libraries took a long time to come to terms with the fact that canceling the subscription of a periodical also meant losing the previously acquired volumes. Digital media are much easier to erase and at the same time easier to keep in unlimited copies.

Lights and Shadows

The 17th century was fascinated with all things optical. The microscope and the telescope had just been invented and opened up new perspectives into yet unseen worlds. The fleeting and slightly moving images of ghosts and death coming from a *laterna magica* must have created similar impression on viewers as the early movies by the brothers Lumière in 1895. The entertainment as well as educational value of these devices was recognized early on. In 1905 the school authority in Vienna hosted a conference on the use of the Skioptikon, the *laterna magica*, in grade school education. A book with over 200 pages describes in minute details the benefits, the usage, and the technology of the apparatus, with high-voltage wiring and arc-light, much of which would be considered extremely dangerous today while cutting-edge at the time: “The projection of series of images that create the impression of a continuous plot, happening in front of our eyes, became well known in recent times due to presentations and it cannot be excluded that this branch of projection art will also conquer schools” (Glack, 1907: 179)⁸. With the limited availability of powerful artificial light sources until the mid-20th century, natural light was used in a range of artistic and scientific projects throughout centuries like the church meridians at San Petronio in Bologna and other churches (Cassini, 1685; Manaugh, 2016), where a hole in the roof was positioned in a way that the light of the sun would create a beam to point to specific points on a line on the marble floor, mostly to ensure that easter was calculated in the correct way. The early motion picture production studio in Orange

County near Los Angeles (1892 – 1902), “Black Maria”, was constructed on a rotating platform and with roof parts that could be opened to adjust daylight as needed, powerful artificial light not being available – one of the reason the film industry moved to Hollywood. (Early Motion Picture Productions, n.d.). The ability to add a certain permanence to images on plates, paper, and then on nitrate film opened a new era of memory creation embraced by professionals and not the least through the efforts of Eastman by everyone. Physical images of reality could suddenly be taken home through a technical process.

Just add Sound

Early sound recordings in the late 1800s allowed for the first time to add a spoken word to a face, to create an acoustic memory. The rules of the ancient *ars memorativa* had gained a new dimension. The image cannot exist without a time axis. While Edison had attempted early on to marry his image and sound technologies, synchronization remained a challenge and while contraptions like wind-up gramophones connected mechanically to a film projector seem absurd from today’s perspective, they were no more a jury-rigged solution than multimedia in the 1980s. Adding sound to film was accomplished until the late 1920s with pianists, organs, and complete orchestras. The objective was to attract audience and to accompany the story in a way known from other forms of entertainment. Early sound recordings did not synchronize with the image and to resolve this the projector that was often driven by a wind-up spring or hand-cranked would be connected to the record player through a tachometer cable. A rough and unreliable contraption replaced by sound optically recorded on film in the 1920s. For all these years, film had not been recognized in its faculty as memory. Film was entertainment, an attraction, developing from vaudeville as much as from avant-garde art. While archives at the MOMA in New York as well as in Moscow and Berlin had started to collect films, it was left to the 22-year-old Henri Langlois to create the Cinémathèque Française, the French film archive, in 1936, as an institution that understands that film needs to be seen to be memory objects: “A cinémathèque must not be a cemetery” (Myrent, 1995: 35). “We need to collect all films; we cannot differentiate what’s important.”⁹ The digital age has made films globally available at the expense of the aura of the image, a sterilized representation void of the qualities of an immaculate black-and-white copy projected with arc-light. A fate shared by books, eBooks with no dust, no creases, and every book being the same size.

Objects of Desire

Memory objects provide us with the calming feeling, the assurance that what needs to be remembered will not be lost. As Douglas Adams explains in his book *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*: Much as the VCR “can [...] watch TV for you, it can watch more channels and watch them better than you can. [and] the Electric Monk does your believing for you” (Nicolas, 2003)¹⁰, hording video cassettes and books provides a sense of knowledge kept in external memory. No need to watch the videos, read the books. Storing videos on a digital storage device at home or in the cloud does not provide the same satisfaction as a well-read or still shrink-wrapped book on a shelf. To satisfy this urge to surround yourself with books, stores sell “Decorative Book Bundles” sets of books in different colors, not intended to be opened to match your living room design¹¹. This is more than decoration; it provides the comfort of knowledge by the yard¹². The visual quality of memory in its objectification as a book a record album and to a certain extent a DVD was never available with film or TV unless you worked in the industry. Film programs and journals, both obsolete forms, tried to fill this gap. A personal library was, and still is a symbol of intellectual competence, the vanity of this effort is both exemplified by works like the *Codex Seraphinianus* (Seraphini, 2013) described by its author Luigi Serafini as “a connection [to] digital culture. I was somehow anticipating the net by sharing my work with as many people as possible. I wanted the Codex to be published as a book because I wanted to step out of the closed circle of art galleries.” (Girolami, 2013). The concept of a book as a visual memory has its roots in the highly illustrated editions of the Middle Ages. It remains an unsolved question if the 15th century *Voynich Manuscript* (ca. 1401-1599) is a puzzle with a hidden message or if the visual representation is the message. It was sent to Athanasius Kircher in 1666 in the expectation he could shed light on this visual memory piece (Kronland, n.d.).

While Josef Wallmannsberger (2016: 592) explores how “[t]he old cameralist dream of ‘quod non est in actibus non est in mundo’ (‘If you do not find it in the papers, it is not in this world’), has become a reality in the context of the information society”, text was initially not considered a domain for computers and the ability to process text was limited to 64 and later 96 or 128 different characters, which pales compared to the 144,697 different characters of the most recent Unicode Standard¹³. Using computers for linguistic research was considered obscure in the 1970s.¹⁴ With the arrival of text processing, the computer was first used as a glorified typewriter, and the final product was printed out to make it “real,” “for what one has in black and white, one can carry home in comfort.”¹⁵ Text on the Computer remained shapeless, without the benefit of pagination. While text strings became searchable, the reader lost the essential element of their ability to remember similar to the rules of the

ars memorativa (Yates, 1978). Even if you do not remember a single item of your physics class in junior year, you may remember this bold statement in the middle of the left page somewhere in the middle of the book. The Expanded Books developed at The Voyager Company 1991 brought reading on a screen from the age of the scroll to the folio with well-defined pages.¹⁶ Ted Nelson, who coined the term ‘hypertext’ in 1963, wrote in his seminal Work “Literary Machines” (1992) that the term was by now commonly accepted as referring to text corpora with a non-linear structure and links in the text.¹⁷ While hypermedia seems to open up new text dimensions, its usage is counterintuitive as it puts an unusual strain on the human memory to serve as push-down storage¹⁸ to remember where the reader comes from, by which path and how to get back. A *flâneur*¹⁹ through the text with no particular way to go may not mind, everybody else will ask themselves what took them down this rabbit hole rather than the next one and how to get out. As much as the freedom of choice and the ability to connect everything with everything in a digital text is much more powerful than footnotes on a printed page, it is also distracting. Text and image creation and representation on a computer evolved. By the mid-1980s, desktop publishing had replaced the IBM Selectric typewriter²⁰ as the method of choice to create printed documents. The text-based memory had been usurped by digital storage, yet it took another 20 years until the electronic version of the text was considered the primary form over the printed version and electronic publishing gained mainstream acceptance. When I presented the CD-ROM to the head librarians of all Austrian academic libraries in 1984, I was told that nobody needs 650MB of storage and I should come back when the disc would be erasable²¹. And yet CD-ROM was never effective for storage but the first electronic publishing medium.

With the CD-ROM it became possible to add images, sound, and video but the computer was not yet ready to process it and we went back to jury-rigged contraptions similar to the mechanical synchronization of film projectors and gramophones in the 1920s. Laser disc-based multimedia projects developed for educational purposes were controlled by a computer but showed their audiovisual content on a TV as a secondary screen. The Voyager CD Companions to Beethoven 9th symphony used a CD-ROM drive as audio CD player with the nine-inch black and white (no grayscale) 512x342 pixel monitor of the Macintosh as a controller.²² Functioning hardware and software set-ups for various time periods are hard to come by and while an old book can be read even today, most CD-ROM based digital media have become inaccessible.

CD-ROMs and other storage media have a physical presence and join the different video tapes on dusty shelves. They share their destiny of hardware and software obsolesce as well as material decay. Magnetic tapes suffer from copy effects and a wide range of other technical issues that can go wrong²³, CD-ROMs deteriorate as the silver surface separates from the substrate. In the years when

CD-ROM was considered the ultimate long-term storage medium for visual digital memory, glass discs with inert gold surfaces, stored in wooden boxes were promoted and climatized storage vaults were created. Even the discs that have not deteriorated can no longer be read because CD-ROM drives have become rare, and the software and hardware environments required to use them has largely disappeared. The memory on these digital media shares the fate of magnetic video storage that the carrier deteriorates, that hardware becomes rare or inaccessible. The formats of digital storage add a layer of complexity. Even with the correct hardware, a suitable software environment needs to be made available, otherwise they join taxidermized birds that may be displayed with a pretty nest and an egg in a museum. Virtual CD-ROM collections seek to remedy these issues: “Over the past 20 years, more than 100,000 CD-ROM titles have been published including thousands of collections of government documents and data. CD-ROMs present preservation challenges at the bit level and in ensuring usability of the preserved artifact.” (Woods, 2009: 184). It took many years to decipher the Rosetta Stone discovered in 1799²⁴ even though the three inscriptions were clearly visible. How complex will it be to decode a disc with microscopic indentation in a silver foil where both the mark as indentation and the non-marked are (no indentation) have the value 0 and only the change has the value 1? And yet, the memory object can still be physically owned. Film, especially cellulose nitrate used before Eastman switched to safety film by 1952, is extremely difficult to archive as it is inherently unstable, deteriorates at 21° Celsius, produces highly flammable fumes and is prone to combust and explode (Executive, 2013). Handled properly, it can be visually examined and copied. Magnetic storage cannot be examined without a matching apparatus. To play the massive two-inch magnetic tape used by TV stations as the first magnetic medium to store recordings, expensive and rare machines are needed that require operation by a highly trained engineer. A few remain. Even the ubiquitous VCR has become rare and while even 9.5mm film can be copied optically, obscure magnetic video and audio tapes are hard to decode. The issue gains degrees of complexity when it comes to memories stored as digital media as it no longer has a way of direct inspection.

Suddenly It Was All Gone

Digital media had established itself; a budding multimedia publishing industry had developed into multiple streams of educational tools, educational applications, and games. “Edutainment” was the call of the moment. And then, in October of 1993, the first web browsers became available, I created my first website, and everything was new again. “Everything began with objects, yet there is no longer a system of objects” (Baudrillard, 1988: 11). Memory, no longer

connected to the written word but the ever-changing connection between words, images, and immersive video, lost its physical presence. The telephone made distance disappear; the worldwide web made physical publishing disappear. Like CD-ROM and before that TV, radio, film, the digital interactive medium was poorly understood. That's why it was called "new media". By 1995 it was clear that the WWW would never be used for commerce, and there would not be any advertising. Three-inch-thick tomes were sold in bookstores, containing all important website addresses organized as a yellow book. It had worked for a century for telephone numbers, why not for URLs? In April 1995, an executive at AltaVista²⁵, a search engine recently launched by DEC²⁶, told me that the search engine market was saturated and there would be no space for additional players. Three years later, Google was founded. Since then, the Web as memory has been more search than content. Twenty-seven years later, startups like YOU²⁷ try to use artificial intelligence to re-integrate search with content in the memory space. Why would you acquire knowledge and memorize it when knowing where to find it seems enough? The disappearance of 24 volume encyclopedias freed up shelf space, walls of video cassettes went to recycling together with obsolete electronics as flat TVs often no longer have a way to even connect. Driven by the trust that if needed, it can be found and recalled from the universal, big, commonly accessible memory, we dispose of the collection we own and rely on a rented version, until it's suddenly gone due to a technical error or a dispute over rights. The message of the medium Web is its ubiquitous availability and permanence as memory. The medium is the message above the surface, colorful and in a wide range of shapes. Below the surface, the medium is the rhizome, the mycorrhizal network that holds the memory in a connected way that seemed inconceivable in the age of the printed book. The network held together the messages in the different volumes was solely in the memory of the reader. This separation required books and treatises to be created, structured, and presented in a way that they fulfilled the requirements of memory as much as accessibility. Reading an over 400 years old memory treatise by Giordano Bruno (1582) requires knowledge of Latin, a certain patience for a long-winded style, background knowledge and access to a copy of the book. The latter has been resolved by digital storage and the Internet Archive²⁸, making a digital copy of the book available to anyone globally.

The "Mandatory Deposit" of all copyrighted material to the Library of Congress²⁹ similar to the "Legal Deposit to the British Library based on English law since 1662"³⁰, the French *Dépot Legal*, as well as similar regulations in most countries regulate the delivery, storage, and accessibility of published materials and in most cases exclude online materials, mostly because it is impossible to include it in the conventional concept of a library. The Austrian National Library attempted for some time to store all Austrian websites on CD-ROM but abandoned this project. The Internet Archive is

the only place to explore the history of a website, and nobody collects software in a way that their functionality can be explored at a later stage. And yet, software and its usage may contain more memory items than most other material published in the last thirty years. A graphic software from 1998 used on a certain hardware allowed the creator of a piece to work in a certain way, with certain limitations. The functionality of Microsoft Excel® in a certain version impacted the calculations made, which in turn may have impacted stock prices and the world economy. Only today, not the least due to the internet, it is easier to research monetary policies in the late 12th century than the functionality of a software version in 1989. Every possible item is searchable, but it has lost its value as memory in the same way as a brick may be an important artefact or a brick.

Today we have access to vast amounts of information in our phone yet have almost no access to the text we need. “The computer spawns the electronic text, a volatile form that paradoxically returns the text to our heads while at the same time enmeshing it in an even more sophisticated apparatus. Electronic texts have no body, only mind, they close the circle to the mnemotechnique of the Romans.” (Brody, 1993: 40) Despite thirty years of development since I created the first eBooks³¹, there is no satisfactory technical solution to reading on a digital medium. While it works on a technical level, and e-paper made the process less eye straining, the screen remains a digital cousin to the clay tablet rather than a replacement for the book on paper.

Bücher werden, wenn man will, lebendig.

Über Bücher kann man ganz befehlen.

Und wer Bücher kauft, der kauft sich Seelen,

Und die Seelen können sich nicht wehren.³²

— Joachim Ringelnatz (1883 - 1934) (1994)

The Medium is the Memory™

After the fleeting message, what remains of the medium is the memory that willingly or unwillingly engraves itself into the medium, which until now is still the book.

“The book has always been used in personal ways, as an extension of memory. Changes in printing affect the availability, portability, and longevity of the book, as well as its position within the reader's life. Paperback editions are available worldwide at reasonable prices – a dramatic change

from the last [19th] century, when the average household was unlikely to possess any volume other than the Bible, much less the medieval monastery, with its sacred manuscripts chained to shelves.” (Brody, 1999: 135f.)

Gen Z, the post-Millennials, not having experienced an Internet-free world, have a different perspective on digital media but don’t differ significantly in valuing books as source of knowledge from earlier generations. The perspective on Book ownership changed with the dramatic movements in the book retail space and the digital availability of information created a bifurcation between the printed word and the message. The penumbra of digital media over the printed word gave rise to the physical quality of the print edition. With the mass production of books since the end of the 19th century, the physical quality of books had degraded to an extent, that libraries had difficulties stopping books printed on acid paper from disintegrating. The thin-print edition of the complete works of Shakespeare, Octavo, bound in green saffian leader and edge gilding remains unrivaled as a prized possession as well as a reading experience, no hyperlinks, no search function.

Remembering and Forgetting

Traditional memory, our memory as well as external physical memories underlie an organic process of decay. The Greek term ἀνάμνησις (anamnesis) defines the items that we don’t want to forget and distinguishes them from all the memories we want to forget and we constantly forget. Lethe (λήθη), the river of forgetfulness in the classic Greek underworld erases all memory upon death. At the same time, it also assigns every memory item a time stamp, giving memory an organic temporal vector along which it is thinned out while keeping contextual reference. Printed documents have a publication date, physical objects can be dated through a variety of scientific methods. Internet items more often than not have no identifiable time. They remain forever new. When the Web arrived in the early 1990s, it had the quality of “now” and did not include a longitudinal historical perspective. It allowed a multi-dimensional representation of linear documents, unfolding memory items into visual experiences. The markup language HTML evolved fast and gained extensions through style sheets and automation through a range of programming languages. Anchoring a memory item in a temporal structure, a publishing or revision date is still not part of the underlying concept. A website as a memory container has no time. Here today, gone tomorrow. It’s new again every moment. Visit it twice and it may look different. The online presence of newspapers and magazines may add a date to their stories, like the article in the Guardian about a project to print a 1000 volume edition of

Wikipedia, with a warning: “This article is over 8 years old” next to articles about Trump and the Russia-Ukraine war and targeted advertising banners. The online version provides the content; it does rarely provide the publishing context unless it is a reproduction from earlier archives, mostly microfilm.

The Worldwide Web was not conceived as having a history. While every website looks different, the same website may also look different tomorrow and despite the efforts of the Internet Archive, most information is lost without undergoing a somewhat organic process where relevant information ranks higher and older documents are preserved in form and content. A ten-year-old article in a newspaper will be set within the new layout or logo created yesterday. Digital media is still new, and “new media” is the one that is not yet understood. The digital memory is evolving, and it will take a major effort to create an appropriate repository which will have to be an organic part of the medium itself rather than an external effort much in the way film archives have to be closely interwoven with the industry. A legal requirement for deposit as it was created for books will not be feasible. Until then it will remain easier to do historical research on coinage under Charlemagne than the impact of different version of Microsoft Excel® on Wallstreet and the world economy.

Conclusion

Digital Media as Memory Place not only redefines the way we create the historical path, we leave behind the intellectual slime trail as we inch forward towards a cleaner, better, more promising future, it opens up the ultimate way of being where we have ultimate control of our being in time (“Dasein”) (Heidegger, 1941) thus becoming one with time (Dōgen, 1240/2010), the digital memory. The disappearance of the physical memory towards a digital and thus bodyless representation in a seemingly post-Cartesian promise of universality opens the gates to remember everything as one big visual impression and at the same time forget everything.

Postscript

In the Arthur C. Clarke story “The Nine Billion Names of God” a Tibetan Lamasery having spent the last three centuries enumerating all names of God accelerates the enumeration of all names of God by using digital media. The monks travel to Manhattan to get “an Automatic Sequence Computer” and the manager, Dr. Wagner, was initially confused about the idea of using their machine

for text processing but rented them the unit (at that time you did not buy a computer and had it shipped overnight) to list the names of God and thus end the world. After the engineers had installed and programmed the machine at the monastery in the Himalayas and walked down the mountains towards the airport to fly back to the US, they wondered if the computer did his job “Look,” whispered Chuck (one of the two computer engineers), and George lifted his eyes to heaven (There is always a last time for everything). Overhead, without any fuss, the stars were going out.” (Clarke, 1958)³³

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Weizenbaum

² Personal conversation on the occasion of a conference at the Johannes Kepler University, Linz, Austria, 1974.

³ “Glücklich ist, wer vergisst was nicht mehr zu ändern ist”/”Happy is he who forgets what cannot be changed anymore” Johann Strauss, Die Fledermaus, finale Act 1.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Fledermaus

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Lasso Retrieved April 6, 2022

⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832): “Man sieht nur das, was man weiß. ”

⁶ \$29,486 in 2020 money

⁷ <https://www.snapchat.com/>

⁸ Translation by the author.

⁹ Personal conversation with Henri Langlois, Paris, approx. 1969.

¹⁰ The quote in the books is “The Electric Monk was a labor-saving device, like a dishwasher or a video recorder. Dishwashers washed tedious dishes for you, thus saving you the bother of washing them yourself, video recorders watched tedious television for you, thus saving you the bother of looking at it yourself; Electric Monks believed things for you [...]. (1987: 4)

¹¹ West elm “Decorative Accents & Sculptures > Modern Decorative Book Bundles” in 11 colors for \$180. 12"w x 6"d x 9"h. Product weight: 16 lbs. Various authors. Each bundle contains 10 – 12 books. Hardcover. Jute twine in Natural. All books were published between 1980-present. Published and made in the USA. “<https://www.westelm.com/products/decorative-book-bundle-d7079/>” visited March 14, 2022.

¹² This is also the physical manifestation of the internalized sense that we need to read books (Bayard, 2007) – if for nothing else so we can talk about them, a task vastly simplified by electronic media.

¹³ Unicode Standard [version 14.0](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unicode) (released 14 September 2021)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unicode>

¹⁴ Borges’ Library of Babel only uses 22 letters to describe the universe.

¹⁵ „Was man schwarz auf weiß besitzt, / kann man getrost nach Hause tragen.“ J.W. von Goethe: Faust I. Studierzimmer.

¹⁶ The Expanded Books Project, co-invented by Bob Stein and Florian Brody. The Voyager Company 1991. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expanded_Books

¹⁷ See also <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypertext>

¹⁸ Push-down storage works similar to plate stack holders in restaurants where the last one in is on top and therefore the first one out.

¹⁹ https://paris10.sitehost.iu.edu/ParisOSS/Day11_Leisure/Public_Life/d9_flaneur.html

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IBM_Selectric_typewriter

²¹ My argument that a 24 volume encyclopedia would not be of less value because it cannot be erased and used as a note pad was not well taken.

²² <https://www.macintoshrepository.org/35856-beethoven-symphony-no-9>

²³ (Council on Library and Information Resources, n.d.)

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosetta_Stone

²⁵ <https://digital.com/altavista/>

²⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_Equipment_Corporation

²⁷ You.com, a search engine

²⁸ “Internet Archive is a non-profit library of millions of free books, movies, software, music, websites, and more.” archive.org

²⁹ Section 408 of the US Copyright Act; <https://www.govinfo.gov/link/uscode/17/408>; UK: Legal deposit libraries regulations 2013 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2013/777/>

³⁰ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2013/777/>

³¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expanded_Books

³² Books can come alive if you so wish / one has full commands over books / and he who buys books, buys souls/ and the souls cannot fight back. Der Bücherfreund (the book lover), poem by Joachim Ringelnatz (transl. by the author)

³³ An online version is available at

https://archive.org/stream/ninebillionnames00clar/ninebillionnames00clar_djvu.txt

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Horrors of History and Colonial Imaginaries.

The Construction and Representation of Black Embodiment in *Them* (2021)

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Elena-Larisa Stanciu

Introduction

This article departs from an interest in exploring the depiction of Black bodies and experiences of suffering, death, and being terrorized in popular television, applied to a particular cultural product, and explore how these may enter/destabilize/reinforce the archive of visual histories to which it relates.

In recent decades, visual culture has come to the fore of critical analysis as a site of resistance to or reinforcing of coloniality (Hanchey, 2020), with the dynamics of encoding visual products, their internal regimes of visibility, and their eventual decoding representing crucial stops in analysis. Ways of “archiving”¹ and interrogating visual histories constitute a prime focus in addressing the role of “imagination as a method to decolonize, encode, and liberate representations of Blackness of art and design...centre[ing] on the interior lives, memories, connecting identities and lived experiences of Black people.”²

Our aim is to question the subversive, decolonial potential of visual representations of Blackness and embodiment, when employed as sites where imagination recasts and instrumentalizes history. The object of analysis is the television series *Them* (Little Marvin, 2021); conventions of cinematography, narrativity, and framing in horror as a visual genre are addressed to investigate how this product of visual culture taps into the history it purports to depict, while informing current discourses on the pervasive experience of racism and Black trauma. Placed in 1950s’ American suburbia, the show rests on white terror as narrative and visual trope in telling the story of the Emorys, a Black family who move into a white neighbourhood and enter a 10-day period of terror and violence, inflicted by their white neighbours, as well as by supernatural forces.

Contemporary racism and the image of the dead, injured, or terrorized Black body are placed in the broader historical heritage of such images, as instituted by the structures of chattel slavery in

the US and extractive and settler colonialism starting with the 16th century.

For a theoretical framing, we employ Kathrine McKittrick's concept of "Black geographies," (2016) Alison Landsberg's notion of "horror verité," (2018); we draw on Mark Sealy's look at race and the "economy of display" in visual culture (2019), as well as notions of seeing and witnessing in the deployment of visual culture and the articulation of visual histories. Saidiya Hartman's account of "Black injured bodies" (1997) is placed in a context of "necropolitics," coined by Achille Mbembe to describe "political order nearly everywhere reconstituting itself as a form of organisation for death" (Mbembe, 2019: 27).

Colonial imagination – and *imaging* – is important to consider, as the analysis draws on broader critiques of modernity. The "molecular terror" of modernity, with its ordering of how the world is to be known, sensed, and produced, leads to the "blurring relations between violence, murder, and the law...the norm and the exception" (ibid.). Engaging with this critique, from a perspective of history, leads us to Walter Benjamin's assertion that "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Benjamin, cited in Landsberg 2018, 640). In *Them*, the articulation of the past blends the historical with the speculative, not least through cinematic conventions that present as modalities of visually and narratively exploring resistance.

The "hold on memory" as manifested in *Them* constructs a particularly porous version of the past – danger, trauma, injury, death, dispossession, they all violently enter memory through the "cracks and fissures" (Little Marvin 2021) in subjectivity, as emphasised by the show's creator, Little Marvin. "Times of crisis" complicate the formation of subjectivity (Mbembe & Roitman 1995) and lead to a "lack of coincidence between the everyday practice of life (facticity) and the corpus of significations or meanings (ideality) available to explain and interpret what happens" (ibid. 324). In its disorientation, the subject looks for referents in its own "historical time," to explain the crisis or trauma; "for lack of these referents, the crisis is exiled to the domain of the inexplicable" (ibid. 338). Interestingly, the inexplicable is what most commonly fuels the horror genre, and it is this continuum of crisis and horror trope arched over the series *Them* that we find particularly important, both in how it is conventionally used, and how it is restructured as a nuance of the genre.

Following a conceptual discussion, we then turn to a visual analysis of the series, which focuses on the use of conventions of the horror genre, tropes and narrative constructions, as well as

visual tropes and cinematic moods. The analysis follows three main conceptual areas, as they emerge from theoretical lenses applied: Body; Thresholds; Containment. We have identified these three dimensions to be constitutive in *Them*, as they articulate matters of ontology, spatiality, and agency, all crucial to understanding the (or speculating on) possibility of recovering a geography and a sense of place for Black bodies in visual culture and history. A final section in the analysis concerns the act of seeing and the complex layering of witnessing, which, we argue, this series helps to address.

A Black Sense of Space

Black geographies “become principally apparent through the historical-racial schema: the captive, the dispossessed, the ungeographic,” and in which “blackness is [seen as] integral to the production of space (McKittrick, 2006: 26). The “ungeographic” Black bodies are traced by McKittrick back to the slave ship, a location that presents with a unique form of mobility, while at the same time endowing a historical fixity on Black subjectivity. The slave ship thus becomes a location of human terror, according to the author, playing a role in the complicating “*where* of race” in America (Ibid.: xiv). Elsewhere, McKittrick addresses spatiality in relation to a systemic approach to Black positionality in post-slavery America, marked by “domination and deliberate attempts to destroy a Black sense of space” (Ibid.: 947).

Black dispossession and death are also central to Saidiya Hartman’s tracing of spatiality produced from within the slavery system, continued after emancipation and perpetuated to present day. Hartman sees a virtually unbroken line drawn from “the slave ship, to the plantation, to the urban ghetto, all in anticipation of the prison” (Hartman, 2016: 169). This looming sense of Black bodies oscillating between expulsion and confinement is present in *Them*, where a Black family’s moving to a white neighbourhood and the subsequent violence endured constitute the narrative premise to explore the complicated and contested mobilities of Black lives in America. The American suburban neighbourhood is refigured as a “location of captivity through which [Black subjects] can manipulate the categories and sites that constrain them” (McKittrick, 2006: xvi).

Nevertheless, we look beyond a binary condition of spatial possibilities for Black bodies; the fears, desires, imaginings, histories, and speculations that come to define expulsion or confinement are in fact more nuanced and multifaceted, as we will see.

The location of Black injury, death, and dispossession in the nexus of space production³ is illuminated by a temporal perspective: “The impressions of transatlantic slavery leak into the future, in essence recycling the displacement of difference” (Ibid.: xvii). A genealogy of spaces and spatiality can be traced here, as “historical geographies and the ways in which we make and know space now are connected” (ibid). Kirsten Simonsen engages with Lefebvre’s concept of “production of space” to underline the elements of embodiment that feature in the experience of the urban as well as its material production. The “intrinsically corporeal” experience of the urban, Simonsen notes, means that a “precondition of the material production [of space] is that each living body both *is* and *has* its space; it produces itself in space at the same time that it produces that space” (Simonsen 2004, 49). This perspective adds to the consideration of Black bodies as “ungeographic”, having their sense of place “erased and despatialized” (McKittrick), as well the possibilities of a narrative that “makes visible social lives that are displaced and ungeographic (ibid.).

Make Visible. Considering The Medium

Alison Landsberg’s concept of “horror vérité,” defined as a “mechanism of the horror genre to expose instances of racism,” is essential to bridge the relevance of the horror genre to the “task of history...to render visible the material conditions and the social relations that are masked by ideology (Landsberg, 2018: 640). The interest here lies with investigating how the series, as a visual product, encounters and communicates the visual history/histories that indexed/archived the Black body as a site of injury and trauma (Hartman, 1997).

If the visual deployment of Black suffering has historically accompanied violence against Black people, what’s also important to note is the specific role of the respective medium is carrying this deployment (ie. from earliest photographic accounts to blockbuster cinema, to popular television, and the viral live footage of recent social media, showing lethal encounters of Blackbodies with police brutality). In his account of the Seely Harris photographs of injured bodies of African people during colonial rule in Congo, Mark Sealy argues that they must be read as “one of the earliest examples in photography of the Black broken body being put to work as part of an economy of display” (Sealy, 2019: 25). Whether to record hegemonic control of the colonial power, to critique racial violence, or to attempt a recovery of Black agency through various inversions and power dynamics stances, it’s

worth considering to what extent visual products perform an objectifying of Black bodies, by their transformation into *images of* Black bodies and their subsequent use in the service of an economy of display and consumption.

Black Pain. Horror Tropes

Them follows a Black family, the Emorys, as they move from North Carolina to California, and buy a house in a primarily white neighbourhood. The series (10 episodes) opens with a historical grounding of the account, as told in a vignette:

Between 1916 and 1970, roughly 6 million African-Americans relocated from the rural Southern United States to the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Widely known as the Great Migration, many families were drawn to California, for jobs. On September 14, 1953, Henry and Livia ‘Lucky’ Emory moved their family from Chatham County, North Carolina to Compton, California. The following occurred over 10 days at the family’s home.

The narrative toggles two timelines – the 1953 present and an undated past, told mainly through Lucky’s memories, in which the family’s youngest child is brutally murdered by a group of white intruders in the family’s home in North Carolina. The timeline of the present spans the first 10 days of their arrival in the new neighbourhood and centres on clashes with the racist, white neighbours, the start of a new job for Henry and the racism of his boss, and the enrolment at the new school for the two daughters. The *external* conflict is doubled by the characters’ individual battles with otherworldly elements, which take different shapes: the monstrous Miss Vera, a book character seen by the youngest daughter, Gracie; Da Tap-Dance Man, a figure in blackface (seen by the father, Henry); Doris, a white girl, seen by the oldest daughter, Ruby; and the Black Hat Man, the figure of a reverend, who haunts the mother, Lucky). The various meetings the characters have with these supernatural entities are visually and narratively encoded within the conventions of the horror genre

– “strong visual and sound cues that shock and unsettle the viewer; editing that also creates surprise and shock; the struggle for survival” of the characters (Landsberg, 2018: 632). The narrative intensity builds up steadily, and each episode adds to the characters’ sense of reality coming undone, each losing grip on the real, before the closing of the story, which finds them badly wounded, alive, yet uncertain of a real possibility of escape.

Where the series departs from the conventions of the genre and recasts some of its tropes is in the implied causality of the otherworldly. The ghoulish figures are not of an entirely unexplained supernatural nature; they are produced, the series suggests, by the characters’ psyche, deeply affected by (racial) trauma. Whereas horror conventionally depicts the unthinkable and exhibits that which is unimaginable in reality (ibid.), *Them* undermines its own characters, by poking holes in the veracity of their accounts – routinely, the characters mistrust each other’s accounts of their visions, while they themselves have their own visions and hallucinatory encounters.

As Michael Jarvis writes, the tension between the rational and irrational is a trope of the horror genre; often the elements of the supernatural, the factors that terrorize are difficult to grasp rationally, which is why characters find that “to leave would be irrational” (Jarvis, 2018: 101). The characters are then left to grasp for the real in the midst of the unimaginable horrific. The viewer, however, is never in doubt – the mental instability of the characters is never under question; their psyche participates in the construction of these imaginary realms populated by monsters invading their reality. In this, the series pushes the representation of the Black injured body, to depict the psychotic effects of racism and trauma, and so articulate a representation of the Black injured psyche.

White Terror

As “horror vérité,” the series shifts the problematics it presents from a realm of abstraction and fantasy, to critically engage with social issues. To Landsberg, “in horror vérité, the terrifying nightmare is everyday reality [...] the present and everyday is rendered unfamiliar and grotesque in order to bring the real conditions of society into sharp relief” (Landsberg 2018, 632). Whereas the “present everyday” of the series is a historical social mood of the 1950s, the series manages to contribute to contemporary issues.

As it tells the story, *Them* makes certain (meta)propositions for contemporary ways of seeing.

Landsberg uses Walter Benjamin's concept of "optical unconscious" of the medium of photography, as she examines how visual technologies affect both the act of perception and what is actually *seeable*. (Landsberg, 2018: 630). Landsberg underlines Benjamin's observation that photography enables the viewer to see "those aspects of daily life that remain invisible to the naked eye" (ibid.). This function of the visual product is echoed in Marvin's series, as he centres the frame on Black people as *subjects* of visual stories in which they had been conventionally pushed to the "margin of the frame" (Marvin). Black bodies are seeable and seen, in this challenging of the genre; the normativity of the horror picture, as an object of the gaze, is disputed, and so is the gaze itself: the viewer is forced to deal with the recognition of the Black body in pain, and perhaps launch subsequent critical interrogations: what does it mean to *look at* Black injured bodies? What regime of visibility are they a part of, and what power dynamics populate it? How different is it to look at these images as produced by popular culture from looking at viral footage of Black bodies falling victims of racism in America today?

These considerations place the series in a contemporary *everydayness* of looking, which keeps the "unfamiliar" and the normative in close tension. Defamiliarization is a convention of the horror genre, one that, according to Landsberg, citing Brecht, can function as a "defamiliarization of the present...speaking up decisively for the interests of its own time." (Landsberg, 2018: 641)

A strategy of this defamiliarization rests with the treatment of violence and terror, underscored by racial issues. In her analysis of the film *12 Years a Slave* (dir. Steve McQueen), Erica L. Ball writes: "The violence of slavery [is] always lurking underneath the surface of every interracial encounter" (Ball, 2016: 183). In a similar vein, bell hooks observes that "all Black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness." (hooks, 1997: 345)

By bringing to the fore this underlining terror of whiteness, *Them* lays the ground for the defamiliarization of the narrative present of the series, as well as for the series to enter contemporaneity. The series gives shape to terror and endows it with figures and entities that haunt characters and leave sensory traces; at a meta-level, the series contributes to a broader conversation on the (contested) existence of a post-racial America (Jarvis, 2018), challenging positions that may claim racist terror to be a thing of the past. The clashes of Black bodies with different elements of a self-described post-racial society have become a permanent discussion in the political and social landscape, with police brutality one of the most dramatic manifestations of these clashes. Despite improvements in race relations since the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-1960s, contemporary altercations between the police and Black people cast doubts on this idea of a post-racial era (Ibid.).

Although *Them* does not directly engage with issues of police brutality, the tense and central presence of the possibility of this violence points to it being a potent trope in present-day America.

In an interview for the *Los Angeles Times* in 2021, the series creator, Little Marvin, stated that his inspiration to create *Them* came from waking up every day and seeing videos of Black people being terrorized in some ways, “either by threats from police, surveillance or something else” (Marvin, 2021) The “something else” is a core dimension of the terror Black bodies experience as a constant. The open-endedness of fear for Black people is referenced through the constructs in the horror genre: one does not quite know where the next moment of terror comes from, but one knows it must be *something else* than what is seen, can be predicted, or fought.

Body Matters

In the coining of “horror vérité,” Landsberg employs a reading of Walter Benjamin to emphasise the *figural* nature of the dialectic relationship between past and present: “History is only ever a product of the present, a dialectic between what was with what is, and as such possesses the capacity to expose the crisis of the present.” (Landsberg, 2018: 640).

In a contemporary ecology of vision, this “exposing”, revealing act is mediated by visual culture and products. Moreover, when the “crisis of the present” exposed is the depth of racism, the Black body and psyche become catalysts of the “exposure.” The *image* of the Black body or the visual staging of Black psychosis thus enter a pervasive “economy of display”, as Mark Sealy would note. The *image* is then endowed with value as commodity within a larger economy of spectacle (sometimes morphed into an economy of activism or humanitarianism, per Sealy). Mark Sealy finds that

photography is dominated by the legacy of a colonial consciousness repressed in the present...this means that the colonial visual regimes historically active within photography remain inherently intact...as the making of photography and its distribution continue to be critically dislocated from the perspective of the subaltern and the marginalised. (Sealy, 2019: 6)

We may be able to trace a similar genealogy of the image in *Them*, once again, with a slight departure from the conventional.

The subaltern dislocation Sealy critiques is central in *Them* – both as a narrative tool, in carrying the conflict and character evolution, as well as in the meta-levels of the production; created by a Black filmmaker and populated with a story of Black resistance to white trauma and terror, *Them* attempts a *relocation* of Black experience, by recasting the “relationship between injury and personhood” (Hartman, 1997: 6): although set in motion by traumatising white violence, eventually the constructs of their own imagination is what hurts the characters. The *felt* effects of hallucinations provoke pain, to which the characters witness sensorially: Lucky feels the hands of imaginary attackers on a late-night bus; Gracie feels a skin burn after the imaginary Miss Vera tries to strangle her. Skin becomes a contact zone with terror.

The “corporeal schema,” defined as “the composition of the self as a body in the middle of the spatial and temporal world,” is central to McKittrick’s “Black geographies.” Citing Frantz Fanon, McKittrick sees the corporeal schema and the historical-racial schema as “concepts that advance how space, place, identification, and history collapse to inscribe the Black body as racial Other.” (McKittrick, 2006: 25)

The otherness of the Black body is a fluid category, with a stark political potential. Regardless of whether the body is used as a site of resistance, or recovery of subject integrity that might have been lost in the history of abuse of black bodies, the epistemological violence of the body used as a site (Longhurst, 2004) is worth exploring: What are the mechanisms employed in knowing the body as shown? In turn, if the body is itself a type of knowledge, what information does it encode and for whom?

If the Black subject becomes a person through injury (Hartman), the recognition of injury is predicated on white witnessing and the working of the enduring “colonial [racial] visual regimes.” (Sealy, 2019)

In the series, a particular scene can be analysed for its exploration of these scopic tensions. In the very first episode, the family’s youngest daughter, Gracie, has a night-time violent encounter with the supernatural entity she calls Miss Vera, to wake up and have Lucky, her mother, bear witness to a physical trace of the attack - a scar on Gracie’s neck (Image 1).

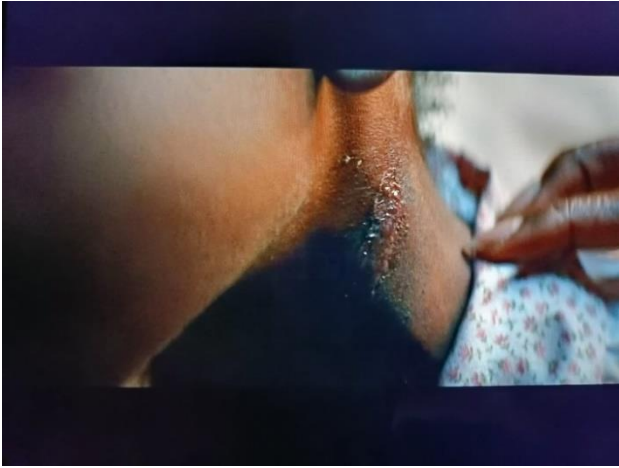


Image 1



Image 2

In the following episode, a police officer is being shown Gracie's neck, yet now the scar is no longer there (Image 2). The scene is telling on several levels. First, it speaks to the “corporeal schema” of the subject identified as a body at the crossroads of real, historical violence, imaginary (potentially self-inflicted) aggression, and the psychological breakdown caused by trauma, which makes itself felt at a bodily level. Second, it is a commentary on witnessing and the politics of seeing: the marks on a Black body became invisible once the white gaze is cast; Black pain was invisible for police in 1953, and, one could argue, might also still be for police in 2021

Violence has always been a constant in the relationship between the West and the rest, by extension between whiteness and non-whiteness; oddly, this awareness is absent from the hegemonic discourses of international relations. The scene asks the viewer to consider Miss Vera, this violent hidden ghost that becomes real through sensory effects, as a symbolic stand-in for the hidden, stealth violence that subsists in the postcolonial world and “post-racial America” (Persaud and Kumarakulasingham, 2019: 199). Episode 6 revisits this scene, when, having journeyed through nightmares in which she hurts her own daughters, Lucky Emory accidentally burns Gracie's neck with a hot comb (Image 3), and later to fully succumb to ideation of killing her children; in a hallucination, we see Lucky being told by the figure of her cousin Hazel: “We are mothers... we may not beat them, but we can make damn sure that we give our babies to our Lord Jesus when we say and not when they say. And in this way we take our power back and take away theirs.”



Image 3

This character arc constitutes a nod to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which explores the theme of trauma of enslavement and its effect on how "Black people, living amidst the stress of racial terror can first acquire and then maintain emotional...intimacy with each other." (Gilroy, 1993: 176)

The stress of racial terror also articulates Ruby's story. The oldest Emory daughter undergoes a process of alienation, aided by her friendship with Doris, the white girls present in her visions. In episode 1, Ruby voices a decisive "we will never be like mamma," as she witnesses Lucky's mental breakdown. This hopeful declaration is, however, ominous, and announces the inescapable path towards psychosis that Ruby later takes. In episode 6, she recasts her wish to "not be like mamma and them... to not be ugly anymore."

The *ugly*, we find out, refers to the colour of her skin, as she has a vision of her own hands being white (Image 4). Throughout the series, we see Ruby spend time with Doris in hidden, empty spaces of the school (the janitor's supply room; a storage room in the basement). Ruby populates these spaces with visions of sociability and racism-free togetherness - she even imagines the cheerleading squad at practice, welcoming her to dance.

Ruby's breakdown peaks in episode 7, with her covering herself in white paint and dancing in front of a group of students; she emerges from the hideaway spaces of her psychosis to occupy a space not typically allowed her. (Image 5) Ruby performs this radical claim of geography, through an inversion of the violence of blackface: in *whiteface*, she embodies a desire to be that which she fears, that which terrorizes her.

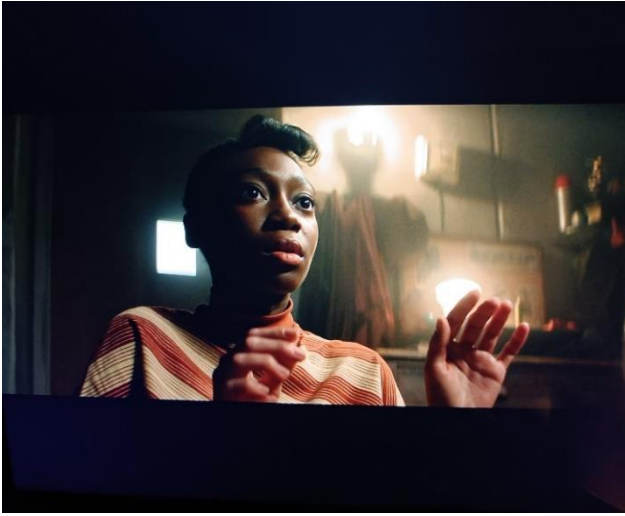


Image 4



Image 5

This disconnect, experienced corporeally, can be seen as a version of a “confiscated body”:

“The Black body has been confiscated. My Black body has been confiscated (...) I feel that I have become this indistinguishable, amorphous, Black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat (...) Within the space of these social encounters, I become other to myself. I feel alienated from my own body.” (Yancy, 2005: 1)

Later on, as she cleans Ruby’s face of the white paint, Lucky announces a possible recovery of the self from this disconnect: “It’s not you, it’s not any of us. It’s this place, and we’re leaving.” Deep into the narrative, the horror trope of the haunted house, of an inherently bad place, allows the characters to imagine and design escape.

Escape, entrapment, confinement, and the crossing of borders between different spaces is what we turn to next.

Thresholds and Containment

The composition of the self in *Them* rests on the various crossings into the imaginary, powered

by trauma, and oscillating between a relocation of subjectivity, in the characters' attempt to "fashion themselves as agents," and a recasting of various forms of violence and injury. The characters appear to undergo an ontologic split, in which the monsters they face in their hallucinations are projections of their own mental and affective response to racial trauma. (Image 6).



Image 6

The entities that ensue fit the conventions of horror as a genre; they appear suddenly at unknown triggers, they oscillate between friendly presences and monstrous creatures, and they seem to generate further damage to the characters' psyche. The sense of horror is thus doubled by the uncanny constructions of these visions – they are scary and antagonistic yet appear as products of the character's imagination; the familiar is rendered unfamiliar.

The monsters cinematically feed images that blend the past and the present, to convey that the present *is* an emergency, it functions as a crisis (Landsberg, 2017). The border of the real and the unreal is crossed at the level of visibility; the monsters embody and make visible the conditions for terror; the unimaginable of the supernatural entities is calibrated with the veracity of historical trauma,

which is not only imaginable, but lends itself to perpetual restaging.

Thus, the sources of dread and terror are located on this blurred border of the real, where they visualize history, as they deconstruct the machinations of racial trauma.

Them employs these problematic thresholds as cinematic and narrative constructions that appropriate spatialities and contested geographies – historical, current, and future. The frightful entities, as well as the descent of the characters into monstrous versions of themselves are instruments of defamiliarization (Ibid.), present as horror trope, but also to trace the history of racial violence, and “bring the present to crisis” (ibid.) The dehumanising injury and fear transform the characters, and uncover the racist gaze, which historically constructed Black bodies as a *something else* of human nature (Marvin, 2021).

“What makes a monster a monster is the fact that it doesn’t respect boundaries,” (Jafa, 2021: np). The illicit crossing of boundaries is abundant in *Them*. From monsters crossing the boundary of consciousness, bodily integrity, or physical boundaries of a house (through the horror trope of the haunted house), the series explicitly constructs the Black family as monsters in the eyes of their white neighbours; “contaminates...elements that will de-purify whiteness” (ibid). These boundaries are best understood as processes (McKittrick), as fluid, open to negotiation, across histories of occupation, territorialization and “ungeographic” experiences. The premise of the series – the moving of the family, during the “great migration” – encodes tropes of mobility, which are further complicated by racial resistance to non-white mobilities.

Mobility, however, is not essentially benign. The Emorys move following a home invasion and the tragic death of their son, which rendered their home a space of traumatic remembrance. The issue of how movement is initiated, and the consequences of it is central to the series.

As Katherine McKittrick writes, “the structural workings of racism kept Black cultures in place and tagged them as placeless.” (McKittrick, 2011: 949) A Black experience of mobility engenders, therefore, particular aspects.

The crossing of the country, the journey and the road are quintessentially American images of mobility, especially used in cinema. As well, home ownership is at the heart of the American dream. In *Them*, we are met with an end of the road, the destabilizing awareness that activates every time a Black body enters a new space. The arrival of the Emory family in the white East Compton neighbourhood is the end of an American journey, yet the violence of racism essentially drafts an American nightmare.

“Why would you want to live where you are not wanted?” Betty Wendell asks Lucky, in a face-to-face confrontation. The conflation of belonging with being wanted places a commentary on the wider politics of belonging and the role of Black bodies’ historic mobilities in complicating it: transatlantic slavery, forced displacements, spatial and social containment in the plantation system, segregation in the racial apartheid era, systemic racism in contemporary cities and urban policies. Black bodies do not belong, in a racial default that seems to propagate through time and space; it keeps Black lives suspended in the experience of “ungeographic bodies.” (McKittrick, 2006: xi)

Normative spatialities are products of historic practices of domination, which, McKittrick writes “naturalise both identity and place, repetitively spatializing where non-dominant groups ‘naturally’ belong” (Ibid.: xv). The practices by which this is accomplished assume that the resulting political, economic, or ideological set-ups in these arrangements are “commonsensical.” (ibid.) In *Them*, the common-sense held by the white residents of the neighbourhood is short-circuited by the presence of the Emory family and their refusal to leave. Beyond their racist reactions, the situation produces confusion and dissonance. We see this most clearly with Betty Wendell, whose perception of the neighbourhood being “my home... our home” clashes with the presence of the Emorys, to articulate a sense of loss.

Betty is initially the ringleader of racist attacks against the Emorys. Battling her own trauma (sexual abuse by her father; inability to have children), Betty represents deeply wounded whiteness, grieving the loss of white privilege in post-slavery America.

Betty’s unsettling anger at what she perceives to be an invasion of her home by the Emorys produces new types of rifts and fissures in the fabric of the narrative. In episode 6, Betty discovers a spot of mould under the wallpaper in her house; later in the episode, following a clash with Lucky, where she is being slapped by Lucky, Betty returns to angrily damage her home, and pulls at the wallpaper to uncover an extensive mould infestation (Images 7-9).

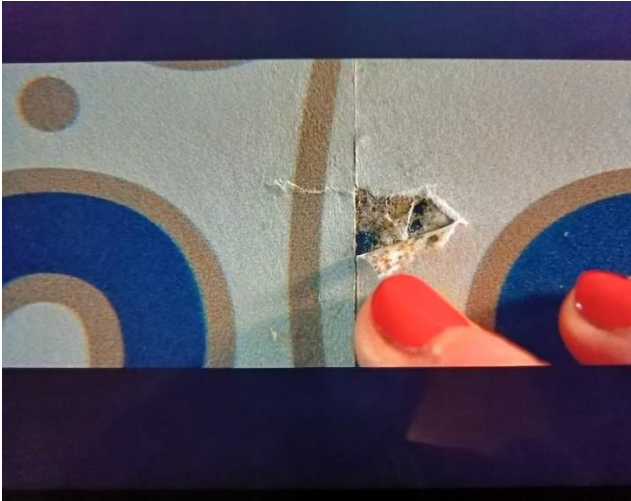


Image 7



Image 8



Image 9

This infestation can be read here as an allegory for Betty's broader sense of despair and loss. The hidden presence of mould hones a commentary on the fragility of the American dream, and could be read as a visual metaphor for the morally deteriorating effects of racism (Gilroy, 1993).

Invasion as a trope also appears in episode 7, when Henry breaks into his boss' home, with the intention to hurt him, and later in episode 10, when a white mob of neighbours invade the Emory house and torture Henry. The two-directionality of violence here blurs the demarcation line between hero and villain and marks the omnipresence of trauma caused by racism.

Whiteness turned against itself is a parallel narrative construction in *Them*, arched over character conflict, as well as spatialities. A conventional encoding of Black experience in cinema (Jarvis, 2018), the site of confinement/entrapment also functions here as a springboard for the series' critical stance. The white neighbourhood, the house, the basement – these spatial localities of

entrapment are doubled, as we've seen, by the human body and psyche transformed into sites of confinement. Citing James Baldwin, bell hooks notes that "people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them. There is then only the fantasy of escape, or the promise that what is lost will be found, rediscovered, returned." (hooks, 1997: 343)

This fantasy of escape may infuse a fantasy of white supremacy, from within a discrepant understanding of whiteness as confinement. In the violent racial clashes of slavery, colonialism, and subsequent historical reinventions of captivity of blackness by whiteness, the psychological toll on the "masters" is important to consider, for the broader possibilities of (historical or speculative) escape. On this, Toni Morrison writes: "The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behaviour of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behaviour of masters." (Morrison, 1993: 12)

In her conversation with Paul Gilroy, Morrison expands on this, to consider the trauma of white domination during and after slavery: "Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can't do that for hundreds of years and it not take a toll. They had to dehumanize, not just the slaves but themselves. They have had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system appear true." (Gilroy, 1993: 178)

A metaphor of confinement and bondage within a space of whiteness is illustrated in *Them* through the relationship between Betty and George, the milkman. Once they develop a friendship, during George's visits to the neighbourhood and learning he shares her racist position, Betty trusts that George can help her fix the "problem" with her Black neighbours and "get them out." She visits George at his farm, and is subsequently drugged and locked in a bunker, forced to enact George's fantasy of suburban happiness. Betty eventually escapes and leaves the bunker, only to be shot and killed by George, as she runs to freedom (Image 10).

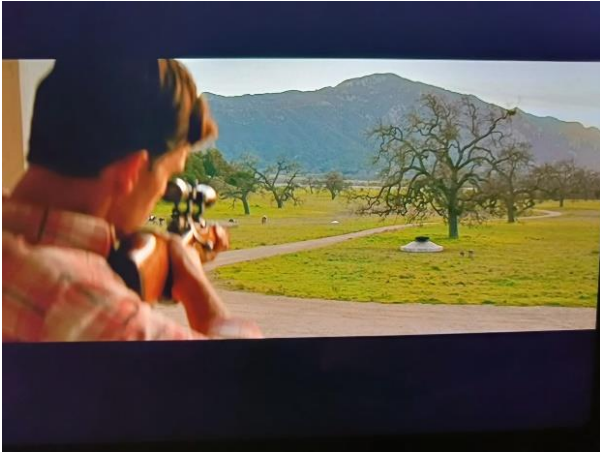


Image 10

The image evokes Black narratives of runaway slaves, as well as echoes what Achille Mbembe identifies as “the connection between the act of hunting and the act of colonizing.” (Mbembe, 2001: 194-196)

Mbembe mentions “entanglement” as a strategy of the hunter; from its literal understanding, entanglement can be extrapolated to illuminate the intricacies of racial violence. If here it evokes the dark underscores of whiteness as a trap for itself, the image of entanglement, chasing and hunting Black bodies is poignant and current, as it can describe the deadly encounters of Black individuals with police brutality.

As a visual gimmick, whiteness is cast in the series in structures and infrastructures of the world the Emory family inhabits, and which double as technologies of confinement. The white fence surrounding the house (Image 11), the white corridors of Henry’s office building, and his boss’ home (Images 12-13) The corridor is here a site of liminality, its inbetweenness producing anguish and unsettling responses cultivated by the horror genre: it is a typical site of transience, but not necessarily one of escape. Indeed, Henry appears temporarily lost in the labyrinthine setup of the corridors.



Images 11, 12, 13

In the series, the neighbourhood becomes an infrastructure of confinement, a way for the geographies of domination and enslavement to extend well past the end of slavery itself. In his discussion of the end of the colony, Mbembe addresses this problem of freedom and recovery:

“How does one get from the colony to *what comes after*? Is there any difference—and if so, of what sort—between what happened during the colony and *what comes after*? Is everything called into question, is everything suspended, does everything truly begin all over again, to the point where it can be said that the formerly colonised recovers existence?” (Ibid.: 196)

Them fully engages with the question of what comes next for the Black body, the formerly enslaved body. It does so by placing its characters in a centre-frame of violence that leaks beyond the boundaries of slavery and populates the liminal passageways of Black American experience. Mbembe notes that one can “die many deaths in the postcolony” (ibid.: 197), and this plurality of death (symbolic, political, biological) represents a key exploration in *Them* – death as erasure, as expulsion, as disconnection from oneself. As well, the recovery of existence is investigated in the series, not least through the dynamics of power and control as expressed through the gaze and the act of looking. We turn next to consider aspects of visuality and looking in the series.

Look Away. Looking Back

Legibility, recognizability, coincidence between what’s seen and its meanings all articulate regimes of visibility (Hartman, 1997; Sealy, 2019). Saidiya Hartman observes that during slavery, “the exercise of power was inseparable from its display” (Hartman, 1997: 7) and domination was

ritually reasserted in staging of violence, where enslaved people became audiences to a spectacle of torture, in which other slaves were victims.

The act of looking is thus endowed with vectors of power. As bell hooks notes, “history allowed white people the right to control the Black gaze. As such, white people can feel safely invisible to the Black gaze.” (hooks, 1997: 340)

According to Donna Haraway, “vision is always a question of the power to see - and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices.” (Haraway, 1988: 585)

In its narrative construction, *Them* places its characters in positions where their gaze is instrumentalised – the white gaze is weaponized as a tool of surveillance and terror (as the neighbourhood watches the Emory house as a form of harassment); the Black gaze is the politically-endowed “looking back,” which unsettles the white experience of being invisible to the Black gaze (Images 14-16).

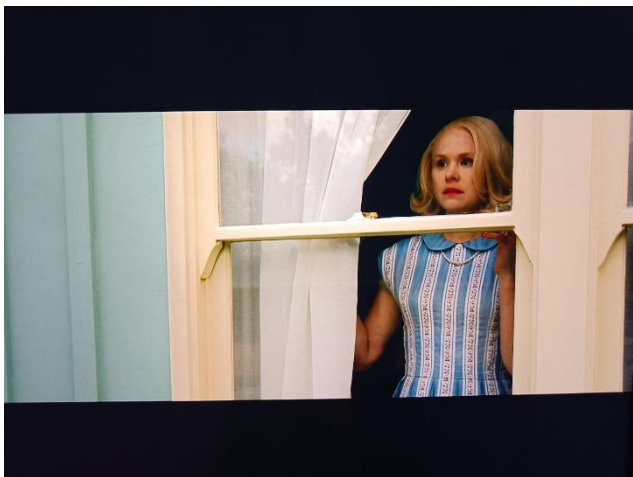


Image 14



Image 15



Image 6

In the scopic realm of the series, Black bodies are catalysts of different themes, which engender (visual) discourses of resistance and recovery. Legacies of injury, violence, and trauma that traverses different forms of bondage are inscribed on Black bodies in television.

Itself the medium of television, particularly while recasting tropes and conventions of the horror genre, constitutes a site, a territory in a contested geography of representation. The series tells a story in fragments, in instalments, which provide the viewer with routine entries and exits into the narrative.

The ending avoids offering closure—the Emory family is only allowed (temporary) survival, as an end to their 10-day journey of terror. In the very last scene, they exit their house, to face once more the white mob, from which they are separated by a wall of fire (a nod to cathartic purification); we never learn if escape from the neighbourhood happens. This may, in fact, be an implicit comment on the impossibility of escape in larger terms, in the social-political context of America today.



Image 17

A parallel can be drawn, between the injured bodies of visual history of America and the injured bodies of today's America, as they constitute an emerging form of visibility within the broader scopical regime (spontaneous video recordings of dead or injured Black bodies). Within this parallel, the “recognition of the subject” (Butler, 2009) is predicated on a racially loaded visual ground, which informs a critical account of emerging modalities of violence and representation. Seeing Black bodies as dead or battered in viral videos recording police brutality deepens the tension between affirming subjectivity of Black bodies and witnessing their recurring objectification. Seeing presupposes a type of performance: asking what is already found in the image, and what is brought to it at the level of spectatorship is essential. Conceptual differences between spectatorship and witnessing must also be considered (Peters, 2001).

Final Considerations

This paper sought to explore the capacity of a cinematic / television product to engage with the historical visual legacy to which its main tropes can be connected. We analysed *Them* (Marvin, 2021), a 10-episode popular series depicting racial violence in 1950s America. The series falls within a rich category of products that tell and retell narratives of Black suffering and Black trauma, rooted in the slavery system. In its casting of the image of the injured Black body, traversing different zones of geographies and visualities, or in attempts at recovery, inversion, and escape, the series can be considered a “repertoire” of embodied knowledge absent from the historical archive (or perhaps

merely neglected by traditional historians).” (Hirsch, 2008: 105)

The analysis of tropes and conventions of the horror genre, cinematic moods, and narrative arcs showed the capacity of the medium to tap into itself and deliver poignant accounts of how Black subjectivity may be constructed simultaneously through and against a deployment of the Black body as the eminent site of injury. The analysis focused on the depiction of bodies in space – at the crossing of thresholds, subjected to confinement, and agents of various designs of circumventing and reinscribing these given spatialities.

In its cinematic restaging of Black trauma, *Them* engages with an embodied archive of Black pain, within a broader cartography of racial relations in America, layered on occupation, erasure, and violent hierarchies of territorial ownership. The series proposes a “conquering of terror through ritual re-enactment;” (hooks, 1997: 342) it creates an occasion for confrontation – both in literal narrative tropes of clashes between White and Black bodies, as well as by imagining the act of seeing, central to the medium, as itself a confrontation. Arguably, this latter type of encounter – of the viewer with the story – acts to destabilise the visual archive to which it belongs. It is an interruption of a history that traps its protagonists (Baldwin, in *Ibid.*: 343); it challenges the stasis of the past as ‘something-that-has-happened,’ and the “dying history [of the Black man], which does not name or record” (*ibid.*). *Them* names racial violence, in a broader act of resisting erasure and disintegration. By going back to trauma, *Them* revisits records of a violent history – the ritual re-enactment that fuels confrontation and “forces the terror of history to loosen its grip.” (*ibid.*)

With Anne Ring Petersen, we have used this analysis to reflect on the role of the Black body (as well as geographies it occupies, territories it traverses) in how visual histories are articulated, indexed, archived, and circulated, and how their origins in white spaces of power and expression of Western modernity impact their content, encoding, decoding, and further entry in broader structures of meaning-making and power.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge their positionality in addressing the theme of this article. Themselves viewers whose gaze has been structured and educated within a Western context, their way of looking (from within White, heteronormative, cis-gender positions) is an implicit object of inquiry, under constant and careful consideration.

Notes

¹ <https://sandberg.nl/temporary-programme-blacker-blackness>

² Ibid.

³ Katherine McKittrick understands the production of space as “any landscape that arises out of social practices; the historical production of spatiality through racialized, gendered, and classed forms of geographic organisation.” (McKittrick, 2006:149)

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(Re)building Women's War Memory in Biographical Cinema: the Case of Female Spies' Films in Post-war Britain

Louise Francezon

Introduction

After the famous order of Winston Churchill, "Set Europe Ablaze !", the prime minister created the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a secret espionage organization that employed men and women to spy and sabotage in occupied Europe. The integration of female agents in the ranks of SOE has generated a popular craze in post-war Britain, and the books *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* which narrate the story of female agents were part of it. (Virgus, 2011: 109-10) First, the writer Jerrard Tickell published the adventure of Odette Samson in 1949. With 500 000 copies sold, the book defied all projections, constraining the publishing house to reprint four times the novel during the first year (Ibid.: 121). The second book – *Carve Her Name with Pride* – told the story of Violette Szabo and was published in 1956 by Rubeigh James Minney. With the financial support of the Air Ministry and War office, these stories have been respectively translated on the screen in 1950 (*Odette* by Herbert Wilcox) and 1958 (*Carve Her Name with Pride* by Lewis Gilbert). Following George Frederick Custen's typology, these movies fall into the category of biopics: both dramatize the life of historical characters and named their main protagonist after them. (Custen, 1992: 179-82) The movies also remind the viewer that the plot is "based on a true story", emphasizing the "truthfulness" of the productions. These first characteristics already announce the claims of these films: they want to remind the past, if not to write it. From that perspective, we want to question the intimate relationship these biopics cultivated with the notion of history.

Yet, the subjectivity of fiction is traditionally opposed to the putative objectivity of history. Consequently, both objects have been conceived as distinct until scholars try to overcome this arbitrary separation.¹ Among them, the French philosopher Paul Ricœur has highlighted the narrative similarities between the logic of a story and the logic of history as both are narrations that reconfigure action with limited primary sources. (Ricœur, 2012; Raw and Tutan, 2012: 8) But as with every reconfiguration, the subjectivity of the author needs to be acknowledged as it interferes in the process. In that perspective, history is no exception to the rules: its production is the result of an intellectual – and subjective – work that organizes facts and produces knowledge about the past. These previous works are then crucial for enlarging our comprehension of history: it is not anymore about objective academic productions but about every production that consciously tries to capture the past while

providing a particular idea of it. (Bleichmar and Schwartz, 2009: 9) Drawing on this argument, we choose to look at the similarities between historians and filmmakers as they can both discuss individual or collective actions while trying to understand their logic by offering an interpretative pattern (Heilbrun, 1993: 297).

In that perceptive, we will ask first how *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* used visual strategies to create a sense of history that “allow the audience to feel as if they are witnessing the past” (Rosenstone, 2007a: 17). For that purpose, I will engage with the process behind the creation of these movies, how they reconfigure action, and how they try to (re)construct a visual experience of the past. I will also identify the key players behind these biopics to understand the historical direction these films took.

In line with Robert Rosenstone, we consider every creation as a highly interpretative act that produces and diffuses knowledge. (Rosenstone, 2007a: 13) In other words, we understand images as active actors that translate and shape our comprehension of the past (Mitchell, 2005: 15; Bleichmar and Schwartz, 2009: 13). Then, if we argue that *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* construct historical narratives, we need to understand what kind of discourses they have disseminated: what do they say about women’s war experiences? What is the place of gender in the formation of these historical narratives? In a second part, we will thus dive into the narrative structure of these biopics with specific attention to gender representations to understand why filmmakers presented a particular scene in a particular way. Understanding these discourses seems even more crucial since both *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* were widely distributed and became authoritative stories in Britain.

Finally, we will trace the success of this visual history to understand how it became a form of public narrative embedded in national memory policy. To comprehend the scale of diffusion of these narratives, we will embrace a cross-media approach to clarify the installation of this visual history in British society. But, if newspapers or television can nourish what we call “popular” memory, we cannot omit the role of institutions in the maintenance of this historical narrative. We will look thus at how Wilcox’s and Herbert’s movies were reinvested, extended, and re-digested into new (visual) forms by public institutions.

Constructing a Visual Rhetoric of the Past: Cinematic Techniques and Historical Actors Behind *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride*

Espionage is a thrilling and romantic subject that has always aroused public curiosity. (Poirot, 2018: 345) Yet, Wilcox and Gilbert did not choose the path of sensationalism but tried to create a convincing historical document. To do that, they use a wide range of visual techniques to give authority to their images.

One of the most central visual characteristics of these biopics is the utilization of black and white images. For *Odette*, produced in 1950, this colour scheme can be explained by the limited democratization of Technicolor at the beginning of the decade.² However, this choice is more suspicious for *Carve Her Name with Pride* produced at the very end of the 1950s when the transition to colour movies in the British cinema industry had already occurred. (Street and al., 2021) From that point, we can assume that black and white images were more an aesthetic choice than a technical constraint. The lack of colour is indeed a powerful instrument to root a biopic in the past while giving it a dramatic style. A good example of the impact of black and white imagery is the last scene before the death of Violette Szabo in *Carve Her Name with Pride*. Interned in Ravensbrück, the female spy appears frail and emaciated. Her face is sunken and her body weak, but she still has a dignified appearance. This operation is due to the lighting effects, accentuated by the black and white colour scheme, which creates a figure of a martyr. For instance, the light halo surrounding the visage of Szabo bolsters the mythologization of the spy while the actress's blond hair – even though Szabo was a brunette – reinforced the brightness of the character. Therefore, light technics were used to reinforce the heroization of Szabo while mimicking the aspect of “real” (black and white) old footage. In the continuity of these visual strategies, other arrangements aim at nourishing an aesthetic of “truthfulness”. While editing the film, Wilcox inserted newsreel images into the narration. These footages depicted well-known events of the Second World War cut the movie *Odette* with newsreel images that depict well-known events of the Second World War (the allied landing, the liberation of Paris...).



Figure 1: Examples of newsreel images in *Odette*, Herbert Wilcox, 1950 (TC 01:41:29-01:41:39).

By intermingling the story of Samson with “true” historical footage, the viewer is invited to understand the event of the film as something that “really happened” among other historical milestones. The addition of dates during the movie – as intertitles – also helps to position Samson’s life in a larger historical narrative. In that sense, the story of the spy appears as a micro-narrative (re)inscribed into the grand narrative of history (Lyotard, 1979). Therefore, the mixing of film rushes with news pictures also participated in this “historical” aesthetic.

Another strategy concerns the mode of expression. In *Odette*, Wilcox used the former head of the SOE, Maurice Buckmaster, as the narrator. He appears first in the opening sequence of *Odette* and breaks immediately the fourth wall by addressing directly the spectators. By doing so, he positions himself not as a simple narrator but as a historical figure that transcends the fiction. Buckmaster also benefits from his status of “historical witness” to appear as a reliable narrator, enjoying the same credibility as a professional historian might have had in this situation. Moreover, his first speech mimics the code of historical productions: similarly to an introduction, he presents the background of the SOE and some historical milestones to recontextualize the story of Samson. Buckmaster also reappears during the film as a narrator-character when Szabo demonstrated remarkable abilities for military training. At this moment, the officer addressed directly to the spectator to say: “I suppose Churchill knew what he was doing”.³ By making this statement, Buckmaster comments on the historical – and controversial – decision of the prime minister to integrate women into the SOE. This intervention betrays Gilbert’s will to create a historical format with *Odette*: this biopic is not a simple representation of the past but a production that wants to capture history and comment on it.

The narrative structure of *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* is also meaningful. If Wilcox and Gilbert wanted to produce a sense of history, we can examine what discursive forms they

choose to translate their ideas. If historians might have created linear and teleological narratives in the past (Kosso, 2009: 21-22), *Carve Her Name with Pride* and *Odette* followed this direction by presenting orientated storylines. First, both Gilbert and Wilcox used dates to create linear narrations but they also made use of temporal ellipses to select what they deem as the most important in this same chronology. For instance, the childhood of the spies, or their pre-war life, are not represented in the film, implying that these events did not directly serve the story the filmmakers wanted to tell. The linear – almost teleological – narratives in these biopics hint at a specific way of arranging facts. In that perspective, the organisation of these films betrays existing notions of historicity and temporality in Britain (Bleichmar and Schwartz, 2009: 14-15). Thus, the structure of the movies also betrays a certain conceptualization of historical time during the 1950s.

But if we have acknowledged the power of some visual techniques to provide a sense of history, we refuse to fully equate the role of the historian to the figure of the filmmaker. Indeed, it has been common to consider the director as the one behind the enterprise of visual history. Dennis Bingham, for instance, defined the genre of the biopic as “a director film genre” characterized by the “filmmaker’s own version of the truth” (Bingham, 2010: 10). Nevertheless, we want to discuss this assumption and investigate other key players behind *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* that may have influenced the production. This approach also wants to uncover other individuals engaged in these visual narratives to understand better why these films took a historical direction.

The former spy Odette Samson is one of the agents that came to my attention as she was appointed technical adviser on both *Carve Her Name with Pride* and *Odette*. According to the *Motion Picture Herald*, she was very active during the writing and filming of the movies.⁴ The former spy was present on the set and deeply involved in the shooting of the films, coaching for instance the different actresses who play either her own role or Violette Szabo.⁵

If Samson’s role was to give historical advice to make these biopics more believable, her – active – participation on the set hints at a more influential role. One interesting area where we can survey her power is the writing of the script. The scene depicting the captivity of Samson by the German reminds with a disconcerting accuracy of the speech given by the spy in the press where she repeatedly recounted her physical torture, including the loss of her toenails and a burn on the back. If Samson actively worked to diffuse the details of her torture in the press, it was to counteract historians such as Michael R. D. Foot who questioned her version of the story. The control over the details of Samson’s torture was even more crucial since her attribution of the prestigious George Cross medal was based on this event. Then, it was essential for the spy to maintain her side of the story and it came as no surprise that the script repeats exactly Samson’s narrative. From this coincidence, we can

suppose that, as a technical adviser, Samson influenced the writing of the scenario. This hypothesis is very likely since it would not have been the first time that the spy intervened to change a historical discourse. In 1966, the historian Michael R. D. Foot published his book *SOE in France* and did not confirm Samson's story regarding the missing toenails and the burnt back. The former spy was disgruntled and threatened to sue the historian.⁶ In 1968, the book was then re-edited with a few modifications that Pierre Reynaud, a former agent of SOE, underlined:

I noted down the differences, they are minimal, the main one was the rectifications demanded by the couple then united Peter Churchill and Odette Samson because Foot was rightly saying that their captivity had been soft and comfortable while Odette's George Cross was based on her silence under torture, branded like Milady, and all her toenails pulled out.⁷

If Samson seems at the origin of the modification of Foot's text, it would not be surprising that she also made suggestions on the script. As a technical adviser, Samson's role was indeed to push the scenario into more historical accuracy, at least with her version of it. The former spy then appears as a key actor to understand the historical direction these films took. In that perspective, if we usually equate the work of the historian with the work of the filmmaker, our study case reveals a more complex situation. Commenting on the past is not the exclusive prerogative of the historian, and in that perspective, the position of Samson was doubly significant. First, her role has suggested a possible female agency in the making of visual history, but she also demonstrated how historical witnesses can be key players too. Thus, understanding the biopic as the "voice of the filmmaker" only, as Bingham did, is limiting. The engagement of the spy is even more important to acknowledge since it is her side of the story that prevails today, even though historians agree that she did not suffer the abuse she claimed (Virgus, 2011: 146).

Gendered Patterns and the Making of Unconventional Female Warriors Characters

After observing the work done to create a sense of history in these biopics, we still need to understand what narrative they offer. As we argued in the introduction, films are a reorganization of facts or, in our case, an articulation of ideas about the past. But as with every intellectual work, storytelling is also a subjective (re)arrangement that contains diverse meanings. The film historian Carolyn Heilbrun also calls this arrangement an "interpretative pattern", or the way film author(s) present a particular element in a specific way according to the story they want to produce (Rosenstone, 2007b: 206). According to Heilbrun, this is a typical operation in the biographical genre where "the director imposes a pattern upon events, invents a protagonist, and discovers the pattern of his or her life"

(Heilbrun, 1993: 297). Understanding this template seems particularly important for *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* since both biopics were dealing with a sensitive topic: women combatants in the military. Thus, we need to comprehend how filmmakers organized and made sense of Szabo's and Samson's "deviant" trajectory to make it acceptable to the public. How can they justify the intentions and motivations of their protagonists? What do they decide to show, and on the contrary, what has been discarded? We will also look at the visual and rhetorical mechanisms employed to translate these interpretative patterns. These arrangements are crucial to our understanding as they encompass as much information about the past as they do about contemporary debates regarding gender in Britain during the 1950s. Finally, as we cannot impute these interpretative patterns to one individual in particular, we will use the name of the film directors as they acted as the final decision-makers, but we will still consider the following choices as the results of different players such as Samson.

One of the common issues of those biopics is the status of women as mothers. The question of maternity was a significant responsibility for women at that time, making women's patriotic engagement difficult to support in a gender-conservative society, including in cinema where the combination of motherhood and patriotic duty represented a challenge for the scriptwriters. Consequently, this subject constitutes an important narrative knot in the films: how can we show maternal abandonment on screen without making this choice amoral?

Married and mother of three children, Odette Samson was a complex case. The spy is first introduced as a very "ordinary woman" who refuses to imagine a military future for herself.⁸ Accordingly, she declines the professional offer made by the SOE in the first minutes of the film by saying that she has three children. But, the military officer deliberately ignores the family situation of the young woman and explains that the SOE is in dire need of volunteers. After insisting, Samson accepted the offer, but the chronology of the events clearly emphasizes how the country asked for her more than she asked for being in the military. As a result, the spy did not choose this job but only accepted it because of the emergency of the situation. Therefore, she returned to SOE headquarters, and to signify her engagement in the military, Wilcox used the motif of the threshold. The camera which followed the character of Samson stops abruptly at the door of the recruitment office to observe the woman entering this new space of the military world. Before letting the young woman out of this room, the recruiter exclaims "Oh I almost forgot one last question! Do you have children?" With the help of a close-up, the camera displays the intense reflection of Samson who ends up saying: "No I have no children".⁹ After answering, the camera moves back to show Samson symbolically crossing the threshold of the office with a proud posture: she is now a new woman, and the camera movements helped to translate her passage from the status of a mother to that of a soldier.

However, the goal is not to make Samson look like a bad parent. Such an image would not be appropriate, and it could have impacted the sympathy the public already had for her. Yet, it was still necessary to depict a loving mother that cares about her children. As a result, Wilcox has inserted scenes of maternal love, even if it does not advance the plot. For instance, Samson calls her children twice during the movie and seems affected by the separation. In that regard, she could embody a modern – and profane – version of the *Mater Dolorosa* who lost her children with the only difference that this time she was the one going behind enemies lines.¹⁰ Without becoming a bad mother then, the future spy emancipates herself from the maternal burden and moves away from the traditional expectations of femininity.

Regarding Violette Szabo in *Carve Her Name with Pride*, she is a widow and a mother of a two-year-old girl who also decides to leave. But here again, this is not about denigrating her choice: the little Tania is entrusted to Szabo's parents, who will take care of the baby with devotion. The transgression is understated but still critical in the spy's transformation from mother to soldier. From that perspective, both films are trying to depict a transition from a "feminine" environment to a more "masculine" one, and the question of motherhood was central to initiating this movement. However, if both filmmakers decided to narrate stories where women put behind their children, this structure also betrays the normative mentality of the directors who cannot imagine typical "femininity" in the military: women needed to change beforehand, and for them, motherhood was the most symbolic attribute to lose. The lifestyle of Szabo and Samson is then structured by a before/after where gender is the marker line. For instance, the opening scene of *Carve Her Name with Pride* is anchored in "domesticity": the elegant Violet is shopping with another woman while chatting about how to find a French soldier to marry. The first part of the film also displays classic codes of romance such as dances, poems, and picturesque landscapes. But, this preamble will end during a perfect mundane party at home. Again, we can see the symbol of the threshold with an opened door that appears to be the only focal point on the screen. In this frame, a man arrives to announce the bad news: Szabo's husband has died in the war. The reaction of the future spy is ignored, and the next scene takes us directly to the office of the Ministry of the Armed Forces. Thus, rather than depicting every moment of Szabo's life, Gilbert uses temporal ellipses, depriving us of her reaction. With this specific sequential order, the filmmaker implies that the recruitment of Szabo happened *because* of the death of her husband. Paul Ricœur coined this type of sequencing "historical sequencing", which differs from chronological logic. The difference lies in the relationships that connect two events. In chronological sequencing, events follow each other as time goes on, but no causal relationships connect them. On the contrary, in historical sequencing, events follow each other *because* of the other. (Ricœur, 2012: 182) Thus, the sequential order of the film implies that Szabo's military

engagement is caused by the tragic death of her spouse. Here, Gilbert selected, dismissed, and rearranged the chronology to make sense of the story of Szabo. He chose, for that matter, to start the film in 1940 and not with the enrolment of the spy in the military because the first years of the war were essential for his narrative: it is during this time that the filmmaker can set up an interpretative pattern, a path for Szabo where we can observe why and how she shifts away from typical feminine behaviours.

Then, the structure of these biopics is designed to understand – and justify – the final result: women engaging in the SOE. Also called teleological inference by Paul Ricœur, both Gilbert and Wilcox get interested in specific details of women's lives to explain why they join the army and for the sake of what. (Ibid.: 183) Gender issues from motherhood to marital status were at the centre of the interpretative pattern: before becoming soldiers, these women needed to lose something traditionally seen as “feminine”. When the female spies returned home, their families did not miss the opportunity to emphasize this change, as Szabo's dad said to her daughter: “Look, I don't know what it is, but you have changed, you used to act differently”.¹¹

As we saw, female spies took distance from traditional feminine preoccupations, but both movies also show the evolution of their protagonist toward new behaviours, traditionally perceived as “masculine” in the 1950s. In *Carve Her Name with Pride*, the training of the young woman occupies almost the first part of the film with sporting exercises, shooting lessons, and moments of military camaraderie. To make this gender “transformation” more realistic, producer Daniel Angel asked Virginia McKenna to undergo intense judo and parachuting training so that the actress could embody the athletic – and masculine – body imagined by the director. The requests of the producer did not stop there: McKenna was asked to take shooting lessons to develop a certain ease with weapons for the credibility of her character. (Summerfield, 2009: 944) Editing choices also emphasized this idea of “transformation” while the future spy is supposed to learn “masculine” habits after leaving those of femininity. At the beginning of her training, Szabo was struggling but as the weeks went by, she improved before ending her military preparation as perfectly confident and capable. Below are the last images of her training when she performs at the shooting stand (figure 2). The spy is first firing at the targets, but slowly a new image is added and superimposed on the screen. This picture reveals a smiling and carefree Szabo, reminding us of the past – and civilian – version of herself, when she was a stay-at-home mother. However, this image starts to crossfade when the spy shoots at the target. With the superimposition effect, Szabo appears as literally shooting to the older version of herself. Finally, the addition of a crossfade reinforces the idea of a transitional phase from woman to soldier.



Figure 2: Violet Szabo during shooting exercises, in *Carve Her Name with Pride*, Lewis Gilbert, 1958 (TC: 00:21:41).

Following her training, agent Szabo took part in different activities with her comrades. If these scenes may look anecdotal, they reinforce the integration of the character into the armed body. In one of the scenes, Szabo wants to organise a prank by attacking her superior who had previously “scorned” her honour. As we can observe the woman assaulting him, a massive explosion goes off behind a bridge in the background. In this scene, the valorisation of Szabo is striking: she looks impressive from a low-angle perspective, and the monumental explosion that covers the background of the screen accentuates this feeling.¹² Typical of war films, these shots also insert the character of Violette into the broader “masculine” scenography of this cinematographic genre. (Sitter, 2012: 75) Thus, Gilbert did not twist the mode of representation of war films to adapt it to female characters. Instead, he adjusted the personality of Szabo to insert her in a typical war imagery. For the film scholar Yvonne Tasker, this representation of women soldiers lies in the gendered structure of the military which is fundamentally marked by masculinity. Once entered into the institution, women are thus consequently tied to this structure and the masculinity that goes with it. (Tasker, 2002: 186) But, respecting a balance between normative representations of women and artistic conventions of the war film was still complex for the directors. According to Bingham, biographical films fail to frame women in heroic actions and display “female figures more famous for their suffering and victimization”. (Bingham, 2010: 214) To resolve this incompatibility between femininity and heroization, Gilbert and Wilcox initiated a gender “transformation” that conducts female spies in an “in-between” gendered space where it became possible to show female heroines in typical war imageries.

However, the process of “masculinization” of these women goes well beyond military training. In the middle of the film, Szabo is being chased by Germans before ending up in a battle in the woods. This scene is of paramount importance for the plot: Szabo is escaping enemies, but she chooses to stop and start firing at the Germans to cover her colleague. The presence of weapons, traditionally dissociated from the female sex, contributes to inscribing Szabo in a troubling reading of her gender identity. But most importantly, the spy also chose to protect her colleague instead of her. By risking her life for the national cause - as well as for her male comrade - Szabo overturns the traditional “gender contract” where men are supposed to protect women.



Figure 3: Violette Szabo shooting at the German army, in *Carve Her Name with Pride*, Lewis Gilbert, 1958 (TC: 01:30:33).

Regarding the movie *Odette*, the spy is also presented as a strong woman with leading responsibilities who demonstrates extensive physical and mental strength. In impressive shots, Wilcox films the character of Odette alone, crossing a lake or even a mountain while carrying wood. The use of natural landscapes accentuates the powerful portrait of the agent and positions the spy in challenging environments. This journey into vast natural areas can also echo mythical spaces where cinematic masculinity was typically manufactured in outdoor and sometimes unsafe areas (Biber, 2001: 26-27).



Figure 4: Odette Samson crossing the Alps in *Odette*, Herbert Wilcox, 1950 (TC: 00:56:04).

Both women are also depicted as independent from men. If we can observe the beginning of a romance between the character of Violette Szabo and Tony Fraser (played by Paul Scofield) in *Carve Her Name with Pride*, the spy immediately stopped the man by saying to him: “We have no time to get attached”.¹³ The structure is similar in *Odette* where no romance disturbs the storyline, at least not before the very end of the movie. Yet, this situation does not correspond to reality since Odette Samson started her relationship with Peter Churchill during her mission in France. These facts are silenced in the film probably because Samson was still legally married during her time in France, and she would have been criticized if people had known her marital situation. Filmmakers have thus modelled female characters who sacrificed themselves for the nation by renouncing their family and their love life. But to make sense of this particular position for women in the history of Great Britain, filmmakers offered an interpretative pattern where gender was a key pivot. As the result, female spies do not appear as “traditional” women but as *viragos*. For the directors, the process of heroization presupposed indeed a cultural distancing from their femininity. In that perspective, only “masculine” habits and values could have been celebrated, and we can sense how the story of these women has been twisted to fit these gender – and cinematic – conventions. But while the habits of the spies changed to be considered “masculine”, their physical appearance still met the “feminine” canons of beauty. To be sure, there is no expensive jewellery or glamorous dresses that reveal body curves, but Szabo and Samson are still white, fit, and young women who remind the standards of beauty in classic cinema. (Dyer, 1997: 42; Bordo, 1993: 12) Thus, if the spies are depicted as “active” and “masculine” to a certain extent, they are also attached to “feminine” visual codes to remind us that if they are “masculine”, they stay before all “masculine” women. This diegetic ambivalence contradicts

– but permits at the same time – the very process of masculinisation. Indeed, it is because their appearance is still “acceptable” that the transgression of masculinisation is possible. As the film scholar Mary Ann Doane explains with the *femme fatale* archetype, women who aspire to masculine power put on a mask that intensifies the feminine. (Doane, 1991: 14) The purpose of this operation is to visually ease the anxiety of gender transgression. Thus, these women still look like women to alleviate the ongoing process of masculinisation. For instance, in *Carve Her Name with Pride* and *Odette*, female protagonists are not exhibited as overtly sexual objects, but they still meet the conventional beauty standards to please – and reassure – the gaze of men. (Mulvey, 1989: 19) Consequently, the feminine appearance of the spies holds back the process of masculinisation while still making it possible by rendering the transgression less threatening for the male audience. Nevertheless, this ambivalence betrays the persistence of a gendered gaze where even the narrative line fails to extirpate women from normative beauty expectations.

From Moving Images to Public Memory

If visual history represents the past, it also contributes to the present. Indeed, it is not enough to create historical narratives: visual history “shapes collective social action and consciousness.” (Bleichmar and Schwartz, 2019: 5) Understanding the dissemination and impact of Samson’s and Szabo’s stories in British society is then fundamental to the comprehension of this visual history. In a saturated media society, we will try to identify the different carriers of memory and how they interconnect to understand how these stories have been propagated within British society. From that perspective, we will also have an overview of how historical knowledge can be formed over time with the influence of the media.

The work of the press was fundamental to support and promote the credibility of the biopics. If the movie *Odette* offered a private insight into the spy’s life, newspapers also wrote “real” portrayals of her that back up the film script. As the topic of maternity was critical to her public image, it came as no surprise that this issue was recurrent in the press. Several newspapers have endeavoured to illustrate their articles with pictures of the former spy with her children that depict a united and perfect family, as they were never affected by Samson’s departure.



Figure 5: Extract of *The Daily Mirror* (left) and *The Daily Mail* (right).

In both photographs, the camera seems to capture spontaneous – happily – family moments. The former spy is smiling and seems close to her daughters. The sartorial uniformity between the young girls also accentuates the apparent harmony of the family. However, under this putative authenticity, the composition of the different photographs seems particularly thoughtful. Each family member is wearing the same garments and the same hairstyles, regardless of the newspaper in which the photographs appear. Therefore, if the images came from distinct journals, it is likely that these images were taken the same day from the same photo shoot. In that perspective, these clichés seem directly commissioned by Samson and not by newspapers. The uniformity of the pictures also points at Samson’s will to control her image to avoid critics about the abandonment of their children. Therefore, Samson exercised control over mediatic discourses by combining her heroic values with her loving abilities as a mother. As a result, the story deployed in the film was also supported by the press, giving it more authority and credibility. Here, films and newspapers act as “story machines” by (re)creating, supporting, and selling portrayals of reality. With a considerable number of articles repeating and relaying the biopics’ plot, these films had a better chance of being perceived as truthful. One way of comprehending these biopics then is to understand them as “simulacrams”. Drawing on Baudrillard, images that simulate reality – as the depiction of one life in a biographical film – can take precedence over reality and act as a simulacrum. (Baudrillard, 1994: 258) From that perspective, we need to question if these visual narratives have been confused with historical reality before supplanting it. According to Laurence Raw and Dene Ersin Tutan, it is indeed crucial to discern the

position one narrative occupies in the (popular) imagery as “the only way we can make sense of a historical film is to look at the way it has affected us.” (Raw and Tutan, 2012: 8)

It can be arduous to gauge popular imagination, but the Mass Observation Archive carries sparse traces of *Odette*’s and *Carve Her Name with Pride*’s establishment in popular memory. In a survey conducted in 2009, the social research organization asked all its participants to describe what the Second World War evoked for them, whether they experienced it or not, to survey popular representations of the conflict. Among these participants, Doreen was born in 1943 and had no direct memories of the war, but she based her imagery on the shows she watched growing up. She writes: “I was impressed how very brave and daring so many people were and how they have been willing to fight for our nation; my feelings were reinforced by the post-war films *Dam Busters* and *Carve Her Name with Pride*”.¹⁴ Angela Pope, another participant, also mentioned Gilbert’s production in her response. Aged of 10 when the film was released, she explained how she was marked by the first viewing of this film: “After watching it, I knew for sure that I’d be a resistance fighter, probably starting tomorrow”.¹⁵ Not only the film seems to have impacted people’s representation of the war, but it has reached different segments of the population, including children. Explaining the success of these biopics with newspaper articles, then, is not sufficient. Indeed, how to understand that years later, people still remember these films and based their representation of the war on them. One of the key platforms that could explain this craze would be television. Broadcasted several times on television, *Carve Her Name with Pride* could have become a familiar production in English homes. For instance, the BBC programming schedules indicate that Gilbert’s film was broadcasted at least once a year between 2008 and 2016, for this channel only.¹⁶ For previous years, figures are unfortunately not available. Yet, the recurrence of *Carve Her Name with Pride* in the television program in recent years suggests that the film could have reached several generations, explaining the diverse responses collected by the Mass Observation. The story of these two biopics and how they have found room in collective memory bespeak how the installation of one visual narrative lies in a wide range of practices that transcend one medium.

But if the media acted as “mnemonic actors”, other players have carried out the memory of these films and participated in the inscription of these narratives in contemporary Britain. In October 2009, the unveiling of a monument commissioned by The Public Memorial Appeal was making the news.¹⁷ The event, which brought together veterans, soldiers, and the Duke of Wellington, was dedicated to the officers of the SOE during the Second World War. To inaugurate this ceremony in the centre of London, the borough councillor Christopher Wellbelove took the floor and gave this speech:

I am proud to be here today representing the people of Lambeth, who in turn are proud of the fact that Violette Szabo – an SOE agent active in occupied France whose sculpture is here on the plinth – was once a resident of the borough. Never forget the sacrifice she and her comrades made so we can stand here as free men and women.¹⁸

After these few words, the massive British flag covering the memorial was removed to reveal an imposing female bust sculpted by London artist Karen Newman. This face is that of Violette Szabo, proudly culminating on the pedestal.

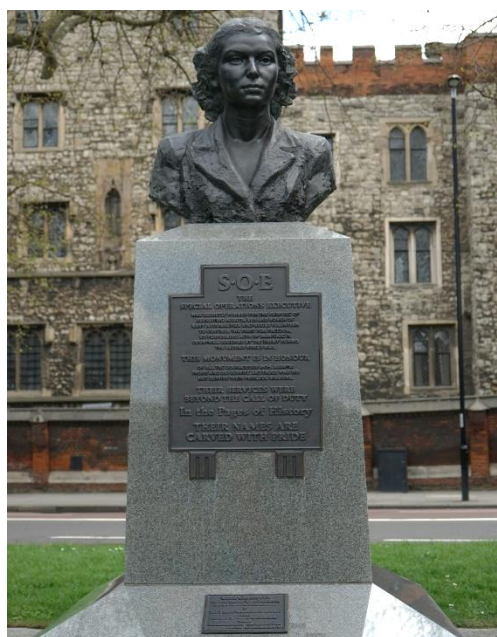


Figure 6: Photograph by Susan Featherstone, catalogue of the Imperial War Museum, n° 57804, Memorial in honour of the agents of the SOE, London.

The speech, already focused on her, and the massive representation of the agent on the stele invites us to wonder if the memorial was erected in honour of Violette Szabo, or for every officer of the SOE as initially indicated. Why does the memory of one spy get the upper hand? The textual inscription on the monument is instructive, in capital letters we can read the following words: “In the Pages of History, Their names are Carved with pride”. This formulation, inspired by the title of Gilbert’s film, testifies one more time of the common confusion between the film and history. Thus, the construction of this monument invites us to think about the possible relays between media discourses and institutional representations. The recovery of these narratives by public institutions could have also abetted the implantation of these biopics in the long run. But if the government or the military used the story of Szabo and Samson, these institutions also extend these narratives by readapting them and redigesting them into new (material) forms as Szabo’s monument showed. In that perspective, institutions have helped the installation of *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* narratives in British society while extending them into renewed visual narratives.

The combined work of media and public institutions has participated in the process of memorialization of these biopics. From this two-level analysis, we can observe how visual history can be sustained through individual practices of remembering (souvenirs and the experience of watching a film) and collective practices (such as the construction of public monuments in shared urban spaces). By creating dedicated spaces for the memory of female intelligence officers, the histories of Szabo and Samson are more visible. Nevertheless, these memorials should not be understood as part of a larger political recognition of the work of female military personnel. The erection of Szabo's status is more a direct consequence of the popularity of the spy – and the film – than a political reflection on the unbalanced and gendered nature of memory and history.

Conclusion

Carve her name with pride and *Odette* were biopics that used visual strategies to create historical narratives. This undertaking was the result of a wide range of actors from historical agents, former spies, and film directors, inviting us to think about visual history as a complex and collective enterprise. Both biopics also deliver a specific understanding of the past, by digesting and (re)organizing the life of Samson and Szabo. In this historical reconstitution, gender was a central component that regulated and framed the story of these female spies. The question of masculinisation – as a movement from femininity to masculinity – has been suggested to viewers through the plotline and visual compositions. In this way, *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* also responded to past and contemporary concerns around military women by explaining how the behaviour of Szabo and Samson was exceptional and should not be confused with “typical” and expected femininity. As a result, both filmmakers slightly twisted the gender perception of these women to make this transgression more acceptable. Finally, the last part of our study has shown the importance of the diffusion of these biopics and their capacities to create and sustain public history. (Custen, 1992: 2) The transformation of *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride* narratives into public memory has also exposed how biopics do more than portray history but actively shape it. In that perspective, images overcome the status of pictorial composition and should be examined as mediums that condition our perceptions, convey historical interpretations, and (re)organise political realities.

Notes

¹ The relation between history and cinema has been the subject of several books, see for instance Antoine de Baecque, *L'histoire-caméra* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016) or Marc Ferro, *Cinéma et Histoire* (Paris: Denoël, 1977).

² We can nevertheless find British productions in colour in 1950 when *Odette* was released. See for instance *Mention of the dancing years* by Herald French that used Technicolor technology.

³ *Odette*, directed by Herbert Wilcox (British Lion Films, 1950), 00:34:39.

⁴ Jr MQ, "Product digest section," *The Motion Picture Herald*, January, 6, 1951.

⁵ A series of photographs is available both in the Keystone Archives (see for instance n° 825314) and in the Hulton Archives Collection (n°848074502) and demonstrate the active role of Odette Samson in the making of those biopics.

⁶ Fonds Pierre Raynaud, 1986-1993, 72AJ/2043, Archives du Comité d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, Archives Nationales (France).

⁷ Original text : « J'ai relevé les différences, elles sont minimes, la principale a été les rectifications exigées par le couple alors uni Peter Churchill et Odette Samson car Foot faisait entendre à juste titre que leur captivité avait été douce et confortable alors que la George Cross d'Odette était fondée sur son silence sous les tortures, marquée au fer rouge telle Milady avec tous les ongles de doigts de pied arrachés » [Fonds Pierre Raynaud, Archives Nationales]

⁸ *Odette*, 00:03:25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 00:08:19.

¹⁰ We refer here to the profane figure of the *Mater Dolorosa* crying her children lost in the war, this figure was particularly used in the cultural imagery of the war. The work of the French Historian Antoine Prost has for instance shown how this figure was common among the war memorials designed after the World War I in France: see Antoine Prost, *Les Anciens combattants et la société française 1914-1939* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 1977)

¹¹ *Carve Her Name with Pride*, directed by Lewis Gilbert (Network, 1958), 00:40:11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 00:30:42.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 00:43:26.

¹⁴ Archives from the Mass Observation cited in Summerfield, Penny. "The generation of memory: Gender and the popular memory of the Second World War in Britain". In *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War*, ed. Noakes Lucy and Juliette Pattinson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013): 28.

¹⁵ "Angela Pope on Carve Her Name with Pride", *The Guardian*, September 6, 1996.

"Carve Her Name With Pride", BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0077196>. [accessed 13.01.2022].

¹⁷ "Memorials Register," Imperial War Museum, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/57804> [accessed 25.01.2022].

¹⁸ "Duke of Wellington unveils SOE memorial on South Bank", Youtube, accessed January 25, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZbDpdIF9_8&ab_channel=LondonSE1

Images : images 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (film stills): application of the fair-dealing law for use of limited extracts of the films for scholarly purposes. Image 6: published under a Creative Common Licence.

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‘The Past Dreams the Future Present’: Dream as Political Visual Historiography **in the work of Artist and Film Maker Derek Jarman**

Elisa Oliver

Jonathan Whitehall

Introduction

The word dream is often used in connection with Derek Jarman’s oeuvre and in his 1996 book on Jarman entitled, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England*, Michael O’Pray observes that a bracket of sleeping or unconsciousness was often used by the artist in his films (O’Pray, 1996: 115). Jarman himself referred to his creativity as being part of the “dream world of the soul” (Jarman and Bartlett, 1996: 108) and in a stretching of the dream definition, his love of home movies as “a longing for paradise.” (Ibid.: 54) This paper will argue that Jarman’s direct, and indirect utilisation of the dream in his work, is a creative and disruptive act that facilitates a temporal play across the past, the present and the future, constructing a unique personal and political visual historiography. To establish the substance of the dream in informing this historiography, alongside the attendant concepts of the vision and the alchemical, we need to explore what Rowland Wymer describes as “Jarman’s life long preoccupation with the Renaissance.” (Wymer, 2005: 4)

The films *Jubilee* (1978), *The Tempest* (1979), *The Last of England* (1987), *The Angelic Conversation* (1985), and *Caravaggio* (1986), all reference the Renaissance. The inclusion of Shakespeare’s sonnets in *The Angelic Conversation* and the interpretation of *The Tempest* are obviously direct engagements, but figures from the Renaissance, like John Dee and Elizabeth I, populate the world of *Jubilee*, while dreaming and alchemical symbols are seen throughout Jarman’s work in films such as *The Garden* (1990) and his final film *Blue* (1993), whose single colour he referred to as alchemy in delivering a type of liberation (Ibid.: 9).

The Elizabethan world was one of “spirits good and bad, fairies, demons, ghosts and conjurors” (Yates, 2001: 87) where the dream reigned supreme as prophecy and wish fulfilment but was constantly riven with concerns around demonology and the occult (Bevington, 2010: 264). Shakespeare’s use of the dream and engagement with dream theory departed from that of his contemporaries. Applied in development of poetics, Shakespeare used the dream to test the

parameters of his art creating tension between truth and fiction, illusion and reality in the theatre 'dreamscape'. Rather than strictly symbolic, the dream in Shakespeare becomes more psychological, facilitating the revelation of a truth for his characters (and for the audience). The lovers' nightmares in *A Midsummer's Nights' Dream*, for example, serves to create an awareness of vulnerabilities as Hermia's loss of Lysander is delivered to her in a nightmare about a serpent who eats her heart clarifying her fear of betrayal, a fear that seems resolved on waking, as David Bevington observes, "their tribulations seem to them only a scary dream from which they awaken into better self-understanding." (Ibid.: 260) The role of dream as a tool of revelation is a technique that goes on to form the basis of Freudian dream analysis. (Garber, 2013: 6) The particular approach to the dream by Shakespeare extends the meaning of the dream state to that of the audience as well as the dreamer, to the waking as well as the sleeping. In many Shakespeare plays the audience has something revealed to it through a character's dream before the dreamer themselves are aware of it, compounding the psychoanalytical connection in the mirroring of the exchange between analyst and patient and between the idea of the latent and manifest content of the dream. Abounding in puns, miscommunication and ambiguity, as Marjorie Garber notes, Shakespeare's use of the dream scrutinises interpretation and reality itself. (Ibid.: 5-6)

Jarman's referencing of dream or sleeping states, via his focus on the Renaissance, could be seen to embrace this role of the dream as a space of potential reinvention and transformation aligning with his self-identification with Elizabethan alchemist John Dee (Szönyi and Wymer, 2011). In this context the dream becomes an alternative world of desire, possibility and imagination which not only portends reality but can become reality (Chatterjee, 2021: 100). As Renaissance dream theory expands its application, as previously suggested, from containment in the nocturnal to the inclusion of the waking world, the boundary between illusion and reality also becomes more permeable, creating a unity or "exchange of states" (Garber, 2013: 6) where one could become the other elevating the imaginative life of the artist to that of a facilitator of active transfiguration.

Ann Marie Plane and Leslie Tuttle's research on dreams and dreaming in the modern period (Plane and Tuttle, 2013) points to a contemporary reinterest in dreams as historical documents in themselves, beyond psychological tools of interpretation. To this extent they identify a "new historiography of dreaming" (Ibid.: 928). Developing Arup K. Chatterjee and Frances Yates' ideas on the exchange between the sleeping and waking dream, Plane and Tuttle point to a science of dreaming that "affirms the potential for dreams to elucidate historical and cultural change" (Plane and Tuttle, 2014: 920) in their reporting of individual rites of passage and collective social transformation. From this context the dynamic of the dream in Jarman's work as disruptive and transgressive has the potential to reveal both the conflicts of an individual and collective history of

the 1970s, 80s and 90s when the films were made. In their temporal and visual re-configuration, new narratives prophetically underline the lesson of the past in the possible fabrication of an alternative future.

With reference to the film's *Jubilee* (1978), *The Tempest* (1979) and *The Last of England* (1987), this article will address how Jarman "*Dreams the Future Present*," as John Dee states in the opening sequence of *Jubilee*. Applying the Renaissance scholarship of Yates, and the Jarman focussed research of Jim Ellis and Rowland Wymer, amongst others, the dream will be pursued as an active rather than passive reverie. The legacy of dream theory in modern psychoanalysis will help elucidate the exchange between audience and film, implicit in the viewing experience of Jarman's work, which is visceral and immersive. It is here in the exchange between the film and its audience that perhaps the alchemical act of transformation is at its height. (Jarman, 1984: 188). We will also draw on *Jarman Now*, a series of recent talks between colleagues and friends of Jarman, curated by Peter Fillingham in collaboration with the authors over summer 2021.

Identifying the Dream Device in *Jubilee*, *The Tempest*, *The Last of England* ⁵⁵

As already observed, the dream presents itself in these films frequently through the use of a bracketing device. In *Jubilee* it is the past of Elizabeth I which begins and ends the film and which conjures up a dreamlike, or nightmare vision of Punk England, "the shadow of this time", as the Angel Ariel says. That Jarman conceived of *Jubilee* as a dream is made clear in *Dancing Ledge*, his first book based on his diaries where he writes: "In *Jubilee* the positives are negated, turned on their heads. Its dream imagery drifts uncomfortably on the edge of reality, balanced like Hermine on the tightrope." (Ibid.: 170)

In *The Tempest* it is Prospero's sleeping face which brackets the film and which clearly suggests that what has taken place is a dream. The dream device as Jarman explained "enabled [him] to take the greatest possible freedom with the text." (Davis, 2013: 188) Most characters in *The Tempest* either are, or think they are dreaming, as Bevington notes, the Boatswain, in Act V, reports the strange noises that he and his companions hear in the night, and when 'awake', they see their storm-battered ship fully rigged, and "were then transported, "Even in a dream," to Prospero's cell". Miranda describes remembering her childhood in Italy "rather like a dream than an assurance." (Bevington, 2010: 277)

This existence of the dream in multiple formats in *The Tempest* presented a wonderful

mutability for Jarman, which allowed him to disrupt ideas of temporality and blur boundaries between reality and fantasy. *The Last of England*, similarly, disrupts the boundaries between the dreamt or imagined and the real. The film opens with shots of Jarman sitting at his desk in Phoenix House, writing in his diaries and reflecting, while we hear the voice over spoken by Nigel Terry. Filmed in monochrome, coloured images flash on the screen, intimating they are emerging from the artist's mind. As Jarman yawns and rubs his eyes we are encouraged to think that the director, like the magician Prospero, sleeps and dreams the images that will unfold. Wymer confirms Jarman "resolved to make a film which would explore 'through metaphor and dream imagery the deep-seated malaise in current Britain'" (Jarman, 1984: 110). This dream framework is extended to the viewer through the particularly immersive experience of watching the film. Many have described it as difficult in its fast paced, confrontational use of the image, compounded by a lack of dialogue, the soundtrack comprising music, found sounds and short passages of voice over it could be felt to be audience unfriendly.

Leo Bersani and Ulysses Dutoit argue that the film "complicitously repeats the violence it represents. There is no distance between what Jarman does with his camera and what he condemns our culture for doing to all of us" (Ellis, 2009: 137). Michael O'Pray however, described it as "Jarman's most brilliant film" (O'Pray, 1996: 156). What can be confirmed is that the lack of dialogue and the aggressive editing, achieved through filming on Super 8, transferring to video for editing, then finally putting back on 35mm, subsumes the viewer, creating a trance like experience in which the ambiguous juxtaposition of images initiates the viewer into a dream state that is psychologically affecting. In this way we join Jarman on a journey, the staple of the dream formation (Garber, 2013: 4), from which we all return changed. In this encounter with dream as transformation, Jarman creates a thread of continuity from its Shakespearean application to that of the present day, where the creation of a dream state or space is visualised through image juxtaposition and ambiguity to make the real feel like the impossible and the improbable, probable.

The Emergence of a Visual Historiography: Re-Imagining and Re-Envisioning History

Although the three films *Jubilee*, *The Tempest*, and *The Last of England* differ in subject matter and approaches, the emergence of a visual historiography is common to all of them and to all Jarman's films. In her overview of British cinema, Sarah Street writes that "In many senses, Jarman's films can be called *histories*." (Ellis, 2009: viii) Like most of Jarman's concerns, however, his

relationship to history is paradoxical; he loved for example the Elizabethan period, but also mistrusted it as the birthplace of capitalism. In many areas of his life he was a radical, including in his film making, but he refused this label saying he was a traditionalist aligning himself with the Western canon (Wymer, 2005: 2-9); but it is in this very ambivalence perhaps, that his relationship to, and negotiation of, his understanding of self as he positions himself in relation to particular histories, is most clearly played out (Brydon, 2013: 1). The utilisation of the dream in his work helps in facilitation of this negotiation and understanding, allowing a temporal mutability to be portrayed that visually reconfigures the past.

In the films this reconfiguration is often achieved by anachronisms such as the typewriter appearing in Renaissance Italy in *Caravaggio* (Ellis, 2014: 378), creating a continuity and dialogue between past and present, a juxtaposition, as previously noted, reminiscent of the dream image.

One such example which conflates time and operates much like a dream is the scene in *Jubilee* where Elizabeth I with Dee and her Lady in Waiting are brought by Ariel into the present. Here the Elizabethan time travellers appear in the wastelands of Deptford to discover the corpse of Elizabeth II who has been murdered by Bod (played by Jenny Runacre who also plays Elizabeth I). The Lady in Waiting peers at the corpse and bends down to snatch away from the body a pair of white plastic rimmed sunglasses. She puts them to her face the wrong way around, vision turned backwards, then Dee speaks prophetic lines about the battle between the forces of darkness and light. In the next shot she is seen wandering across the wasteland the glasses contrasting with the black Elizabethan costume.

Ellis furthers this idea of trace and history in his 2014 article on the role of the object in Jarman's films. Referencing Jonathan Gil Harris's work *Untimely matter in the Time of Shakespeare*, that addresses how objects resist temporal fixity, Ellis posits a similar role for objects in Jarman's work seeing them as creating multi-temporalities as they trail previous histories, contexts and experiences further informing this dialogue across time (Ellis, 2014: 376). James Mackay, Jarman's producer and fellow film maker underlined the importance of objects for Jarman, and how "using objects at hand" in his flat at Phoenix house meant that they became characters in the films, directly therefore uniting the films through personal associations and through the tracking of place and time (Mackay, 2021). Lavinia Brydon extends this conception of history and time through what she describes as Jarman's "systematic imaging of gardens through flashback, rear projection and found footage that evoke multiple pasts including a personal history." (Brydon, 2013: 1) It is in this way Jarman's work opens up the possibility of re-envisioning the past.

The repurposing of objects and symbols can also be seen in *The Last of England* in the film's

use of the Union Jack and the home movies of Jarman's childhood. In one scene, a Union Jack is draped over a bed on which two men aggressively, desperately and drunkenly, yet seemingly unsatisfactorily, have sex. One of the men is naked, the other in paramilitary uniform, his face concealed by a balaclava, suggesting that real intimacy and contact is never actually achieved. Ideas of destruction permeate the scene, the unclothed civilian pouring vodka down himself, spilling onto his body as though to reach oblivion, before he clambers onto the seemingly comatose soldier; afterwards the man is seen throwing and smashing bottles, in anger or frustration. On the one hand, this staging of gay sexuality, with all the connotations of the homosexual as unpatriotic, could be seen as a desecration of the flag, or an emptying out of the potency of symbols. On the other, the meaning of the extended sequence is, however, more ambiguous, as it is suffused with a longing, a need, for real connection, for a past when sex was not likely to kill you, for a past even if that past is imagined, the searching for an English Arcadia located in Elizabethan England.

This sense of longing is further underlined by the interjection of images of Jarman's childhood that occur in the film and that show a particular version of the past, which in its nostalgia for a middle-class family life, and Jarman's belief that all creativity starts in childhood, cannot be easily categorised as a rejection of that past and lifestyle. In both, the presence of the Union Jack and the representation of family there is foregrounded a locus of a particular construction of identity, that inherently needs to be acknowledged, worked through and presented rather than rejected. Like all the paradoxes in Jarman's work this ambivalence aims to interrogate rather than erase. The dream like structure of *The Last of England*, both literal and metaphorical, facilitates this interrogation, its mutability enabling a fluidity of colour that helps blur the distinction between past and present.

Rejecting the conventional use of black and white to indicate memory and colour to define the present Jarman intermingles this colour codex, as Wymer points out the home movies of Jarman in the garden as a child are the most heightened in terms of colour, while scenes in the derelict warehouse representing contemporary England and Tilda Swinton's wedding scenes are in black and white (Wymer, 2005: 114-5). In this way the past is enabled to press on the present in the dreamscape of the imagination, one being seen to be the product of the other. We also see this used to good effect in *The Tempest*, where colour confuses waking and dreaming, present and past to allow the magical and mundane to co-exist. The prophetic quality this seems to suggest and the sense of heightened anxiety in *The Last of England* also provide an historical point of continuity. The Elizabethan age was equally one of division and conflict around national identity and its implications after the 1603 rise of James VI of Scotland to James I, King of England and his attempts at a united government. The implications of this Shakespearean 'Sceptred Isle' persist into our present day resonating with Brexit and interestingly a forthcoming documentary about Covid bearing this title (Fillingham, Oliver

and Whitehall, 2021).

Jarman's re-configuring of history, his re-envisioning of culture is crucial, as he views a culture that is resistant to re-thinking, as we can see in his films and writing, is no longer a culture of value. Yet he is also clearly aware that all establishments rewrite history, to make a version that is acceptable to them. In *Dancing Ledge*, Jarman's entry for the 8th March, 1983, entitled "Consumervision" reads:

Ian Sprout, the Tory minister, is in the *Guardian* (sic) this morning quoted as saying that *Chariots of Fire* helped the government over the Falklands with public opinion in the USA; it confirmed all my suspicions about film which plays a tune reactionaries like to hear. (Jarman, 1984: 220)

Jarman then recounts how the publicity around the actor Ian Charleson who starred in the film *Chariots of Fire* (1981) but who had also previously played one of the twins in *Jubilee* was manipulated, the director of *Chariots of Fire*, David Puttnam suppressing any mention of Charleson's role in *Jubilee* and claiming it was Charleson's first film. Jarman continues: "All establishments rewrite history. No shadows are to be cast over the Royal Command Performance. In Mitterrand's France these dubious manipulators were careful to protest their Socialism." (Ibid.) Jarman's disdain at the rewriting of history and the erasure of gay filmic history and of his work is evident, yet as stated before Jarman was in favour of reconfiguring history when that endeavour was to create new lineages in which to place himself and new communities.

Considering the relationship between legacies of the past and the new in his book *Capital Realism* (2009), Mark Fisher discusses T.S. Eliot's essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, (1919), stating that the essay "described the reciprocal relationship between the canonical and the new." Fisher goes on:

The new defines itself in response to what is already established; at the same time, the established has to reconfigure itself in response to the new. Eliot's claim was that the exhaustion of the future does not even leave us with the past. Tradition counts for nothing when it is no longer contested and modified. A culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all. (Fisher, 2009: 3)

We see an awareness of this position in Jarman's attitude to the heritage film, suggested by the earlier remark about the film *Chariots of Fire*, which he saw as a process of ossifying the past, "there is nothing more excruciating than English Historical Drama." (Jarman, 1984: 14) In this form, as in his comments in *Dancing Ledge* attest, he felt history can be put to work for the establishment, nationalism, and ultimately as *Jubilee* suggests, consumer goods. Yet as we have seen in *The Last of England*, and which is also present in *Jubilee*, there is another history that challenges rather than supports the present and may in fact have a therapeutic dimension and the dream is central to this. Describing the structure of *The Last of England* as a dream allegory, Jarman writes:

In dream allegory the poet wakes in a visionary landscape where he encounters personifications of psychic states. Through these encounters he is healed. *Jubilee* was such a healing fiction, it harked back to *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*. Which was a socio-political tract. In *Jubilee* the past dreamed the future present. *The Last of England* is in the same form, though this time I have put myself into the centre of the picture. (Jarman and Bartlett, 1996: 188)

To write alternative histories becomes necessary for marginal groups, a revisionist history, but also, following Fisher's thinking, for an understanding and process that disrupts dominant thinking. Reimagining a past therefore can also be seen, more specifically as a need to imagine an alternative to the status quo of late capitalism, 'capital realism' as Fisher terms it:

The power of capitalist realism derives in part from the way that capitalism subsumes and consumes all of previous history: one effect of its 'system of equivalence' which can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or Das Kapital, a monetary value. (Fisher, 2009: 8)

Jubilee points to this world where everything is reduced to monetary value. In the scene following Amyl accidentally breaking her Churchill mug, Mad sees the book called *Teach Yourself History by Amyl Nitrate*. Mad mockingly reads aloud Amyl's alternative history. In the first section, *The History of England*, she reads:

It all began with William the Conqueror, who screwed the Anglo-Saxons into the ground, carving the

land into theirs and ours. They lived in mansions and ate beef at fat tables, whilst the poor lived in houses minding the cows on a bowl of porridge. (Jarman, in *Jubilee*)

As Mad ‘performs’ Amyl’s potted history of England, we see Amyl gluing together the Churchill mug, and the lesson concludes with England self-destructing through civil war and sinking in to the sea. The main point of Amyl’s history, according to Ellis, “is that once everything has been commodified, it becomes impossible to make distinctions based on any other scheme of value.” (Ellis, 2009: 60)

Jarman’s creation of new histories, but always in dialogue with an established canon more forcibly achieves Fisher’s contestation. For example, in *Caravaggio* Jarman places emphasis on a reading of the artists’ work in relation to his sexuality but rather than just ‘queering the canon’ the film looks to present a construction of queer identity, avoiding period detail in favour of the previously mentioned anachronistic creation that allow the worries of the present to be seen in relation to their past enabling a continuity of critique that oscillates as much as the movement between stylised speech and contemporary vernacular in the film’s dialogue (Hill, 1999: 155).

Dreams, Alchemy, Transformation: *The Tempest*

It is the power of the dream that on waking one often feels bewilderment as to the time one is actually in. Jarman’s films are of course now reflections of the time of their making, but perhaps, like the dream, one may have a sense that the film is taking place in the present and representing the now. Of course, film does happen or unfold in the present of the viewing moment and so the experience of it, and the potential impact of that experience is, as in Walter Benjamin’s conception of history, always informed by, and implicated in, the current moment (Benjamin, 1968: 196-209). This play of time that Jarman evokes is spoken about by Freud in relation to dreaming, “Dreams give us knowledge of the past. Although derived from the past, the dreamer perceives the dream as occurring in the present and, as a result, they influence the future. In this respect, dreams can be prophetic.” (Goldstein, 2006: 52)

If the dream at least on immediate waking may make us question lived reality, then Jarman, in his frequent application of it, can also be seen as an advocate of changing reality, further witnessed

in the slippery interface between past and present that we have identified across his work.

The dream format and its utilisation as alchemy, both literally, in the symbolic, visual references to the esoteric in his films and in the central themes of psychological and societal transformation is perhaps most clearly evident in Jarman's 1979 adaption of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. As already noted, *The Tempest* is a play shot through with the idea of the dream, in both sleeping and enchantment, and as previously cited by David Bevington, every character believes they are in some kind of dream. This fact allowed Jarman to revel in the dream potential, using *mise-en-scène* to underline the feeling of bewilderment and engender questioning disorientation and juxtaposition in what becomes for Jarman a dreamscape on many levels.

Reconfiguring the totality of the play as Prospero's dream, permits Jarman to radically restructure the play for the film, as he runs with the Renaissance idea of connections between the sleeping and waking world. Opening with a sleeping Prospero we see found footage of a storm-stricken ship that is conjured up as Prospero's nightmare, the sound-track of sleeping breath and the blue tinted colour confirming we are in the world of dreams. This colouring, even in outside shots a blue filter was used, (Davis, 2013: 93) breaks down any distinction between the sleeping and waking dream pulling on its potential to not just visualise change but enable it. If we are in any doubt as to Jarman's conceiving of the totality of *The Tempest* as a dream it is confirmed in the epilogue spoken in voice over by Prospero while he continues to sleep consigning the whole film to his dream (Ibid.).

For Wymer (Wymer, 2005: 77) the opening scene is therefore an important initial pointer to the particular focus of Jarman's interpretation which he identifies as a psychological journey into self with the possibility of transformation, and as Jarman states "the concept of forgiveness in *The Tempest* attracted me." (Jarman, 1984: 202) This, as in much of Jarman's work, enables a certain paradox in the presentation of Prospero, which the dream framework assists. More than just the controlling, self-serving figure that Prospero is traditionally presented as, Jarman allows the quality of forgiveness to co-exist in his representation (Davis, 2013: 99). Even while, as the originator of the dream, Prospero controls all within it, the situating of the masque at the end of the film reflects Jarman's concern, and Prospero's, whom many have established as a key figure of self-identification for Jarman (Wymer, 2005: 76; Ellis, 2009: 68). That concern is to embrace a sense of transgressive community which the film achieves in its culminative representation of a chorus line of sailors dancing to *Stormy Weather* sung by Elisabeth Welch as the Goddess achieving full spectacle and sunlight as we finally emerge out of the shadows.

The reference to Hollywood musicals and Gilbert and Sullivan opera creates a quality of spectacle and liberation that is celebratory and subversive in its sexual inclusivity and its inversion of

imperial representation in the male bonding of the sailors (Harris and Jackson, 1997: 95). As Jonathan Murray says “ultimately, Jarman’s interpretation of Shakespeare posits the idea that sexual liberation potentially forms the enabling precondition for other kinds of social reformation.” (Murray, 2013: 6) This creation of community, something which Jarman in his own life pursued, is equally part of Prospero’s dream casting him in a more forgiving role, and with the masque placed as the film’s culmination, indicating this theme, as Jarman asserts, as the focus of the work.

It is the dream format that makes this possible. The radical restructuring of Shakespeare’s text, where the speeches are broken into smaller units and spread across the action, intermingling with each other, and shifting the masque to the end of the film, is itself a product of the conceiving of the play as a total dream, creating a quality of dream experience in the viewer through the form of juxtaposition embraced by the transfer to film. The masque carries with it the original function it played in Elizabethan drama, which was that of uniting players and audience, often bringing them onto the stage and emphasizing a spectacle in which everyone is involved, mirroring the unity or harmony of an inclusive social order (Ellis, 2009: 72). In Jarman’s *Tempest* a similar unity or point of contact with the audience is created by having characters talk directly to camera. Having the masque occur as the climax of the action in the film emphasizes the role of the dream and imagination in the realisation of change, in Shakespeare’s time it was used to reveal the divide between illusion and reality where Jarman appears to employ it to bring these two qualities closer together.

The fluidity that the dream allows enables Jarman to emphasize the resonance to the moment of the film’s making in the late 1970s. The sense of national identity, division and exploitation of certain sectors of the community in late 1970s Britain finds its echo in Jarman’s interpretation of *The Tempest*, a play that also had social relevance to Shakespeare’s 1611 in its interpretation as a reflection on the developing colonialism of the new world in its articulation of authority and ownership. Jonathan Murray sees the film as an “incisive commentary on its own specific time” (Murray, 2013: 6) with themes of hierarchy, division and the plight of the exploited visually emphasised in the film’s *mise-en-scène* and casting. As Murray continues, there is a prevalence of butterflies in the film, pinned butterflies seen under a magnifying glass by Prospero as he summons Ariel and again a dead butterfly that distracts Miranda as Ferdinand is captured by her father. The metaphor seems to stand for something beautiful not being able to reach its full potential, thwarted by power and ownership, something being played out in the film’s contemporaneous England and seeming to prophetically conjure Thatcher’s measures to control class and workplace unrest which created an arguably unstable economy dispossessing many of the means to thrive.

This contemporary connection is further facilitated by the use of costume that hints at period

specificity but is largely disparate and actually cannot be fixed in time. Miranda's braided hair for example sits somewhere between a 1970s appropriation of corn braids and Elizabethan curls, Ariel consistently appears in a boiler suit, and Prospero has a quality of the 19th century Romantic, perhaps a deliberate point to the New Romantics emerging in 1970s/80s Britain which Jarman described, in a deleted section of *Dancing Ledge* 1984, available in the BFI archives (Wymer, 2005: 73) as a product of the insecurity and conservatism of the times. This approach to costume, again enabled by the dreamscape, avoids the period fixity Jarman so loathed in the heritage film. Instead, we get a sense of the duration of the play, its persistence through time, its costumes reflecting each period in which it has been performed; it equally enables enduring relevance and persistence of its underlying themes for its many audiences. This is consolidated, as Jim Ellis (Ellis, 2009: 76-79) and Rowland Wymer discuss, by the casting of Jack Birkett as Caliban, Prospero's slave, "...a figure of indefinable racial origin with a Northern accent", described by Wymer as so not conforming to any of the stable figures of otherness to create a sense of difference that is truly 'other' (Wymer, 2005: 75). Such instability we could say is the very subject of dreams.

It is however perhaps in the power of alchemy and Jarman's seeming equation of that with the cinematic and the imaginative life of the artist that the dream enables a particular articulation. Belief in alchemy maintains the persistent possibility of change, it also suggests unity in its'-bringing together of disparate elements to create something new.

Informed by reading the psychology of Jung, who embraced alchemy as a psychological search for lost unity, we can see Jarman's concerns with this in framing *The Tempest* as an ultimate search for self, in which the permeable dream world becomes a key tool, "the shifting boundaries between waking and sleeping, illusion and reality, freedom and control." (Harris and Jackson, 1997: 97) In Jarman's identification with John Dee, said to be represented as Prospero, we also get a continued casting of the artist in the role of alchemist. Szönyi and Wymer, in their article *John Dee as Cultural Hero* (2011), suggest that for Jarman Dee's scrying glass or crystal ball needed updating, a new portal into other worlds needed to be found. It seems that this becomes the lens of the camera and the art of film "a wedding of light and matter-an alchemical conjunction." (Jarman, 1984: 188) This equation is made clear in *The Tempest*, with the drawings on the floor of Prospero's study standing in for alchemical drawings in the film, but which are actually blueprints for pinhole cameras drawn and then made by the artist Simon Reade (Jarman, *Dancing Ledge*, 188). As in the dream world of *The Tempest* we are encouraged to break through any veils of appearance to a truth and it seems the camera provides this transparency: "it is through transparency that the world is discovered. The camera lens." (Jarman, 1996: 64) Jarman's films become their own kind of alchemy then, presenting and potentially engendering change with the dream as the format for the viewer to experience and

understand it. This is the legacy of Renaissance magic and dream theory for the 20th century artist. Jarman's radical visual innovation does indeed create its own historiography enabling an understanding of the present through the continuation of the past via the scrying glass of the camera lens.

Conclusion

The rewriting, or reclaiming of history, in Jarman's work becomes in itself an act of resistance, a 'queering' of history that might suggest new ways or possibilities of living now. If we conceive of the dream in Jarman's work in a way that is akin to Shakespeare's and Freud's conceptions of the dream as previously noted, as something which moves us to an understanding of ourselves, to a truth that is transformative, then the vision of a post seventies London in *Jubilee* can no longer be dismissed as mere fancy, Prospero's dream, becomes a radical rewriting to suggest a space of potential transformation, and *The Last of England* a reliving of the trauma of Thatcher's Britain, which may or may not lead to catharsis. The accuracy of both *Jubilee* and *The Last of England* in portraying their time has been commented upon. Jon Savage for example states: "*Jubilee* captured the mood of Punk better than anyone could have predicated... it remains one of the few places where you can see the 1977 London landscape," (Savage, 1991: 376-377) underlining the film's connection to a known reality that is being reconfigured. This opens the Shakespearean permeable border between the waking and the nocturnal world of the dream with the potential to turn the imagined into actuality (Chatterjee, 2021: 100). Writing in *The Guardian* in 1994 the novelist Will Smith said of *The Last of England* "he [Jarman] offered us a set of discursive and plangent images of our own divided nature." (O'Pray, 1996: 161)

The role of the psychic life and how it interacts with our concrete lived realities is something therefore that Jarman's work evokes, and as Jim Ellis notes, "Jarman was an artist who well understood the role history and mythology played in the psychic life of communities." (Ellis, 2009: vii) One could reverse this formulation to say that Jarman also understood the role psychic life played in the creation of those histories and mythologies, for of course history is formed not only from 'fact', but how we encounter those facts and what we imagined, or wanted to remember of the past. Jarman both points to the danger and the necessity of this rewriting of history, one of the many paradoxes in his relationship to his material. The use of historical subject matter in Jarman's work as Ellis writes

is ‘doubled-edged’ challenging official versions of history while at same time claiming ownership of it (Ellis, 2009: viii). Ellis goes on: “Jarman strove in his work to invent new ways of seeing and of representing the relationship between the past and the present, of exploring the ways in which history inhabits and informs the present.” (Ibid.). His films, for example, co-opt some of the emblematic stories of English nationalism, using them to create new mythologies that challenged dominant versions of the present. In Jarman’s evocations of history, the temporal is disruptive, in *Jubilee*, *The Tempest* and *The Last of England*, the moving between past and a present, or near future, facilitated by the dream structure, allows for a re-configuring and re-envisioning of the past that enables it to press upon the present.

There is a sense that for Jarman this re-envisioning is also a contesting of history, and that it is not only an artistic device, but intrinsic to his thinking and also, perhaps, necessary for his psychic survival as a gay, or queer man living in such hostile times. In the documentary film, *Derek Jarman: Know what I mean*, made in 1988 (directed by Laurens C. Postma), Jarman passionately discusses his views on art, creativity, Section 28 and the government of the time which he views with contempt, “There’s absolutely nothing in Margaret Thatcher which is, patriotic, intelligent or honourable” he rails. Later he talks of his adaptation of *The Tempest*, how the film is alchemical, how the island in the play might be a metaphor for gay sexuality, as it is something which is ‘cut off’, and how the island shifts in its nature; is it an island of ‘sweet airs’ or an island that is vicious and attacks people? Is, one wonders, the island a metaphor for England itself? His final comment on *The Tempest*, however, is telling. In Jarman’s adaptation, Prospero’s speech from Act IV has been moved to be the concluding scene of the film so we end with lines describing the disappearance of visions. Jarman comments on this ending: “And the last speech is wonderful, ‘We are such stuff that dreams are made on’... and I like that because I never believed in reality, because if reality was the way it was served up to us who wanted it?”

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Visualizing Historical Trauma in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985)

Steve Ostovich

Film can be an effective way to visualize history by offering more than information and images of the past and by challenging the audience to think critically. Such thinking is especially important when dealing with a historical trauma like the Holocaust or Shoah (a Hebrew word meaning “catastrophe” used to avoid the attribution of sacrificial meaning of “holocaust”). The work of historians to determine what happened in the Shoah is absolutely essential to all critical reflection on the event, and yet the more we know about what happened, the more impossible it appears to explain these events and to incorporate them into the smooth-flowing narratives that enable us to understand and communicate the past. The Shoah is a trauma rupturing the flow of historical time. The more we know, the more we become aware that we are standing at the edge of an abyss that robs our thinking of its foundation. The Shoah is unthinkable according to our usual categories of reason. How, then, are we to think about it, and how are we to work through the trauma critically?

Film provides a possibility for responding to this challenge. Anton Kaes writes that when an event like the Shoah “defies not only historical description and quantitative determination but also rational explanation and linguistic articulation, then a new way of encoding history is called for,” and responding critically to historical trauma “may well be the domain of the filmmaker; it may in fact, be expressible only in such a medium as film, which makes use of theater, literature, painting, photography, and so on” (Kaes, 1992: 208) and thereby assists understanding by blurring the boundaries between history, ethics, and aesthetics. According to Shoshana Felman, “Film would seem to be the very medium which accommodates the simultaneous multiplicity of levels and directions, a medium that can visually *inscribe... the very impossibility of writing*. The film is not merely an overcoming of the actual impossibility, but specifically, a testimony to it.” (Felman, 1992: 248)

Claude Lanzmann's 1985 film *Shoah* provides a test case for evaluating how well film might serve to respond to historical trauma. What follows here begins with a description of how the film works. This is followed by sections reflecting on the implications of *Shoah* for visualizing history in terms of representation and judgment.

1. *Shoah*

Lanzmann began working on *Shoah* in 1974. After more than eleven years of research and production, he offers us nine and a half hours of interviews with people with first-hand experience of the Shoah and its effects (survivors, witnesses, perpetrators), visits in the present to places where events happened, and other constructed scenes. He does this without relying on archival footage or explanatory voice-overs. And Lanzmann was adamant that his film was not a documentary even though this is the category under which it has been approached. He was not trying to represent the past even though the Shoah is a past event. In several places Lanzmann repeats Emil Fackenheim's statement that as a Jewish philosopher reflecting on the condition of contemporary Jews, "For us, the European Jews massacred are not merely the past, they are the presence of an absence." (Quoted in Fuller, 2011: 16) How does one testify to this absence? This was the challenge Lanzmann took on in *Shoah*.

Neither is the film a piece of entertainment, and Lanzmann resists distracting us through beautiful images. When interviewers suggest to Lanzmann that they found images in the film beautiful or when they speak of aesthetics, Lanzmann forcibly rejects their statements: "You say esthetic? How dare you. How dare you talk about esthetic?" (Lanzmann, 1991: 97). At one level, this is Lanzmann's way to keep us centered on the horror of the historical context, a horror that cannot be made beautiful. There is a deeper concern as well: there is no sense of aesthetic wholeness to the film, and there is no closure or redemption of the past. Lanzmann uses the filmic technique of montage to keep things open as we find stories and characters looping back in time and popping up repeatedly in the course of the film. Images of trains in motion recur throughout the film not so much in service of communicating facts about transportation but reminding us we are on a journey that does not end (or, more properly, ends only in the no place and no time of death).

Lanzmann also eschews theoretical explanations of the Shoah, preferring to keep bringing our attention back to details. "I prefer that we avoid, if possible, generalities. Because I have spent my whole life fighting generalities and I think that *Shoah* is a fight against generalities." (Ibid.: 82). Specific details are too easily lost if the focus is on trying to explain events by fitting them into general theories. Lanzmann admits that his focus on details sometimes seems excessive, as when he worried whether the locomotives pushed or pulled trains into Auschwitz, "But this is the film. There wouldn't be any film if for me details were not so important. Everybody knows six million have been killed, which is an abstraction" (Ibid.: 92), that is, focusing on details keeps us from eliding events. "In general, I am suspicious of generalization. To me, there is more truth in a seemingly trivial detail." (Boulouque)

Lanzmann's fixation on details is reflected in his interviewing technique. With victims, Lanzmann presses for details of their stories to keep us from believing we already know what the stories are about. Further, he seems to be pushing his subjects not so much to remember the past but to re-experience it. "Lanzmann seduces, lures, and cajoles the protagonists into doing and saying things which would otherwise have remained silenced and hidden." (Koch, 1989: 21) Perhaps the most controversial example of Lanzmann's practice is in the scenes with Abraham Bomba. Bomba was a barber by profession, and in the interview Bomba recounts how he and other barbers were chosen to cut the hair of women in the gas chamber at Treblinka and how they went about their work. Lanzmann found Bomba living in the USA and did some preliminary interviews with him in this country. (Lanzmann, 1991: 95) But for the filmed interview, Lanzmann rented a barbershop in Tel Aviv complete with barbers and customers so that Bomba and Lanzmann and his crew constituted an island of English-speakers in the busy shop. In recounting his experience as a barber in Treblinka, Bomba eventually comes to the day the women he faced were from his hometown of Czestochowa and how another barber, a "friend" of his, encountered his own wife and sister there in the gas chamber. Bomba stops, standing in sorrowing silence, unable to go on, but Lanzmann keeps pressing him, despite Bomba's entreaties to stop:

We have to do it. You know it.

I won't be able to do it.

You have to do it. I know it's very hard, I know and I apologize.

Don't make me go on please.

Please. We must go on. (Lanzmann, 1985: 117)

Eventually, haltingly, Bomba does go on, but the question remains open: why must he go on? Lanzmann, in view of his earlier discussions with Bomba, already knows no new facts about the past are going to be revealed. What is the point of pressing him to go on? It is not for Bomba's benefit. Dominick LaCapra finds Lanzmann's "insistent questioning" of Bomba "intrusive, if not inquisitorial and violent" and "somewhat sadistic" (LaCapra, 1998: 123-124). LaCapra characterizes this as "acting out" rather than "working through" the trauma, trapping us in melancholy rather than enabling the mourning that might achieve a "recathexis" of life allowing us to live responsively and responsibly again.

But this in turn raises another question: what are we looking for? LaCapra's deploying of the language of psychotherapy seems to aim at closure (even if limited) with regard to the traumatic past—this is the goal of “working through.” Translated into historical terms, we are concerned historically with some level of understanding or answer to the “why” question regarding the meaning of events like the Shoah. But there are limits to closure, particularly with regard to historical traumas. Our goals cannot include treating such events as simply past and over and done with or reaching the kind of closure that would allow us to situate trauma in a meaningful narrative. As Gertrud Koch points out, working through is never over: “In Freud's terms the interminability of comprehensive analysis allows only practical and pragmatic closures which remain hypothetical when the idea of closure is taken to mean ‘coming to an end,’” and “Lanzmann's film *Shoah* follows the idea of ‘interminability’ in the sense that there is no narrative closure.” (Koch, 1997: 398) We need to find ways to keep thinking without forgetting.

Another aspect of Lanzmann's concern with details becomes evident in his interviews of German perpetrators. In these cases, pushing his interview subjects for facts about the past is a way to challenge their embracing of an exonerating forgetfulness. Lanzmann interviews Josef Oberhauser, a former officer at Belzec, while Oberhauser works as a bartender in a beer hall in Munich, and Oberhauser refuses to answer the seemingly innocent question, “Excuse me. How many quarts of beer a day do you sell?” (Lanzmann, 1985: 63) Walter Stier, a Nazi Party member and head of a railway department, feigns ignorance of the purpose and destination of the special trains he arranged to carry victims to extermination camps and claims that finding out about those camps at the end of 1944 was a complete surprise, “Like that camp—what was its name? It was in the Oppeln district... I've got it: Auschwitz!” (Ibid.: 137) Mrs. Michelson, a German schoolteacher in Chelmno, in describing the suffering of the Jews being exterminated in gas vans, is asked if she knew how many Jews were killed there; she replies, “Four something. Four hundred thousand, forty thousand,” and when told the former number was accurate, adds “Four hundred thousand, yes, I knew it had a four in it.” (Ibid.: 94) And Franz Grassler, the deputy Nazi commissioner of the Warsaw Ghetto, whom Lanzmann confronts with dates from the diary of the Jewish Council in Warsaw, claims to have forgotten the “details” of his own role in administering the Ghetto and even asks Lanzmann, “May I take notes?” (Ibid.: 176) and concludes, “Mr. Lanzmann, this is getting us nowhere. We're reaching no new conclusions” (Ibid.: 192), as if frustrated by the way the past eludes him. Lanzmann deploys a kind of irony in pushing for details not to establish the facts but to call people to account for their past actions and to challenge their use of forgetting as a self-exoneration mechanism.

The details are important, but they do not explain themselves, and the Shoah reveals human

behavior that is so excessive as to be beyond causal explanation or moral understanding. Our usual standards of rational judgment are too abstract to make sense of historical trauma. As Lanzmann admits, “It’s a simple question. Why were the Jews exterminated... There are thousands of reasons, but there is an abyss between the reasons and the action of killing.” (Fuller, 2011: 17) Lanzmann’s response is to refuse to answer and to find attempts to answer “obscene.” Instead, he adopts the “posture... of a witness” for whom “Estrangement [not abstraction] is key” (Boulouque) and in *Shoah* demonstrates a “propensity for raising, without unequivocally answering, complex and ambivalent questions about this troubled past.” (McGlothlin and Prager, 2020: 27) Lanzmann’s guiding principle in constructing *Shoah* was to refuse to understand it. For the audience, “the plausible, even seductive transparency of the Holocaust images challenges us to read them at multiple levels—against their grain of universality and emotional fascination.” (Bathrick, 2008: 3)

2. Representation

Among the difficult questions Lanzmann raises but does not answer directly (and one that pertains to the project of visualizing history) is: what are the consequences of his refusal to understand the Shoah? Lanzmann issued a statement shortly after the release of *Shoah* for which he used a quote from Primo Levi as the title: “*Hier ist kein Warum*” (“Here There is no Why”). This was the advice Levi received from an SS guard on Levi’s first day in Auschwitz. Lanzmann writes:

There is indeed an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding. Not to understand was my ironclad rule during all the days *Shoah* was in the making: I braced myself on the refusal as on the only possible attitude, at once ethical and operative. Keeping my guard high up, wearing these blinkers, and this blindness itself, were the vital condition of creation. (Lanzmann, 2007b: 51)

Lanzmann was not interested in representing the past in *Shoah*: “This film is not at all representational” (Lanzmann, 1991: 97), and Lanzmann believed “The worst moral and artistic crime that can be committed in producing a work dedicated to the Holocaust is to consider the Holocaust as past.” (Lanzmann, 2007a: 35) To do so would be to turn oneself into a voyeur. It also would entail assuming a position from which the Shoah can be “mastered” by historical reason as it is understood in modernity.

Lanzmann's disdain for archival images reflects the same concern: "Archival footage too, would have reduced the genocide to the past" (Fuller, 2011: 17) and this "might reductively imply a single reconstruction of the past in its own terms, a mastery of totalization of it." (Robbins, 1987: 250) The Shoah is unmasterable (Maier, 1997). This also is why Lanzmann does not employ commentary by body-less voices: "I don't like the voiceover commenting on the images or photographs as if it were the voice of institutional knowledge" telling "the spectator what he must understand." (Chevrie and Le Roux, 2007a: 40).

A much-discussed danger lurking in the difficulties involved in trying to represent the Shoah is the temptation to stop thinking critically about what happened. "The extermination of the Jews of Europe is as accessible to representation and interpretation as any other historical event. But we are dealing with an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories, an event 'at the limits.'" (Friedländer, 1992: 2-3) It already has been admitted above that the monstrosity in these events threatens to destroy our usual categories of moral judgment and rational understanding. For Jill Robbins, language itself fails here: "Language is incommensurate with this event, and so is the understanding." (Robbins, 1987: 252) Lanzmann himself testifies to the difficulty he faced in naming his film: "I worked for twelve years on the film without having a name for it. I would call it 'The thing'—'*Das Ding* [...] Shoah,' the word the rabbis came up with to name the Catastrophe, is still improper. But how to give a 'proper' name to something which is unnamable, unspeakable?" (Boulouque) Lanzmann's reason for using "Shoah" is itself revealing: "I still chose the term because it is in Hebrew, and my nonexistent command of the language meant that the name remained opaque to me. This opaqueness was as close I could come to not naming it." (Boulouque) What name can be given to what destroys meaning and is without meaning itself?

Lanzmann goes further. *Holocaust*, an American television miniseries, also was broadcast in European countries to great popularity and acclaim. Lanzmann was aghast (and publicly so). The miniseries presumed to understand the events involved and in so doing provide consolation. The Shoah was a unique, incomparable historical event, and the miniseries trivialized it. But it remains a historical event, "the monstrous, yes, but legitimate product of the Western World." (Lanzmann, 2007a: 28) And yet, "The Holocaust is unique because it created a circle of flame around itself, a boundary not to be crossed, since horror in the absolute degree cannot be communicated" so that, "One must speak out and yet keep silent at the same time, knowing that in this case silence is the most authentic form of speech—maintaining, as in the eye of a hurricane, a protected, safe zone that is not to be entered." (Ibid.: 30)

We seem to be entering the realm of the theological and leaving understanding behind, a

dangerous gesture often summarized in one (German) word, *Bilderverbot*, the proscription of images for God one finds in the Jewish and Christian Bibles as well as the Qur'an. Karyn Ball locates the danger in this term for doing history: "the image prohibition is typically deployed as a synonym for 'unrepresentability': the magnitude and intensity of suffering inflicted by the Third Reich is elevated to a divine power that transcends understanding, language, and visualization." (Ball, 1968: 163) LaCapra reacts to the religious overtones of the *Bilderverbot* as indicative of a tendency "to sacralize the Holocaust and to surround it with taboos" and equates it with a "*Warumverbot*" or prohibition of asking the why-question (LaCapra, 1998: 100), both of them getting in the way of working through the trauma. Shoshana Felman defends Lanzmann from this accusation by maintaining Lanzmann's interview technique of "pointed and specific questioning resists, above all, any possible canonization of the experience of the Holocaust" and that "Lanzmann's questions are essentially desacralizing." (Felman, 1992: 219) Still, Sven-Erik Rose repeats the question of Gillian Rose, "What is it that we do not *want* to understand? What is it that Holocaust piety... protects us from understanding?" and provides an answer: "the various constructions of 'Auschwitz' as a figure for the impossibility of thinking protect us from having to keep thinking." (Rose, 2008: 131)

But why should we assume that the use of religious language is an abandonment of reason? Ball calls this "reductive." (Ball, 1968: 163) Might not defenders of the *Bilderverbot* defend the prohibition as calling for more thinking in light of our failure to find satisfactory understanding rather than abandoning thinking? A reading of the proscription on images in Exodus 20, for example, is to call followers to a never-concluded response to a divine mystery that escapes conceptual determination. Modern reason rightly rejects mystery, divine or otherwise, as a category of explanation, and sacralizing the Shoah would be a mistake. But the point is to recognize a call for further *critical* response. *Shoah* is a reminder that there is always more to think about and further relevant questions to ask with regard to this historical trauma.

The Shoah is a past event, but it has an afterlife that requires bringing it into the present. Lanzmann uses various terms for this work including resuscitation, incarnation, and resurrection. Felman demonstrates what this means through another key character in *Shoah*, Simon Srebnik, whose story is used to frame the first half of the film. Srebnik was thirteen years old when he was taken from his hometown of Lodz and delivered to Chelmno. There he was placed on a work detail, and among his tasks was gathering alfalfa for the rabbits kept by the SS guards. This involved a German soldier rowing the shackled Srebnik in a boat on the river to the edge of town and back. Srebnik had a beautiful singing voice, and the soldier usually had Srebnik sing songs Srebnik remembered or songs about the military the soldier taught him. His singing kept Srebnik alive until two days before Soviet

troops liberated the town and camp, at which point the Germans executed the remaining members of the work details, including Srebnik, by shooting them in the back of the head with pistols. As luck would have it, in Srebnik's case the bullet missed the vital section of his brain; he was stunned but awoke later and hid in a pigsty until a Soviet doctor treated him. Thirty years later, Lanzmann found him in Israel and brought him back to Chelmno. Lanzmann opens the film with Srebnik's story and his still beautiful singing and returns to him for recollections and comments throughout the film. Many of the local Poles in the film (including Michelson, the German schoolteacher in Chelmno referred to above) remembered Srebnik and his singing very well.

Lanzmann puts Srebnik among a group of Poles to shoot a scene in front of the Catholic church in Chelmno where Jews were herded before being piled into gas vans for execution. Srebnik says nothing, but those around him recount their recollections of events, in the process betraying their hostility to Jews. The scene is interrupted by another silence: it is a feast day associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and all talking stops when a procession comes out of the church. When the interview begins again, attention shifts to Kantorowski, the church organist and singer, who is deputized by the group to explain to Lanzmann the Church's view of the fate of the Jews and, by implication, the reason for the Church's general silence during the Shoah. Kantorowski's explanation relies on the discredited notion of the blood-guilt of the Jews incurred by their crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and interprets the Shoah as righteous and just in light of that guilt. The Catholic Church disowned this notion of blood-guilt in the 1960s, but it still influences the thinking of Catholics and other Christians, as is evident in this scene filmed over a decade later. What makes this scene shocking is the presence of Srebnik as these people of Chelmno deny responsibility for his victimization.

Srebnik, by the concrete details of his physical presence in this scene and others in the movie, is an example of Lanzmann's project to "incarnate" the past: "To condense in one word what the film is for me, I would say that the film is an *incarnation*, a *resurrection*." (quoted by Felman, 1992: 213-214) The scene can be read in the same way Lanzmann interprets Bomba's onscreen breakdown and weeping: "The tears of this man are what I call an incarnation—it is a sign of truth, a stamp of truth." (Fuller, 2011: 18) Srebnik was resuscitated once by a Soviet doctor; here it is accomplished again by the camera. Resurrection is the most revealing term here: Srebnik has been resurrected but not in the Christian sense of being restored to life. Instead, Srebnik is resurrected as a dead man, and, as Felman points out, "His 'resurrection' does not cancel out his death." (Felman, 1992: 216) Lanzmann highlights Srebnik's presence through Srebnik's silence. Perfectly able and willing—and asked—to speak in other scenes, Srebnik stands among the Poles in front of the church like a ghost, a revenant from the past. He embodies the dead who speak through his silence as an indictment of trying to

explain the past or to fit it into narratives that achieve meaning by forgetting the dead. Felman describes how Srebnik's appearance in Chelmno "embodies a return of the dead" in which "his improbably survival and his even more improbable return (his ghostly appearance) concretizes allegorically, in history, a return of the (missing, dead) witness on the scene of an event-without-a-witness." (Ibid.: 257) Srebnik manifests the "presence of an absence" described by Fackenheim.

How are we to represent this absence? And if we cannot represent it, how can we remember it? What happens when remembering turns into an act of forgetting, in this case forgetting that a traumatic historical event cannot be represented? Jean-François Lyotard raises this issue in the context of *Shoah*. According to Lyotard, even the best attempts to help us remember the Shoah become trapped in a conundrum: "they represent what, in order not to be forgotten as that which is forgotten itself, must remain unrepresentable," but makes an exception of *Shoah*, "perhaps the only one. Not only because it rejects representation in images and music but because it scarcely offers a testimony where the unrepresentable of the Holocaust is not indicated." (Lyotard, 1990: 26) Srebnik is present as a witness in the scene in front of the church but as a silent one, a ghost.

3. Judgment

Are we leaving history behind in order to respond to the witness to absence? The historian typically makes judgments with regard to accuracy, the match between concepts and experience, and the comprehensiveness of a concept that aims to be universally applicable. But what does this mean in the context of the Shoah, an "event at the limits" of our capacity for representation, as Saul Friedländer reminds us? Gertrud Koch responds to the representational difficulties we have encountered by suggesting approaching the Shoah using aesthetic categories, as a *Vorstellung* (an image) rather than a *Darstellung* (a representation), and using the theory of the imagination. (Koch, 1989: 18) Aesthetic judgment is on the basis of authenticity and views aesthetic activity as aiming at expression rather than communication. (Ibid.: 17) "While historians are concerned with the events causing traumas in individuals and collectives, aesthetic theorists are concerned with the kind of experience trauma originates. [...] Trauma in this sense gains a specific aesthetic dimension insofar as it does not communicate information but is purely expressive." (Koch, 1997: 406) Koch uses the reception of *Shoah* in Germany to exemplify the distinction: "The debate about this film, especially in West Germany, has in most cases refrained from aesthetic criticism and instead presented the film as a 'stirring document' from which we can extract various historical, political, and moral dynamics."

(Koch, 1989: 20) For Koch, it is more fruitful to approach *Shoah* as a work of art, something that often “is acknowledged only in passing and almost with embarrassment.” (Ibid.) This approach fits with the claim that *Shoah* is not a documentary.

There is a significant problem with this approach, one which Koch faces. Art aims at wholeness, a wholeness that gives pleasure, “a pleasure culled from the transformation into the imaginary that enables distance, the coldness of contemplation.” (Ibid.) This wholeness also can lead to a “bad metaphysics” wherein everything has a place and can be explained or justified. This is why “The ‘ethics’ of Holocaust aesthetics is to insist that all kinds of human scars and injuries be included, and not only those whose healing can be monumentalized.” (Koch, 1997: 406) We must not forget what disturbs us. In the case of the Shoah, this requires a practice of anamnestic or remembering solidarity with the dead. *Shoah* visualizes this difficult practice in its interviews with revenants like Simon Srebnik.

There is a limit to the “capacity of the human imagination” (Koch, 1989: 18) that one encounters in *Shoah*. It takes the form of absence and the lack of closure. In avoiding the use of photographs documenting the annihilation of the Jews, Lanzmann draws attention to what can and what cannot be imagined, where imagination can take us and what is beyond its pale. We see the places where Jews were exterminated, but not the unimaginable element—the actual annihilation. The result is what Koch labels “an image of the unimaginable” (Koch, 1989: 21) wherein the camera is “not used in a documentary fashion, but imaginatively.” (Ibid.: 22) There is a temporal absence we become aware of because we are spatially present in the site of destruction but at a later date. *Shoah* performs “an aesthetic transformation of the image of the unimaginable” whose “melancholy beauty” is “an aesthetic quality that we cannot afford to oppress.” (Ibid.: 24)

David Bathrick concurs with Koch that Lanzmann’s film presents “imageless images.” (Bathrick, 2004: 295) Lanzmann is not trying to represent the past. The interviews in the film “are not directed toward recovering memory content but seek to explore the process of reconstructing and reliving the past in the present.” (Ibid.) Bathrick follows Lanzmann’s camera (as Koch does) to sites of memory to reconstruct the past “based on traces and traces of traces” with “pans of the rich, green fields of Treblinka and Auschwitz today—that challenge the viewer to work imaginatively against the grain of the normalcy of these traces in order to produce or even to hallucinate the horror of what was.” (Ibid.: 295-296) Bathrick agrees with Koch’s claim that *Shoah* turns against realism and towards a modernist aesthetic of art as “not representation but presentation, not reproduction but expression.” (Ibid.: 296; Koch, 1989: 20). There is a profound lack of faith here in the positivist dictum that seeing is believing. (Bathrick, 2008: 3)

But for Bathrick, this modernism of Lanzmann and Koch is also a problem or, more precisely, “Disturbing in Lanzmann’s formulations are not his modernist proclivities but the simple notion that we can get beyond representation or outside history,” that by overcoming an aesthetic based on an aim of accuracy in representation, “the mind is thus set free to roam where it will.” (Bathrick, 2004: 296) This is misleading as it ignores “the extent to which recycled fictions and prior visual representations continue to circulate as powerful signifiers and constitute an iconic archive by which societies remember their past.” (Ibid.) We cannot pretend to be unaffected by these images even if we know them to be inaccurate or invented, and criticism demands more than simply willing ourselves free from them.

Looking at the photographic record of the Shoah, Bathrick notes that it is extensive and often used in an indexical, evidentiary fashion. Some of these images, however, are transformed into icons, coming to be used as shorthand for the entire Shoah even though they have a specific and limited origin. Used repeatedly, they become “a global language” and assume “an aura of timelessness and a lack of spatial specificity.” (Ibid.: 289; Bathrick, 2008: 3) They become memes. Lanzmann does not use these photographs as documentary evidence in *Shoah*; he and Koch believe this liberates the film and us from the seductive effects of these icons on our thinking. This is, in a sense, a modernist mistake, believing we can separate form and content in images and art generally. Criticism involves instead “reading these images against their grain,” of “immediacy and fascination,” their “plausible, even seductive transparency,” resisting their implicit claim to “tell the whole story,” and recognizing that while these images provide a “window of insight,” they do so with “a focal perspective with an unavoidably blinkered lens.” (Bathrick, 2004: 289) We must be willing to challenge our presumed understanding of an image inasmuch as “The information lurking in the frame of the self-evident snapshot can be excavated only by resituating and destabilizing the image.” (Ibid.) This is especially important in the classroom, where we must not only resist our tendency to look to a film like *Shoah* as a source of information about the past but “must contend with these images as part of the pedagogical process of disfiguring and imagining.” (Ibid.: 296)

We are moving in the direction of the sublime and what this aesthetic category means for doing history. Koch’s description of the “beauty” of *Shoah* as “melancholy” fits with what she writes about the limited possibility of closure with regard to historical trauma. Recovering the concept of the sublime for history helps us respond critically to the absence of closure regarding traumatic events. “Beauty” traditionally has been based on the unity of the work of art, on its “completeness”; the “sublime” disrupts that unity and resists closure, which is why Koch qualifies the beauty here as melancholic. It is the lack of closure that calls for interminable thinking. The challenge of the

historical sublime is that it calls for categories of thinking that fail or are at least under review. Jean-François Lyotard describes how rather than the pleasure of a calm contemplation of beauty, the sublime elicits a feeling of “agitation” or of being unsettled by the fact that “an ‘excess’ has ‘touched’ the mind, more than it is able to handle.” (Lyotard, 1990: 32) This would be an apt description of what Bathrick’s “destabilizing” of the image feels like and how we recognize it is happening. And *Shoah* helps us locate the source of this destabilizing: the presence of those who are absent, that is, the dead. We are called to solidarity with the dead whose presence in our midst disrupts our thinking about this traumatic event and punctures our historical narratives.

Lyotard also explains the difference between modern and postmodern aesthetics in their respective responses to the agitation and excess that mark the sublime. The concept of the sublime (re-)enters aesthetic discourse in modernity when the unity of form and content loosens, as when the sense of excess in the latter shatters the former. The result: “modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents, but the form [...] continues to offer the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.” On the other hand, the “postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself,” but “which searched for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.” (Lyotard, 1984: 81) This sounds like what Lanzmann accomplishes in *Shoah* even though it is not Lanzmann’s own understanding of aesthetics. Unlike the modern sublime, which allows the reader or viewer to indulge a desire for an aesthetic wholeness that once seemed possible, the postmodern sublime challenges them to respond to a world in fragments or ruins—the post-Shoah world.

Lyotard retains the disruptive potential of the sublime. Agitation asks for a response, and this response can be critical. But the modernist aesthetic of the sublime too readily slides into consolation. Lyotard worries that film can be especially successful at providing a therapy for our desires, allowing us to live undisturbed rather than offering the experience of the sublime. If artists “do not wish to become supporters [...] of what exists,” they “must refuse to lend themselves to such therapeutic uses.” (Ibid.: 74) Lanzmann’s *Shoah* is not a therapeutic film, but it also is more than a modernist expression: it demands a critical response.

The adjective “postmodern” may be disturbing to some readers who fear a descent into relativism in embracing the historical sublime. Sven-Erik Rose, for example, criticizes Lyotard as undermining the possibility of thinking in light of the Shoah, using it “as a highly paradoxical foundation for his anti-foundationalism,” propelling “the imperative to think singularity to the extent that is removed from thought altogether.” (Rose, 2008: 132) But this descent would happen only if

thought only takes place under timeless universal categories. Rather, while judgment is still required and our judgments must be defensible and critical, the standards and criteria for judgment are themselves at issue as well. Put another way, judgments are not just about historical *accuracy* based on methodological competence, nor are they based solely on the *authenticity* of artistic expression. Facts remain important as do the intended and unintended desires of the artist / historian. But judgments also follow from the *agitation* of the historical sublime and the hope of critically responding to historical trauma. David D. Roberts reminds us that deciding on the criteria for making these judgments “are continually being hammered out within history as part of the interaction.” Further, “There is no way to transcend the process of interaction and specify what counts as rational or competent once and for all. But though the ongoing interaction never yields suprahistorical rules or criteria, its weak, provisional resultants afford the measure of coherence necessary for dialogue and learning,” (Robert, 1995: 309)

Judgments also can become topics for classroom reflection on *Shoah* by students and faculty. Some of these judgments are ethical: already mentioned has been Lanzmann’s practice of pressing questions on his interview subjects mercilessly, even sadistically, or also ironically; another set of questions attaches to Lanzmann’s failure to press his subjects further, for example, the *Sonderkommando* Filip Müller. Other ethical issues surround Lanzmann’s interview with Franz Suchomel, a former SS officer at Treblinka, whom Lanzmann films surreptitiously after falsely identifying himself as a historian and promising Suchomel anonymity. There also are specifically historical and artistic issues related to Lanzmann’s use of outtakes and unused material (more than 350 hours-worth) while making *Shoah*. These have become available to scholars and reveal the extent to which certain voices (male) are privileged above others (female) by inclusion in *Shoah* or in later Lanzmann films. (Cazenave, 2019) The one thing to be avoided in the classroom is using *Shoah* as simply a source of information about the Shoah. In fact, it is a particularly good example of why “visualizing history” is not a matter of representing the past.

Conclusion

Gertrud Koch makes the challenging claim that “In a normative sense, memory means anamnestic solidarity with the dead—not forgetting *them* means also not forgetting the fragility of solidarity and the need for it among the living.” (Koch, 1997: 400) This means visualizing history is work that is never done—we can never finally or conclusively close the wound that constitutes

historical trauma, and only “practical and pragmatic” closures are possible. Coming to terms with the past can only be completed if we forget or otherwise ignore our obligations to the dead. *Shoah* reminds us of this in many ways as it visualizes this traumatic history. And *Shoah* concludes on a note of sublime interminability rather than closure: the camera / viewer is stationary alongside a railroad track, watching a freight train pass.

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Contemporary Migrations Between Cinematographic Representation and Historical Reconstruction: the Cases of *Human Flow* (2017) and *Fuocoammare* (2016)

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Introduction

In *Artivismo* (2022) the academic, historian and contemporary art critic Vincenzo Trione identifies a new trend that brings together a large group of internationally renowned contemporary artists.

Like a modern-day Virgil, Trione takes us on a journey through 21st-century art, reviewing hundreds of works by visual artists, filmmakers and writers from all over the world, finding a common thread that binds them together: artistic practice as social commitment and political activism. Art as a condemnation of the contemporary society's evils in front of which we often find ourselves indifferent, accustomed or totally unaware, due to the disinformation or lack of attention paid to them by the majority of mass media. For these political artists, "art, [...] we might say in the words of Italo Calvino, must become a magnifying glass placed on the everyday outside, [on] what the naked eye tends to run over without stopping." (Trione, 2022: 22, our translation)

The distance from others' suffering and the hasty media treatment of the tragedies, which grip 21st century society, are the reasons why *artists* decided to deal with today's climate catastrophes, war conflicts, poverty and famine, capitalism and migration, in order to make their works glimmers of light in the darkness that hovers and often distorts the perception of these phenomena.

The mission of *political art*, Trione argues, has to do with the purpose that contemporary philosophy should pursue: to deal with the world in which we live and the phenomena that need to return to arousing astonishment, bewilderment and a desire for revenge. "Yet philosophy cannot continue to decentralise and de-territorialise, it but must give voice to a secret civil, militant tension.

It must begin again to measure itself against the ecstasy of existence.” (Ibid.: 21)

The connection between art and philosophy reveals the theoretical horizon in which the scholar of *Artivismo* moves, visual studies, a disciplinary field based on different knowledge (history of art, history of cinema and media, cultural studies, sociology, aesthetics), which share a common feeling towards ‘visuality’, is perceived as an integral part of the fabric of culture and society. Trione has studied above all the system of contemporary languages, bringing out the links between the phenomenology of forms and the structures of the imaginary. According to him, in fact, the *artists*, by tackling a vast repertoire of burning themes, become producers of multiple imaginaries.

In his book, he explores works on migration and the environment; he analyses street art and those art forms that fall into the still blurred category of global activism, such as the ‘Black Lives Matter’ protest movement.

This article focuses on the issue of migration phenomena as presented in some specific contemporary artistic works. Migration and its artistic representation are considered a particularly urgent topic arising from the recent developments in the war situation in Ukraine, which is already causing a mass migration movement to the centre of Europe, exacerbating the humanitarian emergency that has been an established reality in the Mediterranean Sea for years.

It is not a coincidence that an entire chapter of *Artivismo* is dedicated to what Trione calls ‘migrant imaginaries’, works of artists who have tackled the theme of migration in order to contribute to a more passionate perception of it through the use of different artistic languages. The scholar provides several examples of works on migrations using the concepts of chronism and narration, already addressed by philosophers such as Theodor W. Adorno, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, and presented as points of view shared by *artists* of migrations. Among the different narrative tools indicated by Trione - cinematic epics, monumental installations, graphic novels, abstract frescoes and video art - the authors of this text have chosen to focus on the art documentary in order to question the capacity of film semiotics to serve this new form of contemporary political art.

“We need to ask how *semi-nauts* manage to develop, reactivate and transform shock, pain and emotion into visual discourse?” (Ibid.: 35). Starting from this question raised by Trione, the authors intend to analyse two art documentaries on migration already mentioned in *Artivismo: Human Flow* (2017) by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and *FuocoAmmare* (2016) by Italian director Gianfranco Rosi.

The two artists tackle the theme of migration from different geographical and stylistic latitudes. Trione places Weiwei, also in view of his artistic repertoire, into a vein that prefers a direct

and explicit communication of pain. The rendering of the drama is alive thanks to certain stylistic devices used by the artist, such as the identification in the difference through a mimetic process between himself and the migrant. The final aim is to block the spectator's memory flow on the faceless dead, protagonists of epic migratory feats.

Rosi, on the other hand, is considered part of an alcove of filmmakers who pursue the project of a cinema of reality through an indirect political discourse, free from aestheticization, but not didactic for this reason. This is a type of cinema that manages to keep fiction, testimony and poetry together, involving the spectator on an emotional and rational level.

Following these approaches' nuances, the authors intend to delve into the analysis of the two art documentaries in order to shed some light not only on the particular stylistic choices of the directors, but also on the effectiveness of their use and on the ultimate goal of the *artists*: the elaboration of a politics based on mercy and on the capacity to make the audience's glances responsible.

Alienating Repetition

In the 2017 documentary film *Human Flow*, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, internationally renowned for his courage in denouncing the abuses and censorship of the Chinese government, documents his journey through 23 countries: from Greece to Kenya, from Afghanistan to Turkey, from Jordan to Lebanon, from the Gaza Strip to Bangladesh and Sicily. The aerial views, taken with the aid of a drone, alternate themselves with closer shots for the entire duration of the documentary: an epic feature film that recounts the conditions of more than 65 million people forced to emigrate because of famine, climate change, poverty and war.

It does not matter if the scenes shot a refugee camp, a tent city or a pile of life jackets, shooting them from a great distance and from an aerial perspective helps on understanding the global dimension of the migratory phenomenon. The rendering of mass through the use of repeated evocative objects, piled up or arranged symmetrically in front of the viewer's eye, is a stylistic constant of the artist. Two recent works by Weiwei can be cited in this sense: in 2016, the sculptural installation *Reframe*, composed of 22 identical orange life rafts hung on two facades of Palazzo Strozzi in Florence; and *History of Bombs*, a monumental and encyclopedic print depicting all existing types of bombs and missiles, with an indication of their physical and technical characteristics and the

respective countries in which they were produced and held. In 2020, the artist covered the entire floor of the atrium of the Imperial War Museum in London with this illustration, in such a way that museum's visitors could walk on it and come into direct contact with the work.

In *Human Flow* is possible to find several scenes which can be attributed to the refugees' stories; the scenes are shot from a long distance and show large numbers of objects, spaces or people. Emblematic examples are: the zoom on thousands of life jackets piled one on top of the other probably with the intent to dry them out so that they can be reused during the next disembarkation; the moving overhead shot of countless square tents which are placed one next to the other and which make up the camps where migrants in transit are housed. Similarly, in *History of bombs* the bombs are illustrated in symmetrical and serial order, although the contact with the visitor is closer since it is required to walk on the artistic installation.

Beyond the artist's intention, which is reduced to a desire to convey the idea of the mass dimension of the phenomena, we can see also how the continuous repetition of emblematic objects is well associated with the media bombardment of images to which we are subjected on a daily basis. Indeed, the reproduction of these types of figures brings to mind the countless archive footage of war conflicts which we are used to get in touch through the news and the social networks. It is therefore possible to find in Weiwei the possibility of triggering a critical reflection on the way in which war and migration phenomena are represented by the mass media. This consideration is part of a current debate on the effectiveness of hyper-transmission, by visual means, of tragic phenomena such as migration, war, violence or torture. In particular, the American post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler, in two key texts such as *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2006) and *Frames of War* (2009), underlined the risk of a visual treatment of torture through the photographic medium, which, instead of sensitising the viewer, ends up de-humanising the portrayed subject and anaesthetising the receiver's glance due to the continuous reproduction and transmission of the same images on different platforms. "It is not just that some human beings are treated as human and others are dehumanised; it is rather that dehumanization becomes the fabrication of the human." (Butler, 2006: 91).

Human Flow fixes migration images at a given temporal and spatial time in order to remove them from the indistinct flow that nowadays crowds social media, television and the web. Many of the photographs that flow before our eyes every day, in Butler's words, "do not numb our senses or bring about a particular response. This has to do with the fact that they do not occupy a single specific time and space. They are shown again and again, transposed from one context to another, and this history of successive framings and receptions conditions, without determining, the kinds of common

interpretations of torture that we have.” (Butler, 2010: 77)

Images could therefore be mobile and nomadic, able to cross spatial barriers, digital screens, and to transcend temporal limits. Weiwei tries to make them immutable in *Human Flow*. The aim is to use them in order to resurface what has been removed, to make them indelible in our minds through the paradox of representational accumulation. The display of a mass of objects, places and people has an alienating effect which it is also a potential promoter of the viewers’ placed in action animated by a sense of justice. The paradox lies in the attempt to fight the oblivion on the suffering face of the migrant through the use of images; the migrant is swallowed up by a completely different sea from the one in which he actually drowns: a visual sea. If, on the one hand, the spectacularizing of quantity evokes the media bombardment to which we are subjected every day and reverses the calming effect in favor of a reactive compassion, on the other, it gives us an idea of the global dimensions of the migratory phenomenon, disavowing its relegation in the dominant opinion to certain populations and areas of the planet.

In *Human Flow*, it is not the images that are repeated, as it happens every day through the mass media, but the objects and places that become signs of the migrants’ presence. This suggests that they are not a minority on our planet, but that migration is a global phenomenon. Unlike the sleepy repetition of media images, here the visual accumulation could have a reawakening effect.

Political Abstraction

A series of blurred human figures, shot from above, caught in a moment of life. They look young, agile and dynamic. They move in different directions. Only some of them look up to the sky. Their skin is dark, enhanced by the straw-colored background of the driest desert. They wear brightly colored clothes or stand bare-chested. Some are dancing or running, or maybe fleeing. Alone or close to each other’s, these scattered *humans* are trapped in an apparent immobility, stamped on *Human Flow*’s poster. *Human Flow* refers to the volume, to the moving mass. In order to visually render the scale of this flow, the artist uses aerial shots. These manage to produce overall landscape images in which, however, the contours of the human figures lose their sharpness.

The philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, in his commentary on Weiwei’s film, considers the images produced by aerial devices, whether for artistic or military use, as a true measuring index of the justice and honesty degree of those who use them. The figurative rendering of frames captured by

a drone, an indiscreet and potentially armed spy, would be able itself to express a moral judgement on those who are filming. The philosopher refers to an elevated and privileged point of view shared by both the drone and the artist. Indeed, the framing's distance of some scenes is able to create a blurred image of the subjects portrayed, but it would be reductive to consider the resulting visual abstraction only as a sublimation of nature at the expense of the individual migrant's identity.

Zahid R. Chaudhary, a scholar specialized in visual culture and post-colonialism, argues that in some cases abstraction, with particular reference to some aerial photographs, commonly misunderstood as an expressive tool aimed at avoiding the comparison with things, is actually a political strategy and a stylistic expedient that some artists use for specific purposes. Chaudhary comments in this sense the work *Desert blooms* (2011) by documentary photographer Fazal Sheikh. The latter's photos, taken from an airplane without a hatch, capture some wheat fields in the Israeli Negev desert sowed in an area closer to three villages. Each of these was founded and built on the lands of Palestinian villages, lands that remain in dispute between Israel and Palestine even nowadays. Through the analysis of Sheikh's abstract shots, the scholar reveals the presence of elements of adherence to an unknown reality. Through the use of visual blurring, the photos are able not only to mimic the real condition of the places, but also to indicate illuminating details: the remains of the original Palestinian villages that are about to be wiped out by collective memory. Referring to these photographs, the scholar states that "these images are abstract and figural, and they indicate world-historical forces and uniquely local histories. That might be one way of understanding the politics of their abstraction. But is abstraction itself ever truly apolitical? To turn its back to the world and revel in pure form, abstraction must assume a stance that still carries with it a political valence. Derived from the Latin verb *abstrahere*, "to draw away", abstraction can be leveled as a term of accusation, indicating maneuvers of distancing or even evasion, or as praise, signaling an expansiveness, a peek into the capacious nature of even a single shape." (Chaudhary, 2019: 14).

Ai Weiwei's migration film poster shows silhouettes of migrants in the middle of the Bangladeshi desert. The frame has to narrow down on their surprised, excited or frightened faces at the sight of the drone, this expedient gives us the possibility to look them directly in the eyes. Through the use of blurring shots, the artist tries to capture the attention to our blindness. In reality, behind what look like coloured patches across the screen, there are hidden human existences on their way to being erased and forgotten. The stains indicate the presence of humans, of a migrant humanity. "Abstraction is a kind of methodology that seeks the unseen, not to render it entirely visible but to point out its existence." (Ibid.: 18).

Weiwei uses aerial footage in all its political potential - even though he uses a tool wrongly

associated solely with war. The human beings, which appear only sketched in the aerial footage, become strangely abstracted indexical traces of an entire humanity pressed on by war, climate catastrophes and poverty. “Such conditions of mimesis are the conditions of politics. [...] Abstraction and concreteness work in tandem, and disclosure and evidence reveal themselves as versions of each other, analogous, in Israel/Palestine and also elsewhere”. (Ibid.: 19).

Rather than an amoral use of the aerial technology provided by drones, Weiwei’s attempt is to sublimate the spectator’s consciousness through his own gaze.

Activism and Overacting

While the political nature of Weiwei’s art is clear in his use of aerial shots and repetitive subjects, what appears more twisted is the use of his own body in the documentary. In general, in his artistic production, Weiwei has often used mimesis and substitution in order to give dignity or justice to its subjects; in this sense just think of the famous photograph taken in 2016 by a soldier in Aylan al-Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy found dead on a beach lapped by Turkish waters. Weiwei reproduces the same photograph, but in black and white, putting himself in the child’s place, and shares it on Twitter to raise awareness of the humanitarian migrant crisis. This process of identification is understandable if we think that the Chinese artist and designer was born in Beijing in 1957 into a family of intellectuals, but soon his father, a poet, was accused of right-wing ideas by the Chinese Communist Party and was forced to go with his family to a military re-education camp. For years the family was forced to live in a cave in the Gobi Desert and his father, Ai Quing, was given the task of cleaning the hamlet’s latrines. Only in 1976 he was allowed to return to the capital. Ai Weiwei stayed in Beijing for only a few years; in 1981 he decided to leave China and to move to New York, where he began his career as a conceptual artist committed to denouncing the evils of capitalism, consumerism and, last but not least, the problems behind the migration phenomenon.

During the first scenes of *Human Flow* the zoom is focused immediately on the landing of a rubber dinghy crowded with cold migrants, this scene is followed by a shot of the artist who is taking pictures from the ground, in a pose which reminds the one of nature photographers or war reporters. At this point, a recently disembarked Iraqi boy utters the first sentence of the film. Still trembling, he turns to the artist, who is holding him by the arm, and says: “Thank you very much, you are a good man”. It is only at this point that the camera shifts solely to the migrant. Weiwei accompanies the boy to rest, wrapping a shiny thermal blanket around his shoulders, and receives a special thank you from

the boy for this, which he does not fail to include in the documentary.

In 2016 the artist will use gold thermal blankets, the ones generally used to counteract the hypothermia of migrants during rescue operations, in a performance during the Berlin Film Festival gala dinner, where he will ask to all the dressed-up participants to put on a blanket and take a collective photo in solidarity with migrants. The resulting shots are irreverent because, rather than raising the status quo of the cold migrant, they create an aesthetic of the thermal blanket. A lifesaver for migrants becomes a flashy cover to enhance the embellished bodies of the *elite* who attend large art festivals.

In another scene, awkwardly turning towards a group of migrants, Weiwei tells his story by mentioning his own studio in Berlin, claiming that he will welcome them there one day. The boys' admiring glances candidly testify the illusory effectiveness of the artist's reassurances. Almost certainly, the boys will never come knocking on the door of his studio, but perhaps they will believe that changing their fate is still possible. What emerges is the figure of a contemporary artist who is able to save himself and others through his art. In Weiwei's narrative, art is a tool through which he can restore dignity to migrants by telling their story and guaranteeing them future employment in a better place.

The constant framing of himself seems to be an attempt to produce a testimony of his own role not as a mere observer, but as a migrant in the first person. While this is true on the one hand, on the other, his fixed presence makes the gap between the privileged artist and the community of wanderers to which he feels so strongly he belongs glaringly obvious. There is a constant bounce from documentary narrative to *mise-en-scène* in which the artist's presence fuels confusion. Sometimes he seems to mimic the role of the reporter by assuming journalistic poses and temperaments, at others times he tries his hand as an apprentice rescuer. But it is when Weiwei plays himself that the disturbance necessary for the documentary to fulfil the ultimate goal of the *artists'* new political art is released. What comes out is the inequality that characterizes contemporary society, the gap between different parts of the world in terms of opportunity and future viability.

The Discreet Eye

With *Human Flow*, Ai Weiwei makes his first attempt at an art documentary. He tries to use the stylistic and expressive strategies that he usually uses in his installations and film projects.

Gianfranco Rosi, on the other hand, is a professional in the genre who, since his first steps in the field, has never ceased to collect awards from international critics. The director's attention, like that of Ai Weiwei, has always been focused on denouncing social dramas that affect humanity as a whole. Rosi's work has ranged from the treatment of poverty in India, to the situation of the *homeless* in America, to the conditions of certain social categories living in the most decadent areas of the Italian capital, to the themes of the war in the Middle East and the migration emergency in the Mediterranean.

Unlike Weiwei, who shot *Human Flow* in a single year-long travelling trip to 23 countries along the migration routes, Rosi's method involves spending several years in the places where he shoots. To shoot *Notturmo* (2020) the director spent three years in border areas, looking for extraordinary stories from ordinary people. For *Fuocoammare* he went to live on Lampedusa for a year, and it was on the island that he edited the film, the creative phase par excellence. Rosi also spent several weeks with the military corps in charge of the rescue at sea as well as with some of the inhabitants of Lampedusa.

This total immersion in the island and its personalities, which then become the characters, interpreters of themselves in the film, is what makes Rosi's filming never equate to stolen shots. The director's eye is not an indiscreet one, but that of a friend, someone whom the characters trust blindly and whose presence is not perceived as an imposition. Evidently, the spontaneity of those is given by the constant presence of the director, by the habit of being subjected to his trusting gaze. Time is a fundamental factor in fully understanding Rosi's poetics. In fact, the continuous way in which the director devotes himself to the subjects and places he portrays allows him to enter their world, their everyday life and thus to be able to recount it authentically.

Samuele, the child protagonist of the documentary, son of a fisherman from Lampedusa, is introduced to us with his own name and allows himself to be filmed in very intimate moments of his life. The moments in which the boy undergoes two medical examinations are particularly delicate for him: one to check his eyesight, after which he will be diagnosed with lazy eye, and the other for a problem he feels in his chest, a sign of an anxiety disorder. Samuele's state of mind, all about school, childhood games and the desire to explore the sea despite suffering from nausea, is a guide for the viewer who is led by him in reading the upsetting events that affect him. In a cinematographic rhythm of contrasts and correspondences, the scenes of Samuele's life are contrasted with those in which Pietro Bartolo, health director of the local health authority, deals with the migrants and their sorting in reception centres. There is an interesting comparison between the scenes in which Samuele is examined and the one in which Bartolo gives an ultrasound scan to a pregnant girl who has recently landed on Lampedusa. The focus is on the doctor's delicacy and sensitivity, on his humanity. While

Pietro is more relaxed with Samuele, when addressing the migrant, the director does not fail to stress the extreme conditions in which the girl had to carry out her pregnancy and the consequences of these on her health.

Another key character in the film is Samuele's father. The fact that the man is a fisherman, a figure who, like that of the migrant, is familiar with the roar of the waves and the unpredictability of the sea, leaves a lasting impression. He appears little because he is often out fishing and, in his stories, told to Samuele from the cabin of a fishing boat, the memory of a difficult youth, spent between sky and sea even when the weather conditions were not good, is vivid. The figure of the fisherman, as well as another figure linked to the sea, that of the diver, are not marginal in *Fuocoammare*. Through them, the director weaves an invisible thread linking the people of Lampedusa to the migrants. In a commentary on the film, Rosi says: "When I asked the doctor why Lampedusa was so generous, he said: 'Because we are a land of fishermen, and fishermen welcome what comes from the sea. We should all learn to be a little more fishermen.'"¹

This slow pace of Rosi's gaze has its own intrinsic criticism of a certain journalism accused of being too hasty in reporting news about the landings. A journalism that is more concerned with emphasising the tragedy through the display of headlines rather than reporting the facts punctually. The director seems to want to accentuate this critical reflection, especially in a scene in the documentary in which Samuele's grandmother is immersed in the preparation of a Sunday sauce. She is stirring while listening to the news on the radio. In a few seconds, the presenter lists the number of landings, refugees and corpses recorded on the island the night before. Maria is not in time to exclaim "poor Christians", when he has already gone on to announce the electricity cut that will affect some parts of Lampedusa the following day.

The misleading timing of the radio news is echoed by the voices of the desperate migrants on the boat demanding immediate intervention by the local authority. Time is a life-or-death factor for migrants. Their voices are agitated and urgent in their hiccup-like communications with rescuers in the film's early scenes. The contrast in sound between the calm, professional voice of the rescuer and that of a panicked woman desperate for immediate rescue makes the difference in positions clear. Death at sea and its news are fleeting, and Rosi forcefully opposes this fleetingness without resorting to the mimetic stratagems so dear to Weiwei, but using the eloquence of reality. He does not ape the reporter, he does not become the protagonist himself, but shows the misleading effect of haste by laying bare people's everyday lives. The solitary director's concern is not to hinder in any way the actions of his protagonists, especially those of the rescuers. Slowness becomes passionate accuracy in the attentive gestures of Samuele's grandmother as she adjusts the double bed, she once shared

with her now deceased husband or when she turns the wooden spoon in the Sunday sauce. As the characters' gestures unfold, the camera becomes invisible in order to reveal what the lazy eye does not allow us to see.

Human Dimension

Despite the exaggerated realism, Rosi manages not to be didactic: his writing is rich in feeling and mood. To keep the viewer's emotional involvement alive, Rosi uses various stylistic devices. First of all, visual metaphors and the use of scenes immortalising natural elements, whose details become lyrical, play a fundamental role. The film's title is already full of metaphor: on the poster, the title "Fuocoammare" appears half in red and half in blue. The two words are held together in a single statement in the local dialect that is also the title of a song that returns several times throughout the film. A woman from Lampedusa superstitiously dedicates it to her fisherman son to ward off bad weather and allow him to return to the sea. Samuele's grandmother tells her grandson that during the war the sea was tinged with red because of the reflection of the missiles launched by the military ships passing in front of the island. The red of blood and the blue of the sea refer to the horrors of war, which is involved in the migrant deaths in the Mediterranean: it was so in the past and it is still today.

If we look closely, the whole path of Samuele's character in the film is also a metaphor. In the opening shots, the child is immersed in a green area of the island, among prickly pears and gnarled trees, trying to learn how to use the slingshot he made with a friend, aiming at a small bird. In the last scenes, Samuele no longer tries to torture the bird, but imitates its cry and, in the moonlight, manages to stroke it while holding a stick. The *nocturne* lights, perhaps anticipating in some way the director's last work, *Notturmo*, alternate with brightly lit scenes in which the noises are often chaotic. The transition from light to shadow, from chaos to stillness, reinforces in the spectator the feelings arising from both situations.

The little bird tortured by Samuele is used by the director as a sort of metaphor; the little creature represents an alien element to Samuele's life, and the only way to approach it is through the apprentice of its own language, a language that requires exercise and dedication to learn, just like the English language that Samuele studies with interest at school or at his grandmother's house. Rosi tries to tell us that language and knowledge of another person's language is something that unites, brings people together, creates dialogue, binds and brings them closer. This particular aspect of the

relationship between different cultures meeting is conveyed well by the director when, in parallel with the events of the islanders, he approaches the more dramatic events of the migrants.

Through the display of certain rituals concerning both migrants and islanders, a shared humanity is glimpsed in the film. Rosi tells us the story of the migrants who arrive on Lampedusa from the very beginning: from the frantic calls for help, to their recovery at sea, the identification operations and their life inside the reception centres. He films these people at very delicate moments, the most important of which is that of identification. There is a long close-up on the faces of some of the young people as they look at the camera lens and are associated, through the placing of a numbered white card on their face, with an identification number. The director wants to challenge that process of de-humanisation of the human being, so he dwells on those faces just when they are recorded as mere numbers. Numbers that will then be part of the news on the migratory flows that circulate around the world through the media and the web.

The message that is clear in *Fuocammare* is that the migrants are not numbers, they are people, and the director emphasises this by capturing them in scenes of daily life in which they pray collectively, organise five-a-side football tournaments or sing. These rituals alternate with the rituals of the inhabitants of Lampedusa: the sauce prepared for the family Sunday lunch; the life of the radio presenter; the diving of a diver and the misadventures of the fishermen. This element is central to the creation of an axis that unites Lampedusians and migrants beyond their relationship with the sea. It is a shared humanity that emerges through the manifestation of everyday gestures and, in particular, singing.

In one of the film's most intense scenes, from the dormitory where the disembarked people are temporarily placed, Rosi films them all singing passionately together. The choral singing is in their language of origin, while a single boy, filmed in the foreground, as if he were a second voice, sings in English, recounting their exploits during the journey:

We could not stay in Nigeria, many were dying, there was bombing. We fled to the desert, in the Sahara many died, were killed, raped. We couldn't stay. We escaped to Libya, but in Libya there was ISIS and we could not stay. We cried on our knees: What are we going to do? The mountains didn't hide us, the people didn't hide us, we ran to the sea. On the sea journey many died. They were lost at sea. The boat had ninety passengers. Only thirty were saved, the others died.

Today we are alive. The sea is not a place to be crossed. The sea is not a road. But today we are alive. In life it is risky not to risk, because life itself is a risk. We went to sea and we did not die.

The choice of narration through music and poetry, understood as a soothing and communicative tool, unites the two directors of *Human Flow* and *Fuocoammare*. Music becomes the mental and emotional place of the crossing, understood as the processing of trauma, its banishment and potential resolution. In a certain sense, abstraction is present once again, but it is obviously not a visual abstraction provided by the filmmakers' distant shots. Rather, it is a spiritual abstraction from the harshness of reality that unites refugees and non-refugees alike. In *Weiwei*, migrants take refuge from the thought of loss of home, separation from their place of origin, and forced uprooting in poetry and folk dances. In some scenes of *Human Flow*, the director cites verses by poets from the various countries portrayed on the theme of migration. In another scene, he immortalises the migrants who have just disembarked from a rescue ship, dressed in white tunics provided by the rescuers, while they sing and dance to give each other strength and celebrate their escape from danger. They abstract themselves through music, song and poetry to survive the vividness of the pain.

In Rosi's film, both the Lampedusians and the refugees resort to popular music as a way out of suffering. The woman dedicates the song to her son to ward off bad weather and allow him to go out to sea to fish. As mentioned, it is an almost primitive gesture that is superstitious. Similarly, the migrants in the Lampedusa reception centre sing a passionate song full of tradition, superstition and popular beliefs. Scholar Jack Leedy in *Poetry the Healer* attributes therapeutic power to poetry, pointing out that it, along with singing, is "one of the natural human resources for healing, poetry helps people handle their feelings, people turn intuitively to poetry for healing" (Leedy, 1973: ix). Furthermore, music therapist Jaap Orth, in his article entitled "Music Therapy with Traumatized Refugees in A Clinical Setting" (2005), states that listening to or playing music from their home countries for refugees stimulates the experience of their culture. Studies by ethnomusicologist and anthropologist Alan Lomax also underline the symbolic link between popular music and place of birth, and he attributes to music the social function of providing security. "From the point of view of its social function, the primary effect of music is to give the listener a feeling of security, for it symbolizes the place where he [or she] was born, his [or her] earliest childhood satisfactions, his [or her] religious experience, his [or her] pleasure in community doing things, his [or her] courtship and his [or her] work - any or all of these personality shaping experiences." (Lomax, 1959: 929)

Singing, poetry and prayer are gestures that unite humanity in trauma. Especially people who migrate find in songs a link with their motherland, an ancestral sense of belonging in the awareness of separation. These days the song of a little Ukrainian girl forced to take refuge in a bunker because of the bombings that are hitting her city still rings in our ears. Today's news images show a Ukrainian

musician playing amidst the rubble of his destroyed city.

Returning to the metaphor of language conveyed through Samuele's experiences with the bird and English learning, we should also highlight that they are both about communication as a means of contact between people from different cultures. In addition to the traditional rituals just described, Rosi shows, in some scenes filmed on ships rescuing migrants, their difficulty in communicating their physical ailments. In these circumstances, only those who know a few words in English manage to make the rescuers' task less arduous; otherwise, it is gestures that dominate. An emblematic example of this is the gesture of a boy whose right eye was injured, filmed bare-chested, and who, after disembarking, is unable to explain his problem and tries to mime to make himself understood. Shortly afterwards, a tear of blood runs down the boy's eyes, streaking his face, the detail of which the director does not fail to highlight through what we would call an empathetic close-up.

Empathetic Close-up

It is masterful how Rosi manages to arrive at the most disconcerting scene in the film without making it appear pornographic or excessive. It is a shot taken from inside the hold of a barge in which the director has struggled to film the worst spectacle of all: an unspecified number of corpses piled one on top of the other in which no faces can be made out, but the difficulty of the migrants' journey is immediately apparent. The shot is in half-light; the director's attentive gaze rests delicately on the bodies, the only sounds are made by the slight rocking of the boat and the silence of death prevails.

This scene is the climax of the documentary and of a series of frantic scenes capturing the rescue of a barge carrying 150 people that was intercepted by Italian rescuers 20 miles off the Libyan coast. Rosi calls it "the barge of tragedy" and says he had access to it thanks to the relationship he built up over the year with local authorities. He says he found himself in the hatch where he saw the bodies and had a few seconds to decide whether he had a duty to film or not. "In three minutes I decided to film death,"² a very difficult act. The director says he was able to do it because that would have been like closing the circle of his own experience on the island of Lampedusa.

The documentary tells the stories of the Lampedusians and the stories of the landing, the desperate cries of the women who survived, up to the most important scene. Rosi is keen to emphasise that it is not only the investigative material that counts in his research, but above all the emotional state, allowing Rosi's documentary to get around the danger of anaesthetisation which, in Trione's

words in *Artivismo*, is one of the triad of risks of the work of *artists*, together with moralism and aestheticization (of which Weiwei is instead a victim).

The Italian-American director decides to place the death scene immediately after the one in which three rescuers, immersed in their white overalls, exhausted by the day's work, remain on the rescue ship and stare at the black bags containing the last bodies to be brought ashore. The atmosphere is spiritual and meditative. The rescuers seem to observe a moment of silence to commemorate the death of these faceless people. These images are preparatory to what will be filmed next. The scene of the dead bodies of the migrants on the boat was like a conquest for the director. Rosi's concern was not to create a *splatter* effect, not to make the sight of the atrocity gratuitous, but to make it an integral part of a process, also visual, of humanising the migrant. He had to prepare the whole context of the film and the spectator in a crescendo that could culminate in that moment. Unfortunately, a similar scene in Weiwei's film does not have the same effect. The artist suddenly places it in front of the viewer's eye in a disturbing close-up of the corpse of what looks like a boy, but whose features cannot be distinguished. Rosi's scene, on the other hand, manages to convey great dignity and his gaze continues to be unobtrusive. The touch is realistic, adding nothing, but enhancing what is already there through a game of contrasts that transforms technicalities into narrative tools.

After the scene of the corpses in the hold, the camera focuses on the waves of a rough sea and then gradually on the moon. A beautiful, white, almost full moon, which seems to lack only a bite. That night, under the same moon, Samuele is stroking his new friend, a little bird. A child, the caress of a new friendship... hope?

Conclusions

Having discussed the new political trend in contemporary art, in the last chapter of his book the scholar of *Artivism* crushes the hopes of approval of almost all the artists previously mentioned. Not even Ai Weiwei and Gianfranco Rosi survive the sentence of *artists* with a small "a", and they are thrown into a large cauldron of artists with good intentions but compromising outcomes. There are three sins that most second-rate artists commit: aestheticizing tragedies, anaesthetising the viewer and excessive moralising. Weiwei is mentioned here too, but this time the author emphasises the artist's feel-good spirit and the aerial perspective which, in Didi-Huberman's words, "ends up producing *visual clichés* – as opposed to truthful images – of our world, like the glossy pages of certain so-called geographical magazines which are, in truth, more touristic than anything else."

(Didi-Huberman and Giannari, 2017: 2).

Rosi is not explicitly named in the list of sinners, but it is assumed that his condemnation pertains to the excessive realism of his poetics. Rosi's images would end up being too familiar, not so shocking, even anaesthetising because of their poetic ability to embellish, gilding them, dramatic and violent acts such as those relating to migration.

On closer inspection, the critical issues found in this analysis in the works of the two artists are not on the whole related to those identified by Trione. The problem with Weiwei's aerial shots is not so much the aestheticization of landscapes, but the resulting difficulty in recognising the stories of individuals. The view from the drone maintains a wide vision of the contemporary migratory phenomenon to the detriment of the close-up view that is always present in *Fuocoammare*'s shots. Moreover, the Chinese artist's mimesis among the migrants during the documentary, and more generally his substitution with the subjects he portrays, such as the photo of Aylan Al-Kurdi, creates confusion about the artist's role. Weiwei's overacting as the artist-saviour, as a migrant, as a rescuer and as a chronicler raises questions about the appropriateness of his presence as a protagonist within the documentary. Not least, although the director's intention is to shock the viewer into action by placing a corpse in the foreground without warning, the effect is more pornographic than mobilising.

On the other hand, Rosi's filmic writing seems to give only the inhabitants of Lampedusa a name of their own. Despite the director's empathetic close-up on the eyes of the migrants, it is the names and characters of the islanders that linger. The migrants remain "migrants", their identity is not fixed in any way, and the most emblematic scenes concerning them are scenes in which they come together as a group. The local tragedy affecting the waters around the island is evident, the global scale of the phenomenon is less apparent. The human dimension is present in both *Human Flow* and *Fuocoammare* thanks to scenes that immortalise the migrants in their passionate singing, dancing and praying. However, while in Rosi this dimension is also addressed from the point of view of the host, Weiwei omits this element.

In both documentaries, we found a common desire on the part of the filmmakers to propose an alternative narrative to the one that the mass media disseminate on a daily basis regarding migration. In *Human Flow*, we identified in the emphasis on the repetition of emblematic objects a possible strategy of subversion of the linguistic and visual bombardment that affects us daily. If Weiwei challenges the bombardment of news and images through an evocative bombardment of objects, Rosi lets the scenes of the daily life of the people of Lampedusa and migrants speak for themselves in order to attack the superficiality and haste with which dramas such as the humanitarian

emergency in the Mediterranean are treated by the media. While Weiwei's eye is like a wide-angle lens on migrations around the world, Rosi's eye is a magnifying glass on the landings in Lampedusa.

If what Trione says is true, works such as those analysed in this text fail to achieve the objective of moving the masses because they do not disorient them sufficiently. The two documentaries use visual references that are too close to reality and easily assimilated by the viewer. The *artist* par excellence would only be the one who does not use reality to create dismay and raise awareness about atrocious phenomena, but who manages to create another reality, more difficult to understand and therefore potentially upsetting and mobilising. The *Artivists* "aim to reveal what is missing from reality itself. They are not interested in data, but in its meaning. They do not limit themselves to documenting, but try to prefigure what could have happened or could happen. By placing themselves not in front of, but to the side of the *extreme*, they try to arrive at more secret truths than those provided by the news" (Trione, 2022: 196, our translation).

The *Artivists* question representation per se. Among the artists mentioned by Trione, of particular interest for our discussion are Harun Farocki and Hyto Steyerl, who can be defined as documentary filmmakers on the same level as Rosi and Weiwei. Farocki focuses on the mechanism of reading images, while Steyerl questions the concepts of surveillance and invisibility, always starting from a critique of images. These two artists constitute a critical paradigm in the contemporary art world in that they not only produce images, but, first and foremost, reconsider their own status as image-makers and film-makers. Farocki is an archaeologist of representation, inviting the viewer to participate in the process of image construction and analysis. "Farocki thereby puts his finger on the essence of media violence, a 'terrorist aesthetic' (Paul Virilio) of optic stimulation, which today appears on control panels as well as on television, with its admitted goal of making the observer into either an accomplice or a potential victim, as in times of war." (Christa Blümlinger, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, <https://www.harunfarocki.de/films/1980s/1988/images-of-the-world-and-the-inscription-of-war.html>).

According to Farocki, the image system is a system that acts in the world, not something passive, but something active and operational. This system is not detached from the world of cinema, but is deeply linked to it. We are governed by the regime of images, and the only way to escape from it, according to the artist, is to become our own agents capable of interrogating them.

Steyerl's reasoning is quite the opposite: for her, it is the images that take what they want from people in an incessant flow that is difficult to control. Given that the documentary constitutes a kind of aesthetic of empirical contact with reality, since the contemporary context has made reality

digital, abstract and intangible, Steyerl wonders how a realistic attitude to documentary can still be conceived today. In order to answer this question, the German artist has adopted a documentary ethos while making the viewer aware of the fact that reality today is something fluid, abstract and elusive.

In an interview commenting on her work, Steyerl argues that she has to use fiction and humour to bring the common viewer closer, to overcome the negativity of the perceptions that come out of her works and their untranslatability by the common public. *Artivists* feel that it is difficult for their work to reach the masses, and so they have to resort to more familiar expedients that draw their attention. Similarly, *artivists*, despite their good intentions, end up repeating the problems arising from an aestheticizing or overly realistic use of images. It is crucial to consider this problematic aspect while attempting to answer a question that becomes central at this point in our discussion: can art cinema be considered a tool for the visual reconstruction of history concerning phenomena such as migration? It would certainly be naive to believe that a documentary made by visual artists can exactly record an event that took place in the past and thus become a document attesting history. On close inspection, art cinema does not present itself as a mirror of reality, something absolutely objective, since its realisation always implies the choice of a point of view and an editing activity, whether it involves first or second-class *artivists*. It is not an aseptic reconstruction of the past as it was, but rather the documentary can be a starting point for further investigation, a stimulus for the viewer's curiosity, an impetus for becoming aware of phenomena such as migration. What Trione attributes to the skill of a few good *Artivists* should be applied extensively to the art documentary intended as a source of energy for the nourishment of collective memory related to phenomena that affect humanity. "Starting from a precise awareness: there must be a non-coincidence between signs and things, which condemns every work to always recall, in itself, an absence, an emptiness". (Trione, 2022: 199, our translation)

It is this emptiness that fuels the viewers' curiosity and pushes them to focus on a phenomenon and deepen their knowledge of it. In this lies perhaps the service that art cinema can still render to history today: to be an instrument and agent of memory.

Notes

¹ The full interview can be found at <https://www.panorama.it/lifestyle/cinema/gianfranco-rosi-fuocoammare-perche-vinto-berlino?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1>

² The interview is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgOWT-1NrB4>

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Representation and Dismissal of the Past in Pasolini's Cinema

Edoardo Rugo

Introduction

The intellectual figure of Pier Paolo Pasolini has represented a standout voice in the Italian and European cultural landscapes during the second post-war period. Over the course of more than twenty years, from the beginning of the fifties to the mid-seventies, Pasolini has expressed through a variety of artistic forms an always personal and atypical thought, never fully aligned, seldom discordant, indeed, with the more “official” left, represented by the political and philosophical line of the Italian communist party. From his earliest poems in Friulian dialect and its peasant-Christian myth to his painful but lucrative move to Rome, the Italian poet and director was committed to the narration of local realities and their changes throughout history. As Guido Santato reminds us, “Pasolini’s entire artistic and intellectual experience is marked by an uninterrupted conflict between myth and history, passion and ideology, past and present.” (Santato, 2007: 15)

Like his first two novels – *Ragazzi di Vita* (1955) and *Una Vita Violenta* (1959) – and up to the release of *La Ricotta* in 1963, Pasolini’s cinematic works describe a universe, the Roman suburbs, that is a direct descendant of the cultures and populations of southern Italy, whose intrinsic ethos he claims to be still preserved.

During the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, prior to his tragic and untimely death, Pasolini became the protagonist of a very harsh critique of the changes brought about by the new consumer society that was spreading in Italy in those years. These were the years of the so-called ‘Italian economic miracle’ which over the course of a few decades would give rise to drastic transformations in the lifestyle of the peninsula’s inhabitants, leading to a renewal of local customs in favour of massive consumerism. Pasolini famously spoke out against the socio-cultural consequences of such industrial revolution: for the Italian intellectual, the arrival of consumer society brought to a total massification of the Italian people, leading to an ‘anthropological mutation’. He goes so far as to formulate a real ‘cultural genocide’ that took place in Italy during the 1960s, a deep-rooted annihilation of every local reality. The technocracy of capital and large industries – especially concentrated in the north of the country – homologated to bourgeois consumerism “the ethics, culture, social values, linguistic expression, religious sense and irrationality that constituted the multiform

heritage” of local cultures sedimented and formed over the centuries. (Murri, 2008: 148)

Nevertheless, this article does not propose to analyse specifically the various articulations in which Pasolini’s thought has been constructed over time with regard to consumer society and its characteristics. Instead, the text endeavours to show how Pasolini’s critique cannot be attributed to a mellowed vision of the pre-modern, a nostalgia for a past that was lost with the arrival of modernity. In order to clarify this crucial connotation, our aim is to understand and investigate Pasolini’s conception of history through the analysis of some of his works – above all, the film *La Ricotta* (1963).¹

Starting from a very brief overview of Christian Metz’s idea of cinema and language, the first segment of the article describes some of the most important considerations of Pasolini’s cinema theory as “the writing of reality” (*la lingua scritta della realtà*). The latter analysis, conceived by Pasolini throughout the 1960s, and the value that the body assumes in his work, enable us to take on the allegorical reading of *La Ricotta*: lingering over Pasolini’s film theory is therefore a way of extrapolating the meaning of the subproletariat and his personal conception of history from one of his cinematic works. To conclude, the last part of the text focuses on an examination of Pasolini’s dialectical conception, an analysis of some of his late writings in relation to what has been said regarding *La Ricotta*. This enables us to conceive how modernity has set a new period in history that does not leave any space for other realities.

Pasolini and the Real as a Discourse

In the mid-1960s, the French film theorist Christian Metz published an essay that paved the way for a new methodology for cinema theory. Metz’s *Cinéma: langue ou langage?* changed the paradigm through which the filmic object has been analysed until that time. From the definitory Bazinian question “What’s cinema?”, which addressed film theory within an ontological discourse, Metz’s theoretical framework gains meaning only if inscribed in the semiological field.² The French theorist makes a fundamental new step: in asking himself the conditions under which cinema can become an object of semiotics, he first refers to a research framework and then verifies the inclusion of an investigative phenomenon within it. (Casetti, 1993: 97) Metz’s answer to his own question, in a brief summary, underlines the impossibility of seeing cinema as a language (*langue*); more precisely, according to the French thinker, “there is nothing in the expressive form of cinema that can be seriously compared with the classificatory grid that a language [*langue*] projects onto the material of meaning by systematically organising it.” (Montani, 1989: 9)

In the context of this article, the main element worth dwelling upon, in order to subsequently understand the motivations of Pasolini's framework, is Metz's idea that "there is nothing in the cinema that corresponds, even metaphorically, to the second [linguistic] articulation."³ (Metz, 1991: 61) Without delving too deeply into specific linguistic issues, the 'second articulation' can be described as that which operates on the level of the signifier and not of the signified. This means that, in cinema, contrary to the written language, the distance between signifier and signified is minimal: the signifier is an image and the signified is what the image represents. If in the written language phonemes "are distinct units without their own signification" and, therefore, totally separate from the signified – i.e., there is a "great distance between content and expression" – in film language this cannot happen. A shot of a dog within a film and the dog itself can only, according to Christian Metz, "simultaneously carve out the signified and the signifier." (Metz, 1991: 63)

Into the heated debate sprung from Metz's question lies the analysis of Pier Paolo Pasolini. The Italian poet and writer embarks on a very personal and 'heretical' conception of cinema in a series of essays, later collected in 1972 by Garzanti in a book entitled *Empirismo Eretico* (Heretical Empiricism). Within these texts, it is possible to find interesting considerations regarding the socio-political potentiality intrinsic to the cinematic medium itself: Pasolini explores the discourse generated by Metz's analysis, overturning his thinking and coming to define cinema not only as a langue, but as the 'written language of reality' – "la lingua scritta della realtà".

In Pasolini's view, in the cinematographic work, contrary to what was affirmed by Metz, two different levels of articulation can be discerned. In doing so, he constitutes a theory capable of subverting Metz's statement on the system of signs: "the im-sign" (*imsegno*) is for Pasolini the *monema* on which the cinematographic langue is based, that is, the representation of each fragment of reality on the cinema screen. If for Metz we cannot further divide the shot of a dog from the image of the dog itself because they overlap, for Pasolini the opposite happens. He asserts, in fact, in the pages of his essay *La lingua scritta della realtà*: "The moneme maestro [the teacher] cannot disregard all the phonemes that compose it: just as my shot of the teacher cannot disregard the teacher's face, the blackboard, the books [...]. I can call all the objects, forms or acts of permanent reality within the cinematographic image by the name of 'cinèmi', by analogy with phonemes." (Pasolini, [1972] 1981: 202-203) The framed object thus comes to constitute the minimal cinematographic unit, the 'cinema', "because if I exclude either one or the other of the real objects in the frame, I change the frame as a signifier." (Ibid.: 202)⁴

Moving away from a purely semiological-linguistic discourse, it is possible to state that, through this type of reasoning, Pasolini sets as the foundations of his cinema the objects, individuals

and entities of which reality itself is made up: they are placed as the basic building blocks of Pasolini's theory.

Another analogy with the written language can, in any case, clarify the matter further, bringing us closer to a more complete understanding of the idea of the 'written language of reality'. It is well known that, in order to compose a work, the poet or writer must necessarily draw on a limited system, namely the vocabulary of the language he or she wants to use. To this basic assertion, Pasolini counterposes the action of the director, stating that: "the film author does not possess a dictionary but an infinite possibility." (Pasolini, [1972] 1981: 169) That is, for the director it is necessary to compose through reality, since the minimal units of his discourse can only be the objects and entities of that same reality that surrounds him. The ultimate entity of any language of the human being can therefore be reduced, following this reasoning, to action itself; the human being himself, his / her being-there thus becomes the foundation of his / her own language. If written and spoken languages are a means and an integration of this reality, cinema, on the contrary, has a privileged relationship with it, since it is its mechanical audiovisual reproduction. As Giovanni Mistrone reminds us, for Pasolini reality and cinema are thus two sides of the same language of action. The first is its spoken, free and unstable pole. The other stands as its written counterpart, codified and regulated by human conventions, i.e., the written language of reality. (Mistrone, 2018)

To quote Francesco Casetti's words on Pasolini: "Cinema exploits the signs of reality, makes them its own and re-proposes them." (Casetti, 1993: 148) Making cinema, therefore, corresponds exactly to a rewriting of the world, to the "written moment of a natural and total language." (Pasolini, [1972] 1981: 206) Consequently, a cinematographic semiology for Pasolini would consist in a real analysis of reality itself: "What is needed, therefore, it is the semiology of the language of action or tout court of reality." (ibid.)

However, Pasolini's conception of cinema as a written language of reality should not be misinterpreted as an attempt "to collapse the notion of reality onto cinema, and reintroduce a neo-Bazinian reverence for reality." (Bruno, 1991: 3-4) Quite the contrary, the relation between cinema and the real in Pasolini's theoretical framework is to be seen as "the site of interaction of historicity and the social text with the language of film." (ibid.: 4) As we previously mentioned, the cinematic language for Pasolini has the great freedom to choose from an infinite range of possibilities of the real. But it is exactly for this very reason that the director, contrary to the writer, is restricted to 'talk' exclusively through the real. The film author, thus, "can never pick up abstract terms" because cinema can only write through the reality presented to it. (Pasolini, [1972] 1981: 172) "It is specifically through the objects of reality that a camera reproduces, moment by moment." (ibid.: 229)

All this converges in a question of extreme importance, which Pasolini underlines in a letter to his colleague Carlo Lizzani. “By its very nature”, Pasolini reiterates, “cinema cannot represent the past. Cinema represents reality through reality: a man through a man; an object through an object.” (Pasolini, 2008: 2818) The only way to represent the past for the director is therefore through an allegorical structure, through a re-actualisation of the past or, better, as Gil Bartholeyns reminds us, “reterritorialising.” history (Bartholeyns, 2000)⁵

Indeed, when Pasolini talks and writes about reality, he is not referring to it as a metaphysical concept or a “ontological entity”: reality is the place in which dwells the possibility to communicate every socio-political discourse of our words. “Pasolini conceives reality as the ‘discourse of things’ that cinema re-narrates.” (Bruno, 1991: 27) This is feasible precisely because of the conception of minimal units of cinema as an entity of reality, framed by the eye of the camera. Every moment of reality thus becomes a language that can be transcribed through the medium of film: the signified itself becomes a sign, as Pasolini himself reminds us: “in reality there is no signified: because the signified is also a sign.” (Pasolini, [1972] 1981: 264) This means that objects that appear on the screen need to be seen as semiotic signifiers, “inscribed in a process of unlimited interpretation and recordings, determined and overdetermined by the instantiation of a readership.” (Bruno, 1991: 9)

The following reading of *La Ricotta* therefore starts from this theoretical conception, from this possibility of constituting an allegorical structure through reality itself, in order to describe and re-interpret the socio-political vision that characterizes Pasolini’s work during the 1960s and especially the 1970s.

Within his filmography, the most voluminously prominent object is undoubtedly the body; the body is seen as a writing process, a corporeal signifier. To properly understand this statement, it has to be underlined that, throughout his cinematographic career, Pasolini has often used actors and characters who did not come from an acting background, but from the Roman suburbs. This operation, although it might seem similar to the way in which neorealist directors have selected their actors, expresses a totally opposite view. Bodies of the pasolinian figures, like Franco Citti and Ninetto Davoli, do not represent just an attempt to reproduce reality as accurately as possible. Pasolini instead uses the corporality of his actors and actresses to express the class to which they belong and, by the way in which he places them in his films, the director enables these underclass bodies to convey a specific political meaning. The body thus, in Pasolini’s cinema, “constitutes a reserve, an archive that informs the decoding of images – the locus where signification makes its mark, embodying the social process and historicity.” (Bruno, 1991: 37)

The decision to analyse *La Ricotta* is dictated precisely by the value that the bodies represented on the screen acquire in the film. Specifically, it allows us to see how Pasolini's cinema is a statement of the politics of the body and, most importantly for our concerns, how "it reclaims the inscription of the lumpenproletariat⁶ physiognomy." (ibid.)

La Ricotta, History and Physiognomy of the Lumpenproletariat

In 1963 *Ro.Go.Pa.G.* was released in Italian cinemas, an anthology film ("film a episodi") in which Pasolini participated – along with Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard and Ugo Gregoretti – with *La Ricotta*, the director's third film effort. *La Ricotta* is a medium-length film, about 35 minutes long, characterised by a wise use of an allegorical structure that seals the director's cinematic artistic maturity.

The film is divided into two different perspectives. On one side, it is presented in colour – the first use of colour cinematography in Pasolini's filmography – an intellectual and disenchanted director, played by Orson Welles, and his crew of actors and technicians, intent on shooting a film on the passion of Christ set in the hills of Lazio. The other perspective of the film is instead shot in a pictorial black and white that easily recalls the forms already widely used by Pasolini in his previous works – consider especially the cinematography of *Accattone* (1961) and its Masaccio influences. The protagonist, in this case, is Stracci, a poor subproletariat in constant search for something to eat, who is present on the set to play the role of an extra. In addition to the use of colours in the cinematography, it is the general atmosphere that differentiates the two angles even more: while Stracci is accompanied by an austere and sacral mood even in his most farcical moments, the crew and actors often perform dances and engage in lewd behaviour.

Throughout his earlier projects, the Roman subproletariat has always been a main focus of Pasolini's work. If, in his first two novels, the inhabitants of the suburbs could only 'represent' themselves through language – i.e., through the Roman dialect that Pasolini uses in his writing – in the films, precisely for the reasons explained in the previous section, the director / writer can add a new representational possibility. Both *Accattone* and *Mamma Roma* (1962) - the two films preceding *La Ricotta* - are set outdoors, more precisely, inside the degraded Roman suburbs, and the actors who take part in them are the very inhabitants of the places where the films are shot: Pasolini thus calls

upon the underclass to play the role of itself.⁷ In *La Ricotta* essentially the same process happens: the role of Stracci is in fact played by Mario Cipriani, a real Rome's lumpenproletariat.

His third film remains, however, a step forward and a novelty in Pasolini's career as a director. In fact, it is characterised as his first narrative work with a more specifically allegorical structure, in which there is the first, albeit partial, appearance of the bourgeoisie and a metanarrative film-within-a-film structure that is unique in his film career. The critical force and maturity of this work are well underlined by Pasolini himself: "Stracci is a more mechanical character than Accattone, because it is me - and you can see it - that pulls the strings. And you can see it exactly in the constant self-irony. This is why Stracci is a less poetic character than Accattone. But he is more significant, more generalised. The crisis to which the film bears witness is not mine, but the crisis of a certain way of seeing the problems of Italian society (...) Stracci is no longer a hero of the Roman underclass as a specific problem but is the symbolic hero of the Third World." (Murri, 2008: 39)

The crisis Pasolini refers to in this excerpt is the crisis of the underclass, of local realities outside the bourgeois world. The working years of *La Ricotta* are, indeed, the years in which the 'anthropological mutation' denounced by Pasolini at the end of the decade was already beginning to become a tangible reality. In order to fully understand the motivations behind such a peremptory definition, one must first recall how Pasolini often underlined a shift within the logic of conformism in the peninsula before and after the economic boom. The Italian population used to appear conformed to its corresponding class, but with the consolidation of consumer society it began being homologated 'according to an interclass code'. "The cultural model offered to Italians – Pasolini recalls – is unilateral", namely the bourgeois and consumerist one. "The conformation to this model is first of all in the lived experience, in the existential: and therefore, in the body and in behaviour." (Pasolini, 1999: 322). As he would write a few years after the publication of *La Ricotta*: "Consumerism consists in fact in a real anthropological cataclysm: and I live, existentially, this cataclysm that, at least for now, is pure degradation: I live it in my days, in the forms of my existence, in my body". (Pasolini, 1999: 382) It is precisely with regard to these considerations on the body that the film's dichotomous constitution seems to conceal its fundamental hinge.

On the one hand, in fact, the film-within-a-film that director Orson Welles⁸ is about to shoot is a paroxysmal formalistic work: the passion scenes are actual *tableaux vivants* taken from 16th-century Italian Mannerist painters⁹, staged in saturated or even "kitsch" colours - according to Serafino Murri's definition (Murri, 2008). Besides such a deliberately forced formal choice, the staging of the *tableaux vivants* is characterised by scenes with a comic and de-sacralising flavour, in Pasolini's successful attempt to ridicule an austere representation of the Passion. Every try to film the

fateful moments of the Gospel story, in fact, is constantly accompanied by errors and distractions in the mise-en-scene that frustrate director Welles' efforts, mystifying the fictitious sacred aura that this type of representation should entail, the climax of which is represented by the clumsy fall from the cross during the filming of the actor impersonating Christ.

The fundamental passage that the reader must bear in mind in this examination lies in the value attributed to the representation of the Passion. In fact, the analysis reported here intends to establish how the representation of the imago christi in *La Ricotta* is not limited to questioning the history of the pictorial-visual tradition for its own sake - through the images of the Mannerists and the influences of Masaccio - but it extends to a dialogue concerning the tradition as such. Already through the bodies of the *tableaux vivants*, Pasolini constitutes an allegorical structure, a challenge to a bourgeois concept of religion¹⁰ - and therefore, metonymically, of society - represented precisely by this extremely mannered and forced way of representing religion itself. The actors' bourgeois bodies and their derision in the mise en scène embody the bourgeois ethos, i.e., the vision of the world and society that was becoming the only possible one in those years.

The film's dichotomous approach, divided between the static depiction of the Gospel stories and Stracci's life in constant search of food, can therefore be interpreted as a dual mode of depiction of history of representation itself, two divergent ways to represent the past (and, consequently, the present). The only way - as we have seen early in the text - to achieve this analogy is through the allegorical construction: "that is, by representing a modern time in some way analogous to the past. [...] The past becomes a metaphor for the present: in a complex relationship because the present is the figural integration of the past." (Pasolini, 2008: 2118-2119)

For if the hieratic nature of the bodies in the *tableaux vivants* is to be seen as an allegory of bourgeois history; they are consequently accompanied by an opposite way of representing the sacred. Such immobility of the representation of the past is thus "countered by a living Christ figure." (Vert, 2010: 4) This figure is represented by Stracci, by his story and his corporeity.

Stracci, after various vicissitudes, manages to find something to eat, namely the 'ricotta' that gives the film its title. However, he ends up bingeing himself to excess in front of the much sought-after food. In the midst of this voracious feast, the extra is suddenly called upon to fulfil his task: to act in a section of the film as one of the thieves crucified next to Christ. The heat, the extremely hasty meal and the uncomfortable position - Stracci is placed, as per script, on one of the crosses - lead the poor protagonist to a real death on the cross by congestion, amidst general indifference. Stracci thus becomes, in the eyes of the spectator, the true Christ-like figure of the film, downgrading to mere

extras those who were supposed to symbolise the most significant evangelical figures. Stracci's body is thus emblematically crowned¹¹ as a new messianic figure, in all its plasticity and allegorical value as a sub-proletarian body. As previously mentioned, the human physiognomy never assumes a banal role in Pasolini's cinematography, but rather always embodies a discursiveness of political value. As the author recalls, "there will never be a body if not the political appearance of a body." (Vert, 2010: 5) The body, therefore, must be seen as an emblematic example of a definitive social transformation according to the Italian director. For the latter indeed, within consumerism a completely new mode of production has started: this entails the Marxist concept that to a new mode of production corresponds a new model of social relations and so a drastic change of the former cannot but entail a new type of humanity: "the goods produced are totally new and the type of humanity that is produced is totally new." (Pasolini, 2008: 2840). Objects and goods – that is, commodities - are, following Federico Sollazzo's reasoning, "educators par excellence" for each person. "This is because every single thing is a linguistic sign that communicates or expresses something. The whole world, therefore, is a semiological dimension in which people are completely and constantly immersed, thus receiving the lesson that these symbols, things, provide." (Sollazzo, 2013: 422)

Mass production and the massification of consumption has thus decreed for Pasolini "an expropriation of the body of the young people: the last place where reality, that is, the body, the *corpo popolare*, used to live has thus disappeared." (Santato, 2007: 32) Within a cinema intended as a "written language of reality", the physiognomy, the plasticity, the language of action of Stracci-Cipriani - who metonymically embodies the entire popular body of the Roman suburbs - can be erected as an allegory of the *Weltanschauung* of his class, crushed by the mass consumerism of the economic miracle. The figure of Stracci, on the other hand, is not only the bearer of the values of his class in the very moment of the filming. On the contrary, following the reasoning previously developed on the representation of the past in Pasolini's films, the *corpo popolare* embodied by Stracci-Cipriani comes to represent the past and the history of the sub-proletariat, peremptorily different from that of the bourgeoisie. The election of the underclass as a Christ-like figure is not directed towards a momentary and conservative attempt to preserve a class that is now on the verge of extinction. Through the representation of the bodies and their socio-political value Pasolini wants to stage an act of redemption of the subproletariat and a reformulation of his present conception of history and society: *La Ricotta* thus expresses a desacralisation "of old symbols in order to sacralise new ones." (Subini, 2009: 107) In other words, Pasolini succeeds in demystifying the perfection that modern bourgeois society believes it embodies. At the same time, however, he was able to elevate to sacredness what society was repudiating and to elect a subject on the edge of the world as a messianic symbol, the symbol of a class in extinction. In this double act of desacralisation-sacralisation lies a

revolutionary possibility: once he realised that Stracci had died on the cross, director Welles closes the film with an emblematic phrase: “Poor Stracci! Dying... was his only way of making a revolution¹²”.

“Death is for Stracci a means through which he can affirm his existence, and thus keep his essence alive: his senseless life, ignored by everyone, acquires meaning only when it is completed, in death.” (Arlorosi, 2009: 263) This, then, becomes Stracci’s true revolution: through his death, he redeems a social class on the verge of extinction. Pasolini’s approach is therefore in turn revolutionary, since in his act of sacralising the underclass, he seeks to save a certain past, a peculiar ethos from the oblivion of the bourgeois history. Stracci’s elevation to a Christ-like figure, on the other hand, responds to an attempt to reformulate the present through a vanishing past. “I extract from the past a form of life that I polemically oppose to the present one, that is, I actualise the present,” Pasolini recalls (Pasolini, 1999: 1710).

The Force of the Past / The Dialectics and the Disillusion

To further understand how the desacralisation of the sacred and sacralisation of the profane in *La Ricotta* can be considered a historical-political act of revolutionary reformulation of the present, it is necessary to take a step back within the film.

In the middle of *La Ricotta*, the director character, tired of the banality of the questions of an interviewer who had come to the set for a journalistic article, decides to read and recite a poem. The poem in question is one of Pasolini’s writings, which was later published in the selection of poems “Poesie in forma di Rosa”. The part of text read in the film is the follow:

I am a force of the Past.

My love lies only in tradition.

I come from the ruins, the churches,
the altarpieces, the villages

abandoned in the Apennines or foothills of the Alps where my brothers once lived.

I wander like a madman down the Tuscolana, down the Appia like a dog without a master.

Or I see the twilights, the mornings over Rome, the Ciociaria, the world, as the first acts of Posthistory
to which I bear witness, by arbitrary birthright, from the outer edge

of some buried age. Monstrous is the man born of a dead woman's womb.

And I, a fetus now grown, roam about more modern than any modern man, in search of brothers no longer alive.

(Pasolini, Sartarelli, and Ivory, 2014: 312-313)

The subject of the poem, the 'force of the past' mentioned at the beginning, in the context of *La Ricotta* is represented by Stracci. As we have seen, in fact, his value of the past is made possible by the allegorical system on which Pasolini's cinematographic thought is based: Stracci embodies the culture of his class; he, like the "force of the past", is rooted in "tradition", in the "ruins", from whence he comes. (Arlorosi, 2009: 261) It is exactly in this tradition, then, where the "force" of Stracci dwells: in the culture that he represents and his collocation in the role of messianic figure left vacated by the desacralisation of the *tableaux vivant*.

The revolutionary potentiality symbolised by Stracci's death lies therefore in the value of its act: the violent insertion of his figure, with all his intrinsic meanings, into the pre-established order. The values that Stracci embeds through his figure opens then the doors to the possibility to overcome the present order in the attempt to achieve a different conception of history, 'other' than the bourgeois one. As Roberto Cavallini reminds us, "Pasolini's subjective negotiation between past and present is materialized in his works as a radical proposition to imagine the future and therefore to make sense of time itself." (Cavallini, 2016: 215)

The juxtaposition of a forgotten past, of debris of history - to put it in Benjaminian words - into the present makes *La Ricotta* "a much more genuinely dialectical film than its predecessors" (Murri, 2008); dialectical, however, in a strictly Pasolinian sense. The pasolinian dialectic is a 'contradictory' one, as he himself reminds us in a famous interview with Jean DufLOT. (DufLOT, 1977) It does not predispose a Hegelian *Aufhebung*¹³, but a continuous and uninterrupted historical stratification. The possibility of change, the flow of history is therefore due to a continuous intermingling of past and present forces, which collide with each other¹⁴. "Pasolini's heretical conception of time is based on the idea that the living present is a spectral and ambiguous mixture of past evocations and future projections" (Cavallini 2016, 215).

The conception of history of the Italian intellectual can be read, thus, in the same way in which Franco Fortini has described Pasolini's entire artistic work. Fortini thought that the oeuvres of Pasolini should be outlined with the word "syneciosis": that is, the rhetorical figure that consists of expressing two opposites at the same time, but not in order to oppose each other (as in antithesis). In Pasolini "the world presents itself as an infinite plurality, [...] an unquenchable polarity that does not

allow for overcoming”. (Fortini, 1993: 22)

No idea of the past therefore has to be lost for the Friulan poet and director; past moments lie unheard, waiting: Pasolini’s utopia “tends to overturn the past into revolution and vice versa: only the past is revolutionary”. (Santato, 2007: 27)

The “Forces of the Past”, therefore, do not simply represent a nostalgic memory, a value lost in the passing of time; they must always remain quiescent seeds in every present in the possibility of being remixed in the historical past. The sacralisation of Stracci, and in general of that dying class that was the Roman underclass, is therefore allegorically identified with a dialectical act of deflagration of the bourgeois system. In this lies the revolutionary value of Stracci, in his dialectical act of inserting an ‘other’ past into the neocapitalist present.

On the other hand, Stracci is said to be a witness “from the outer edge of some buried age” of “the firsts act of Posthistory”. Pasolini has already understood in the early sixties that the subproletariat class was heading towards extinction. A new idea of history was rising: the posthistory (*dopostoria*) of the new neocapitalist society, called in this manner in the poem because of its dialectical structure, i.e., its fagocitation of every moment of the past that creates a new form of totalization: for Pasolini, then, is clear that “neocapitalistic industrialisation will desiccate the seed of History” (Pasolini, 1999: 1566). What Pasolini calls the ‘seed [germ] of History’ turns out to be precisely that heterogeneity of cultures liquidated by the new consumerism: the figures in Pasolini’s novel and, above all, the characters in his films thus represent the ultimate example of this heterogeneity, the anachronistic testimony of any ‘other’ cultures.

In 1975, Pasolini published an article in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* entitled *Il mio Accattone in TV dopo il genocidio*. In the text, the author asserts peremptorily that “if I wanted to film *Accattone* today, I could no longer do so” (Pasolini, 1999: 677). The affirmation meant that the ‘anthropological mutation’ he had indicated a decade earlier has in 1975 come to fruition: the homologation of the Italian population is such that it is impossible to represent the *corpo popolare* in the cinema, because all the subproletariat population has been assimilated culturally and physically into the bourgeoisie. In view of what has been said about Pasolini’s dialectical conception, however, the denunciation of the lack of characters to shoot *Accattone* and, therefore, the absence of a Cipriani for *La Ricotta*, must be read not only as an invective against the disappearance of an ancient world but also and above all as Pasolini’s serious fear of the disappearance of a dialectical possibility. The transformation brought about by the revolutionary changes of the consumer society does not only entails a homogenisation of cultural particularisms, but a real loss of a past that carried within itself

an ‘other’ thought, opposed to the dominant one. The most famous and evocative accusation against the all-encompassing modernity that had invested Italy in those years can be found in another article that appeared in the *Corriere della Sera*, published in the newspaper shortly after the one described above: The power vacuum in Italy, best known as *The article of the fireflies*. In this article, the Italian writer uses a meaningful metaphor to express the anthropological mutation. “Something has happened in the last ten years”, writes the intellectual, “and I shall call that something ‘disappearance of the fireflies’” (Pasolini, 1999: 405). Pasolini thus recounts how, during the 1960s, due to air and water pollution in the countryside caused by industry, the species of firefly disappeared in Italy. But obviously, the author wants to underline how the decimation of fireflies undergoing during those years had a much wider meaning. Indeed, the disappearance of the fireflies must be seen instead by following the same dialectical pattern as in the discussion of *La Ricotta*. The poetic analogy acquires a more articulated meaning than the disappearance of the human figures Pasolini loved so much: the peasants, the old underclass, all crushed by neo capitalist standardisation. The figure of Stracci in *La Ricotta*, his lumpenproletariat body, as we have said, did not represent just Pasolini’s contemporary roman subproletariat, but a whole subaltern class’ conception of history, a past and an ethos to be dialectically counterposed to the bourgeois’ present worldview of the ruling class.

If we see the image of the fireflies as the poetic representation of the figure of Stracci and the values he embeds, we come to the conclusion that it is the past itself that is in danger of extinction; and with it, a pasolinian possibility of formulating his vision of the dialectic. From the so-called ‘disappearance of the fireflies’ onwards, Pasolini “could no longer see where or how the Past [might] impact the Now to produce” new formulations of the present: the revolutionary act of Stracci’s death on the cross cannot occur anymore (Didi-Huberman, 2018: 32). Georges Didi Hubermann has rightly called ‘the disappearance of the fireflies’ the “disappearance of survivals”, i.e., “the dismissal of the anthropological conditions of resistance to Italian neofascist’s centralized power” that the fireflies, the Stracci and the subproletariat’s ethos represent (Didi- Huberman, 2018: 31).

Within a decade, therefore, we have gone from the revolutionary representation of Stracci’s crucifixion to the blind desperation of the fireflies’ article. *La Ricotta* still carried with it an attempt, a hope to unhinge the advance of the consumer society and to redeem the underclass. Through The fireflies’ article instead Pasolini wants to stage a real extinction of the past perpetrated by modernity, which does not even leave room for dialectical otherness but totalizes the whole of reality.

Notes

¹ The choice of *La Ricotta* was dictated by several factors. Within Pasolini's cinematography there is no lack of examples with which one can establish a discourse at least analogous to that carried out in these pages - it is enough to think of the political use of the body in the so-called 'Trilogia della Vita' (Rumble, 1996) or the analysis of 'Notes Towards an African Orestes' ['Appunti per un'Orestide Africana'] showed in Bianchi, 2015. However, taking into consideration *La Ricotta*, a film released in 1963, and assisting the analysis with some of Pasolini's articles written in the 1970s, it is possible to trace a broader discourse regarding the evolution of Pasolini's thought. Secondly, the allegorical structure that constitutes the foundations of the film makes *La Ricotta* one of the director's most personal and critical films, enables the following text to linger over the representation of past, history and classes.

² In this regard, please refer to Casetti, 1993: 98-99.

³ For further consideration please refer to Metz 1991: 61-88.

⁴ For more in-depth information regarding the topic, please refer to Pasolini [1972] 1981: 198-226.

⁵ For Gil Bartholeyns, Pasolini's "artistic programme consists of reviving the past by reinventing it" (Bartholeyns, 2000: 36). Bartholeyns uses the term "reterritorializing history" as to describe those Pasolini's films set in a non-specified past, like those of the 'Trilogia della vita' or *Medea*. However, in our analysis we decided to open Bartholeyns' statement up to Pasolini's entire oeuvre, with special reference to the arguments that will be presented later for *La Ricotta*.

⁶ Composed of the German 'lumpen', meaning rag, the term lumpenproletariat literally means a proletarian dressed in rags. Coined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the term is used within Marxist theory to refer to the poorest stratum of the proletariat, or, as in this case, those who have no fixed employment and receive no income. Considering that the protagonist of *La Ricotta* is called by Pasolini "Stracci" (rags), the use in this context is almost inevitable.

⁷ As mentioned above, this attitude should not be confused with a direct neo-realistic derivation. As Michael Vesia suggests, neorealism can in fact be seen as "cinema of reconstruction", i.e. a cinema that witnesses the devastation of war with strongly documentary intentions (Vesia, 2005: 54-55). On the contrary, Pasolini's early cinema can be indicated as a "cinema of destruction", because in its desire to represent reality there is a challenge to contemporary bourgeois society.

⁸ Not to be confused with the director-Pasolini.

⁹ The two paintings in question are *The Deposition* (1521) by Rosso Fiorentino and *Transporting Christ to the Sepulchre* (1526-28) by Jacopo Pontormo.

¹⁰ As Alberto Moravia had already noted on the release of the film in the pages of *L'Espresso*, the desecrating way of representing the scenes of the Passion in *La Ricotta* is determined by Pasolini's desire "to tear Christ, the Madonna and the Saints out of the theatrical and insignificant attitudes in which they had been confined for three centuries of Counter-Reformation conventionality and make them move and live in a new way" (Subini, 2009: 195).

¹¹ The crown of thorns used in the film can eventually be seen as an anticipation of Stracci's fate: filmed in black and white and found near the rubbish on the set, it is erected in an evocative shot of simple sacredness.

¹² It is interesting to at least recall here the story of this last line. The censorship has indeed altered it: "Poor Stracci! Dying... he had no other way to remember us that he was alive" (Subini, 2009). Despite the cancellation of the word "revolution", the censorship does not change at all the meaning of the sentence. Quite the contrary, it underlines its significance: it is the act of reminding us that Stracci - or rather the subproletariat/Third World - is still alive that is revolutionary.

¹³ As Matteo Bianchi has underlined: “Pasolini’s utopia leaves no room for any *Aufhebung*, hence for any overcoming, but only for a synthesis of past and present that remain unaltered” (Bianchi, 2015: 39).

¹⁴ Pasolini has never hidden the contradictoriness of his theory: “I am equally aware, however, that such data [the data of the past] are never eliminated but are permanent. It may be irrational, but it is so” (Pasolini and Duflot, 1983: 77).

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Representing the Last Military Dictatorship in Argentina: The Example of the Graphic Novel *ESMA* (Juan Carrá, Iñaki Echeverría)

Aurélia Gafsi

From 1976 to 1983, a military dictatorship introduced a high level of violence in the Argentinian society. The junta used the idea of a threatening “subversion” to legitimate a systematic, illegal and brutal repression against any possible opponent. Afterwards, the dictatorship became infamous for the forced disappearance of numerous victims and for the use of death flights. Since 1977, a group of citizens has protested to know the truth about their missing loved ones. Today we know them as the Grandmother of the Plaza de Mayo. Since the end of the dictatorship until now, the Argentinian society has demanded justice and truth for the victims and has also put forward the need to remember them. In 2017, the Supreme Court’s decision to shorten the sentence of a former executioner by applying a law that had been repealed since 2001 caused outrage. Human rights associations and victims’ families organized demonstrations to denounce this decision. This legal decision shows that forty years after the dictatorship, justice for the victims and the memory of the recent past may be in danger. The graphic chronicle *ESMA* was created in this context. Its authors are Juan Carrá, a journalist who covered the trial ESMA III (2012-2017), and Iñaki Echeverría, an illustrator. Their book creates a visual history of the last dictatorship with three reading inputs. First, nine chapters corresponding to the graphic novel genre show the third trial and the military repression between 1976 and 1983. Secondly, each chapter ends with two didactic pages narrating a concrete experience of the military repression. Those pages mark a pedagogical rupture, given that they do not follow the graphic novel’s pattern, even though they associate images and text. They put forward the authors’ will to represent and transmit the past with individual examples. Thirdly, the book ends with annexes composed of maps and a glossary. This part completes the graphic novel adding pure historical facts. The originality of *ESMA* lies in its structure. It transforms this work into a symbolical place of memory that creates a community of victims and images of recent history. Our study of the visual history created in *ESMA* will be divided in two: first, the graphic representation of the military repression in the past; then, the depiction of the consequences of the dictatorship in the present through images of the struggle for truth and justice.

Representing the Repression

A. The clandestine arrests

In *ESMA*, the presentation of repression reconstructs the military *modus operandi*. Chapter 3 highlights the different stages of repressive violence. The first one is the clandestine arrests carried out by the « Grupo de Tareas 3.3.2 »¹ as shown in the last panel on page 35, which recreates an arrest scene (Fig. 1).

A medium shot shows a man whose head is covered by a hood. He is the vanishing point of the image. On each side two men appear to be forcing him forward. They are dressed in civilian clothes (during clandestine arrests the members of the military were not usually in military uniform) and their faces are cut off at the nose. This is the first graphic representation of clandestine arrests. This representation of an act of repression is completed by several panels in the penultimate chapter. They show in more detail a scene of clandestine arrest. This chapter is dedicated to the disappearance of the French nuns Léonie Duquet and Alice Domon in December 1977. The arrest depicted is that of a group to which the nuns belonged. The last panel on page 103 is a medium shot showing silhouettes (Fig. 2).

On the left of the picture two military men are recognizable by their rifles and helmets, while on the right three figures - with their hands on their heads - represent the future prisoners. The next three panels focus on the figure of a soldier with two types of shots: a medium shot and with a medium close-up. These three panels also adopt three different points of view: first, in profile, then three quarter back (we see his chest but his face is turned so that we cannot even see his profile) and finally from the front (Fig. 3).

These three images of a soldier² underline the dynamic participation of the soldiers in arrests of groups considered subversive by the junta. In this graphic chronicle, the imagery of repressive

strategies does not stop at clandestine arrests. Indeed, the authors have dedicated several pages to the killing of ESMA prisoners during the death flights³.

B. The death flights

For the representation of the death flights, we must keep focusing on Chapter 3, which, as we have already mentioned, shows the stages of repression. The final stage was the death flights.

The testimonies on this subject make a graphic representation of this physical and lethal violence possible (Fig. 4, 5, 6).

The first representation of this repressive process is an extreme close-up. The two thirds of the panel are empty and contrast with the right-hand side which focuses on a full syringe and four fingers of the hand holding it. The extreme close-up of the syringe makes it an instrument of repression and a symbol of the death flights. Indeed, the survivors' testimonies indicate that the military used to drug the victims before throwing them out of the plane. Thus, the logical continuation of this panel is a general shot showing a plane in the sky. As in the previous panel, most of the image has a white background. It contrasts with the black colour of the plane already in flight and of the trail it leaves behind. The image of the plane is repeated thereafter but with nuances. The next panel - the first one on page 40 - also shows the aircraft in flight. There is a change in framing: it is a general shot showing it from closer, which explains its more detailed graphics. While in the previous panel the plane was just a black shape, here the light grey colour makes it possible to distinguish the two engines and the open hatch under the plane. These lightgrey elements contrast with the rest of the aircraft in black. The detail of the open hatch is very important in relation to the tiny human figure underneath the aircraft. The size of this silhouette creates a discrepancy with the plane, a sign that the state repression was breaking individuals. Moreover, in a more pragmatic way, this figure represents the victims thrown into the sea. But the representation of death flights in this panel goes further. In the left-hand corner of the image, another silhouette stands out, from behind, in a low angle, whose legs and one arm can be seen. The close-up on this part of a silhouette questions the reader. They may interpret this as someone looking up at the sky in which the depicted death flights occurred. The next panel leaves the reader in doubt because this time the image is almost empty except for the text on the right and on the left corner and for a shape on the left. This black shape can be understood as an extreme close-up of the silhouette from the previous image. It could therefore be a very close-up of the shoulder of the figure previously seen from behind. The identity of this figure seems to be resolved in the next and last panel of the page which is a medium close-up of the journalist. He appears to be lying on the ground close to a light source as two rectangles of light are reflected on him, possibly from a window. The position of the journalist lying on the ground, with his head towards the sky, allows us to express the hypothesis that the figure that appeared in the two previous panels as an observer of the flights of death is his.

Therefore, the fictitious journalist becomes an observer of the visual presentation of military

repression. The images of clandestine arrests and of the death flights are mainly close-ups that aim to reconstruct scenes of repression of which there are no real images. The image thus becomes a tool to try to fill the visual void around repression and reconstruct *a posteriori* this historical phenomenon by focusing on the fate of the victims.

C. The portraits of the missing victims

The missing victims' graphic representation is mainly concentrated in the double pages at the end of Chapters 1 to 8. Indeed, these pages focus on the victims' individual or family trajectory. Those pages interrupt the graphic novel structure and refer to the genre of the chronicle. The portraits do not appear as panels but are inserted directly next to the text with or without a frame. They are close-ups or very close-ups of the faces, with the exception of one image that we will study later. They are generally of a large format. For example, in the first double page of this type, the portrait of Rodolfo Walsh takes up more than half the page (Fig. 7).

This portrait is characterised by a three-quarter viewpoint. The choice of an intermediate point of view between front and profile is repeated in the double page on Elisa Tokar, at the end of Chapter 4 (Fig. 8).

This time, the victim is portrayed in a very close-up of her face, part of which is cut off. Moreover, the graphic design is simpler than for Rodolfo Walsh's face, as shown for example by the drawing of the mouth as a line. A graphic distinction is thus made between these two victims' depictions in the degree of precision. In the double pages, the portrait that is most striking for its precision is that of Inés Ollero at the end of Chapter 6 (Fig. 9)

This portrait appears at the end of the double page and takes up half the page. The very close-up on her face adopts a front point of view that allows the whole face to be seen. Compared to other victims' portraits, there are fewer pencil strokes and the drawing of the eyes, nose and mouth is particularly detailed. This precise representation creates a graphic presence of the missing victim. And the frontal viewpoint may evoke the photographs of the disappeared civilians held up during demonstrations on behalf of these victims of repression.

The sketchy or more detailed portraits of the missing victims are therefore the central axis of their representation. Apart from the double pages at the end of the chapters, the use of portraits of disappeared victims characterizes a chapter in particular: Chapter 8, that we already mentioned for the representation of clandestine arrests. It reconstructs the clandestine arrest of a group including the French nuns Alice Dumont and Léonie Duquet on December 8, 1977, in Santa Cruz.

This graphic reconstruction is done with panels showing the opposition between the armed military and the defenceless civilians. Moreover, the portraits of the people who disappeared after the arrest create a community of victims (Fig. 10).

The portraits are organized in small vertical rectangular panels stuck together in two lines. These close-ups of the faces put forward the missing victims and their memory.

All the victims' depictions we have studied are portraits. We want to put forward an image of a victim that is an exception because it is not a portrait. This is the depiction of Ricardo Aníbal Dios Castro at the end of Chapter 2.

It is an exception because it shows a victim's corpse in medium shot. It therefore differs from the portraits in the other double pages, which are close-ups of the victim's face while he or she was still alive. Here, the face is precisely the least visible part of the image, as the body lying on the ground is the vanishing point. Moreover, the face, whose profile can be seen, is drawn in very little detail. This is the first and only representation of a corpse in the graphic novel. This image is all the more striking because the black spots on the upper part of the body evoke the victim's blood.

Thus, this image represents the victim after the act of repression, whereas the other images represented the victims before the military repression.

Therefore, the visual representation of the military repression shows the techniques used by the junta (clandestine arrests, death flights) and the victims of this extreme violence. *ESMA* creates a visual history about an aspect of the last dictatorship. Moreover, it also puts forward the actual consequences of this period. Indeed, the authors highlight the struggle for truth and justice conducted by several types of protagonists: victims' families, associations, the fictitious journalist and the prosecutor in charge of the trial.

The Consequences of the Dictatorship in the Present: Putting the Struggle for Truth and Justice into Images

A. The work of victims' families and associations

The images of the quest of truth and justice begin with a representation of the work of the associations. In Argentina, the best known associations are the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (1977), the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (1977), the Argentine Historical and Social

Memory Foundation (1987), the H.I.J.O.S⁴ Association (1995); the Memory, Truth and Justice Commission (1996) and the Provincial Commission for Memory (1999).

In the graphic novel, the role of associations is represented even before the first chapter, in the page that follows the authors' text: "Sobre este libro"⁵. The first page of the book is a medium shot that occupies the whole page and shows a demonstration for the missing victims (Fig. 11).

In the foreground, two people are holding up a photograph of their disappeared loved one. In the background, other photographs are held up by participants of the encounter. This is a mass meeting that readers - especially those in Buenos Aires - may recognise particularly well. Indeed, every Thursday afternoon since 1977, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo have been going around the square proclaiming the names of the disappeared victims and carrying their portraits at arm's length. Thus, this first page highlights the role of a specific association that embodies the quest of victims' families for truth and justice. The choice of placing this image at the beginning of the book seems to indicate the authors' desire to be part of this quest. Indeed, at the end of "Sobre este libro", they associate the book with the titanic task of recovering the recent past. Moreover, this representation of a demonstration of victims' families holding up photographs of the disappeared family members is also present in the second chapter. Page 29 is characterised by a single panel which is the image previously analysed. The only difference is that here there is text in the top left which reproduces a quote from the prosecutor Mercedes Soiza Reilly. The quote emphasizes the collective nature of the search for truth that is still relevant in society. The image of the manifestation for the missing victims illustrates this idea. The repetition of the middle plan of the demonstration for the disappeared reinforces the emphasis on the active role of the victims' families organized into associations. In addition, this panel highlights the issue of the 30,000 missing victims. Their portraits carried by the two demonstrators in the centre of the image publicly mark the families' willingness to remember and to demand justice. The use of visual supports (photographs of the disappeared, placards) is part of the context of demonstrations. They are a privileged tool for the victims' families and associations in search of truth and justice. An example of it is shown throughout Chapter 6. This chapter stands out from the others by the presence of an introductory paragraph before the first panels. It contextualizes the upcoming panels in time and space: "Buenos Aires, 24 de marzo de 2016", and then briefly describes the event. It was the 40th anniversary of the military coup d'état, a meaningful commemoration day for the victims' families, and more widely the Argentinian society. This textual presentation to

the chapter thus introduces this encounter during which the fictional journalist meets Miriam Lewin, an ESMA survivor. The graphic representation of the demonstration alternates between close-ups of symbols and close-ups of militants. The symbols are multiple and are displayed on placards. There are many images of placards in the chapter, which underlines the use of visual supports in the manifestations. Some of the signs are not legible or partially hidden, but the very fact that they are shown emphasizes the committed nature of the gathering. Among the legible signs, the one in the first panel of the chapter is central: it is a close-up that focuses on a large poster that reads: “Nunca más”⁶. The letter “n” is hidden by a flag, but this does not prevent us from deducing the slogan made famous by the title of the CONADEP report in 1984.

The choice to start the chapter with a poster reading this expression puts forward the visual demands of the human rights militants. Another demand represented at the beginning of the chapter is the need not to forget the disappeared victims. The last panel on page 76 is a medium shot of the indistinct faces of the demonstrators, among whom one individual stands out on the right of the image. His face appears above those of the others, as if he were standing on someone’s shoulders,

and what makes him even more singular in the image is that he holds up a sign announcing: “30,000 presenters?”. This phrase refers to the 30,000 disappeared and to the habit of saying “present” after each one of their names during the demonstrations of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The representation of this sign therefore reinforces the active and committed character of the demonstration, through this refusal to forget. Moreover, it is a visual support that gives a voice to the demonstrators by transmitting their demands. These demands can be expressed through slogans and also through symbols that combine text and image. This is the case of the logo “Juicio y castigo”⁷ preceded by a drawing of the military kepi of the members of the Navy. It is present in three panels on pages 81 and 82 (Fig. 12).

The slogan itself appears in the background of this panel in Chapter 6 on page 81, and then the kepi and part of the slogan are in very close-up on the right of the next panel. These two successive panels thus provide two views of this symbol, which is associated each time with the representation of individuals (Miriam Lewin, the journalist and anonymous demonstrators). The second panel we mentioned is a bird’s eye view that echoes with an eye-level panel at the beginning of the next page. The repetition of this very close-up on the logo with a different point of view underlines the importance of this symbol, which we will come back later in the context of the trial.

Regarding the demonstration depicted in this chapter, we should underline that the placards present not only the demands (through slogans and symbols) but also the role of the individuals. Indeed, in the first panel of the chapter, a sign is superimposed on the “Nunca más” sign and reads “Centro de estudiantes”⁸. This image insists on the role of the younger generation. Furthermore, the role of the victims’ families and the associations is reinforced by medium shots showing the group of demonstrators. Two panels represent their active role and echo each other. They have in common a chest shot of individuals holding a poster at length (Fig. 13, 14).

The first panel is superimposed on the main rectangular panel. It shows the participants of the demonstration. In the foreground, the reader can see two women wearing the white headscarf, which is the symbol of the Grandmothers’ Association of the Plaza de Mayo. This foreground thus represents the importance of this particular association in public manifestations. On page 81 another panel echoes this one. It represents a man and a woman holding a sign. In the background there are

other faces, including a woman in profile wearing a white headscarf, which is also the case of the woman in the foreground. In addition to the role of the associations symbolized by these women with white headscarves, the role of anonymous individuals is also shown. The two panels we have just studied show the role of associations and individuals in the context of the mass meeting. Beyond individuals, the chapter also represents the importance of the group. Indeed, from page 82 to the end of the chapter the medium close-up of the group represent individuals gradually disappearing. The first two panels on page 82 are close-ups of the demonstrators’ faces (in profile and then in front) with little detail.

After these panels, the faces give way to barely drawn faces at the beginning of page 83: the pencil strokes on the faces are more numerous and evoke a sketch. The final stage of this gradual erasure of individual faces in the group occurs in the final panels on pages 83 and 84 (Fig. 15, 16).

They clearly echo each other graphically because the treatment of the individuals is the same. The faces and bodies are no longer visible; the reader can only guess them by the many semi-circular pencil lines that evoke the tops of the heads on a light grey background. In the last panel on page 83, these evocative forms are in the foreground. The individuals are only represented by a minimalist form, but their struggle for truth and justice is still represented because there are signs in the background. In contrast, the last panel on the next page is even more minimalist: the background is completely light grey, there is neither foreground nor

background, only a few semi- circles. In this image, the symbols of the demonstration have disappeared, and the only remaining idea is the group represented by these shapes.

The image of the associations' work is followed by the symbols representing their demands in the context of the trial. We have already analysed the symbols associated with the manifestations in Chapter 6. It should be noted that the symbols of the associations' quest for truth and justice go beyond the demonstrations. This is particularly true of the "Juicio y castigo" logo. It appears in the comic for the first time in Chapter 2 with the last panel on page 26. It is a close-up superimposed on a panel showing the inside of the courthouse. It puts forward the logo that claims "Juicio castigo" underneath the drawing of the Navy's military kepi (Fig. 17).

Finally, at the very end of the last chapter this symbol is introduced again as a sign at the bottom of the main panel. The close-up of the sign is superimposed on the close-up of the Comodoro Py⁹ building. This association of the logo with the trial building thus underlines the role of the associations and the victims' families in the trial (Fig. 18).

Indeed, the last chapter abundantly represents these protagonists in their quest for justice and truth. On pages 116 and 117 several panels show the victims' families waiting for the verdict of the trial outside the Comodoro Py (Fig. 19, 20).

The last two panels on page 116 are medium shots of individuals holding the portrait of a disappeared person in their hands. The graphic reproduction of these close-up portraits of victims emphasizes the commitment of these families to fight against oblivion and for justice. Their role is reinforced by the first panel on the next page. A chest shot shows a group of individuals. The person in the centre of the image is holding up the portrait of a "disappeared" in the foreground and a series of portraits of missing victims in the background. The collective character of this image underlines the role of groups constituted around associations. The group's image is also important in the two panels of the last chapter (Fig. 21).

These panels divide the page in two with two chest shots that represent two components of the group of justice and truth activists. The first one focuses on two relatively elderly women who are in the foreground, facing away from the camera, applauding the reading of the sentences. The question of their age (the woman on the left has a cane) is not insignificant because, combined with the white headscarf they wear, they embody the founders of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo Association. They are representative of the first generation of militants. The second generation is represented by the following panel. Here too, the chest shot puts forward two women in the foreground holding the portrait of a missing person. As in the previous panel, the

background shows individuals with less graphic detail. In both cases the graphic design highlights two figures in the foreground who embody both the founding generation and the second generation of activists. Thus,

this page shows their role in the trial and especially in its outcome, as the individuals are shown waiting for the verdict.

The work of the associations in the search for justice and truth is therefore represented graphically by symbols (the white headscarf, the “Juicio y castigo” logo) and by people forming a group of human rights militants. In addition to these protagonists of the struggle for justice and truth, *ESMA* shows two other individuals involved in this struggle: the fictitious journalist and the prosecutor Mercedes Soiza Reilly.

2. The research work of the journalist and the prosecutor

At the end of “Sobre este libro” the authors announce that the role of the fictional journalist is to cover the trial (2012-2017), which makes him directly involved in the quest for justice through the trial. The journalist is the only fictitious character in the graphic novel. He embodies the authors and represents their investigation work prior to the creation of *ESMA*. But before the representation of this documentation work, it is first of all the birth of his interest in the period of the last dictatorship that is represented. The first chapter focuses on the journalist’s personality through a series of close-ups and very close-ups of his face that give an introspective value. In the first person singular, the character narrates that his interest in the dictatorship comes from his discovery of the movie *La Noche de los Lápices*¹⁰ (Héctor Olivera, 1986) at the age of 11. This important moment is illustrated in the first panel on page 15, which partially reproduces the poster of the movie (Fig. 22).

The actual poster is characterised by a close-up of the faces of the seven teenagers from La Plata who had demonstrated against the increase in student transport fares and who were arrested, kidnapped and murdered in September 1976. The right of the poster represents the face of a young man, blindfolded and with his mouth open. It takes up twice as much space as the other six faces. These are on the left of the poster, much smaller and not blindfolded. Because of the rectangular format of the panel and of the text superimposed on the left, the poster’s layout represents four of the seven faces present in the real referent. The most important one is of course the one highlighted on the poster: that of the blindfolded young man. In the panel, the difference in size

between this central face and the other faces is reproduced. Moreover, the sketch style reinforces this difference. The blindfolded face is more detailed than the other three, whose mouths are hardly drawn at all; whereas the central face has a mouth that is an essential element in establishing the link between the

image and the movie poster. This is therefore a partial representation of the poster. However, the partial nature of the reproduction does not prevent a visual link with the real image. Indeed, the authors have chosen to reproduce the second plane of the poster as well. On the poster, a red background (which evokes a blood puddle) with rounded contours serves as a background for the faces. Since the graphic novel is in black and white, the reproduction of this background is done exclusively through the outlines, and in the bottom right-hand corner there is a demarcation between the black background (which occupies the majority of the panel) and a white background in this corner. This demarcation thus recalls the background of the film poster and further anchors the panel in its relationship with the real referent.

Once the origin of the journalist's interest in this period has been established with the graphic reproduction of the poster for *La Noche de los Lápices*, it is possible to put his research work into images. This is the case at the beginning of Chapter 2, with a very close-up view of the hand writing in pen on a notebook. Let's put this panel in the context of the page. The two previous graphic panels are portraits of soldiers (Jorge Acosta, Alfredo Astiz) accompanied by a description of their role in the repression. The very close-up of the hand taking notes is accompanied by a text panel that concludes with the role of Astiz. The reader can therefore deduce that the note-taking hand is that of the journalist whose research and information gathering work is being created before our eyes. This work of researching and formatting data is even more present at the very beginning of Chapter 3, with two complementary panels that illustrate the work of the journalist in the quest for the truth about repression.

The first panel is a close-up of a diagram of the organisation of Grupo de Tareas 3.3.2. The diagram is divided into three columns: « Inteligencia », « Operaciones », « Logística »¹¹. In addition to showing the division of labour of this group, the image highlights the diversity of repressive actions that appear in the column: « secuestros », « robo de autos », « saqueo + botín de guerra »¹². The representation of a diagram illustrates the research work carried out by the journalist. The same page gives another image of this work with a chest shot showing the character in profile working on a computer. The image of the journalist in a work situation is renewed with

the first panel of Chapter 7, which is a very close-up view of his hands typing on a computer keyboard. Thus, the representation of the journalist's role (who researches and collects information on ESMA and on the news of the trial) uses close-ups or very close-up shots that highlight the research work done in a quest for truth shared by the associations.

In addition to the journalist, another figure - a real one this time - is portrayed in an attitude of research as part of the quest for justice and truth. This is the prosecutor Mercedes Soiza Reilly. She is particularly present graphically in Chapter 4 where she talks to the fictional journalist. Pages 48 and 49 highlight the graphic representation of her research work. Indeed, this double page is characterised by the presence of five small rectangular panels that are superimposed on the main graphic panel (Fig. 23, 24).

The overlapping panels are located to the side of the main panels. They are very close-ups of the files in the prosecutor's office. These very close-ups create a freeze-frame effect and emphasize that these material elements should not go unnoticed. They show piles of documents (for the first, fourth and last small panels), briefcases (for the second panel) and annotated sheets (for the third panel). These small panels put forward the materialization of the prosecutor's work. The main panels also participate in the representation of the documentation to reconstruct the recent past in the context of the trial. This is the case for the first two panels on page 49.

The first one shows the journalist and Mercedes Soiza Reilly shaking hands in the foreground. In the background, her office is shown: on the left there are shelves with document holders (which refer to the small panel at the end of the previous page) and on the right there are annotated sheets of paper which seem to be stuck to the wall. This last element is not a detail because the following panel focuses on these sheets on the wall. They construct a schema composed of portrait titles and arrows that establish logical links between the various elements. However, the close-up does not allow us to read what is written on them or to distinguish the faces, since all this information is only sketched out with pencil lines. What is important is the effect created by these numerous documents and not the information itself. This image keeps the content of the diagram vague but underlines the work of documentation, which here involves the elaboration of logical links to reconstruct the mechanisms of repression in the context of the trial.

The struggle for truth and justice in relation to the dictatorship is portrayed in two groups of images. On the one hand are those that illustrate the role and demands of the victims' associations and families (during demonstrations, during the trial). On the other hand are those that highlight

the research and documentation work carried out by the fictional journalist and the prosecutor. Both categories of images represent collective and individual efforts in the search for truth and justice in relation to the military repression of the last dictatorship.

In the prologue to *El pasado que miramos: Memoria e imagen ante la historia reciente*¹³ (Claudia Feld and Jessica Stites Mor, 2009), the German researcher Andreas Huyssen puts forward the need for the use of images. According to him: « no hay memoria sin imágenes, no hay conocimiento sin posibilidad de ver, aun si las imágenes no pueden proporcionar un conocimiento total »¹⁴. Images are therefore necessary in the process of memory, even if the knowledge they convey may not be complete. Indeed, images create in *ESMA* a visual history of the repression during the military dictatorship and also show how this historical period still has consequences in the present. This graphic novel demonstrates that visual art is a powerful tool to represent the recent past. In the case of the last military dictatorship in Argentina, the phenomenon of compelled disappearances constitutes an obstacle to the visual representation of this deadly violence. In the introduction to the book they coordinated, Claudia Feld and Jessica Stites Mor point out that the dictatorship erased the material marks of the political violence. A difficulty in portraying the repression is therefore the absence of concrete traces of it, due to the almost systematic erasure of these traces by the military. Therefore, the representation of the repression with images fights against the silence imposed by the junta who tried to hide this illegal and extreme violence. Juan Carrá and Iñaki Echeverría provide a visual history that creates a link between the past and the present. Thus, the depiction of the consequences of the dictatorship in the present is as important as the representation of the repression. Both reveal the mark left by the dictatorship in Argentinian society.

Notes

¹ The group in charge of the clandestine arrests of victims who were then taken to ESMA.

² This time in military uniform, whereas in the arrest depicted in Chapter 3 the two soldiers were in civilian clothes

³ The expression was used by a former Navy officer, Adolfo Scilingo, in 1996.

⁴ “Sons” (my translation).

⁵ “About this book” (my translation)

- ⁶ “Never again”(my translation).
⁷ “Trial and punishment” (my translation).
⁸ “Student Center” (my translation). (The traduction is ours)
⁹ The Buenos Aires’ courthouse
¹⁰ “The *Night of the Pencils*”.
¹¹ “Intelligence”, “Operations”, “Logistics” (my translation).. (The traduction is ours)
¹² “kidnappings”, “car theft”, “looting + war booty” (my translation). (The traduction is ours)
¹³ “The past we look back on: Memory and Image in the face of recent history” (my translation). (The traduction is ours)
¹⁴ “there is no memory without images

Images: courtesy Juan Carrá and Iñaki Echeverría

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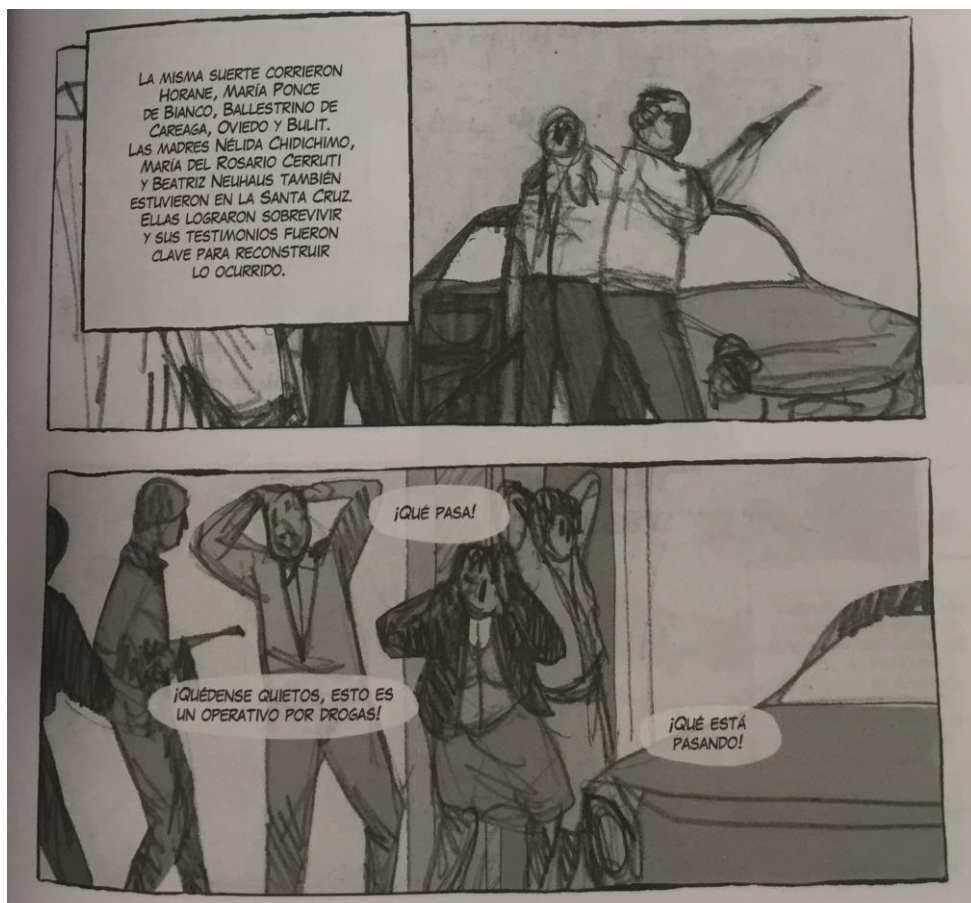
Valenzuela, Andrés. “Cómo abordar la dictadura desde la historieta | “¿Qué querés ser cuando seas grande?”, de Marcelo Pulido”. *Página12*, (2020).

Fig. 1



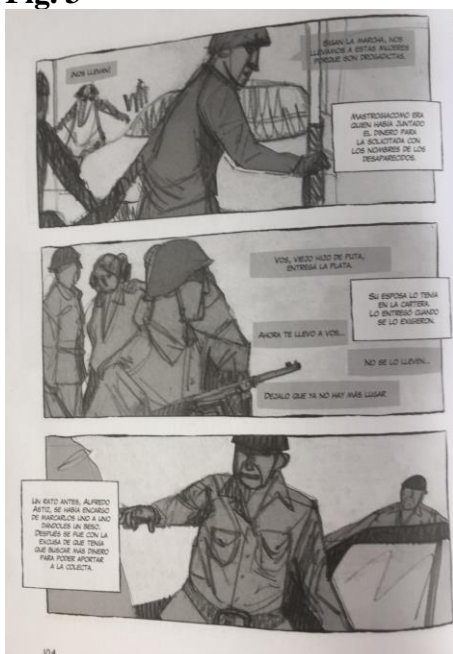
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Fig. 2



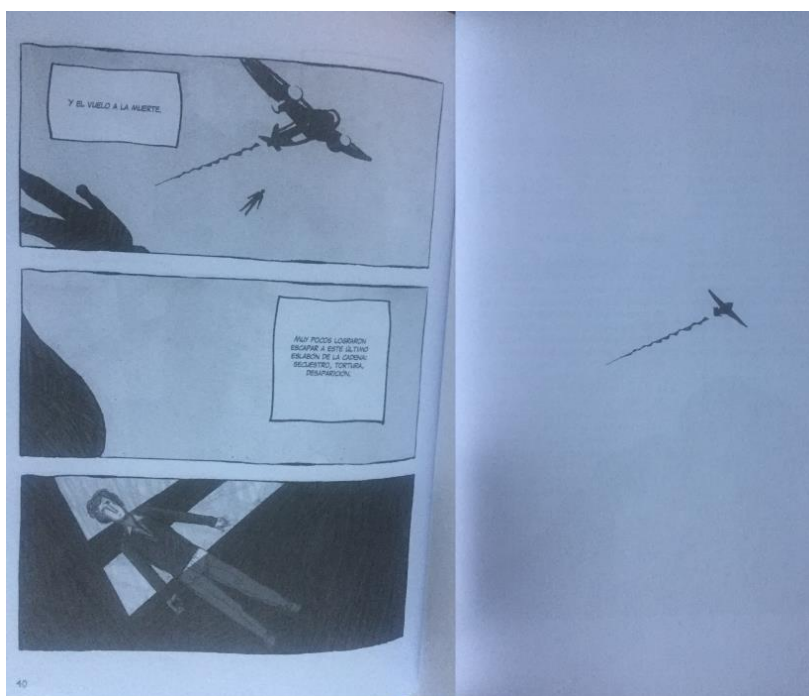
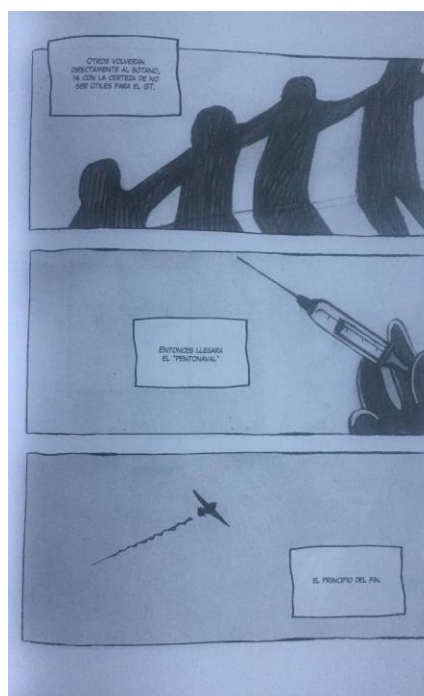
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Fig. 3



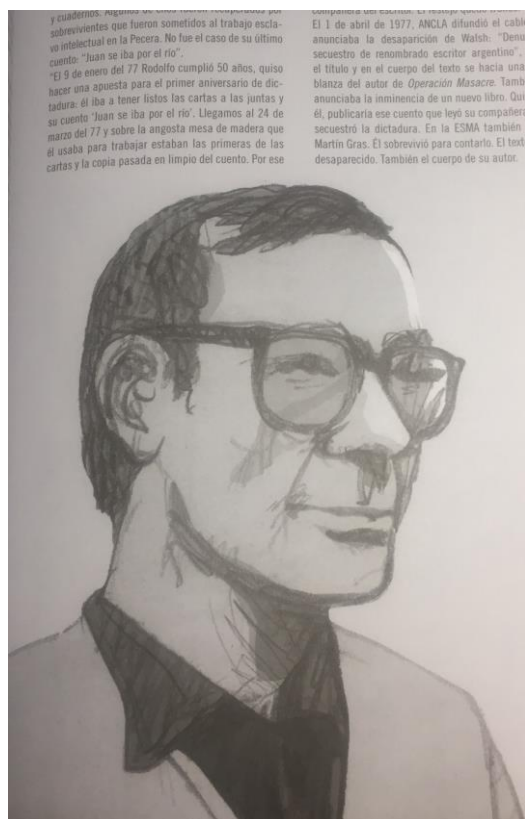
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Fig. 4, 5, 6



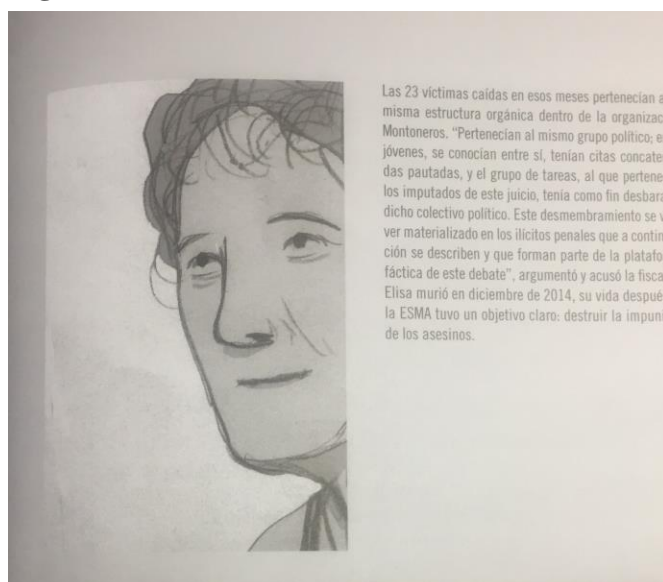
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Fig. 7



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Fig. 8



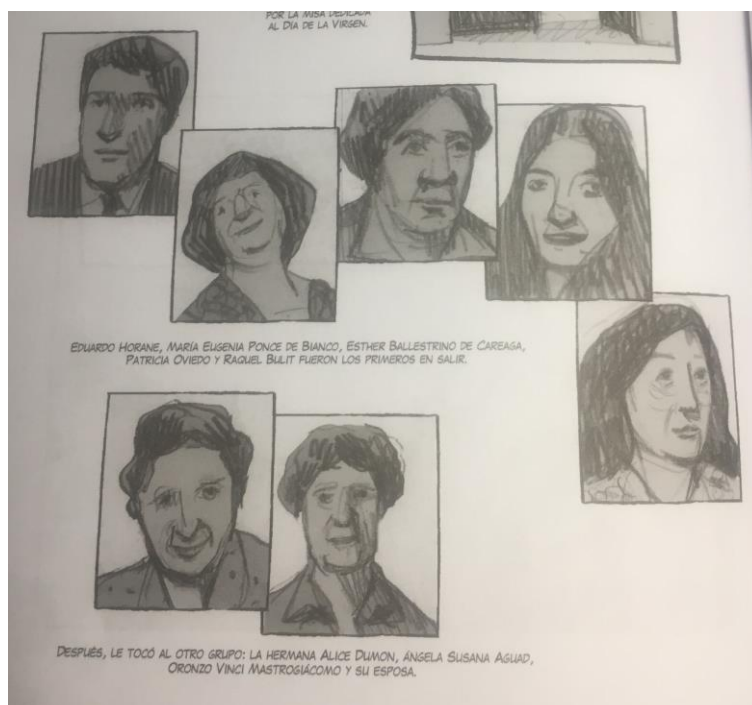
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En el colectivo, los miembros de la Marina dijeron haber
El es colectivo, los miembros de la Marina dijeron haber
encamado "pandillas partidarias subversivas". Nueve
estaba que eran presas del Partido Comunista. Sobre
esto se interrogó a los pasajeros. Inés fue la única que
fue detenida de manera ilegal y fue trasladada a la
cárcel de la Marina. Allí, como la suerte de la mayoría de los detenidos
CAM, ANI, como la suerte de la mayoría de los detenidos
"trastornada". Aun así desapareció.
"Inés estudiaba y trabajaba. Tenía la decisión y la
voluntad de ser protagonista de su tiempo. Militaba

Estaba convencido de que Inés estaba ahí. Y después
se demostró que era cierto por el testimonio de una
sobreviviente", recordó Graciela Rosenblum, miembro
de la LAOM, que mantuvo contacto permanente con el
padre de Inés durante su búsqueda.
El poeta José Murillo escribió más de un verso para
Inés. "Hay una estrella que los estudiantes de la Uni-
versidad de La Plata le pusieron el nombre de Ana
Diego. Debería haber un ave, la más bella de nuestra
patria, que lleve el nombre de Inés Otero".

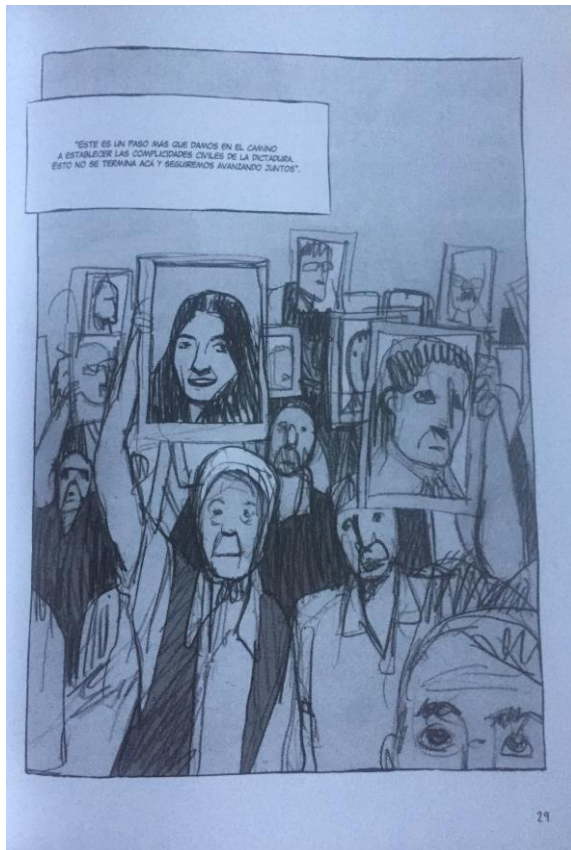


Fig. 10



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Fig. 11



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Fig. 12



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Fig. 13, 14



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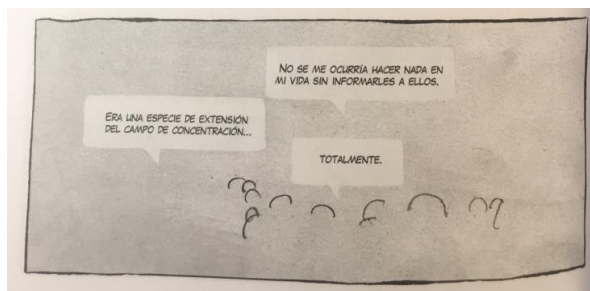
Fig. 15, 16



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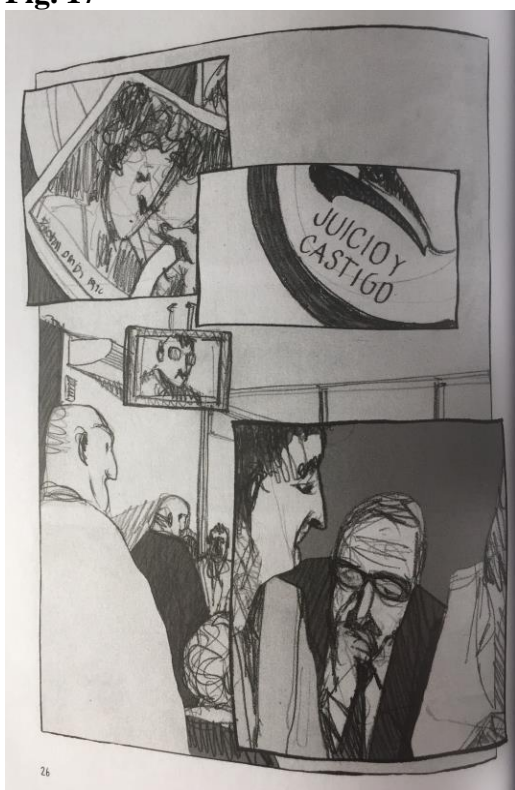


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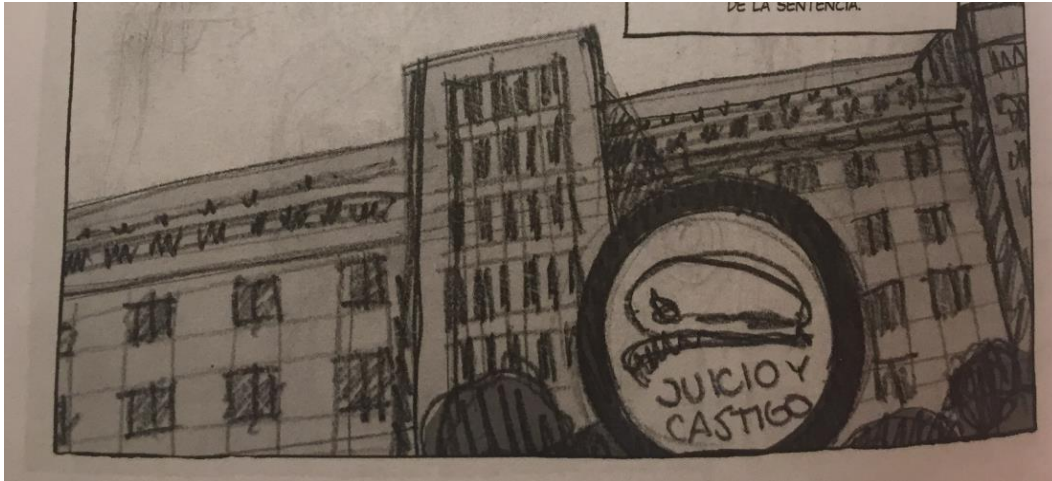
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Fig. 19, 20



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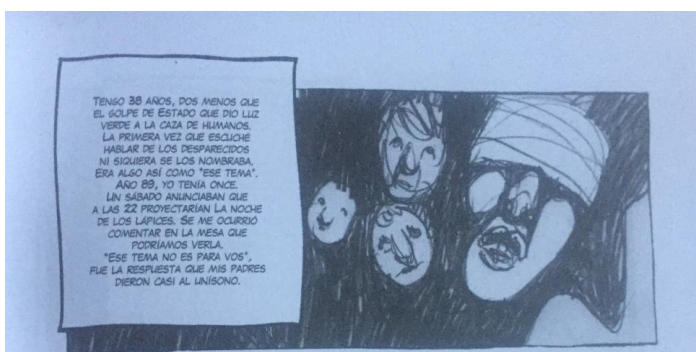
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Fig. 21



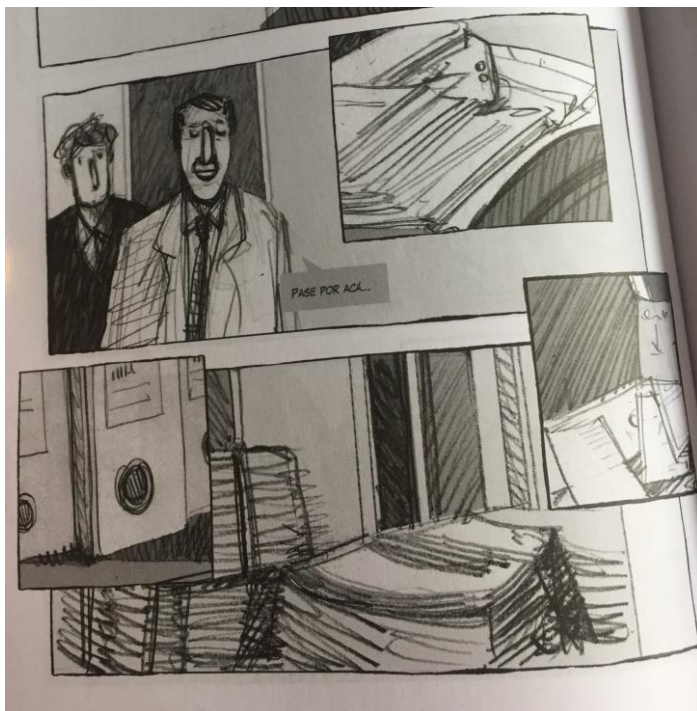
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Fig. 22



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Fig. 23, 24



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Representations of the Past in Visual Form as a Tool in Educational Process. An Example of History of Spain Till XIX Century

Ewa Grajber

The term “visual history” combines two words. History as events that took place in the past seem to be unchanging, and only their interpretation is variable. However, we do know that what the written sources convey is only a selected part of history that the author of the words or person who commissions the text to be written wanted to tell us. On the other hand, the term “visual” refers to our perception through sight, which is all the more important since we live in an audiovisual world that combines text, sound, and image, and even offers us a virtual participation in another reality. Piotr Witek points to this new character of our reality when writing about methodological problems of visual history: “Visual history emerged as a research trend resulting from transformations of contemporary verbal culture into audiovisual.” (Witek, 2014: 176). This transformation affects various areas of our life, including education. In the case of history, learning about events that happened in the past has traditionally been based on written sources. As a result of the development of technology, since the 19th century we also have useful non-verbal sources such as photographs and later recordings and films, thanks to which we can see and hear what happened in the past. Works of art also offer us a wide range of possibilities, as they store the memory of events expressed in visual form.

Historians debate the possibilities that visual sources open up to them, about the potential of visual history and the risk associated with it, about new skills and requirements from the historian and new research methods useful for the analysis of audiovisual representations of the past (Skotarczak, 2012; Saryusz-Wolska, 2020). According to Gerhard Paul, German historian and professor of history and didactics of history, images can be understood as sources, as media and as generative powers, and most of the historical studies focus on five levels: “(1.) context and functional analysis, where based on historiographic source criticism production conditions, genesis and functions of historic pictures are analysed; (2.) the actual product analysis, e.g. the analysis of semiology, semantics and, if need be, on the pragmatism of visual testimonies; (3.) the analysis of iconization processes, i.e. the question of how and why certain images advance to become icons of the cultural memory; (4.) the analyses of processes of inter picturality and media transfer, that is, the question of how certain subjects and motifs communicate with other images and move through the

world of images or, respectively, enter into other media and as a result of this transfer change their original meaning, as well as (5.) the audience and use analysis, i.e. the question of how images are utilized, functionalized and refunctioned within cultural memory and for identity construction.” (Paul, 2011: 4).

This paper examines selected examples of artistic works from different times of Spanish history till the 19th century to show their value and utility in supporting the educational process. It is focused on two levels indicated by Paul: context and functional analysis (to show practical and symbolic function of the object), and the audience and use analysis (to reveal how the object was used for political purpose, to create or affirm unity, personality or identity).

In every case, a short, historical context will be described, the primary function of the object, its meaning or message, and the proposed purpose of the analysis. The task of the students is always to observe, to describe what they see, to identify what is essential, to determinate what is historical fact and what is expression of ideology, to list vocabulary, to define terms, to exchange opinions, and to try to find comparisons or references to other historical periods or to the present.

Medieval Vision of the World in the Tapestry of Creation in the Museum of the Cathedral of Girona

Historical context

In 711 began the Arab conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. The Catalan cities in the late 8th century passed under the protection of Franks and the territory of Catalonia, called Spanish March, became the border area between Muslims and Christians. The first counties started to form there, among which Barcelona gained the dominant role. Count Wilfred the Hairy, the first of the lineage of the House of Barcelona, promoted the repopulation of lands recovered after the reconquest and wanted to make the Catalan bishoprics independent from Narbonne. He founded, among others, the monastery of Ripoll, which became the intellectual center, the most valuable in Europe for producing and copying manuscripts. It still preserves some of the most important medieval manuscripts, such as the Bibles of Ripoll and Rodes.

In the 11th century, Castile and Leon establishes its domination in the Iberian Peninsula. For its part, Catalonia in the times of count Ramón Berenguer the Great strengthened its ties with Italian

and Provencal lands. The Catalan, Genoese and Pisan fleets fought against the Muslim pirates who occupied the Balearic Islands.

Due to the conflicts and violence that filled the new feudal society throughout the 11th century, a peace movement emerged in France. Its promoter in Catalonia was Bishop Oliba, the abbot of Ripoll, considered the founder of the Truce of God. Taking advantage of his trips to Rome, Oliba hired master builders from the north of Italy, which contributed to the introduction to Catalonia of the Lombard Romanesque style that reached its splendor in the churches of the Boí Valley, an exceptional example of the art of the 11th and 12th centuries. Another unique work preserved in the cathedral of Girona dates from the same period: the tapestry that represents Christ Pantocrator and different scenes of creation accompanied by short explanatory texts, where we can find influences of the classical, Carolingian and Byzantine world.

Object and Its Function

The Tapestry of Creation was made in the second half of the 11th century, especially for the Cathedral of Girona, where it could probably be solemnly placed in 1097, during a council presided by the papal legate and the archbishop of Toledo (Castiñeiras, 2016: 12). The function of tapestry was liturgical and symbolic. It has been preserved fragmentarily (original size was probably 480 x 540 cm) and is exhibited at the Cathedral's Museum. The piece is formed of fringes of wool fabric embroidered with the *acu pictae* technique, with vivid and contrasted colors, where the black thread is used to design the figures as in a mural painting. It represents the action of God on the earth through the act of creation. The Pantocrator being in the center is surrounded by the scenes of creation of the world, a representation that seems to be a wheel (two circles with the space between them divided into spokes). The circles are inscribed in a rectangle where four winds occupy its angles. The representations of the Sun, Moon, year, seasons, months, rivers of paradise, biblical characters are placed as a frame. In the poorly preserved lower part, we discover the story of the Invention of the Cross by Saint Helena. In Catalonia, fabrics, carpets and tapestries were used in important ceremonies. In front of the altar, for example, as liturgical tablecloths, curtains, banners, decoration for the naves, apses, walls and columns. The Tapestry of Creation shows the greatness of the act of creation, the possibility of making Easter calculations, which leads us to the celebration of Resurrection Sunday, and alludes to Saint Helena who has found the places of Passion and

Resurrection of Christ. Probably, it was used as a carpet in the presbytery at Easter celebrations and the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (Castiñeiras, 2016: 77-85).

Purpose of the Analyses

The aim of analyses can be to gather knowledge about the ideological program presented on a Tapestry, its symbolic function, to find other similar objects from the same period, as well as looking for sources of inspiration.

The Tapestry of Creation gives us the opportunity to become familiar with a kind of theological treatise which presents the connection of the earth with heaven through the creative activity of God, who is present at the beginning of creation as a trinity. The central figure of Jesus is *Logos* understood in antiquity as an order, a rule, and therefore, a way out of the chaos that God arranged in the act of creation. God is also the creator of the time which is represented as the calendar (months, seasons and possibly the days as well). The Tapestry itself shows how vast the field of interpretation can be. The production technique can be analysed, trying to identify features that help to determine for what purpose the object was made. We can look for some examples of similar manufactures such as the Tapestry of Saint Ewald in the church of Saint Kunibert in Cologne, the star mantle of Emperor Henry II, the tapestry from the Cathedral of Bayeux. They allow us to identify similarities and differences, as well as the peculiarity of the Girona Tapestry. Thanks to scientific analyses (such as the one presented in the work of Manuel Castiñeiras *El tapiz de la creación*), it is possible to look for analogies and sources of inspiration for the creators of the ideological program, which could have been medieval miniatures adorning books from the monastery of Ripoll. The composition of representations may suggest that the celestial planisphere was its model. We can also discover other period influences, such as the classic representation of the four winds as young men with wings on their backs and feet. Furthermore, the Tapestry could convey a social and political message using references to power as a Sun, an allusion to the image of Constantine as *Sol Invictus*. It can be interpreted in the context of relationship between two political powers, spiritual and temporal, and supremacy of the *Sacerdotium* over the *Regnum*, in view of the fact that the Council in 1097 was convened to resolve, among other things, the internal conflicts in the Catalan church and to affirm the power of Count Ramón Berenguer III, who was protected by the Holy See. In 1100, Berenguer confirmed all the possessions of the bishop of Girona (Castiñeiras, 2016: 87).

Another aim of analyses can be to show the link between a word and an image, i.e. illustrating *Genesis* chapters about creation. The task may also be to discover the presented object and its functions, or to describe the activities of the persons. Additionally, the images of animals can be an excuse to talk about the medieval bestiary.

The Representation of the Medieval Legend and Miracle in the Cathedral of Santo Domingo de la Calzada (Architecture and Living Animals)

Historical Context

Over the centuries, many pilgrims wandered Camino de Santiago, the route leading to Santiago de Compostela, where, according to tradition, the tomb of St. James the Apostle was discovered in the 9th century. Along the route, declared World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO, roads, bridges, hospitals and temples were built, creating a unique complex. Such was the activity of Domingo García, living in the 11th century, known as Saint Dominic of the Causeway (Santo Domingo de la Calzada). The village on the way was named after him. The saint was not only a builder who wanted to ease the way for pilgrims, but he also performed miracles. One of the most famous concerns a German pilgrim unjustly hanged and miraculously alive by the intercession of the saint. The Mayor of the city could not believe the miracle, saying that the pilgrim was as alive as two roast chickens served for dinner on his table. The chickens came to life and a henhouse with a live cock and hen in the Cathedral of Santo Domingo de la Calzada remind us about it to this day.

Object and Its Function

The Cathedral of Santo Domingo de la Calzada has a special monument, which it is a Gothic henhouse made in the 15th century of polychromatic stone and hung inside on one of the walls like a birdhouse. This fact makes the cathedral a unique church, which constantly houses living animals in its interior, white cock and hen, changed approximately every two weeks. They can be seen behind the decorative grille. On both sides of the henhouse there are images of the birds inhabiting them. However, their symbolic function is more important. It may be a living memory reminder of the

miracle. Visitors to the cathedral inevitably turn their eyes to the henhouse, which is well displayed and from which one can hear the cackling of birds. The animals were in the cathedral before the mid-14th century, which confirms the bull of Pope Clement VI of 1350, who granted indulgences to those who visit the cathedral and watch the birds (Pérez Escohotado, 2009: 80).

Purpose of the Analyses

The life of Saint Dominic, inherently connected to the Camino de Santiago, can be the starting point for getting to know the route recognized as world heritage, as well as selected buildings associated with it. A henhouse is a beautiful and curious construction representing late gothic art. It is also an interesting example of how architecture and living animals can be used to materialize a legend. The object affects our senses of sight, hearing and even smell. Should we believe in medieval hagiographies? How fiction and reality were understood when there had not yet been a clear distinction between popular culture and the culture of the elites? What does it mean “to believe” in the case to believe or not in the miracle? In “El milagro del gallo y la gallina en la literatura popular europea del siglo XVI” Luís Manuel Calvo Salgado suggests a reflection on these questions. In addition, we are dealing here with a miracle related to the pilgrim, and pilgrims often took various kinds of items as a souvenir or as a testimony of the realized way, like the shells of St. James. What stands out in analysed case, is that the animals are not a simple re-presentation of miracle but they are similar to those original birds that came to life. Pilgrims took feathers as confirmation of their pilgrimage but perhaps also to protect them on the way: “Thus they reaffirm their sentient relationship, especially visual and tactile, with the animals of the miracle or with their caged descendants, a relationship that united the laity to the sacred through the five senses.” (Calvo Salgado, 2002: 28, my translation¹)

A henhouse as an original visual form is as a trigger to evoke the person of Saint Dominic and his miracle, which can be a pretext for discussions about medieval thinking. Besides, Javier Pérez Escohotado points two more interesting aspects. The miracle may be related to the spread of alchemy and game books that offered recipes such as how to make a chicken jump. On the other hand, a certain rivalry can be observed between the saints James and Dominic, both considered authors of the same miracle. This rivalry would reflect the historical time in which La Rioja (where the town of Santo Domingo de la Calzada is located), a territory between other more important kingdoms of Castile, Navarra and Aragon, tried to affirm its personality or identity (Pérez Escohotado, 2009: 68).

Additionally, we can observe that the legend remained not only in written and visual form (in the cathedral we can also see paintings or sculptures that depict it) but also in a saying about the town: *Santo Domingo de la Calzada donde cantó la gallina después de asada* (Santo Domingo de la Calzada where the hen crowed after being roasted).

Three Concepts of Unity in the Government Policy of the Catholic Kings Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile in the Main Altarpiece of the Royal Chapel of Granada

Historical Context

In 1410 the last king of the House of Barcelona died and two years later Ferdinand of Antequera, of the Castilian Trastámara dynasty was chosen king of the Crown of Aragon. His children continued to fight for their Castilian possessions and finally they failed. The elder son, Alfonso V, had no official heir, and his younger brother, John II, king consort of Navarra, inherited the right to the crown of Aragon. John II of Navarra was in a dispute over power with his son from his first marriage, whereby, he led the country to civil war. On the other hand, he negotiated with Castile a marriage of his son, Ferdinand (from his second marriage). In Castile, there were also fights between the children of John II of Castile, from two different marriages. Finally, Isabella received a crown, and her wedding became a crucial issue for Castile's future. The young infanta decided to give her hand to Ferdinand of Aragon. Their wedding was secretly celebrated in Valladolid in 1469 uniting the two branches of the Trastámara dynasty. The dynastic union between the Crowns of Castile and Aragon, actually linked several different kingdoms that kept their own institutions and laws, although Castile dominated among them. The year 1492 was a key moment in the reign of Isabella and Ferdinand. With the conquest of Granada, the war with the Nasrid kingdom, the last Muslim enclave in the Peninsula, ended. In recognition of their merits for Christianity and the Church, Pope Alexander awarded them the title of the Catholic Monarchs. After the reconquest, Isabella supported the expedition of Christopher Columbus who arrived in America that same year, beginning the period of future discoveries and conquests of the New World. It was also the year in which the expulsion of Jews who refused to be baptized was declared, followed by Muslims a few years later. The grandson of Catholic Monarch, Charles I, as Emperor Charles V, fought for the faith, on the one hand with the Reformation, and on the other, against the Ottoman Empire that was threatening Europe.

Object and its Function

It was a wish of the Catholic Kings to be buried in Granada. To commemorate the greatest achievement of their reign, the political and religious unification of Spain after the conquest of the last Muslim redoubt on the Iberian Peninsula, their bodies were buried in the Royal Chapel of the Cathedral of Granada. Their grandson, Emperor Charles V, wished to magnify the mausoleum and hired numerous relevant artists to decorate the Royal Chapel. The Main Altarpiece stands out, finished in 1522. The altar, whose composition resembles a triumphal arch, has an extremely rich iconographic program. The reliefs in the lower part represent the taking of Granada and the baptism of the Moriscos. In the center are the most important scenes, Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist, the patron saints of the kings, and their martyrdom. Over them, there is a Crucifixion, Holy Spirit and God the Father. In another bass-relief we find the scenes of the life and martyrdom of Jesus, and a series of personas: apostles, Peter and Paul, the evangelists and four Fathers of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Kings as orators, are represented twice as bas-reliefs on both sides of the scenes depicting the conquest of Granada, and over them, as sculptures protruding beyond the main body of the altar, having behind the backs the saint patrons of their kingdoms, Saint George and Saint James.

Purpose of the Analyses

First of all, the altar is an example of how art can reflect stories and political ideas, how it can be propaganda. Students can be asked to find representations related to the two kings connected by a dynastic union (the figures of kings and saint patrons), as well as to identify historical scenes (The Catholic Monarch with the Christian armies, King Boabdil handing over to them the keys to the city of Granada, the baptism of the converted Muslims). The question we may ask is why these scenes were chosen? How can we characterize them? How can we interpret them in the context of the whole altarpiece? Placed at the bottom, they seem to be less significant, although at the same time they constitute the basis for developing the idea of defending the Christian faith, the essence of which is the history of salvation present on the altar. Religious scenes would thus be an image of religious unity, where a significant symbol would be the figures of two saint Johns placed in the center.

On the one hand, they were patron saints of the kings, and on the other hand, they participated in the beginning and in the end of Jesus' evangelizing mission marked by Jesus' baptism in the Jordan river by St. John the Baptist, and death on the cross where St. John the Evangelist was present, author not only of the narrative about the life and activity of Jesus (Gospel), but also the vision of the end of days (Apocalypse). Thus, the mission of Christ continues, and so do the Catholic kings.

The conquest of Granada is a symbolic beginning not only of building religious unity on the Peninsula (which was also reflected in the Baptism of dissenters), but also in the near future of the evangelization of the New World. Political and territorial unity is symbolized through the persons of the kings, whose marriage united the two kingdoms, and through their accompanying patrons of Aragon and Castile, St. George and St. James, who made miraculous interventions in battles with the infidel armies.

Also highlighted is the devotion of the kings praying on their knees, depicted as reliefs on the altar (as the participants of the mission), and at the same time being outside, as sculptures slightly protruding from the main body of the altar, which may symbolize the link between what is earthly and what is celestial (Gallégo, 1991).

Emperor Charles V undertook work on the Royal Chapel to turn it into the pantheon of the new Habsburg dynasty, to revere the memory of his grandparents and strengthen his position as their descendent and successor by renewing the Monarch's commitment to the defense and propagation of the faith (León Coloma, 2000: 379).

Additionally, we can admire one of the works that represent transition between medieval and renaissance art.

Paintings of Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen Documenting Tunis Campaign of the Emperor Charles V as a Project for the Monumental Series of Tapestries

Historical Context

Charles V inherited the Crown of Aragon after the death of his grandfather, Ferdinand the Catholic. Because his mother, the Queen of Castile, Joanna the Mad, had mental problems, chose to seize power and was sworn in as king. After the death of his grandfather, Emperor Maximilian, he

inherited the right to apply for the title of emperor, which he managed to obtain, becoming the ruler of the first world empire, which included the Iberian Peninsula and the lands of the Crown of Aragon in today's Italy, territories belonging to the House of Burgundy, the Habsburg dynasty and the German Empire, as well as the lands conquered in America. Charles, as a descendent of emperors and Catholic Kings, swore to defend the faith and the Church. He reigned over the Reformation and religious wars in Europe, while he fought against Protestants. He also acted as a defender of Christianity, fighting against the advancing power of the Ottoman Empire both in Europe and in North Africa. Africa was a departure point for the corsairs harassing the Spanish coasts, led by Barbarossa who became the admiral of the Turkish navy, which had settled in Tunis. Charles V organized a crusade. The port of Barcelona was the site of a fleet gathering that sailed towards Africa and conquered Tunis in 1535.

Object and Its Function

Charles V, as Roman Emperor, took to war with him campaign writers and artists to immortalize his feats. One of them was Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, a Flemish painter and tapestry designer, who accompanied the Emperor at the conquest of Tunis.

As an eyewitness, the fact providing legitimacy to an event's happening, Vermeyen documented the campaign, and on his return, made a set of sketches on paper for the design of twelve tapestries: *The Map or Cartographic view*, *The review of the Troops at Barcelona*, *The landing at La Goleta*, *The Attack on La Goleta*, *The Naval Battle off La Goleta*, *The Enemy Sortie from La Goleta*, *The Taking of La Goleta*, *The Battle of the Tunisian Wells*, *The Taking of Tunis*, *The Sack of Tunis*, *The Enemy Encamped at Rada* and *The re-embarkation of the Army at La Goleta*. The tapestries, being a visual chronicle of the feats, were made by Willem de Pannemaker's tapestry workshop in Brussels (1548-1554) from the best wool and silk, interwoven with gold and silver metallic thread. They represent a map of Western Mediterranean where the events took place, and the episodes of the campaign, including the conquest of the Corsair's fortification La Goleta.

"(...) The *Conquest of Tunis* tapestries became the flagship of the Habsburg dynasty, displayed at every court festivity, religious ceremony and state event as visual affirmations of Habsburg supremacy, and were hung with great pride in the principal reception rooms of the Brussels palace and later in the *Alcázar* palace in Madrid during the reign of Charles V, the regency of his sister, Mary of Hungary and the reign of his son, Philip II of Spain." (Tapices flamencos en España.

“The Conquest of Tunis series”).

Purpose of the Analyses

The analysis may cover each tapestry separately or a selected topic that appears on various tapestries, as the view of the cities, the army or the figure of the emperor himself. For example, Miguel Ángel Zalama in his article *Vestirse para la Guerra* (Getting dressed for war), draws attention to the importance of the costumes in order to impress the enemy. It can be observed during the review of the Troops at Barcelona “the thing is that one not only goes to war with weapons.” (Zalama, 2020: 60). However, the main purpose is to show the series of tapestries as a whole, as an example of creating the mythical figure of Charles V, as we would tell it today to build an image on the model of a Roman Caesar. Antonio Gozalbo shows links between tapestries and *Chronicle of Emperor Charles V* by Alonso de Santa Cruz. “Thus, tapestries and chronicle converged generating a powerful iconic literary framework intended to mythicize Charles V” (Gozalbo, 2016: 109). An interesting exercise could be to compare the descriptions of De Santa Cruz with the woven images, to show the connections between text and image, between written history and art.

The tapestries are an example of a unique work of art, made in the best Brussels’ tapestry workshop. The enormous size, when hung together measure a total of approximately 600 square meters (Tapices flamencos en España. “The Conquest of Tunis series”), must have made a great impression.

The Battle Paintings of Hall of the Kingdoms in Buen Retiro Palace Glorifying the Monarchy of Philip IV

Historical Context

In the 17th century, Spain was involved in a series of religious conflicts. The Moriscos who still remained on the territory of the Peninsula were expelled, and the Spanish army fought almost

constantly against Protestants, being an active side of the Thirty Years' War. Finally, Spain recognized the Kingdom of the United Netherlands, and the Catalan territories beyond the Pyrenees, Cerdanya and Rosselló, passed into the possession of France. The English people attacked the Spanish possessions in America. Spain could not help Portugal, whose territories in Asia and Brazil were attacked by the Dutch.

The most important person in the state during the reign of Philip IV was Count-Duke of Olivares. He gave the king his *Instrucción secreta* (Secret instruction), which was an ambitious plan to reform the monarchy towards the unification of the territories that formed it under one single law. The Union of Arms was like a preamble that tried to increase the participation of the kingdoms that formed the Spanish Monarchy in the war that was carried out in Europe (in the form of taxes and military recruitment). Philip IV should have become the greatest Monarch in the world, like his great predecessors, Ferdinand the Catholic, Charles V, and Philip II. On the other hand, the 17th century is the golden age of Spanish literature and art. In the Buen Retiro Palace, whose construction and decoration was promoted by Olivares, the king led a courtly life accompanied by the best poets, dramatists and painters.

Object and Its Function

Buen Retiro was a palace complex surrounded by gardens, built as a place of recreation for Philip IV and his court. The king was an art collector, lover of music and theater. The performances of the best Spanish dramatists of Golden Age and court parties took place outside, in the gardens, as well as inside the buildings forming the palace complex. The Hall of the Kingdoms, part of royal residence, was used as a throne room, at state events, celebrations, during the visits of ambassadors and other distinguished guests. It was a central hall in Buen Retiro Palace decorated with four series of paintings, one about the adventures of Hercules, two related to Roman history, and one about the battles. The coats of arms of the twenty four kingdoms and realms that formed the Hispanic monarchy adorned a hall as a frieze. The battle paintings are twelve scenes representing the Spanish triumph over Protestants, with one exception (*The Relief of Genoa*). Feats interpreted by different artists took place during the king's lifetime: in 1621 *The surrender of Juliers* (by Jusepe Leonardo), in 1622 *The*

victory at *Fleurus* (by Vicente Carducho), in 1625 *The recovery of the island of Puerto Rico* by Don Juan de Haro (by Eugenio Caxés), *The Relief of Genoa by the second Marquis of Santa Cruz* (by Antonio de Pereda), *The Surrender of Breda* (by Diego Velázquez), *The defense of Cadiz against the English* and *The Marquis of Cadereyta commanding a navy* (by Francisco de Zurbarán), in 1626 *The Recovery of Bahia* (by Juan Bautista Maíno), in 1629 *The recovery of the island of San Cristobal* by Don Frederic of Toledo (by Félix Castelo), in 1633 *The relief of the Plaza de Constanza* and *The capture of Rheinfelden* (by Vicente Carducho), *The Relief of Brisach* (by Jusepe Leonardo), in 1635 *The Relief of Valencia del Po* (by Juan de la Corte) (Pérez Viejo, 2002: 247).

Purpose of the Analyses

The battle paintings can be analysed separately, as a series and as a part of decoration of the Hall of the Kingdom. For example, *The Surrender of Breda* does not represent a battle but the handing over of the keys to Spinola by a Dutch leader after the capitulation of the city. The Spanish victory was interpreted by one of the best Spanish painters but also by one of the best Spanish dramatuges, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, in his comedy *The Siege of Breda*. In this manner, we can observe a connection between politics and different arts.

The aim can also be to show the battle paintings in the context of the Hall of the Kingdoms as representations of national identity (Pérez Viejo, 2002), understood as national consciousness of a selected part of the society who could participate in ceremonies, parties or theater performances which were held there. We can ask: who is the Spanish people? A common history would be the foundation of this “nationalizing process” with the figure of the king as the heir of power who refers to Roman history or to the mythical figure of Hercules, and who is a defender of the catholic faith against heresy.

Students can try to find similitudes between painting, as an absence of King or representing of specific scenes and not the battlefield. The king does not appear in the pictures as he never shows himself to his subjects, being an abstract representation of monarchy.

According to Tomás Pérez Viejo, in the Hall of the Kingdoms there is the first great set of paintings with coherent iconographic program at the service of a certain national idea, proposed by a monarchy that tends to identify itself with the nation. The battle scenes are like photographs or theatre specific scenes. “This type of representation [...] supposes an affective implication of the person who sees the painting, getting into it, a propagandistic-affective aspect.” (Pérez Viejo, 2002: 244, my

translation²).

Paintings and Engraving of Francisco Goya Reflecting Napoleonic Invasion and the Same Period Presented in Caricatures of Thomas Rowlandson

Historical Context

Under the Treaty of Fontainebleau of 1807, Napoleon's troops were allowed to pass through Spain to attack Portugal. However, Spain was also in the orbit of the imperial plans of Napoleon, who gathered in Bayonne a quarreling royal family: the supposed romance of Queen Maria Luisa with Manuel Godoy, who became the most influential person in the country, the royal couple's hatred towards their son Ferdinand VII under the accusation that he had conspired to seize power. After the abdications of Charles IV and Ferdinand VII in Bayonne, Napoleon handed the crown to his brother, Joseph Bonaparte. On May 2, 1808, the inhabitants of Madrid attacked Mamelukes, being a part of French army, which was met with repressions and executions. The rebellion was an example for all of Spain, where guerrilla began to be organized, and became the symbolic beginning of a War of Independence.

Object and Its Function

Works of Francisco Goya and drawings of English caricaturist Thomas Rowlandson are reaction to the Napoleonic invasion of Spain. Goya painted a diptych representing *The Second of May 1808 in Madrid* or *The Fight against the Mamelukes*, and *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid* or *The executions on Príncipe Pío Hill*. He also depicted the war in a series of 80 prints *The disasters of War. Fatal consequences of Spain's bloody war with Bonaparte, and other emphatic caprices*. Between numerous drawings of Rowlandson there are some related to the political aspect of the war, such as *Billingsgate at Bayonne or the Imperial Dinner*, *The Corsican Nurse soothing the Infants of Spain*, *King Joe on his Spanish Donkey*, *King Joe's Retreat from Madrid*, *A Spanish Passport to France*.

Purpose of the Analyses

Obviously, each work by Goya or Rowlandson could be the source of a separate analysis. However, their work shows the same event in two different manners. There are many ways to portray a war: battlefields, clashing armies, heroic deeds, as well as tragedies of ordinary people (works of Goya) and the political aspect of the conflict (works of Rowlandson). On a few selected examples it is possible to see a point of view of two artists, one of whom was a participant in the events, and the other an insightful external observer. We can ask questions to define the main idea of the artists. What does the scene show? What people are presented? Can we identify them? Is it important to know their names in order to interpret the author's message? How were they presented? What is the background of the events? Do we know where they happened? Does it matter? What role do colors play? How do the artists comment on the events? What do the comments give us? Goya in his diptych glorifies the courage and sacrifice of the people of Madrid with colorful and affective representations. In a series of graphics in shades of black and gray, which further emphasize the drama, he shows cruelty, violence, dehumanization, hunger, death of people and values. Victims also become cruel torturers.

The task may be to describe graphics that show death, violence, despair, hunger as, for example, *Enterrar y callar* (*Bury them and keep quiet*), *Las camas de la muerte* (*The beds of death*), *No quieren* (*They do not want to*), *¿De qué sirve una taza?* (*What good is a cup for?*) What do the scenes express? What do they tell us, what messages and feelings do they convey? By showing the destruction that war causes in man, depriving his graphics of the background, the artist imparts universal value to his work: he talks about every 'past and future' war. On the other hand, Rowlandson's drawings are political satire where we can see as protagonists the people having power in that time, Napoleon and his brother Joseph, Spanish kings and infants, politicians. The author is well versed in the situation, as shown, for example, by *Billingsgate at Bayonne*, where the royal family is presented colorfully and with biting satire. We discover a passion of the king Charles IV who is playing violin, as if absent from all this madness. His wife tells their son Ferdinand that he is a bastard. Her lover Godoy, known as the Prince of Peace, informs that he wants to be left in peace.

Conclusions

Representations of the past in visual form are very useful tools in the educational process.

There is an enormous variety of works of art that can be used for the complement study of history, to see not only feats, but also, how they were used as an inspiration for art, as propaganda or as a form of conveying specific content, especially in times when photography or film did not exist. Images can be used as triggers for our memory, that help us in the process of learning and remembering. There are numerous scientific studies of works of art that help us to discover new interpretations, such as the cited earlier *Pintura de historia e identidad nacional en España*, Pérez Viejo's investigation about representation of a national identity in history painting. They can be used when creating a lesson plan. The selected examples of history of Spain show how through various forms of communication, through architecture, living animals, textiles, sculptures and reliefs, series of tapestries, battle paintings, graphics and caricatures, that one can tell stories and interpret them, can present ideologies, beliefs, ways of thinking, and images, but also what is immaterial, such as feelings and experiences. Works of art were shown to the public, when formerly they were limited to a select group of people. Now they offer the same possibility to observe, describe, recognize known events or persons, try to understand the thinking of people from another time, discuss what has been changed, to express our opinions and even feelings. We can not only read about the past but also experience it through our senses: seeing, hearing, even smelling.

When we look at a work of art related to historical events, in fact, we are dealing with their interpretation. Thus, we are confronted with human thinking from many years ago, while having the right to our own perception of a reality that has passed but thanks to the material form it is still present, even alive, and, in some measure, it enters into a dialogue with us.

Notes

¹ “Reafirmaban así su relación sensitiva, sobre todo visual y táctil, con los animales del milagro o con sus descendientes de la jaula, una relación que unía a los laicos a lo sagrado a través de los cinco sentidos.”

² “Este tipo de representación,[...] supone una implicación afectiva por parte de la persona que ve el cuadro, un meterse en él, una vertiente propagandístico-afectiva.”

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A Wall of Dates: How a Work of Art Can Make the 20th Century Readable, Audible and Traversable

Antonella Sbrilli

Those Registry files were connected to real fates

Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth* (2012)

It Was Me

“August 2nd. Bologna. Bomb attack at the main railway station. A bomb with 20 kg of explosives hidden in a suitcase goes off. 85 people die, more than 200 are severely wounded. I survive”. Those familiar with the history of Italy recognise that this phrase refers to one of the most severe attacks during the so-called “strategy of tension”: the terrorist bombing of the Bologna Centrale railway station on the morning of 2 August 1980. The phrase seems taken from a diary of someone deeply and personally involved in the tragic event, but it actually comes from an artwork, a monumental and at the same time impalpable work, entitled *Ich war's. Tagebuch 1900-1999 (It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999)*. As stated by the title, the work effectively presents itself in the form of a diary, but it is a particular diary that spans the entire twentieth century, concentrating a selection of epochal events in a virtual leap year of 366 days; the dates and the entries are recorded one after the other, from January to December, as if all the facts had happened, in different years, to the imaginary author, who appears sometimes as a responsible, sometimes as a victim, sometimes as an active, sometimes as a passive party (Fig. 1).

The dates are reported in the format month day (January 1st, January 2nd...), without reference to the years in which the events occurred. “While the life events of 366 days are told in chronological order, the sequence of historical events is broken” (Misiano 2019: 18): for this reason, the work is accompanied by a chronology that allows to individuate at which year the sequence month-day refers. Moreover, since only the year appears in the chronology, without further explanation, it is up to the visitor to reconstruct the protagonists and the context of the event, looking for information in sources. This is an important feature of this work, that involves people to actively participate in the

reconstruction of a century of history, condensed into one year. The Italian Berlin-based artist Daniela Comani realized it from 2002 in various audio and textual versions: it can be listened to like a radio chronicle lasting one hour, in various languages, including German, in which the work was originally conceived; it can be read by leafing through a book, with a different layout from language to language; it can be looked at, printed on canvas and mounted on a large panel, like a wall of dates and words, of varying dimensions depending on the location.

A version of 3x6 meters printed in net vinyl is preserved in the permanent collections of Bologna's Mambo Museum; other versions have been presented in 2011 at the 54th Venice Biennale for the San Marino Pavilion, and in other significant venues in Europe and Asia: Paris, Budapest, Moscow, Hong Kong, sometimes in relation with anniversaries of historical events connected with the places of exhibition. The quote at the beginning, for example, was chosen in 2012 for the official manifesto that commemorated the 32nd anniversary of the Bologna bombing: printed in Italian as an epigraph on a grey background, the phrase lists a series of the data, including how much explosive, how many dead, how many injured, closing with the bare statement "I survive" ("Io sopravvivo").¹ In the juxtaposition between the terrifying information and the final use of the first person lies one of the peculiarities of this work and its impact, that transports the history in a personal, intimate dimension: "It is history read through the filter of the self" (Madesani, 2006: 5) (Fig. 2).

Another excerpt from Comani's wall of dates can illustrate this mechanism: "*January 2nd. Berlin. I was able to look into my Stasi files*". Searching within the chronology, one finds that this entry refers to the year 1992, when the archives of the GDR security service were opened. Like one of the characters in the film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), the anonymous subject saying this sentence can learn about the controls to which his/her daily life has been subjected and the records of the events that concern him or her. There is another major aspect of *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999* in fact to be mentioned: all the events reported, wars, attacks, edited books, suicides, treaties, discoveries and so on are told by the author in the female first person, immediately perceptible in Italian already from the title *Sono stata io*. "Gender assumptions get flipped" in Daniela Comani's universe (Knight, 2015), as observed by the Los Angeles Times' art critic Christopher Knight, referring to a corpus of works – *Daniela Comani's Top 100 Films, My Film History* – where the titles of great classics switch from male to female and vice versa. Among them are *The Godmother*, *Rocco e le sue sorelle* (*Rocco and Her Sisters*), *Catman*, *All the President's Women*, where Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford become Carla Bernstein and Roberta Woodward, with a touch of lipstick added on their lips in the retouched poster of the movie. The artist hijacks the titles and the illustrations on the covers of famous masterpieces of world

literature, too, in another series of works: *New Publications Edited by Daniela Comani*, where *The Old Woman and the Sea*, *La petite princesse*, *Le promesse spouse (The Betrothed Brides)*, *Mr Dalloway* and *Monsieur Bovary*. These appear together on the shelves of a library that applies and disseminates Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* narrative invention of gender change. While these conceptual and visual manipulations take place on fictional works and on their characters, *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999* deals with historical documented facts of the 20th Century, reported by a female narrative voice who takes charge of each, as a leader, a decision maker or an anonymous survivor, a passerby. "The dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular, between the impersonal and the personal are characteristic of any narrative. People tell their life stories, which in their turn reflect their era" Viktor Misiano asserts, adding that "At the same time, when people are talking about their era, they inevitably draw on their personal experience. Unlike most narratives in which this background is hidden, the structure of Comani's piece *per se* makes it clearly visible" (Misiano, 2020: 19). Reflections about the main issues of individual, public, private, personal, impersonal, singular and collective are triggered via a visual artwork that uses the means of writing and recording, and calls visitors to involvement and commitment.

The Author and the Context

Born in Bologna in 1965 and graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in her hometown, Daniela Comani moved to Berlin, the city of the divided sky (*Der geteilte Himmel* of Christa Wolf's novel) right in 1989, the year of the demolition of the Wall. In the Berlin of the nineties, between reunification and reconstruction, political landslides and social experiments, she continued her education, starting an artistic activity oriented towards the themes of gender stereotypes, cultural habits, memory, and expressed through photographs, drawings, videos, performances, installations, assemblage, editorial productions (www.danielacomani.net). While she was settling in Berlin, expectations toward the end of the century and the millennium grew all over the world, with the resulting popular media hype, publications and research that have resonated, directly or indirectly, with the creation of this work; and to which this work is added, as a creative testimony of an epochal passage. In 1990, the essay by the American historian Hillel Schwartz, *Century's end: a cultural history of the fin de siècle from the 990s through the 1990s*, was published, which analysed and compared the recurring characteristics of the millennial dates and the end-of-century crises.

In 1994, the volume by British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short*

Twentieth Century, 1914-1991, came out, whose title would become a sort of slogan to define the twentieth century: the short century, with its phases, the age of catastrophe, the golden age and the landslide, which corresponded to the fall of the Soviet Union and the demolition of the Berlin Wall.

The topics of preservation, archiving, storage in art had been faced by a groundbreaking travelling exhibition (1997-98), promoted by the Haus der Kunst of Munich, *Deep Storage – Arsenale der Erinnerung* and showed in Germany and USA (Schaffner and Winzen, 1998).

The year 1999 saw the publication of Aleida Assmann's research on cultural memory *Erinnerungsräume, Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, which brought into play the themes of responsibility and collective memory. A little further back, stands also the research of the German artist Hanne Darboven (1941-2009), with her work *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* (*Cultural History 1880-1983*), realized in 1980-83. An impressive installation consisting of 19 sculptural objects (among them a statue of Bismarck) and nearly 1600 works on paper, postcards, photographs, magazine clips, manuals, visual documents of a century of high and low culture, of public and private relics. An “opus magnum” on time, history and memory, a great archive that, juxtaposing a huge amount of disparate visual documents, “rewrites other stories with different and unexpected implications” (Subrizi, 2012: 106). As Daniela Comani recounts, in that period of time, she began “to perceive almost physically the heaviness of the century that was ending, like an Atlas holding the vault of heaven on its shoulders”.² During the decade, she had been already working on collections of newspaper clippings, photos, notes and texts, which served her for different research all deeply related to the theme of the individual facing history. The accumulation of the events of the century becomes a dominant thought until she decides to concentrate precisely on this accumulation, to make it the object of an Atlantic work in terms of breadth and objectives. She began to collect articles from Italian and German newspapers and magazines, photographs, short news items, at first without any preconceived intention. The clippings accumulated on tables and desks in her studio, stratifying in horizontal palimpsests, in piles and in boxes. The choice fell on singular facts, biographies that struck her. A first use of this material can be found, starting in 1995, in the series of so-called *Double Drawings*, drawings of faces and figures taken from the periodical press and outlined on tracing paper, so that they can be superimposed. Double portraits, multifaceted, multiple, such as the one dedicated to the truly multiple personality and tragic fate of Tamara Bunke (1937-1967), guerrilla and secret agent, interpreter and revolutionary, German and Argentine, as well as Cuban. The media are the source from which to draw to tell single emblematic stories, avatars of larger stories, of history tout-court. It was in January 1999 that the *It Was Me* project began to take concrete shape, moving in the direction of narrating the 20th century from the side - as mentioned

above - of an imaginary subject, victim, responsible, co-conspirator, witness of all that the century had produced, two world wars, the fall of secular empires, the Holocaust, dictatorial regimes, weapons of mass destruction, colonialism, capitalism, terrorism, feminism, protest, hope for a better world. In the background there are the ten years spent in Berlin and the materials already collected until then, used for the double drawings and kept in the atelier, in what Comani herself defines as a personal, open archive, not organized according to scientific criteria. The oxymoron of a chaotic archive renders well the nature of this accumulation, casual but not ineffective, in which the serendipity effect (one finds one thing while looking for another) plays a creative role, moving reflections and research on new, sometimes unexpected paths. The idea of using the countless clippings and photos, notes and texts, to tell the story of the 20th century from the side of a single subject, an imaginary individual who has crossed the century, needed, in order to be realised, to find a support structure.

The Calendar Structure

As a support structure for *It Was Me* project, Comani identified the system of partitioning time based on dates: the calendar, a system capable of offering a grid to the dispersiveness and co-presence of the events that have occurred, endowed with a nature that is both public and private, administrative and identitary. In the matter of calendar, the name of Hanne Darboven has to be mentioned again; since the 1960s she had been operating on the notations of time in calendrical works containing conceptual, mathematical and visual aspects. And in relation to dates, a reference has to be made to the Japanese On Kawara (1932-2014) with his *Today series* began on January 4th 1966. Every day he hand-painted on canvas the date of that day, attaching sometimes on the canvas' back pages from the newspapers of the same day, with the constraint that if the work had not been finished by the end of the day, the artist would have destroyed the canvas (Lee, 2004: 288-308). Not by chance, with On Kawara, Comani participated in the collective exhibition *Lesen*, at the Kunsthalle of Sankt Gallen in Switzerland, in 1996. Another figure related to the representation of time is Roman Opalka (1931-2011), an artist of Polish origin who lived in France and Germany: he represented sequences of progressive numbers, starting with 1 in 1965 and going on until death covering canvases of numbers while counting them in Polish: a dialogue between Opalka's and Comani's works has been significantly proposed in the exhibition *Accoppiamenti giudiziosi* (Opalka and Comani, 2013). The force of the calendar's grids has attracted not only the artists' creativity, but also curators of major exhibitions and catalogs. To provide an example of the permanence of the calendar format and the

interactive potentialities of its use: in 2017, the *Documenta 14* exhibition, held in Kassel and in Athens and dedicated to artistic research of a political, social, ecological and participatory nature, offered - alongside the catalog - a *Daybook*. It was a diary-agenda governed by a double chronological criterion: the grid of the shared conventional calendar and the wandering days in the memory of the surveyed artists, who had been invited to choose the memory of a day in their lives. These two time-lines mixed past and present, individual chronology and shared time, leaning on the familiar day-month sequence of calendars (*Documenta 14: Daybook*, 2013).

The Method

Once Comani had chosen the framework - the grid of 366 boxes - it had to be filled in completely, selecting a fact every day, for a total of 366 events that would represent, in a meaningful way, all the years of the century. As noted above, the account of the facts would not follow the succession of years but would take place day after day in a single calendar year, from January to December. Moreover, since the first version of the work was conceived for an audio installation, a sort of radio chronicle of the 20th century, read by a speaker without interruptions, the century would be condensed into an hour of listening. In this audible version listening goes from January 1st, correspond to the foundation of the German Communist Party on January 1st 1919 to December 31st, corresponding to the escape from Cuba of the dictator Batista on December 31st 1958. In the book and the display, however, access to the dates (and to the data) is not necessarily sequential; the reader can consult the diary as he or she wishes, going from one date to another according to personal curiosity, suggestions, and references.

To achieve her goal and get on with the job, the large personal archive collected over the years by Daniela Comani is systematized, so that no date remains empty and no year is uncovered. Classifiers appeared, the practical black-covered *Ordner*, and tables of correspondence between dates and events were drawn up. Comani began to methodically frequent the libraries of Berlin (the National Library, the Amerika-Gedenk-Bibliothek), consulting databases and viewing microfilms of vintage newspapers and magazines. The work followed a precise procedure: she took the news from the archives, deposited it in her personal filing cabinet and then poured it into the order of the calendar. In this passage, however, that news incurred in the change mentioned above. Whatever was being talked about, the proclamation of Fascism, or the first space flight, the news, in a dry, concise, almost protocol-like language, was always given in the first person that in some languages, specifically in

the Italian version, turned out to be female. This aspect introduces a relevant fictional element in the making of this many layered levels artwork. Daniela Comani recounts that, during the months of work, the book she had on her table was *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar, the writer of *Archives of the North*, capable of transforming the traces of private, family and historical memories into subtle and powerful narrative material. The tutelary deity, always present behind her back, was Borges, with his masterful passages from the real to the imaginary via historical details. It is in this perspective, that the entry “September 27th I take my life in Port Bou on the border between Spain and France” can report a suicide: the one actually committed in 1940 by Walter Benjamin, once and for all, and another one, recurring every September 27th, when someone reads the statement. Thus, throughout 1999, while Europe was discussing the euro, while NATO was intervening in Serbia and Roberto Benigni was winning an Oscar for *Life is Beautiful* (and while the whole world was waiting for the year 2000 with the dread of the millennium bug), Daniela Comani attended to her daily work of research and classification of those facts that led to the Holocaust, to the Balkan conflicts, to European unity and to technological globalization, transcribing and photocopying paragraphs, eyelets, agency launches, essays and articles. In making this, she imagined a life made up of many lives that would tell the selection of events, one day at a time, one day after the other.

Day, Month, Year

Scrolling through the calendar of *It Was Me*, the irreverence towards chronology disconcerts and attracts, forcing one to go back and forth in history, to an effort of identification, to a profitable activity of thought. One tries to remember, without going immediately into chronology, in what year, October 10, “I” occupied the secretariat of the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf; and who “I” am. In this case the first person singular pronoun refers to Joseph Beuys and the year was 1972.

In this anamnesis, personal memories overlap, we remember where we really were on some crucial dates in collective history, whose impact has fixed our position in time. We try to imagine where our parents or grandparents were in a single, precise day in history, while huge events were happening.

When *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999* is exhibited, visitors scroll through the wall of dates, stopping on one or the other. Interviews made during the show *Dall’oggi al domani. 24 ore nell’arte contemporanea* (Macro Museum Rome, 2016) show that people looked for important dates in their own lives and those of their loved ones; once checked the year, comparisons with important dates in their family life were activated. Others tried to verify their historical competence on the facts of the

20th century, tested their memory and intuition. A few were just watching the work, without questioning. This is the strength of *It Was Me*: the first-person involvement, declared in the form of the statements, is confirmed and enacted by the behaviors of people interacting with the work, that becomes - to take up a concept from the call of this issue dedicated to Visual History - “a space of interaction, between creation and reconstruction, between imagination and fact”, to which we can add, between the flow of history and oneself. There is always *me*, committing nefarious deeds, or making humanitarian decisions, or succumbing to nature’s adversity, or surviving, as in the passage from August 2nd.

It Was Me In The World

When Comani was invited to participate in the commemorative poster of the Bologna bombing with an excerpt of *It Was Me*, she accepted with the aim to “develop a historical memory”, “for a form of respect towards the victims and their families” and to reach the younger generation”, who often ignore “this never solved case.” (Naldi, 2012, XV)

The effectiveness of *It Was Me* format for approaching history is demonstrated by other invitations received for commemorative events. In 2016, in occasion of the 60th anniversary of Hungarian Uprising (October-November 1956), the Goethe Institut in Budapest and the OSA Archivum have motivated the exhibition of the work with these eloquent considerations: “The 20th Century was shaped by violence. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was one of these violent events. The 60th anniversary is an occasion for the Goethe Institute and the Open Society Archives in Budapest to present Daniela Comani’s fictional / historical diary *It Was Me*. This project is like a diary about 366 days: from January 1st to December 31st. The events are actually from the entire history of the last Century, and the narrator writes in first person, as if these events are personal. One day, the narrator is the victim and the day after the offender. The 23rd of October is also part of Comani’s diary”. (AZ ÉN NAPLÓM A TI HÍREITEK, 2016) (Fig 3).

It Was Me is clearly described in its structure, conceptual framework, and visual form: a “fictional/historical diary” that keeps track of important events of the 20th century. Among them, the date of the beginning of 1956 Hungarian Revolution stands out: “*October 23rd. Hungary. Following a mass demonstration for democratic freedom, the armed popular resistance against my governing system begins*” (danielacomani.net). A diary entry - expressed as a line in a wall of dates - becomes the bait for recalling a tragic, collective experience through the testimony of an anonymous imagined participant.

During the exhibition in Budapest (October 19 – November 27, 2016), *It Was Me* was also the cue for exploring the reception of the events in Hungary in western TV and printed press (*My Diary – Your News / AZ ÉN NAPLÓM A TI HÍREITEK* 2016), proving to be a way of inviting historical and documentary research. Indeed, the international vocation of this work is proved by the many translations both of the audio installation (German, English, Italian, Russian) and the written version. Originally composed by Comani in German in 2002, it has been translated by the artist herself in Italian (2007): *Sono stata io. Diario 1900-1999*; and then in many languages worth mentioning: in English (by Ann Cotten, 2007): *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999*; in Swedish (by Jenny Tunedal, 2008): *Det var jag. Dagbok 1900-1999*; in Chinese (2008): 我曾經。日記1900-1999; in French (2010): *C'était moi. Journal 1900-1999*; in Hungarian (by Duró Gábor, 2016): *Én voltam. Napló 1900-1999*, and in Russian (2019): Это была я. Дневник 1900-1999. Each translation brought with it different effects and reactions, not to mention the visual changes that the various languages have caused to the formal aspect of this work of art.

In the Winter 2007-2008, Daniela Comani released a particular “local” version of the *It Was Me* format, dedicated to her city of choice. *It Was Me. Around Alexanderplatz in 32 days. 1805-2007* tells two centuries of Berliner history, choosing 32 real events which took place around the famous Alexanderplatz (Comani, 2007). From the “9th January. Heavy mortar fire at Alexanderplatz: I fight for the so-called Spartacus Rebellion and declare a general strike” (1919), to “12th October. Tonight I watch *The Punishment Begins* on TV: the first episode of Fassbinder’s adaptation of the novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* by Alfred Döblin” (1980), the chosen dates retrace large and small facts connected to the square. Written in typewriter style and in the first person singular, as if the chronicle were a private diary, with the artist as the originator of the events, all the 32 entries were published on as many large billboards installed in the underground station of the Linie U2 in Alexanderplatz. As with *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999*, also in the case of this work, the year corresponding to the diary’s entries were reported on a separate chronological panel. Also, in this case, visitors, passers-by, underground users could look at the work, read the phrases, wonder about the years, check data, revive memories, travel through time. A virtuous and critical circle is activated by this artwork, that proves itself a platform to put history at disposal.

Notes

¹ Signed by the Comitato di solidarietà alle vittime delle stragi (Committee of solidarity to the victims of massacres), the manifesto Bologna 2 agosto 1980/2012 Per non dimenticare (Not to

forget) reports the Italian text, with some slight differences from the English version: “2 agosto. Bologna. Attentato alla stazione ferroviaria centrale. Alle dieci e venticinque esplode una bomba nascosta dentro una valigia nella sala d’aspetto di seconda classe. La miscela di tritolo e T4 distrugge parte dell’edificio e uccide ottantacinque persone, mentre più di duecento vengono ferite. Io sopravvivo”.

² I thank the artist for the information and the documents made available during the collaboration for the exhibition *Dall’oggi al domani. 24 ore nell’arte contemporanea*, Macro Museum, Rome (29 April – 2 October 2016), where a version of *It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999* was exposed.

Images: courtesy Daniela Comani

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The Lives of Others (Das Leben der Anderen), Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Germany, 2006)


Fig. 1



Visitors in front of Daniela Comani. Sono stata io. Diario 1900-1999 (It Was Me. Diary 1900-1999), digital point on vinyl, cm. 300x600, exhibited in Rome: Macro Museum, 2016

Fig. 2





Daniela Comani, Detail of the installation view in the exhibition MY DIARY – YOUR NEWS / AZ ÉN NAPLÓM A TI HIREITHEK and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 from the perspective of the western press / En voltam. Naplóm 1900 – 1999 és az 1956-os forradalom nyugati visszhangja, OS A Archivum and Goethe Institut Budapest, 2016

Editorial Note

Life Narration and Storytelling

Tiziana Lentini

One of the inalienable and intrinsic characteristics of human beings is to keep a weather eye on the horizon of the past. Walking across the memories' path allows the possibility to steal scraps of past lives and to open avenues of introspection for truth. Life is perceived as an eternal succession of existences where one generation comes in aid for the successive ones through the memories' preserving and the passing down of experiences, both literally and metamorphically. The human body becomes an allegory of an empty container to fill with experiences and stories which contribute to build what we known as *individual identity*.

Galen Strawson in her work "Against Narrativity" introduces the concept of *Psychological Narrativity thesis*, "a straightforwardly descriptive, empirical psychological thesis about the way ordinary, normal human beings experience their lives." (Strawson, 2015: 11) She shows how talking of narrative currently became "intensely fashionable in a wide variety of disciplines including philosophy, psychology, theology, anthropology, sociology, political theory, literary studies, religious studies, psychotherapy, medicine, and law. There is widespread agreement that human beings typically experience their lives as a narrative or story, or at least as some sort of collection of stories." (Ibid.) As far as we are aware, storytelling has always been an idiosyncratic human nature's characteristic; according to Ivor Goodson "the recounting of narratives itself is nothing new but an immemorial practice. Rather the question becomes what sort of narratives are predominantly current and how are narratives being constructed and deployed in contemporary life" (Goodson, 2017: 6). In addition, Goodson sustains that contemporary society, through an implicit popular consensus, entered into a new 'age of narrative'; but there is one detail which requires closer examination: the reason hidden behind the question "why we tell stories". Christopher Booker points out that:

"At any given moment, all over the world, hundreds of millions of people will be engaged in what is one of the most familiar of all forms of human activity. In one way or another they will have their attention focused on one of those strange sequences of mental images which

we call a story. We spend a phenomenal amount of our lives following stories: telling them; listening to them; reading them; watching them being acted out on the television screen or in films or on the stage. They are far and away one of the most important features of an everyday existence.” (Booker, 2004: 2)

Starting from these critical trends, this special section of IDEA adds further insights into the topic of narrativity. The phenomena of narrating lives is explored and analysed with an interdisciplinary approach which is at the core of our research values. Life narration, biography writing and autobiography become the major arteries through which flows the desire to discover life’s pieces of strangers. Due to the worship and the fanfare which dot popular culture, in the last years people have developed an inherent urge to know someone they never knew in real and this attitude brought to the lives’ deconstructing into many facets. But how can an entire life be described? What does it happen during the process of writing an autobiography? What does it really mean to narrate lives and memories? The essays collected here address these questions, focusing on different aspects and dimensions of life writing. Scholars from various academic backgrounds and research experiences have proposed their readings on some aspects concerning (auto)biographical acts, memory, experience, identity, embodiment, space and agency. In this volume, the topic of narrating lives will be analysed from two different points of view: the one of Chiara Corazza and the one of Wolfgang Büchel; both authors show us the importance of narration of lives not only as a genre which extends itself from the past to the present, but also as a practice that crosses time and cultures.

Chiara Corazza, through the works’ analysis of one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, W.E.B. Du Bois, shows how his (non)fictional and autobiographical production contemplates the process of writing as an epistemic tool and provides a way to reinterpreting the concepts behind “reality” and “truth. Through the study of Du Bois’ masterpiece: *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Corazza aims to the heart of the narrating lives question showing how Du Bois changes the sociological analysis into a first-person narration and how the author was able to give a significant analysis on racial dynamics in the United States.

Wolfgang Büchel’s approach to the topic of narrating lives is more focused on the fugacity of life; the author affirms that the only reliable material of a biography is the objective life data, the other elements such as thoughts, the permanent inner monologue, feelings, are hardly communicable and for this reason perceived as biographically intangible. According to Büchel every process behind writing a biography or an autobiography can be challenging and fragmented and every life story can only be seen and experienced in wisps.

Thanks to the authors’ interdisciplinary approach we are aware that more uses and forms of

interpretation will certainly be found in the future.

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‘The Eternal Paradox of History’: An Analysis of W.E.B. Du Bois’s Autobiographical and Fictional Writings

Chiara Corazza

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963) was one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century. He was the first African-American who earned a PhD at Harvard University, and a Professor of Sociology at Atlanta University. In 1909, he contributed to founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and was one of the fathers of modern Pan-Africanism. Since his first sociological study, *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), Du Bois wrote extensively on the issue of race (Levering, 1993).

One of his most important works, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a masterpiece unique in its kind, met with wide success, and would become a milestone in Critical Race Theory (Reed, Jr., 1985; Shuford 2001). In *The Souls*, Du Bois changes the sociological analysis into a first-person narration. In his vast corpus of writings, and especially in *The Souls*, *Darkwater*, *Dusk of Dawn*, and *A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life*, the author widely uses the autobiographical material. Also, his fictional works, and in particular *The Black Flame Trilogy*, provide an (autobiographical) analysis of the racial dynamics in the United States.

By analysing these outstanding works, in this essay, I will show that Du Bois’s (non)fictional, and autobiographical production considers the process of writing as an epistemic tool, and offers a key to reinterpreting the notions of “reality” and “truth.”

The Souls

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, we find some of the most meaningful pages of Du Bois’s autobiographical writings. A collection of essays converging the personal experience of the author, with history, and African-American culture and music (each chapter is introduced by a slave spiritual), *The Souls* blends the historical writing and the autobiographical voice in a composition exquisitely unique in genre and style. Moreover, in *The Souls* Du Bois conceptualises his most

important formulas, like “veil”, and “double-consciousness”, which, along with the “color-line” would introduce a new way to analyse racism (Rabaka, 2006).

The need to excavate his personal experience in order to find answers emerges at the beginning of the book. In his “Forethought,” in fact, Du Bois writes: “Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the twentieth century.” (Du Bois, 2003: 3) The point of closeness to reality emerges then between the margins of “possibility” (for example he wrote: “if read with patience may show”) and “unavoidable indefiniteness” (“forgiv[e] mistake and foible”; “I have sought here to sketch, in vague, uncertain outline, the spiritual world in which ten thousand Americans live and strive”). (Ibid.) The declaration of authority is resized to the dimension of a “little book”. “I pray you” – the author turns to the reader, “receive my little book in all charity, studying my words with me.” Therefore, the reader is necessarily drawn into an epistemic process to seek “the grain of truth hidden there”. (Ibid.)

At any rate, the matter he has to deal with is not actually palpable in its materiality: in fact, Du Bois points out that the subject of his sketches is the African-American “*spiritual* world (italics mine)”. (Ibid.) This is outlined in the first chapter, titled “Of our spiritual strivings” in which the narrator creates a collective “us” that subsumes the African-American experience in its wholeness. At the very beginning, however, the voice is the first person, “I”, and debuts with the renowned passage:

“Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All nevertheless flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly ‘How does it feel to be a problem?’ they say, ‘I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, ‘I fought at Mechanicsville,’ or ‘Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? [...] And yet being a problem is a strange experience.” (Ibid.: 7-8)

The act of remembering is necessary here to outline a story-line of Du Bois’s “strange experience” of “being a problem”, and that requires the narration of the very moment in which Du Bois locates the “unveiling”: the episode is about a newcomer schoolgirl who adamantly but without apparent reason refuses Du Bois’s offer of his visiting card as part of a children’s game taking place among schoolmates. His assertion at the beginning of his memory – “I remember well” – stands in contrast with the declaration of “unavoidable indefiniteness” of the book expressed in Du Bois’s “Forethought”. The experience of his “being a problem” is described with the trenchant metaphor: “the shadow swept across me”. (Ibid.: 8) “Then”, he concludes “it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others.” (Ibid.)

The autobiographical voice in *The Souls* emerges again in the chapter “Of the Meaning of Progress.” The narration opens with the incipit typically used in tales and retellings of myths. The first-person narrator, “I” – Du Bois himself – is the young seeker in the story: “I was a Fisk student then” (Ibid.: 48). Similarly, we can find some other functions theorized by Vladimir Propp: the departure of the hero (“there came a day when all the teachers left the Institute and began the hunt for schools”) (Ibid.: 49), the helpers (the educators who trained the teachers and revealed “the teacher fractions and spelling and other mysteries”), and the hero’s vicissitudes (“So I walked on and on – [...] until I had wandered beyond railways, beyond stage lines, to a land of ‘varmints’ and rattlesnakes, where the coming of a stranger was an event, and men lived and died in the shadow of one blue hill.”) (Ibid.: 49) The “princess” who wants to be saved is Josie, “a thin, homely girl of twenty [who] wanted a school over the hill [...] herself longed to learn.” (Ibid.: 49). However, the fairy-tale tone drastically changes and turns to bare reality, when the hero “felt the awful shadow of the veil”. “I was haunted by a New England vision of neat little desks and chairs, but, alas! The reality was rough plant benches without tracks, and at times without legs”. “The schoolhouse was a log hut.” “There was an entrance where the door once was”. “Great chinks between the logs served as windows.” (Ibid.: 50).

Finally, the hero is unable to save the “dark-faced Josie”, who died. The death of Josie, then, makes the narrator question the meaning of Progress, showing the aporias of US society which, in the folds of modernity, make such evident contradictions possible.

The dramatic experience of the death of his son is another impressive passage of *The Souls*. In chapter XI, in lyric prose, Du Bois depicts his emotional and intimate soul, his mixed feelings of wonder at his first son’s birth, and the fear of the “Shadow of Death” when the child grew sick. Though the writing delves deeply into Du Bois’s emotions, the issues of race and racism emerge in the world full of sufferings – a world that his son did not experience – his life was “perfect” – because he “knew no color-line”. The “color-line,”¹ namely racism, emerges though, when, at the funeral, some white people exclaimed the slur “niggers!” (Ibid.: 150), after having noticed the procession.

Du Bois concludes that, maybe, at some time in the future, the tangibility of the veil might be lifted – but this is something his son will never see. In this section of the book, the jarring revelation of this personal tragedy, Du Bois opens a window into the African-American sorrow, and white supremacy’s mercilessness. More than an autobiographical passage, this chapter better shows the inherent aim of the book – whose title wants to suggest – which is the disclosure of the African-American intimate reality – a reality that the aseptic language of social science is unable to grasp.

In this work, an ethnographic voice “describes the experience of the white traveller observing” this little world “[...] like other worlds he has visited,” (Du Bois, 2003: 218) the same journey taken

by Du Bois when he first ventured into the deep South during his Fisk years. The narrative of his first experience in the “black belt,” in *The Souls*, took on the tones of the travel report of the white European who entered black Africa. Du Bois identified the “black belt” with Africa and the occult, and used the tools of analysis not of the sociologist, but of the anthropologist who went into unexplored geography.

From Darkwater To a Soliloquy

Du Bois wrote *Darkwater. Voices from Within the Veil* when he was in his fifties. The book was published in 1920, and it is considered the first of Du Bois’s three autobiographies. The first-person narration is combined with history and poetry. Each chapter is characterised by a blending of styles, a narrative section, and a poetic one. Du Bois reflects on his experience at Fisk, his awareness of racism, and his role as a politically engaged intellectual. The author discusses contemporary events, like the First World War and the Peace treaties, and the role of Africa. Also, Du Bois intersects analysis of US racial relations, and global dynamics, with excerpts from his own and his family members’ life.

As a continuation of *The Souls*, *Darkwater* dives deeply into the social and political dynamics produced by the “color-line”. The author re-uses the striking concept of the “veil” he introduced in *The Souls* to describe the effects of racism – in Du Bois’s own words: “And yet it hangs there, this Veil, between Then and Now, between Pale and Colored and Black and White—between You and Me.” (Ibid., 246) In an attempt to define the “counter-modernity” represented by the African-American people, Du Bois searches for formulas and concepts that can describe that “anomaly of the black condition with respect to the ‘standards’ of modernity.” (Mezzadra, 2010: 32, my translation) Therefore, Du Bois coined the concept of the “veil” to describe the psychological implications of racism. According to the author, the “veil” prevents whites from considering blacks their equals, and at the same time, it prevents blacks from considering themselves entitled to equal rights. A psychological implication, the “veil” is made visible by personal experience. As he wrote: “I have seen the human drama from a veiled corner, where all the outer tragedy and comedy have reproduced themselves in microcosm within. This inner torment of souls the human scene without has interpreted itself to me in unusual and even illuminating ways.” (Du Bois, 1920: 1)² His personal and interior perspective is used here once again as an “unusual point of vantage”, which makes him “singularly clairvoyant” (Ibid.: 29).

In *Dusk of Dawn. An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940), Du Bois leads the notion of race to maturation by drawing a genealogy of the concept, and intersecting it with

the autobiographical voice.³ In the “Apology”, Du Bois connects *Dusk of Dawn* with the previous works, *The Souls* and *Darkwater*, as part of an autobiographical trilogy, “three sets of thought centering around the hurts and hesitations that hem the black man in America.” (Du Bois, 1940: 1) Du Bois warns his readers that “autobiographies have had little lure; repeatedly they assume too much or too little; too much in dreaming that one’s own life has greatly influenced the world; too little in the reticences, expressions and distortions which come because men do not dare to be absolutely frank.” (Ibid.: 1) However, as he explains, his attempt to define a “race concept” by using autobiographical material stems from the fact that his “life had its significance and its only deep significance because it was part of a Problem [...] the central problem of the greatest of the world’s democracies and so the Problem of the future of the world,” namely the “race problem.” (Ibid.: 1-2) Therefore, Du Bois notes that *he himself* is the subject and, at the same time, *he* is the means by which he tries to address the issue of race. He, in fact, writes, that “I seem to see a way of elucidating the inner meaning and significance of that race problem by explaining it in terms of the human life I know best.” (Ibid.: 2) Despite – as he asserts – being a “specimen” of this “Problem” in capital letters, Du Bois cautions against identifying his accounts with completely objective reality, for this “concept of race” will be “elucidated, magnified” but also “doubtless distorted in the thoughts and deeds which were mine”. (Ibid.: 2) The autobiographical narratives, then, regain significance, but partiality is an unavoidable side of the coin, when trying to deal with such a flawed and complex matter of analysis.

A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade in Its First Century is the second autobiographical work that carries the notion of “*bios*” in its title (*Dusk of Dawn* was the first). Du Bois likely completed it in 1961, but it was published posthumously. In *A Soliloquy* Du Bois analyses his life in the light of the persecution he had to face for being involved in pacifist issues. In addition, *A Soliloquy* is another relevant analysis of the role of autobiography. With his “soliloquy”, Du Bois voices his thoughts and makes them audible (readable) by his audience. Because of the inner personal and individual experience, he necessarily engages with the negotiation of meanings of “truth” and “reality”. As he wrote, “autobiographies do not form indisputable authorities.” (Du Bois, 2007: 12) And, “Memory fails especially in small details, so that it becomes finally but a theory of my life, with much forgotten and misconceived, with valuable testimony but often less than absolutely true, despite my intention [...] This book then is the Soliloquy of an old man on what he dreams his life has been as he sees it slowly drifting away; and what he would like others to believe.” (Ibid.)

Du Bois goes beyond the pattern of African-American autobiographical writing, inaugurated by Frederick Douglass “to write in the service of a people.” (Harris, 2014: 182) Du Bois’s autobiographical works are more than testimonies of the reality of American post-slavery society; they are also a tool by which to chart truths. Autobiography, then, is an “intersubjective process,”

(Smith-Watson, 2013: 17) which engages writer and readers. In this process it is possible to come to an “intersubjective truth,” (Ibid.) made of dreams, beliefs, expectations, which entails the necessary role of the readers to validate the writer’s interpretation.

Black Flame

The *Black Flame Trilogy* is another interesting work for an examination of Du Bois’s confrontation between history and his life. Du Bois wrote the three novels at the end of his life: *The Ordeal of Mansart* (1957), *Mansart Builds a School* (1959) and *Worlds of Color* (1961) were his last (semi)fictional writings.

Despite the fact that the trilogy has been initially overshadowed by Du Bois’s other works, recent scholarship has acknowledged its relevance. In fact, with its overflowing narrative of nearly one thousand pages, *The Black Flame* offers an outstanding lens of analysis for approaching the concept of race.⁴ Contemporary readers generally critiqued *The Black Flame* because of its repetitiveness, switching registers, and characters, which made the narrative incoherent and artificial. However, these critiques do not appreciate the detailed historical reconstruction provided by the author, as well as the fact that repetitiveness and artificiality may be interpreted through their allegorical meanings. Lily W. Phillips asserts that *The Black Flame*’s recursiveness creates a particular effect of “déjà vu.” For example, this effect is produced by Du Bois’ alter egos: the editor of *The Crisis* (James), and a teacher indicted for being a foreign agent because she talked about peace movements to her students (Jean Du Bignon). Their role in the story, shows us how the author uses his life as a key for interpreting history.

Du Bois’s search for truth involves Mansart, the doubtful and thoughtful protagonist. Paradoxically, answers are offered by unconventional and peculiar characters. Their prophetic role often provides others with warnings against coming threats, like mobs, lynching, and wars. They also envision possible solutions, but these epiphanies of “truth, and no falsehood” (Du Bois, 1957: 316) are usually unheard. To most of their audience, they appear stuttering illogical discourses: for instance, an old lady reverses the sequence of events in her narration of the Atlanta race riot, an old man prophesies the coming of the First World War, and a Great War veteran describes the coming Versailles peace conference as a witches’ sabbath: they all are generally believed to be mad, even though their prophecies come true.⁵ Moreover, Du Bois uses these (self-fulfilling) prophecies to show the nihilism and paradoxes of modernity.

Also, the repetitive, open-ending narration, and its “polyphonic” voice force us to rethink events, and the notion of truth. As a (semi)fictional narrative, *The Black Flame* is the ultimate work of an intellectual on his (personal), and the (collective) African-American (hi)story. As we read in the postscript:

When in this world we seek the truth about what men have thought and felt and done, we face insuperable difficulties. We seldom can see enough of human action at first hand to interpret it properly. We can never know current personal thoughts and emotions with sufficient understanding rightly to weigh its cause and effect. After action and feeling and reflection are long past, then from writing and

memory we may secure some picture of the total truth, but it will be surely imperfect, with much omitted, much forgotten, much distorted. This is the eternal paradox of history. There is but one way to meet this clouding of facts and that is by the use of imagination where documented material and personal experience are lacking. [...] Yet I would rescue from my long experience something of what I have learned and conjectured and thus I am trying by the method of historical fiction to complete the cycle of history which has for a half-century engaged my thought, research and action. I have personally lived through much of the history of the American Negro. [...] The gaps of knowledge I can in part supply by the memory of others. [...] Yet with all this I am far from being able to set down an accurate historical account of those fatal eighty years. [...] Much, indeed most, is missing: just what men thought, the actual words they used, the feelings and motives which impelled them – those I do not know and most of them none will ever know. These facts are gone forever. But it is possible for the creative artist to imagine something of such unknown truth. If he is lucky or inspired, he may write a story which may set down a fair version of the truth of an era, or a group of facts about human history. This I have attempted to do: [...] I may have blundered in places; I may have widely misinterpreted what seemed truth to me. But I have tried and I believe the effort was worthwhile. Here lies, then, I hope, more history than fiction, more fact than assumption, much truth and no falsehood. (Du Bois, 1957: 315-16)

These words resonate in Gayatri C. Spivak’s considerations about the relationship between history and literature, real events and imagined ones:

That history deals with real events and literature with imagined ones may now be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind. The difference between cases of historical and literary events will always be there as a differential moment in terms of what is called ‘the effect of the real’. What is called history will always seem more real to us than what is called literature. (Spivak, 2006: 241)

Spivak, who analyses Mahasweta Devi’s short stories, a fictional work grounded on historical documentation, asserts that Devi’s characters are plausible and realistic, embedded in a historical and

cultural framework.⁶ The same can be said of Du Bois's characters in the *Black Flame* trilogy. Moreover, the blurred distinction between history and fiction, according to Phillips, enables the author to imagine multiple possibilities of political change. "By showing history contestable," the fictional element may indicate "alternative ways to understand the past and see the future." (Phillips, 2015: 167)

Conclusion

In *The Souls* and other later works, Du Bois widely used (auto)biographical and (non)fictional narratives to provide additional meanings to his analysis of the racial dynamics in the United States. He questioned the sociological and scientific-social research tools of a positivistic matrix that sociology had used, demonstrating their epistemological inadequacy. Such investigative tools were limited to the extent that they regarded racialized social relations as an *a priori* entity located outside the social sphere. (Du Bois, 2003) Du Bois's own experiences, and those of his characters, represent multiple paths that should lead to the disclosure of the aporias of modernity, in which the African-American experience is embedded. His works are more than testimonies of the reality of American post-slavery society: they are also a tool by which to re-chart truths.

Du Bois's quest for reality stems from the realization of the limitedness and failure of scientific investigation. The difficulty to deal with a subject – the "Negro problem", which is in idiosyncrasy with "modernity", with the social scientists' methods of analysis, make it necessary to resort to other ways and tools.

Narrative and self-narrative, therefore, become the primary key for interpreting reality and by which interrogating truth. The social scientist abandons his instruments of analysis and plunges his sight into the deep materiality of experience that necessarily implies a personal, partial and fragmentary view, of which Du Bois always warn us.

Du Bois's narration of lives and lived-ins discloses a particular declination of the meaningfulness of actually experiencing something in relation to the "closeness" to "factual truth". As a result, Du Bois's interpretation of personal experience, considering the autobiographical and the historical aspects, provides us with interesting insights into the science of narrating (and interpreting) lives.

Notes

¹ On the occasion of the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900, Du Bois uses the formula to caption the Atlantic slave trade routes: “The problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color-line.” See David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, 258.

² See also Cynthia D. Schrager, “Both Sides of the Veil: Race, Science, and Mysticism in W. E. B. Du Bois,” *American Quarterly*, 48, No. 4 (Dec., 1996): 551-586.

³ See David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*; David L. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000); W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Concept of Race.” In *Dusk of a Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1940) 97-133; W.E.B. Du Bois, *Against Racism: Unpublished Essays, Papers, Addresses, 1887-1961* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

⁴ See Lily W. Phillips, “The Black Flame Revisited. Recursion and Return in the Reading of W.E.B. Du Bois’s Trilogy,” *The New Centennial Review*, 15, No. 2 (2015), 157-170. Keith E. Byerman, *Seizing the Word: History, Art and Self in the Work of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); Amir Jaima, “Historical Fiction as Sociological Interpretation and Philosophy: on the Two Methodological Registers of W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Black Flame*,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 53, No. 4 (Fall 2017), 584-600; Christa Buschendorf, “‘Race’ as a Function of Capitalism and Imperialism: W.E.B. Du Bois’s Appropriation of Marxian Ideas in ‘The Black Flame,’” *American Studies*, 62, No. 4 (2017), 567-584.

⁵ As the character of the old woman claims: “‘the earthquake did not cause the riot – it was the other way around. The riot brought the earthquake and fire in San Francisco [...]’ ‘But the riot was five months later!’ ‘What difference? Time is but habit of thought. Reason is more than Time, and Deed embodies Reason,” Du Bois, *The Ordeal of Mansart*, (New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1957), 250. On the 1906 Atlanta riot, Du Bois wrote “The Tragedy of Atlanta: From the Point of View of the Negroes,” *World Today*, 11 (November 1906), 1173-5; Du Bois, *Mansart Builds a School* (New York: Mainstream Publishers, 1959), 290.

⁶ See Gayatri Chakraworty Spivak, “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman’s Text from the Third World,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 332-370.

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The Biographical Darkness.

On the Fragmentation of Life Narratives

Wolfgang Büchel

Every day that has passed leaves behind memories, but they never encompass everything experienced that day. What remains of an ordinary day are few details. Only special events imprint themselves more comprehensively and deeply. In retrospect, individual days and weeks blur into an almost contourless period of time, which at best is made more precise by facts. Each diary achieves no more than an abstract reflection of experienced time.

A year lived through is usually perceived as a time that no longer reveals its individual days as clearly outlined memories. Even the months resemble each other and become unrecognisable. The pace of experienced time accelerates to a breathtaking degree when looking back. The shrinking of the present into the past as memory and existing things is all that remains. Every day transports a day of a life into this memory. The fragmentary nature of each memory is at the same time the forgetting or losing of many experienced details. They were part of the life that was lived. It is impossible to remember them all. A completely remembered life would need exactly another lifetime to be recalled or told. Every day also means the loss of some of the things that were important in those hours.

The Biographical Beyond

No life course can be experienced as a whole. Neither is one's own life consciously experienced from the actual beginning to the actual end, nor is the entire life of any other. No life trajectory has been observed without gaps. A human life is not visible to anyone as a whole. Every human being to date has gone through phases of their life that were conscious to them and those that eluded them. At the same time, his perception by others was never continuous, but always intermittent. An accomplished life cannot be consciously experienced as a whole and cannot be revealed to anyone else in its entirety. No one can be accompanied continuously. A life course from beginning to end cannot be grasped. It cannot be experienced without gaps, neither from the inner nor the outer perspective. Biographical and, even more so, autobiographical narration therefore only have

the known fragments of another or one's own existence. Nevertheless, neither a narrated biography nor an autobiography always reduced by the lifetime after writing it down is perceived as a fragment, although both are precisely that to a large extent. However life is presented, it is rounded by the receiving gaze. Open sequences are not conscious, just as one's own life is not seen, felt, thought as a rudimentary sequence.

A second level, as it were, of the fragmentary nature of a life is achieved by looking at this life – both one's own and that of others. The biographical and autobiographical representation of a life consolidates such a view. Whether one's own life is congruent with one's own view cannot be determined. And whether the views of others about this life come closer to the lived reality is completely uncertain. Niklas Luhmann once said: "A biography", both lived and written, "is a collection of coincidences, the continuous consists in the sensitivity to coincidences". (Luhmann, 1987: 134, my translation) He specified: "I do [...] not believe in a determinacy of life stories. Biographies are more a chain of coincidences that organise themselves into something that then gradually becomes less mobile." (Luhmann, 1987: 149, my translation)

There are various aspects of human existence, both individual and interpersonal, that are closed to biographical and autobiographical narration. For the individual, these are one's own birth, the first years, sleep, fainting, coma, agony, death. For others, it is the inner life of the other person and all the hours, days, years that separate, the invisible to others of every life lived. In principle, human existence is unaccompanied. In other words: no one is able to be next to us all the time. Moreover, no one else is capable of adequately grasping our feelings, thoughts and emotions. We ourselves can only partially experience our own existence. Apart from non-sensible physiological processes, it is the phases during which we are not conscious of ourselves. Every human life is only partially ascertainable. My own life would have to appear to me as a perforated process. That of anyone else is never more than a series of experienced snippets of this life with permanently inaccessible parts. In his poem *Who Am I?* Dietrich Bonhoeffer records:

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?

Or am I only what I myself know of myself?

And a few verses later:

Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person to-day and to-morrow another?

Am I both at once? (Bonhoeffer, 1953: 165, highlighted in the original)

The aforementioned facts refer not least to the individual's self-contained aloneness, which, already rudimentary to itself, cannot be revealed to anyone as a whole. Its radical loneliness or the impossibility of showing itself directly prevents comprehensive acquaintance and thus a complete picture. One senses how far one is from others and still from oneself. Biographical darkness is essential to human life. This is inevitably reflected in life narratives. Their fragmentation is unavoidable.

The encounters with others and ourselves, which are always only temporary, imply daily and frequent farewells. We say goodbye to people, things and circumstances that we may or may not encounter again. This forms gaps. It thwarts lasting continuity and promotes a complexity that does not make life any easier. Karl Heinz Bohrer writes: "Saying goodbye, as an idea and image, is something like a primal scene of the human being." (Bohrer, 2014: 9, my translation) Phases of separation correspond to interpersonal encounters. Individual active consciousness includes periods of absence from oneself, so to speak.

We are born without being able to consciously experience it. Later, others tell us about the beginning of our own life as well as the first ego-document of our biography. We live, according to Ernst Bloch, "and know not what for". Finally, we die without knowing "where to" (Bloch, 1918: 443, my translation). It remains open until the last human being, in their death, seals the end of experience. In any case, the ego-documents that follow this act remain reserved for others. Whether we will know less about our own end than about our beginning, namely nothing more, or whether we will become aware of death and the after begins, is the central existential question par excellence.

The Ever-Distant Other and the Remembered

The encounter with another person confronts everyone, without exception, with a predominantly unknown and inscrutable counterpart. Their thoughts are not recognisable, neither are their actual feelings, and their past is at best partial. Every individual is only limitedly factual towards others. We assume more than we can know. But the individual itself is also only a limited fact. Everything that is one's own is subject to a narrow perspective and often becomes blurred in memory. Individuals and their lives are hardly comprehensible. To try to do so nevertheless is bound to fail. Biographical and autobiographical narratives are each an attempt to present something comprehensively that can only be grasped to a very limited extent. The only reliable material in a biography consists of objective life data. In the words of Wilhelm Dilthey, they are the once remaining remnants of our past and our entire existence. (see Dilthey, 1965: 246) Everything that did not come to light or was concealed in all lives was, as is well known, taken to the graves. What rounds out the biographical narrative is foreign interpretation and the recipient's involuntariness. The autobiography is completed by means of self-interpretation and the unconscious concession of the reader.

It makes only a marginal difference whether one knew the person whose life one is describing or not. Most biographical narratives are likely to be carried out far away from the person portrayed, spatially and even temporally. At best, one relies on personal statements and communications of one's hero, then on ego-documents, on the precipitates of the course of his life and finally on those remnants left behind. Everything else that these statements and objects do not provide, but that is needed for a rounded story, is left to interpretation, and life testimonies – perhaps only apart from that of birth – are inevitably directed to the subjective gaze. This applies to a thematised life of the fellow world as well as to any from one of the former worlds, and there even more.

Beyond the individual and his or her conditioning, it is the course of time and other people who play a role in shaping each life course. Considering that most individuals of the past are completely forgotten and those who are remembered are subject to a changing view of themselves and their lives, any attempt to write a biography becomes even more difficult. – The remembered are biographed. The remembered are living or dead. The living are remembered when they are absent. The living remember the dead or have forgotten them. If the dead are remembered, this means, in a sense, continued life after the actual one. These memories end with the last one who is able to think back. A name that can still be found does not change this. For most of the dead, this line determines that nothing further remains, which is why the past in all its phases shows an almost depopulated world, in which only a few remain in each case. Crossing this line is only permitted to those whose image, however composed – of description, work, deed – is deemed worthy of preservation or indispensable. Only those with whom works or deeds are associated are remembered, but by no means

every work and every deed. Deeds, rather, that had consequences for the course of time after them, just as, on the other hand, every work that expresses something universally valid. These are the protagonists of the history of the world, of art and of science, without whose contribution every subsequent present would have a gap in its visible past. The possible gap determines the weight of what is remembered and the significance of the reason for remembering.

The Illusory of Every Narrated Biography

No one has so far contradicted the apparent plausibility of biographical narration as much as Pierre Bourdieu. In *The biographical Illusion*, he explains “the notion of *trajectory*”, which would be constructed “as a series of successively occupied positions by the same agent (or the same group) in a space which itself is constantly evolving and which is subject to incessant transformations. Trying to understand a life as a unique and self-sufficient series of successive events (sufficient unto itself), and without ties other than the association to a ‘subject’ whose constancy is probably just that of a proper name, is nearly as absurd as trying to make sense out of a subway route without taking into account the network structure, that is the matrix of objective relations between the different stations” (Bourdieu, 2005: 303–304, highlighted in the original). To take account of what gravely co-determines a life, the entire environment of individual existence must be elicited, considered and narrated.

[...] one can understand a trajectory (that is, the *social aging* which is independent of the biological aging although it inevitably accompanies it) only on condition of having previously constructed the successive states of the field through which the trajectory has progressed. Thus the collection of objective relations link the agent considered – at least in a certain number of pertinent states – to the collection of other agents engaged in the same field and facing the same realm of possibilities. (Bourdieu, 2005: 304, highlighted in the original)

It is obvious that this is hardly possible. And much more: the aspects explained by Bourdieu are joined – as the undoubtedly most difficult – by the inner life of the individual. A person does not only live in the factually objectified and where documents prove what has happened. He lives even

more in himself, withdrawn from everyone else. In his thinking, feeling, his remembered past and imagined future, every human individual is more strongly and permanently at home than in his physical surroundings and in his dealings with others. In other words, every life is at the mercy of the same number of perspectives on itself as it encounters subjects. However, it is the self-view of each subject that is most permanent.

Images of Life

Biographies are pictures of people whom one does not and cannot know as a rule. They are narratives of a lived life that the narrator has not accompanied in any of its sequences. The biographical manifestations of a historical figure reflect the course of his reception. The factual forms the schema around which the narrative and later re-narratives are built. Different times and authors as well as readers always see this vita changed, more or less, because the whole of a new or later perspective has changed in relation to the previous one. Nevertheless, once the picture of a past figure has been formed, it will not become – if only in view of the stable facts – a completely new one. But it will not become an untouchable or perpetually fixed image of life either. Certain features will endure, the rest will change. Important figures are consistently biographed several times, whereby the continuation of the narrative reflects the weight of the reception. Autobiography is usually exhausted in a single execution. Self-reflection as a written text moves within very narrow limits. Biographies, on the other hand, lead in the course of time to traditional images of life, which experience variants on a predominantly minor scale. The reason for this is the developing receptive process. The factuality of the texts remains or is supplemented by new testimonies. Their perspectival component is able to put the facts in the new light of a new present.

Norbert Rath states: “A biography stages the image of a [...] person; it gives a shot under certain conditions, in a certain lighting and perspective, a – perhaps not even representative – excerpt, an abstraction that is not to be confused with the multi-dimensional reality of a life. Biographies present deceptively real images of life, but they present deceptions, inventions of context, subversions of meaning.” (Rath, 2000: 281, my translation) Biographical narratives form an affiliation to a life, sort out life events with due regard to the *factum historicum* and situate their hero or protagonist, situate him or her in an epoch or historical space that the narrator has not experienced.

In his *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen (History as making Sense of the Senseless)* Theodor Lessing states:

Biography seems to be not only the purest but also the most revealing source of history. On the other hand, however, it is also certain that biography and autobiography, no matter how honestly, objectively, selflessly, without vanity and intention they are written down, always reflect the life reproduced by thought, but not directly lived [...]. After all, even diary pages and letters, i.e. the most intimate material of historical writing, are a life that has already become factual, removed from the personal. (Lessing, 1921: 112, my translation)

In the following paragraph, he speaks of the “immense confusion of life” and of the “best-known figures in history [...] whose real humanity blurs in the twilight of legend and is actually and nothing but an illusionary façade on which longing and desire, need and will of striving groups of people hang, like ivy on ruins. The figures of Lysurgus, Solon, Pythagoras, Socrates, Buddha, Lao-tzu, Moses, Jesus shine clearly through the millennia because they have left no written words and because therefore the contradictory, changeable empirical man does not stand in the light of historical man”. (Ibid.: 113, my translation) The aforementioned distant historical figures are outline-less. The considerable lack of biographical facts makes a contoured image of life impossible in each case. According to Lessing, one knows best the unknown person whose life one can imagine free of life-historical facts.

The Individual Perspective of Simplification

Every life path is largely determined by factors that cannot be influenced by the person concerned. The incomprehensible complexity of human life does not allow any life to be shaped according to individual wishes. Nothing is predetermined, yet there is little that can be freely chosen. Already at birth much, perhaps most, is unattainable for this one human being. When and where a life begins affects the same, and to a great extent throughout. Every thinking back about one's own past sees the events of that time, without, however, being able to clearly recognise to most why this life has turned out this way and not differently. Everyone can only decide within the bounds of his or

her possibilities. Beyond this limit, either the potential to act or the knowledge that there is still something there is missing. The horizon of every individual without exception is very limited.

Because the course of one's own life is predominantly incomprehensible or, in other words, because the fate of one's personal existence within an unmanageable and inexplicable world of life eludes all understanding, one looks back by means of a perspective of simplification. A certain linearity is imposed on one's own life and the individual stages are given a sense of meaning. However, this cannot be successful throughout. The resulting incomprehensible turning points and the phases of a life path that follow them are called fate. Fate is always the serious change in a life path that refuses to be clarified, for the better, but much more often for the worse.

In Robert Musil's *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Qualities*) it says,

“that the law of this life, for which one yearns, overburdened as one is and at the same time dreaming of simplicity, was none other than that of *narrative order*. This is the simple order that consists in one's being able to say: ‘When that had happened, then this happened.’ What puts our minds at rest is the simple sequence, the overwhelming variegation of life now represented in [...] a unidimensional order: the stringing upon one thread of all that has happened in space and time, in short, that notorious ‘narrative thread’ of which it then turns out the thread of life itself consists.” (Musil, 1979: 435–436, highlighted in the original)

The novel continues: “In their basic relation to themselves most people are narrators. [...] What they like is the orderly sequence of facts [...] and by means of the impression that their life has a ‘course’ they manage to feel somehow sheltered in the midst of chaos.” (Ibid.: 436)

Theodor Lessing writes:

Already in the system of meaning of the individual ego, chance determines whom you meet during the course of your life, who loves you, who comes to you for friendship, comradeship, marriage, which country, which parents, which gifts and conditions fall to you. Nevertheless, in every case where a core or value of the soul is touched, the human-logical need reaches for fatalistic necessities. The sympathy of love, for example, is explained from a previous life, passions from an irresistible natural compulsion, unexpected fate from pre-birth or karma. This is the only possible way to become calm about the

apparently incoherent, unspeakable, elementary nature of all original experiences. We thus impute causal series of so-called reality to the element of life. World history, however, is to an even greater extent than the history of the individual an impenetrable thicket of nothing but surprises! Nothing can be foreseen. (Lessing, 1921: 44–45, my translation)

Without exception, every single one is “in need of consolation [...] as only human beings can be, hurt, wounded and full of the great pain with which man is distinguished above all other creatures”. Ingeborg Bachmann continues: “It is a terrible and incomprehensible distinction. If this is so, that we have to bear it and live with it, what is consolation supposed to look like and what is it supposed to do for us anyway?” (Bachmann, 1968: 324, my translation)

The simplifying perspective on one’s own life is essential. For it is ultimately a matter of enduring life. Man, aware of his inevitable and short-term end, whose greatest need is for a meaning to his existence, would not be able to survive without the constitutive gaze of not perceiving the relentlessness of existence. It is that which takes the sting out of the view of life, one’s own as well as the whole. In other words, even our position towards our own individual existence is distant from its truth. And even more: life itself is no longer accessible to reflection.

“Who [...] could bear a true biography!” (Nietzsche, s.a. [1918]: 148, highlighted in the original) Nietzsche asks in the *Genealogy of Morality*, a biography, therefore, that relentlessly presented the unmanageable, even inscrutable, aspects of human life.

It remains open whether one finally takes one’s biography, i.e. one’s own lived life, with one, or whether it is left to the memory of others, and thus very fragmentary, or whether it perhaps, if no one is close enough, falls prey to oblivion.

The Detachment of Individuals From Each Other

Written “biographies and autobiographies are” first and foremost “of a constructional character that goes hand in hand with a certain degree of fictionalisation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, in contrast to all forms of fiction, they are ‘referential’ texts that refer to a ‘reality’ lying

outside the text” (Tippner and Laferl, 2016: 11, my translation), no more and no less. Virginia Woolf sees in

two parts the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us to-day. On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (Woolf, 1958: 149)

Virginia Woolf was always critical of biographical literature. “The biographer” she claimed “is doing 2 incompatible things. He is providing us with sterile & fertile. Things that have no bearing upon the life. But he has to provide them. He does not know what is relevant. Nobody has yet decided. A bastard, an impure art”. (Quoted after Lee, 1997: 10) Elsewhere, she had proposed a remarkable synthesis that reveals the little that is factual and the expansive that is fictional in any biographical enterprise: “The biographer cannot extract the atom. He gives us the husk. Therefore as things are, the best method would be to separate the two kinds of truth. Let the biographer print fully completely, accurately, the known facts without comment; Then [*sic!*] let him write the life as fiction.” (Ibid.: 10)

The conflation, always lamented by Virginia Woolf, of two highly different spheres, the objectively true on the one hand and the subjectively imagined on the other, results in every case, without exception, in the following “the three or four hundred pages of compromise, evasion, understatement, overstatement, irrelevance and downright falsehood which we call biography”. (Ibid.: 12) “There is no such thing as an objective biography” (Lee, 1997: 3), writes Hermione Lee. It is not without a certain irony that, despite this knowledge, she has written an extensive biography of the decidedly biography-critical Virginia Woolf.

Describing a life or depicting a human being from birth to death nowhere reaches its limits as completely as in view of the world of thoughts of this individual, his world of feelings, his affects, fears, every sensation. No one is able to recognise this to a fellow human being to a describable degree, i.e. to communicate it objectively. In the face of a past individual, this is completely impossible. The degree to which each individual human being is deprived of all others is in and of itself frightening. Just as no one can reveal himself directly, no one is capable of grasping much more

than outward appearances of another. What this fact means with regard to a person who no longer exists is obvious. And not only that. We cannot even imagine individuals of a pre-photographic past externally, i.e. comparable to how we encounter others on a daily basis. Let's take a figure like Mozart, for example. We do not know what he looked like. Wolfgang Hildesheimer, in his great essay on Mozart, rightly states that "We are not able to put ourselves in the place of someone from the past". Added to this is the absence of the "historical time and space – but, be it noted, not the cliché, not only what is called the 'age', not just the metaphorical space, but the actual place, today become a museum". Also the absence of all "who loved him or hated him or had no opinion about him [...], everyone who received him or avoided him or sought him out. Also part of his time and place were the rooms he walked through, disarranged, or left untouched, their acoustics, accoutrements, their furniture, all the matter that helped give him shape, even the most concrete". And more: "His conscious life was, as we know, tied to matter, to physicality, sometimes to excess. Eating and drinking were part of it, unsublimated physical contentment, right down to the voiding of his intestines". What is certain, however, is that "we will never really be able to comprehend the dimensions of his experiential range" (Hildesheimer, 1983: 279–280). We are no more able to grasp it than we are able to grasp it in relation to a fellow human being. The historical figure is merely incomparably more distant from us than the living one. We also lack the ability to place ourselves in a present figure.

Sophronius Eusebius Jerome, one of the four great Latin Church Fathers, has been depicted many times, including several times in the so-called case. There, as for example in Albrecht Dürer's *Saint Jerome in his Study*, he is not only alone in a room, he has obviously sunk into his inwardness. This individual in his double rapture, as it were, is not accessible to anyone. It is not only such concentrated rapture that withdraws us from each other; every thought has the same effect as everything else that is not communicable in the human individual. The fact that, despite the unbridgeable, individuals are described from person to person, together with their stations in life, is firstly based on the reality of the actual distance between people, which cannot be concretely experienced. Strictly speaking, every life story, every biography and autobiography is a narrative or "a Tale / Told by an Ideot [*sic*], full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing" (Shakespeare, 1623: 150) as it says in *Macbeth*. A narrated life picture can only fail for lack of actual understanding of that person. As it says in the 39th Psalm, people meet as shadows or phantoms. Nothing more can be perceived. Moreover, everyone is predominantly an enigma to himself.

Biographical, also autobiographical narration – as text, film, drama, image – arises from the desire to approach human life. Life narration is the attempt to grasp one's own imagined fractured

existence. To give an account of one's own life in comparison to other lives reveals the deep need for more experiential substance of existence. Each of these narratives confronts the fleetingness of life. And each one does so by means of helpless simplification. The result is a construct of simplified linearity and assumed meaningfulness. By its very nature, the incomprehensible cannot be described.

Jesus as a Biographical Special Case

“The limit of all efforts to recognise the past is that the space of hypothesis cannot be exceeded, because we cannot bring the past into the present” (Ratzinger / Benedikt XVI, 2013: 16, my translation). This is what Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI says in the preface to the first part of his *Jesus von Nazareth*. In the space of the hypothesis, the whole of the past is brought into view. Exclusively that which has come down to us or the respective present as an objective fact is outside the limits mentioned. Jesus of Nazareth cannot be biographed in the conventional way. Superficially, this is not possible because of the hardly existing facts. And completely impossible is a biography of Jesus because he is the Son of God, the Messiah, and the Trinity essentially constitutes him. He is a completely singular figure in world history. His impact, which is both after-effect and permanently present, is incalculable. The profane factuality of his life was at no time merely humanly local. Matthew's and Luke's Gospels begin with his birth. Luke also reports about the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple. Not a child like others, for “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man” (Saint Luke, 1611: chapter 2, verse 52). The *Old Testament* already announces Jesus: namely in the book of Isaiah chapter 9, verse 5 and chapter 7, verse 14–16, where childhood is also mentioned. In Micah chapter 5, verse 1 Bethlehem is already mentioned. Even apart from the almost non-existent verifiable dates of Jesus' life, this life already eludes biographical access *ante festum*. Despite God's incarnation, there can be no question of a human being like all others. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: “The unique and altogether singular event of the Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man, nor does it imply that he is the result of a confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man.” (*Catechism*, 2003: 103)

Furthermore, it is clarified: “Many things about Jesus of interest to human curiosity do not figure in the Gospels. Almost nothing is said about his hidden life at Nazareth, and even a great part of his public life is not recounted.” (Ibid.: 114) Moreover, under the heading *Christ's whole Life is*

Mystery states: “Christ’s whole earthly life – his words and deeds, his silences and sufferings, indeed his manner of being and speaking – is Revelation of the Father.” (Ibid.: 115) And: “Christ’s whole life is a mystery of *redemption*. [...] what was visible in his earthly life leads to the invisible mystery of his divine sonship and redemptive mission.” (Ibid.: 115, highlighted in the original)

That is why it is logical when Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI “wanted to make the attempt” to “present for once the Jesus of the Gospels as the real Jesus, as the ‘historical Jesus’ in the true sense. I am convinced and hope that readers can also see that this figure is much more logical and also historically much more comprehensible than the reconstructions with which we have been confronted in recent decades. I think that this Jesus – the one of the Gospels – is a historically meaningful and coherent figure” (Ratzinger / Benedikt XVI., 2013: 20–21, my translation). In the *Compendium of Theology*, Thomas Aquinas speaks of the “properties of the Son”: “Two properties must pertain to the Son: one whereby He is distinguished from the Father, and this is filiation; another whereby, along with the Father, He is distinguished from the Holy Ghost; and this is their common spiration.” (Aquinas, 1947: 53) “filiatio” and “communis spiratio” (Aquinas, 1963: 80) and the mystery of this life as a human being remove Jesus from superficial biographical access. Although no life is really open to such access, this applies much more clearly to that of the Son of God.

Conclusion

Whatever is biographically portrayed, with one’s own blurred, short-sighted and limited gaze one undertakes to explain the limited, deficient expressions of a stranger and to bring them into contexts, to fathom their meaning or to attach such meaning to them. Every narrated biography is, in principle, a precarious picture. Life remains largely unknowable, the other as well as one’s own.

To narrate a life in its entirety would require its lifetime. And because language cannot grasp complexity in its parts synchronously, but only linearly, much longer time would be needed. Every biography can only be a selection. No past life can be evoked, let alone grasped, as what it really was. Biography is the recreation of a human life. It is doing so by taking the risk of first creating a life that has long been lived as a structured and meaningful one, and even with the real danger of becoming “narrative attempt[s] at an aestheticised shaping of the course of life” (Schmidt-Lauber and Hengartner, 2005: 11, my translation). Therefore, every biography establishes itself between science, art, empiricism and transcendence, between remembered facts and approximations, facticity and

conviction.

The life lived is a specific invisible life, one that no one can fully comprehend without even considering one's own birth and death. No one possesses a complete picture of his or her own life. Biography as narration is in its own way unattainable. A biography as well as an autobiography is the mostly literary representation of that which can be conveyed neither by the portrayed nor by the portrayer. The fact that biography inevitably has to rely on the vehicle of testimonies points to the malaise of life history studies.

Sigmund Freud writes to Arnold Zweig on 31 May 1936 in a letter that is still widely cited in the discourse on biography/autobiography: "Anyone who writes a biography is committed to lies, concealments, hypocrisy, flattery and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth does not exist, and if it did we could not use it." (Freud, 1970: 127) Even the overflowing testimony of a completed life does not help to reach a certain judgement and also not "easy explanations for everything, within a range of probability we can comprehend. The primary source and the motivation are the same: wishful thinking" (Hildesheimer, 1983: 7).

The last verse of John's Gospel reads: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world it selfe [*sic*] could not containe [*sic*] the books [*sic*] that should be written". (Saint John, 1611: chapter 21, verse 25)

What has been said applies to every human life. An omission-free description of life would have to describe every moment of life or all expressions and also inner processes – an impossibility. On the other hand, no one's own life as a whole is present or manageable, because no one remembers himself as a whole, all days, hours, actions, thoughts. Everyone is reduced in his or her memories and puts himself or herself down. The actions of even a single day, its thoughts, impressions, words, looks, gestures, memories, plans are largely omitted or psychologically buried and only very partially remembered. Who one actually is, i.e. the one of all moments, is not even known by oneself. Everyone is a riddle to himself and a greater riddle to everyone else. Memory becomes a deceptive idea. Every life becomes, remembered, a fragment of the effectively past lifetime. Biography and lived life mean two rudimentary complexes: firstly, what the person whose existence is to be thematised only knew and reflected upon, and secondly, what the biographer chooses from what can be found.

The unaccompanied and merely shadowy human being eludes any actual access. A fact that hardly anyone seems to be aware of, since otherwise no one would take the trouble of such narration. For every biography and autobiography – apart from objective facts – owes the proof of whether it

even comes close to the intended individual – even in its fragmentation.

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