

# IMAGES, TRACES, AND NARRATIVE IMAGINATION: DOCUMENTARY APPROACHES TO ARCHIVE MEMORY

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“I write into the images and then read something out of them,” Harun Farocki explains in *Interface* (*Schnittstelle*, 1995). Few documentary filmmakers would contest the imaginary and creative side of their role as historians and, yet, compilation aesthetics in more popular contexts remains a transparent device where the footage is subordinated to the historical narrative at hand. With particular attention to the reuse of archive film, this paper will acknowledge the creative process of memory work in documentary; the “documentary fiction” according to Jacques Rancière where memory is being “forged.”<sup>1</sup> This process is inseparable from the aesthetic pleasure and attraction of the compiled sequences which unfold on the screen as memories, although memories that are not part of our personal memory. This aligns with the fact that, in due time, every film is a document. This archival dimension of moving images (video and television included) adds an important dimension to the mode of transition associated with the notion of “the trace” in classical philosophy, and most notably in existential phenomenology.

The enigmatic appearance of the trace resides in the implied ambivalence of passage and mark, hence of temporal transition and the static, material presence of the *tupos*. Despite the inevitable impulse of any narrative to abstract the historical referent into a teleological structure, the trace opens up to time experience in a sense of a “lived duration,” which transgresses the present, the past, and the future (Augustinus and Bergson). The trace goes beyond the materiality of the imprint; it is more contingent than the image and richer than the index.<sup>2</sup> Most important, it is “indissociable from affect.”<sup>3</sup> It designates the transcendental impact of an image-memory, the aporia of memory and imagination, the now of reminiscence and the then-and-there of the historical referent. In dialog with Paul Ricœur’s account of “the trace” in *History, Memory, Forgetting*, this paper suggests a reassessment of film as an art of record. Looking beyond cinema, and considering, for example, the often overlooked archive memory of television, I wish to call attention to the alternative archives and untold histories that still await to be represented, interpreted and imagined by documentary filmmakers, media activists, and video artists.

In order to illuminate the very transit of a film sequence from the archive to its reappearance in the imaginary realm of a film narrative, I will also take the risk of combining this theoretical reflection with a reference to the contemporary realm of documentary filmmaking. Usually I cannot avoid referring to the famous vanguard of compilation film, but this time my current project on documentary in early Swedish television found a thematic matching with a recent Swedish documentary. *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975* opened in Stockholm in March 2011 after a successful, prize-awarding touring to Sundance and Berlin. This film by Göran Hugo Olsson is based on footage from the Swedish TV archive – images that have not been shown since they appeared in public broadcasting during the 1960s and 1970s. Cameramen and a few women from the Swedish television went to the US to record their impressions of the civil rights movement.

Before I return to the example of *The Black Power Mixtape*, I will try to highlight some aspects of the trace as a philosophical discourse with implications for the analysis of narrative imagination and memory work in documentary.

## Ricœur and “the trace”

According to Ricœur the problem of the trace originates in the classical confusion conveyed by the expression “memory-image,” and hence it belongs to the relation between memory and imagination. True to his method of critical synthesis, Ricœur’s own definition of the trace depends on a compromise between the affective and imaginary realm of appearance outlined by Plato, where the operation of memory is bound up with forgetting, and the Aristotelian model which implies the social realm of language and “the trace” in terms of recollection – the intended action of remembrance. I am particularly interested in the creative and intersubjective aspect of Ricœur’s approach to the trace in historical representation. In the three-part volume *Temps et récit* he discussed the role of “emplotment” that organises the contingencies of time and being into a whole<sup>4</sup>. The hermeneutic inquiry is concerned with ways in which philosophers, historians, as well as authors of fiction have acknowledged and exemplified this narrative structure. Hence, the telling of time belongs both to historiography and poetics.

Despite Ricœur’s obvious bias towards narration and the written text, I think that his argument welcomes a re-reading of the trace and the trope from the perspective of film and visual media. More specifically, in the poetics of documentary film there would be two interrelated readings. First, there is the existential impact of the trace as presence of absence, and as an incentive for both historiography and imagination. Second, the material aspect of the recorded sound-image opens up to formal and cultural aspects of the moving image as archive memory. In documentary filmmaking, practical issues of copyright, accessible archives, and historical events in lack of archival record, meet with formal strategies of editing and narration – processes through which the archival footage is reused and enacted as a documentary readymade.

Ricœur emphasizes that in order for the trace to stand out as image-memory, language, interpretation, and even knowledge is required. There must be something with which to fill the trace to make it count as the past. This is where Aristotle’s “memory is of the past” meets with the material side of the trace in historiography. History is a science of traces, and it is the trace that “orients the hunt, the quest, the search, the inquiry.”<sup>5</sup>

In the audiovisual poetics of film, there are many ways in which the temporal contingency of the trace also orients the quest – however different this quest may be. “The trace” is evoked frequently in documentary film and video, where the vestige, photograph, moving image, or recorded sound may be framed to evoke the presence of the past. Moreover the camera may zoom into the vestiges and scars of landscapes and faces. In this context, “the trace” constitutes a recurrent iconography of “pastness,” which often fuses with violence and death. However, the affective impact of “the trace” goes beyond any narrow concept of the “photo-trace.” Sound plays a pivotal role, and the trace-status of documentary is not limited to photographic representation. The affective impact of history as lived experience is not less convincing when acted out as testimony before the camera.

Applied to the context of film and media, the poetic enactment of the trace cannot be considered beyond the social dimension of film as cultural memory. Here, the trace is less a token of past events or something that happened, than a constituting sign in the narrative re-invention of history. In response to the radical omission of film and photography in Ricœur’s philosophy, this

reading involves a critique of his argument, or, at least, indicates its limitation in the realm of film and media. More useful, however, is Ricœur's reference to Aristotle with which he underlines the social realm of language and "the trace" in terms of recollection – the intended action of remembrance. This, I think, echoes in Rancière's essay on documentary fiction and his note on memory work: "Memory must be created against the overabundance of information as well as against its absence. It has to be constructed as the liaison that connects the account of events and the traces of actions."<sup>6</sup>

### *The Black Power Mixtape*

Let us return to the *The Black Power Mixtape*, a film which has brought international attention because of the rarely seen archive material and, not least, because of the personal recollection by civil right front figures like, among others, Angela Davis and Danny Glover who look back at past events while – off-frame – contemplating their younger selves in the compiled images. I am less interested in the overall narrative, than in the collage of film fragments from the Swedish TV archive, and the ways in which the mere choice and editing of sequences underlines the outspoken political commitment and somewhat naïve point of view on the part of the Swedish filmmakers. The contrasting of public events to interview situations in a more private setting, brings attention to aspects of performance and enactment that have often been overlooked in scholarly work on compilation film.

A pertinent illustration is offered in the scene where Ingrid Dahlberg from the Swedish television is interviewing Mrs. Mable Carmichael, the mother of Black Panther leader Stokely Carmichael, when Stokely suddenly proceeds to overtake the role as the interviewer. Provoked by the naïve perspective of the Swedish journalist, and by her conventional approach in addressing "the mother of the Black Panther leader," Stokely Carmichael encourages his mother to characterize hers and the family's social background in a series of leading questions:

*Where did you live? [...], What kind of neighborhood was that? [...], What do you mean by the "run down side?" [...], How big was the place? [...], How many people lived there? [...], How many is that altogether? [...], How was life in general for your children? [...], Could they do what other kids in the US did?, Why didn't they? [...], Why didn't your husband make enough money? [...], But there were other carpenters who lived better than your husband? [...], Why didn't your husband? [...], Why was he always the first to be laid off? [...].*

Mrs. Carmichael's final answer, "because he was a colored man," which of course is the answer her son anticipated in the first place, closes this scene which ends with Stokely's affirmative nod. In this case the trace as affective sign-effect is propelled by the very chance-element of filmmaking: during the unfolding of Carmichael's performative act the fury and pride of political commitment seem literally to crystallize. The domestic and private aspect of this scene, apparently far beyond the more common framing of Carmichael's public speeches, also implies the critical potential of the trace which, in turn, depends on filmmakers' attention to alternative archives, tapes being erased, images destroyed, and the obvious incompleteness of any historical narrative.

*The Black Power Mixtape* was realized by the support of a number of Swedish and American production companies, individual producers and institutions (including the Swedish Television). Notable in the enthusiastic reception of the film is the excitement with the film's rare footage. To quote an interview with Danny Glover, who also co-produced the film, "can you believe it – these

images were found in the basement of Swedish television!” In fact, the sequences are hardly found footage or orphan films in the spectacular sense of something discovered by chance. They belong to the many films and programs stored in the archive of the Swedish Television, which indeed should be a gold mine for anyone interested in Swedish media history and the representation of political events and everyday life since the first decades of television.

For good and bad, documentary fiction represents an important cultural context where historical events are invoked and memories are produced. To this may be added that in the contemporary realm of documentary filmmaking the enactment of history, memory, and forgetting has a lot to do with compromising in the shadow of copyright restrictions and a complex set of funding parties. The reuse of films in *The Black Power Mixtape* brings attention to the potential archive memory of television, but, most of all, it exemplifies the poetic drive of documentary, the incentive (in Bazin’s words), to “tame the ghosts of the past,” to select and enact the sequences, to transform the material into a significant trace of the past.<sup>7</sup>

1 Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, Berg, Oxford-New York 2006, p. 158.

2 Monique Sicard, “De la trace à la traque,” in *Les Cahiers de médiologie*, no. 9, 2000, p. 106.

3 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2002, p. 225.

4 Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984-1985.

5 *Idem*, p. 120.

6 Jaques Rancière, *Film Fables*, cit., p. 158.

7 André Bazin, *À la recherche du temps perdu: "Paris 1900"*, in Id., *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1958, vol. 1, p. 41.