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Introduction

Representing history is always an ethical and moral dilemma. Works that depict the past must shape some form of order from the chaos of information (Rosenstone 1989, 13). They select and narrativize particular images, mold random past events into ‘history,’ and often contribute to the ways that ideas of ‘nation’ and ‘homeland’ have been imagined. The referential aesthetics and rhetoric of truth that documentaries often deploy implore us to believe them, complicating, perhaps even obscuring, that dilemma. What part does the way the past has been envisioned and recounted, remembered and forgotten, play in our attempts to make sense of the meanings of both ‘history’ and ‘nation’?

A recent Kurdish documentary *Prison No. 5/5 No.lu Cezaevi* (Çayan Demirel, 2009) explores a traumatic moment in Turkish history, the state brutality in the aftermath of the 1980 *coup d'état*, breaking a tacit taboo against speaking out about the state’s shameful past. It utilizes firsthand testimony, the heartfelt words of people whose lives were directly affected, punctuated and supported by archival footage (Spence 2013). A recent Turkish film *Mustafa* (Can Dündar, 2008), a less than heroic reenactment of the life of the founder of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, attempts to move beyond idealized depictions of the charismatic leader by unearthing his feelings and ‘individuality.’ Both works, although employing extremely different hermeneutics, politics, and aesthetics, by their very nature as visualizations of history, surely have the potential to enter into the field of contested meanings in which cultural constructions of nation are produced in Turkey. The comfortable indexicality of *Prison No. 5* and the powerful iconic presence of *Mustafa* raise important questions about how *re-presentations* nourish the illusion of providing truth for the nation’s public memory.

Other imaginings of the past have taken a more modernist approach, reflecting on the way the past is narrated and using means of representation that problematize the notion of historical knowledge. *Diary Film – I was 12 in ‘56/ Naplófilm. 12 Voltam 56-ban* (Boglárka Edvy, animator, and Sándor Silló, 2006) tells the story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution from the point of view of 12-year-old Gyula Csics’s diary. The documentary uses archival footage of the uprising, still photos, vintage radio broadcasts, period records, and the elder Csics reminiscing. But it also employs recreated scenes of the child writing in his diary, the voiceover of a boy reading passages from the diary, animated scenes of the child’s drawings, and digitally tinted (in the national colors) flags and banners.

A child's drawing of a greenish brown tank with a red star is animated so it travels across the diary's pages; later, superimposed over black and white newsreel footage, it journeys across the streets of Budapest. In one scene, frenetic violin music simulates the frenzy of the crowd, as a still photo of a statue of Stalin is toppled in an obviously digitally manipulated maneuver that cracks the veneer of authenticity that we usually associate with archival material.¹

Films such as John Akomfrah's 1986 *Handsworth Songs*, Rea Tajiri's 1991 *History and Memory*, Péter Forgács' *Free Fall* (1996), and Rithy Pahn's *The Missing Picture/L'Image manquante* (2013) also eschew discursive transparency and coherence. By striking at notions of authority and challenging its constitution, they visualize history as malleable. Instead of aiming to fix the meaning of the past or reach an all-encompassing truth, these films portray the past as contingent, something that is reshaped again and again by the needs of the present day. Yet these works, too, engage our notions of nation and national selves.

Joshua Oppenheimer (*The Act of Killing*, 2012) explores how the perpetrators of the mass murder of suspected communists in 1965–1966 Sumatra feel about themselves by letting them stage a film about the massacres. 'Forget about Jakarta, this movie is going to be seen around the world!' As the killers bragged about their past, Oppenheimer wondered, 'What does it mean to live in, and be governed by, a regime whose power rests on the performance of mass murder and its boastful recounting.'²

Although not speaking specifically about historical representations, Ismail Xavier (2012) writes of an impulse in Brazilian documentaries over the past few decades and compares it to the Cinema Novo productions made before the 1964–1984 military dictatorship.

The modernist brilliance of Cinema Novo and the aesthetic modesty of the current 'listening' documentaries seem to belong to different worlds . . . The Cinema Novo film-makers had shared, broadly speaking, a belief in a national-political project; they felt they had a mandate, as spokesmen for an imagined community they were helping to bring into being. Their aesthetic radicalism was based on their confidence that the people would grasp the message of their bold experiments in conceptual cinema. (111)

He argues that the more recent Brazilian documentaries constitute a clearly oppositional cinema in which 'the aim is to illuminate the enormous problems facing the country by exploring how particular subjects experience their social predicament and what they have to say about it when "given voice."' Yet he suggests that no matter how much these documentaries affirm their subjects, the notion of 'giving voice' to the oppressed, when conceived as a panacea, is not enough. What is needed are more agonistic strategies that question the 'authenticity' of personal experience and that see their agenda as part of the country's rediscovery and remaking of itself, part of the nation's always becoming, always deferred future (112–113).

Imagine the performative hopes for personal and national transformation of Cinema Novo, the whole-hearted embracing of contradiction of *Handsworth Songs*, the more moderate ambitions of recent Brazilian ‘listening’ documentaries and *Prison No. 5* These are not only formal issues, but social and political ones as well. Much of what we know about the past is derived from documentaries shown in movie theaters, museums, festivals, libraries, on television, and increasingly on computers. For many, documentaries present an ‘authoritative’ representation of history. They are shown in schools as lessons. They appear on TV on socially significant occasions. But seldom do we consider how the narrative logic of a documentary work represents a standpoint on the past. Documentaries can function to shape historical consciousness. Their selection and combination of sounds and images can give meaning to our historical imagination. But how do they negotiate the relations between private memories and national histories? In what ways are they embedded in or oppositional to national discourses? And what does the proliferation of visual narratives of nation tell us about official stories, old and new, and their limits?³

What follows is an assortment of views, short articles and interviews that explore the way the past has been depicted in documentaries. Some authors take their cue from the issues raised above. Some pull back the curtains on their own documentary practices. Each of the commentaries that follow sees documentaries as historical artifacts. And they all share an interest in how moving image media contribute to our conceptualizations of ‘nation.’ Each looks at a specific instance of nationhood. And all these scholars, although coming from diverse backgrounds, using differing conceptual models and methods, and employing a variety of examples that represent, perform, or evoke the past, all, directly or by implication, raise questions about the nature of historical inquiry.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to Nilgün Özten for piquing my interest in this film and provoking these thoughts.
2. Director’s Statement, theactofkilling.com/?page_id=738 (accessed November 1, 2013).
3. I thank Levent Soysal for calling my attention to this last notion and for suggesting that essays on this subject should be collected and published.

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