

DOCUMENTING VIETNAM: TELEVISION WAR AND REPRESENTATION OF PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE

MICHAEL BARCHET

Institut für Amerikastudien, Frankfurt

«No man can act before the camera in the face of death». This statement by Ernest Hemingway does not only claim authority for the images from the Spanish Civil war of Joris Ivens' *Spanish Earth* (1937). The decidedly dry and restrained diction of Hemingway's performance as author and speaker of this *Voice of God* was not only much admired for its difference to contemporary newsreel and documentary practice when the film was released in the US; its very factual mode of presentation also transports Hemingway's assertions to a level of universal and pragmatic truth about an essential affinity of documentary modes of representation to the *mise en scene* of military combat. The battle field as pro-filmic realm implies situations where the filmed subject's control over his image is suspended, since the necessity to deal with existential threats of harm, injury and ultimately death, does not leave much room to worry about being recorded on film. The presence of the camera in the world of the filmed subject is minimised to a degree that inflects an illusionary but nevertheless very powerful notion of direct access of camera and spectator to an universe of danger, transgression and death, as it is experienced and endured by its inhabitants. Thus, images derived from the battle field promise insight into the conditions of human existence beyond its social construction, since the suspension of social norms and the ultimate existential transgression of violent death are intrinsic to the «Real» of war as pro-filmic situation.

Documentary images and sounds from the battlefields furthermore foreground claims to an indexical link between aesthetic representation and represented historical reality. The «having been there» of the camera remains at the foreground of the filmic text, as object and source of spectacle, and as vehicle of an ambivalent kind of experience decidedly surrogate. Few filmic forms address their viewers so frequently and forcefully with the contradictions and paradoxes of indexical reference as war documentaries do precisely because their scenarios of «death, murder and bereavement» are simultaneously mediations of terrifying actual physical annihilation, violence and moaning on the one hand and reassurance that cinema and Television by virtue of their technical apparatus and aesthetic conventions keep us physically save and ultimately protected in modes of aesthetic consumption.

These dispositions of presence and distance, of danger and protection and above all of transgression and control are the subjects of this paper. To concentrate in this context on the construction of physical presence under the conditions of aesthetic mediation, means to define the stylistic, ideological claims and the aesthetic power of documentary representations of war as allegorical space for the inquiry into forms, concepts and ideologies of documentary authenticity as analytic and theoretical issues.

Speaking in these terms of the 1960s in the USA means certainly to speak of the experience of the Vietnam War within American society. Considering the immense geographical and unmeasurable cultural distances that «kept the war in Vietnam from its production in the USA»¹, it is mediation as prerequisite of experience, that renders the issue of Vietnam not only inseparable from the issue of its representation but also locates 'Vietnam' as an allegory on the conditions of mediating transgression.

Leaving aside for the moment the still raging debates about media influence of the outcome of the war², this first of all requires a look at the structures and strategies of constructing filmic access to experiences that were - at least potentially - incompatible and disruptive to the rituals of self-recognition within the flow of mediating social reality in American Media; implied are notions of containment as prerequisite of transgression. The site of this disposition within the American discourse of representing Vietnam is invariably the American Soldier. The G.I.'s experience of the war, always weightier and more authoritative than ours and so circumscribing any experience we can have, is proposed as the moment of authenticity and knowledge - of authenticity as knowledge - upon which the war can be evaluated and validated, just as his sacrifice is the war's justification, the proof of its virtue³.

Beyond the G.I. as source for the countless tales of war told in American Television from 1964 on, and the veteran as character of (non-fiction) «novels of education»⁴ it is indeed the filmic observation of his rites and suffering, the gaze on his injured, crippled or dead body, where the mediation of the Vietnam war locates its claim for privileged authenticity via transgression, as well as anxiously containing relief by means of reducing the Vietnam War to the eternally tragic fate of individuals being sacrificed. This implies on the one hand that perspectives of political and social analysis of the USA's reason to be in Vietnam, was to a large degree left to propagandistic efforts like the Defence Department's very own *Why Vietnam?* (1965). It also means that the Asiatic experience of the war is screened out as mere background - little more than incidental. The G.I. in combat as signifier and vehicle of an authentic experience is however also significant for the aesthetic and ideological structure of that crucial instance of mediation as it is circumscribed by 'the camera.'

It is a camera that is subjugated under the same circumstances of physical danger, that facilitates its illusionary absence for its subjects. Much as «no man can act for the camera in the face of death» no cameraman can act as artist, as *metteur en scene* in the face of a pro-filmic situation that threatens not only the people he films but also his very own physical survival.

The conditions and logistics of modern warfare, especially the conditions of the Vietnam battlefields prohibit the use of tripods let alone dollies or cranes. The camera is «handheld» which means - if you think of it in terms of the pragmatic of shooting film - it becomes part of the cameraman's body. All camera movements directly refer to movements of this body; be it walking, running or taking cover. This physical connection show this element of filmic perception in an ensemble of stylistic markers: The trembling of the image in the gate due to the impact of explosions, shakily defined frames during «tracking shots,» frequent passages from focussed to out-of-focus materials, sudden pans, jumpy zooms, obstructions of the field of vision by objects, «incorrect» adjustments of the parameters of exposure and «wrong» balances of colour. The pro-filmic situation of the battlefield defies attempts to achieve control over image composition or the technical parameters of filmic recording. These «flaws» and imperfections of the image serve as stylistic markers for an essential kind of authenticity. They reflect a camera as extension of a body; a body that is controlled by the fear of being damaged or destroyed, rather than being absorbed in the concerns of artistic production.

It is this double condition of total subjugation under the conditions of the pro-filmic - of the filmed subjects and of the instance of recording - the imminent danger of losing control and the struggle to regain it, that circumscribes documentary stylistic of authenticity. These stylistic structures exceed the realm of combat footage proper and can be recognised in documentary approaches like Direct Cinema (a.k.a. Cinema Verite) that developed far from Vietnam during the 60s in the US and elsewhere.

To base what I am talking about on specific filmic material, I am going to show a short excerpt from **Frontline**, an Australian film made by David Bradbury in 1979. The film uses a variety of filmic materials, among them interviews with and footage shot by the war cameramen Neil Davis in Vietnam and Cambodia, which was marketed at the time by a British Newsagency. The film's argument as a whole revolves around the somewhat problematic lines between the war correspondent as heroic figure and the construction of an «Asiatic perspective» of the Vietnam conflict; it implies a critique of US military strategy as well as a somewhat ironic statement about the representation of Vietnam in American media. The context within which I want to place this material is that of a demonstration of the notion of physical camera style I have been talking about.

Even though **Frontline** replaces American with Vietnamese soldiers, it is the body of the warrior where the fundamental «truth of war» is inscribed and on display for the spectator; extended and valorised is the talking head of the normal invisible warrior with the camera who tells his episodes of war from the magical perspective of the survivor. The aesthetics of the Camera with a body as the site of privileged authenticity I tried to spell out should be obvious. They are reinforced by the «electrifying moment» of a death happening before the camera; physical annihilation as threat and actuality thus become markers of documentary authenticity, since the ultimate emotional paradox between indexical reference to the Real and the physical distance of reception is made spectacularly clear⁵.

Up to this point I have done little more than spell out some of the elements that transport documentaries of military combat's claim for privileged access to transgressive experience. To at least potentially fulfill my claim to constitute this particular sub-genre as allegory of more general issues of documentary authenticity, it seems necessary to pick up some of the points which I have only hinted at so far.

It seems that scenes like the one we just saw, represent a fissure in the aesthetics of presence of the filmic text, forced open by the implications of an indexical reference to the historical reality of the specificity of death. It is this fissure that resembles what in the conceptual language of American Direct Cinema in the Sixties was called an «electrifying moment.» Patient observation of «real people in uncontrolled situations»⁶, with a camera that tries to eschew any influence over what is happening before it, seemed to promise the occurrence of such fissures, where in a glance, an action, a moment of despair or an instant of being overwhelmed by circumstance or emotions, some universal, perhaps unexpected insight into the nature of the human condition, or at least a glance behind the mask of social rituals could be laid bare for the recording grasp of the camera. Without going further into the institutional formation of Direct Cinema as a distinctive style of documentary film during the early 60s the aesthetic parallels to the representation of combat especially in camera style seem striking. To demonstrate this I'd like to show an excerpt from *The Children were watching* (1960). This film represents one of the earliest manifestations of American Direct Cinema, which Richard Leacock, Donn Alan Pennebaker, Albert Maysles and others developed into an influential and aesthetically as well as conceptually defined approach in the early 1960s⁷.

Compare the camerastyle, the traces of physical presence reflected in the compositions of the frames, the play on technical flaws and the enigmatic structure of exposition to *Frontline*. It seems that the notion of privileged authenticity that Direct Cinema promised in its permanent aesthetic reflection of subjugation under the conditions of the pro-filmic, reproduces the *mise en scene* of the battlefield. Far from applying any notion of conscious strategy or direct historical influence it could be argued that stylistic and conceptual frames of the representation of combat have been and are a prevailing models for documentary claims of privileged access to a authentic human behaviour. Think of Direct Cinema's affinity to situations of crisis⁸ and its preference for «individuals under stress» as filmed subjects.

Even if intrinsically specific collusions of combat styles and documentary representation can certainly not be a universal model for rewriting the history of representing American social reality, it is nevertheless important to note the abundance of Metaphors of War, or more precisely metaphors of combat and military logistics in the rhetorics of description, legitimisation and mediation of vastly diverse strands of American Culture. Perhaps this is an area of inquiry worth following in more detail than was possible here

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

- (1) JAMES, David. «Presence of Discourse/Discourse of Presence: Representing Vietnam», **Wide Angle**, Vol. 7, No. 4 (1985): 41.
- (2) Although in the light of the US military strategy concerning the media in the Gulf War these issues are invested with new significance, since «Learning from Vietnam» has been a main theme of the rhetorics of the US military and of the militaries' handling of the media.
- (3) JAMES, D. *Op. cit.*, p. 42.
- (4) Comp. ROWE, John Carlos. «Eye-Witness. Documentary Styles in the Representation of Vietnam», **Cultural Critique**, No. 3 (Spring 1986):137.
- (5) It is certainly no accident that theoretical discussions of documentary styles frequently deal with death as subject of documentary representation.
- (6) MAMBER, Stephen. **Cinema Verite in America**. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974, p. 2.
- (7) **Children** deals with white segregationist attitudes in the South as they erupted around the integration of local public school.
- (8) Comp. MAMBER, S. *Op. cit.*, pp. 115-138.