Towards a New Historiography: Peter Forgacs and the Aesthetics of Temporality

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Péter Forgács and the aesthetics of temporality

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Since the 1990s there has been an enormous spread of what might be described as 'memory practices' in art and literature. These memory practices manifest themselves around issues such as trauma, the Holocaust and other genocides, migration, and also in the increased 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, whether we should see this as a celebration of memory, as a *fin de siècle*, and more recently a *debut de siècle* – as an expression of the desire to look backwards – or, in contrast, as a symptom of a severe memory crisis or a fear of forgetting?

Whatever it is symptomatic of, this art practice so typifies our moment that it may point to the very meaning of the present itself. In order to come close to answering the question of the meaning of the present through art practices, I will focus on the work of Hungarian filmmaker and artist Péter Forgács. His films and installations are exclusively made up of material that he finds in the archive of home movies. As a consequence of this self-imposed limitation, it is clear that memory practices are at stake in his work in several respects. Since 1988 Forgács has assembled the Private Hungary Documentary Series from an archival collection of home movie stock dating back to the 1930s and up to the present. These films draw upon a film archive established by Forgács himself and the Private Film and Photo Archives in Budapest. It comprises more than 300 hours of home movies and an additional forty hours of interviews with the relatives of the amateur filmmakers who shot the footage. For most of the films Forgács collaborated with Hungarian minimalist composer Tibor Szemző.

What all of his montage films have in common is that they deal with the Hungarian bourgeois under two totalitarian regimes, Nazism followed by communism. However, Forgács also made some films that do not specifically focus on Hungary. One of them is the film *Maelstrom* (1997), which was commissioned by VPRO for Dutch public television. This film is also archival: it draws upon found home movies from diverse origins. For *Maelstrom* two sources are predominant: firstly, the home movies of the Dutch Jewish family Peereboom, filmed by the oldest son Max. These home movies cover the period of the early thirties until 1943, the moment when the family was transported to Auschwitz. The second and secondary source consists of the home movies of the Austrian Nazi Seyss-Inquart, who was appointed *Reichs Commissioner* of The Netherlands in 1940 as representative of Hitler. A third source Forgács used more sparsely in this film are the home movies of a Dutch SS member. So, like his other films, this film is also about the bourgeois under a totalitarian regime, in this case Nazism.[1] Forgács more recent film, *El perro negro* (The Black Dog, 2005), is about another political war with totalitarian results, namely the Spanish Civil War, on which more later. Wars, totalitarian regimes, or both, treated through home movie footage is the stuff of Forgács' work.

1. Compared to most of his other films the overall structure of *Maelstrom* is more conventionally narrative. It begins with the oldest footage in 1933 in Amsterdam, where the father of the camera operator, Max Peereboom, is editor of the *Nieuw Israelitisch Dagblad*. Max himself lives in Middelburg where he works for his future father-in-law. When the chronology reaches the late 1930s we get to see some of the footage of a Dutch SS member. Having arrived in 1940 the home footage of *Reichskommissar* Seyss-Inquart is introduced. We see him mainly on his estate Clingendael, in The Hague. In 1942 Max and Annie Peereboom and his in-laws are forced to move to Amsterdam. Seyss-Inquart has ordered all Dutch Jews to move to Amsterdam in order to facilitate their deportation to Auschwitz and other camps. The reason was that their deportation was going to be much more efficient if all Jews were concentrated in one city. The film stops abruptly when Max is transported and then killed (along with the rest of the Peereboom family and extended family); here the family narrative comes to an end. The only person of this family who will survive is Max's youngest brother Simon.

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 selected on the basis of a specific criterion: they consist of memories of happy moments. But as Forgács pointed 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.

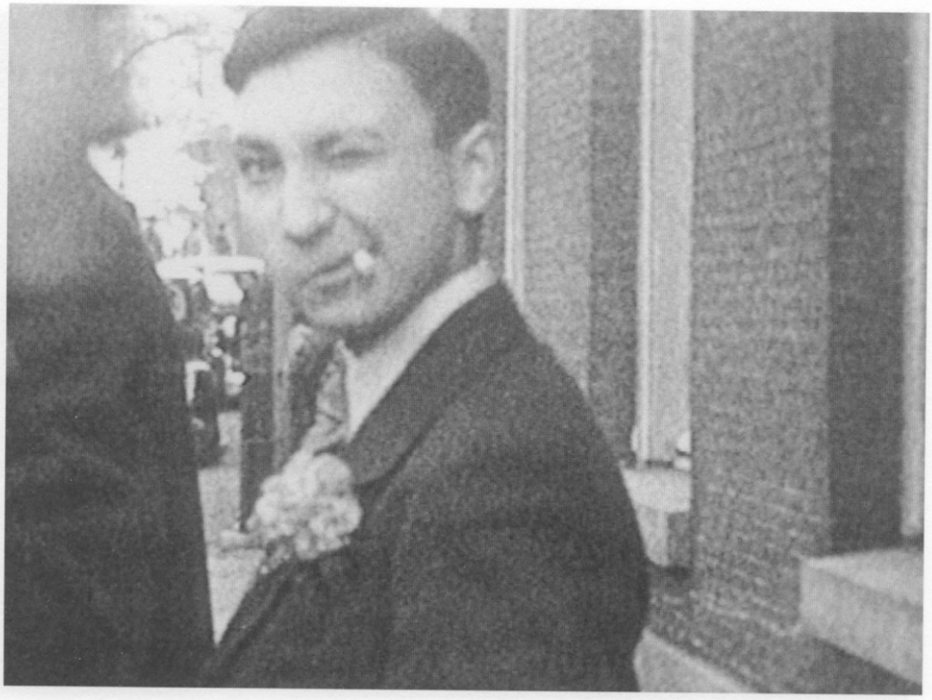
If Forgács is right in this view of home movies as analogous to dreams, Freud's explanation of the dream work is also extremely relevant for an understanding of home movies. Take *Maelstrom* again. Although the macro-structure of *Maelstrom* is narrative, if you look at the fragments of footage that form the building blocks of this narrative, they are not so much telling but 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' montage edits the key moments of history into this personal temporality. History is present in *Maelstrom*, albeit necessarily in a de-centered way. For example, some Peereboom footage shows a visit of Queen Wilhelmina with Princess Juliana to the town of Middelburg; another fragment shows the celebration in Middelburg of the 40th 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, which are performed by the director's hand. Sometimes we hear a radio broadcast, or there are titles or texts written on the screen pointing out in which historical moment the 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 Seyss-Inquart stipulating how to kill warm-blooded animals, or regulating who is considered Jewish and who is not, stipulating what 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 the Second World War and the Holocaust progress, 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 also films the moment that his family prepares for deportation to Auschwitz. Firstly, it is remarkable that he decided to film this. 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. The footage in itself does not describe what they are doing (preparing themselves for deportation), this is done by a 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

Péter Forgács, *Maelstrom*, 1997, film stills



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' work, Kaja Silverman argues that his films are based on strategies of re-personalisation instead of objectification or categorisation. His films evoke the phenomenal world: they are about vitality, enjoyment, about activities such as dancing and playing. Whereas the archival mechanisms of objectification and categorisation strip images of their singularity, Forgács' archival footage insists 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.[2]

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 looks into the camera are of a completely different order. For here, there is no clear distinction between the camera and the person behind the camera. *Maelstrom*, but also *El perro negro* contains many examples of such interactions. Especially Max's youngest brother Simon, who persistently makes fun of Max the cameraman by pulling funny faces at the lens. He does not do this 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. Max filmed his infant daughter at one of the many weddings. The little girl turns her face to the camera expecting to see the face of 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 them. According to Silverman, people in home footage do not just convey Roland Barthes' idea of 'this has been' (*'ça a été'*), but also 'I love you.'

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 through 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 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' 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.

2. Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press (forthcoming 2008).

Hence, the effect of re-personalisation brought about by Forgács' films is not only the result of the specific genre of home movies, but also of his intensification of qualities within the broader genre of the moving image as such. His manipulation of moving images – the slow-downs, the movement back and forth, or halting 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 de-naturalizes 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 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, the other the one of perpetrator. I am referring to the fact that Seyss-Inquart was appointed by Hitler to represent 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. But at the same time it seems that the Seyss-Inquart family members are aware of the fact that it is not only the cameraman who is looking at them, but also anonymous, abstract or later viewers. They embody History, and later their role in History will be judged. When I watch the home movies of this family, I cannot avoid mobilizing the distinction between what is 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-Inquart's 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' combination and alternation of the Peereboom 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 a celebration of memory. It seems to be the expression of a situation in which memory is under siege. This conclusion concords 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.[3] 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 is not only historically specific in the socio-political sense, it is also caused by media culture, by its overwhelming presence since the 90s 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, "[b]anality as a condition of everyday life appears here in its specifically German modality, as a sort of psychic anaesthesia."[4]

Already in the 1920s, German sociologist and cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer explained how media culture can have this devastating effect. In his essay simply entitled "Photography," he makes a diagnosis of his own age that seems to be a prophetic diagnosis of the present:

> 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-images.' 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.[5]

Relevantly 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.

3. Benjamin Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive", in *Atlas: The Reader*. London: Whitechapel, 2003, p. 109.

4. Buchloh, p. 112.

5. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography" (1927), in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, edited and translated by Thomas Y. Levin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 58.

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.[6]

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. 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.[7]

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.[8] 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 illustrated their texts more and more and the number of illustrated newspapers increased. For Kracauer those illustrated journals embody 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 since the 1990s. His somber prophecy seems to have come true.[9] For Huyssen, the spread of memory practices especially in the visual arts is symptomatic of a crisis, rather than a flourishing, of memory.

6. Kracauer, p. 49.

7. Kracauer, p. 50.

8. Kracauer, p. 61.

9. Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 1.

10. Huyssen, p. 18.

11. Huyssen, p. 4.

The memory crisis that started at the beginning of the twentieth century seems to have accelerated and intensified at the century's end. The reasons for this are again twofold. Firstly, there is a historical and specific reason; secondly, this acceleration is a result of the impact of developments in media culture. I will address the second issue first. 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, and by 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.[10]

Yet, it is not only this very specific mediation of (historical) reality that has its devastating effects on memory, it is 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 more or less stable links weakened drastically. In the processes of globalisation and massive migration, national traditions and historical pasts are increasingly deprived of their geographic and political groundings.[11] 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, and 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 Forgács' film *El perro negro*. This film differs from his earlier work in that historical time rather than personal time is the main issue. At first sight this film can be mistaken for a conventional historical film, dealing with a specific national and political history, namely the Spanish Civil War of 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 occur in thirty years in 1931, 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 – including a law that allowed divorce, and the separation of state and church – the army and the right-wing bourgeois became more and more opposed to the new republic. Ultimately a civil war began 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 Taragga, Catalonia, and Ernesto Noviega from Madrid.

The films made by the amateur filmmakers can be home movies, but not exclusively. Ernesto Noviega, for example, begins to document the civil war when he becomes a soldier fighting in the falangist (fascist) army. The angle from which he films remains personal, however. His adventures during the civil war, the events he partakes of, are the events that are filmed and shown.

I wish to discuss *El perro negro* for its surprising contrast with the artist's preceding work. Compared to Forgács' earlier work, in *El perro negro* 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, the home, so that the continuity of historical time had to be imposed on it, in *El perro negro* 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 so. And such a refusal or failure often occurs. The filmic image usually does not illustrate what the voice-over says, or 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 *El perro negro* 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 *El perro negro* 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, Kracauer 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.[12]

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' attempts to force a new historicism.

The 'pieces of disjointed nature' that film plays with according to Kracauer, are in Forgács' work and time 'pieces' that belong to personal time and 'pieces' that belong to historical time. He presents these as radically disjunct. Although in *El perro negro* there are certainly moments when personal history functions as the synecdoche of History, usually the relation between the two realms is one of disjunction. These moments when personal time and historical time clash are the moments that allow for 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.

12. Kracauer, p. 62.

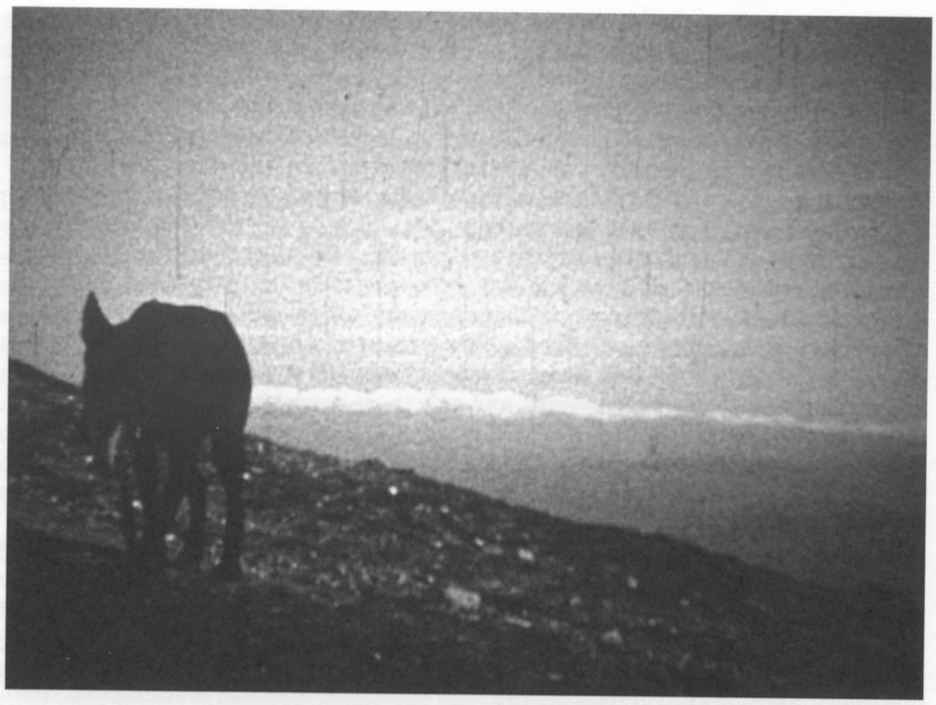
So far, I have characterized home movies and historicism as opposites. The home movie genre embodies the realm of personal time, whereas historicism is the ultimate consequence of historical time. But when we approach them from the perspective of the viewer or reader, in other words, as an issue of aesthetics, 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 repeatedly 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 the 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 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 it 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.

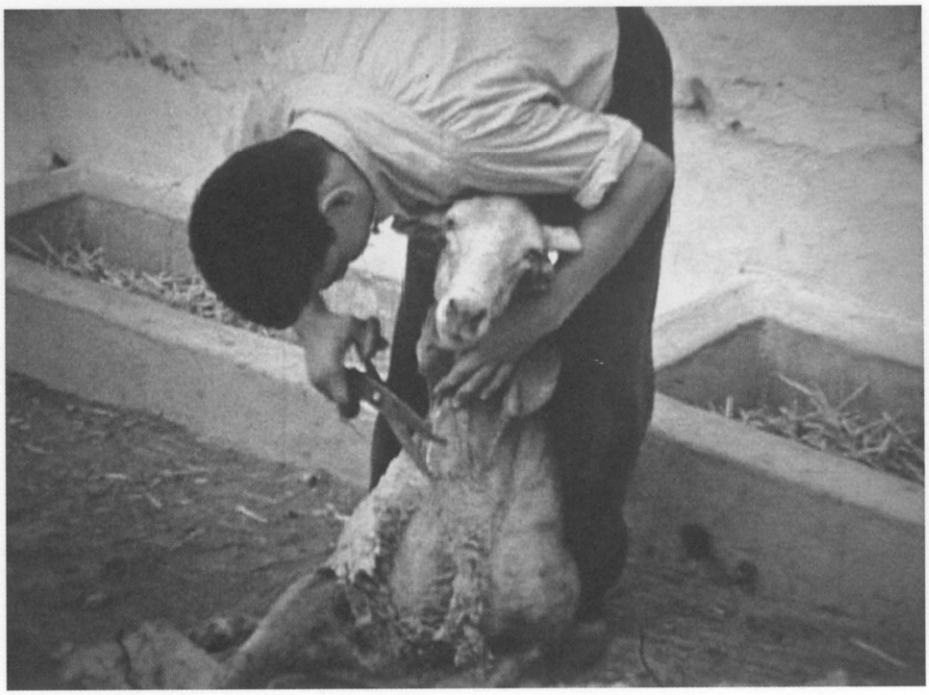
In Forgács' *El perro negro* this strategy of establishing similarity between the viewer and the represented subjects is intensified by yet other means. The title points this out. Throughout the film shots of animals play a crucial role. The title of the film refers to one of these shots, a clip of a 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, 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.

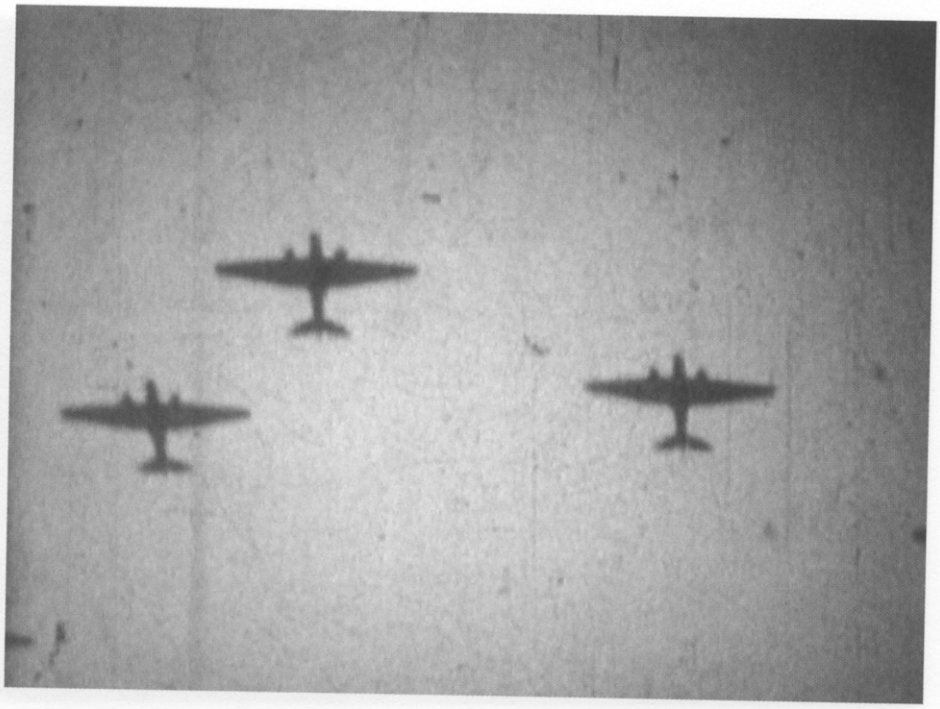
At one moment the allegorical meaning of the animal clippings becomes more or less explicit. We see pigs maltreated by men. Then there is a voice-over. The identity of this voice-over is clearly not the same as the one who provides us with the historiographical narrative. When personal testimonies are 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."



Péter Forgács, *El perro negro*, 2005, film stills





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 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, on the temporal sequencing within which each moment is unique and incomparable to other moments. The possibility of similarity within that logic would confuse the project of re-establishing temporal sequences. If similarity occurs, it has to be disentangled and re-positioned into unique sequential moments. Similarity, hence allegory, is the enemy of historicism.

But in addition to the effect of the allegorical animal clips Forgács uses another device to reorient historiography towards the present. Again and again he uses footage in which we see people play-act, 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 *El perro negro* provides the audience immediately with a powerful example of 'play-acting 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 homo-social. After the dance the same young men play something resembling a lawsuit that ends in the execution of one of the men. Blindfolded and with his arms tied 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 as an event, because this 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. Secondly, because the film opens with this footage, even before we get to see the title sequence. This gives the whole scene extra significance. Thirdly, this gruesome event surprises because it is not real, it is not an historical event. It is play-acted in the context of theatre rather than history. If this opening scene provides a prelude to the Spanish Civil War, it is, again, only allegorical.

This opening scene is, however, also a forerunner in a non-allegorical sense: repeatedly in *El perro negro* we see footage of scenes that are play-acted or that concern moments or events that are repeated, that is 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.

On one level, the genre of home footage explains this: the home footage out of which *Maelstrom* consists also shows mainly 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, do 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 the 1930s. It specifies that Joan Salvans – one of the camera operators – apparently did not feel threatened by this conflict – he was the son of an important employer – because he went out camping in the Pyrenees with a club of mountaineers of which he was the chair. The footage begins with images of a bullfight followed by Joan dancing with his fiancée Merce, then of Joan and his friends and fellow mountaineers in the Pyrenees. As in the opening scene the young men are play-acting: they perform another homo-social conflict resulting in yet another play-acted execution: one of the men is rolled down the mountain. In contrast with *Maelstrom*, a film that enacted the radical split between personal time and historical time, in *El perro negro* the personal time at stake in these play-acted performances provide 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' 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 obstructs these principles within the film by his use of the allegorical motifs of animals standing for human subjects and of play-acted performances that ritualize violence and cruelty. He then conducts his obstruction by establishing 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 60 years ago, far away in the southwest corner of Europe. When it happened, we were not there. Now, we are.

Forgács' work is a strong example of what I called at the beginning of this reflection the spread of memory practices that have become 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' to overcome these distancing practices. My reading of Forgács' films *Maelstrom*, and in relation to it, of *El perro negro* 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 that are 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."[13]

This is a call for an aesthetics that subverts traditional temporality. Forgács' 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 gives personal time a broader historical significance. The genres and media he works with and in, genres and media that seem preconditioned for historiographic projects do no longer comply to 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.

This text was first presented as the lecture "Towards a New Historiography: Péter Forgács and Personal Time," at the conference *Transforming Aesthetics*, University of New South Wales, Sydney, July 7-9, 2005.

13. Jill Bennett in a lecture held at the conference *Transforming Aesthetics*. Sydney: University of New South Wales, July 7-9, 2005.