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Iterating Archival Footage and the Memory of War

Julia Noordegraaf, University of Amsterdam

Keywords: Archive, Art, Aernout Mik, Memory, War

In this article I focus on the archive as a specific site of memory, in particular the audiovisual archive. I investigate the use of audiovisual archival records as sources for remembering war, specifically the war in the former Yugoslavia (1991-1995). I do so by discussing one particular case study, the two-channel video installation *Raw Footage* (2006) by the Dutch artist Aernout Mik. In this work, Mik presents a selection of unused, unedited news footage from the archives of press agencies Reuters and ITN – literally "raw footage." Mik selected, compiled and staged this material in an installation that present us with a different perspective on that conflict, a view on the war in the former Yugoslavia that we literally have not seen before. My discussion of this example aims to show that the reuse of audiovisual archival material in artistic work can be a means to move the public memory of war in new and unexpected directions. By extension, I argue that keeping track of such iterations of archival footage is crucial for a proper understanding of the different ways in which we remember the past.[1]

Performing the Archive

Mik's exploration and use of the archival material of Reuters and ITN is part of a wider interest by artists in the archive, both in its concrete manifestation as a collection of audiovisual documents of the past and in its ontological dimension, indicating social and cultural processes of remembering and forgetting. Many contemporary artists have explored collections of audiovisual heritage and reused the footage in compilation films and in film and video installations.[2] The iteration of archival footage from the archive to the artwork entails a shift in meaning: in their new, manipulated context – exposing hidden or previously unnoticed aspects of the footage – the images can reshape our memory of the past documented in those images. As visual artist Fiona Tan puts it: "The recycling of film fragments or photos breathes new life into the images; they are liberated from the harness of their original context. Recycling makes it possible to see images in a new way. Recycling creates new images. Editing as a window cleaner."[3]

It is no coincidence that this "archival impulse"[4] in art occurs at a time where digitization makes unprecedented amounts of documents of the past available in an eternal, online presence.[5] On the one hand, the widespread implementation of digital technology has caused a renewed interest in analogue media, as in artist's installations that investigate the ontology of analogue cinema.[6] Besides, the wide-scale implementation of digital technology has greatly affected the collection, description, preservation and accessibility of audiovisual

heritage. For example, in the broadcasting archive the digitization of the entire working process has moved the role of the archivist from the end of the production chain – collecting content right after circulation – to the centre of the digital production environment, making decision about archivable content from a virtual and dynamic collection of media objects from which editors "publish" on different platforms and screens. As a consequence, the reality of the contemporary audiovisual archive has become extremely *dynamic*: as an integral part of the digital workflow the process of archiving no longer has one clear location and takes place throughout all phases of the production process.[7]

The dynamism of contemporary archival practice is also reflected in the theoretical conception of archiving as a *process*. This conception is part of what literary scholars Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney describe as "a larger shift of attention within cultural studies from products to processes, from a focus on discrete cultural artefacts to an interest in the way those artefacts circulate and interact with their environment."[8] In the case of archives this processual approach is based on the idea that the meaning of archival records is located in their *use*, including their use at the various stages of the archival process itself. As archival scholar Eric Ketelaar has argued, archival records have performative power, in that they incite actions: "Records are not only evidence, they communicate, and through communication they can have performative power, they can accomplish something, make a difference in status before and after."[9] These activations or performances of archival records add meaning to them: "Each activation adds a branch to what I have called the semantic genealogy of the record and the archive."[10] This activation of the record occurs at the moment of use – each activation adds new layers of meaning to it. As such, these activations influence the evidentiary status of archival records as documents for remembering the past.

As Claire Waterton points out, using the concept of performativity allows for a view on the archive as a technology "that constitutes not only a record of our representations of the world, but as an active and iterative making of the world and of entities and selves within it."[11] The purpose of the following analysis of *Raw Footage* is to investigate how this performance of archival records – their iteration through various contexts – affects the way we remember war. In a more general sense, this analysis aims to investigate how the performance of archival records can contribute to a dynamic conception of memory.

Aernout Mik

Aernout Mik (born in 1962) is a Dutch artist best known for his staged, video-based works, that are projected in installations that have a clear, sculptural presence in space. He usually films groups of actors in a space that we recognize as relating to reality – a parliament, a trade floor, a supermarket – but that also clearly looks like a stage set. The action appears similarly staged and somewhat puzzling, especially since most of his works contain action and movement in the images but do not have a soundtrack. These films are projected on multiple screens that that are installed in a particular relation to the space.[12]

Thematically, the works refer to 'snippets' of reality – the financial crisis, deportation, or a crisis in parliament, as in the multi-channel installation *Vacuum Room* (2005). Yet the works are abstract enough to keep this relation with reality open and ambiguous. In that sense, his works can also be relevant for different actualities. As Mik himself explains in a video on the occasion of his solo show at MoMA in 2009: "Many of my pieces relate to different political or social events but they are not direct images of it – there's a short moment, a short flash that brings in images that you recognize but cannot really place."[13]

A good example is the work *Middlemen* (2001), in which we see a stock market floor or commodity exchange peopled with workers who look anxious and move erratically in the room which is filled with scattered papers. The single-channel video installation was completed in the Summer of 2001, just before the attacks on the Twin Towers, but was read anew in the light of the financial crisis that followed 9/11. Exhibited in New York in 2009, as a centrepiece of Mik's solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, the work took on yet another meaning, now being connected to the 2008 financial crisis.[14]

Raw Footage

In his two-channel video installation *Raw Footage* (2006), Mik presents two compilations of unedited news footage on the Bosnian war, projected side by side on two rectangular screens. It concerns footage that has not been shown on television because of its mundane, unspectacular character. We see soldiers waiting, eating, or firing guns at unseen targets while cracking jokes in front of the camera. Other sequences show how even in the circumstances of war people continue their lives as usual: civilians working the land against a backdrop of burning houses, or people walking the street, seemingly unaffected by an air-raid warning.

The installation consists of two different compilation films. Each consists of short sequences or "chapters" that are distinguished from one another by a few seconds of black and that comprise images with similar content, such as various shots of tractors driving down the road against a backdrop of smoke, seemingly caused by bomb attacks. Most of the time the projections run simultaneously, but sometimes they alternate, starting with an image on the left side, which is later joined by similar images on the right side, or vice versa. The two projections show sequences with similar images, such as those of farmers working the land or driving tractors. This is a form of visual rhyming, where an image on the left is "mirrored" on the right side or the other way around. On other occasions the effect is that of contrast, such as in the sequences with the different groups of soldiers where the double projection appears to represent the two conflicting parties, suggesting the representation of two sides of the same conflict. In another sequence, grown-up soldiers on the one side are contrasted with children playing soldiers with real guns on the other.

What do the images in this work document, exactly? What are they evidence of? Besides their content, the use of this footage in Mik's installation focuses our attention to the dimension of *forgetting* that is part and parcel of contemporary media culture, as of the archive.[15] In this case, the material was kept, but not really *remembered* – it only becomes part of our memory of the war in the former Yugoslavia at the moment it is presented in a public setting. The work "complements" – in a modest way – the audiovisual memory of the Bosnian war, by showing its "unspectacular" character (boredom, the need to clean and repair military equipment, the clumsiness involved in removing corpses from a river bank, etc.) As such, this form of reuse constructs a different image of war.

Also, the work plays with the boundaries between reality and fiction. The documentary images are "real" in the sense that they were shot during the war, but often look and feel quite absurd (as the shot of a line-up of men joined by one white sheep). When I saw this work in 2006 in Utrecht, the Netherlands, it was presented in parallel with the installation *Scapegoats*.[16] This is a work that is more characteristic for Mik's oeuvre: we see a stage set – a large, unspecified sports arena – in which groups of people on beds are supervised by uniformed guards, and in which acts are performed along a non-explicit scenario. This

fictional work, when installed parallel to *Raw Footage*, works to intensify the documentary images used in the latter work. In a way, it shows a reality that the documentary images used for *Raw Footage* do not show – that of the day-to-day affairs in a refugee camp, or a similar place of holding. One can see this as an example of *imagining history* – using invention and fabulation to achieve a more realistic impression of reality.

As has been argued many times, amongst others by Mary-Ann Doane in her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, the realistic impression of cinema – or, by extension, any moving image – heavily depends on manipulation and illusion: the greater the manipulation and illusion, the more *real* these moving images appear to be.[17] This characteristics helps us to understand the effect of Mik's works. His tactic often is to omit certain acts or gestures that are crucial for understanding the overall action. Or he leaves out certain expected manipulations of audiovisual content, such as an explanatory voice-over, the alterations of total shots and close-ups, or the move from one camera position to the next. In that sense, he plays with the way in which film and television mediate our perception of social and political reality. The omission of certain cuts and the inherent changes in viewpoint make us aware of what we normally expect from audiovisual media, and thus how strongly constructed their representation of reality are. Besides, the inclusion of references to specific social or political events triggers us to find a connection to that past or present reality. At the same time, the omission of certain crucial explanatory acts, gestures or commentary prevents us from forming a direct, uncritical interpretation of the events hinted at. The effect is that the viewer starts to notice all kinds of details; your eye is drawn to aspects of the image that you normally do not notice.

Moving the Memory of War

In his text "Our Balkanist Gaze," film scholar Thomas Elsaesser points out that most media productions about the war in the former Yugoslavia construct the people that lived through that war as victims; in that sense the Western spectator remains *at a safe distance* and can take upon him/herself the – fictional – role of the benefactor.[18] Here, then, the formal conventions of the news reports and documentaries on TV function to create a distance between on the one hand the event and its victims, and the empowered spectator on the other: it was a war that took place somewhere else, and affected other people. And even in the case of the failure of Dutchbat in Srebrenica the media coverage focused very much on the Dutch side of things, keeping the distance to the region in which the genocide took place.

How does *Raw Footage* "move" these mainstream mediated memories of the Bosnian war? In order to answer this question I refer to Patricia Pisters' ideas on the *neuro-image*.

In her new book *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Filmphilosophy for Digital Screen Culture*, film scholar Patricia Pisters argues that watching moving images on a screen has a direct effect on the spectator, at a neurological level.[19] This neurological approach to cinema spectatorship is inspired by philosopher Gilles Deleuze's dictum "the brain is the screen." In her book, Pisters refers to research from the field of neuroscience on mirror-neurons. Mirror-neurons play an important role in letting people develop affective relations with others. When we see someone crying, the parts of our brain involved in that physical action and the related emotions will also become active – on a neurological level we simulate the process that take's place in the crier's brain. As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has argued in *Looking for Spinoza*, this primary, physical process, that takes place both in the brain of the crier and that of the observer, is followed by a connection to the more conscious side of emotions – in this

example, feelings of sadness.[20] Such activation of mirror-neurons is not limited to "live" settings: experiments have demonstrated that watching actions on film or video has the same effect. Consequently, Pisters argues that the power of images is more direct than we have ever conceived before: watching images on a screen has a *direct* and *embodied* effect in our brains. As she concludes: "It is now possible to speak of spectatorship in terms of becoming: we quite literally become what we see, at least on a neurological level. […] We are truly affected, touched by what we see."[21]

Pisters' conception of spectatorship in these neurological terms provides an interesting perspective on Mik's *Raw Footage*. What this installation shares with Mik's other work, is the emphasis on certain gestures, movements and expressions of emotion that are not embedded in a clearly delineated narrative or context. Yet, in spite of the absence of a clear frame of reference, or exactly *because* of the lack of this explanatory framework, we do develop affection for the protagonists of his films. Quite literally we simulate their emotions in our own bodies – at least on a neurological level. This makes it impossible to maintain the distance that characterizes mainstream media representations of this war.

Also, one can argue that Mik's choice among the footage at Reuters and ITN focuses on the ways in which people and animals survive in the extreme conditions of a civil war. Many shots emphasize that life goes on: people scurry the streets while snipers fire overhead, farmers work their land while houses are burning in the background, animals find their way amidst the debris. By emphasizing these scenes, *Raw Footage* portrays the people in the region as *survivors*, allowing them a different role in the mediated memory of the conflict, as active agents rather than passive victims.[22] In Deleuzian terms, the work is thus "creating a people:" "When a people is created, it's through its own resources, but in a way that links up with something in art […] or links up art to what it lacked […] it's […] a question of a 'fabulation' in which a people and art both share."[23]

In Deleuze's view, artworks are "war machines" that can operate as "circuit breakers" by occupying space and time, or inventing new space-times.[24] For Deleuze, a crucial aspect of this reconfiguration of space and time is that it is not designed to communicate a clear message: "Creating has always been something different from communicating. The key thing may be to create vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers, so we can elude control."[25] In the case of Mik's installation, the circuit that is broken is that of the mediated memory of the war in the former Yugoslavia: the memory of the past as created by the mainstream media representations of it. By highlighting the spaces, moments and actions that do not fit the mainstream memory of the war, and presenting them in a form that does not construct a clear narrative but that affects us directly, via our brains, *Raw Footage* "breaks the circuit" of this mainstream memory and invites a new, affective engagement with the events documented in this footage.

Deleuze's philosophy has often been criticized as being non-political, lacking the agency that political action requires. As Patricia Pisters indicates, the basic charges are that Deleuze's critique on representation and ideology seems to prohibit any contact with political reality and that his (and Guattari's) philosophy leaves no room for specific voices of others.[26] Pisters convincingly argues, though, that Deleuze's conception of "the virtual" is closely connected to the real world:

> *In a Deleuzian system of thought it is wrong to see the virtual as "out of this world" – the virtual is an immanent force that has to be taken into account in* this *world. The consequence of this circulation between the virtual and the actual is that the virtual is also real (albeit on a*

more invisible level – in our minds, in memories, in fantasy/imagination, in the invisible layers of images and culture).[27]

In this way, as I have argued above with regards to the parallel exhibition of *Raw Footage* and *Scapegoats*, virtual images can emphasize the socio-political and historical reality that surrounds the actual ones. In the words of Pisters: "It is not a matter of reality being in a limbo, but a matter of the virtuality surrounding the actual images that make them ever more powerful and infuse the images with socio-political and historical layers."[28]

The political dimension of artworks like *Raw Footage* is also located in their style. For Deleuze, style as politics is marked by a mixing up of codes into something new and uncodeable.[29] It is precisely because of the escaping of established media codes – the explanatory voice-over or soundtrack, the alteration of close-ups and total shots, a clear narrative – that Mik's work has political relevance.

Conclusion

To conclude, how are we to capture these moves in the memory of war? How can make them productive for future processes and practices of remembrance?

As any type of reuse, the use of news footage in Mik's installation adds new layers of meaning to those images. As Elizabeth Edwards points out in her book *Raw Histories*, an archival document's meaning, whether photograph or audiovisual record, does not so much depend on what it is *of*, but in which contexts it is made, distributed, kept and seen.[30] In that sense, all uses of archival material, including that of the archival process, add new layers of meaning to the record and thus influence what it testifies of.

I think we should consider the afterlife of archival documents as part and parcel of the archival process, rethinking archives not as stable sites of memory but as performative processes that inform *remembrance*. We should find ways to document the various iterations of archival footage, their lifecycle of uses. Only then can we keep track of what they have come to mean, including the circuit breaking actions on the small scale of artistic work. In that way, we will do justice to the fact that the memory of war is never stable and complete, but dynamic and changing, and create room within the dominant discourse for the artistic circuit breakers that encourage us to critically reflect on the process of remembering war.

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[1] This research is a first attempt to articulate the mechanism through which the archival footage used in *Raw Footage* establishes a connection between real historical events, the media that document and mediate those events, the settings in which the material is reused and the bodies and minds of the spectators in which these images and sounds mingle with previously established memories of the (mediated) events. These ideas will be further developed in my forthcoming book *Performing the Archive: Tracing Audiovisual Heritage in the Digital Age*.

[2] See, amongst others, Charles Merewether (ed.), *The Archive*, Whitechapel/MIT Press, London/Cambridge, MA, 2006, Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon (eds.), *Ghosting: The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artist's Film and Video*, Picture This Moving Image, Bristol, UK, 2006, Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, International Center of Photography/Steidl, New York/Göttingen, 2008

and Christa Blümlinger, *Kino aus zweiter Hand: Zur Ästhetik materieller Aneignung im Film und in der Medienkunst*, Vorwerk 8, Berlin, 2009.

[3] Fiona Tan, *Kingdom of Shadows*, in Mariska van den Berg and Gabriele Franziska Götz (eds.), *Scenario: Fiona Tan*, Van den Berg & Wallroth/NAi Publishers, Amsterdam/Rotterdam, 2000, p. 127. Elsewhere I have discussed Tan's use of colonial footage as a specific technology of memory: Julia Noordegraaf, *Facing Forward with Found Footage: Displacing Colonial Footage in* Mother Dao *and the Work of Fiona Tan*, in Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (eds.), *Technologies of Memory in the Arts*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2009, pp. 172-187.

[4] Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, no. 110, 2004, pp. 3-22.

[5] Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Public Culture* vol. 12, no. 1, 2000, pp. 21-38.

[6] See Matilde Nardelli, "Moving Pictures: Cinema and Its Obsolescence in Contemporary Art," *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 8, nr. 3, 2009, pp. 243-264.

[7] For a detailed analysis of the effect of digitization on broadcasting archives and television history, see Julia Noordegraaf, "Who Knows Television? Online Access and the Gatekeepers of Knowledge," *Critical Studies in Television: Scholarly Studies in Small Screen Fictions, Television Archives: Accessing TV History* (edited by Lez Cooke and Robin Nelson), vol. 5, no. 2, 2010, pp. 1-19.

[8] Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2009, p. 3.

[9] Eric Ketelaar, "The Performative Power of Records," unpublished paper, presented in Japan, 2009, p. 10.

[10] Idem, p. 7. See Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meaning of Archives." *Archival Science*, vol. 2, no.1, 2001, pp. 131-141.

[11] Claire Waterton, "Exerimenting with the Archive: STS-ers As Analysts and Co-constructors of Databases and Other Archival Forms.' *Science, Technology, & Human Values* vol. 35, no. 5, 2010, p. 651.

[12] See Libby Hruska (ed.), *Aernout Mik*. Catalogue of exhibition with the same title, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 6 May-27 July 2009. Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009.

[13] "Aernout Mik discusses his exhibition at MoMA." *YouTube*, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmnIKihcBHw, last visit on 8 August 2011.

[14] Ken Johnson in a review of the show describes the work as "eerily prophetic." Ken Johnson, "Video Spectacles, Imagined or, in One Case, Real," *New York Times*, 21 May 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/22/arts/design/22mik.html, last visit on 9 August 2011.

[15] See Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," cit., and Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1998 [1995], 25-31.

[16] *Raw Footage/Scapegoats*, solo exhibition by Arnout Mik at BAK (Basis voor Aktuele Kunst), Utrecht, the Netherlands, 1 October-24 December 2006.

[17] Mary-Anne Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002, p. 213.

[18] Thomas Elsaesser, *Our Balkanist Gaze: About Memory's No Man's Land*, in Id., *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2005, p. 358-359.

[19] Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Filmphilosophy for Digital Screen Culture*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, forthcoming.

[20] Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, Harcourt, Orlando, FL, 2003.

[21] Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Filmphilosophy for Digital Screen Culture*, cit., chapter 3.

[22] See Thomas Elsaesser, *Our Balkanist Gaze: About Memory's No Man's Land*, cit., p. 366.

[23] Gilles Deleuze, *Control and Becoming*, in Id., *Negotiations 1972-1990*, translated by Martin Joughin, Columbia University Press, New York, 1995, p. 174. See also Patricia Pisters, *Violence and Laughter: Paradoxes of Nomadic Thought in Postcolonial Cinema*, in Simone Bignall and Paul Patton (eds.), *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2010, p. 208.

[24] Gilles Deleuze, *Control and Becoming*, cit., p. 172.

[25] Idem, p. 175.

[26] Patricia Pisters, *Violence and Laughter: Paradoxes of Nomadic Thought in Postcolonial Cinema*, cit., p. 202.

[27] Idem, p. 204.

[28] Idem, p. 206.

[29] Idem, p. 211.

[30] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, Berg, Oxford, 2001, p. 88.