CHAPTER ONE
Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering

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I remember that month of January in Tokyo, or rather I remember the images that I filmed of the month of January in Tokyo. They have substituted themselves for my memory. They are my memory.

Chris Marker, Sans Soleil

Memory is often embodied in objects—memorials, texts, talismans, images. Though one could argue that such artifacts operate to prompt remembrance, they are often perceived actually to contain memory within them or indeed to be synonymous with memory. No object is more equated with memory than the camera image, in particular the photograph. Memory appears to reside within the photographic image, to tell its story in response to our gaze. Since its invention, the photograph has been associated with memory and loss. An early emphasis on portrait photography demonstrated the desire to fix an identity in the image, to have the image live after the individual's death. (1) Hence, the photograph evokes both a trace of life and the prospect of death. Roland Barthes famously wrote, "Ultimately, what I am seeking in the photograph taken of me ... is Death: Death is the eidos of that Photograph." (2) In its arrest of time, the photograph appears to hold memory in place and to offer a means to retrieve an experience of the past.

Yet memory does not reside in a photograph, or in any camera image, so much as it is produced by it. The camera image is a technology of memory, a mechanism through which one can construct the past and situate it in the present. Images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a nation. They can lend shape to histories and personal stories, often providing the material evidence on which claims of truth are based, yet they also possess the capacity to capture the unattainable.
However, the relationship of the camera image to memory and history is one of contradiction. On one hand, photographed, filmed, and videotaped images can embody and create memories; on the other hand, they have the capacity, through the power of their presence, to obliterate them. Some Vietnam veterans say they have forgotten where some of their memories came from--their own experience, documentary photographs, or Hollywood movies. The AIDS Quilt, as a means of forgetting the gaunt figures of people who have died of AIDS, often presents images of them as healthy and robust individuals. For every image memory produced, something is forgotten.

I would like to examine the role of the image in producing both memory and amnesia, both cultural memory and history. Camera images, still and moving, provide important evidence of the past and help define its cultural meaning. They offer incomplete but often compelling versions of the past that often eclipse more in-depth historical texts. They are also a primary mechanism through which individuals participate in the nation. Indeed, national stories are often mediated through specific camera images. This chapter addresses the role of camera images in the production of cultural memory and history through three well-known images: the Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination, the television image of the Challenger explosion, and the home video image of the Rodney King beating.

**Remembering the Image**

When Chris Marker says the images he filmed "are my memory," he is invoking the common conception of the photographic image as a receptacle of memory, the place where memory resides. What does it mean to say that an image, which remains caught in time, is the equivalent of memory? One of the most fundamental characteristics of camera images is their apparent fixing of an event at a single moment. Yet it is precisely this quality of the camera image that distinguishes it from memory. For, unlike photographs or film images, memories do not remain static through time--they are reshaped and reconfigured, they fade and are rescripted. Though an image may fix an event temporally, the meaning of that image is constantly subject to contextual shifts.

A photograph provides evidence of continuity, reassuring in its "proof" that an event took place or a person existed. Though it is commonly understood that photographs can be easily manipulated, this knowledge has had little effect on the conviction that the camera image provides evidence of the real.(3) One seemingly cannot deny that the camera has "seen" its subject, that "it has been there." One looks through the image to the "reality" it represents, forgetting, in essence, the camera's mediating presence. Thus, the camera image testifies to that which has been.

In Ridley Scott's 1982 science fiction film Blade Runner, replicants (cyborgs with four-year life spans) are given photographs depicting childhoods they never had. The photographs provide evidence of their humanness, prove the existence of mothers and fathers and childhood homes, record birthdays celebrated. These photographs establish "fake" memories for the replicants, their designer Tyrell explains, to compensate for their emotional inexperience. Yet the images do not simply render the replicants more docile
and emotionally stable; they provide the replicants with evidence of their subjectivity. As Kaja Silverman notes, the fake memories of the photographs are constitutive--they construct the replicants as the subjects they appear to be, subjects with childhoods.(4)

The emphasis on photographs as providers of memory in Blade Runner has been discussed at length, precisely because of the anxiety it provokes concerning the veracity of memories and the role of camera images in their construction. The photographs in Blade Runner raise the fundamental question of whether one can ever judge a memory to be "fake" or "real" and what role the camera image plays in creating that uncertainty. How can one know, for instance, that all memories derived from photographs are not as "fake" as the replicants?

In a certain sense, all camera images can be seen as "screen memories." Freud defined screen memories as memories that function to hide, or screen out, more difficult memories the subject wants to keep at bay.(5) Similarly, an image can substitute for a memory. The distinction between the image and the memory, between the screen and the real, becomes imperceptible. There is no "original" memory to be retrieved; it has already been rewritten and transformed. Freud noted that all memories from childhood may be screen memories:

It may indeed be questioned whether we have any memories at all from our childhood: memories relating to our childhood may be all we possess. Our childhood memories show us our earliest years not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when memories were aroused. In these periods of arousal, the childhood memories did not, as people are accustomed to say, emerge; they were formed at that time. And a number of motives, with no concern for historical accuracy, had a part in forming them, as well as in the selection of the memories themselves.(6)

This distinction between the formation, rather than emergence, of memories is crucial. Does the photographic image allow the memory to come forth, or does it actually create the memory?

This critical question applies not only to personal memories of childhood but also to collective and national memories induced by camera images. Freud not only suggests that memories are often formed or scripted at a later time but also elucidates the relationship between memory and fantasy. He defines memory as the object of desire, formed in "periods of arousal" to create a tangle of memory and fantasy within the individual. In analogous fashion, fantasy becomes central to the stories told in the larger narrative of the nation.

The image plays a central role in shaping the desire for cultural memory, specifically the need to share personal experiences. Indeed, the camera image blurs the boundary between cultural memory and history. Well-known images frequently become part of our personal recollections, personal (and "amateur") images often move into public arenas, and Hollywood docudramas can rewrite once personal recollections of "national" events.

At the same time, camera images are evidence of history and can themselves...
Parents, Grandparents - History of family photos

The writings of Walter Benjamin are perhaps the most influential in representing history as an image. In a famous passage in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin wrote:

"The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.... To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" ... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger." (8)

For Benjamin, history is the image of a fleeting moment. The historical image announces absence, loss, irretrievability. Like a screen memory, it offers itself as a substitute.

The image Benjamin writes about in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is an instant image, conjured up in a flash. It is the image of history arrested, a moment of historical rupture when everything stops and is irrevocably altered. This is history as the photographic image, history standing still. (9) Still and moving images shape memory and history in fundamentally different ways. The still image carries a particular power, in its arrested time, to evoke the what-has-been; it seems to have an aura of finality. Stillness is precisely what allows the photograph to be, in Eduardo Cadava's phrase, "the uncanny tomb of our memory." (10) The photograph achieves its moment of certitude in its evidence of death, its capacity to conjure the presence of the absent one. (11)

Yet the historical image is not only represented in still photographs. It is also constructed in the realm of cinematic and television narrative, as both drama and docudrama. The Hollywood docudrama is a central element in the construction of national meaning. The films of World War II, for instance, retain a powerful cultural currency; they provide popular narratives of the war that supersede and overshadow documentary images and written texts. Similarly, as I will discuss in Chapter 3, the history of the Vietnam War is being "written" not only by historians but also through Hollywood narrative films produced for popular audiences. These films are ascribed historical accuracy by the media and reenact famous documentary images of the war. They represent the history of the war, in particular to a generation too young to have seen it represented contemporaneously on television.

The historical television image would seem at first to evoke not a fixed history but, in its immediacy and continuity, a kind of history in the making. The essence of the television image is transmission. It is relentlessly in the present, immediate, simultaneous, and continuous. Hence, television is defined by its capacity to monitor (in the form of surveillance cameras) and to be monitored, to transmit images regardless of whether anyone is watching. The primary elements of television's historicization are repetition, reenactment, and docudrama.

The blurring of boundaries between the image of history and history as an image, between the still and moving image, between document and reenactment, between memory and fantasy, and between cultural memory and history is evident in the construction of national memory. Camera
images--photographic, cinematic, televisual, documentary, and docudrama--play a vital role in the development of national meaning by creating a sense of shared participation and experience in the nation. It was the collective viewing of television images of the Gulf War, for instance, that made possible a "national experience" of the war. Similarly, the television image of the Challenger space shuttle exploding prompts a shared cultural memory of that event. Though the still photographic image is crucial to memory, and memory and history are often evoked by flashes of images, it could also be argued that memory most often takes the form of cultural reenactment, the retelling of the past in order to create narratives of closure and to promote processes of healing.

It does not follow, however, that the collective experience of watching "national" events on television leaves all viewers with similar and singular interpretations. Rather, in watching national television events, viewers engage with, whether in agreement or resistance, a concept of nationhood and national meaning. Benedict Anderson has written of the "imagined community" of the modern nation as being crucial to its coherence:

[The nation] is an imagined political community--and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.... [The nation] is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.(12)

Anderson points to the tombs of the unknown soldiers as emblems of the modern culture of nationalism precisely because they are either empty or filled with unidentified bodies; the bodies they contain (either literally or symbolically) are defined solely by their national status. These tombs do not mark individuals, as do the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the AIDS Quilt. They are, in Anderson's words, "saturated with ghostly national imaginings." Similarly, when one views a "national" text such as a Hollywood docudrama or television coverage of an event of intense public scrutiny, one participates as part of an imagined audience specifically coded as American.

National events are often traumatic ones; we remember where we were when they happened. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, and the Challenger explosion, stand out as some of these moments of shock, experienced not as part of the continual flow of history but as ruptures in it. (Earlier events such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the death of President Roosevelt, primarily experienced via radio, also produced a collective national witnessing.)

Psychologists Roger Brown and James Kulik call these kinds of memories "flashbulb memories" that "suggest surprise, an indiscriminate illumination, and brevity."(13) They find a correlation between the fixed memories of national events and traumatic personal events and suggest that surprise,
extraordinariness (seeing an authority figure cry, for instance), and consequentiality (the effect of the event on their lives) are central aspects of this memory retention. These vivid memories evoke photographic ("flashbulb") moments in which history appears to stand still. Yet research on flashbulb memories has shown that, however vivid they may be, they often bear little resemblance to the initial experience.

Increasingly, Americans participate in the witnessing of history through camera images; "where we were" when it happened was in front of the television screen. Indeed, recent psychological research shows that people often misremember the moment when they first heard of a national catastrophe by reimagining themselves in front of a television set.(14) This particular mechanism of remembering, whereby we imagine our bodies in a spatial location, is also a means by which we situate our bodies in the nation. Photography, film, and television thus help define citizenship in twentieth-century America. The experience of watching "national" events, from the Kennedy assassination to the first moon walk, enables Americans, regardless of the vast differences among them, to situate themselves as members of a national culture. This experience is an essential component in generating the sense that a national culture, a "people," persists.

The Zapruder Film: From Still to Reenactment

When an image coincides with traumatic events of historical rupture, it plays a central role in the construction of national meaning. Abraham Zapruder's film of President Kennedy's assassination in 1963 (Figure 1) is perhaps the most famous piece of documentary film in American history. It is both a still and moving image icon: because the moving image was restricted from public view, for twelve years it was seen in public only as a series of stills. The Zapruder film represents history as a succession of individual frames sliding forward in slow motion, offering only fragments of clues to what happened. It is a secret image, hidden from view, imbued with a kind of sacred status, as if it holds within it an essential clue to the meaning of this event. Never before had a piece of film been so dissected (in this case, as a surrogate for Kennedy's absent corpse) in the belief that it contained the truth—a truth existing somewhere between the frames.

In the Zapruder film, the limousine carrying the president, Jacqueline Kennedy, Texas governor John Connally, and his wife, Nellie, drives past the camera in a matter of seconds. Briefly obstructed by a stand of trees, Kennedy reemerges into the frame the moment after he is shot for the first time; the camera then witnesses the impact of the fatal shot and follows the car swiftly to the right as it speeds away. Jacqueline Kennedy, clad in a pink suit and pillbox hat, first cradles her husband's head, then crawls backward onto the trunk of the car, presumably to aid a Secret Service agent running toward it. The original Super-8 film presents a grainy color image, its detail blurred by motion—an image that hides as much as it reveals.

The Zapruder film has its own history, and its cultural status has changed several times. It was shot on a home movie camera by Abraham Zapruder as he watched Kennedy ride by. Although an amateur, Zapruder, who ran a