

# History and Progress in *Buried in Light* and *Empires of Tin*: The Archive of Pain in the Oeuvre of Jem Cohen

Maria Teresa Soldani, *Università degli Studi di Firenze*

## Abstract

This paper explores the use of archival images in Jem Cohen's *Buried in Light* (*Central and Eastern Europe in Passing*, 1994), and *Evening's Civil Twilight* in *Empires of Tin* (2007-2008) in order to read the development of his reflections on history and memory. The archive is intended "in its concrete manifestation as a collection of audiovisual documents of the past and in its ontological dimension, indicating social and cultural processes of remembering and forgetting" (Noordegraaf, 2011). Strongly influenced by Walter Benjamin, Cohen conceives history not as a chronological line, but as a collection of traces (shots) mapped out by the documentary collagist (filmmaker) that simultaneously speaks about the past and the future in a layered present tense (editing). Mainly as an essay film form, his work is constructed by film fragments of places and people that build an unofficial history with a geographical form. Cohen calls such way of collecting shots "the archive of the feet" (2000). Starting with his first "historical" film/video, *This Is a History of New York* (*The Golden Dark Age of Reason*, 1987), the paper analyzes Cohen's conception of history and progress through the archive of human pain, and in relation to Benjamin's work.

## Premise

Jem Cohen dedicates his work to film fragments of places and people in order to build a collective and unofficial history with a geographical form. He calls such a way of collecting shots "the archive of the feet."<sup>1</sup> Deeply inspired by Walter Benjamin, he conceives history not as a chronological line, but as a collection of traces (shots) mapped out by the documentary collagist (filmmaker) that simultaneously speaks about the past and the future in a layered present tense (editing). This paper analyzes Cohen's structure of montage in *Buried in Light* (*Central-Eastern Europe in Passing*, 1994) and *Evening's Civil Twilight* in *Em-*

<sup>1</sup> Rhys Graham, "Just Hold Still: A Conversation with Jem Cohen," in *Senses of Cinema*, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2000/feature-articles/cohen-2>, last visit 26 May 2014.

*pires of Tin* (2007-2008) in order to read his reflections on history and memory through the archive of pain. In these works he explored daily life, firstly with an act of remembrance on a collective historical event (the Holocaust), secondly with a re-enactment of collective as well as personal archival images (on WWI/contemporary politics, and Ground Zero/Vienna, respectively). His artistic practice crosses photography, film and video, connecting street photography, city films, music and a later introduction of archival images. Archive is intended here: “in its concrete manifestation as a collection of audiovisual documents of the past and in its ontological dimension, indicating social and cultural processes of remembering and forgetting”.<sup>2</sup>

A connection with Benjamin on such themes as temporality, history, and memory will be helpful to understand how Cohen developed a more complex (audio)vision of history.

### *Into the “dream world”*

Cohen started his artistic path with a poetic reportage on Florida. After which he made a portrait of Austin’s band Butthole Surfers (*Witness*, 1986) and an audiovisual-history of New York City (*This is a History of New York. The Golden Dark Age of Reason*, 1987). Such projects gave a strong imprint on the main themes of his oeuvre: a key interest in the quest for history from urban settlements; an attitude for portraying given by his familiar milieu in street photography; a sensitivity for music and its compositional tools raised in Washington-D.C. during the D.I.Y. movement. Since then, he self-defined his works as “film/video” to give value to the way these were made: the shooting process with analog devices and film rolls (Super 8 and 16mm) and the editing process in video, using nonlinear systems.<sup>3</sup> He works as an archeologist (with old cameras and outdated formats) searching for meanings during the editing process (on video). Ranging between essay, documentary and experimental film, his oeuvre can be placed in the context of contemporary independent US filmmakers who move back and forth between personal and public spheres tracing a living history.

In *This is a History of New York* (Super 8 on video) Cohen investigated the details of the urban environment with his eye-camera to recollect an alternative history of the city that is visible on the streets. He captured it with the primitive grain of b/w Super 8 film. The result is a personal experience of the space with no explicit traces of the subject-maker (e.g., no first-person voice-over [V.O.]).

<sup>2</sup> Julia Noordegraaf, *Iterating Archival Footage and the Memory of War*, in Alessandro Bordina, Sonia Campanini, Andrea Mariani (eds.), *L'archivio/The Archive*, Proceedings of XVIII Convegno Internazionale di Studi sul Cinema/XVIII International Study Conference (Udine/Gorizia, 5-7 April 2011), Forum, Udine 2011, p. 265.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra Lischi, *Amber City*, in Josétxo Cerdàn, Gonzalo De Pedro (eds.), *Signal Fires. El cine de Jem Cohen/The Cinema of Jem Cohen*, Gobierno de Navarra, Dpto. de Cultura y Turismo – Institución Príncipe de Viana, Pamplona 2009, pp. 138-147.

This length of time is collapsed by the unity of place and by the choices on postproduction (Super 8 films reversed on tape, no-synch sounds, slow-motion and brightness/contrast tools). Rather, the montage division in the title cards follows a chronological succession (from Prehistory to The Space Age) in which a certain idea of progress in the US capitalistic society (a technical progress embodied by new machine-products) is criticized.<sup>4</sup> The soundtrack is a collage of sounds, pieces of music, and a street radio that shifts swiftly from station to station. Cohen edited almost 4 minutes of the above footage in *Talk about the passion* (1988), his first R.E.M. music video. In this way, he started to treat his own images as a collection of archival records.

Cohen declared to be influenced by several photographers (e.g., Eugene Atget, Helen Levitt, Leon Levinstein) as well as filmmakers (e.g., Jean Vigo, Chris Marker, John Cassavetes).<sup>5</sup> Besides them, the author who mostly influenced him was Walter Benjamin to whom *Lost Book Found* (1996) and *The Passage Clock* (*For Walter Benjamin*, 2008) were dedicated.<sup>6</sup>

Benjamin based his historical method on the concept of experience and the use of montage, as in *One-Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*.<sup>7</sup> He examined history from his contemporary, personal street-level viewpoint, shaping his writings through montage. A parallel can be drawn: as Benjamin collected texts, places, objects, Cohen collected films, places, objects, as a “collage artist.”<sup>8</sup> An oeuvre assembled by personal fragments taken by the archive. They also share a key feature of the essay form, what Timothy Corrigan identifies as the ability to relate to experience, the “experience represented in the essay, the experience of representing a subject writing the essay, and the experience of a public receiving that essay.”<sup>9</sup>

For Benjamin images have the potential to capture a glimpse of history through an “optical shock,” so a diachronic meaning is bared underneath its surface. A dreamy/sleepy condition is essential to experience the city to find an image of truth – a monad – in the continuum.<sup>10</sup> Therefore photography and cinema are able to reveal this “optical unconscious,” this history as history of images.<sup>11</sup> For

<sup>4</sup> Maria Teresa Soldani, *Intervista a Jem Cohen*. New York, 7 novembre 2006, in Id., *Naked City. Identità, indipendenza e ricerca nel cinema newyorchese*, Quaderni di CinemaSud/Edizioni Mephite, Avellino 2013, p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Josétxo Cerdà, Gonzalo De Pedro, *An Interview with Jem Cohen*, in Id. (eds.), *Signal Fires. El cine de Jem Cohen/The cinema of Jem Cohen*, cit., pp. 28-77; Maria Teresa Soldani, *Intervista a Jem Cohen*, cit., pp. 181, 183.

<sup>6</sup> Josétxo Cerdà, Gonzalo De Pedro, *An Interview with Jem Cohen*, cit., pp. 47-48.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1982 (Eng. ed. *The Arcades Project*, N1,10, p. 458; N1a, 8, p. 460; N2, 6, p. 461).

<sup>8</sup> Maria Teresa Soldani, *Intervista a Jem Cohen*, cit., p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Corrigan, “The Cinematic Essay: Genre on the Margins,” in *Iris: A Journal of Theory on Image and Sound*, no. 19, Spring 1995, p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1989 (Eng. ed. *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in Id., *Illuminations*, Schocken Book, New York 1968, pp. 262-263).

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1955 (Eng. ed. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in Id.,

Cohen something unconscious concerns the use of Super 8 with its “uncanny ability to feel like memory,”<sup>12</sup> because it was used in his house to capture and show private films.<sup>13</sup> In *This is a History of New York* a fragmented space is developed shot-by-shot in order to transform the visual shock into a “moral shock,”<sup>14</sup> where a “shot” can be conceived in Eisenstein’s terms of a “montage cell”:<sup>15</sup> “the montage is the means of unrolling an idea with the help of single shots,” as well as “an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots—shots even opposite to one another.”<sup>16</sup> An additional comparison with Eisenstein could make such a connection between history and montage clearer. Antonio Somaini refers to Eisenstein’s considerations on “conflict montage as comparative activity,” in the same years of Benjamin’s reflections. The Russian director had “a conception of history of consciousness and culture as a process in which all epochs and ‘layers’ survive and are able, if necessary, of being reactivated in the present. [...] A conception of cinema as a great ‘synthetic’ and ‘total’ art that is able to structure and activate all these temporal ‘layers’ internally.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the cinematic form, in terms of writing and montage, was thought of as a “conflicting, polarized, and dynamic field” to express abstract ideas. However, even if Benjamin talked about montage as a conflicting juxtaposition of heterogeneous and discontinuous elements,<sup>18</sup> the starting point is inverted: for Benjamin, as well as Cohen, the search starts collecting images, then making a collage that suggests an (unfinished) idea. Perceptive shocks/shots as “bullets” on the spectators to reveal an “optical unconscious.” For Cohen the montage is associative and proceeds for analogy and contrast to ‘active’ the spectator openly (Benjamin) and not ideologically (Eisenstein). In this process (shots-montage/montage-history) two visual elements are extremely significant: “close-ups” and “details” to dilate space; “slow motion” to dilate the movement.<sup>19</sup> To put it in Cohen’s words they are “ephemeral records; [...] part of a paradoxical search at the core of photography – the search for a permanent ghost.”<sup>20</sup>

These expressive elements work in the tradition of US straight and street photography on portraits and landscapes’ forms: projects such as *Americans* by Robert Frank, *American Photographs* by Walker Evans, and *New York* by William Klein. As Susan Sontag pointed out: “In America, the photographer is not simply

*Illuminations*, cit., pp. 236-237).

<sup>12</sup> Rhys Graham, “Just Hold Still: A Conversation with Jem Cohen,” cit.

<sup>13</sup> Josétxo Cerdà, Gonzalo De Pedro, *An Interview with Jem Cohen*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, cit., p. 238.

<sup>15</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram*, in Id., *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, Harcourt, New York 1949, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *A Dialectic Approach to Film Form*, in Id., *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Somaini, *Eisenstein*, Einaudi, Torino 2011, p. 66 (my translation).

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 41-44.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, cit., p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> Jem Cohen, *Letter to Myself*, in Josétxo Cerdà, Gonzalo De Pedro (eds.), *Signal Fires. El cine de Jem Cohen/The Cinema of Jem Cohen*, cit., p. 19.

the person who records the past but the one who invents it. As Berenice Abbott writes: "The photographer is the contemporary being par excellence; through his eyes the now becomes past."<sup>21</sup> Also the concept of "spatial" temporality in Cohen's oeuvre can be understood through Sontag's words on Benjamin's characteristic "to convert time in space": "Benjamin's recurrent themes are [...] means of spatializing the world: for example, his notion of ideas and experience as ruins. To understand something is to understand its topography, to know how to chart it. And to know how to get lost."<sup>22</sup>

*The "waking world": Buried in Light*

V.O.: Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal.  
It requires ignorance – nothing more.

But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest...

Walter Benjamin, *A Berlin Chronicle in Buried in Light*<sup>23</sup>

*Buried in Light* (Super 8 on video and a video triptych installation) maps Cohen's travel among European cities: Berlin, Dresden, Kraków (and Auschwitz), Budapest, and Prague. It is divided by title cards with quotations, encyclopedic records, and lists in order to create intervals to reflect. Presented as "notes / and a wanderer's / phrasebook" (title sequence), the film/video constitutes a passage, and a personal path, "since the essayistic subject" – as Corrigan puts it – "is a self continually in a process of investigating and transforming itself."<sup>24</sup>

*Buried in Light* is Cohen's first work associating US with European historical and economic facts; his personal history as a man with a collective history of men; totalitarianism with capitalism. Even if one of the aspects is the search of his own Jewish origins, this is a personal travelogue and not a personal film.<sup>25</sup> It is the first autobiographical experience and coincides with the introduction of archival footage, from Yivo Institute. Here the shift is from experiencing one place by compressing the Great Ages of Man in a present tense (*This is a History of New York*) to mapping cities that have crucial historical events in common. Furthermore, while the first was shot with a subjective style that attempted to become objective, *Buried in Light* starts with a V.O.: a citation of Benjamin in Ger-

<sup>21</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Rosetta Books, New York 2005 (1973), pp. 52-53.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Sontag, *Introduction*, in Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Harcourt, New York 1968, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> The transcript of *Buried in Light* was kindly provided through personal communication by Jem Cohen.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, after Marker*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, p. 104.

<sup>25</sup> Jem Cohen, *Central and Eastern Europe in Passing*, in Josétxo Cerdàn, Gonzalo De Pedro (eds.), *Signal Fires. El cine de Jem Cohen/The Cinema of Jem Cohen*, cit., p. 131.

man and in English. After that, the voice in German keeps on reading, fading out in the sound of the city. This way Cohen suggests that the voice is Benjamin, who is assuming a “guiding role” (highlighted in the end titles as the “signalman”).

The film/video begins in Berlin and continues on the architectural scars of Dresden’s cathedral. This section interestingly ends up with a famous photo of the destruction of the city during WWII taken from the top of the City Hall, in front of the iconic angel’s statue. Cohen noted in his journal: “(another angel of history).”<sup>26</sup> He possibly refers to *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee, a single picture that frames Benjamin’s vision of history. The angel is the historian.<sup>27</sup> He just sees ruins because of the catastrophe and he wants to recollect them in order to give meaning to the bigger picture: he is trying to but he cannot, because a hurricane, symbolizing progress, is upon him. He does not want to look ahead, but only wants to recollect single fragments. This image clashes remembrances of ordinary people with those of scholars (media and family memories, memories of memories on war, Benjamin’s reminiscences).

Alice Cati, in her thorough study on the images of memory, clarifies how human memory is essentially a visual process; hence, the photo-cinematographic media play a crucial role in the generation of contemporary memory. Because of such mutual connection, “films or film sequences” may function as “memory texts.”<sup>28</sup> With “a highly distinctive organization of time” – Cati quotes Annette Kuhn – “[...] the memory text is typically a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, ‘snapshots’ and flashes that can generate a feeling of synchrony: remembered events seem to be outside any linear time frame or may refuse to be easily anchored to ‘historical’ time.”<sup>29</sup> Through the language of film, memory is reassembled to be decoded by a set of socially shared rules; similarly, the cinematic apparatus is able to produce memory while developing codes. Cati quotes Russel Kilbourn: “[...] ‘cinematic’ memory in this sense at best supplements and at worst destroys ‘natural,’ human memory by naturalizing the technical and artificial, providing a seemingly ‘universal’ objective visual language for the representation of the subjective (re-experience) of the past.”<sup>30</sup> The “trace” of the event, which is impressed chemically on films strips, becomes the connection between recorded images and their referent in the real world, establishing “two essential principles” shared by filmic images and memories: “inscription and temporality.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Ivi*, p. 132.

<sup>27</sup> He wrote about “historical materialism” but his position was considered exceptional in respect to Marx’s theories. E.g., Hannah Arendt, *Walter Benjamin: 1890-1940*, in Walter Benjamin, *Iluminations*, cit., pp. 1-58; Paolo Pullega, *Nota 1991 in L’opera d’arte nell’era della riproducibilità tecnica*, Einaudi, Torino 2000, pp. 163-184; Rolf Tiedemann, *Introduzione* in Walter Benjamin, *I passages di Parigi*, Einaudi, Torino 2007, pp. IX-XXXVI.

<sup>28</sup> Alice Cati, *Immagini della memoria. Teorie e pratiche del ricordo tra testimonianza, genealogia, documentari*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2013, pp. 47-56.

<sup>29</sup> Annette Kuhn, “Memory Texts and Memory Work: Performances of Memory in and with Visual Media,” in *Memory Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2010, pp. 298-313.

<sup>30</sup> Russel J. A. Kilbourn, *Cinema, Memory, Modernity: The Representation of Memory from the Art Film to Transnational Cinema*, Routledge, New York 2010, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Alice Cati, *Immagini della memoria*, cit., pp. 56-57 (my translation).



The section on Kraków is divided in two parts: “Part One: The City” and “Part Two: A Nearby Place.” The first part alternates found footage on the Kraków ghetto during WWII and shots of Cohen in a hotel room during his travel. The archival material is introduced by an old picture of Krakow held in front of the camera. Immediately afterwards, there is a sequence dedicated to Auschwitz. The written name of the town is shot in German and pronounced by the filmmaker in Polish. This part is a first person narration and is dedicated to Primo Levi. As Laura Rascaroli pointed out, “reflectivity” and “subjectivity” as well as “the presence of the spectator” and “the structure of the dialogue”<sup>32</sup> are key elements in essay films. So in *Buried in Light* Cohen activates two processes of memory: the reassembling of his memory (travel in Central Eastern Europe and Auschwitz) through the remembrance of a universal, historical, traumatic event that has an autobiographical implication (his family’s origins). Thus, the central Kraków section is so effective because Cohen is able to access “that” collective memory starting from a personal inquiry (even if implicit), which recall Paul Ricoeur’s considerations about history and memory. Malin Wahlberg wrote on the connection between Ricoeur’s account of “traces”<sup>33</sup> and a documentary made with archival images: “history is a science of traces, and it is the trace that ‘orients the hunt, the quest, the search, the inquiry’ [...] the social realm of language and ‘the trace’ in terms of recollection – the intended action of remembrance.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore Kraków ghetto and Auschwitz become the places of past and present reminiscences through archive footage and shooting of collected objects and photo portraits. As Didi-Huberman suggests, the photographic arts are capable of giving evidence to historical events in the continuum through the montage, which makes images dialectical.<sup>35</sup> So in the process of remembrance images are able to create a rupture.

After the Shoah, this rupture happened for historians and philosophers: Benjamin wrote his *Thesis on the Philosophy of History* in 1940 before committing suicide while escaping the Nazis; Fernand Braudel wrote his masterpiece on the Mediterranean history in a German imprisonment camp, recalling by heart every reference in his Parisian archive; at that time Adorno and Horkheimer were already in the US. The Shoah was a turning point, an irreversible event, a suspension of any previous conception of history, as well as a moment to re-think how to write it, its historiographic method and its function to society. Giorgio Agamben talks about a “blank gap” between the witness and his act of witnessing, starting from the analysis of Levi’s words in *The Drowned and the Saved*.<sup>36</sup> Didi-Huberman reminds us that Jewish people in Auschwitz tried

<sup>32</sup> Laura Rascaroli, “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments,” in *Framework*, vol. 49, no. 2, Fall 2008, pp. 34-37.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Seuil, Paris 2003.

<sup>34</sup> Malin Wahlberg, “Images, Traces, and Narrative Imagination: Documentary Approaches to Archive Memory,” in *Cinéma & Cie*, vol. XI, no. 16-17, Spring 2008, pp. 39-42.

<sup>35</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Minuit, Paris 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L’archivio e il testimone, Homo Sacer III*, Bollati

collecting proofs of the horrors “in spite of all”: with intentional modality, carefully planned regardless of danger and death. Hence, each painful image is important to understand that “that” history is “our” history. Marianne Hirsch highlights that “the phenomenology of photography” is a crucial element for “postmemory,” the memory of the second generation after those who witnessed trauma, which is based on “autobiographical readings.”<sup>37</sup> She affirms:

*[...] It is the technology of photography itself, and the belief in reference it engenders, that connects the Holocaust generation to the generation after. Photography's promise to offer an access to the event itself, and its easy assumption of iconic and symbolic power, makes it a uniquely powerful medium for the transmission of events that remain unimaginable.*<sup>38</sup>

In *Buried in Light* the archival material gives to the spectator the images of horrors on the streets: portraits of families, kids, women, men; the arrogance of the Nazis; violence, starving, death. After that, Auschwitz recalls other evidences (a past shown to us, a presence with us) and their loss (today, there, here for us). For Hirsch photos are “ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world. They enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past but also to try to reanimate it.”<sup>39</sup> So Cohen gives evidence to “the drowned and the saved”: a physical-chemical evidence through photography and cinema in filmstrips, and a lively-electronic evidence through video, accomplishing his “search for a permanent ghost.” According to Didi-Huberman, an image does not resuscitate at all, but it redeems itself: it saves a knowledge reactivating memory of its time. So remembrance is redemption, and according to Cohen, it avoids every chance of disappearance. Sontag stated:

*Remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead. So the belief that remembering is an ethical act is deep in our natures as humans, who know we are going to die, and who mourn those who in the normal course of things die before us – grandparents, parents, teachers, and older friends.*<sup>40</sup>

After the Polish section there are Budapest and Prague, with Kafka's grave and the Jewish cemetery. The montage proceeds as a line made by small openings to the history of the last two centuries not in a chronological order, making connection between totalitarianism and capitalism. Cohen finds the drift of communist regimes as well as the signs of a potential new capitalistic drift, creating

Boringhieri, Torino 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” in *Poetics Today*, no.1, Spring 2008, pp. 106-107.

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>39</sup> *Ivi*, p. 115.

<sup>40</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of the Others*, Picador, New York 2003, pp. 115-116.



'short-circuits' from Stalin to Walt Disney, from political regimes to business and corporations. The last sequence is a collage of images with the author's V.O.:

*I've often heard Eastern Europe described as "gray and depressing." Now, it will become colorful, with fast food franchises and shopping malls. Change had to come: politically, environmentally, these countries were disaster areas. But I wonder if the people aren't waking up, yet again, to an imposed system, and a new set of disappearances?*

Finally, Cohen shot his image reflected on a mirror in a train coach, this way giving a personal twist to the end of his travel/passage. This reverberates Sontag's words on Benjamin: "his goal is to be a competent street-map reader who knows how to stray. And to locate himself, with imaginary maps. Elsewhere in *A Berlin Chronicle* Benjamin relates that for years he had played with the idea of mapping his life."<sup>41</sup> Such considerations on memory and mapping are in line with two concepts that may be detected in works reassembling archival images: firstly, the "mapping impulse" as the "art of connecting" and recollecting (Teresa Castro);<sup>42</sup> secondly the "displacement" of "meaning," "time" and "space" that occurs when this material is moved from the archive to the gallery (Julia Noordegraaf).<sup>43</sup> Both concepts assume the "archival impulse" that, according to Hal Foster's thesis, is present in contemporary arts.<sup>44</sup>

*Empires of Tin* is an extreme step in this direction: mapping, recollecting, recycling, and displacing memories because "historical understanding" is "an after-life of that which is understood, whose pulse can still be felt in the present."<sup>45</sup>

### *Phantasmagoria: Empires of Tin*

History is a daisy chain of lies  
Humans love distortion  
Public record is a poetic device  
Blown away out of all proportion  
Vic Chesnutt, *Distortion in Empires of Tin*

*Empires of Tin* (live and DVD) was a performance of 16mm and DV projections with music and readings, "something between a film and a concert."<sup>46</sup> It was com-

<sup>41</sup> Susan Sontag, *Introduction*, cit., p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> Teresa Castro, "Economies du Référent 3: 'The Mapping Impulse,' or the Cartographic Reason of Contemporary Images," in *Cinéma & Cie*, no. 10, Spring 2008, pp. 41-50.

<sup>43</sup> Julia Noordegraaf, "From the Archive to the Gallery: Displacing Colonial Footage in the Work of Fiona Tan," in *Cinéma & Cie*, no. 10, Spring 2008, pp. 105-113.

<sup>44</sup> Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," in *October*, no. 110, Fall 2004, pp. 3-22.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker* in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1989 (*Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian*, in Id., *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, cit., p. 352).

<sup>46</sup> Josétxo Cerdàn, Gonzalo De Pedro, *An Interview with Jem Cohen*, cit., pp. 52-53.

missioned by Viennale-Vienna International Film Festival to be an *unicum* and was built as a montage. It was played by Bobby Sommers as narrator and Vic Chesnutt, members of Silver Mt. Zion, Guy Picciotto, Dave Payant, T. Griffin, and Catherine McRae as musicians. It was “a documentary musical hallucination”<sup>47</sup> of re-edited historical (WWI, contemporary politicians) and individual (Ground Zero, Vienna) archival materials that “foregrounds landscape as the repository of memory and emotion”:<sup>48</sup> a clash between empires as well as two types of archives. As Noordegraaf writes: “the archive serves as a site for developing alternative memories or reconstructing forgotten pasts. They achieve this by elaborating on the found image, object, and text and presenting them in a new form.”<sup>49</sup>

It is useful to analyze this work by applying the principle of Eisenstein’s vertical montage<sup>50</sup> because of its complex audio-visual [A/V] layers of narration: a first person narrator for Joseph Roth’s excerpts from *Radetzky-March* and *The Capuchin Crypt* [A]; a re-elaborated Strauss’ *Radetzky-Marsch* [A]; instrumental pieces with sounds [A]; Chesnutt’s songs [A]; film/video containing photographs [V]; films from Cohen’s archive [V]. The following movements/lines are developed: the readings that open and almost close the performance, in which songs and instrumentals are linked; each song creates loops – with its musematic and structural repetitions – and contains lyrics, as well as images and places that recur, while the instrumentals have a free-form.

The historical images of Kaiser Franz Joseph I and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as the images of war, slow down the montage of 16mm films shot in Vienna and New York today. They stage an effective association between the decline of that Empire with the actual US economic crisis. The flux has almost an arrest on the b/w still archival images of human pain and death of WWI, while narrator-Roth and songwriter Chesnutt are speechless. Only the voice on the radio and the instrumental music “talk,” with their distortion. It reverberates Benjamin’s words:

*The idea of eternal recurrence conjures the phantasmagoria of happiness from the misery of the Founders Years. This doctrine is an attempt to reconcile mutually contradictory tendencies of desire: that of repetition and that of eternity.*<sup>51</sup>

*The belief in progress – in an infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task – and the representation of eternal return are complementary. They are the indissoluble antinomies in the face of which the dialectical conception of historical time must be developed.*<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> Jem Cohen, *Director’s Note on IFC Center Website*, <http://www.ifccenter.com/films/empires-of-tin>, last visit 30 September 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Julia Noordegraaf, “From the Archive to the Gallery: Displacing Colonial Footage in the Work of Fiona Tan,” cit., p. 108.

<sup>50</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, Harcourt, New York 1942, pp. 74-109.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, cit., D9, 2, pp. 116-117.

<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, D10a, 5, p. 119.

*The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are 'status quo' is the catastrophe. It is not an ever-present possibility but what in each case is given.*<sup>53</sup>

Having access to the photo-cinematographic media – as the milieu for experiencing our perception of world – it is possible to create a present tense where past and future collides in a revolutionary way. As Somaini highlighted commenting Benjamin, critical writing is able to oppose the capitalistic culture and its “sense of dreaming,” as well as its “new mythology” marked by passages and fashion: from this perspective, its aim is “awakening, disenchantment, and demythicization.”<sup>54</sup> In these terms the archive of pain becomes the lens for reading and knowing human history: it makes possible an alternative use of images to show hidden truths. For instance, a comparison between the two family dynasties, Habsburg-Lorraine and Bush, is made when Chesnutt sings these title cards in English as verses, which are alternated with b/w photos of politicians and generals filtered in red (e.g., Reagan, Bush Sr. and Jr., Putin):

*Er ist nicht Satan  
Er ist nur ein Vorstandsvorsitzender  
Er ist nicht der Teufel  
Er ist nur ein Kapitalist  
Er ist nur schrecklich  
Er ist kein Voodoo-Meister  
Er ist nur ein Verschwörer  
Er ist nicht Luzifer  
Er ist nur ein Profiteur  
Er ist nicht der Antichrist  
Er ist nur ein Politiker  
Er ist kein Dämon  
Er ist kein Hexenmeister  
Er ist nur ein Manipulateur  
Er ist nur verkommen  
Er ist nicht geheimnisvoll  
Er ist nur finster  
Er ist nicht menschlich  
Er ist nur eine Marionette*

In the performance's structure, the archive of pain can fully accomplish a non-positivistic idea of “progress” exacerbated by “eternal recurrence.” Cohen represents this non-chronological and cyclic 20<sup>th</sup> century history, firstly tracing “a” history experienced in space and time by the self (first person V.O., personal archive, re-

<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, N9a, 1, p. 473.

<sup>54</sup> Antonio Somaini, *Sezione VII. Architettura e città*, in Walter Benjamin, *Aura e Choc. Saggi sulla teoria dei media*, edited by Andrea Pinotti, Antonio Somaini, Einaudi, Torino 2012, p. 349 (my translation).

enactment of public archive), secondly using painful archival images (public images of WWI) inside a structure of montage that creates loops. The present is a passage in which time could be experienced in an awoken state of consciousness due to dialectical images and, as in the essay film, to conflicting ideas.<sup>55</sup> It establishes a dialectical temporality between shooting, when photographic time of the still collides with cinematic time of the reel, and editing, when cinematic time of reels collides with manipulated time of video. Music challenges them with the recurrences of the song-form, doubled by returning images. The last sequence recalls images of the first sequence, the Kaiser and the Imperial Palace in Vienna, accompanied by *Radetzky-Marsch*. The image shifts to a contemporary parade with military in front of the palace.

### Conclusion

*Buried in Light* maps some crucial cities where terrible historical events of Western culture happened. The use of painful images of the Holocaust, underlined by an almost silent soundtrack, produces an arrest in the continuum, revealing this way an awakening moment of remembrance. Additionally, a comparison is made between yesterday's totalitarianism and tomorrow's capitalism, pointing to the risky "erasure" of "the uneasy layering of history, the disappearance of neighborhoods, of people, of memory."<sup>56</sup>

These elements are taken to an extreme in *Empires of Tin*, a phantasmagoria of documental traces (WWI and Ground Zero) and manipulated traces (contemporary politicians) representing human pain and the chain of eternal recurrence in Western societies. Personal and collective archives are mixed together in a temporality that allowed the simultaneous existence of the continuum through the flux of video and its arrest due to still photography. Images become passages from one to another in the video-medium that is the "*passeur*" between motion and stillness.<sup>57</sup> In these circles of narration, Roth and Chesnutt voice a personal point of view on facts (first-person omniscient narrator-Roth) and an inner voice on history (third-person super-omniscient interpreter-Chesnutt). Archival images of pain as ruptures of optical and moral shocks reveal hidden truths brought to consciousness in order to remember and to stop catastrophes (Benjamin).

*The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out what has been in remembering the dream! Therefore: remembering and awaking are most intimately related. Awakening is namely the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance.*<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1981, p. 162.

<sup>56</sup> Jem Cohen, *Central and Eastern Europe in Passing*, cit., p. 130.

<sup>57</sup> Raymond Bellour, *L'Entre-Images: photo, cinéma, vidéo*, La Différence, Paris 1990 (It. ed. *Fra le immagini. Fotografia, cinema, video*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2007, pp. 6-7).

<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, cit., K1, 3, p. 389.

*Empires of Tin* is “a mode of inquiry, where initially unlikely juxtapositions create space – for the viewer’s own questions, connections, and dark reveries,”<sup>59</sup> this way confirming the “subjective” position stated by Rascaroli: “the essayist allows the answers to emerge somewhere else, precisely in the position occupied by the embodied spectator. The meaning of the film is constructed via this dialogue. [...] It is this subjective move, this speaking in the first person that mobilizes the subjectivity of the spectator.”<sup>60</sup> Still, starting with “locating the self” (Sontag) this relationship becomes decisive to “map” (Castro) and “displace” (Noordegraaf).

*Empires of Tin* is “a free-wheeling, time-bending, historical essay”<sup>61</sup> made by recycling each format (film, video, photos) and type of archival material (historical/collective and personal/individual), as a found footage film,<sup>62</sup> and by using cinematic and video apparatus (camera, video editing, projection). An *unicum* that is possible to re-experience through the DVD format.

By doing this, Cohen accomplishes a new media history made by obsolete formats, photo-cinematographic and electronic media, private and public archives.

<sup>59</sup> Jem Cohen, *Director’s Note*, cit.

<sup>60</sup> Laura Rascaroli, “The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments,” cit., p. 36.

<sup>61</sup> Jem Cohen, *Director’s Note*, cit.

<sup>62</sup> William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films*, Anthology Film Archive, New York 1993.