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## History in the Rewind Mode. The XVth International IAMHIST Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. 1993

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MICHAEL PUNT

## History in the Rewind Mode

The XVth International IAMHIST Conference, Amsterdam,  
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In a gesture which reflected the thoughtfulness, planning and intellectual thrust of the XVth International IAMHIST Conference on Film and the First World War, the organizers arranged a »postscript« event which equipped the participants to »rewind« the tape of the previous week in a most appropriate way. The postscript to the conference was a tour of the astonishing and somewhat bizarre Art Deco interior of the Theatre Tuschinski cinema in Reguliersbree-straat, Amsterdam. By finally returning us to the cinema, and in particular this one built during the first world war (1917) by an émigré whose financial background was in the garment trade, the major themes and strategies of the conference were underscored and fixed with an apt architectural mnemonic.

The presentation of a wealth of visual material was fundamental to the coordinates of the conference debate. Throughout the event, indeed even before it officially began, the cinema screen was ever present. The Nederlands Filmmuseum provided stunning examples of fiction and non fiction films from the period and these were accompanied by substantial presentations and discussions. In addition there were nightly presentations of broadcast television histories of the Great War, and these too were followed by discussions. For film historians they showed the questionable impact of the War on the particular codes of narration, genres and representational strategies of cinema in the teens, whilst for political historians they showed that the »photokinetic« images of the war, subject as they were to propagandist manipulation, demanded special understanding. Between these two, the archivists were torn between the demands of their own discipline, and scholars looking for authentic cultural representations and researchers looking for trustworthy data. With three distinct models of objectivity at stake, narrative cinema's own project of subject construction inevitably made itself felt.

Navigating in such mixed terrain would have proved difficult had it not been for the structuring of screenings, keynotes and panels along four major strands. These were: National Experience and Trans-National Trade, Uses of Cinema in Wartime, Framing The Great War, and finally The War on Television. Within these major divisions, identifiable topics clustered around production, signifying practices, cinema culture, reception, national attitudes and practices, propaganda, gender, and television. The effect of this structure was to more or less ensure

that each panel audience comprised a mixture of specialisms, and that the larger questions of the conference were identified and addressed. The interdisciplinary emphasis was reinforced at the conclusion of each day's proceedings with plenary sessions in which panel chairs summarized the presentations.

The plenary sessions provided the intellectual bite of the conference and a number of important topics emerged. These centered on issues of representation and reception, the question of fakes, definitions of propaganda, and future research projects. But by far the most challenging issues were the place of history and its ownership, and the real impact of the First World War on politics and cinema – the view from outside the cinema so to speak. The view from the long duree and the view from television – the flying howitzer shell and the bayonet – the least photogenic of WW1 weaponry.

The panel presentation and keynote addresses informed these topics. We were told how the desolate expanses of no-man's land, and the deprivation and tedium of the trenches were too uneventful for the film camera, and how narratives and film styles which were popular before 1914 were necessary to structure representations of the war. In effect, for all its risk and potential as a theater of heroism, the Great War made little impact on modes of storytelling. We were shown that in moves of frank opportunism, neutral countries invested in film production so as to break American control, but ultimately failed to alter the balance of power in the international market in canned goods.

It was proposed that the War might be viewed as a symptom of larger and more significant events in shaping the present. In the context of political history the outbreak of the Great War was no surprise, it was argued, but its self-sustaining momentum was a shock which shaped twentieth century avant-gardism. The urge to create became replaced by an urge to destroy. In essence that WW1 seemed to be a questionable periodisation for both cinema and political history.

The counter argument seemed to come from fighting at close quarters which returned us to the intimacies of the cinema auditorium. For although for technical reasons bayonet warfare could not be relied upon as a cinematic source – the film camera was not yet an instrument of remote sensing – it seems that in a close analysis of narratives, images, and audiences that the impact of the war was most apparent. The intensely moving melodramas of love and loss, and the documentary footage with its knowingly reconstructed events of the war satisfied the cinema audience which grew remarkably during the period.

What this suggested was that at the micro level of individual subjectivity and response, representations of the First World War in cinema were significant if not crucial in the work of making sense of something which, even to the high command, was difficult to comprehend. The enduring image of »Over the Top« from *BATTLE OF THE SOMME* and direct address to the camera had a mnemonic function which derived as much from its careful staging and contextualisation as its own history and inter-textual references. In this reading the question of

fakes seemed insignificant. Gore Vidal, among others, has suggested that »...much of what we take to be true is often seriously wrong, and the way that it is wrong is often more worthy of investigation than the often trivial disagreed upon facts of the case«, (*Screening History*, London, 1992, p. 154). After the screening of *BATTLE OF THE SOMME* I recounted to a friend how we had been shown the film at school. On reflection I realized that it was impossible, cinema, unlike war, was not approved of in my school. But the images were familiar, for throughout the 1950s we had endlessly rehearsed the finesses of trench warfare in the municipal flower gardens with the park keeper, (who could well have been a WW1 veteran), as the off screen enemy. Cinema's mnemonic effect, and its capacity to organize memory, it seems, extends beyond the represented actuality to include the conditions of viewing.

Fighting at close quarters also brings me to the »War on Television« strand of the conference. The final part of the Tuschinski tour was a visit to the projection booth. Behind the thinly disguised nineteenth century mechanisms stood a bank of video monitors. Video cameras were aimed down the projector beam to survey the screens and audiences of six auditoria – cinema's own Gulf war. The television debate was also invisible but ever present in the conference (which was videotaped throughout). The particular question it posed was – who owns history now that the price of access to the archives was set by television? If, for example, video surveillance had been in place in the Tuschinski in 1975 when feminist activist started a fire to register their objection to a programme, who, one wonders, would have the film rights? the cinema, the insurers or the protesters? In what sort of archive might the tape rest until it was sufficiently forgotten to need remembering? And at whose price? Or, in view of the excess of visual memories now that there are over 250 million camcorders in private hands, have we reached the end of visual history?

In this rapid rewinding of the conference tape it seems appropriate to conclude with an introduction. The XVth IAMHIST Conference on Film and the First World War was organized by Stichting Film en Wetenschap, and Film-en televisionwetenschap, Universiteit van Amsterdam and with generous support from Nederlands Filmmuseum who arranged extensive screenings. There were some 270+ participants, and over 80 speakers in half a dozen spaces each fully equipped with audio visual facilities. The logistics of the organization were daunting, military metaphors spring to mind. Although not on the scale of the washing 4000 soldiers blankets a day as we saw in Willy Mullens' magnificent *LEGER - EN VLOOTFILM*, it was, none the less, a demanding task which was expertly managed. IAMHIST, who sponsor *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, and whose aims include research in the development and the impact of audio visual media in mass communication, have set a rich agenda to sustain us until their next conference in Berlin in 1995.