

On the Misrecognition of Images

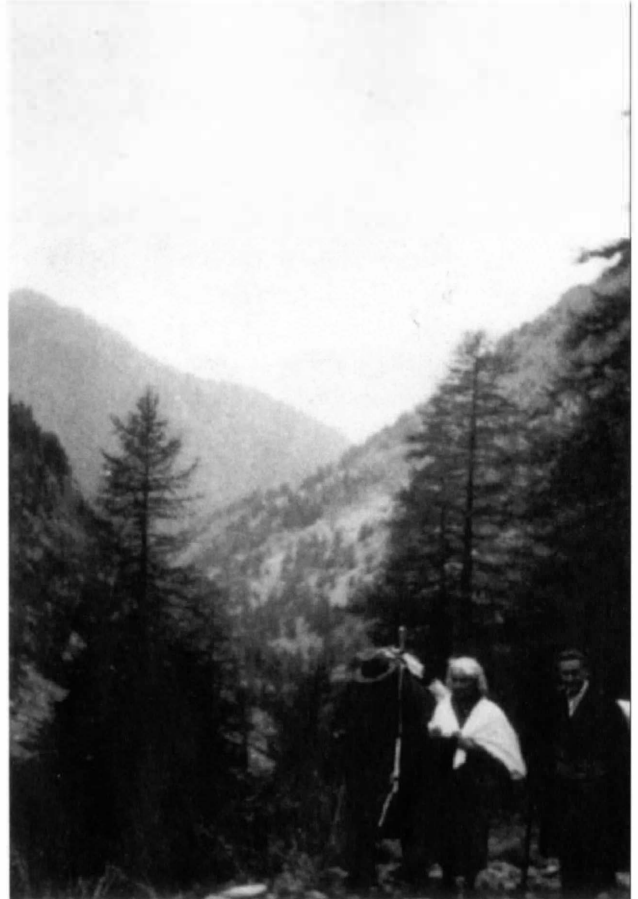
by Amish Morrell

In Barbara Hammer's latest film, *Resisting Paradise*, screened at the Images Festival in Toronto this past April, there is a photograph of people ascending a steep valley. Framed by the surrounding mountains, I almost read this image as being of a group of hikers on a weekend outing in the Alps or the Pyrennes. In *Remembrance of Things to Come*, a film by Chris Marker and Yannik Bellon that was recently screened at Cinematheque Ontario, the viewer is shown photographs taken by Denise Bellon, most of which are from Paris and the French countryside between the first and second world wars. The images are of recreational parachutists, café life in Paris, people swimming, a woman stretched out naked by a river. Both films capture what seem on the surface to be idyllic times, yet gesture toward complex ways of thinking about the role of the image in relation to war.

Unlike the recent photographs of us soldiers torturing prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison, the images in *Resisting Paradise* and *Remembrance of Things to Come* are unfamiliar as either records of, or responses to, violence. On April 28, when the Abu Ghraib images first appeared on the CBS program *Sixty Minutes II* they provoked a flurry of responses.¹ Susan Sontag wrote an essay that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, in which she describes the ways the photographs were taken up by callers to Rush Limbaugh's radio talkshow. Callers analogized them to fraternity rituals, making this comparison

of actions recorded as images." The act of looking affirms the self that is conceived in the photograph, the self who took the photograph and the self who looks at it, all produced through the dynamics of imaging. In describing the images from Abu Ghraib as recording a community of actions, Sontag analogizes them to photographs of lynching in the American South, circulated by white southerners as postcards much as the images of Abu Ghraib were used by soldiers as screen savers and circulated to others via email. College hazing rituals, torture and lynching all affirm a social order and here, their photographic record can function as either souvenir or evidence.

Sontag also compares the images to pornography, both because they replicate familiar tropes of erotic display and because they were circulated in much the same way ordinary people sometimes post images on the internet of themselves emulating pornographic poses.³ Her argument, succinctly stated on the cover of the magazine, is that "the photographs are us." This relationship, however, is not



Barbara Hammer, *WWII Refugees Fleeing Through Switzerland*, still from *Resisting Paradise*, 2003.

necessarily a mimetic one. Depending on how these images are framed or the context in which they appear, the viewer might experience voyeuristic pleasure, participate in perverse moralism such as that used by the soldiers to legitimate their actions or be invoked to judgment.

When looking at photographs it is difficult to affectively bracket their strictly referential qualities from how they operate as part of a system that extends beyond their physical frame. Through their semiotic play, images mediate material relations. They shape a social imaginary, inciting responses to the events they portray as well as guiding the workings of military and industrial infrastructure. The role of images as part of institutionally managed structures of violence was a central theme in the programming at this year's Images Festival in Toronto, as was the problem of how image can be employed to counter a sense of the inevitability of war.

Harun Farocki's *War at a Distance* describes the workings of images as part of military and industrial processes with robotic monotony. Farocki carefully illustrates how images guide missiles to their target or enable robot welders to recognize seams to be welded on an automotive assembly line. The film begins with screen images from the Gulf War transmitted from cameras installed in the heads of missiles. The camera reduces the landscape to shapes and curves, discerning only the edges of fields, roads, powerlines and bridges, as if sent from a security camera roving the sky. The ground comes closer, the picture disappears and the screen turns to snow. The idea of images enabling the viewer to extend their power of sight while remaining at a distance is concretized by this operation. Here, the act of seeing is synonymous with destruction. Like the news reports of the

Gulf War, these images do not show civilian casualties. To not be seen is, tragically, to not exist.

If Farocki explains how images are part of the physical mechanisms of war, in his lecture at the Images Festival titled *War Games: Digital Gaming and the us Military*, Ed Halter illustrates the interwoven relationships between Hollywood cinema, video gaming and the us military. Commercial video games available in the early 1990s such as *Doom* proved easily adaptable to military training and provided an environment that was familiar to many new recruits. In conjunction with MIT, UC Berkeley and Lucas Films, the military produced a video game called *America's Army* that is available from their recruiting website and melds real and virtual environments to create a simulated training ground. *Full Spectrum Warrior*, another game used in military training and distributed commercially, is also set in the Middle East and hyperlinked to the us Army recruitment site. Employing what Halter calls "military realism," the guns in these games fire the same number of bullets as real guns, military maneuvers replicate real military training practices and the enemy invariably looks like Saddam Hussein. The trailer for *America's Army* promotes the game as a site of civic engagement, invoking the user to "help liberate the oppressed" or to "empower yourself, defend freedom." The conflation of the virtual and the real becomes even more pronounced in *KUMA\WAR* games where, as Halter notes, through online subscriptions gamers receive playable missions based on current news reports. Supplying the viewer with not just a cinematic language, but with a set of skills in which to participate in war, the real conditions of countries like Afghanistan and Iraq become an extension of the hyper-reality of the video game. If this sounds like a paranoid fantasy, it is

because these *are* paranoid fantasies. Halter describes an agreement between several major Hollywood film studios and the us government by which film productions obtained access to army facilities in exchange for making scripts approved by the military. This led to an uncritically glamorous portrayal of military service, exemplified by major motion pictures such as *Top Gun*, one of the first films produced under this arrangement.⁴ If the cinema is one of the places where political consciousness is shaped, it would make sense that post-9/11 reality has seemed at times like a bad movie. In 2002 the us military met with a group of Hollywood screenwriters to imagine possible terrorist scenarios. At around the same time Karl Rove, a senior White House advisor, convened with a number of Hollywood movie executives to discuss Hollywood's contribution to the war effort.⁵

Resisting Paradise, set in the French coastal town of Cassis near the Spanish border, is ambiguous and arguably difficult in its logic. From within the beautiful stillness of this place Barbara Hammer narrates a counter-history of the Jewish Resistance. Hammer was drawn to this fishing village to film the light that had enticed Henri Matisse and other painters including Van Gogh, Renoir and Duras. While she was there, the war broke out in Kosovo, sending waves of refugees across Europe, invoking her to ask "how art can exist in a time of war" and inspiring her to produce a film of this place through the lens of her questioning. While interrogating the work of Matisse and his iconic images of beauty, she maps a force of resistance that radiated from the streets of Cassis through countless actions, interviewing people who forged papers, smuggled people out to sea under the cover of night to meet rescue boats and guided people across the mountains to their

escape. Describing the heroic work of these ordinary people, she explores the problem of how suffering can exist amidst such beauty, the question that is often presented as the aesthetic paradox of the twentieth century.

In *Remembrance of Things to Come* Denise Bellon's beautiful images of the years between the world wars evoke a visual memory that is almost always shadowed by the events that followed. In Bellon's photographs we see Paris before it was re-written by WWII, workmen arrived from the country, as Marker describes them, "...pour(ing) asphalt as though they were pouring wine." She captures draught horses tied outside the gates of the Tuileries castle, the bridges and the first cinematheque. We also see

Yannik and her sister Loleh as children, the surrealists, the men with shattered faces who served testament to the travesty of war, piles of scrap metal to be turned into bullets and the images of the parachutists and the woman laying on the banks of a river in the warm sunlit air of late spring. A decade after these images were taken, Marker notes, a photograph of a naked body beside a river would come to evoke the image of bodies laying alongside roads after German planes had flown overhead, and the parachutist would become synonymous with the paratrooper. The draft horses would be gone, the 1940 Olympics would be postponed until 1952, and some of the surrealists — those with foreign sounding names — would find themselves in internment camps.



Denise Bellon, *Salvador Dalí with Mannequin*, 1938 Surrealist Exposition, Paris, still from *Remembrance of Things to Come*, 2003.

Bellon and Marker deduce that if the image can be used to remember the past, perhaps it can also reveal something of the future. The film begins with Bellon's photographs of the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris, held in 1938. There are mannequins covered in insects or dismembered and transforming into machines, a menacing statuette with a distorted face. The filmmakers note that the press reacted to the show with insult. For them, such art seemed ridiculous and incomprehensible when Europe was readying itself for war. Anticipating the possibility that we may one day be unrecognizable even to ourselves, the work of the surrealists was uncanny in its predictive accuracy. As the surrealists noted the marriage of the body to progress and its deathly outcomes, Bellon and Marker reveal history's obliteration of the memory of what could have been. Through these beautiful photographs and their careful cinematic framing one glimpses a forgotten place, bringing its visual trace to bear upon the present.

Barbara Hammer, Yannik Bellon and Chris Marker counter the plausible outcomes engineered by these imaging practices, soliciting a utopian promise from images of the past. Bellon's photographs evoke alternate possibilities from those that unfold from familiar historical narratives, breaking the illusion of a mimetic bond between the image of history and the past, thereby transforming the texture of memory. The narrator tells us of Bellon's photographs of the bridges of Paris "...in fact only the names will change. There is a pont Neuf, a pont de Bercy, but no pont de Bir Hakeim. Nobody knows where Bir Hakeim is, nor Birkenau, which will literally succeed it in the dictionary with the comment: very close to Auschwitz." If our past selves can become unknowable to us, then the

places we once inhabited can become unrecognizable too.

In the case of the photographs from Abu Ghraib, the clear correspondence between the images and the subjects they depict enables viewers to read them as indicative of a failure that is bureaucratic, democratic and moral. While creating one reality, the images presented by Farocki annihilate another, concealing the visible trace of this destruction. There are, thankfully, other images in the memory museum. Bellon's images mark the disappearance of one world and foreshadow the catastrophe to come. But in order to have their affect upon the viewer, they draw us into the short-lived culture where the Popular Front was discovering their bodies, the seaside and skydiving. They reveal a past and its latent possibilities, however forgotten. Through this montage, Marker and Bellon free memory from the determinism of their future, now our past. Just as *Resisting Paradise* begins with Hammer's meditation on the light of Cassis, *Remembrance of Things to Come* is also a meditation on the light of pre-war Paris. If the trace of light captured in these photographs gives us access to the memory of the past, these places themselves mark the survival of the past in the present. Hammer films Cassis as if it were a still life, illuminated by the oblique rays of an autumnal sun, this beautiful village much the same as in 1945 when thousands of people fleeing the Nazis found refuge there.

Hammer gives visibility to what at the time had to be done in absolute secrecy — the work of the resistance — showing us their faded archival images and the places they once inhabited. Alongside the photographs of refugees, Nazi speeches, the quiet streets of Cassis, she presents the familiar quote from Walter Benjamin: "A

storm from paradise is blowing so violently that the angel of history cannot close her wings."⁶ If this quote suggests that we cannot repair the past, from these images perhaps we can better understand how to repair the present. Hammer's archival stills of people surrounded by trees and mountain peaks, ascending a rugged path, these are not images of people on an outing, enjoying the fresh air, but of refugees escaping through the Swiss Alps. Staging an unexpected recovery and transforming the texture of memory, perhaps these misrecognitions can help evoke the imaginative possibilities necessary for reparation.

Notes

1. Ramonet, Ignacio. "Torture in a Good Cause." *Le Monde Diplomatique*. June 2004: 1.
2. Sontag, Susan. "The photographs are us." *The New York Times Magazine*, 23 May 2004.
3. The danger of this comparison is that it risks suggesting that perhaps "the porn made them do it," a problematic argument that Frank Rich recently described in *The New York Times*. Rich notes that organizations including Concerned Women for America, the Family Research Council and the Heritage Foundations, are using these images as artillery in their homophobic crusade, blaming the events at Abu Ghraib on mtv, on gay and lesbian marriage and on tv shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Sontag's prose is far too strident to invite such an odious and homophobic reading.
4. According to Halter, military enrollment went up by 400 percent following the release of *Top Gun*. Supporting his argument, *The New York Times* recently reported thirty percent of a group of young people with positive views of the military formed their views as a result of playing *America's Army* (*New York Times Magazine*, 22 August 2004: 35).
5. Zimmerman, Patricia. "Blasting War." *Afterimage*, Winter 2003: 5.
6. This quote appears with slightly different wording in Fragment IX of Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Concept of History," most recently translated and published in *Selected Writings*. Balknap Press: Cambridge MA, 1996: 392.

Amish Morrell is a Phd student at oise/University of Toronto. He is writing about the re-staging of images of the past in contemporary photography and how these practices shift narrative conceptions of time.