

The Visual Memory of the Cold War

The Long Afterlife of the FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU Newsreels on the Building of the Berlin Wall

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It is striking how familiar images and stories from the newsreel reports of the early 1960s still are. Even after fifty years they live on in our pictorial memory and form our view of the world. The persistence of these newsreel images and constructions is related to the aesthetic form and the interlocking of newsreel with other media. Their continuing potency is also due to the particular relationship of the newsreel to the state.

The specific character of the newsreel is based on swiftly bringing spatially and temporally distant events into the here and now through the moving photographic image. Images contained in the newsreel were perceived as windows on the world; there was the “notion that if wielded with sufficient skill, the camera could provide an accurate and irrefutable account of an event in time” (Atkinson 2011, 78). This belief in the proof of photographic images developed along with the technical innovations for depicting natural phenomena and the concomitant assumption that “objective witness” and the production of scientific data guaranteed the “truth” (cf. Feenberg/Hannay 1995, 161). From 1927 onward, with the introduction of film sound, an additional acoustic accompaniment and interpretation of the visual sequences could be centrally controlled.¹ According to Nicolas

1 In 1927 the Fox Film Corporation released the first sound newsreel, FOX MOVIE TONE NEWS.

Pronay, this changed the status of the newsreel overnight (cf. 1976, 95-120). The new level of commentary, music, and sounds strengthened the newsreel's effect of authenticity² and the illusion of participation and shared experience.

THE INTERLOCKING OF THE NEWSREEL WITH OTHER MEDIA

The newsreel has been closely tied in with the illustrated press. Aside from their parallel technical development—"in continental Europe the newsreel appeared at the same time as printed photojournalism" (Baechlin/Muller-Strauss 1952, 10, translated by the author)—their contiguity was explicitly expressed in the names of the early newsreels, such as *ÉCLAIR JOURNAL* (1907), *PATHÉ'S ANIMATED GAZETTE* (1910) or *GAUMONT GRAPHIC* (1910). Since the turn of the century, the interconnection between the "mixed news" of the new mass press and true-to-life visualizations in panoramas and wax museums had led, particularly in the cities, to increasingly unbri-dled visual curiosity (cf. Schwarz 1998, 283-317). The new public sphere associated with this and the emerging "prominence of the media" influenced both press and newsreel. The visual semantics of the newsreel drew on the well-established narrative conventions of the feature film. But in contrast to the feature film, "the meaning projected onto the newsreel image was oriented to narratives that were created and distributed in other published and transmitted versions of reality: in newspapers and magazines, on the radio, in speeches and appeals" (Öhner 2002, 370, translated by the author). Decisive to the form of the "images of the world" produced by the newsreel was their structural embedding in the commercially oriented cinema.

2 I understand authenticity as aesthetic strategy, not as a description of an actual relation to pre-filmic reality. Concerning the relation of documentary footage and authenticity cf. Hattendorf 1994.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEWSREEL AND THE STATE

In political terms, the early newsreels operated with the imagination of a neutral, unbiased state. This attestation by the state or the ruling class was of great importance to the credibility status of the newsreels. In this sense, Ute Daniel described them as “governmental propaganda,” an “ensemble of strategies for the creation of political meaning and the control of opinion and perception” that aimed to intensify “moods in the population for which the originator can then be presented as executor” (1994, 72ff., translated by the author). Even if the extent of their effect remains questionable, it is beyond doubt that the newsreels as a whole were placed in the service of state propaganda (Reeves 1999, 157). They influenced both emerging public discourse and the collective pictorial memory, and generated attentiveness to the functional elites. The genre was particularly attractive to politics, as it can be oriented to current interests more easily and at shorter notice than the feature film.

Due to continual economic dependence, politics and business were able to exert influence on newsreel production through subventions, and thus to gain access to a permanent structure for the conveyance of images and narratives, and to a large audience (cf. Schwarz 2002, 16-18). At the start of the cold war, the newsreels enjoyed a prominent place in the media landscape, and were shown before feature films worldwide. A report commissioned by UNESCO during the 1950s suggests that the sameness of coverage, unified perspective, and lack of dissenting voices heightened the impression that newsreels offered a definitive account of events. The report warns that the “quality of conviction” given by the newsreel’s combination of words and images creates an impression of objectivity that can mask their status as instruments of politics (cf. Baechlin/Muller-Strauss 1952, 31-45).

THE FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU

With the outbreak of the First World War, the continual production of newsreels was given government support in Germany, thus confirming and sustaining the newsreels’ relationship to the state described above. Follow-

ing the war, American film corporations such as 20th Century Fox, Universal, Paramount, and a little later MGM began to dominate the European film markets because of the strength of their financial resources and the weakened state of the post-war cinematic infrastructure of many European countries. Primarily due to the expensive introduction of sound, German newsreel production came to be concentrated in the hands of a few dominant film corporations from the 1930s onward.³ From 1940, only the National Socialist *DIE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU* was shown in Germany and Austria. After the Second World War, the Allies took over film reporting and the production of newsreels became an instrument of “re-education.”⁴ State newsreel production was supported by the British from 1950 and by the Americans from 1952.⁵ In 1950, the newsreels from the American production company Fox returned to Germany. *FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU* was the only German-language commercial newsreel in the German-language market after the war. Against the background of the European Recovery Program,⁶ *FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU* stood for a new, comprehensive form of political communication. Fox had branches in West Berlin and Vienna, and operated under American management and editorship. While the foreign news from globally operating 20th Century Fox was compiled from around the world, the production of national media culture was reserved for local journalists. The *FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU* there-

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- 3 In the 1930s, the most commonly screened newsreels were the *UFA-*, *DEULIG-*, and *EMELKA-TONWOCHE*, as well as the *FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU*.
 - 4 The Allies set out to re-educate the German population after 1945. The changed aims of this program, due to the cold war, were later expressed in the term “re-orientation” (cf. Brigitte Hahn 1997, p. 235).
 - 5 The federally owned *NEUE DEUTSCHE WOCHENSCHAU* (NDW) and the *WELT IM BILD* were shown in 1953-62 in around two thirds of the cinemas in the Federal Republic and West Berlin. The rest shared the *FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU* and the French-supported *WELT IM BILD* (cf. Uta Schwarz 2003, 189).
 - 6 The Marshall Plan, officially called the European Recovery Program, was the most important American program for the economic recovery of war-destroyed Western Europe. Three reasons can generally be considered objectives of the program: help for the destitute and even starving population, containment of the Soviet Union and communism, and the creation of a market for American over-production.

fore acted as an interface between the global and the national visual memory, and shaped the recollective images of the global news market. Today, its edited newsreels are distributed under individual years as “a piece of history in moving images!”⁷

The lasting effect of newsreel images as a determining element of post-war visual culture can be seen in the representation of one of the key events of the cold war⁸: the building of the Berlin Wall. Here it becomes clear that the newsreel material is both an indication of a transnational pictorial memory—which can be understood as a reservoir of widely circulated pictures made understandable and connectable across nations, languages and generations—and an archive of identity concepts. The popular media in particular were part of the culture of a “divided world” (1961, report 41; 1962, report 18). The cold war manifested not only in economic, political, and military endeavor; the division of the world into two blocs was a central element of the propagandistically instrumentalized area of entertainment and the media. Images and readings of the confrontation “in struggle for freedom” (1961, report 41) that are still circulating today can be traced back to newsreel reports of the time.

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- 7 20th Century Fox builds on shared recollection with the distribution of annual compilations of the FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU. Its advertising—“For decades the famous FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU reported as the voice of the world on sporting events, fashion trends, world catastrophes, attitudes to life, and memorable occurrences ... Moving, unforgettable moments and endearing insights into everyday life”—corresponds to the general contemporary view of the newsreel as an “unbiased chronicle.”
- 8 In the postwar period, the different aims and interests in reordering the world gave rise to a conflict between the “Western powers,” led by the United States, and the “Eastern bloc,” led by the Soviet Union; a conflict that was waged from 1945 to 1990 with all available means, but not as an all-out war. The American journalist Walter Lippmann first described this situation in 1947 as a “cold war,” a phrase he had heard from Bernard Baruch.

THE “SELF” AND THE “ALIEN” OF THE COLD WAR

All contributions to the Fox Tönende Wochenschau of 1961,⁹ the year in which the Berlin Wall was built, address a “we” that takes form in a differentiation from what it doesn’t include. Even their title images distinguish between and define the “self” and the “alien.”

Fig. 1: The own: “The struggle for peace”



Source: DAS WAR 1961, Beitrag 14 ‘Kampf um den Frieden’

The American president John F. Kennedy is introduced as the most important representative of this collective “self” (1961, report 3, 14, 16 & 35), with the legend “The Struggle for Peace” (1961, report 14, see Fig. 1), and his intentions are interpreted and evaluated from the very beginning. Ken-

9 The VHS FOX TÖNENDE WOHENSCHAU. DAS WAR 1961, distributed by 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, contains a selection of reportage from the year 1961. Five reports deal with the situation in Berlin. The corresponding footage archived in the Filmarchiv Austria is sometimes more comprehensive and was shortened for the commercial video tape.

nedy is usually shown frontally; the visual perspective and framing used lend his words great authority. Kennedy's speeches are appraised as "impressive" by the commentary of every newsreel, and the audience is reminded in the voice over that the United States "safeguards the freedom of West Berlin." America and the non-socialist countries are striving for "peace"; it is assured that there is "full agreement" between Western politicians such as Konrad Adenauer and J. F. Kennedy (1961, report 16). There is also a consensus in the newsreel between Western government bodies and citizens: the police have the "unpleasant task of reprimanding West Berliners, with whom they see eye to eye" (1962, report 40).

The newsreel's affinity with military campaigns remained unchanged in the aftermath of the Second World War. American troop movements were accompanied by music full of suspense and narrated as an adventure with an open end. A NATO winter maneuver was celebrated with superlatives and festive music as the "biggest winter maneuver of the Western world" (1961, report 7).

Fig. 2: The alien: "This is what the workers' paradise looks like"



Source: DAS WAR 1961, Beitrag 47 'Wohnungen an der Sektorengrenze'

As the opposing power, the Soviet Allies are described as aggressive and “responsible for all consequences” (1961, report 35). The Berlin Wall is described as the “most shameful building of the Ulbricht regime,” a barrier which “inhumanly blocks its disenfranchised citizens the way to the better Germany” (1961, report 50). The commentary suggests that “freedom and human dignity end in the streets of East Berlin.” (1961, report 47). “Innocent people [are] forced to leave their homes in Ulbricht’s workers’ and peasants’ state. Raiding parties of the Soviet-friendly Ulbricht regime deport their fellow countrymen.” The GDR is described as a “huge prison camp of the Soviet zone.” Water cannons are depicted menacingly. “Brutal arbitrary measures” are in force here, the montage implies, before the eyes of uncomprehending children (1961, report 47). The combination of sound and image often diverges. Footage of advancing tanks, for example, is accompanied by an ironic comment from the voiceover: “This is what the workers’ paradise looks like” (1961, report 47, see Fig. 2).

The political newsreel reportage covering the United States, also referred to as the “free West,” the “free part of Germany,” (1962, report 18, 38, and 40) and the military maneuvers of the American Allies is related “authentically,” through a closed narrative illusion of reality. The manner of presentation is an invitation to identify as seamlessly as possible with “Western” politics and its content and personalities. There is little leeway for interpretation: the classical cinematographic portrayal gives the impression of direct participation. Methodically produced visual evidence suggests the truth and transparency of what is being shown.

When the Soviet Allies, referred to as “dictators” and “the ruler of the zone” (1961, report 38) or “Ulbricht’s Prison” (1962, report 18) become the subject of coverage, the reportage is characterized by a tension between image and commentary. Distancing, irony, or open defamation dominates. Miriam Hansen has pointed out that the aesthetic mode of authenticity in the newsreels is a marker for one’s own in order to distance oneself from what is alien through an emphatically theatrical, “unnatural” stylization (1991, 55). The differentiation between the self and the alien, good and bad, peaceful and aggressive, freedom and prison camp, is likewise produced aesthetically.

BUILDING THE BERLIN WALL IN NEWSREELS

The reportage directly referring to the building of the Berlin Wall describes the day before it went up as a paradisiacal situation. Footage of an exuberant children's party, carousel rides, and a game of Ring around the Rosie with West Berlin's mayor, Willi Kressmann, is narrated as follows: "It is August 12, 1961. As in every year, the West Berlin district of Kreuzberg organizes a children's party at the sector border [...] everyone is happy and gay" (Film Archive Austria 1961, see Fig. 3). On August 13, 1961, the day after the construction of the Berlin Wall, everything has changed: "The eastern sector of Berlin became a military camp. Tranquil parks become the deployment zone of the Soviet tanks. Soldiers of an enforced other Germany stand on guard against Germany" (Film Archive Austria 1961, see Fig. 4).

Fig. 3 & 4: In the west: "Everyone is happy and gay" (left) and "Tranquil parks become the deployment zone of Soviet tanks" (right).



Sources: DAS WAR 1962, Beitrag 38 'Ein Jahr danach – Die Mauer' (left), DAS WAR 1961, Beitrag 38 'Aufmarsch in Ostberlin' (right).

The report divides time into "before" and "after" the Wall's construction, and the commentary makes both the East German population and the "West" into victims of the "inhuman" East German politicians.

The images from the East are apparently shown for what they really are through the friction between visuals and commentary. The "unjust regime" of Eastern Germany is portrayed by the FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU with footage of barbed wire and military parades, and is charged and convicted of deception, false promises, and the instrumentalization of "innocent chil-

dren.” “But”, the voiceover claims “the reality looks different”¹⁰ (Film Archive Austria 1961, see Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: The gulf between image and voice over: “But the reality looks different.”



Source: DAS WAR 1961, Beitrag 38 ‘Militäraufmarsch in Ostberlin’

Aside from these aesthetic distancing strategies, documentary images consistently remain a part of the production of evidence. The photograph of the border guard, Conrad Schumann, jumping over the barrier in Bernauer Straße becomes a symbol that unites all elements of the narrative (Fig. 6): “With courage and despair he broke through the barbed wire. With courage and despair a young border guard crosses the arbitrary boundary he is supposed to guard as a German against Germans” (Film Archive Austria 1961). The picture of Conrad Schumann, who chooses to live in “the free

10 The reports of the German newsreel agencies likewise focus on human suffering, and symbolize the GDR as a dictatorship through use of images of barbed wire and the military (for these productions, cf. Steinle 2003, 186-189).

part of Germany” apparently confirms all previous narratives of the news-reel and becomes a concise symbol of Cold War rhetoric. Through contextualization and extensive circulation in media, the image can only be understood in combination with the previous contents. The “arrival of 1,500 American soldiers” finally celebrates the “unfailing help” of the United States, and invokes the community of the West: “Now the West Berliners know once again that they do not stand alone in the struggle for freedom. The West has not forgotten us” (1962, report 41).

Fig. 6: “With courage and despair he broke through the barbed wire“



Source: DAS WAR 1961, Beitrag 38 ‘Militäraufmarsch in Ostberlin’

This perspective introduced in 1961 had become well-known visual and narrative elements and a solid body of knowledge a year later.¹¹ In 1962, the reportage drew on material from the previous year as a matter of course. The West is represented by economic prosperity; the “economic miracle” is

11 Here I refer to the six contributions to the commercial DVD FOX TÖNENDE WOCHENSCHAU, DAS WAR 1962 that relate to the division of Berlin.

depicted affirmatively: “The result of wise and consistent economic policy. Minister Ludwig Erhard has been proved right in his plans. So let’s drink to that” (1962, report, see Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: “The result of wise and consistent economic policy [...], let’s drink to that”.



Source: DAS WAR 1962, Beitrag 5 ‘Die Währungsreform’

East Germany is still portrayed through images of border guards and barbed wire. The suffering of those affected is primarily illustrated with images of people waving over the border or women weeping at the border and spectacular escape attempts (Figs. 8 and 9). As Schindelbeck explains, “In order to make the message of the ‘inhuman structure’ [...] obvious, visual documents showing people in direct, fateful contact with it, tragically coming to grief on it, or heroically overcoming it were indispensable” (translated from Schindelbeck 2011, 42).¹²

12 The extensive visual documentation of the Berlin Wall from West Germany narrowed at times to two photographs. Images of the “wall jumper” Conrad Schu-

Fig. 8 & 9: The suffering: women weeping at the border (left) and spectacular escape attempts (right).



Sources: DAS WAR 1961, Beitrag 50 'Die Mauer in Berlin' (left), DAS WAR 1961, Beitrag 47 'Wohnungen an der Sektorengrenze' (right).

On its first anniversary (1962, report 38), the coverage aggressively called for remembrance of the building of the Berlin Wall: "Have we already forgotten how things used to be?" Images from the reportage of 1961 are now given a pointed commentary, and have become a closed narrative:¹³ "There are no children playing any more. Right through Berlin, the streets are being dug up. Tanks have been brought in; heavily armed soldiers have been mustered. Barbed-wire barriers are being laid. Walter Ulbricht, prime minister of a so-called republic that even describes itself as democratic, has deployed German people to separate German people from one another with violence." The report is a call to live through and confirm the newsreel version of the events in all its emotional complexities. Other perspectives are excluded; the context and background of the confrontation is dropped in order to bring one specific interpretation into focus.

These potent newsreel images took on a special role: the material was dubbed and broadcast around the world. However, most of the information about the events is conveyed exclusively through the commentary; the images rely on previous knowledge shaped by media. "News images basically

mann and the "wall victim" Peter Fechter determined the image of the Wall in the "West" for decades.

13 Many of the subsequent Wall films make use of material and motifs produced during and after the first weeks of the construction. For the numerous Wall films, cf. Steinle 2003, 175-186 and 207 et seqq.

prove nothing,” observe Hans Petschar and Georg Schmid in their analysis of Austrian newsreels between 1949-1960, “and they are only capable of developing their theoretically inherent semantic value when they are related to older, already collected images” (translated from 1990, 108). The newsreel images of the building of the Wall also appeal to the emotions and ideas of earlier portrayals. Stereotypical portrayals of the Allies and the ideologies associated with them, which had been circulating in the newsreels and other media since the late 1940s, are re-edited and recycled. The images are produced and selected in such a way as to link in to previous cultural knowledge and take up the content in other media. “By situating contemporarily valid image worlds within a particular horizon, the images, sounds, and commentaries of the newsreels function in the mode of invocation” (translated from Öhner 2002, 371).

The effectiveness obtained by the narratives through these images is clear to the newsreels’ editors, and is set out by the voiceover: “These are images of harrowing drama,” and “speak more powerfully than words”; “these images speak a language that knows no words” (1961, reports 47 and 50).

THE PERSISTENCE OF NEWSREEL IMAGES

These images are circulating once again, decades after their original production. In the early 1990s, the collapse of the GDR and unification of the two German states became a cause for sounding out sustainable interpretations of the past, explaining the present with a view to the past. The officially celebrated anniversaries of German unification (October 3, Day of German Unity) and the television programs produced for it provide a short introduction to the official readings of national history.

The media event 10 YEARS OF GERMAN UNITY, in 1999, was shown on numerous television channels primarily as a celebration of overcoming the past and of embarking on a new beginning as a “united nation” within Europe.¹⁴ Formally, the festivities appeared on the one hand to be the staged

14 After a decade of negotiation, the “tenth anniversary of German unity” was celebrated particularly elaborately in the media. German “reunification” was equally celebrated on the anniversary of the “Wende“ (turnaround) in 1999.

conclusion of a decade of political negotiation about how the GDR and the shared history of the two Germanys should be commemorated. On the other, the program seemed to be the beginning of a whole series of anniversaries that would consolidate these official views of the German past.¹⁵ Particularly important in the broadcasting of the 1999 ceremony were three compilations of images that underpinned the event's central content and reinforced a specific remembrance of, and perspective on, national history. Their combination of heterogeneous elements reveals a narrative contour that becomes a closed historical account. The archive images compiled for television programs and on the anniversaries of the "Wende" (turnaround) and "Wiedervereinigung" (reunification)¹⁶ adhere firmly to the visual semantics of the Cold War, even though having been actualized for the compilations of the festivities by a new montage and voiceover.

The images used from the 1960s are emotionally charged: "Each in its own way has the status of a 'witness for the prosecution'" (translated from Schindelbeck 2011, 40). Like the newsreels from 1961 and 1962, the audiovisual remembrances produced for television broadcast on the anniversaries of "German unity" are conceived as a binary opposition of the failed GDR and the united Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). The GDR is still the negative foil to which the (now new) FRG is contrasted. The sequences represent a selective construction of the history of the division of Germany and its overcoming, while at the same time functioning as a meta-narration of the "victory of good over evil," or the overcoming of human suffering.

Despite their concreteness, the individual images are imprecise. We see a woman weeping because—the image suggests—the wall has separated her from those close to her (Fig. 10). People are waving because—the image suggests—this is the only possible form of contact between relatives over the now closed border. The images of "waves of refugees" from the "Soviet zone" are utilized, like the images of the Cold War, as an argument

15 A central motif of the commemoration was the Wall. In individual productions, but above all throughout the entire program, remembrance of the Wall was constructed as a unifying symbol of the suffering of "the Germans" from the GDR and the FRG.

16 *FESTAKT ZUR EINHEIT 1999*. The media ceremony, anchored by Anne Will, was a summary and rearrangement of the official commemorative event by the television channels SFB and WDR.

in support of the “West” as “the better Germany” (DAS WAR 1961, Beitrag 47, ‘Wohnungen an der Sektorengrenze’). The “way to a longed-for new life” (ibid.) continues to be depicted as the departure from a militarized zone, illustrated by the same images of dramatic escape attempts through barbed-wire barriers or spectacular jumps out of windows (Fig. 11).

Fig. 10 & 11: Persistent interpretation nearly 40 years later: women weeping at the border (left) and spectacular escape attempts (right) restaged in 1999.



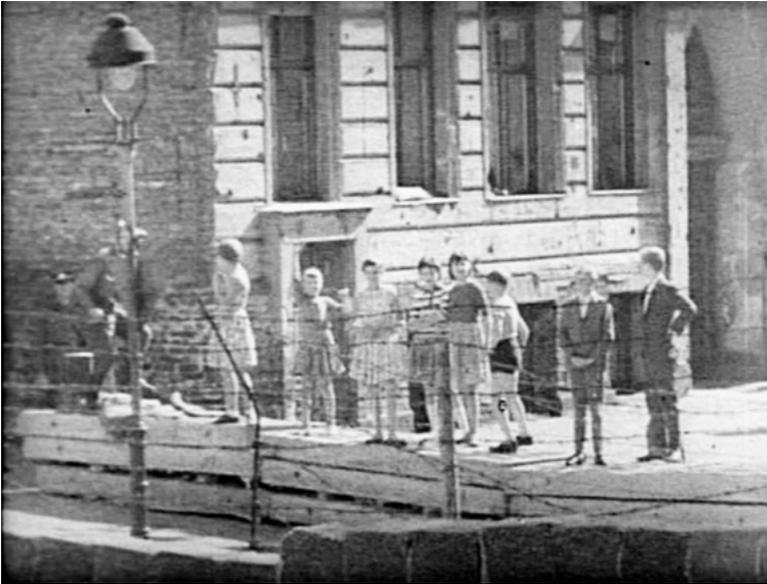
Source: (FEST ZUR EINHEIT 1999, Coproduction by SFB & WDR) (left & right).

With ideological zeal, the newsreels of the 1960s compare the GDR to the National Socialist state. “These images could come from the years of Hitler’s tyranny, but they were filmed in September 1961” (1961, report 47). The voiceover narration explicitly equates Walter Ulbricht with Adolf Hitler, noting that “dictators always loved to present themselves as friends of children” (1961, report 38). This parallelization of the GDR with National Socialism at the height of the Cold War became unusual for several decades. Almost forty years later, after 1989, in order to render the historically preserved narrative of the “reunification” plausible, the GDR is narrated as the extension of National Socialism again—with recourse to the newsreel material (Fig. 12).

“There was no overthrow of images after the war. Today we look at them as documents,” comments Hartmut Bitomsky in a montage of excerpts from National Socialist KULTURFILM documentaries in his film DEUTSCHLANDBILDER (FRG, 1983). This observation applies not only to National Socialist image production; there was no overthrow of images, no iconoclasm after the Cold War either. The newsreel images from this time

are frequently shown today as self-explanatory historical documents, thus perpetuating a media understanding that “sees [these] documentary images as depictions of reality and not as constructs bound to intention and context” (translated from Schwarz 2002, 187). In contemporary media theory approaches, no material is allowed a privileged approach to reality (cf. Hohenberger 2012).

Fig. 12: Parallelization of the GDR with National Socialism, 1961.



Source: DAS WAR 1961, Beitrag 47 ‘Wohnungen an der Sektorengrenze’

Such a simplified notion of media goes hand in hand with a reductionist view of history, in which complexity and context are neglected in favor of usability. The use of the newsreel material in accord with the logic and needs of television in remembering the Berlin Wall extends the logic of the Cold War with the juxtaposition of two systems presented as representing “good” and “evil”. It encourages a reading in which “the Germans” become “victims of history” through their suffering. In the 1960s, newsreel images showed Germans who were suffering because of the “inhumanity” of the GDR. Nearly forty years later, taken out of context of the historical reports,

those widely circulated pictures became even more vague: now they function to show that “the Germans had suffered”.

According to Uta Schwarz, one quality of historical documentary footage lies in the fact that “it enables the atmosphere of a time to be felt in extract, thus creating both distance and closeness between today’s viewer and the depicted past.” On the one hand, the newsreels show us things that no longer exist today; on the other, they show us how things were portrayed at a specific time for a cinema audience, allowing us to experience something of what life was like for those who came before us. This friction between “near and far” no longer occurs when archive material is used in the festivities around “ten years of German unity,” without the original soundtrack and re-edited, thus merely functioning as marker of “authenticity” and to illustrate a present-day historical discourse. “Undressed” in this way, the abstraction of most newsreel images causes them to become loaded with a historical and cultural meaning that stems primarily from equally media-produced knowledge. According to Vivian Sobchack, such image fragments, “because of their abstraction and vagueness,” invite us to “name” and “locate” time and space, and to activate them for narratives. The images “appeal to our knowledge, and invoke our presuppositions about the contexts they lack—and thus become loaded with a historical accuracy that, because of their abstraction, is absent from the images themselves” (translated from Sobchack [1999] 2003, 142).

In negotiating the meaning and memory of a political event, visual elements of its coverage and later portrayal are of great importance. They underpin the central content of the narrative, and reinforce a specific memory of it. Already existing bodies of knowledge are confirmed and reified by the deeply interconnected images and narratives of the newsreels. Recourse to newsreel material is thus also a practice of stabilizing interpretations and value systems. Once introduced, the newsreel images appear “natural” and “accessible”; they become quasi-objective representation. The interpretations and bodies of knowledge naturalized as a consensus are safeguarded by the “accessibility” of existing stereotypes and dichotomies. Archive images can also be drawn upon to validate and authenticate new historical narratives, as shown by the example of the historicization of “German unity”.

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