Film and Memory

WINFRIED FLUCK

The major theoretical issue in the relation between memory and film is brought to the fore in the preface to the essay collection *Film und Gedächtnis*:

> Wenn in Ingmar Bergmans *Wilde Erdbeeren* der alte Professor Borg sich erinnert, dann sieht er vor sich eine Szene ablaufen, wie der Zuschauer im Kino. Ganz selbstverständlich setzt Bergmann voraus, daß die Erinnerung ein Film ist und ein Film jederzeit die Erinnerung vertreten kann.[1]

Because of the skillful coordination of sound and vision, but also, and perhaps even more so, because of the iconic nature of its images, film achieves the impression of an unmediated directness of representation, an impression which caused the critic Robert Warshow to come up with his famous description of film as "immediate experience." The concept implies a direct, unmediated encounter with reality, something we also attribute to processes of remembering in which images appear to come to us in direct, unpredictable fashion and without the "gatekeeper"-function of consciousness. The impression that filmic images outrun conscious reflection and easily overwhelm consciousness is thus given as major reason not only for the strong appeal of film but also for recurring attempts to link film with unconscious processes. However, the recent semiotization of literary and cultural studies, including film studies, has sharpened our awareness that this impression of "immediacy" is only an illusion produced by a set of representational conventions. Film theory has discarded the view that photographic or filmic images function as transparent windows to either the real world or the unconscious. The renewed interest in the representation of memory can, in effect, be considered a response to this awareness, because it foregrounds the elements of subjective construction and the narrative logic of textualization in our representation of past events.

This, in turn, refers us back to the relation between film and memory. What is the role of film in representing collective and individual memory? If film is regarded as more than just another addition to the cultural archive because of its specific and special powers of articulation, then the crucial

---

1   "When old Professor Borg remembers the past in Ingmar Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries*, he sees a filmic scene just as the spectator does in the cinema. Obviously, Ingmar Bergman assumes that memory works like a film, so that a filmic scene can represent his character's act of remembering." (Karpf/Kiesel/Visarius 1998:7)

question must be whether the starting premise of film studies – that film can do something written words can not – may also be usefully applied to the issue of how memory is represented in film. Does film, as a medium with unique powers of representation, have a special function or potential as a site of memory? If it is true, as Robert Rosenstone argues convincingly in his study *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, that "in privileging visual and emotional data and simultaneously downplaying the analytic, the motion picture is subtly [...] altering our very sense of the past" (1995:32), how do the representational possibilities and conventions of film affect memory – not only in picturing the act of remembering itself, but also in the larger sense of influencing a culture's collective memory? I want to address the issue by dealing with a number of American films, all of them drawn from mainstream cinema for the simple reason that this cinema has had a larger cultural impact in shaping collective memory than subcultural forms.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

In the transition from the late Thirties to the early Forties, two American movies were produced that became major events in the history of the American cinema, although they could hardly be more different in style and artistic ambition. I am referring to *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and *Citizen Kane* (1941). Both films made movie history for entirely different reasons. *Gone with the Wind* was the first real "blockbuster" in the history of Hollywood that paved the way for a new way of producing films, the so-called one-film-deal, which was taken up in the Fifties in response to a growing loss of audience and has now become a standard model of production in American film, replacing the traditional reliance on studio-specific genre movies. *Citizen Kane*, on the other hand, marks the entry of modernism into the American cinema. Both movies present exemplary, but although quite different ways of dealing with the past and the issue of memory. *Gone With the Wind* became the epitome of the historical epic with its forceful melodramatization of the conflict between a noble past and a corrupt, materialistically-minded present. *Citizen Kane*, in highlighting the subjective nature and relativity of acts of remembering, provides an influential modernist problematization of the quest for historical knowledge and historical truth.

Not surprisingly, the historical epic has stood at the center of discussions about how film represents and shapes collective memory. Historians have played a major role in these discussions. The results, however, are fairly predictable. Discussions are concerned mainly with the high number of

instances in which Hollywood "historicals" distort or trivialize historical facts.[2] There is no need here to go into a detailed recapitulation of this criticism, no matter whether it concerns the genre of the historical epic in general, or *Gone With the Wind* in particular. I presume that most readers will find this criticism convincing. Seen as historical document, a film like *Gone With the Wind*, with its nostalgic idealization of a benevolent plantation South and its stereotypical portrayal of Blacks, can be easily unmasked nowadays as distorting history – and, hence, as a harmful influence on America's collective memory.[3]

As Catherine Clinton points out in her analysis of *Gone With the Wind* in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*:

> *Gone With the Wind* reigns uncontested as the most popular American historical film ever made. The single most influential interpretation of the Civil War in twentieth-century popular culture, the film has defined that war for a mass audience. (1995:132)

Clinton confirms Michael Kammen's point that the American Civil War and its aftermath are events in American history that have been most often submitted to distorting revisions (1997:204). Understandably, this power of film to define or redefine history and thereby – subtly, or not so subtly – shape America's collective memory, provokes and angers historians. Out of very narrow commercial motives and without any real interest in history, film is doing their job and taking their place. In view of this growing impact of film on perceptions of the past, perpetuated and enhanced by television's continuous re-runs, Mark Carnes speaks of film as the nation's night school,

---

2   In his discussion of Michael Mann's film version of *The Last of the Mohicans*, Richard White provides an especially spirited example of this kind of critique: "The relation of these Indians to historic Indian peoples of the region is, to put it generously, postmodern. For *The Last of the Mohicans*, history is a junkyard full of motifs and incidents that can be retrieved, combined, and paired with new inventions as Mann sees fit. It is not that all the details are wrong; it is that they never were combined in this fashion. It is like having George Washington, properly costumed, throwing out the first ball for a 1843 Washington Senators baseball season opener. Sure, there was a George Washington; sure, there once were Washington Senators; sure, the president throws out the first ball; sure, there was an 1843. So what's the problem?" (1995:82) A more typical version of the historians' critique can be found in Mark E. Neely's analysis of two films on Abraham Lincoln, John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* and John Cromwell's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*: "Ford's version of the young Lincoln made little attempt to get the facts of his life straight, and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* confused the chronology of Lincoln's early life so much that it is a muddle." (1995:127)

3   In *Visions of the Past*, Rosenstone lists *Gone with the Wind* – together with *Cleopatra* – as one of "the kind of works that have given the historical film such a bad reputation" (1995:51).

"a great repository of historical consciousness in these United States of Amnesia. For many, Hollywood history is the only history." (1995:9)[4]

Carnes's point is a valid one, but it conflates and confuses two aspects that should be kept apart in discussions of the relation between film and memory. It is ground for concern indeed that for many people "Hollywood history" has become the only history. However, this cannot mean that fictional texts should be reconceptualized along the lines of history-writing and become reliable historical documents, so that we should judge their merits by how truthfully history is represented.[5] It is worrisome, actually shocking, that there are not enough institutions or at least not enough institutions which are effective in providing reliable knowledge of American history. But it is not surprising that fictional texts are often unreliable and, in effect, misleading as historical documents. After all, the freedom fictional texts have in redefining reality is the main rationale for their existence, and the reinterpretation, distortion, or even repression of historical facts is part of that freedom, at least within the limits given by the moral and legal consensus of a society. The – often infuriating – possibility that history is represented in inaccurate and misleading ways is part of the price one has to pay for institutionalizing a form of communication in which the imagination is given free reign. To a lesser or larger degree, fictional texts, including films and, more specifically, historical films, will always distort, just as the predecessor of the historical film, the historical novel, distorted history and still does (so that many critics prefer to call it historical romance and not historical novel).

This is not to say that history and fiction can be neatly separated on ontological grounds. Fictional texts, and certainly movies, often authorize themselves by claiming historical veracity.[6] On the other hand, representations of history cannot do without narrative, that is, coherent stories with beginnings, middles, and endings. Inevitably, history writing contains varying, often considerable degrees of fictionalization. However, to acknowledge the extent to which the representation of history is shaped by conventions of narrative genre, the connotative power of language and the associative logic of the imagination, is something altogether different from claiming that fiction and history are identical forms of dealing with reality, including historical reality. As a long discussion in literary studies has shown, the term fiction is not an ontological category but a functional one, so that, in fact, one and the same text can be considered as either history or (historical) fiction, depending on the function assigned to it by context and cultural contract. As soon as we agree to regard a linguistic or visual representation as fiction, we de-pragmatize and de-referentialize it and thereby grant it the freedom to lie.[7] If a historical text is shown to distort history, then this is a serious matter which undermines the text's legitimacy as an interpretation of history. If I point out a lack of historical veracity in a fictional text, on the other hand, this may provide an interesting and valid point of analysis, but it is not a point that endangers the text's legitimacy.

In principle, and by definition, fictional texts are free to depart from the truth, to distort reality, to invent it anew. This, in fact, is one of the major functions fictional texts have had in Western society ever since the demise of a mimetic norm in the eighteenth century. (More precisely, one should say that the emergence of the word aesthetics in the eighteenth century is part of this changing function.) This freedom of fiction was institutionalized as cultural practice, because it adds an important dimension to social life: it is the source of fiction's ability to violate existing conventions (for example, by articulating wishes and desires that are still tabooed); it can de-familiarize convention in order to make us see reality anew; it permits the articulation of utopian ideas that cannot yet be expressed in any other way. And, most important for this discussion: it can also be the source of an individual or collective counter-memory which is not yet accepted as valid description of the past by the dominant social consensus.

---

4   Cf. also George Custen who describes the influence the movie *Patton* had on Richard Nixon and then continues: "More importantly, Nixon's – and many Americans [sic] – views of the world have been shaped, in part, by a lifetime (and not merely a single) exposure to filmic representations of powerful individuals and the roles they played in history." (1992:2) In his study of the role of tradition in American culture, Michael Kammen also employs the term amnesia, although he rightly emphasizes an increasing obsession with "heritage" which, ironically, contributes to growing historical ignorance: "The democratization *and* decentralization of tradition proceed apace, leading us to a highly embarrassing cultural anomaly: amnesia and historical ignorance in an age of great apparent enthusiasm for the past at every level of society and all modes of articulation, from high culture (so-called) to mass and popular culture." (1991:12)

5   Robert Brent Toplin acknowledges as much when he says, in conclusion of his study *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past*: "Still, historians cannot treat dramatic entertainment simply as a non-fiction brought to life with actors." (1996:226)

6   In an interview with Eric Foner, John Sayles, director of several revisionist historical films, including *Lone Star*, strongly emphasizes this source of authorization: "There's a certain power that comes from history. I mean, I've heard producers say many, many

---

times that the only way a movie is going to work is if the ad says 'Based on a true story.' Audiences appreciate the fact that something really happened. Whether it did or didn't, they're thinking that it did or knowing that it did. That gives the story a certain legitimacy in the audience's mind and sometimes in the filmmaker's mind, whereas if you make something up out of whole cloth, it's not the same." ("A Conversation Between Eric Foner and John Sayles," 17)

7   On this pragmatist redefinition of aesthetic function, cf. my essay on "Pragmatism and Aesthetic Experience" (1999).

In recent discussions of the representation of history in fictional texts, it seems, there is a greater willingness to grant fiction a certain degree of freedom in deviating from the ideal of historical truthfulness. Criticism of the representation of history in fiction then shifts its focus from the issue of historical distortion to a critique of objectivity claims implied in certain forms of representation.[8] The makers of *Gone With the Wind* may have the liberty to present Southern history from the point of view of white Southerners and their self-perception as historical victims. However, they should not claim that this presents an objective representation of history as it really was. The critical point here is not a particular interpretation of history but the mode of representation itself. By foregrounding the conventions of filmic illusionism, filmmakers should acknowledge that their representation of history is "subjective" in the sense that it is constructed out of a cultural archive in – by no means disinterested – acts of selection and the subsequent narrativization of these choices into "history."

*

This inherently "subjective" dimension of representation is acknowledged in *Citizen Kane*. In effect, one may say that it is the film's actual topic. The beginning already establishes the film's project. It consists of three parts: first, a highly subjective, dream-like montage of isolated, fragmented images at the moment of Charles Foster Kane's death; then, a newsreel on his life, in which the form of the newsreel functions as apparently "objective" representation of historical events; and, finally, the response of a group of journalists to the newsreel.[9] Their debate sets the narrative in motion, for there is agreement that the enigmatic personality of Kane has not been grasped by the newsreel and its reliance on "objective facts." Who was Charles Foster Kane? Despite its accumulation of factual information, the newsreel is unable to explain his character and motives. In order to capture this subjective dimension, five people that were close to him are interviewed whose memories are presented in the form of flashbacks. The influence of modernism (one thinks of Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, for example) is obvious here and the

point to be made is similar. By reconstructing historical events through five different, often contradictory perspectives, it becomes clear that history is accessible only in subjective, fragmented form. It resembles the crystal ball that shatters to pieces at the beginning of the film, thereby becoming a metaphor for what happens with the "truth" of Kane's life. This fragmentation is never overcome in the course of the film. The different recollections do not add up to an explanation of the secret of Kane's person, nor can they clarify with any certainty that there is a secret. The one dimension that could give meaning to the events reported in the newsreel, Kane's subjectivity, remains elusive and cannot be recovered by retrospective investigation. Nevertheless, this insight empowers the film. True, the meaning of a historical phenomenon like Kane's life cannot be fully grasped. But *Citizen Kane* reveals why this is so by demonstrating how history is constructed out of different (and differing) memories.

In its form of depicting acts of remembering, *Citizen Kane* resembles the example of Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* referred to at the beginning of this essay. The recollections of the five different characters are presented as flashbacks that form coherent narratives in themselves and appear as films within the film. This is also characteristic of a genre in Hollywood cinema in which acts of remembering are central, the so-called *film noir* of the Forties and early Fifties. Most writing on the genre seems to agree that the expressive visual style of *film noir* forms its constitutive element. But examples of this style can be found in other genres as well, just as, on the other hand, not every *film noir* exhibits these stylistic traits. Another aspect, I think, is more essential in defining the genre. By definition, *film noirs* are films about crime. However, in contrast to the gangster movie of the Thirties it is not a gangster who commits the crime but an ordinary, often respectable citizen who drifts into crime – or seems to have been drawn into crime – by a combination of fateful chance encounters and a moment of inner weakness. This crime "by accident" raises the issue of guilt, which, in turn, can only be approached by addressing the issue of motivation.[10] How is it possible that a respectable citizen can become a murderer or be suspected of being one? The seemingly unthinkable is in need of explanation and this explanation is provided in the form of a flashback and/or voice-over narration in which the accused tries to explain what nobody else can possibly know by reconstructing the steps that have led up to the crime (or the suspicion of having committed one).

At first sight, *film noir* does not seem to go beyond *Citizen Kane* in that it emphasizes the radically subjective dimension of any reconstruction of past

---

8   See, for example, Robert Rosenstone: "And yet neither fictionalization nor unchecked testimony are the major reasons that these films violate my notions of history. Far more unsettling is the way that each tends to compress the past into a closed world by telling a single, linear story with essentially a single interpretation. Such a narrative strategy obviously denies historical alternatives, does away with complexities of motivation or causation, and banishes all subtlety from the world of history." (1995:22)

9   A detailed discussion of the film, including its beginning, is provided in my essay "*Citizen Kane* als 'filmischer' Text und als Text der amerikanischen Kultur" (1988).

---

10   For a more detailed analysis of the centrality of the issue of guilt in *film noir* see my essay "Crime, Guilt and Subjectivity in *Film Noir*" (2001).

events. Like *Citizen Kane*, *film noir*, as a rule, also employs narratively and visually coherent filmic sequences to represent the act of remembering. However, since the individual is not presented as the (possible) sum of the recollections of others, as in *Citizen Kane*, but as the only one who should actually know what has happened and who reconstructs past events in an act of remembering in order to clarify the question of his or her own guilt, the precariousness of the act of remembering becomes part of the representation. To be sure, as mainstream Hollywood movies *film noirs* do not employ experimental forms of narration, as Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* does for example. Nevertheless, the act of remembering is centered around something that appears unrepresentable, the elusive issues of guilt and motivation. In keeping with its promise of a clarification of "dark" motives, *film noir* represents the recollections of its main characters through images, but the images represent something that is absent and cannot be represented, namely impulse, mood, and desire as the dominant forms of motivation of the *noir*-character.

Double Indemnity, which was a break-through film for *film noir* (so much so, in fact, that Hal Wallis, an influential producer at Warner Bros., vowed that all of his films would have flashback structures from now on), illustrates the confessional, but also the introspective role of remembering in *film noir*. The film uses the figure of the femme fatale, played by Barbara Stanwyck, as shorthand for motivations that cannot be articulated, only represented in made-up, fetishized form. Her appearance is deliberately artificial, so that her fatal influence on the citizen-turned-murderer cannot be explained by the image alone. In order to understand what goes on in the respectable citizen's perception of her, we need an explanation of what he sees in her, or better, projects into her. This is the rationale for the flashback and voice-over structure of the *noir*-narrative. *Citizen Kane*'s point about the issue of film and memory is that filmic images are unreliable representations of authentic subjectivity, because we cannot be sure whether we actually got the right image – which the film finally supplies in its last shot, the burning sled carrying the words *Rosebud*. In *film noir*, on the other hand, images are never sufficient to grasp the meaning of past events, because they are only that, images, which cannot fully represent the elusive, fleeting sources of human motivation.

*

This point is further radicalized in the movie of a director, John Ford, who appears to be an unlikely candidate for a reflection on the limitations of the "classical Hollywood system" and its pictorial illusionism. As one of the main representatives, together with Frank Capra, of a cinema of populism, Ford had made wholesome historical films such as *Young Mr. Lincoln* and was instrumental in making the genre of the Western respectable with such films as *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*. In the hands of Ford, both of these genres, the national epic as well as the classical Western, present a highly mythologized version of American history, based on a sentimental belief in the superior moral powers of the common man.[11] But then, somewhat surprisingly, Ford began to question the premises of his own work in his late movies, as, for example, in his Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*.

This film tells the familiar story of how civilization arrived in a small, lawless town of the Old West. The story is told in the form of a flashback, that is, it emerges as the result of an act of remembering, thereby foregrounding the fact that our knowledge of history is always a retrospective construct. However, this narrative form is only taken as point of departure for a far more radical problematization of the representation of memory in film. Ford's flashback is not primarily designed to draw attention to the precarious subjectivity of acts of remembering. On the contrary, it promises to set the record straight about the Old West by revealing a fact that had not been known and made public until then. In order to achieve this, however, a flashback within the flashback is needed, because Ransom Stoddard, the focalizing figure (played by James Stewart), who recalls the events of the past, was actually ignorant of what really happened then. His own memory of his gunfight with the notorious outlaw Liberty Valance, a gunfight that made him a hero in the Old West, is correct and undistorted – but nevertheless completely wrong, because Stoddard never comprehended the true sequence of events. The truth about what "really" happened therefore has to be provided by a second flashback which reveals that it was not Stoddard who shot Liberty Valance, as he – and everybody else – believed (and his own recollection of the duel shows), but his rival John Doniphon (played by John Wayne) who stood in the shadow in order to protect the naive, stubborn greenhorn.

In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the problem of representing history in film does not consist in the fact, as it does in *Citizen Kane*, that different people may have different views and recollections of the past. It also does not consist in the fact, as it does in *film noir*, that the image cannot recover the subjective dimension of motivation and therefore cannot grasp the true meaning of what happened. Ford, in effect, goes one step further. The two flashbacks show the same event twice, but each time from different camera angles. Since we only see Stoddard and Liberty Valance in the first flashback

---

11 For a detailed, still valid analysis of the cinema of Capra and Ford as a cinema of populism, see Jeffrey Richards's study *Visions of Yesterday* (1973).

and never get any hint of Doniphon's presence, we do not even consider the possibility that a third figure might be involved. Then, in the second flashback, the camera is shifted in a 90° angle and reveals that Doniphon stands hidden in the dark, shooting at exactly the same moment as Stoddard. This retrospective correction, however, redefines the relation between filmic representation and collective memory, as Robert Ray has pointed out:

> Significantly, *Liberty Valance*'s crucial revelation of Tom's role in Valance's death discredited the most basic figure in Classic Hollywood's formal paradigm – the shot-reverse shot. The audience's acceptance of this figure had always depended on the tacit guarantee that nothing narratively important lay outside the seam of significance isolated from the larger space by shot-reverse shot patterns. Sustained shot-reverse shot sequences repeatedly confirmed that guarantee. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Ranse's showdown with Valance occurred in such a sequence, with twenty-four shots conclusively reducing the viewer's area of concern to the thin strip of space between the two men. Only a later flashback revealed that Tom had shot Valance from a position that the twenty-four-shot sequence had systematically kept offscreen. In demonstrating that crucial narrative developments could take place outside the seam established by such a classically rigorous sequence, Doniphon's confession undermined the invisible style itself, exposing the guarantee on which its most fundamental figure rested as a mere cinematic convention. Most important, by implying that every camera setup and editing pattern resulted from exclusionary choices, this formal rupture expressed the flashback's thematic insistence that Ranse had triumphed at Tom's expense. (1985:229-233)[12]

Citizen Kane argues that film cannot represent history "truthfully" because its retrospective reconstruction in different acts of remembering cannot grasp subjectivity – and thereby fails to get at the true meaning of past events. *Film noir* goes one step further in its representational critique by suggesting that film may not be able to represent subjectivity because the image, even if it is employed as part of one subject's self-definition, cannot represent the actual source of motivation. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* questions the premise that the images which represent memory can be taken as reliable representations at all.

The narrative device of a story told twice in order to foreground the potentially deceptive nature of filmic representation had already been used by Alfred Hitchcock long before *Liberty Valance*. In the thriller *Stage Fright*, Hitchcock employs the potential of filmic representation to deceive, thematized by Ford's *Liberty Valance*, in an especially cunning way, namely by deliberately misleading the audience about who has committed the crime. By opening the film with the flashback narration of a suspected murderer, whose version seems designed to convince the heroine (and us) of his innocence, an empathetic bond is established that is the result of narrative manipulation. Hitchcock regretted the deception later: "I did one thing in that picture that I never should have done; I put in a flashback that was a lie." (Truffaut 1968:231) To correct this lie, a second flashback is needed at the end of the film in order to set the record straight. In contrast to Ford's *Liberty Valance*, however, the function of the story's retelling does not lie in the correction of an incomplete act of representation, but simply in unmasking and thereby redefining an act of remembering as a lie.

In *Vertigo*, on the other hand, which was released four years before *Liberty Valance*, the retelling of the story of the heroine's death has the more interesting function of revealing the self-induced blindness of the main character to himself. The film anticipates *Liberty Valance* in two ways. In both films, the main character, played by James Stewart, is ignorant of what really happened, and in both cases the audience shares his ignorance, because it trusts the authority of the images through which the events are represented. But *Liberty Valance* is the more interesting case for our purpose, because it explicitly raises the possibility of an act of remembering to function as counter-memory. For what the retelling of the shooting of *Liberty Valance* implies is nothing less than a revision of the history of the American West, as we find it, for example, in more recent movies like John Sayles' *Lone Star* in which the investigation of a murder gradually reveals the violent acts of exclusion and suppression that are part of the history of Texas.[13]

---

12 Other extensive and detailed discussions of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* are provided by Stowell (1986:107-120), Gallagher (1986:384-413), and Luhr/Lehmann (1977).

13 This function of memory to recover aspects of history that have been suppressed or downplayed in the official version of history is especially dominant in narratives of marginalized, oppressed groups. For example, Robert Rosenstone draws attention to Rea Tajiri's video *History and Memory* (1991), a film about American relocation camps for Japanese Americans and Japanese during World War II: "Early in the film, Tajiri tells us in voiceover, *I began searching for a history, my own history, because I knew the stories I had heard were not true – and parts of them had been left out*, while on the screen we see a woman, her back to the camera, standing in a dusty place and filling a canteen with water. This vision of her mother is Tajiri's sole legacy from the camps, a place she has never been but which she somehow can remember, a place of *great sadness* that has haunted her life." (1995:211) For a critical view of recent identity constructions based on victimhood see Ian Buruma's article "The Joys and Perils of Victimhood" (1999).

In *Liberty Valance*, too, the second flashback reveals that the progress of civilization in the American West is not based on the slow but steady triumph of law and order but, ironically, on just the reverse, a lawless murder committed not in an open showdown-situation but from the safe cover of the dark. The history of the West thus turns out to be grounded in self-deception. It consists of legends which transform that self-deception into history. Ford, however, rejects the revisionist implications of this insight. After the story of the shooting of Liberty Valance has been revised by the second flashback, the newspaper editor refuses to print the true story. Instead, he tears up his notes and insists on preserving the myth by saying: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." The myth of the American West may be patently false but it nevertheless should remain part of the collective memory because it has established a positive fiction of identity. This rejection of a potentially subversive counter-memory refers us back to the relation between history and fiction, because in an intriguing paradox, Ford uses the historical convention of "setting the record straight" in order to justify a fiction (in the sense of a lie) about history. Somewhat unexpectedly, it is the "distortion" which is supported by Ford, because it opens up the possibility of preserving a consensus about the West on new epistemological grounds.

*

I have argued that the issue of film and memory can only be meaningfully discussed if we do not treat film as merely another discursive item in the cultural archive. Instead, the specific representational possibilities of film have to be taken into account because they make filmic representation such a powerful instrument in shaping individual and collective memories. As we have seen in the discussion of *film noir*, a constitutive source of filmic effect is the image and, specifically, its potential for doubling effects in representation by linking a visible object with something invisible that can range from the most fleeting affect to traumatic experiences. By doing this, the filmic image can achieve intensely heightened forms of experience. This heightened form of experience is further enhanced by narrative and its power to reinforce mythic elements. But it can also be employed in the service of a counter-memory. For this latter function, the films discussed here offer two basic modes: one is the revisionist retelling of a historical event, the other the narrative reconstruction of identity by telling a story from a new and different perspective. Although it is not minority-conscious, *film noir* can be seen as an example of such a form of counter-memory in the sense of contradicting an official version, because its whole point is to redeem somebody who seems to

have committed a crime by telling the story of what happened from that character's perspective.

We arrive here at a crucial function of fiction for collective memory – and, specifically, of film as a heightened, intensified form of fiction. This function can be considered one of the main reasons for the amazing success-story of fiction in Western societies since the eighteenth century. *Film noir's* flashback and voice-over are needed, because the official version of the crime, presented by the authorities, does grave injustice to the accused who therefore has to re-tell his or her story in order to clarify the issue of guilt. Fiction is a pioneer form of introducing the claims of the individual into culture; as a part of this function, the act of remembering can become part of the individual's search for justice. Injustice is experienced, above all, as lack of recognition of one's own individual needs, emotional states, and secret desires. Narrative employed as counter-memory holds the promise of making up for this lack of recognition.[14] For example, Max Ophuls' film *Letter From an Unknown Woman* tells the story of a young woman who gets involved with a self-centered concert pianist, becomes pregnant, is deserted and forgotten by her lover, and finally writes a letter to him on her deathbed which the film presents in the form of a flashback. This confessional narrative completely changes her standing, for by "publicizing" her story in this way, she succeeds in transforming herself from a dreamy, innocent "nobody," a Cinderella-figure of sorts, into the heroine of a grand romantic drama. A character not considered unusual or especially significant by others is revealed to actually be a person of unusual depth of feeling, loyalty, and powers of self-sacrifice. The act of remembering here becomes an act of self-justification which sets the record straight and rescues the unknown woman of the title from anonymity, that is, from a complete lack of recognition.

This raises a highly interesting point. For linking the act of remembering with the search for individual recognition and "justice" would actually imply that every fictional text, in one way or another, can be seen as a counter-memory, even *Gone With the Wind*. And this, indeed, is what I want to claim, even though I share the common critique of the film as a romanticized plantation melodrama. The association of such a film with the term counter-

---

14 In her study *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*, Maureen Turim addresses this issue of the subject's reinscription into history: "If flashbacks give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past, they also give us images of history, the shared and recorded past. In fact, flashbacks in film often merge the two levels of remembering the past, giving large-scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single, fictional individual's remembered experience." (1989:2)

memory may therefore appear questionable and puzzling.[15] The explanation lies in an aspect that I find sadly neglected in all discussions of the relation between film and memory, and, to put the issue in broader terms, of the relation between fictional text and cultural archive. Due to a watered-down Foucauldianism, fictional texts are treated as merely another item in the cultural archive, and not as forms whose "freedom to lie" is culturally accepted, even institutionalized, because they provide aesthetic experiences that make new forms of cultural contact and cultural redefinition possible. This constitutive role of aesthetic experience provides, in effect, the only plausible explanation for the amazing fact that a film like *Gone With the Wind*, although dealing with American history of bygone days, can still find resonance not only in present-day America but also in countries and cultures that are far removed from Southern plantation life, such as, for example, Germany.

What is the source of this amazing resonance? What is the reason – to take another example from present-day debates – for the amazing resonance ethnic literature has for white middle-class readers for whom these texts cannot possibly fulfill their purported function of serving as collective memory and source of cultural identity? The one meager explanation historians and cultural critics usually provide for the continuing popularity of a film like *Gone With the Wind* lies in the unfortunate persistence of stereotypes about the South, constantly refueled and rekindled by popular culture and the media. But why are these stories and stereotypes so persistent? Many, if not most, of the viewers of *Gone With the Wind* have never been to the South and may not care about it particularly. They have never met Scarlet O'Hara; indeed, one may safely assume most are aware of the fact that she never existed. This, however, is exactly the point. In order to make a character like Scarlet O'Hara come

alive as a fictional character a transfer has to take place in which the viewer invests her or his own emotions in the figure, for example, by attaching her own affects, e. g. experiences of social humiliation, or traumas of loss, to the fictional characters.[16] After German unification, for instance, a strong (although short-lived) temptation emerged in the former GDR to compare itself to the American South during Reconstruction. For such a purpose, the "otherness" of the represented world is especially useful; in effect, it may be the precondition for the articulation of feelings that cannot yet be articulated in any other way. In this sense, *Gone With the Wind* can function as a counter-memory – not in what is visible but precisely in what is not visible on the screen.[17] This, I argue, is the explanation for the often amazing influence of film on our collective memory: film is wonderfully effective in mobilizing strong emotions, ranging from affect to trauma, and in hiding them, at the same time, behind the immediate experience of the image.

WORKS CITED

Buruma, Ian. "The Joys and Perils of Victimhood." *New York Review of Books* (April 8, 1999): 4-9.

Carnes, Mark C. "Introduction." *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. Ed. Mark C. Carnes. New York: Holt, 1995. 9-10.

"A Conversation Between Eric Foner and John Sayles." *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. Ed. Mark C. Carnes. New York: Holt, 1995. 11-28.

Clinton, Catherine. "Gone With the Wind." *Past Imperfect. History According to the Movies*. Ed. Mark C. Carnes. New York: Holt, 1995. 132-135.

---

15 Clearly, the term counter-memory can be defined in different ways. In his book *Time Passages*, George Lipsitz provides one possible definition: "Counter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. Counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience." (1990:213) In my use, however, the term counter-memory is not restricted to self-definitions of oppressed or marginalized groups but includes any unacknowledged individuality that has been excluded from dominant narratives.

---

16 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. provides a perceptive analysis of the space of negotiation the spectator has in the act of reception, a view that has been recently accepted even by critical media theory after years of uncompromising ideological critique: "Moreover, the audience supposedly passive in the shrouded theater, is actually an active collaborator, seizing from the movie what it needs for its own purposes of tutelage and fantasy, responding to each movie not as an isolated event but as reverberant with memories of other films, with private lives of stars, with their own private lives." (1979:xii)

17 For a psychoanalytic critic like Laura Mulvey, the traumatic experience finds representation on screen in fetishized form: "The fetish is the legacy of some single, traumatic moment in time, which then remains frozen in the unconscious mind, and the trauma transmutes into an obsession with an object. [...] Freud argues that the fetish functions as a screen memory. The fetish, preferably glittering, dazzling, attracting, and holding the eye, interjects an object between memory and the original traumatic moment." (1992:72) However, all images in film are, in principle, designed to "hold the eye," and since, moreover, the spectator is invited (and has the recipient's space) to attach his or her affects to any object on screen, there is no "key" or code that will be able to tell us with any certainty what image will trigger transfer processes.

Custen, George F. *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1992.

Fluck, Winfried. *"Citizen Kane* als 'filmischer' Text und als Text der amerikanischen Kultur." *Film und Literatur in Amerika*. Ed. Alfred Weber and Bettina Friedl. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988. 96-118.

-----. "Pragmatism and Aesthetic Experience." *REAL – Yearbook in English and American Literature* 15 (1999):227- 42.

-----. "Crime, Guilt, and Subjectivity in *Film Noir.*" *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 46 (2001):379-408.

Gallagher, Tag. *John Ford: The Man and His Films*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.

Kammen, Michael. *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. New York: Knopf, 1991.

-----. *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

Karpf, Ernst, Doron Kiesel, and Karsten Visarius, eds. *Once Upon a Time....: Film und Gedächtnis*. Marburg: Schüren, 1998.

Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990.

Luhr, William, and Peter Lehman. *Authorship and Narrative in the Cinema*. New York: Putnam's, 1977.

Mulvey, Laura. *Citizen Kane*. London: British Film Institute, 1992.

Neely, Jr., Mark E. "The Young Lincoln." *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. Ed. Mark Carnes. New York: Holt, 1995. 124-127.

Pye, Douglas. "Genre and History. *Fort Apache* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.*" *The Movie Book of The Western*. Ed. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye. London: Studio Vista, 1996. 111-122.

Ray, Robert B. *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1985.

Richards, Jeffrey. *Visions of Yesterday*. London: Routledge, 1973.

Rosenstone, Robert A. *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1995.

Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur M. "Foreword." *American History/American Film: Interpreting the Hollywood Image*. Ed. John E. O'Connor and Martin A. Jackson. New York: Ungar, 1979. ix-xiii.

Stowell, Peter. *John Ford*. Boston: Twayne, 1986.

Toplin, Robert Brent. *History By Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1996.

Truffaut, Francois. *Hitchcock by Francois Truffaut*. London: Secker, 1968.

Turim, Maureen. *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*. London: Routledge, 1989.

White, Richard. "The Last of the Mohicans." *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. Ed. Mark Carnes. New York: Holt, 1995. 82-85.

FILMOGRAPHY

Citizen Kane, 1941 (Orson Welles)
Double Indemnity, 1944 (Billy Wilder)
Gone with the Wind, 1939 (Victor Fleming)
Letter from an Unknown Woman, 1948 (Max Ophüls)

Lone Star, 1996 (John Sayles)
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, 1962 (John Ford)
Sans Soleil, 1982 (Chris Marker)
Stage Fright, 1950 (Alfred Hitchcock)
Vertigo, 1958(Alfred Hitchcock)
Wild Strawberries, 1957 (Ingmar Bergman)

Sites of Memory
in American Literatures
and Cultures

Edited by
UDO J. HEBEL