

**Politics of a film:** *The deconstruction of the Privatization of History*

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“Liberal documentaries” as Jill Godmillow argues, “end up confirming and making comfortable the class status of that audience by providing opportunities for compassion, uplift, for hope, for self satisfaction and perhaps, for complacency.” She continues to explain that the problem with the experience of this type of cinema is , “There is nothing to learn about our activities or ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> Filmmakers typically educate by creating a political or historical memory that is believable and therefore goes unquestionable. The liberal documentary creates a generalized and simplified understanding of the subject. Characters become objects, distanced by time, space and culture and create sentiments that persuade or deliver a political agenda.

In the film, *Miss Universe, 1929* (2006) the director, Peter Forgacs avoids creating a film that lulls the viewers and creates puppets out of the masses. Forgacs has turned to images outside the official history as a resource to understand and represent a political reality. In order to do this he has done three major things:

1. While living in a censored communist state, the use of **archived** home footage and amateur films as a political tool to challenge the official history.
2. Forgac’s **editing** creates gaps in the story and provides a complex layered experience for the audience.
3. The **narrative** reveals what people had and had to lose in order to adequately represent suffering.

**1. Archived home footage as a political tool:**

Forgacs lived in Soviet Hungary where he experienced censored information and expression as he has expressed, “It was a permanent 1984 in Hungary, and finding the vanishing

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Gomillow, *What’s Wrong With the Liberal Documentary*,  
www.proquest.umi.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/ March 8, 2012)  
(original source: **Peace Review**, Palo Alto: March 1999. Vol. 11, ISS. 1; Pg. 91-92)

culture of Hungary, and later of Europe, was a form of resistance.”<sup>2</sup> Starting in 1983<sup>3</sup>, Peter Forgacs collected and transferred films with the Private Photo and Film Foundation in which he has made numerous films utilizing this footage. Adding to the layers of the reality and nostalgia he combines the archived footage with the interview of a living person who was either featured in the footage or who had created it.

In *Miss Universe, 1929* Forgacs uses archival footage from amateur filmmaker, Marci Tencze to not just explain a history but to challenge and interrupt the viewer’s notion of that time period. The time period of the twenties, thirties and forties which Fogacs is interested in has large archive of documented political and social events—specifically war, revolution, social upheaval and people suffering. This is in part due to the invention of the motion picture camera. Additionally it is the integration of the tool for propagating an idea that added to the large amount of footage during that time span. Living in the Orwellian society of Hungary, Forgacs fascination with home footage was due to the capabilities to reevaluate a historical time period that had an official history that obscured the personal narratives that co-existed<sup>4</sup>. The problem of the official historical imagery is that these images represent and stand in for memory and history without the contemporary viewer’s knowledge of how they were made and for what purposes—this history has evaporated. The official history has been represented and re-represented by such imagery creating a separation of the viewer from image; this process is what Roland Barthes terms *The Privatization of History*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema 4: Peter Forgacs* (Berkley, California: University of California Press, 2005), p. 297

<sup>3</sup> MacDonald, p.301

<sup>4</sup> MacDonald, p. 297

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, *Myth Today*, p.20

Forgac's process to archive and utilize home videos breathes new life into almost forgotten footage and turns it into a political tool re-contextualize history in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Patricia Aufderheide refers to the autobiographical film as a way "To make public an experience that they [filmmakers] felt had been rendered invisible by the profit imperative of mass media, by social discrimination or both."<sup>6</sup> Forgacs's film is not autobiographical but instead it pulls from family biographical documents of a pre-communist and bourgeois culture, his films fall within similar motivations as many of the autobiographies that Aufderheide mentions and in a way it is an autobiography of Peter Forgacs through his culture.

Forgacs preserved home footage with the intention of looking at these images as unofficial documents of history that had been *rendered invisible* through the censorship of the Hungarian government as well as the importance of professional standards in documentary. "Most filmmakers have a "professional" need for crisp, clear images, and since much of the archival material is scratched, and not in good shape generally, it doesn't fit to their needs.<sup>7</sup> Much of Marci's footage is scratched, overexposed, underexposed and shaky. Forgacs makes use of this footage by slowing the footage down, freezing on particular frames, zooming and repeating the imagery throughout the film. He makes use of the footage despite their poor quality and extracts information by changing the way the footage is displayed.

Harun Farocki's film *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992) is a video essay in which Farocki compares the civilian's ability to document as an uncensored advantage as oppose to the government cameras which were turned off at the moment when the citizens began to revolt. The citizens even had an advantage over the News whose reports were censored during the Romanian

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<sup>6</sup> Patricia Aufderheide, *Public Intimacy: The Development of First—Person Documentary*, web.ebscohost.com.libproxy.newschool.edu/ehot/ details, March 10. 2012 (original source: Afterimage, 03007472, July/Aug97, vol.25, issue 1), P.5

<sup>7</sup> **MacDonald, p.300**

revolution and gave particular information in attempt to keep the people uninformed. This film also predicts the idea of horizontal news coverage as oppose to the traditional vertical power structure of News and government reporting. This form of horizontal news reporting was notorious during the weeks of the global Occupy Movements; the earthquake in Haiti and it was featured in the film *Burma VJ* (2008). This footage is often another view of the dominant political event from the civilian's eyes. *Peter Forgacs* uses the civilian eye and the personal subject in which Marci's footage focused on in order to understand a different form of political. It is civilian and amateur filmmaker, Marci Tencze's glance that becomes significant as it reveals his personal culture that exists simultaneously with the official. It demands the viewer to understand the complexities of history and memory.

Peter Forgacs shows interest in the individual's personal everyday lives during major world conflict. Aufderheide states, "It [First person video storytelling] stands both as symptom of and response to the challenge of social location in a postmodern society."<sup>8</sup> Marci was able to save money and get financial assistance from Lisl's family, the Goldarbeiter's to buy a camera, and it was with this tool that Marci documents what he deemed important. Forgacs emphasizes Marci's interests, dreams and concerns and shows the ordinary that co-existed with the political. He makes the political history less important than the personal narrative which is in contrasts to the typical historical documentary about that time period.

"In Eastern Europe, after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, government archives became raw material for documentary films reexamining history."<sup>9</sup> The professional filmmakers desired footage that would depict the larger historical events such as battles, government take over, social upheaval, parades speeches and other official events in which they could reexamine and reveal

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<sup>8</sup> Aufderheide, pg.1

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary: A Brief Introduction* p.76

another side to the already told story. However both the footage and the contemporary filmmaker who is re-contextualizing the footage ends up reasserting the dominance of the official history. The social-political myth is a product of the belief in an official reality with multiple perspectives that carve out of the past one specific simplified cultural memory. Roland Barthes writes in “Myth Today” that the creation and understanding of myth is a function of human experience in particular times, places and circumstances.<sup>10</sup> While the intentions of the documenters and filmmakers may have been to create change in how we view the past or to document for the “public good”, the filmmakers were motivated by the circumstances of the time.

“Filmmakers in the World War II era often believed they had not only a right but an obligation to produce propaganda.”<sup>11</sup> During the era in which Forgac’s film is focused, the documentary had a political agenda with a voice of authority and this belief in the objective demanding view had the ability to influence the viewers understanding of truth. The documentation for the most part was mostly focused on the world political climate. The technology was in the hands of those who had the money such as the government or organizations and therefore most political documentaries were based on a modernist perspective of the world.

The home movies along with the interviews with the amateur filmmaker Marci reveal an alternative view of the time period. The films are made for the private view and within the family. The circumstances within the family reveal the personal hopes and beliefs of the subjects documented in the films. Some moments relate to the modernist mindset of the time for example Lisl’s participation in the Miss Universe contest—representing the belief in progress, which the era is known for. At the same time the footage also reveals a contradiction, Marci explains that

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<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes; (original source: From *Mythologies: Myth Today*, translated by Annette Lavers, New York, Hill and Wang, 1984)  
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/myth.html>

<sup>11</sup> Aufderheide, *Documentary: A Brief Introduction* p.74.

Lisl's competitor in the contest had to remind her to "smile." Forgacs also reveals contradiction by choosing to let certain footage remain in the edit. Specifically, Forgacs does this with the official documentation of Lisl as she made public speech or performing an interview to an American audience. Lisl finishes her statement and then her facial expression changes and she expresses frustration and imperfection. She then re-performs the statement she wants to make. This footage shows her imperfections despite standing for a universal standard of beauty.

Forgacs use of home footage and personal stories, which coincided with dominant history, creates a platform for the viewer to re-examine this history as a complex multi cultural experience. His work not only questions objectivity, it additionally challenges the mythological lens in which filmmakers explore this form of history.

## **2. Providing a complex and layered experience for the audience:**

"There is nothing to learn about ourselves. There is everything to learn about the other. We and they are not linked other than by feelings." What Godmilow essentially explains is how this experience in liberal documentaries of objectification may create sympathy for a subject but it does not allow understanding and therefore doesn't have a direct effect on the viewer except to increase their ego and add to the commoditization of "the other."

Roland Barthes writes:

"The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. When the other is 'irreducible', Barthes explains, "There is here a figure for emergencies: exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home."<sup>12</sup>

Forgacs edits the film in such a way that reveals layers and complexities, which challenge the desire to either reduce the "other" or else transform him into himself. Forgacs successfully does

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<sup>12</sup> Barthes

this with the self-reflectivity of the film and the multiple stories that coexist within the complete film.

The desire to strive for perfection, to conquer and to be the best can be seen in the images of Lisl as Miss Universe. Her hands posed in the Miss Universe pictures, and yet free and relaxed in the family footage that was shot by Marci. Through comparisons to the historical simultaneous events she can symbolizes the world as well as Austrian pride. All of the men seen standing with her in images stair at her as though they want to conquer her. In this objectification of women, femininity is reduced to a conquerable object. It is similar to how the Nazis who fought for world domination had justified and reduced “the other” countries as well as non-Arian peoples to conquerable objects. The issue of the other in documentary becomes a political point of change for Forgacs who does not create objects out of his subjects but out the material and what the material can reveal about the people they documented performing in a moment. Through slow pans on faces, the change in emotion becomes the focus and the original intention to capture beauty becomes secondary to the complex story of hidden and real-time emotions. The search for the real, the human becomes the main story of a film centered on an objectified woman.

When the footage is observed out of the original context it was created for the viewer reads the images within their own context. According to Roland Barthes, images have meaning built within them<sup>13</sup>. Forgac explores the subtleties with which the private footage reveals,

“if you think of these movies as found objects for Fluxus art, then you see that what might other wise be *boring* can also be understood as a series of sacred moments: non-historical, private footage becomes historic evidence of a certain mood, of a background; a color or a gesture or a smile, or the shape of a face, reveals dimensions of a society that are never visible in public art.”<sup>14</sup>

The difference of time and space can help the viewer to seek out these reveals. Forgacs exaggerates this phenomenon by slowing down the footage, zooming images, dissolving image

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<sup>13</sup> Barthes

<sup>14</sup> Forgacs [p.308]

over image, and by repeating the same images with different sounds and juxtaposition. This is what Forgacs explains as a way of inviting the viewer to look at what he found, to sit beside him and think about it. He states, “his work offers an opportunity for a contemplative experience.”<sup>15</sup>

Since the home footage is created for personal use, it reveals the hopes and dreams of the filmmaker, which in the case for Marci was his love for Lisle and for his ability to document his life. Marci’s footage is created with the intention of having fun and not to be seen by the public, but instead for his family. Therefore there are gaps in information, this is what Forgacs believes is a revealing factor of the filmmaker and what is an important element in engaging the viewer.<sup>16</sup> This varies from footage created for the public, in which the most important aspect is that it fills in the gaps of information, it shapes the historical content for public discourse and makes sure that all information is provided.

History is always complex, during major events people continue to live their life. In most documentary films much of what is being described is based on the official history, and yet it is expected that a documentary fill in the un documented with narration, interviews and/or imagery that describes the missing information. It is important to also remember that the images are being created based on the official understanding of a moment. The documentation has an agenda, yet this is lost when the image is taken without question. Lack of information is inherent in Personal documentation because there is no need to fill in the gaps for personal/family images of reference. The families own memories fill in the gaps for the information needed to understand their images.

Forgacs drifts away from the expectation to explain all documents. This can be seen specifically when Lisl’s friend Nelli is introduced in the film. She was apparently living with Lisl and her husband, Fritz because they all *got along well together*. Footage of Nelli with Lisl and Fritz

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<sup>15</sup> macdonald, Scott, p.308]

<sup>16</sup> MacDonald/ Forgacs p.312].



as they play in a park is combined with clips from a vaudeville styled scene in which two women are flirting and playing as an older heavysset man makes facial expressions of excitement. The insertion of this footage suggests another complex layer to the Marci's footage.

Forgacs additionally edits Nelli and Fritz together flirting and freezes on a particular frame in which the two of them become blurry while behind them is Lisl's face in focus and smiling. The footage begins to replay again and this time the freeze frame is on Lisl and Fritz kissing. There are no specific answers to what their relationship was and how everyone felt about it. The footage must be searched.

Due to this comparative editing style, used in *Miss Universe, 1929*, there are many layers of interpretation and understanding: It is a romance story, a story about a changing city and mentality, a survival story, an anthropological study, a re-exploration of archived footage. It is personal while having a political and social agenda. The film is a portrait of a *Miss Universe* and of Lisl the person as well as a portrait of an amateur filmmaker and his love for Lisl. It is also a metaphorical portrait of Austria and Hungary throughout major social/political changes. To create such a complex and layered experience for the audience allows the viewer to formulate their individual perspective, which in turn contributes to creating a rich public discourse.

### **3. Narrative utilized to adequately represent suffering:**

Arthur and Joan Kleinman would describe Forgacs film as "focusing planning and evaluation on the interpersonal space of suffering, the local."<sup>17</sup> Kleinman and Kleinman see this as a necessary compliment to the globalization of local images.<sup>18</sup> Instead of commoditizing images of suffering people and shaping the characters as victims, Forgacs spends a majority of the film building up what the family in Marci's footage had and what they had to lose. He shapes them as

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<sup>17</sup> Keinman, ? (for right now).

<sup>18</sup> Keinman P. 16

people rather than objects who have no agency in the world. The change in their lifestyle is what shows their individual cultural response to the historic events. It is within the characters loss that the viewer comes to realize how they suffered and how this suffering affected their mentality.

The problem with the globalization of local images is that it makes the images of suffering a needed commodity in order for a company, government or organization to move the masses to participate. The viewer is not acting politically or changing out of understanding for the subject or humanity but out of guilt or anger. It makes the viewer susceptible to acting without understanding, which in turn creates puppets out of the masses. Susan Sontag argues, "To the militant, identity is everything. And all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions."<sup>19</sup> Images of suffering are powerful in that they can be used for various political agendas because the emotions that it evokes also enables the justification or a simplified understanding of an historic event. The simplification along with the images of suffering contributes to an unquestioned mythology that can be passed from generation to generation.

The contemporary film borrows the narrative film technique of *Nanook of the North* (1922), Robert Flaherty. Similarly, Forgacs uses a person such as Lisle Goldarbeiter and her family to stand in for a culture. Flaherty and Forgacs share the desire to show "the former majesty and character of these people [their subjects], while it is still possible."<sup>20</sup> For Flaherty it is the possibility capture the Inuit before they had completely forgotten their traditions while it is for Forgacs ability to preserve forage considered unimportant from being thrown out or decaying. In the case for *Nanook* it was the white man's culture that was changing the Inuit life. Inherent in

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Sontag, A Critic at Large: *Looking at War*, (original source: The New Yorker, dec.9, 2002)

[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/12/09/021209crat\\_atlarge?currentPage=2](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/12/09/021209crat_atlarge?currentPage=2), March 12, 2012, P. 2

<sup>20</sup> Aufderheide, Patricia; *Defining Documentary* (p.28).

Forgacs films is the notion to preserve and remember a way of life and mentality of a European or in this case Austro-Hungarian culture before World War II and Communism. Fortunately for Forgacs subjects, the technology to capture ones own life had already been made possible and was integrated into their lives, unlike Flaherty whose subjects had never been documented and who acted for the camera with the intention of making public their traditional culture. It is the future Marci Tancze in old age that becomes similar to the Inuit filmmakers that Flaherty worked with. Marci is asked by Forgacs, to remember and share more of the story with the intention of making it public. The personal footage is transformed from personal to public images through this process.

*Miss Universe*, 1929 is strung together by the love story between Lisl and Marci from the time they were born and follows consecutively into the contemporary life of Marci. As Flaherty stated *Nanook* (1922) was about, "love and life in the arctic," Forgacs's film is love and life in the 'arctic' politics of Austria and Hungary. Just like the arctic was just a background for the lives of the Inuit, the politics of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was just the backdrop for Lisl and Marci as they went on with their everyday lives.

There is a bigger love story for Forgacs and it is with the anthropological study of change in culture throughout history. The focus on the romantic aspects of the footage creates the tension for the film. "It is as if they [major historical events] blow a hole in the personal, create wounds that must heal before an individual can rejoin domestic life."<sup>21</sup> Forgacs sets up the story by showing what the subjects had and in doing so creates nostalgia for those moments when the images are reused alongside the story of the war, anti-Semitism and communism. The events eventually take hold of the characters lives, and there is less family footage. There is a void in what

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<sup>21</sup> MacDonald, p.303

Marci can create because his freedom as a filmmaker is taken away. All that he loved was taken away for a time period.

It is easy as contemporary viewers to look back on the time period of 1929 and understand the effects of the beliefs at the time. When we look at films about events in the aftermath we create the expectation that the average person at the time also understood this knowledge. What Forgacs shows is how life occurs beside the atrocities without the individual knowing or expecting the worst and it is not until the worst has come that the characters in *Miss Universe, 1929* react and need to stop their lives in order to adjust. In the scene about the development of the ghetto, Marci's father brought with him all of his tools for plumbing believing that he would continue to work. This mentality shows that the family did not know what the future held nor did they know what the Nazi's plan was for them. When the imagery is repeated after this point, it has a new context. The facial expressions of the characters are seen in a very different way. The uncertainty in Lisl's eyes express the uncertainty they must have felt as the global issues ruptured their lives.

The narrative and the way in which Forgacs develops the story allows the audience to ponder suffering as a subjective experience that does not make a person a victim but instead interrupts their beliefs and dreams, scaring them in such a way that they need to heal in order to move on with their lives. This politically removes the archived footage away from becoming commoditized suffering.

### **Conclusion:**

With *Miss Universe, 1929*, Peter Forgacs has successfully created a political film in that it does not only edify but it specifically engages the viewer by agitating them to come to their own understanding of the work. He focuses on the local history as a means to question the authoritative history by rejecting the privatized state history. The film also allows the viewers the

opportunity to question the objective notion of suffering through the individual experience. The images are given voice by the filmmaker himself, instead of being juxtaposed and utilized to contribute to a sanctioned historical film or worse destroyed and never again looked upon. In the midst of this experience we as the audience are capable of learning about *our activities and ourselves* by probing our conditioned concept of documentary to equate emotion with change. We cannot do this here, there are no victims, and instead Forgacs has provided the viewer with an example of what we can do to create change. He has shown us how to deconstruct the privatization of history.