

Image History: Compilation Film and the Nation at War

CHRISTOF DECKER

Resumen

Este ensayo investiga las formas y funciones de los documentales de compilación preocupándose, en especial, de su papel en los procesos de cómo se inventa o se imagina la nación. Postulamos que las películas de compilación sobre la experiencia de la guerra pueden considerarse un medio importante de la memoria cultural para investigar el pasado histórico de los EE.UU., contribuyendo a la vez al surgimiento de una identidad nacional. Partiendo de las discusiones actuales sobre las películas de compilación y la intertextualidad, el artículo ofrece una conceptualización de las funciones del metraje e ilustra, sobre la base de una serie de análisis ejemplares, tres maneras distintas de reconstruir el pasado (o recordar la guerra), cada una de las cuales contribuye a crear la imaginación de una nación ya sea unida, dividida o en procesos de desintegración.

1. Introduction

The assumption that the images and sounds of documentary films are understood by the audience to refer to the historical world may be regarded as a relatively undisputed axiom in the recent theoretical discourse on the genre. Whether this reference is called a presumptive assertion, an indexical relation or a reference to the profilmic, the rhetorical claims of the form are seen to be predominantly based on the idea that what we see and hear establishes a privileged link with an event that belongs to the realm of the historical world (cf. Carroll; Nichols, *Representing*; Beattie). As Bill Nichols puts it, “we bring an assumption that the text’s sounds and images have their origin in the historical world we share” (*Introduction* 35). This notion is a feature of the so-called contract between filmmaker and audience and it is reinforced not only by stylistic and formal elements but also by reading strategies on the part of the audience, and by cultural assumptions about technology and mass-mediated forms of communication.

Oddly enough, however, one form of filmmaking which negotiates the desire for historical referentiality in a particularly interesting way has received relatively little scholarly attention: the compilation film. In this case, especially, the notion of a photo-

graphic trace which might allow an unfettered or direct access to the historical world seems to be an indispensable premise. Furthermore, compilation films are particularly relevant for the creation of national self-images since they represent a primary way of relating to the past, and of assessing its significance for the present. Thus, the audience is presented with an 'image history,' which also entails a history of the image(s), making it necessary to consider both, the promise to show historical events based on archival footage and the specific (institutional and aesthetic) histories of the footage itself.

My aim in this essay is two-fold: on the one hand, I will address some recent attempts at defining the formal and stylistic features of compilation films in order to conceptualize them as media of cultural memory. On the other hand, I will examine a number of historical examples to assess how the compilation aesthetic is related to the idea of the U.S. American nation. I will focus on the depiction of war as a collective experience central to the compilation aesthetic as well as to the question of national identity. A time of crisis and challenge, war can be seen as a major if not *the* decisive historical moment for the self-definition of a nation. Consequently, its significance in many compilation films lies not just in testing the quality and intensity of patriotic feelings culminating in the willingness to die for one's country, but in making the good and evil qualities of the American national character manifest. Considering *Strange Victory* (Leo Hurwitz, 1948), *The Civil War* (Ken Burns, 1990) and *The Atomic Café* (Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty, Pierce Rafferty, 1982), I want to suggest that the design of compilation films remembering the experience of war has favored three forms of mediating cultural memory, in turn stressing the unity, division, or disintegration and "madness" of the nation.

2. Film, War and the Concept of the U.S. American Nation

In order to contextualize the compilation aesthetic and its relation to national self-images it is helpful to draw on Benedict Anderson's influential notion that nations are imagined political communities. According to this approach, nations are imagined as limited and sovereign. Furthermore, and most importantly for my purposes, they are "conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). This becomes most relevant in times of war, as Anderson points out: "Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7).

Richard Slotkin has elaborated on Anderson's approach, arguing that myths play an important role for the invention of crucial components of national identity, including, for example, the notion of ethnicity. From this perspective, the concept of the (modern) nation only evolves *after* territorial borders have become established and fixed. And even then the nation is "a generalized or abstract place, which we inhabit through acts of patriotic imagination" (470). Anderson's idea of a nation as imagined

is relevant to all modern states, yet Slotkin argues that the formation of the American republic, in particular,

preceded the definition and popular acceptance of a distinctly “American” nationality. It was only after the Civil War and Reconstruction that the unitary American nation became a primary focus of ideology and power, superseding loyalties to and personal identification with particular provinces of the federal republic. (472)

The development of a unitary sense of the nation was strongly shaped by the myth of the frontier and the westward movement, yet Slotkin emphasizes that in certain historical periods new self-images emerge which create a new mythology and demonstrate that the nation as an imagined entity may change in rather substantial ways. The experience of war, in particular, seems to be a major catalyst for a changing representation of national images and identities. Focusing on combat films made during the Second World War, Slotkin argues that a major development took place which reconfigured the sense of the American nation. Against the background of nativism and cultural assimilationism prevalent in the first half of the 20th century, combat films indicated the “shift from the myth of America as essentially a white man’s country, to that of a multiethnic, multiracial democracy” (470).¹

For the history of documentary film, too, the idea that nations are imagined or invented communities puts a special emphasis on media of remembrance and cultural memory, which help to shape collective self-images. Remembering warfare is a crucial constructive act, a core site of patriotic imagination, which allows us to call compilation films representing the war experience a *mnemonic practice*.² Following Slotkin’s approach we may ask: How has the U.S. American nation imagined itself with regard to the experience and waging of war? And, more specifically, how has the compilation aesthetic been employed to remember, represent and reinterpret the nation at war?

3. Defining the Compilation Film

Surprisingly little work has been done on compilation films, even though their significance, at least on German television, has been increasing steadily in recent years. Jay Leyda, who wrote an early book-length study on the genre, stated that historians seemed to be wary of archival footage, yet today what might be called image histo-

¹ The concept of the ‘American nation’ has become a hotly contested, if not the key, issue in the revisionary context of the New American Studies; for an introduction to this debate, cf. Kaplan/Pease and Pease/Wiegman.

² The significance of film as a medium of cultural memory can be distinguished at different levels, which are developed in more detail in Decker, “Interrogations.” The first level concerns the materiality of the cinematic signifier; secondly, remembering can be seen as a process pertaining to and recollecting the past; thirdly, structural patterns are laid out to generate representations or models of memory. On the relation between fiction films and cultural memory, cf. Fluck, Erll/Wodianka; on the historiographic discourse about film, cf. Smith.

ries—i.e. historical narratives relying primarily on audiovisual material and eye-witness accounts—are a ubiquitous phenomenon that requires a more comprehensive scholarly treatment.

One difficulty of the discourse on compilations has been the question of which films should actually be classified as such. In her film dictionary Ira Konigsberg writes that a compilation film is

made by combining footage from other films and assembling them in such a way that they achieve new significance from their present context. The term was first used by Jay Leyda in *Films Beget Films* (1964). Such films often deal with past political, social, and historical events. Drawn from old newsreels, propaganda films, and official archival footage, they are often compiled from a specific perspective. (60)

Useful as this definition seems to be at first, it also raises questions: How old does an ‘old newsreel’ have to be? If we draw footage from different sources, how can we *not* compile it from a specific perspective? Nevertheless, agreeing with Leyda, Konigsberg makes clear that compilation films are constructed synthetically out of prior material, and that this material is regarded as belonging to the past. In his 1964 study, Leyda added to these points that a compilation film should also give expression to an idea, thus separating it from being a ‘mere document.’ This formulation clearly echoes the Griersonian definition of documentary as a ‘creative treatment of actuality,’ which Grierson had introduced to separate it in a similar way from the less ambitious aesthetic of newsreels (cf. Grierson). In effect, then, Leyda was thinking of artistic re-workings of prior footage, which he went on to describe with considerable historical detail, even though his conceptual framework remains rather sketchy and insufficient for my purposes.

A key factor for the definition of compilation films seems to be the amount of archival footage used. There is a sense that a film based exclusively on this kind of material is the most ‘pure’ type of compilation (cf. Beattie). This could be seen as a call for a narrow definition of the term. However, I want to argue for a wider sense of compilations, first, because pure compilations are relatively rare, and second, because if we consider the use of archival footage as an important mnemonic practice, then we should also examine hybrid forms that combine archival footage with footage that is coded as contemporary or recent in order to engage in a dialogue between past and present. Obviously there is a gray area between genuine compilation films and other modes of documentary representation. A heuristic proposal might be to say that when the majority of footage used is archival and it is employed to present a historical argument that relies on its thoughtful, telling or provocative juxtaposition, we should call the production a compilation film.

The source material of compilation films has sometimes been called “found footage.” However, as Keith Beattie rightly points out, the term “found footage” is misleading and glosses over the complicated strategies and ways of acquiring and selecting material included in a compilation film. It evokes the connotation of accidental discovery, easy, unhindered access, and creative artistic treatment that seems to dis-

avow the economic and ethical imperatives underlying the modern business of trading with images. To be sure, the term “found footage” is closely linked to specific art movements such as collage art practiced in the Bay Area in the 1950s. In that context it does indeed refer to avant-garde artists like Bruce Conner, who did not have the financial means for more elaborate projects (cf. Peterson).

But as Jay Leyda has shown, the compilation praxis and aesthetic is much older. On the one hand, it goes back to the early, commercially motivated method of reusing material in order to save money on the production. On the other hand, it is related to the propaganda efforts following the First World War. In this second case we might more aptly speak of “captured footage” to stress the point that the recontextualization of anterior material constitutes a deliberate act of deconstructing existing newsreels or films to create a new rhetorical design. However, in order to address not just these cases of propaganda when discussing the compilation aesthetic, I want to propose that, at its most basic level, we should use the descriptive term “archival footage,” which may refer to any kind of source material, i.e. not just newsreels or propaganda films but fiction films, home movies, advertising, industrial films and much more.

4. Compilation Film and Questions of Intertextuality

The process of reassembling material from prior texts shares many characteristics that in literary studies have been discussed as instances of intertextuality. Oddly enough, the rich theoretical discourse that has developed around this concept in the past thirty years has made little impact on film theory.³ On the one hand, there are obvious similarities between literature and film. The reference to prior textual material may be implicit or explicit, it may have the status of an allusion, or it may be given as a direct quote (cf. Pfister). On the other hand, there is a major difference between the literary and filmic forms of intertextuality resulting from the respective semiotic systems. Put simply, the materiality of the sign appears to be less important for the medium of language than it is for the visual and auditory quality of film. This may be the central reason why a direct quote from prior material—i.e. an insertion of footage—is less frequent in fiction films than in literary texts because this insertion may potentially be much more disruptive and destabilizing with regard to narrative coherence. Even the highly reflexive films of the New Hollywood Cinema took great pains to motivate these direct quotes from old Hollywood films by inserting them only when the characters visited a cinema or watched television at home.⁴

³ For a recent summary of concepts of intertextuality, cf. Allen.

⁴ However, in contrast to direct insertions, allusions to prior material are much easier: body language, phrases or scenes are frequently, indeed increasingly, quoted; furthermore, parodies, which are seen to represent the highest degree of intertextuality, are a common filmic practice. On different forms of intertextuality, cf. Pfister.

The intertextual historical discourse of compilation films is, therefore, crucially dependent not only on formal and stylistic features like the literary intertext, but also on the aesthetic and technological codification of its source material. A highly intertextual modernist classic like John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), though fragmented and collage-like, seems to be relatively coherent in terms of its medium. This is different with filmic intertextuality based on direct quotes or insertions. Editing patterns, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and generic classifications represent highly specific formal and stylistic codes that are complemented by the materiality of the signifiers: film stock, color or black and white footage, the density of images, the speed of shooting, the sound quality—its frequency range, clarity, number of channels—and so on (cf. Arthur; James).

This semiotic specificity encoded in the material is primarily responsible for two basic notions that Paul Arthur has identified in the early praxis of compilations. First, it has informed the idea that archival footage is a historical sign: the “presumptive trace” that allows us to treat it as a transparent referent to historical events, thus stressing its evidential quality. Second, it has encouraged the contrary impulse to treat it primarily as an aesthetic phenomenon endowed with a certain materiality that can be reconfigured for new forms and meanings. In both cases, *something* has been encoded in the material that makes its physicality more important (and disruptive) than is the case with literary intertextuality. In the first instance, it is the indexical relation to the historical event; in the second, archival footage takes on an aspect that David E. James has termed *allegorical*. As an indication and trace of technological and financial means that went into the production of sounds and images, the footage signals a relative position within the context of the film industry indicative of economic and discursive power (cf. James 3-28).

The status of archival footage is thus shaped by both its presumed historicity and its materiality, and only by relating it to the social and cultural context in which it is produced and received can we fully grasp the complexity of the compilation aesthetic. As indicated, archival footage is usually not *found* as the term “found footage” would suggest, but traded. Just like other forms of documentary representation, therefore, compilation films are implicated in a network of power relations. First, access to and availability of footage is regulated by public or private institutions. Second, footage represents an economic source of income that is traded according to a value placed on images and sounds (cf. Beattie).

Finally, if we accept the premise that referential claims and socio-economic relations are encoded in the material, then archival footage also raises ethical issues. As many authors have argued, documentary filmmaking is not just based on a contract between audience and filmmaker but also between filmmaker and film subject (cf. Winston; Nichols, *Representing*). The interaction with ‘real people’ is a contested terrain shaping a social and ethical constellation that is inscribed in the sounds and images. Indeed, the relation between filmmaker and subject is usually not regulated by normative moral or legal guidelines and carries with it the constant negotiation of ac-

cess and disclosure, of participation and professional distance. How should one deal with footage that was shot as a result of hierarchical power relations? Or, to put it more bluntly, how could or should a compilation film integrate footage shot in a concentration camp by German cameramen working for the Nazi regime? Who should trade these images? Who should profit from selling Gestapo footage shot in a ghetto? Should a compilation film indicate under which circumstances archival footage was created? In short, how can the specificity of a historical situation encoded as a complicated social, evidential, aesthetic and ethical 'trace' be adequately acknowledged?

As Jay Leyda recounts in his study, the creation of compilation films was professionalized during the Second World War as part of the propaganda efforts on both sides. Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* alone was recut by British editors three times between 1940 and 1943 (cf. Leyda 70). In times of war the ethical imperatives seemed to be simple enough. Film was understood as a weapon and the battle over footage became a military objective. As with literary intertextuality, the reassembling of prior film material indeed has this aspect of cannibalization and reappropriation, of deconstruction and counter-propaganda. Yet the ethical implications of dealing not only with historical events but also with power relations inscribed in the footage has not been adequately recognized. One reason for this strategic blindness may be the compelling promise of a transparent indexical reference corresponding with the desire to know—an "epistophilia," in Bill Nichols's sense—helping to disregard where the footage comes from (cf. *Representing*).

Yet, as Paul Arthur has argued, the authenticity and indexicality of scenes in compilation films and their role in the context of a rhetorical argument is complicated. Referring to a synthetic scene in *The Atomic Café* which joins American planes approaching Hiroshima and a Japanese man seemingly responding to the planes in the sky (looking up), who, Arthur claims, must have been taken from a fiction film, he writes:

Documentarists who would never dream of restaging an event with actors do not hesitate in creating collages which amount to metaphoric fabrications of reality. The result is that guarantees of authenticity ostensibly secured by archival footage are largely a myth. In consequence, the binary opposition of unalloyed illustration—as the imperative of conventional documentary—and figurative reshaping is scarcely as absolute as some commentators suggest. (66)

Although I believe that Arthur misses the significance of this particular scene in *The Atomic Café*, the mythopoetic dimension of compilation films seemingly based on authentic historical 'traces' is an important factor highlighting the constructedness of many historical narratives.⁵ Brian Henderson, in his discussion of *The Civil War* se-

⁵ Arthur points out that the shot has been edited into *The Atomic Café* in a way that follows the temporal and spatial rules of continuity editing. However, the editing of *The Atomic Café* reverts to this pastiche of fictional editing at several points, especially at the end, where similar shots are combined to form the finale of an attack on the United States. In this case, the obvious diversity of the material (mixing, for instance, animated and real

ries, makes the similar point that Ken Burns's use of photographs deemphasizes the historical specificity of photography in favor of metaphorical renderings. Yet before contending that the authenticity of compilation films is a myth, we have to be more specific about the claims that are actually connected with the uses of archival footage.

5. The Uses and Rhetorical Functions of Archival Footage

Paul Arthur, Stella Bruzzi and Keith Beattie have recently made suggestions about the status of archival footage. At the most basic formal level, the key question seems to be which function the archival footage has for the design of the new textual whole.⁶ How has it been employed? Beattie, following Arthur and Bruzzi, proposes to distinguish between a denotative use on the one hand and an expressive use on the other, which, in Arthur's article, corresponds to the schools of realism and constructivism, or documentary and avant-garde. These suggestions are helpful but I believe they do not really offer a comprehensive overview that does justice to the complexity of the compilation aesthetic. In semiotic terms, I find it problematic to designate the use of footage "denotative," since visual images are, compared with linguistic signs, far less bound by cultural conventions as to what constitutes denotative and connotative meanings. More importantly, I believe that, as a first step, we must distinguish between the use of archival footage for the new design on the one hand and the relation of the archival footage to the rhetorical argument on the other. In other words, the way archival footage is used in a compilation film and the function it has for the rhetorical argument do not have to be identical, and this should be acknowledged in our analytical framework.

In order to distinguish between different uses I propose three categories. First, the use may be *illustrative*: the footage gives an example or instance of something. Second, the use may be *evaluative*: the footage is questioned with respect to its worth or significance (as historical evidence or visual clue). Finally, the use may be *reconstructive*: the footage is reassembled in a way that stresses its (material or semiotic) specificity. The degree of reflexivity about the ways of dealing with archival footage increases as we move from illustrative to evaluative and reconstructive uses. However, these categories only refer to the use in the new textual organization. For a thorough assessment of the degree of intertextuality, one would have to look at both textual designs, since, obviously, the use of archival footage in the new text may correspond to, or differ from, the use in the prior text. For instance, a shot of Hitler greeting his troops in *Triumph des Willens* may first have signified powerful strength; this is employed in

action shots, and repeating scenes from the earlier 'duck and cover' sequence) highlights the artificiality of this strategy so that, retrospectively, the film makes clear that it has created false continuities and causal relationships all along (cf. Arthur).

⁶ On questions of textual functionality, cf. Bordwell.

a similar way by Leo Hurwitz, who retains the sense of a powerful menace but is most probably undermined by Len Lye to highlight a ridiculous case of self-stylization.⁷

The interrelation between textual designs and the functions that footage may have is not just a formalist concern that we should clarify in order to better analyze compilation films. Jay Leyda makes the interesting observation that in his opinion it is very difficult, if not impossible, to turn war propaganda against itself. He feels that Nazi material was not used with great success for anti-Nazi aims (cf. Leyda 63). In more general terms, this raises the question of whether we can discern recurring patterns of using archival footage. Which material has been used for compilations in specific ways? Which prior material appears to have a higher ‘internal resistance’ against being deconstructed and re-used in ways that would go against its original design? Put differently, how can the working with or against a prior generic, stylistic and rhetorical design be systematized and explained?⁸

One way of coming to terms with these questions is, as mentioned above, to distinguish between the uses of archival footage on the one hand and the relation between the footage and the argument the film is developing on the other—if, indeed, it is designed to be argumentative, a question which I will address below. Again, I propose to consider three categories. First, the use of footage may be in support of the argument: the footage is used as (putative) historical evidence confirming the verbal logic. Second, it may be used in contrast or opposition to the argument: the footage creates a tension between images or sounds and the verbal logic of the film. Finally, the use may be disassembling or destabilizing the argument: the footage, either deliberately or inadvertently, seems to go in a fundamental sense against the creation of a coherent argument.

It is important to stress that this proposal of categories is a very broad attempt at finding descriptive classifications for signifying practices that are actually very complex. For instance, the first category, using the footage in support of an argument, has to be qualified further concerning the (putative) status of footage as historical evidence. The referential claims it adds to the verbal logic may be specific or general, it may relate to identifiable events or persons, or to a general category evoking what may be called a setting, a time and place. Likewise, the second category of footage in contrast or opposition to an argument needs to be elaborated on. A major mode of this category is ironical inversion, in which official footage (like army information films or

⁷ In my estimation of Len Lye’s film *Swinging the Lambeth Walk* (1940) I am relying on Jay Leyda’s description which makes this recontextualization highly probable. In any case, this example is only meant to be an illustration of an issue—different textual functions of the same sequences—that does not seem to be controversial (cf. Leyda 61-94).

⁸ This is how Leyda puts the issue (in the German edition): “Steigert sich die Heftigkeit eines Materials vielleicht, wenn man es im Gegensatz zu seinem Inhalt bearbeitet?” (118). In her chapter on archival footage, Stella Bruzzi similarly mentions the “innate value and meaning” (39) of non-fictional records without, however, elaborating on its ontological status.

public announcements) is treated ironically. A complex (and not primarily ironic) case in point occurs in *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968). The film begins with a shot of a press conference; sound and image are synchronous. An official spokesperson explains that Vietnamese prisoners have not been mistreated. While the sound continues, the image track changes. We see a Vietnamese man lying on the ground, being viciously kicked in the groin by an (American?) soldier who can only be seen from his waist down. Both image and sound track are used in an illustrative sense: the images show an instance of abuse, the sound track documents an instance of official announcements during the war. Yet they do not form a coherent argument—on the contrary, their asynchronous combination creates a particular tension. In this case, the images are meant to counter and question the verbal logic by uncovering that officials are lying.

Needless to say, the third category, too, has to be investigated further. What I have in mind here is the way the avant-garde has used archival footage, for example by breaking it up into different parts and reconstructing it according to a completely different logic that may be, as with Bruce Conner, more associational or poetic than rhetorical (cf. Arthur; on the modes, cf. Bordwell/Thompson). In this case it is appropriate, as Paul Arthur suggests, to discuss the mode of recontextualizing archival footage as metaphorical. Yet for the first two categories it seems wholly insufficient to link documentary realism only with an illustrative mode. In many if not most cases the relationship between images, sounds and rhetorical arguments goes beyond mere illustration by drawing on metonymic and synecdochical forms of historical referentiality.

In the last section of this essay I want to examine how these attempts at theorizing the compilation aesthetic can be connected with concrete historical examples. As indicated, I want to suggest that remembering different wars has revolved around three concepts of the U.S. American nation as divided, united, or disintegrating.

6. The Nation at War: *Strange Victory*, *The Civil War* and *The Atomic Café*

Strange Victory (1948) by Leo Hurwitz is a little known film that deserves wider recognition. Though it is not mentioned in Jay Leyda's filmography of important compilation films, it seems to be exceptional for reappropriating the visual 'traces' of the war in Europe at a time of collective cultural amnesia, and in a way that relates them to the situation in the United States at the time of the film's release. In accordance with the practice of documentaries in the 1940s, the film combines reedited archival footage with scenes of contemporary America (e.g. street scenes, a newsstand) and acted sequences (e.g. a black war pilot applying in vain for a civilian job). Throughout the film the emotional appeal of the material is strongly coded by the musical score, while the rhetorical appeal relies almost exclusively on a male voice-over addressing the viewers directly and expressing a sense of urgency and anger. At one point in the film, when a pregnant woman is shown, the voice-over switches from a male to a female voice de-

scribing the promises connected with new-born babies. After this passage the male voice again takes over to counter and confront these visions of hope with the experience of racism, anti-Semitism and inequality in the United States.

The victory over Nazi Germany and its racist ideology is thus contrasted with the feeling that life in America seems not to have changed. Worse, fascist ideologies are seen to have slipped into the social fabric of the United States when the commentary mentions invisible yellow stars or the discrimination of babies according to color of skin, slant of eyes or religious denomination. It seems to be a strange victory, the narrator concludes, with "the ideas of the loser still active in the land of the winner." Though Hollywood films of the late 1940s like *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947) were made from a similarly 'progressive' political point of view, *Strange Victory*, with its much more explicit and aggressive critique, must clearly be seen in the tradition of the radical political left of the 1930s.⁹ The compilation aesthetic that Hurwitz employs is polemical and drastic, joining the shot of a self-possessed Hitler with a ghastly composition of broken-out teeth, or an African-American baby with children being led out of a liberated concentration camp.

The selection of archival war footage centers around scenes of fighting, liberation or surrender and, most importantly, the rise of the Nazi movement in Germany. These scenes are mostly used illustratively, as historical evidence, yet there are several stylistic techniques that can also be seen as an evaluation or interrogation of the footage. The film begins with the fighting in 1942 and even though these events are not long in the past when *Strange Victory* is released in 1948, there seems to be a feeling among the filmmakers that a considerable resistance to this act of looking back has to be overcome. Repeatedly, the commentary remarks, "remember how it was?," as if having to counter the wish to forget. Thus, on the one hand, the film uses the footage as a verification of the war experience but, on the other, it also verbally creates a mood of distanced reflection that seems to anticipate the reservations against looking back.

A second way of interrogating the archival footage is connected with a more obvious treatment of the images as such. In one scene a close shot of Hitler, filmed in the typical heroicizing style from below, is superimposed with footage shot from a plane flying over a city in ruins, possibly Berlin (see Illustration 1). Creating a palimpsest-like composition, the posture of determination and power is inextricably linked with destruction and death. This might be called a dialectical composition joining together shots with synecdochical implications to create an interpretation of history: fascism means war. It represents one of the most effective ways of interrogating encoded meanings. But it also goes most clearly against the conventions of documentary realism and therefore seems to be much less frequent than other forms of critical evaluation.

A further instance of manipulating archival footage with technical means happens after the commentary has first praised the promise of babies only to counter this hopeful view with a 'face the facts' sequence that highlights the legacy of slavery, rac-

⁹ On the Hollywood films of the late 1940s, cf. Decker, *Blick* 434-91.

ism, anti-Semitism and religious intolerance. Suddenly, war footage is introduced that has been inserted running *backwards*. Thus the Nazi leaders who have been shown earlier as dead seem to be reanimated and the specter of Nazism rises again. This instance of trick photography ensures that although the footage is mostly used to support what the commentary has established as a historical assessment, there are also sequences that question its merely illustrative use, making the film at the same time rhetorical and reflexive.



Illustration 1: *Strange Victory* (Leo Hurwitz, 1948)

The function of the reversed motion scenes is, once again, to connect the past with the present in order to develop the film's argument that a particular form of fascist ideology is living on in the United States. At the core of this ideology is the idea of inequality based on the concept that one part of the population is seen or said to be superior. For Hurwitz this is epitomized in American society by the category WXP (white, Christian, Protestant), which is stamped on one of the baby cards. The conclusion drawn at the end is that the victory over German fascism has not had the desired effect at home. Juxtaposing archival footage with scenes from contemporary America is thus meant to commemorate the common fight and victory of the war but also to argue that the unified ideological front has given way to the disillusioned assessment that the conflict is not over. The battle for a more equal and democratic society has not been won, or as the commentary states at the end: "If we want victory, we'll still have to get it."

The lesson that *Strange Victory* propagates through its particular way of remembering the war is, then, that war against enemies like fascism is necessary and reward-

ing. Yet the struggle against external forces has to continue internally because the U.S. American nation is divided and dominated by racist and anti-Semitic sentiments. In a striking contrast to Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1943-45) the war footage is not used to construct the vision of a unified nation but rather to emphasize its internal violence and disunity. Thus *Strange Victory* deflates the importance of the Second World War as a unifying force in favor of the domestic political struggles of the pre-war years. Instead of overcoming internal divisions, the war experience has intensified the feeling of injustice and anger.¹⁰

In the case of *Strange Victory* the mnemonic practice of compilation films drew on archival footage to stress the disunity of the American nation in the present. In contrast to this practice, the remembrance of wars via archival footage may also serve to emphasize the nation's unity. My case in point for this contention is *The Civil War*-series by Ken Burns whose compilation aesthetic relies on a unique mixture of elements that not only creates a high degree of intertextuality but also, by bringing together the temporal quality of film and the spatial quality of photography, a particular form of intermediality. On the whole, the series is characterized by the dominant expository logic established by a voice-over commentary. The historical narrative that evolves is complemented by interviews with historians, excerpts from diaries, newspaper articles or other source material, and, most importantly in terms of the series' visuality, by thousands of photographs.

By drawing on diaries, letters and other personal notes, the series achieves the personalization of cultural memory. Choosing eye-witnesses as privileged sources of information—individuals from both sides of the conflict and from different social classes—indicates the attempt at re-individualizing an experience that has become, as a precursor of modern wars, collective and all-encompassing.¹¹ As part of a mnemonic practice, the series adopts a celebratory and reconciliatory tone meant to stress the unity of the nation as the primary result of the war. As Gary Edgerton writes, *The Civil War* is "less a story of socio-political conflict than a poignant and mythopoetic lesson in national commitment, self-sacrifice, valor, and fulfillment" (58).

In order to create a sense of unity and unification through struggle, the compilation aesthetic goes to great lengths to establish connections between its elements, and to reinforce a sense of balance and closure. Indeed, the notion of coherence, both at a textual and at an idealized national level, seems to be a predominant aspiration behind

¹⁰ The example set by Hurwitz was taken up twenty years later, albeit with different formal means, by Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1968). Although de Antonio addresses a different military and political conflict the film basically adheres to the patterns established in *Strange Victory*: it employs archival footage for an argument about the past in order to point up a state of national disunity and internal rift in the present.

¹¹ The personalization of war histories has also affected other conflicts like the Vietnam War. In Errol Morris's *The Fog of War* (2003) remembering the war shifts fundamentally from the collective to the individual level, from the analytical assessment (of films like *In the Year of the Pig*) to the personal anecdotes and (largely unchallenged) interpretations of Robert McNamara.

the textual design. For instance, contemporary scenes showing former battlegrounds and the silhouettes of canons are shot at sunset or sunrise, thus stressing the circularity of natural processes, of endings and beginnings—the war ends, the new nation emerges.¹² Though the war represents a state of crisis and a challenge, in its mythological dimension it is also seen as a time for great leaders or great failures, bringing out patriotic virtues like honor, loyalty, dedication, and the willingness to die for one's country.

In the spirit of *The Civil War*-series, then, war is horrible but it is also a time for courageous and self-sacrificial behavior (cf. Edgerton). Furthermore, even though the series repeatedly shows the horrors of the war, it ultimately assesses the fight for freedom and the abolition of slavery as a unifying experience for the American nation. The promises of freedom have not been completely realized yet the 'honorable' way of remembering the war experience is meant to demonstrate the high degree of unity that has developed in the meantime. The Civil War as a time of interior division and struggle is thus reinterpreted as a first sign of overcoming the state of divisiveness. According to one of the series' experts, the U.S. American nation, formally a nation since gaining independence, was 'reborn' truly unified as a result of the war. Needless to say, this historical perspective, which has been characterized as liberal and pluralist, is a major departure from Leo Hurwitz's depiction of racism and violence against blacks as the major legacy of slavery.¹³

The final example in my analysis—*The Atomic Café*—employs yet a third way of relating to wars of the past. Here, archival footage is not used to stress the unity or disunity of the American nation (in the present) but rather to express its self-delusions and anxieties vis-à-vis a highly efficient yet at the same time highly irrational war machinery. In contrast to *Strange Victory* and *The Civil War*, *The Atomic Café* is an example of 'pure' compilations, made up exclusively of archival footage. No interviews or retrospective voice-overs contextualize the material (only some of the music seems to have been added). Structurally, the film begins with the atomic explosions at the end of the Second World War, and first reactions to the enormity of these events. The film then moves on to the Cold War, the spy hysteria, and the parallel development of legitimizing the potential use of atomic weapons against the Soviet Union, and of persecuting the political left at home. Finally, the compilation assembles material from popular culture and from official information films (with the famous 'duck-and-cover-sequence'), creating the impression of a hilarious but also horrifying disjunction between the enormity of the danger and the ridiculousness of coping with it in the public sphere.

¹² The underlying desire is suggested by Ken Burns himself: "we Americans who are not united by religion, or patriarchy, or even common language, or even a geography that's relatively similar, we have agreed because we hold a few pieces of paper and a few sacred words together, we have agreed to cohere, and for more than 200 years it's worked and that special alchemy is something I'm interested in" (qtd. in Edgerton 54).

¹³ On Burns's politics, cf. Edgerton.

The central claim of *The Atomic Café* is that the political elite is characterized by an 'arrogance of power' in dealing with common people.¹⁴ This is not suggested through explicit statements but revealed rather indirectly by showing, for instance, how the "natives" from Bikini are treated by the military superpower. Just like the pigs in the bomb blast area, they are considered to be test cases for the analysis of the weapon's effectiveness. While the voice-over from the official film (or newsreel) states that they are well and happy, we see images demonstrating that their hair can be pulled out in handfuls. In the tradition of de Antonio, the lies of the power elite are uncovered by deconstructing its official propaganda.

A related aspect of this kind of 'propaganda' is seen to rest in the images of the American family represented in advertising and other footage from the 1950s. In this case, too, the prevailing feeling is one of anxiety. As television sets enter the home, the idealized and indeed virtually sanitized white American family, watching in awe how the world changes in the atomic age, is connected with a sick reality that slowly seems to contaminate it. The film thus highlights a fundamental distrust of collective self-images and of the political authorities who are seen to have misinformed the American public in inflammatory ways about the destructive power of atomic weapons (cf. Bruzzi).

In this sense, *The Atomic Café* does not remember the war to stress the unity or the disunity of the nation, and the lessons to be drawn are neither conciliatory or divisive nor celebratory or critical. Rather, the film seems to be overwhelmed by the excessive logic of the atomic age—the paradoxical simultaneity of powerlessness and power, the unusual and normalcy, reasonable behavior and irrationality, chaos and order. The compilation aesthetic may uncover the 'schizophrenic' state of mind of the U.S. American nation but it cannot provide it with a deeper significance in the context of established historical master narratives. In this case, then, the investigation of archival footage unveils an amusing but also exhausted and ultimately horrifying archaeology of the pre-apocalyptic mind—a collage of a disintegrating nation.

7. Conclusion

I have argued that the compilation aesthetic has played a major role for the invention and imagining of the U.S. American nation. Here, in particular, remembering the experience of war has been a crucial way of relating to the past, and of shaping influential versions of cultural memory. How influential and pervasive these audiovisual forms actually are, has not been sufficiently realized, and much work on the compilation aesthetic remains to be done. Drawing on a number of historical examples, I have suggested categorical distinctions for the analysis of the compilation film genre and have argued that the representation of war has been characterized by an increasing tendency to personalize history. A second important change appears to have happened with re-

¹⁴ On the pervasive influence of this theme in the 1960s, cf. Kraas.

gard to the issue of ethnicity and race. The very different assessment of the legacy of slavery by Leo Hurwitz in the 1940s and Ken Burns in the late 1980s is indicative of the new myth of the United States as a multiethnic and multiracial nation described by Richard Slotkin. Finally, as an afterthought, war compilations exhibit a remarkable predilection for the spectacle of destruction: the mushroom cloud of the atom bomb, carpet bombing in Japan, missiles launched at night from war ships—the visual spectacle of explosions and forms of mass destruction and death is slowed down for an intensified form of contemplation. Turning images of war into aesthetic objects may be a defense mechanism of survivors, yet it is striking to realize that archival footage has served so extensively as the material for what might be called, in analogy to the city films of the 1920s, war symphonics of matter, movement, and destruction. These sequences shockingly illustrate and often implicitly criticize the war machinery, yet at the same time they appear to be more ambiguous: not just signs of madness but disturbing projections of (national) power.

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