

## **Resighting From Memory** by Kathy Geritz (1995)

"I wonder how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape. . ."

-- Chris Marker in *Sans Soleil*.

What happens when the responsibility of remembering shifts from a person to a film or video record? We are all familiar with those ubiquitous new documentarists who view family events and vacation trips through the video viewfinder. They seem to have created a new relationship to time, where an experience is shifted, to another, later time -- the time of viewing, which often never comes.

This is somewhat different from our relationship to the snapshot. With a photograph one is less likely to wonder whether the original moment was "experienced" (as in, "they were so busy filming the Grand Canyon, they never actually looked at it"). Instead, the photo may trigger associations beyond the captured moment; it may serve as a Proustian madeleine, bringing forth memories of events outside of the photographic frame. Since film and video are time-based media, our experience of viewing them is more complex; the past seems to come to life again in the present.

Chris Marker shifts the location of remembering away from the mind or body to external repositories. His choice of locations - film, photograph, tape - links the act of remembering to images, images collected via recording apparatus. This is modern memory, not recalled through association - those tricks to remember names or phone numbers - or patterns and repetition - how does the *Odyssey* go? - but through representing the past. For of course ours is an image-age.

In some ways film, because of its mimetic quality, is the ideal memory tool. If you pause now and try to recall your mother's face to mind, what do you see?[1] Can you hold in your mind a clear picture of her? Does this "picture" refer back to a previous picture? a photograph perhaps? Film remembers without this vagueness.

This points to a peculiarity of remembering with film. It is a very precise way of recalling the past. Roland Barthes has written of the photographic image as having a denotative or literal message - the content that is depicted which copies reality, and a connotative one - the cultural and historical associations which are called forth by the image through the choice of colors, gestures, subject, composition.[2] It is this latter quality of photographic images to be "read", not just received that is of interest to many alternative film and video makers.

We are accustomed to thinking about the link between memory and writing - memoirs and autobiographies abound, and to see writing as a means of giving shape to, fleshing out recollections. Toni Morrison speaks of beginning with a memory as an image, and searching for its meaning through her novel writing.[3] Her text reveals its subtext. For her, fiction arises from the exploration of both the actual and the possible. Film of course always refers to the "actual world" - the photograph by its nature retains a trace of the world.

For some, Morrison's "possible" is explored through reworking existing images, rethinking their implications, imagining other possibilities. The images' subtext becomes the filmmaker's text. The very preciseness of the image is thus countered; our reading of it is opened up, its meaning multiplied. In his recent monograph, William C. Wees refers to found footage as "recycled images," a name suggesting a certain economy, and the possibility of finding new use of that which has been discarded, a use perhaps not intended by the original "owner." [4]

Bruce Conner evocatively uses public images as the means to both a personal journey back to childhood and to suggest a collective memory shaped by shared images in his well-known collage films, *Valse Triste* and *Take the 5:10 to Dreamland*. His *A Movie*, cited as the first found footage film, was also the first to reveal the political and social implications of the original footage.

Such subversive rereading characterizes work as diverse as that of Craig Baldwin who combines footage from newsreels, B-features, cartoons and educational films to create delirious, impossible histories critical of dominant discourse and documenting in general; Jerry Tartaglia who uses gay pornography to make grating, aggressive statements about the treatment of gay sexuality in a heterosexual world; and Martin Arnold who steals a few frames of images from mainstream films and works them in repetitive exercises which exhaust the original material's content.

Several years ago Rea Tajira made a video *History and Memory* in which she tries to "remember" events her mother won't discuss or can't remember. She finds footage of U.S. internment camps of the Japanese during World War II; she stages an incident - her mother with a canteen at a water fountain, with herself depicting her mother; Hollywood images, newsreel and government propaganda films are included in a section with the word "history" inscribed over them. In addition to her own musings, her mother and aunt are heard, and Tajira reads a review her nephew wrote of a Hollywood film on the internment camps.

As Jennifer Montgomery's super-8mm film *Home Avenue* begins, we see her drawing a map to illustrate the location where she was raped several years earlier. She later gives a tour of the spot, detailing her memory of the rape and the incidents that led up to it. She talks of her mother's disbelief of her version of events, and of her own uncertainty as to whether she was raped with a penis or a gun.

Neither of these films contains footage of the original experience which is being recalled through visual images. If none of the images are documents in the traditional sense; what then is documented? Tajira finds she understands why her mother has forgotten her experience. She ends the film with an image from a Hollywood film of a train going to the camps, as she announces her intention of going to the camps to see them for her mother, seeking to at least carry a mental image of the place her mother has forgotten.

While Montgomery explores her own memory, rather than another's, she too approaches it indirectly. She retraverses the route she took the night she was raped, recounting anecdotal details regarding her confusedly emerging sexuality, traveling a literal and psychological route. Approaching the past through recounting is fundamental to oral histories and family legacies, as well as to psychoanalysis. In the talking cure, one doesn't necessarily relate an event as it occurred, but rather it surfaces in language which compresses, transforms or displaces the original event. When she reaches the house where the rape occurred, the film footage is hand-processed. The image is unstable; it is difficult to discern details through the mark left by the hand processing. The image, usually so reliably of the world, is here hesitant, personal; it cannot be categorized as an objective record, but rather one that has the mark of a maker who in touching the filmstrip, grasps at the elusive event.

For years Peggy Ahwesh has filmed an intimate group of friends and family; at times they deliver lectures on something that interests them, often they recall an incident from their past. From her accumulated collection of film rolls, she creates her super-8mm essays, loosely organized explorations of issues such as gender socialization, conceptualizations of romance, and personal versus social experiences of history.