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1986-10
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A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm OCTOBER 1986

Title: Documentary Film and the Visualistion of Nineteenth-Century American Social History.

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No. 201

DOCUMENTARY FILM AND THE VISUALIZATION OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN SOCIAL HISTORY

Joshua Brown

"Historical understanding is like a vision, or rather like an evocation of images." Johan Huizinga's insight taps the essence of historical inquiry. [1] Our understanding of the past is inextricably bound in images -- whether we acknowledge them or not, whether the images are accurate or not. From Emmanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" to Thomas Nast's William Marcy Tweed, our consciousness of the past is rife with imagery. Yet historical scholarship and teaching has remained resolutely textual. The image lies in the realm of the art historian or the museum curator, at times the cultural historian and archaeologist. It is particularly surprising that social historians, who pride themselves on their use of innovative techniques and sources, continue to neglect historical evidence so rich in information about past relationships, beliefs and behavior. [2]

This reluctance to treat history visually -- in particular social history -- might be predictable in the linear medium of the text through which most historians express themselves. [3] But the challenge to historical research and teaching that visualizing history poses has been eschewed by documentary filmmakers as well. This might seem a strange remark in the light of such recent documentaries as ROSIE THE RIVETER, WITH BABIES AND BANNERS, and MILES OF SMILES, YEARS OF STRUGGLE. But these and other fine social history documentaries are about subjects in the 20th Century, the era of the motion picture and surviving witnesses. Where there are no "on-camera" witnesses to be interviewed, where there is no extant film footage -- when we turn to the vast terrain of 19th Century (not to mention colonial and 18th Century) social history -- we find few

documentaries. Of the films that do broach earlier periods, their focus usually falls upon the broad brows of great men, upon familiar celebrated events, high art, genteel manners and technological wonders.

One reason for the narrow focus of these documentaries lies in the resources available. The panoply of archival evidence -- paintings, lithographs, engravings from the daily and weekly press, daguerrotypes and photographs, illustrations from fiction, depictions in reform publications, graphics in city and regional guides, and cartoons -- is, in a word, one-sided. The institutions and publications from which much of our visual record derives, before the era of half-tone photographic reproduction, expressed the beliefs, perceptions and values of some Americans and not others. [The means to reproduce the imagery of everyday life, let alone momentous events, was beyond the technological and financial capabilities of most working-class organizations and publications.] [4] Many events and circumstances pivotal to our understanding of relationships, actions and beliefs were simply not illustrated. Or, when they were, these depictions were mediated by the perceptions of the recorders whose "seeing" was governed by visual conventions and traditions that shaped their perceptions and limited the language of the images they created. A case in point is the iconography of urban poverty in the 19th Century, graphics that either sentimentalized or sensationalized the lives of the working poor. [5] In attempting to portray and evaluate the past, the historian and documentary filmmaker are repeatedly confronted by "silences" in the visual record or by images that are interpretations rather than objective accounts, versions of the past that, if considered uncritically, can distort our understanding of people and their behavior, as well as of conditions and events. [6]

The problematic nature of the visual record must not serve as the

excuse for ignoring the potential of pictures to convey information. Physical appearance possesses the power to change the dimension of historical understanding, to "restore presence," as Raymond Williams has put it, to the seemingly dead and faded past. [7] This quality should prompt filmmakers in particular to develop innovative methods to portray 19th Century history and overcome the obstacles built into the visualization of the past. The techniques, approaches and sources of social history that have expanded and enlivened historians' understanding in the last generation might serve as a model for filmmakers concerned with presenting history to a wider audience. However, with the exception of oral history in films on a 20th-Century subject and some use of material culture inspired by archaeology, this challenge has been largely unanswered. The availability (or lack of availability) of graphics [-- what visual evidence portrays and the style in which the portrayal is rendered --] often dictates the subject matter of a film, hence the emphasis on great men and events. Filmmakers treat graphics in a cursory fashion that only furthers to limit their ability to convey new history. They use pictures to depict events with no concern for the ideology and "ways of seeing" the images contain, for example the lack of distinction between pictorial expression and pictorial communication of fact that characterized graphic production in the era before the photograph dominated popular consciousness. [8]

The relationship between graphics and narrative in most documentaries also curtails the ability of film to widen historical understanding. Documentaries too often mimick the trappings of scholarship: the drama of events is divorced from the "objective" narrator's voice or the testimony of specialists. Pictures accompany the narration but they do not convey history directly: they remain sumptuous illustrations supplementing a

lecture, not elements in a dramatic story. Camerawork, pacing and editing that potentially can bring graphics to life, actively conveying history, are underutilized. Random placement of images reinforces the notion that the lives, actions and beliefs of "ordinary" people have little to do with the great decisions and moments of history. The failure to use graphics in an active, critical manner represents a missed opportunity to convey new historical knowledge in film terms. The range of historical subject matter made available for a popular audience is thus inhibited, reinforcing a predictable, standardized sense of American history. [The critique of social history -- that much of the scholarship fails to connect social life with larger political, economic and cultural trends -- is certainly evident in the presentation of film history.]

1877: THE GRAND ARMY OF STARVATION is an attempt to address the challenge social history poses to filmmaking. We set out to produce an accessible, inviting and sophisticated account of a significant yet little known event that both illuminates the nature of Gilded Age America and powerfully portrays the role working men and women played in the making of American history. [9] To achieve these goals, we transposed social history to the medium of film, not just in terms of content, but in the method of social history as well. In other words, people's behavior and beliefs are presented as central to understanding the event and their words and actions are the means by which the history is depicted.

Unlike many other 19th Century strikes and mass actions, the nationwide uprising in the summer of 1877 received wide press attention. Visual depictions and commentary on the strikes and violence appeared in periodicals and books during, immediately following, and for months after the events had taken place. The large number of graphics at our disposal,

however, could not obscure the fact that there is a sameness to many of these representations of the Great Uprising.

"To find something interesting," Flaubert said, "you...have to look at it long enough." By carefully examining these images, the strengths of 19th-Century visual conventions may be exploited to elicit information and narrative qualities. Through camerawork guided by the insights of social history, attitudes and actions can be pulled from the "thick description" of 19th Century graphics. The density of imagery in engravings permitted us to focus on details in an overall composition, delineating individual actions in relation to the context of an event. A graphic often presents a progression of actions simultaneously; through editing and pacing techniques we were able to show cause and effect, presenting very specific information while, at the same time, emphasizing the dramatic nature of the strikes.

Despite the number of extant graphics on the 1877 strikes, we had learned from earlier experience in slide-show and television production that black-line wood engravings (the standard medium of cheap 19th-Century newspaper and book reproduction) often appeared archaic, static and murky to audiences accustomed to the photographic and moving image. We therefore tinted the pictures in the film to bring out details and add dimensionality to the drawings. The colors and intensities we chose were those of the tabloid press of the period and shortly after -- the hues of the chromolithography in Puck and in the following generation's color supplements -- accenting the drama of the Great Uprising's story. [10] At times components in a picture were animated in a limited way to draw attention to significant moments in the strike.

Enhancing the dramatic and narrative strengths of contemporary graphics must be balanced with preserving what Natalie Zemon Davis has

termed "the pastness of the past." At times the viewer must be reminded that images were interpretations mediated by historically-specific ideologies, perceptions and the very process of 19th Century printing (where the artist's sketch -- whether drawn at the scene or not -- was later reinterpreted and editorialized by an engraver). [11] Therefore, on occasion graphics were retouched and, through animation, juxtaposed to the original to indicate their problematic nature as evidence.

Through first-person accounts such as interviews, diaries, and hearings, social history has revolutionized the way we have thought about the relationship of people's lives to the circumstances surrounding them. Using such sources, we filmed actors dressed in period costume to present the observations of participants. Often the camera first closes in upon a person in a graphic accompanied by voice-over narration, then a cut is made to the actor on-camera seated in a similar pose, who continues the testimony. In this manner, the anonymity of figures in pictures is reduced, indicating, for example, that a seemingly amorphous group of figures in a drawing was actually composed of individuals much like the viewer who had ideas and who participated in making the history portrayed. In the context of 1877, such a technique unshrouds the motivations of strikers who otherwise seem, in the graphics of the events, to be lost in chaotic, mindless violence. These statements, in combination with other voice-overs, are integrated with James Earl Jones' narration. The insights of participants fill out the narrator's broader sweep; they are not isolated from the history of which they were a part.

Other techniques are more familiar to the documentary medium. For example, maps were animated to give a sense of process and change, and political cartoons were interspersed throughout the film, making tangible

the attitudes of contemporaries toward the issues of monopoly, power and protest. [12] Finally, a full soundtrack was constructed, composed of background dialogue, sound effects and music based on historical evidence, to expand the visuals' explanatory power, suggest greater complexity, and to make the history of the Great Uprising more immediate to the audience.

In the year since we completed 1877, what we did not fully achieve becomes increasingly apparent. The use of an on-screen host might have served to direct the viewer's attention and explain our intentions at the same time as it relieved the rush of imagery. Historical locations and material artifacts, elements used with great success in other documentaries, might have helped tie the past to the present more concretely. More use could have been made of metaphor, in pictures and objects, of symbols not directly related to the circumstances of the strike. For example, shots of the icons of progress and unity in the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition could have served as a counterpoint to the strikes' causes and objectives. This procedure too often results in loving shots of predictable or hackneyed icons but, if used with historical sensitivity and a dose of nuance and irony, metaphor can help immeasurably to make concepts tangible.

Many of these lapses were based on a budget limited to $80,000 -- a small amount of money for a union-made film -- but other decisions about the inclusion and exclusion of information were based on pedagogical considerations. There is only so much that can be coherently included in a 30-minute film designed for use in community-college classrooms and other educational settings. We addressed certain subjects -- such as the panoply of opinion about the railroad as exhibited in cartoons, or the "ways of seeing" depicting strikers and the poor -- in a manner that is hardly comprehensive but which was designed to highlight certain information for

the viewer. Our process of selection was dictated by the length of the film, but also by the concern that our story of 1877 not appear to be the last word on the subject. Presenting a coherent, complex view of the past must be weighed against creating a false impression of a seamless totality, the illusion of telling all. [13] A historical documentary must balance the quantitative goal of presenting names, dates and facts with a qualitative one which stimulates intellectual curiosity, raises questions and prods further investigation. A compendium of names, dates and facts may satisfy the historian's penchant for inclusiveness, but our aim was to foster the power of social history to provide durable insights into the reasons for actions and ideas, and to present the past as a dynamic process moved, in part, by the people who lived in the time.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting, December 1985. My observations are the product of five years of intensive collaboration with colleagues on the American Social History Project. In particular, Steve Brier, Kate Pfordresher and Bret Eynon contributed the lessons of their experiences in transposing social history to film.

[1] J.H. Huizinga, "My Path to History," Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century and Other Essays (London, 1968)), 269.

[2] Raphael Samuel, "Editorial Introduction: Art, Politics, and Ideology," History Workshop Journal 6 (Autumn, 1978), 101-106; Neil Harris, "Iconography and Intellectual History: The Half-Tone Effect" in John Higham and Paul K. Conkins, eds., New Directions in American Intellectual History (Baltimore, 1979), 196-211. Of course, the contemporary American textbook is literally redolent with imagery. However, historians rarely play a part in the selection and captioning of such illustrations. In these lavishly-illustrated books, Frances FitzGerald archly comments, "American history is not dull any longer; it is a sensuous experience." But it is one, she adds, that is less critical than "polymorphous-perverse." (America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century [Boston, 1979], 15-16).

[3] Even when visual evidence is available to illuminate a historical argument, it is often neglected. A recent example, directly relevant to our concerns, is The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890 (NY, 1985), ch. 19, in which Richard Slotkin cogently argues that the definition of "savagery" evolved to depict both Indians and workers as enemies of civilization after the 1876 Battle

of Little Big Horn and the 1877 railroad strike. His extended argument is borne out in one startling cartoon in the [DATE] issue of the New York Daily Graphic. Slotkin quotes extensively from the Daily Graphic but does not refer to nor display the image.

[4] Exceptions that prove the rule are some of the lithography and radical plebeian publications of the Jacksonian Era (e.g., The National Police Gazette before its more sumptuous, bourgeois phase) and the 1870s-80s Irish World. See Raymond Williams, Culture, (Glasgow?, 1981), 99: Williams' discussion of the asymmetry in relations between dominant and subordinated cultures, although about relations and their implications in writing, sheds light on the social relations in the production of 19th Century American popular art. Williams' comments, along with my glancing assessment of 19th Century cultural production, must be considered in the context of recent new work on the rise of a commercial culture which assesses the often multi-layered and contradictory components of its expression (see, as just three examples, William R. Taylor, "The Launching of a Commercial Culture: New York City, 1860-1930" [unpublished ms.], Peter Buckley, "To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860" [PhD., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1984], and Susan G. Davis, Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia [Philadelphia, 1986]).

[5] John Berger, Ways of Seeing (New York, 1972); T.J. Clark, The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851 (Princeton, DATE); Clark, The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers (New York, 1984). Peter Bacon Hales, Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839-1915 (Philadelphia, 1984), 182-192, on the imagery of the poor (before Riis); Patricia Hills, "The Fine Arts in America: Images of Labor from 1800 to 1950" in Robert Wieble, ed., Essays from the Lowell Conference on Industrial History, 1982 and 1983: The Arts and Industrialism; The Industrial City (North Andover, 1985), 120-164, on high art and the iconography of work; L. Perry Curtis, Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature (Washington, DC, 1971) on ethnic and racial stereotypes. For a broader notion of stereotype, see E.H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation (Princeton, 1969; 1st ed., 1960), ch. 2. (Gombrich compares drawings and photographs of crowds, denoting the limitations imposed on the artist by his time -- as well as talent -- through the circumscribed number of gestures and expressions drawn [86, 87]).

[6] The impact on the objects of these depictions is hard to discern. There is an unspoken tendency in the work of some cultural historians to solder the adjective "popular" to the middle-class audience that greeted some of these productions: e.g., Peter C. Marzio, The Democratic Art: Pictures for a 19th Century America (NY, 1980), on chromolithography's audience, and Hales, Silver Cities on the stereograph's appeal (PAGE?). Perhaps the most telling example of the effect of visual "silence" on the consciousness of a people can be found in Frederick Douglass' remarks concerning racist depictions of Afro-Americans (quoted in Marzio, The Democratic Art, 104). "Organic" working-class or "folk" art cannot be viewed as being produced in a historical vacuum; these works -- from artisanal banners to filigreed documents -- were also mediated by ideology and conventions and must be analyzed as such (Samuel, "Editorial Introduction," 104-105, and following articles).

[7] Williams, Culture, 111.

[8] Estelle Jussim, Visual Communication and the Graphic Arts: Photographic Technologies in the Nineteenth Century (NY & London, 1974, 1983), 5, 305-306.

[9] The Great Uprising has played a paradoxical role in American culture and consciousness. Although scholarship on the strikes and their circumstances has expanded in the last decade, broadening from Robert Bruce's seminal study to include general and local investigations such as the work of Philip Foner, Richard Schneirov, David Roediger, Nicholas Salvatore, Marianne Debouzey and Richard Slotkin, many textbooks and general histories still treat 1877 as a curiosity with only passing relevance to Gilded Age society, economy and culture. Although it can be safely said that public knowledge of the Great Uprising is slight, the railroad strikes have remained a standby in popular fiction, from John Hay's The Bread-Winners (1884) to Thomas Fleming's Love and War (1985).

[10] Richard Marschall, "The Comic Strip: The Golden Age: Origins and Early Masters" in John Carlin and Sheena Wagstaff, eds., The Comic Art Show: Cartoons in Painting and Popular Culture (New York, 1983); Dennis Gifford, The International Book of Comics (New York, 1984), 9; Pierre Couperie, et al., A History of the Comic Strip (New York, 1968), 19. [FIND CITATIONS PUCK AND NY GRAPHIC BKS]

[11] Jussim, Visual Communication and the Graphic Arts, [PAGE].

[12] Thomas Milton Kemnitz, "The Cartoon As a Historical Source," Journal of Interdisciplinary History IV (Summer, 1973), 81-93.

[13] Critique of totality: Frederic Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca, 1981), 50-57[?]. On danger of creating a "harmonious whole," Terry Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction (Minneapolis, 1983), 79-82 (as related to literary reception theory).