Toward a New Historiography: The Aesthetics of Temporality

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Cinema's Alchemist

The Films of Péter Forgács

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[3] *Toward a New Historiography*
The Aesthetics of Temporality

Since the 1990s, the spread of memory practices in art and literature has been enormous. These memory practices manifest themselves not only around issues such as trauma, the Holocaust and other genocides, and migration but also in the increasing use of media and genres like photography, documentary film and video, the archive, and the family album. These memory practices form a specific aesthetics. The major question raised by this flourishing of memory practices is, should we see this as a celebration of memory, as a fin de siècle, and in the meantime a debut de siècle, as an expression of the desire to look backward, or, in contrast, as a symptom of a severe memory crisis or a fear of forgetting?

Either way, this art practice so typical of our moment may point to the meaning of the present itself. Home movies form a particular genre, and as a genre they have specific properties in relation to memory. The genre focuses almost exclusively on the personal. The societal dimension of human life only figures obliquely, if at all. We get to see anniversaries, weddings, family outings, the birth and growing up of children. These personal moments in the life of families are restricted because they are selective on the basis of a specific criterion: they consist of memories of happy moments. But as Forgács points out in an interview, the home movie is personal in yet another way. It is structured like a dream. In the case of old home movies, it is exclusively visual. There are no words spoken; there is no voice-over. Visual communication is the only medium. Moreover, it contains many strange ellipses.

If Forgács is right in this view of home movies as analogous to dreams, Freud's explanation of the dream is also extremely relevant for an understanding of home movies. Take his film *Maelstrom*, for example. Although the macrostructure of *Maelstrom* is narrative, if you look at the fragments of footage, they are not so much telling as showing. For

this reason, I contend that the footage does not have the form of a family chronicle but of externalized memory. This shift is best explained in terms of temporality.

Whereas home movies are almost exclusively concerned with personal time, Forgács's montage edits the key moments of history into this personal temporality. History is present in *Maelstrom*, albeit necessarily in a decentered way. For example, the home-movie footage of the Peereboom family, the main archival source for *Maelstrom*, shows a visit of Queen Wilhelmina with Princess Juliana to the town of Middelburg; another fragment shows the celebration in Middelburg of the fortieth anniversary of Queen Wilhelmina's reign. When taken as personal, private footage, the fact that the family filmed this can be read as symptomatic for their assimilation into Dutch culture. They identified with the strong attachment to the Dutch royal family. But there are other insertions of history, and these are performed by the hand of the director. Sometimes we hear a radio broadcast, or there are titles or texts written on the screen pointing out to us in which historical moment the filmed family footage is embedded. At other times, a disembodied voice explains the historical moment. A voice chants in the mode of a traditional Jewish song the laws, rules, or articles proclaimed by Arthur Seyss-Inquart stipulating how to kill warm-blooded animals, regulating who is considered Jewish and who is not, stipulating what the Jews who were going to be deported were allowed to take with them, and so on. Whatever device Forgács uses to insert history, historical time is never part of the personal time of the home footage but always superposed, *imposed*, on it.

Characteristically, however, the imposition of history on personal time never works smoothly. As a result, the completely different temporal dimension of the home footage again and again strikes the viewer. Personal time and historical time are in radical tension with each other. We expect to see traces or symptoms of the dramatic history of those days in the home-movie footage. But we do not. While the history of World War II and the Holocaust progresses, the home movies continue to show happy family memories. But what does "happy" mean?

That "happy" is a slippery notion becomes clear when Max Peereboom films the moment that his family prepares for deportation to Auschwitz. First of all, it is remarkable that he decided to film this at all. We see his wife, Annie, and her stepmother around the table repairing the clothes they want to wear or take with them on deportation. They drink coffee and Max smokes a pipe. It is not the footage that conveys what they are doing (preparing themselves for deportation) but a written text imposed on the footage. What we see is a happy family situation. Nothing of the

history that will victimize them in such a horrific way is able to enter the personal realm of the home movie. This separation of the two domains is visible because the temporal dimension of the home movie does not unfold as a collective narrative but persistently as a personal narrative. In *Maelstrom* personal history is not represented as part of collective history, as synecdoche of historical time; it is in radical tension with it.

In her essay on Forgács's work, Kaja Silverman argues that his films are based on strategies of repersonalization instead of objectification or categorization.[1] His films evoke the phenomenal world: they are about vitality, enjoyment, and activities such as dancing and playing. Whereas the archival mechanisms of objectification and categorization strip images of their singularity, Forgács's archival footage keeps insisting on the private and affective dimensions of images. Silverman writes that this is first of all achieved through the many direct looks with which people face the camera. This seems to be a defining feature of home movies as such.

When people face the camera in a fiction movie, this kind of look is self-reflexive; for a moment it short-circuits the fictionality of the film by establishing direct contact with the viewer. The film shows its constructedness. In home movies the frequent looking into the camera is of a completely different order. Here, there is no clear distinction between the camera and the person behind the camera. *Maelstrom*, as well as *The Black Dog*, contains many examples of that interaction. Simon, the youngest brother of Max the filmer, makes fun of Max the cameraman again and again, making funny faces before the camera. He does this not to spoil the film but to make the cameraman laugh or to make him angry. His funny faces function within an affective relationship between two human beings.

There is another extreme example of this in *Maelstrom*, this time of a different order. At one of the many weddings, the two- or three-year-old daughter of Max and Annie is being filmed. When she turns her face to the camera, she expects to see the face of Max, her father, or one of her relatives. Instead she sees a monstrous object, namely the camera. She is clearly utterly terrified. In this negativity, this example shows that people in home movies are not posing for the camera but for the person who holds the camera. They let themselves be filmed, not to be objectified into a beautiful or interesting image, but out of love for the person who films. According to Silverman, people in home footage convey Roland Barthes's idea not only of "this has been" (*ça a été*) but of "I love you."[2]

Barthes was talking about still photographs; like Silverman I am discussing moving images. As Forgács explains in an interview, there is a fundamental difference between looking at a photograph and watching moving images. He intensifies this difference by his manipulation of film

time, by slow-motion or even stopping the moving image, reducing it to a film still:

> The slow-motion technique and manipulation of the film time, the movement and the rhythm, give an opposite dynamic or an opposite possibility than in the example of the photo explained in *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes. The frozen photographic second of the Barthes' thesis is a good example of why the photo is a tombstone, whereas the moving image is not. . . . If we made right now a black-and-white photograph of ourselves, we could observe the event as already-past time: history. . . . But while we have moving images of the past, we always have the fluxes of life, the contrapuntal notion between Barthes's photo thesis and the movement (= life) on film, which proves forever that we're alive. So my viewers—and you—know that they (the amateur film actors, my heroes) are physically dead, but they are still moving. They are reanimated again and again by the film.[3]

Hence, the effect of repersonalization brought about by Forgács's films is not only the result of the specific genre of home movies but also the result of his intensification of qualities of the broader genre of the moving image as such. His manipulation of moving images—slow-downs, movement back and forth, the stopping of the movement for a few seconds—creates a rhythm that makes the aliveness of the movements a deeply sensorial experience. It creates a distance between real time and the time of the moving images. This denaturalizes our reception of time and movement, as a result of which we become overwhelmed by the life embodied in these moving images.

Forgács works with the qualitative difference between historical time and personal time as we experience it. One could wonder if this quality also depends on the filmmaker and the kind of family that is being filmed. In this respect, the difference between the Peereboom and the Seyss-Inquart home movies, his second archival source for *Maelstrom*, is revealing. The distinction I have used so far between personal time and historical time does not automatically apply in the same way or same degree to the Seyss-Inquarts' footage. Seyss-Inquart's position in history is radically different from that of the Peereboom family. I am not referring to the fact that the one family occupies the victim position in history and the other the one of perpetrator. I am referring to the fact that Seyss-Inquart was appointed by Hitler; he represents him in the Netherlands. He is the representative of Hitler, of history; one could say he *is* history or, rather, the embodiment of it. This makes one wonder, can the embodiment of history make home movies of his family and friends? Or is the genre of the home movie disabled when history enters the realm of the personal?

There is, of course, also a class difference between the Peereboom family and the Seyss-Inquart family. Whereas the Peereboom family belongs to a Jewish–Dutch lower-middle-class family, the Seyss-Inquarts belong to an Austrian upper-middle-class family. This can explain the vitality of the Peerebooms and the more restrained behavior of the Seyss-Inquart family. It seems that the Seyss-Inquart family members are all the time aware of the fact that not only the cameraman but also anonymous, abstract, later viewers are looking at them. They embody history, and later as history will be judged, their role in history will be judged. When I watch the home movies of this family, I cannot avoid mobilizing the distinction between useful and useless. It is from the Seyss-Inquart footage that I get information. I become interested from a historical point of view when I notice that Reichsführer SS Himmler visited the Seyss-Inquart couple at their Clingendael estate in the Netherlands. They were not only fellow Nazi leaders; they and their wives socialized with each other and played tennis.

The fact that the Seyss-Inquarts' home movies evoke a mode of looking that this genre usually discourages only foregrounds differentially the more usual mode of looking at home movies. Forgács's combination and alternation of the Peerebooms' footage with the Seyss-Inquart footage, of personal time and of a personal time that is infected by historical time, sharpens our eye for the special qualities of the Peereboom home movies.

As I have argued so far, in *Maelstrom* personal time is shown to be in radical tension with historical time. In terms of my starting question, this tension suggests that the spread of memory practices since the 1990s is the symptom of a memory crisis rather than of memory celebration. It seems to be the expression of a situation in which memory is under siege. This conclusion concurs with that of other cultural critics. Scholars like Benjamin Buchloh and Andreas Huyssen have argued that this memory crisis is first of all historical and specific. According to Buchloh, mnemonic desire is activated especially in those moments of extreme duress in which the traditional bonds between subjects, between subjects and objects, and between objects and their representation appear to be on the verge of displacement if not outright disappearance.[4] In the 1990s especially, massive migration due to economical reasons or political wars, resulting in genocides, has caused such moments of extreme duress. But the memory crisis not only is historically specific in the sociopolitical sense but also is caused by media culture, by its overwhelming presence since the 1990s, and by the specific forms this culture develops. The enormous impact of photographic and filmic media culture has not worked in the service of memory but, on the contrary, threatens to destroy historical memory and the mnemonic image.

Buchloh elaborates this erosion of historical consciousness in the German context, specifically through a reading of Gerhard Richter's archival work *Atlas* as a critical response to that context. The photographs collected in *Atlas* belong to very different photographic registers, namely, both to registers that construct public and historical identity and to registers that construct private identity, such as the family photograph. Yet it is the continuous field of banal images more and more prevalent since the 1960s that levels out these different photographic formations into a general condition of amnesia. According to Buchloh, "Banality as a condition of everyday life appears here in its specifically German modality, as a sort of psychic anaesthesia."[5]

In the 1920s, German sociologist and cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer explained how media culture can have this devastating effect. In his essay simply titled "Photography," he makes a diagnosis of his own times that seems to be at the same time a prophetic diagnosis of our times:

> Never before has any age been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense. . . . In reality however, the weekly photographic ration does not all mean to refer to these objects or "ur-mages." If it were offering itself as an aid to memory, then memory would have to make the selection. But the Hood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory. The assault of this mass of images is so powerful that it threatens to destroy the potential existing awareness of crucial traits. Artworks suffer this fate through their reproductions. . . . In the illustrated magazines people see the very world that the illustrated magazines prevent them from perceiving. . . . Never before has a period known so little about itself.[6]

Relevant for our discussion, Kracauer sees historicism, the scholarly practice that emerged more or less at the same moment as modern photographic technology, as the temporal equivalent of the spatial mediations that take place in photography. In Kracauer's words, "On the whole, advocates of such historicist thinking believe they can explain any phenomenon purely in terms of its genesis. That is, they believe in any case that they can grasp historical reality by reconstructing the course of events in their temporal succession without any gaps. Photography presents a spatial continuum; historicism seeks to provide the temporal continuum. According to historicism, the complete mirroring of an intertemporal sequence simultaneously contains the meaning of all that occurred within that time. . . . Historicism is concerned with the photography of time" (49). How can we consider a medium and a scientific discourse as parallel? Photography and historicism regulate spatial and temporal elements according to laws that belong to the economic laws

of nature rather than to mnemonic principles. In contrast, Kracauer argues, memory encompasses neither the entire spatial appearance of a state of affairs nor its entire temporal course. Nor does memory pay much attention to dates; it skips years or stretches temporal distance (50). Kracauer writes in this respect, "An individual retains memories because they are personally significant. Thus they are organized according to a principle which is essentially different from the organizing principle of photography: memory images retain what is given only in so far as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory images are at odds with photographic representations" (50). Memory images are also at odds with the principles of historicism, concludes Kracauer later in his essay: "Historicism's temporal inventory corresponds to the spatial inventory of photography. Instead of preserving the 'history' that consciousness reads out of the temporal succession of events, historicism records the temporal succession of events whose linkage does not contain the transparency of history" (61). It is in the daily newspapers that photography and historicism join forces and intensify each other in their destruction of memory. In the 1920s daily papers are illustrating their texts more and more, and the numbers of illustrated newspapers increased. For Kracauer those

Figure 3.1 *El Perro Negro.* An anonymous soldier filmed at night. Do such images preserve memory or replace it with iconographic impressions?

illustrated journals embody in a nutshell the devastating effects of the representation of spatial and temporal continuities mistaken for the meaning of history.

Clearly, Kracauer's diagnosis of a memory crisis as caused by the phenomena of photography and historicism, relatively new in his day, seems also highly relevant for an understanding of the position of memory in the 1990s and after. His somber prophecy seems to have come true.[7] For Huyssen, the spread of memory practices, especially in the visual arts, is for him symptomatic of a crisis, not of a flourishing of memory. The memory crisis that started at the beginning of the twentieth century seems to have accelerated and intensified at the end of that century. The reasons for this are again twofold. First of all, there is a historical and specific reason. Second, this acceleration is a result of the impact of developments in media culture.

To address the second reason, the principles of mediating historical reality introduced by photography and historicism are intensified through film, advanced electronic technologies such as computers and the Internet, mass media, the explosion of historical scholarship, and an ever more voracious museum culture. It is among other things the abundance of information that explains the memory crisis of the 1990s. Huyssen writes in this line of argumentation, "For the more we are asked to remember in the wake of the information explosion and the marketing of memory, the more we seem to be in danger of forgetting and the stronger the need to forget. At issue is the distinction between usable pasts and disposable data."[8] Yet it is not only this very specific mediation of (historical) reality that has its devastating effects on memory but also the nature of historical and political reality of the 1990s itself. Historical memory used to give coherence and legitimacy to families, communities, nations, and states. But in the 1990s these links that were more or less stable links have weakened drastically. In the processes of globalization and massive migration, national traditions and historical pasts are increasingly deprived of their geographic and political groundings (4). Whereas older sociological approaches to collective memory, most famously represented in the work of Maurice Halbwachs, presuppose relatively stable communities and formations of their memories, these approaches are no longer adequate to grasp the current dynamic of the fragmented memory politics of different social and ethnic groups.

It is against this background of a century-old but now accelerated memory crisis that the memory practices in the visual arts should be understood. It is in these practices that memory becomes an issue of transforming aesthetics. To assess the social value of such transformations in

the aesthetics of memory, the question that remains to be answered is how effective these practices are in countering the threat of oblivion. I would like to address this question by taking a closer look at Péter Forgács's 2005 film *El Perro Negro* (*The Black Dog*). This film differs from his older work in that historical time rather than personal time is the main issue. At first sight this film can be mistaken as a conventional historical film, dealing with a specific national and political history, namely, the Spanish civil war in the 1930s. It is consistently chronological: it begins with the civil war's prehistory in 1930, when Alfonso XIII is still king of Spain. Then the first free elections to occur in thirty years in 1931 are held, when the majority of the people voted republican. The king left the country and the republic was proclaimed. Because of a series of new laws declared by the new republic—among which a law that allowed divorce and the separation of state and church—the clergy, the army, and the right-wing bourgeois became more and more opposed to the new republic. Ultimately this led to a civil war on July 18, 1936.

Most of this red thread of official historiographic storytelling is, however, told, not shown, in *El Perro Negro*. More than in most of his other films, there is a voice-over that imposes on the images the coherence of public, historical time. The film images we get to see belong, again, to the genre of home movies or they are made by amateur filmmakers. At the beginning of the film the voice-over (Forgács himself) declares, "We travel through Spain's violent decade with the images and stories of amateur filmmakers such as Joan Salvans from Terassa, Catalonia, and Ernesto Noviega from Madrid."

The films made by the amateur filmmakers can be home movies, but not exclusively. Ernesto Noriega, for example who is more or less neutral in the civil war, begins to document the civil war in 1936. It is only in 1938 that he becomes a soldier fighting in the Falangist (Fascist) army, not out of ideological conviction, but in order to survive. The angle from which he films remains personal, however. His adventures during the civil war, the events in which he participates, are the events that are filmed and shown.

I wish to discuss *The Black Dog* for its surprising contrast with the artist's preceding work. Compared to Forgács's earlier work, in *The Black Dog* the balance between personal time and historical time is reversed, so to speak. Whereas in his earlier work the viewer was completely immersed in the personal realm of weddings, anniversaries, and the home so that the continuity of historical time had to be imposed on it, in *The Black Dog* it is the other way around. The voice-over's storytelling leads the viewer through the filmic events. The filmic image substantiates this

narrative or refuses or fails to do that. And such a refusal or failure often occurs. The filmic image usually does not illustrate what the voice-over says, or it is the other way around: the voice-over does not explain or elaborate what the filmic image shows. Most of the time, the spoken word and the image are not continuous. This incongruity appears crucial.

Still, in *The Black Dog* Forgács is doing, or performing, historiography. In his earlier work Forgács was rather deconstructing historiography, exploring the limits or perhaps even the failure of historiography by showing the radical difference between personal time and historical time. In *The Black Dog* he seems to explore a possible remedy against that failure of historicism in order to develop an alternative historiographic mode. In order to understand the principles of this alternative historiography, I call again on Kracauer.

> After his devastating critique of photography as a medium and of historicism as a scholarly practice, he ends his essay "Photography" with a rather unexpected optimistic remark about the possibilities of film: "The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film. This possibility is realized whenever film combines parts and segments to create strange constructs. If the disarray of the illustrated newspapers is simply confusion, the game that film plays with the pieces of disjointed nature is reminiscent of dreams in which the fragment of daily life becomes jumbled." (62)

Obviously, the kind of filmic aesthetics Kracauer is referring to differs radically from the kind of film that is dominant now. In the 1920s he would see the experimental films of the German and Russian tradition as defining the genre. But in spite of this historical specificity of Kracauer's view of film, it is precisely this historical background of the filmic medium that helps us to understand Forgács's attempts to force a new historiography.

The "pieces of disjointed nature" that film plays with, according to Kracauer, are in Forgács's work and time pieces that belong to personal time and pieces that belong to historical time. He presents these as radically disjunct. Although in *The Black Dog* there are certainly moments when personal history functions as synecdoche of history, usually the relation between the two realms is one of disjunction. These moments of clash between personal time and historical time are the ones that result in a different reading of the genre of home movies. Conversely, this clash makes the genre of home movies a key element in our understanding of time and of history.

So far I have characterized home movies and historicism as opposites. The home-movie genre embodies the realm of personal time, whereas historicism is the ultimate consequence of historical time. But

when we approach them from the perspective of the viewer or reader—in other words, as an issue of aesthetics—they have more in common than appears at first sight. Watching somebody else's home movies is usually a rather boring experience. This boredom stems not from the fact that the filmic quality of home movies tends to be rather bad and sentimental but because what we see does not concern us, but them. Watching conventional home movies does not establish a relationship of similarity but of difference; the genre makes us aware of the privacy of personal time and of the sentimentality of conventional ways of portraying the family.

Historicist historiography also establishes a relationship of difference, this time not a difference between personal and public, but between past and present. Memory, in contrast, is fundamentally connected to the present: it is again and again actualized *in the present*, and only those memories that are significant in the present can be activated. As Kracauer argues, the historicism of conventional historiography is fundamentally different from what characterizes memory. As we have seen, in his view historicism attempts to regulate temporal elements according to laws that belong to economic principles of nature rather than to mnemonic principles. For the viewer or reader of historiographic texts or images, this results in an awareness of difference between past and present, between that past political situation and ours, between their culture and our culture.

But when home movies are combined with the historiographic mode, as in the work of Péter Forgács, another kind of relationship with the viewer or reader is stimulated. The clash between—not harmonious blending of—the personal time of home movies and the historical time of historicism brings the situations in the home movies closer to us. Instead of sensing an uncomfortable alienation, as occurs usually when we watch other people's home movies, we begin to identify with the people in the home movies. The personal time of the home movies becomes an anchor within the historicist framework with which it clashes.

In Forgács's *The Black Dog* this strategy of establishing similarity between the viewer and the represented subjects is intensified by yet other means. The title points this out. Throughout the film, shots of animals play a crucial role. The title of the film refers to one of these shots, a clip of a black dog that recurs several times in the film. But there are many more clips of other animals, of pigs that are maltreated, of donkeys, of horses, and of rabbits being shot. All these animal shots have a heavily allegorical significance that sets them off from traditional use of animals in visual representation. The animals are never filmed as contextual details to produce a reality effect. In contrast, the animal shots, especially

of the black dog, are isolated within the film. This demarcation facilitates their allegorical functioning. The black dog becomes an allegory of destruction—of the evil of war.

At one moment the allegorical meaning of the animal clippings becomes more or less explicit. We see pigs maltreated by men. Then there is a voice-over. The identity of this voice-over is clearly not the same as the one who provides us with the historiographical narrative. When personal testimonies are quoted, another voice-over is introduced, clearly with another voice, in order to set the historiographic story apart from the personal stories. This personalized voice-over says, "The peasants hated the bourgeoisie because they treated them like animals. One of them said, 'Once we looked at the landowner, we thought we were looking at the devil himself.'"

At this moment it becomes impossible to see the clipping of the pigs maltreated by the men as unrelated to what the voice-over says. The image proposes an allegorical interpretation of how landowners or bourgeoisie treat the peasants and the lower classes.

These allegorical devices function on the basis of similarity. The similarity between the maltreatment of the pigs and that of the peasants

Figure 3.2 *El Perro Negro*. A stray dog, but what does it signify? The random moments of home movies retain their enigmatic quality. For Forgács history cannot be reduced to a simple tale, but its effects are no less palpable.

makes the one into an allegory of the other. This deployment of similarity is key to the polemic Forgács is conducting in this film. Similarity obstructs the principles of historicism, since historicism is based on the principle of radical continuity and on the temporal sequentiality within which each moment is unique and incomparable to other moments. The possibility of similarity within that logic would confuse the project of reestablishing temporal sequences. If similarity occurs, it has to be disentangled and repositioned into unique sequential moments. Similarity, hence allegory, is the enemy of historicism.

But in addition to the effect of the allegorical animal clippings, Forgács uses another device to reorient historiography toward the present. Again and again he uses footage in which we see people playact or where they are involved in events of a ritualistic nature. In both cases the represented moments or histories relate in a very ambiguous or complex way to the historicist attempt to establish a continuity of unique historical moments. The opening scene of *The Black Dog* provides the audience immediately with a powerful example of playacting history. We see two groups of young men, facing each other and performing a ritualized dance. Later, and retrospectively, we can read this dance as an allegorical representation of the two parties fighting each other in the Spanish civil war. The dance, then, formalizes the war as a conflict between groups of men. Because men they are: the event appears to be exclusively and deeply homosocial. After the dance the same young men play something resembling a lawsuit that ends in the execution of one of the men. With his arms tied up and blinded, he is pushed off a mountain into nothingness, seemingly into a gorge.

This event is amazing in many respects. First of all, it is amazing because a group of young men executes another young man by pushing him over the top of a mountain into a gorge. This happens after a dance, which turns out to have been a ritualized duel. Second, the film opens with this footage, even before we get to see the title sequence. This gives the whole scene extra significance. Third, this gruesome event surprises because it is not real—that is, it is not a historical event. It is playacted. Not history, but theater, is the context in which it happens. If this opening scene provides a prelude to the Spanish civil war, it is, again, only in an allegorical way.

This opening scene is, however, also a forerunner in a nonallegorical way: again and again in *The Black Dog* we get to see footage of scenes that are playacted or that concern moments or events that are repeated—that is, they are events of a ritualistic nature, such as weddings, banquets, or dances. It is not the unique historical moment at which the event takes

place that strikes the eye but the fact that the unique history of the Spanish civil war is so insistently represented through images that show events of a repeatable nature: plays, performances, and rituals.

At first sight, Forgács's use of the genre of home footage explains this: the home footage out of which *Maelstrom* consists also mainly shows events that are only unique on a personal level, not on a historical or historicist level. Weddings, births, and the like occur one after another. The Holocaust, or other violent events, does not intrude into the representational realm of this genre. The home footage of these two Spanish sources is, however, strikingly different, and this difference sheds a retrospective light on the relation between personal and historical time in *Maelstrom*. Many of the performed, ritualistic events, which are filmed by the two amateur filmmakers, provide us with images of the violence of the Spanish civil war, albeit it in an allegorical way. First of all there is footage of bullfights, the quintessential Spanish performance of ritualized cruelty. But there is other amazing footage comparable to that of the opening scene.

The voice-over tells us about a conflict between employers and militant anarchists in 1930. It specifies that Joan Salvans—one of the

Figure 3.3 *El Perro Negro*. A recurring ritual or event in the film is the rally or political parade like this one. These rituals parallel the private rituals of weddings and dances.

filmmakers—apparently did not feel threatened by this conflict (he was the son of an important businessman): he went out camping in the Pyrenees with a club of mountaineers of which he was the chair. The footage shows first images of a bullfight, then of Joan dancing with his fiancée, Merce, and then of Joan and his friends and fellow mountaineers in the Pyrenees. As in the opening scene the young men are playacting: they perform another homosocial conflict resulting in yet another playacted execution. One of the men is rolled down off the mountain. In contrast with *Maelstrom*, a film that enacted the radical split between personal time and historical time, in *The Black Dog* the personal time at stake in these playacted performances provides access to the Spanish civil war by means of the device of allegory.

But if we are to assess the nature and effect of Forgács's attempt to transform the principles of historiography, we must account for the key fact that in his historiographic project Forgács does not obey the principles of historicism. He obstructs those principles by introducing devices based on similarity, the repeatable, and identification and deploying them on different levels. First of all, he uses allegorical motifs of animals standing for human subjects and of playacted performances that ritualize violence and cruelty. Second, he establishes a different relationship between the represented human subjects and the viewers. This is how he performs historiography without the overwhelmingly distancing effect of difference. As a result, a film about the Spanish civil war can suddenly affect us emotionally and politically in our present moment. When similarity becomes a leading device *within* historiography, the Spanish civil war suddenly becomes an experience close to us, although it happened more than sixty years ago, far away in the southwest corner of Europe. When it happened, we were not there. Now, we are.

Forgács's work is a strong example of what I called at the beginning of this reflection the spread of memory practices so prevalent since the early 1990s. Of course, it is impossible and undesirable to generalize about this art and the cultural practices that are performed in it. It is more important to distinguish productive from unproductive memory practices and try to understand in what respect memory practices are productive or unproductive. Because some and perhaps even most of these practices show a kind of naïve, nostalgic, and sentimental celebration of the past, usually limited to a personal past, without actively engaging this past in our political present, it is imperative to stop at attempts such as Forgács's to overcome these distancing practices. My reading of Forgács's films *Maelstrom* and, in relation to it, *The Black Dog* suggests, however, that the media and genres used for these memory practices are themselves

deeply implicated in the crisis of memory they appear to counter. If used conventionally and uncritically, media such as photography and film, the archive, and genres like documentary, the family album, or home movies lead to a memory crisis. They embody the principles of traditional historicism Kracauer criticized, for they are based on the kind of temporal or spatial continuities easily mistaken for the meaning of political situations or of personal lives. It is only when the use of these media and genres is performed critically and self-reflexively that they are transformed from embodiments and implements of that crisis to alternative practices that counter the very same crisis. It is only then, in the words of Jill Bennett, "that art does not represent what already occurred, but that art sets up conditions for relating to the event."[9]

This is a call for an aesthetics that subverts traditional temporality. Forgács's systematic clash between personal time and historical time is an example of such a productive practice. His staged clashes do not end up in a deadlock but result in an aesthetics that inserts personal time into historical time, or the other way around, without either false harmony or insurmountable incompatibility. Instead his aesthetics of temporality give personal time a broader historical significance. The genres and media he works with and in, genres and media that seem preconditioned for historiographic projects, no longer comply with the principles of historicism. This is how historiography can become relevant again for our political and personal present. This is how, in different words, historiography can return to its mission to serve and preserve, not dictate and erase what we are and do today, with that past in our present world.

NOTES

1. Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).
2. Ibid.
3. http://www.artmargins.com/content/interview/forgacs.html, accessed August 2006.
4. Benjamin Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive," in *Atlas: The Reader* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2003), 109.
5. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Atlas," 112.
6. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 58.
7. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.
8. Ibid., 18.
9. Jill Bennett, lecture at University of New South Wales, Sydney, July 18, 2005.