

Looking for History on Film

Larry Wilcox

All who know me well know that this setting is not one in which I am either very comfortable or very confident. However, I am humbled, even a bit surprised, by your apparent confidence in my ability to speak for a much shorter time at this annual Ohio Academy of History luncheon than in my more preferred settings in a classroom or conference session. [In order to delude myself that you are students in one of my classes, I have prepared a handout for you luncheon guests.]

I want to begin by recognizing the valuable service of Vivien Sandlund as this year's President of the Ohio Academy of History. The small gifts I want to present to her are only a small token of our appreciation for all her efforts, which I know will continue long after her term formally ends.

You already know how much I appreciate your support of the important activities of the Ohio Academy of History, but you should also know how much I am counting on all of you to help me advocate the cause of History in our state over the next academic year. **The Humanities in general, including History, seem to be under attack again with our state's current emphasis on something called STEM, which has been extended to STEMM at my New University of Toledo.** The University of Toledo has now been merged with the former Medical University of Toledo, and the MUO President is now the President of this New University of Toledo, an institution of higher education now committed to even greater emphasis on something labeled STEMM, i.e., Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine.

You probably do not need to be encouraged to work even harder to convince our students, as well as their parents and the wider public, of the importance and value of the study of History. All of us assembled here for this conference believe, along with William Faulkner, that "The past is not dead. It's not even past." **However, as the organization for all historians in the state of Ohio since the early 1930s, we do need to continue to take the lead in advocating the cause of History vigorously, and we dare not procrastinate about expanding our efforts.**

Some of you may remember Austin Kerr's presidential address in April 2003, in which he called for the more active involvement of historians in the setting of state standards for the teaching of History in the schools. His conclusions are even more important in 2007 than when he talked with us in Canton. As he put it at that time: **"We need to become more effective in the future than we have been in the recent past."** He argued in particular that we need to be more effective in advocating high standards for the teaching of History in the schools, but I believe very strongly that we also need to be more concerned about the place of History in our institutions of higher education. [You can find Austin Kerr's presidential address and other useful information about the Ohio Academy of History on the website generously maintained by Martin Wainwright at

the University of Akron, at <http://www2.uakron.edu/oah/>, which is on the inside front cover of your program.]

I urge you to contact me, or any other member of the Executive Council, at any time with your ideas and suggestions about how we can make our organization more effective in advocating the cause of History in Ohio at all levels of education from K-12 to graduate programs !!!

[Add any relevant comments from our afternoon Executive Council meeting, as seems appropriate at this point.]

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It should be obvious to all of you that the most important person in our organization is the current Secretary-Treasurer, Ann Heiss of Kent State University, and I want to thank her sincerely for her generous assistance to me and all the other officers of the Ohio Academy of History for many years. [Ask Ann to stand up and be recognized!] Ann, and the other members of the Executive Council, have been very helpful to me in planning for the future of our organization, including for the fall meeting at the University of Toledo on 12 October 2007 and the next spring conference at Wright State University on 11-12 April 2008. My special thanks also to Betsy McLean and her Program Committee for putting together this wonderful meeting at Otterbein. She has set a high standard for next year's local arrangements coordinator at Wright State University, Jake Dorn, and his colleague Carol Engelhardt, who will chair the Program Committee for our 2008 meeting. [Some of us envy Carol who has spent part of her leave year in London.]

My other brief musings this afternoon, hopefully brief enough for you to avoid indigestion, are neither very scholarly nor very profound. However, these comments do reflect part of my continuing attempt to convince our students, and our wider public, of the relevance and importance of History in our world. This seems even more difficult in the early 21st century than when I began my own journey in academia nearly half a century ago. We certainly may be in the midst of another major technological revolution, one with lots of computers, servers, and cell phones, as well as the world wide web, a revolution perhaps comparable to the early modern Scientific Revolution or to that tectonic intellectual shift heralded by Einstein, Freud, Mendel, and even Picasso at the beginning of the 20th century. However, let me continue with a more old-fashioned text message from a less than wired, or should it be wireless, speaker.

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Once upon a time, a long time ago, a very inexperienced, and very naive, History instructor faced a very serious pedagogical issue. He had read stacks of scholarly books and journal articles. He had unwound many reels of microfilm, usually in a library basement housing the papers of the founder of his graduate institution, known on those hallowed grounds only as TJ, [or in some old building on Pennsylvania Avenue in our nation's capital.] Ultimately, all such intellectual exercises of us historians have been, and hopefully ever will be, in search of something called "historical truth," to find out what

really happened in the past, [or at least that part of the past connected to our dissertation or current research project.] This specific historical quest related to the origins of the “Thousand Year Reich,” which fortunately lasted only twelve years, but what momentous years those were, and not only for Germany.

As he faced a room full of students not much older than himself [in some distant and misty past], this young instructor wondered how he could possibly help his eager students develop a better understanding of Adolf Hitler and National Socialism in post-WW I Germany. He had assigned the standard [Koppel S. Pinson] text, supplemented by an abridged version of Alan Bullock’s very readable biography of Hitler and some examples of important primary sources in translation. But he still harbored some doubts that these printed materials would be sufficient to address the enormity of the task he faced. As he prepared his inaugural lectures, usually in the dead of night, he tried to remember what had drawn him into our eternal quest for deeper historical understanding [of “wie es eigentlich gewesen”], and the projector switched on, [as it would not have for Leopold von Ranke in the later nineteenth century. By the time of his death in 1886, von Ranke had only reached the 12th century in his planned history of the world.]

This young university instructor, obviously me, now in much older iteration, had grown up with the Hollywood versions of WW II, John Wayne and all that, as well as the early television documentaries about that “good war,” such as *Victory at Sea* (NBC, 1952-53, 26 half hour episodes) and *The Twisted Cross* (NBC, 1956). I had also watched, probably with undue fascination, but also with much horror, when my high school History teachers, both coaches as well as veterans of WW II, had switched off the classroom lights and switched on the 16 mm projector with its grim footage from the liberation of Nazi camps in Europe. Suddenly I realized that I [,as a neophyte History instructor,] was obligated to integrate visual primary sources into my classroom, and, as it turned out later, into my own research.

As some of you may remember, the American Historical Association established something called the Historians’ Film Committee in 1970, a group founded by John O’Conner and Martin Jackson. [Very few of you probably remember that some members of our own organization formed an Ohio Historians’ Media Group at about the same time.] These two colleagues also published one of the earliest AHA pamphlets on teaching history in 1974, titled *Teaching History with Film*, revised in 1987 as *Teaching History with Film and Television*. This AHA affiliated group publishes the journal, *Film and History*, and sponsors the bi-annual conferences of the Film and History League, [on which see the website <http://www.h-net.org/~filmhis/index.html>] With the slim O’Conner and Jackson pamphlet in hand, and the little else available in the early 1970s, I began “looking for history on film,” but from the perspective of a professional historian determined to help my students get a better understanding of the historical background to the world in which they lived. In the short time remaining today, I can only refer to a few examples of what I have “seen,” illustrating all too briefly why I have come to believe that we must integrate more visual sources into our teaching and research. [Please refer to the handout for my integration of such sources in this “class,” which I probably

should have done with a PowerPoint. I will be glad to give anyone a much longer version whenever you have the time and patience to listen.]

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The usual way to introduce visual materials, in both teaching and research, is to consider them as a different type of primary source, in my case to help answer questions about why Hitler attracted so much support from Germans in the 1930s, [especially in view of what he actually did as the leader of Germany from 1933-45.] For this example, we are fortunate to have readily available one of the best known documentary films ever made, Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, her "record" of the September 1934 Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg. Nearly all of you have probably heard of this film, but the same is much less true of our students. [Leni Riefenstahl died in 2003 at the age of 101, and she is the subject of at least two major 2007 biographies.] If you have any memory of this nearly two hour film for a pre-television audience, you know that it is not only a technically sophisticated visual record of a Nazi party celebration, but it also presents Hitler almost as a Messiah come from the heavens to save Germany in its crisis after WW I. Even selections from the twelve scenes of this film give our students a better sense of the positive appeals of Hitler and National Socialism to many Germans in the 1930s. [Note the two examples on the first page of my handout.] However, a careful consideration of what the film presents visually also reveals to students the insight that Riefenstahl left out some very important aspects of Nazism, in particular racism and anti-Semitism. Thus, such contemporary visual "primary sources" must be analyzed not only as documents for what they present, but also for what they leave out. Indirectly, this should help students develop a better understanding of the role of visual propaganda in History, a skill even more important in our own time when an ever larger portion of our information comes from visual sources. [I.e., to be more direct, a discussion of Riefenstahl's classic documentary film should encourage all of us to be more critical of visual materials we encounter in our own lives today, including on the internet.]

All the major belligerents in WW II recognized the importance of visual propaganda in that war, thus providing an unparalleled, and probably unintended, treasure of visual documentation for us future historians. The best known German example, drawing on the prewar, and rather dull, newsreel format, utilized actual dramatic combat footage skillfully edited by Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, the *Deutsche Wochenschauen*, [now available on video with convenient English subtitles.] In our own USA, the government hired many Hollywood film people to produce dramatic visual materials [for public edification and mobilization], including well known directors, such as John Huston, John Ford, William Wyler, and, of course, Frank Capra. The latter was detailed by the Army Chief of Staff, George Marshall, to produce "information" films to explain to soldiers why they were going off again to fight in a foreign war, the genesis of the seven part "Why We Fight" series. [See Capra's own account in *The Name Above the Title*.] How might we historians use such wartime visual documents to help answer other important questions about the contemporary representation of the war, for example, "Did the Real War Get

Into the Pictures?" [with apologies to Walt Whitman regards the Civil War and books, via Paul Fussell's *Wartime*.]

My own close evaluation of the best known US wartime documentaries supports an unsurprising, but qualified, conclusion that few of these films provided an honest and historically accurate visual representation of the most important aspects of WW II, except as examples of wartime propaganda. [The partial exceptions include John Huston's *Battle of San Pietro* (3 May 1945), and some of the late war documentaries on the Pacific war, in particular *With the Marines at Tarawa* (2 March 1944) and *To the Shores of Iwo Jima* (7 June 1945).] This conclusion should remind us that even in a democratic society, visual materials have been consciously manipulated and, therefore, must be analyzed critically as historical documentation, just as we try to teach our students to analyze critically available printed primary sources.

Aside from the "incomplete" representation of the "real" war in wartime films, something else seemed seriously amiss in my own research on US wartime documentary films, especially to someone who spends rather too much time with what we now usually call the Holocaust. Repeated viewings of Frank Capra's wartime films, and many other wartime documentary films from several countries, including even the so-called camp footage taken in liberated Nazi camps by the allies, revealed the absence of any significant consideration of Nazi racism and anti-Semitism, what one might call the "invisible Jew" in wartime visual propaganda. [See for example, the one hour compilation of camp footage screened at the Nuremberg Trials in November 1945, titled *Nazi Concentration Camps*, with only one passing mention of Jews.] One also notices the absence of African-Americans in Capra's wartime films, with an exception that proves the rule, the 1944 "docudrama" film, *The Negro Soldier*, featuring Carlton Moss as a black preacher condemning Nazi racism, ironically with references to a key primary source, *Mein Kampf*.

Thus, my own search for visual documentation of WW II has broadened to a closer analysis of the visual representations of genocide against the Jews of Europe, a continuing, and probably endless, quest. As implied above, few wartime documentary films provide significant visual evidence of the ongoing persecution and genocide against the Jews of Europe. The camp footage recorded by the allies when they liberated Nazi concentration and death camps, an important source of visual material for all post-war documentaries on the Holocaust, reveals to us in stark and graphic images the aftermath of the Holocaust, but little about its development before liberation. [The most widely used footage comes from the British liberation of Bergen-Belsen in northwest Germany in April 1945, the camp where Ann Frank and her sister died of typhus shortly before the British forces arrived. The camp footage, for example, is what we all usually view in the best known post-war documentaries of the Holocaust, such as the 1955 Alain Resnais film *Night and Fog* and the 1974 British television World at War selection titled *Genocide* (not Holocaust). The 1978 NBC fictional miniseries was titled *Holocaust*, and, as bad as it seemed to most historians, it was the first visual program to bring the genocide against the Jews in WW II to a wider audience.]

In reality, if we dare use this term in our age of “reality” television shows, the most important actual footage of the Holocaust known to exist as it developed comes from the Nazi cameramen who were detailed to document visually the life and death of a Jewish ghetto in Warsaw, footage intended to be used in a Prague museum for an extinct race after the war. This Nazi footage, discovered in Heinrich Himmler’s archives after the war, would be used in a 1968 BBC documentary on that important example of the development of Nazi genocide against the Jews, with very moving narration by a survivor of that ghetto, [Alexander Bernfes.] The discovery of such footage raised the very difficult issue of how historians should use visual materials created by the very subjects we are trying to understand, in this case the perpetrators of unimaginable atrocities. Some have even argued that such Nazi and allied footage should not be shown because to do so constitutes yet another violation of the victims. The best known exponent of this view is Claude Lanzmann, the French producer of the widely discussed 1985 documentary *Shoah*. [See Lucy Davidowicz article, as well as Sybil Milton.]

[One footnote to this very abbreviated version of “Looking for History on Film,” and there must always be a footnote or two, may suggest one possible response to our difficult dilemma, at least for more recent periods of history.] However, in the final analysis, historians must utilize all the available visual primary sources in our quest for better historical understanding, as we draw on all other surviving primary source materials. [Whether it be Leni Riefenstahl’s visual propaganda for Hitler, or Frank Capra’s very incomplete visual explanation to American audiences of “Why We Fight,” or surviving Nazi footage, or the allied footage taken in liberated camps, these visual materials are an important part of the documentation for the history of the twentieth century. Fortunately, we have had access to other important types of primary sources on WW II and the Holocaust, and not just the captured German records or the more recently, but partially, opened former Soviet archives. See, for example, the NY Times Book Review, 4/22/07.]

We do have available other important visual sources that we historians can consult, now and in the future, to avoid over reliance on documentation from the perpetrators, i.e., the visual testimony of survivors of the Holocaust and visual documents preserved by the victims of Nazi genocide. These documents have become a more important part of retrospective documentaries in the last two decades, [but such visual testimonies had already been displayed in the 1970s World at War series and Claude Lanzmann’s 1985 *Shoah*.] The preservation of such valuable documentation of WW II and the Holocaust has been the focus of many ongoing projects to videotape the memories of Holocaust survivors, [beginning with Yad Vashem in Israel through the Yale Fortunoff project, but also including the efforts of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the *Schindler’s List* funded Steven Spielberg Survivors of the Shoah Foundation, and, in my neighborhood, the University of Michigan at Dearborn Voice/Vision archive. [Note Christopher Browning’s George Mosse lectures on this issue, as well as his Cambridge lectures: *Nazi Policy, Jewish Worker, German Killers* (Cambridge U. Press, 2000), and *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (U. Of Wisconsin Press, 2003)]

Whatever your own experience with high school coaches teaching History, “Looking for History on Film” is not just going to the movies, it is a very important, even essential, part of what we do as historians, whether in the classroom or in the archives. It should also play a much larger role in how we present the importance of History to a wider public audience, but then that is a subject for another class.

[If time permits, I should refer again to the Film and History League activities, e.g., through its website at <http://www.h-net.org/~filmhis/> and biennial conferences, such as the one in Dallas last fall on “The Documentary Tradition.” I might also note the recent announcement of a “Visual Evidence Listserv”]

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Addendum

Handout follows on next page

“Looking for History on Film”
Ohio Academy of History, 28 April 2007
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Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* presents her documentary “record” of the 1934 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg, as well as her view of Hitler as the savior of Germany.

http://www.archive.org/movies/thumbnails.php?identifier=Triumph_of_The_Will_1



A typical camera angle used by Riefenstahl in her film makes Hitler appear larger than life.

<http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/triumph/tr-will.htm>

Leni Riefenstahl died in September 2003 at age 101, and she is the subject of two recent biographies.



German Weekly Newsreel *Picture: Imperial War Museum.*

<http://www.focalint.org/azarticle1.htm>

These Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda wartime weekly newsreels are available from International Historic Films with English subtitles.

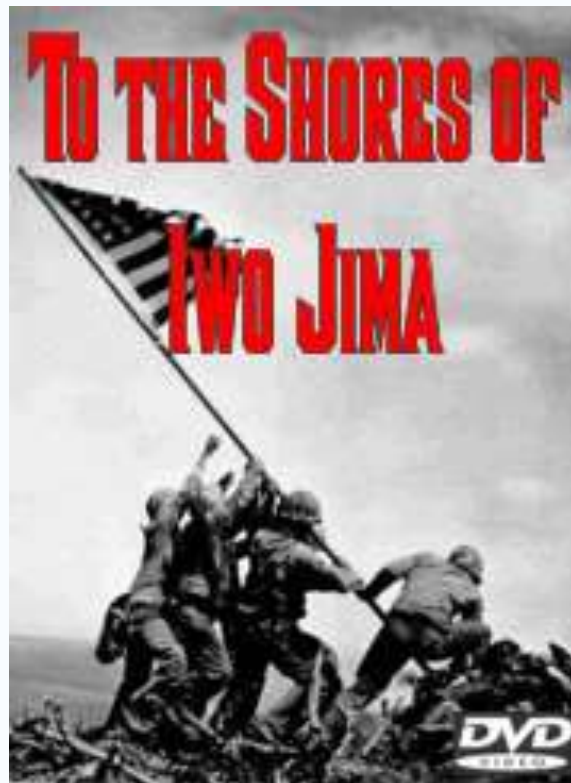


Frank Capra's *Prelude to War* (1943) was the first of seven “information” films in the Why We Fight Series produced for the U.S. War Department. In 2000, the Library of Congress designated these films for preservation as part of the National Film Registry. Many of them are available on the internet. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Why_We_Fight



John Huston's version of the *Battle San Pietro in Italy* in December 1943 was not released until 3 May 1945 because he had difficulties with military censors who considered his film too "realistic" and "anti-war" in its portrayal of this battle.

http://www.archive.org/movies/thumbnails.php?identifier=battle_of_san_pietro



This US Navy color production, *To the Shores of Iwo Jima*, was released on 6 June 1945, i.e., after the end of the war in Europe but before the final anticipated assault on the Japanese home islands. <http://www.chqsoftware.net/catalog/images/iwojima.gif>
http://www.wv2incolor.com/gallery/movies/iwo_jima1



Dwight Eisenhower at the Ordruf concentration camp in April 1945, a visual “document” included in the compilation of camp footage shown as evidence at the Nuremberg Trials in November 1945 with the title *Nazi Concentration Camps*.

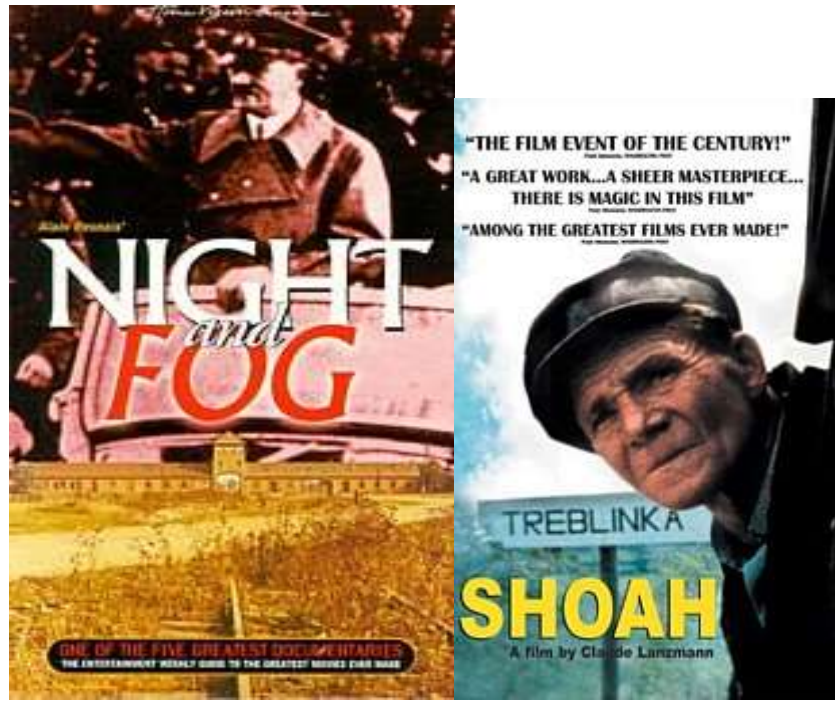
<http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/exhibit/Pages/Image-2723.html>



Tvsi Nussbaum

The Stroop report on the Warsaw Ghetto rising in April-May 1943 and other Nazi footage of this ghetto have been used in documentaries, such as the 1968 BBC production *Warsaw Ghetto*.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Warsaw_Ghetto_Josef_Bloesche-edit1.jpg



Alain Renais, *Night and Fog* (1955) & Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (1985) illustrate two quite different retrospective visual representations of what we now call the Holocaust.

<http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/133p/133p04papers/SSandhoffFrenchFilms046.htm>

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