



History and the Production of Memory

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The volume "History/Production/Memory", the outcome of a conference related to the annual Edinburgh Film Festival, discusses issues of some importance for our concern with history and national identity mediated through the New German Cinema, and which pertain to questions of a 'counter-cinema' generally. What motivated these essays was the appearance in France around the mid 70s of films that proposed to rewrite contemporary history (specifically questions surrounding the experience of World War II): Lilliana Caviani's *Night Porter*; Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien*; Marcel Ophüls's *The Sorrow and the Pity*, etc. The attempt in these films (as perceived by French critics, especially those attached to the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*), was to depict France in a somewhat less heroic light than done prior to the late sixties, as being predominantly sympathetic with Fascism. Rather than simply accept these "rewritings of history" as truth, these critics, with the help of Foucault's ideas regarding the archeology of knowledge through the reassertion of repressed discourses, and those of Benjamin with respect to the different ways of acknowledging constellations of present and past, point to the 'neo-conservative' motivation of the present political situation in France as conditioning reconsiderations of the past.

With this as justification, these essays proceed to consider the theoretical problems generally of rewriting and re-presenting history through film as such. They focus on the unique capacity for popular media to obstruct the flow of 'popular memory' (defined as the traditions of struggle by marginalised groups for legitimacy through oral, written, or musical expression) through its 'reprogramming': the tendency to depict for these groups (workers, women, etc) not the 'way things were' but a particular construct or image of them, what they "must remember having been", that is greatly shaped by present political issues (*Interview with Foucault*). The popular media, generally synonymous with narrative traditions in film, corresponds for these writers to the notion of history in Christian Metz's sense of the term as a self-validating expression that effaces all 'marks of enunciation' and disguises itself as a story. It is a history, as is usually the case, of already 'completed' events. In the same way, the transparent film, that which has a narrative that proposes to tell everything, rests upon a denial that anything is absent or that anything has to be searched for. As Metz himself asserts, with this model "we see only the reverse (and always more or less regressive) face of those factors, the one which is completed and satisfied, the formulated accomplishment of an unformulated wish ("History/Discourse: Notes on Two Voyeurisms"). 'Discourse' is then what corrects this self-validation, what fosters this bringing to the fore of the multiple voices actually sedimented into this effective absence.

Consistent with Foucault, and extending this distinction elaborated by Metz, these essays point to the theoretical problems with narrative films proposing to reorganize or restructure memory and history, and accordingly offer some ideas regarding how this can be overcome. Believing generally that 'history' denotes a non-discursive past and a discursive present (John Ellis, "The Institution of Cinema"), it becomes more specifically defined, in Foucault's terms, as being not "the past as such, nor yet a discourse in which

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the past is revealed, but rather a set of discourses in which the past is constructed, and constructed not simply from 'the past' itself but from the various discourses that the past has thrown up and that have been accumulated in various forms of 'archive' (The Archeology of Knowledge, 1972). Since 'history' never comes to us as anything less than a text or construct of some kind ("raw data" or facts already worked by "ideology"), in order to be more 'objective' about the past we have to, with Brecht, distance ourselves prior to a clearer apprehension. Objectivity consists in the exposure of subjective voices and models, the purging of argument and bias, that might approximate a structurally induced *stunde null*: the feeling of being able to see the past for the first time that emerges from the demystification of previously functional myths that are tainted with ideology or a false vision. In this regard the Cahiers' critics, when interviewing Foucault, assert that it is all important "that we don't limit ourselves to re-establishing the truth, to saying, about the Resistance, for example, "No, I was there and it wasn't like that!". If you're going to wage any effective ideological struggle on the kind of ground dictated by these films, we believe you have to have a much broader, more extensive and positive frame of reference".

In this move away from posing some final 'truth', they simultaneously provide a critique of 'historicist' views of history. According to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith ("On the Writing of the History of the Cinema: Some Problems"), the difficulty has been that historical investigation aims to produce historical explanations of past and present events in terms of a process known as History (not just an explanation of a past event in its own terms). Yet historical explanation in this sense, he contends, is not valid, because 'History' as a causative force does not exist. All inquiries into the past tend to lapse at some point into this attribution of causative power to this non-existent entity, that is into historicism. If past events, he continues, are to be examined at all, they should be seen structurally, in terms of successive synchronies or as elements of "synchronous formations", rather than in the "misleading term", to which all invocations of 'History' inevitably lead, of the causal development of one thing out of another.

Such a 'radical' rethinking of the writing of history is actually heavily indebted to (if only indirectly) the Blochian notion of *ungleichzeitigkeit* where it is believed that histories are not continuous and do not simply accumulate, but provide a "terrain of possibilities which materialize erratically according to determinations which have no comfortable linearity about them". And it is dependent upon two notions coming out of the field of Linguistics in the early part of this century, which became the cornerstone of Russian Formalism: that the explanation of a present state is not to be sought in a past state of the same thing ("diachrony does not explain synchrony"); and the outside cannot explain the inside.

There is little in these essays which actually extends these implications further to advocate a particular type of 'alternative practice' that escapes from the difficulties outlined. This is so, it seems, because the critics are more interested in presenting the symptoms (the negative features) of the classic, narrative model as it relates to the repression of memory (as opposed to the construction of a liberated memory within an avant-garde practice).

They accordingly put forth two provocative hypotheses: that 'memory' is itself not directly realizable on film; and, related to this, that the problems of 'Popular Memory' in the cinema run into a conjunction of 'humanism' (in the philosophical as opposed to the socio-political sense of the term)

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and 'historicism' in the attempt to render memory representable filmically. Regarding the latter, Colin MacCabe ("Memory, Phantasy, Identity: 'Days of Hope' and the Politics of the Past") views "the cinema" (actually the narrative model) as inherently inscribing the significance of a past in the heroes that it constructs. In film, the attempt to realise a history rapidly regresses into a 'humanism' as its support in which the person is the bearer of the history, the visible agent of historicity in whose actions are inscribed the 'truth' of a past. That is, the coming together of 'historicism' and 'humanism' in dominant cinema produces two main negative effects: the construction of narrative in such a way that the historicity of events closely rests on the faithful representation of the agents of this history (and whose viewpoint, consistent with 'classic' cinema, we are destined to assume); and the self-evident (consistent with historicism) primacy of visual imagery that blocks efforts to achieve a complexity of historical knowledge. As MacCabe points out regarding "Days of Hope", because the "image looks right" the truth of the argument (pertaining to the reconstruction of '20s labour history in Britain) becomes conditional not upon the actual viability of the politics that set this history to work but on an apparent truth of this history as an autonomous object. The 'verity' of the image of the past prevents the working through of a historical discourse with its own principles of truth!

Given their too little emphasis, then, on possible modes of memory reconstruction (in favour of its repression), the assertion that "memory is not directly realizable on film" is an inevitable one. A type of cinema that can interrelate 'history' and 'discourse' (in Metz's sense of the terms) in new ways is a test case that could prove such a statement to be an ahistorical one. The New German Cinema is such an example (these writers as a general rule provide few specific examples) where conscious attempts are made to use narrative within discursive arrangements that address the socio-historical context in greater depth. The greatest deficiency of these essays, then, is the theoretical proximity to Metz's distinction between history and discourse. Kluge's ideas, for example, about the capacity of the film medium to present history in a form encouraging viewers to remember, are exactly what these essays lack.

That is, Kluge appears to offer the possibility of a larger socio-historical context within which personal dramas (the raw material of narrative, popular cinema) are positioned (perhaps a new amplification of the 'family romance', the form of novelistic cinema par excellence, where the private melodrama of everyday enters into a different constellation with the documented). To use narratives and fantasy in an enlightening relation to documentary, his avowed aim, can provide one means of positively re-programming popular memory. Where 'classic cinema' appears to incorporate a process of forgetting (little is carried away from such films, even when political and historical issues are treated, for reasons (partially) pertaining to the suturing process), and the 'political avantgarde' concentrates predominantly upon the generally immediate historical conjuncture to the de-emphasis on tradition (Syberberg's critique being quite apt in this regard), Kluge implicitly argues for a use of the film medium that exploits cinema's unique "mode of presencing" (Metz's notion of film language as perceptual presentness, a kind of *jetztzeit*). This quality, the power of evoking immediacy, would seem to qualify cinema as being ideal for re-presenting history. Yet, as Kluge argues, this power of evocation (as mainly typified in the medium of TV and the press) privileges the actual, immediate to the detriment of the future and the past. He asserts that "experience is always a question of a specific situation. In this concrete situation, there is always a future, past, and actual present: it's always the same". Stated differently, you can never make the false separation between past and future while concentrating on the present: the

three parts are always present in our mind. Drawing upon Freud's notion of free association as being the elementary unit of thinking and feeling, Kluge places cinema within a similar disposition: "This sort of mass medium film has its basis in people's minds and experience over several thousand years". ("Film and the Public Sphere", *New German Critique*, 24-25).

The problem then becomes the effective reconstruction of such an "experience" that presences this constellation of past and future, one that works against this tendency to forget. Though these essays provide the beginning framework for such a project, they fail to take the mandatory next step.

FOOTNOTE

1. For an elaboration of these issues see Keith Tribe: "History and the Production of Memories", *Screen*, Vol 18 No 4, especially pp. 21-22

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