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Re-writing History / Re-constructing Memory: Uses and Re-uses of Archival and Found Footage in Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi's Barbaric Land (Pays Barbare, 2013)

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Abstract

In the realm of the moving image we can find several examples of a tendency to revisit the past in order to rewrite or reconstruct historical events. Following the ideas of Ariella Azoulay (2019, 2013) about the potential history as a way to imagine other possible histories and the role of the archival materials for the reconstruction of the narratives about the past, this article analyzes the ways in which Yervant Gianikian (1942) and Angela Ricci Lucchi (1942-2018), throughout their works, call into question the hegemonic narratives of history. I will focus in the analysis of their film *Barbaric Land (Pays Barbare*, France, 2013), in which the directors worked with archival footage from the 1920's and 1930's, related to the Italian colonization of Ethiopia. The text addresses how, by using montage as a theoretical and technological tool, the couple examine critically those documents and narratives to contrast the colonial politics of Mussolini with the shocking reality of the African territory and its inhabitants. Finally, the paper analyzes the manipulation processes of those materials and the ways in which they explore the Fascist ideology that produced the images of the so called "barbaric land" and its "primitive" inhabitants.

Keywords: Experimental Cinema; Archive; History; Memory; Film Studies.

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Introduction

In a letter published in the thematic dossier of the third issue of Found Footage Magazine (2017), dedicated to Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Atom Egoyan refers to their work as a powerful and spirited reanimation and re-signification of various documents and expressions of time. Egoyan also recognizes the status of their works, based on documentation and preservation of archival and found materials, as a response to the contemporary representational crisis or, in other words, to the fact that the world is becoming "increasingly drowned in useless imagery" (Egoyan 2017: 14).

In their manifesto, *Our Analytical Camera* (2017), the filmmakers state: "we travel cataloguing and we catalogue travelling, through a cinema we film anew". This sentence might define the totality of the artists' *oeuvre*. From their first experiments with *cinema profumato*, a group of multisensorial film performances, based on the odors and fragrances of the objects and places they used to film, to the last film of Gianikian, *Angela's Diaries* (*I diari di Angela - Noi due cineaste*, 2018), made after the death of his wife on February 2018, their works deal with the recollection and classification of images and documents that later will be mobilized, rearranged and manipulated.

According to Paula Arantzazu Ruiz (2017), the filmmakers began to conceive the idea of their works as catalogues with the making of *Catalogue of Decomposition* (*Catalogo della scomposicione*, 1975): "a ten-minute film described by the artists as a photo album of the Central European people and landscapes" (18). After that, the notion of cataloging became a recurrent motive in their films. But it was after the 1979 discovery of a collection of *Baby Pathè* films at the premises of a dried flower trader in Milan, that the couple turned their attention to found footage and archival materials as Robert Lumley (2011) states. These findings consisted on some documentaries, scientific movies, as well as amateur and fictional films, "dating from 1922 to 1928, and belonging therefore to the era of 'silent cinema'" (Lumley 2011: 30). The treasure of 9,5 mm stock became part of their collection and was catalogued, under several and exhaustive categories, following a comparative method.

This practice involves not only a vast research, through which the couple find the raw materials, but of the disruption of the original meaning of the filmic footage that they have used in other films, examples of which include *Criminal Animals* (*Animali Criminali*, Italy, 1994), in which the couple recycled some animal sequences that belong to the Luca Comerio's archive, previously used in *From the Pole to the Equator* (*Dal Polo all'equatore*, Italy, 1986), and *Oh! Man* (*Oh! Uomo*, Italy, 2004), as well as in their last commissioned film *Où en êtes-vous?* (2015), a work about displacement, made for the *Centre Pompidou*. In all of these examples, the artists studied every single image/frame in detail, classifying it not only according to its recurrent themes (like war, colonialism, religion, violence, etc.), but to the elements that constantly appear on them, like gestures, places, animals, customs and ways of living, artifacts, etc. I argue that this act of subjecting the material to a meticulous formal and contextual analysis in order to extract them from the historical continuous which they supposedly contain and represent implies both reflection and reinterpretation. It can also be described in terms of what Ariella Azoulay (2014, 2019) has called "potential history" which I analyze in relation to *Barbaric Land (Pays Barbare*, France, 2013).

1 Re-constructing memory

Potential history is, according to Ariella Azoulay, the consideration of factors that determine the investigation of the past through violence in the double sense of historical events and as the condition under which most of the colonial and war archives are constituted. Therefore, it reclaims the necessity of a re-construction of memory in the terms of carrying out a reconfiguration of the hegemonic historical narratives and their relationship with the present. This means that the archive should and must be reactivated in several productive ways in order to find out what has been erased or left out from the historical construction of collective memory.

Following this idea, I contend that *Barbaric Land (Pays Barbare*, France, 2013) can be described as an exercise of potential history that takes form through several formal strategies such as montage, reframing, tinting and slowing down the original reproduction speed of the images. Through them, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi look closer into the ruins and fragments of some of the images contained in the filmic and doc-

umental archives about the Italian Empire's colonial enterprise, in order not only to reconstruct the violence that shapes them, but to pose a severe critique about the traces of a forgotten past (therefore, of a lost memory) contained in them.

In this film, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi approach the history of the conquest of Ethiopia during 1936. The film is composed of archival footage from the 1920's and 1930's, that supposedly belonged to several anonymous and private collections. Through the re-framing and re-filming, *Barbaric Land* (2013) examines the role of the images (photographic and cinematographic) within the rise of Italian imperialism and fascism. Without being explicit, the filmmakers also ask several questions about the quality of those images as witnesses —and, hence, as instruments of memory—, accomplices or even instruments serving the political interests of Mussolini and the fascist party.

I claim that the kind of montage used by the artists operates allegorically in the Benjaminian sense: as a technique implying "a mode of writing in which image and signification are split apart and meaning is built on the ruins of historical detail" (Russell 2018: 23). Moreover, Jeffrey Skoller (2005) and Catherine Russell (2018), both of whom studied the relations between archival practices, the moving image and the production of historical narratives beyond documentary and fictional forms of cinema, considered this reactivation of the past by bringing it into dialogue with the present, through montage, as allegorical. This suggests new possibilities for the reactivation of every object that became meaningless by the passage of time and the production of new meanings in the present by bringing together, by the means of juxtaposition, the "fragmented, fractured and decontextualized remains of the past" (Skoller 2005: xviii).

The film can be understood as an ethical action against the separation of the past from the present. That is to say, as an attempt to transform the epistemology of the Italian colonial history and its narratives in order to ethically reconstruct memory. Its production is "an effort to approach a discursive or archival point zero from which one could begin to see that which could not have been seen, as the discourse and the archives were" (Azoulay 2013: 551) constructed by the political regimes. Furthermore, the latter implies the tracing of the possibilities of what has been erased and silenced from the popular memory and the hegemonic historical discourses to force us to think about the conditions of contemporary racial violence.

2 Re-writing of history

The provenance of the images that Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi reframe, re-film and show in slow motion in *Barbaric Land* (2013), is unknown. The only statement given by the artists is that they used to be part of a private collection, what makes almost impossible to trace their origins. However, I argue not only that they respond to the conventions of ethnographic and anthropologic documentary, but also to what Ruth Ben-Ghiat has called "Italian Fascism's Empire cinema". This term comprehends a vast corpus of fictional and non-fictional films that contributed to the shaping of the Empire's mythical image, through its role "as an agent of conquest and mass regimentation" (Ben-Ghiat, 2010: 180).

For the Fascist party, cinema represented a massive weapon, incredibly useful for the transmission and expansion of the regime's imperialist politics. To prove its utility, the production of a vast amount of films and news reels were sponsored by public and private institutions which also funded several colonial missions. The visual materials collected by specialized crews ended up giving shape to several "archives of still and moving images that were diffused to the general public through 'ethnographic atlases', photo essays, and through exhibitions such as the 1940 *Mostra delle terre d'oltremare* (Exhibition of Overseas Territories)" (Ben-Ghiat, 2010: 51).

During the last years of the 1920's and after the collapse of the *Cinestudio*, managed by Stefano Pittaluga, the Fascist State founded the *Istituto LUCE* and took control over the film industry. The majority of the films produced during those years relied on the construction of an imaginary visuality of the colonized territories, based on the greatness of the landscapes, and its ultimate aim was to give shape to an exoticized image of the colonies in order to promote them as the greatest touristic attractions.

The film industry's efforts were directed towards the implementation of a political agenda and a national policy according to the popular ideals of the epoch. According to Gian Piero Brunetta (2009), "in these films, the impoverished and underdeveloped Italy is practically invisible and remains, as much as possible, beyond the

camera's gaze" (74). The aim of these films was not only to show the road Italy was taking towards its modernization, but to construct an image of the Empire as a triumphant war machine. This image of the Empire resulted in the constitution of a strong and complex formal and narrative system that provided the necessary referential frameworks to understand the films.

Moreover, several newsreels such as *Notizie dell'Imperio* (1936), celebrated the accomplishments of Il Duce's imperial campaigns during the Abyssinian war while shaping the public opinion about the subject. This war, also known as the Second Italo-Ethiopian War, took place between October 1935 and May 1936 and consisted on several aggression attacks, ordered by Mussolini, against the Ethiopian people. These attacks included the use of modern and chemical weapons such as mustard bombs, and caused the suffering and death of thousands of Ethiopians.

At its beginning, most of the Italian people were not in favor of the battle, however, as Alberto Sbacchi (1976) states, "fascist propaganda and the secret police prevented any possible opposition from developing" (123), and, in order to do so, the government began to forge an epical narrative about the colonial campaign to gain the people's approval. In the filmic domain, propaganda documentaries such as Corrado D'Errico's *The Path of Heroes (Il cammino degli eroi*, Italy, 1937), as well as feature films like Augusta Genina's *The White Squadron (Lo squadron bianco*, Italy, 1936), followed several formal strategies such as the use of magnificent aerial shots and the construction of dramatic histories that appealed to the sensibility of the audiences and sought for their approval of the Ethiopian invasion.

With this visual legacy in mind, in *Barbaric Land* (2013), Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi draw our attention to the complex and contradictory reality that lies behind the fascists visual monuments perpetuated by these aforementioned filmic examples. Their analytical camera allows them to perform an ethical act that "assess an appraisal of history and its image based on a regardful distance that progressively fades and becomes respectful commitment" (de Rosa 2017:34), about the violence which shaped the official narratives of the performance of the Italian troops during the invasion of Ethiopia, but also about the persistence of colonial and racial violence in contemporary Europe.

The montages of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi "no longer prioritize a certain chronological and documentary order of the facts, instead [they seek] out obsessions, survivals and reappearances of forms" (Ruiz 2017: 23). In an attempt to deconstruct and re-write the linearity of historical narratives, the images become discontinuous phenomena and are re-articulated into other kinds of *continuum* in which different types of relationships and analogies are created. This implies that history is problematized and renegotiated in terms of constructed narratives that cannot be thought as a set of causes and consequences. In this sense, I assert that the filmmakers recognize the mediation of several power relations in the constitution of the archive and its documents as a complex network of knowledge. Thus, other lectures about the past and the present as a problematic conjunction become possible.

3 Re-construction and re-writing as acts of potential history: ethics and aesthetics

As I have stated before, the interweaving of multiple temporalities by means of montage, as well as the physical intervention on every single frame that takes place throughout the film, should be seen as an ethical act of resistance that seeks to re-write history by re-constructing the memory of "what was, what is, and what may well be" (de Rosa 2017:33). These strategies are complemented by firstly, a critical deacceleration of the reproduction speed of some sequences whose narrative continuity has been disrupted through their extraction from their original contexts and secondly, by the presence of a voice-over that tends to be non-diegetic since its dialogue does not describe what we see, but problematizes it.

I claim that this set of strategies should be seen as an attempt to constitute an act of potential history that refuses the existence of a univocal and almost mythological past of the Italian colonial enterprise in Ethiopia by carefully reconstructing it through what it has left behind. Following this idea, in this section I analyze several sequences of *Barbaric Land* (2013) following the microscopical approach of the filmmakers to some visual fragments that commemorate Il Duce's Imperial campaigns as great missions of civilization and modernization

for the Ethiopian population. Moreover, I examine the ways in which they construct a kind of counter narrative by facing those images with the violent reality that lies behind their production and that appears to be traceable up to the present.

It seems to me that, by showing interest in the multiplicity of time involved in the notion of the archive and also in the present as creative force, the filmmakers embrace the logic of Walter Benjamin's historical materialism. According to Benjamin, for the historical materialist, the experience of the past is produced as something unique by the conditions of the present but, moreover, it is necessary to recognize the existence of the past only in relation to the present and its continuous transformation through the materials and remains of the past in the forms in which they continue to exist: ruins, detritus, documents, images, etc.

This montage logic, that is also allegorical as I have explained above, operates since the very beginning of *Barbaric Land* (2013), when two intertitles appear to announce that we are about to see the images of Mussolini's corpse. Then, we are confronted with the images of the dead body as it was exhibited, during April 29th, 1945, to the masses in Milan's *Piazzale Loreto*. These texts, in which we can read "April 29, 1945, Milan-*Piazzale Loreto*", and "the corpse of *Il Duce*", are followed by a remarkable quote of Italo Calvino in which he exposes the paradox between the lack of images of the fascist's massacres and the excess of images of *Il Duce*'s death. The caption "After initiating so many massacres without images, the final images of him are those of his massacre", is followed by an overwhelming silence and, then a ten-minute loop of blue tinted and slowed-down images, and then we see massive amounts of people approaching to a group of dead bodies lying on the floor, among which are the corpses of Benito Mussolini and Clara Petacci, his lover, after being arrested and executed on April 28th, 1945.

According to Luca Acquarelli (2017), these images are part of the repository used in the RAI's documentary series *Combat Film*, aired between March and April 1994. The content featured in the series was originally shot "by American soldiers in Italy in the final weeks of the war" (Pezzotti, 2016:125), and stored in the National Archives in Washington. Supposedly, the aim of the project, according to its producers, Roberto Olla and Leonardo Valente, was to present the materials without any kind of intervention, except for the musical score, composed by Ezio Rinaldi. Its first episode began with the shocking images of Mussolini and Clara Petacci, after being examined by the forensic experts. The images of Il Duce's disfigured corpse were followed by several "sequences that showed, *inter alia*, the bodies of the *gerarchi* at Piazzale Loreto, the victims of the Fosse Ardeatine massacre, the execution of Fascist spies, the hunger of citizens of Lucca, the eruption of Vesuvius (the longest sequence) and, finally, Christmas Eve at an orphanage at Montecatini" (Cooke, 2011: 164).

In *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (2011), Philip Cooke argues, following Simona Monticelli, that the placing of these images at the start of the series is not casual. It implies that with or without an "intervention", the true intentions of the project were "to elicit audience sympathy for Mussolini and his lover [...]. Instinctively, one feels a sense of *pietas* before the almost unrecognizable images of Mussolini and his lover" (164). Furthermore, the placing of the sequence was supposed to decontextualize "the reasons for the public vilification of the corpses" (Cooke, 2011: 164).

In the case of *Barbaric Land* (2013), I argue that the placing of these images, which would be challenged by the directors, also represents a disruption in the linear succession of the events. However, the intentions of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi are far away from the ideas of Roberto Olla and Leonardo Valente, highlighted by Philip Cooke (2011), since the filmmakers were not concerned about what drove to the killing of Il Duce, but about the development and results of his colonial enterprise in Ethiopia. Throughout nine segments or chapters, the film decomposes the history of the foundation of the so-called Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*). The structure of the segments does not follow a logic of cause and consequence. In each of the chapters, the viewer is allowed to look closely into different aspects and details of the invasion and its brutality and, by doing so, it is possible to recognize its consequences on the life of the Ethiopian people.

In the middle part of the film, after several groups of moving images that relate to the Italian colony of Libya, the text *CARTON ORIGINAL DE 1935-1936 "Ethiopie, pour ce pays primitive et barbare, l'heure de la civilization a désormais sonné.*" (ORIGINAL CARDBOARD FROM 1935-1936 "Ethiopia, for this primitive and barbaric country, the hour of civilization has now come"), is followed by a darkened and red-tinted image of

a man's silhouette looking at the horizon. After that, the montage, shows us the images of what seems to be a indigenous dance: a group of people —of whom we can only see their anthropomorphic black figures—is moving frenetically and jumping around while carrying spikes, daggers and shields, to the rhythm of the musical score composed by Keith Ullrich, explicitly for the film.

When the image of the warriors begins to fade into black, the face of a young and smiling native woman appears in the screen. She is wearing ethnical necklaces and the slowed down velocity of the image allows us to discern in her facial features and gestures. Then, as the voice over of Yervant Gianikian exclaims in French: "We have recently come back to search film archives to look for photograms of Ethiopia-Abyssinia from the Italian colonial period. The bare bodies of the women and the 'body' of the film, this stock damaged and even torn from countless viewings", we see more people dancing followed by two sequences showing the daily life of the inhabitants of Abyssinia (a family and a group of naked people, gathered in the river) is presented as the voice of Gianikian continues reading: "Certain words appear in one card after another: type, barbaric, marauder, primitive, devious, proverbial wariness, bigamy. Zoological vocabulary is applied".

For me, there is a radical contradiction between what we see and what the voice of Yervant Gianikian states. Some of the images are repeated and we are able to see once more that those who are represented on them do not match the criteria listed by the director: "Today, here in Europe, racism is spreading. People arm themselves to chase the poor and the disturbing foreigners, to send them back to their original hell". At the same time, the first shot of a kid's face, smiling playfully, invades the screen. Suddenly, another kid appears, he is also smiling, his facial expression is slowed down. Then, a jump-cut shows a woman breastfeeding a baby, whom we will be able to see in detail after the image is reframed, thanks to the technological device developed by the filmmakers years before, while they were making *From the Pole to the Equator* (1987).

The complex apparatus allows the filmmakers to "get close to, even to enter deep within each individual frame. [They] have control over the speed of the film, the details, the colour. [They] can freeze and reproduce the archive material in unusual ways" (Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi 2017:89). In *Our Analytical Camera* (1995, 2017), the couple describes the functioning of the two elements that compose the mechanism, in which:

The 35mm original travels vertically in the first one. It accepts Lumière sprocket holes as well as films with various widths and various degrees of decay of the support and of the emulsion, right down to loss of the frame line and even total cancellation. Movement is applied manually using a crank: this is due to the precarious state of the sprocket holes, and the continual fire hazard posed by the inflammable material. The jaw consists of two moving teeth instead of four. Photographic lamps are used with the temperature varied by a rheostat. This first part of the camera was made by transforming a contact printer. The second, suspended part is aligned with the first, from which it takes the image in transparency (Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi 2017:9).

The camera is thus "more photographic than cinematographic" (Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi 2017:9). I contend that it functions as a microscope not only allowing the sliding of the film strips in all directions, but to split them into sequences and individual frames and to multiply them. Also, the camera can respect the entire frame size or dissect the images, as well as respect their original colors or coloring them by hand. By doing so, the status of the images as representations, as well as their various relations with history and the historical practices, is called into question. These alterations of the original footage add several layers of meaning to the images, compelling us to read history against itself by paying close attention to the little details that the official and dominant historical narratives left behind, but that are inscribed in them as a remnant.

The multiple reading of the almost forgotten Italian colonial past is even more explicit in the final part of the sequence described above, when a fragment from a letter written by Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) is read by Y. Gianikian: "The people of the Harar are neither more stupid, nor more dishonest than the white negroes of the so-called "civilized" countries". At the same time, the images, in a palimpsestic form, show us how contradictory was the relationship between the discourse of the colonizers and the reality of the Ethiopian people through a close-up of an Ethiopian woman who is taking care of her headdress and the images of a

The whole paragraph of Rimbaud's letter criticizes the way in which the black population of Harar had been described as evil and
uncivilized: "The people of Harar are neither more stupid nor greater scoundrels than the white niggers of countries alleged to be
civilized. They are merely of another breed, that is all. They are, if anything, less nasty, and can, in certain cases, show gratitude and
fidelity. It is only a question of being human with them" (Rimbaud cited in Starkie 1968: 390).

soldier gently washing another woman's neck as a young boy helps by holding a vase, and later taking care of her by sweeping the water off with a piece of cloth.

Finally, this tension, or even contradiction, between what Rimbaud stated in his letter and what the images show, as I argue, constitutes a threshold in which the dialectical image, created by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, emerges as an ideal space for the inscription of the potential history. That is to say, that the filmmakers created, through montage, a space of visibility that questions the representations of the exoticized other —the inhabitants of Ethiopia— by analytically and carefully looking for what remained invisible or inaccessible because of its position in the margins of the frame or in the back of every image, while confronting it with the impressions of Rimbaud.

4 Conclusion: to be contemporary

In this text I have considered the ways in which Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi broke up the official narrative about Mussolini's Ethiopian (Abyssinia) conquest. The filmmakers gave shape to a critique of the representation of the colonialist enterprise in the ethnographic images with which they created their film *Barbaric Land* (2013). They also called into question the dialectical capacity of the images to function as both witnesses and evidence of the fatality of the events. In order to do so, the directors of *From the Pole to the Equator* (1987), manipulated and edited a vast amount of archival and found footage in different and innovative ways, creating and revealing other kinds of relations between history and memory that call into question the ways in which we understand and construct our relationship to the past.

One of my principal claims is that the filmmakers rearrange and manipulate the materials to open a critical threshold to question the past and its relation with the development of the contemporary racial violence in Europe. In these interstitial zones, a new kind of historical knowledge takes form and place. The connections and relations between documents (objects, images, texts, etc.), as well as their meanings, become infinite, so the archive demands an analytical construction or, in other words, a montage —as well as a work of the faculty of the imagination—, that gives epistemological consistency to the fragments at the same time that it detects and renders visible the correspondences between them.

Although the couple never spoke about or define their work in terms of found footage films, I claim that their works constitute a kind of artistic-archival practice whose origins can be traced up to the prewar period, so it is possible to talk about it not only as an exercise of archival excavation, but also as the inheritance of some conceptual practices of the mid-century that lead to the abolition of a univocal historical —official—narrative by calling memory question, and that became increasingly significant and popular as the political and technological sources were multiplied.

Most of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's films, for example *The War Trilogy (Prigionieri della Guerra*, 1995, *Su tutte le vette é pace*, 1998, *Oh! Uomo*, 2004), not only draw their materials from multiple personal and institutional archives, but construct and inhabit their own archives. Through the use of their well-known *camera analytica*, the archival moving images that Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi recollect are carefully and patiently dissected in order to explore "the themes of the past to show how they underpin the present, how the time passed in the first half of the century continues to mould our present" (Bertola 2012: 4). In works like *From the Pole to the Equator (Dal Polo all'Equatore*, Germany-Italy, 1986), *Men, Years, Life (Uomini, Anni, Vita*, Italy, 1990), or *Images of the Orient- Vandal Tourism (Images d'Orient- Tourisme vandal*, Italy, 2001), among many others, we are faced with creative and critical arrangements of "previously archived images and shapes [that create] an enormous inventory of the 20th history century" (Ruiz 2017: 17).

Although the artists and filmmakers define their work as "non-political, non-aesthetic, non-educational, non-progressive, non-cooperative, non-ethical, non-coherent: contemporary" (Gianikian & Ricci Lucchi 1996), I claim that it is necessary to recognize the critical dialectic that operates between past and present in their films. Their works look back in history and are really concerned about its images and their production, but "at the same time, they express an intense engagement with the present and contemporary artistic as well as political realities" (Lumley 2011: 129). So, it becomes clear, I state, that in the center of their practices lies the production of different kinds and operations of knowledge in which not only the past is called into question

and become the principle of action for the present and the future, but also contemporary ethical and political priorities are challenged.

In *Barbaric Land* (2013), traces of a decadent memory are rescued from the lacunae inherent to every archive (as Derrida and Didi-Huberman have pointed out), in order to ethically reshape the history, to imagine those other possible narratives of the past. Finally, this can be summarized by the words of Robert Lumley (2011), according to whom "history can only be constructed from the documents that survive and the memories of the living" (Lumley 2011: 136).

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