

## 8 Visual Narratives

Every picture tells a story.

So far this book has had little to say about historical events. Images have evidence to offer about the organization and the setting of events great and small: battles; sieges; surrenders; peace treaties; strikes; revolutions; church councils; assassinations; coronations; the entries of rulers or ambassadors into cities; executions and other public punishments and so on. One thinks, for example, of Titian's painting of the Council of Trent in session in the cathedral, of the surrender of Breda as painted by Velázquez, of the coronation of Napoleon according to David, of the firing squads painted by Goya and Manet, of the punishment of heretics in an auto da fé in Madrid in 1680, as viewed by the painter Francisco Rizi.

The age of the daguerrotype produced memorable images such as the Chartist meeting on Kennington Common in 1848 (illus.74), which records the orderly appearance of what the middle class viewed as a subversive occasion. In the age of photography, the memory of particular events became more and more closely associated with their visual images. In 1901, a leading Brazilian journalist, Olavo Bilac, predicted that his profession was doomed because the photograph would soon replace the description in writing of any recent occurrence. In the age of television, the perception of current events is virtually inseparable from their images on the screen. The number of these images and the speed with which they are transmitted are novelties, but the televisual revolution in everyday life should not lead us to forget the importance of images of events in earlier periods.

In the age of film, it became possible for viewers to imagine that they were watching the rise of Hitler. Before the camera, woodcuts and engravings were already performing similar functions.



74 William Edward Kilburn, *The Great Chartist Meeting on Kennington Common*, 10 April 1848, daguerrotype. Windsor Castle, Berks.

### *Images of Current Events*

Early in this book (Introduction), it was suggested that one of the most important consequences of printing images was to make it possible to produce pictures of current events and to sell them while the memory of those events was still fresh, making these images the pictorial equivalent of the newspaper or news-sheet, an invention of the early seventeenth century. Some images of this kind can be found earlier, images of Luther at the Diet of Worms, for example, or the coronation of Charles V at Bologna. However, production increased sharply during the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), in which so many Europeans were involved at all levels of society. Engravings illustrated the news-sheets recounting the major events of the war as they happened, or were sold separately, like the images of the burning of the town of Oppenheim in 1621, or the assassination of General Albrecht von Wallenstein in 1634, both engraved by one of the leading graphic artists of the time, Matthäus Merian (1593–1650).<sup>1</sup>

Some paintings too were commissioned precisely in order to commemorate current events. The revolt of Naples in 1647, for

instance, led by the fisherman Masaniello, was recorded in a painting by Michelangelo Cerquozzi (1602–1660), made for a sympathizer with the revolt, the anti-Spanish cardinal Spada. A whole cluster of paintings was commissioned by Dutch patrons to commemorate the Congress of Westphalia and the Peace of Münster, which finally brought an end to the Thirty Years' War, including Bartholomeus van der Helst, *Officers Celebrating the Peace of Münster*; Cornelis Beelt, *The Proclamation of the Peace of Münster in Haarlem*; and Gerard Ter Borch, *The Smearing of the Oath of the Ratification of the Peace of Münster* (illus. 75). It will be seen that Ter Borch has been careful to show as many as possible of the participants at the same level, an important as well as a difficult task, given the conflicts over precedence which bedevilled peace conferences in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The prominence given to the documents themselves is also worth noting.

Again, the American painter John Trumbull (1756–1843), encouraged by Thomas Jefferson, made it his life's work to represent the major events of the struggle for independence. His painting of *The Declaration of Independence*, for example, made use of information provided by Jefferson, who had participated in the event.

Of another of Trumbull's history paintings it has been argued that



75 Gerard Ter Borch, *The Smearing of the Oath of the Ratification of the Peace of Münster on 15 May 1648*, 1648, oil on copper. National Gallery, London.

it 'is not, nor was it meant to be, an eyewitness account', since the painter accepted the conventions of the grand style of narrative painting, which meant omitting anything that might detract from the dignity of the scene, in this case a battle.<sup>2</sup> The same point might be made about the literary conventions associated with the doctrine of the 'dignity of history', which for many centuries excluded references to ordinary people.

Ter Borch, on the other hand, definitely painted in the eyewitness style (illus. 75). The artist spent three years in the city of Münster during the peace conference, in the entourage of the Dutch and later the Spanish envoy. His *Ratification* offers a sober description of a special occasion. The contemporary engraving of the picture is described in the inscription as 'a most exact image' (*icon exactissima*).<sup>3</sup> The eyewitness style has its own rhetoric, as we have seen (Introduction), and Ter Borch may well have arranged the scene to look more orderly, as group photographers do today, but he allowed himself less latitude than Trumbull did. In any case, peace conferences offer fewer opportunities for breaches of decorum than battles do.

#### *Reading Narratives*

Narrative paintings pose problems of their own both for the painters and for the readers – the metaphor of 'reading' images is especially appropriate in this case. For example, there is the problem of representing a dynamic sequence in the form of a static scene, in other words of using space to replace or to represent time. The artist has to condense successive actions into a single image, generally a moment of climax, and the viewer has to be aware of that condensation. The problem is to represent a process while avoiding the impression of simultaneity.<sup>4</sup>

The reduction of sequence to scene faces viewers with a number of interpretative problems such as the problem of distinguishing between arrivals and departures, or – as in the case of Watteau's famous painting of an art-dealer's shop – between the act of placing the portrait of Louis XIV in a box or that of taking it out. Sometimes the context provides the answer, as in Watteau's case, since the work was painted after the king's death in the very different atmosphere of the Regency. Packing Louis XIV away in the cellar makes sense in this political context, while taking him out does not.

In many cases, anticipating difficulties such as these, the painter provides explanations in the form of inscriptions, legends or 'subtitles' (formerly known as *tituli*), making the image into what the art

historian Peter Wagner calls an ‘iconotext’ (Chapter 2). Thus the first scene of Hogarth’s *Marriage à la Mode*, discussed in the previous chapter, includes a paper in the hand of the girl’s father bearing the words ‘Marriage Settlement of the Rt Honorable Lord Viscount Squanderfield’, not only allowing viewers to identify the scene but also alerting them, via the term ‘squander’, to the presence of satire.

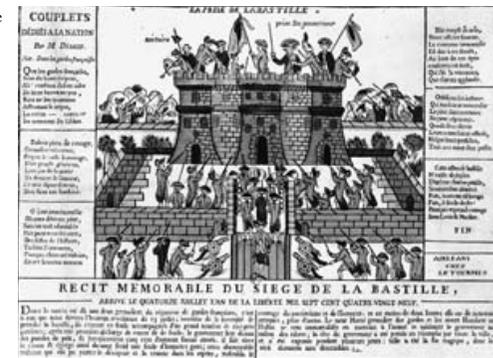
Readers of images who inhabit a culture or a period different from that in which the images were made face more acute problems than contemporaries. Among these problems is that of identifying the narrative conventions or ‘discourse’ – whether leading figures may be represented more than once in the same scene, for instance (below, p. 153), or whether the story is told from left to right or vice versa, or even, as in the case of a sixth-century Greek manuscript known as the Vienna Genesis, alternately from left to right and from right to left. Narrative conventions also include stereotyped elements which might be described, following the model of a classic analysis of oral narratives, Albert Lord’s *The Singer of Tales* (1960), as ‘formulae’ and ‘themes’.

By ‘formulae’ I mean small-scale schemata, such as a figure in a particular pose, a ‘stock’ figure in the sense that it was part of an artist’s repertoire which could be brought out when needed and adapted to different commissions. A well-known example is that of the figure of Christ taken down from the Cross, adapted by eighteenth-century painters, as we have seen (Chapter 4) to the cases of Wolfe and Marat. Themes, by contrast, are large-scale schemata, ‘stock’ scenes such as battles, councils, meetings, departures, banquets, processions and dreams, recurrent elements in long narratives such as the Bayeux Tapestry, which will be discussed in some detail below. Hollywood films have often been criticized as formulaic, and this characteristic has sometimes been explained in terms of mass-production. However, it is only reasonable to recognize that most if not all narratives rely on formulae of some kind, even stories which try to disrupt the expectations of their readers. This point is relevant not only for narrative sequences but also for attempts to freeze the action, to capture a story in a single image.

### Single Images

In ancient Rome coins often alluded to contemporary events and their testimony of these events is sometimes all that remains (especially in the mid third century AD, when surviving literary sources are sparse).<sup>5</sup> Both the choice of events to commemorate and the way in which they are presented testify to the nature of the regime in which

76 ‘Récit Memorable du Siège de la Bastille’, colour woodcut, Paris. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



they were produced, while the analyses of a whole series of ancient coins over the long term reveals unconscious or at least semi-conscious changes in the perception of events.

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, it is possible to discern a rise in the number of images of public life. A new genre, the political medal, modelled on ancient coins, was specifically designed to commemorate important public events. Medals were distributed by governments to ambassadors and other important people. Their inscriptions effectively gave contemporary viewers instructions on how to read the images, just as they now give historians access to the way in which the regime which produced the medal viewed itself. Although the term had not yet been coined, the medals produced in increasing numbers for rulers such as Emperor Charles V and King Louis XIV may reasonably be described as making ‘propaganda’, since they offered official interpretations of specific events as well as the vaguer praises of rulers which had been customary before that time.<sup>6</sup> The triumphalism of the medals struck to commemorate events such as the victory of Charles V over the Protestant princes at Mühlberg (1547) or Louis XIV’s crossing of the Rhine (1672), is obvious enough. In similar fashion the destruction of the Spanish Armada was celebrated and interpreted in the Netherlands and in England by a medal that proclaimed that ‘God blew and they were scattered’ (*Flavit et dissipati sunt*).

Images of this kind were in a sense historical agents, since they not only recorded events but also influenced the way in which those events were viewed at the time. The role of image as agent is still more obvious in the case of revolutions. Revolutions have often been celebrated in imagery, provided that they have been successful, as in the

cases of 1688, 1776, 1789, 1830, 1848 and so on.<sup>7</sup> However, the function of images is arguably even more important while the revolution is still in progress. They have often helped to make ordinary people politically conscious, especially – but not exclusively – in societies of restricted literacy.

A famous example of the image in action concerns the taking of the Bastille, which was almost immediately represented in prints that circulated widely – they were cheap, and those who could not afford to buy them could look at them in the windows of print-shops. One such image was already on sale on 28 July 1789, in other words, only two weeks after the event it represented. The image was surrounded by texts justifying the attack on the fortress. In a later woodcut, the accompanying text placed greater stress on the themes of liberty and the people, thus contributing to the creation of what might be called the ‘myth’ of the taking of the Bastille, now presented as a symbol of a repressive old regime. Less realistic and more schematic, a ‘split representation’ (to use the phrase of Lévi-Strauss) in which the right-hand side mirrors the left in reverse, this second woodcut (illus. 76) has been aptly described as ‘a political devotional image’. It is indeed very much in the style of French woodcuts of the saints, known as ‘images of Épinal’, still being produced in large numbers at this period and indeed well into the nineteenth century. Portraying actual events less exactly than the first, it was more vivid and doubtless more effective as an illustration of the myth.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Battle-Piece*

Among portrayals of events, the battle-piece deserves pride of place. Partly because the tradition goes back such a long way, at least as far as the battle of Til-Tuba represented on an Assyrian relief of the seventh century BC. And also because, for centuries, especially from 1494 to 1914, so many European artists created images of battles, usually on land, but sometimes at sea, from Lepanto to Trafalgar. These images were requested by rulers, by governments and finally by journals as well. If oil paintings of battles were seen by relatively few people, even in the age of public exhibitions of art in the nineteenth century, many of these images circulated widely in the form of engraved copies.

Representing such scenes raised awkward problems, expressed in epigrammatic form by the British historian John Hale: ‘Battles sprawled. Art condensed.’ One possible solution to the problem of sprawl was to concentrate attention on the actions of a few indi-

viduals, fragmenting the grand narrative into small ones. The painter Horace Vernet was criticized by the poet Baudelaire for producing battle-scenes which ‘consisted merely of a host of interesting little anecdotes’.<sup>9</sup>

As a point about Vernet in particular the comment is less than fair, but it does highlight a recurrent problem of the genre. The difficulty of observing combat at close quarters and the desire to produce heroic images encouraged the use of stock figures, formulae taken from classical sculpture (the battles represented on Trajan’s Column and the Arch of Constantine, for instance), and also from earlier paintings, ‘genre plums’, as Hale calls them, which artists could ‘pull out of the pie of visual clichés almost automatically’.<sup>10</sup>

For an example of the formula, at once literary and visual, one might turn to the *Lives of the Artists* first published in 1550 by Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574), and note his description of Leonardo da Vinci’s lost fresco of the battle of Anghiari, including the detail of two horses ‘with their forelegs interlocked ... battling with their teeth no less fiercely than their riders are struggling for the standard’. Writing only a few years earlier, the Florentine historian Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540) had included in his account of another Italian battle, at Fornovo, a vivid vignette of ‘the horses fighting with kicks, bites and blows, no less than the men’. Later in the century the poet Torquato Tasso, in his epic poem *Jerusalem Delivered*, described the opening of a battle with the words ‘every horse also prepares to fight’. The use of such formulae suggests that the aim of painters, poets and historians alike at this time was to represent fighting as dramatically as possible rather than to look for what was specific to a particular battle.

Images of combat are a vivid form of propaganda, offering the opportunity of portraying the commander in a heroic manner. Renaissance images of battle tend to show the leaders as themselves engaged in the fray. Later images, corresponding to changes in the organization of warfare, show the commander viewing the battlefield after the victory, as in the case of Napoleon in *The Battle of Eylau* by Antoine-Jean Gros (1771–1835).<sup>11</sup>

Alternatively, as in a number of scenes from the wars of Louis XIV, commissioned by the king, the commander is represented observing the progress of the battle from a hill, receiving news of the fighting and giving his orders accordingly. He is literally as well as metaphorically above the battle. Narrative has been replaced by the portrait of a man of power against a military background or panorama.<sup>12</sup>

As a pictorial genre, the panorama, made to be displayed in a circular

building, emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. Battle-scenes quickly took their place among the most popular panoramas, the *Battle of Aboukir* (1799), for example, by Robert Barker (1739–1806), or the *Battle of Waterloo*, by his son Henry Aston Barker (1774–1856). At last a means had been found of conveying to the viewer some sense of the complexity of a battle, if not of its confusion.<sup>13</sup>

Any discussion of the evidential value of images of battle needs to draw distinctions. Some artists tried only to represent a generalized battle. Others, like Horace Vernet (1789–1863) – son of Joseph Vernet (discussed in an earlier chapter) – took the trouble to speak to participants in the battle of Valmy about their impressions of the fighting, before painting his battle-scene. Henry Barker did the same in his research on the battle of Waterloo.

Again, some artists lacked personal experience of fighting, but others, like Swiss Niklaus Manuel (c. 1484–1530), had served as soldiers themselves. A few were sent to the front precisely in order to witness and record what happened. The Flemish painter Jan Vermeyen (c. 1500–59) was ordered to accompany the emperor Charles V on his expedition to North Africa for this reason, while another Fleming, Adam van der Meulen (1632–1690), accompanied Louis XIV on campaign. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the war artist, like the war photographer, became an institution.

For example, Louis-François Le Jeune was an eyewitness of the battle of Marengo in northern Italy 1800, where Napoleon defeated the Austrians, and recorded his impressions in sketches made on the spot.<sup>14</sup> The photographer Mathew Brady witnessed the American Civil War and made a collection of photographs which he described as ‘a complete Pictorial History of our National Struggle’. Brady was praised at the time for these pictures, ‘which will do more than the most elaborate descriptions’, as a contemporary predicted, ‘to perpetuate the scenes of that brief campaign’; Another contemporary verdict on Brady was that ‘He is to the campaigns of the republic what Vandermeulen was to the wars of Louis XIV.’<sup>15</sup>

Again, the Crimean war (1853–6) was ‘reported’ visually by the French painter Constantin Guys and also by a virtual platoon of British artists, sent by newspapers, art dealers and publishers and including Edward Armitage, Joseph Crowe, Edward Goodall and William Simpson.<sup>16</sup> The photographer Roger Fenton was also in attendance. From that time onwards, no major war has been without its corps of photographers or, more recently, its television crews.

Looking back over western images of battle from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, two major changes stand out. The first,

beginning in the sixteenth century but becoming more obvious in the seventeenth, was a shift from representing ‘a’ battle, any battle, to a concern with a unique event, the battle of the White Mountain (say), or the battle of Waterloo, with its particular strategy and tactics. This shift was in part the result of an increasing interest in visual record, exemplified by a wide range of images, from drawings of plants to sketches of everyday life in other cultures.

The change also corresponded to modifications in the art of warfare, the so-called ‘military revolution’. Following the invention of drill, battles were becoming less like an agglomeration of single combats and more like collective actions in which groups of soldiers marched, charged or fired as one man. The new pictorial trend, in step with military developments, was to show a scene which could be read like a diagram – and was indeed influenced by the diagrams printed in books on the art of war.<sup>17</sup> Another way of describing the shift in style is to say that ‘hot’ images, which were supposed to involve the spectator emotionally, were being replaced – or at any rate, supplemented – by ‘cool’ images, which were intended to inform.

The gain in legibility attained by the new style of battle-piece should not be equated with a gain in realism. Indeed, it may have been achieved at the expense of realism, by a deliberate refusal to take account of the confusion or ‘sprawl’ of actual warfare. The change in the conventions of visual narrative allowed more information of one kind to be communicated, at the price of making another kind of information less visible than before, privileging what was supposed to have happened over what actually happened. Once again, historians have to be on their guard not to take idealizing images for the reality they claim to represent.

The second major change in western images of battle was the shift from a heroic to a ‘factual’ or an anti-heroic style. This shift should not be dated too precisely, to the Crimean War for example, since alternative styles coexisted in different milieux over the centuries. The ‘battle-scene without a hero’, for instance, was already being produced in Naples in the mid-seventeenth century. At most we can speak of a gradual revulsion against what the American writer Stephen Crane (1871–1900), most famous for his unheroic account of war in *The Red Badge of Courage*, but a photographer as well as a writer, called ‘the romantic distortions of generations of battle paintings’.<sup>18</sup>

The horrors of war – sometimes emphasized by artists on the losing side in a kind of visual counter-offensive – were displayed in vivid detail in the etchings of Jacques Callot (c. 1592–1635), and Francisco de Goya (1746–1828). In the series of etchings which

Callot published in 1633, *Les misères et les malheurs de la guerre*, the artist shows scenes such as the destruction of a convent, the plundering of a farmhouse and the burning of a village, together with the punishment of indisciplined soldiers by hanging, by firing-squad, at the stake and on the wheel.

After 1800, these horrors invaded the scene of battle itself, as in the famous close-up of the dying Prussian grenadier in *The Battle of Eylau*, or the famous photograph of the battle of Gettysburg in the American Civil War, *A Harvest of Death* (illus. 5), or some of the images of the Crimean War by British artists who had observed its conditions for themselves. A few artists and photographers remained within the bounds of the heroic style, but others represented ordinary soldiers, invalids or generals caught in unheroic attitudes.<sup>19</sup>

The heroic style survived the Second World War in certain locales, in paintings commissioned by British officers' messes, for example, or by the government of the USSR. By this time, however, the majority of twentieth-century artists and photographers of war were expressing the values of civilian, democratic or populist cultures in their choice of alternative styles. Battles were increasingly viewed from below. John Sargent's *Gassed* (1919), like Robert Capa's famous photograph of a Spanish Republican infantryman (Chapter 1; illus. 4), represents the tragedy of the ordinary soldier, while Hung Cong Ut's equally celebrated photograph, *Napalm*



77 Hung Cong Ut, *Napalm Attack*, 1972, photograph.

*Attack*, showing Vietnamese children, one of them completely naked, running down a road screaming (illus. 77), displayed the consequences of war for civilians.<sup>20</sup>

Historians using these images as evidence face the usual battery of problems. The problem of fabricated photographs, for example, discussed earlier in this book (Chapter 1) on the basis of military and other examples. In the case of the heroic battle painting, the pressures of the patrons – often princes or generals – have to be remembered, while in the case of the anti-heroic photograph, the historian cannot afford to forget the pressures of newspaper editors and television stations, concerned with ‘human interest’ stories. All the same, images often reveal significant details which verbal reports omit. They give viewers distant in space or time some sense of the experience of battle in different periods. They also testify in vivid fashion to changing attitudes to war.

#### *The Series*

Some of the problems arising from the attempt to turn a story into a scene can be avoided by displaying two or more images of the same event. The antithesis, so effectively employed by Cranach (Chapter 3) – or by Hogarth in his contrasts between Beer Street and Gin Lane or between the industrious and idle apprentices – can be adapted to a narrative of ‘before’ and ‘after’. Later commonplace in the history of advertising, the technique was already in use in 1789 to illustrate the consequences of the French Revolution. In the first of a pair of anonymous prints, a peasant staggers under the weight of a priest and a nobleman. In the second, he is riding on their backs and announcing that he always knew that one day it would be his turn (as in the case of medals, the use of a text as a guide to the reading of political prints is worth noting). Pairs of images of this kind cry out for structural analysis in terms of binary oppositions, although it might equally well be argued that the existence of these prints implies that structuralism is not really new (Chapter 10).

The political graphics representing incidents in the revolt of the Netherlands (1568–1609) and the Wars of Religion in France (1562–89) were a little more complex. For example, the illustration of the ‘cruel and barbarous’ assassinations of the powerful family of the Guises by order of King Henri III of France divided the story into eight scenes, including two close-ups of the bodies of the Guise brothers pierced by daggers and halberds. A print of this kind sensitizes the historian-viewer to the attempt to appeal to the emotions of

ordinary people at the time, the ‘rhetoric of hate’ also revealed in the language of the pamphlets of the time, and thus reveals an important aspect of the conflict.<sup>21</sup>

For still more complex narratives we may turn to a series of images illustrating different episodes in a war or a reign. Callot, for example, devoted six etchings, published in 1628, to the Spanish siege of Breda in the Netherlands, and six more, published in 1631, to the siege of the French Protestant city of La Rochelle by the troops of King Louis XIII.

Images made for the purposes of propaganda often employed the device of the series. Jan Vermeyen, for instance, represented the emperor Charles V’s campaign in North Africa in designs for tapestries representing incidents such as the emperor gathering his forces in Barcelona; the fall of the fortress of La Goleta; the attack on Tunis and the release of 20,000 Christian captives. In similar fashion a series of tapestries was made to celebrate the victories of Louis XIV, a series known at the time as ‘the story of the king’ (*L’Histoire du roi*). (Louis’ enemies the British and the Dutch commissioned a rival series of tapestries depicting the victories of the Duke of Marlborough). Engravings of the three hundred-odd medals issued to glorify the events of the reign of Louis XIV were gathered into a book entitled the ‘medallic’ (or ‘metallic’) history of the reign. They are vivid testimonies to the ‘official version’ of the history of France under Louis, the way in which the regime wanted events to be perceived and remembered.<sup>22</sup>

### *Narrative Strips*

From a series of discrete images it is only a step to a continuous strip, like the Assyrian reliefs at Nineveh, the procession on the frieze of the Parthenon, or Trajan’s Column in Rome, where the reliefs, spiralling around the column, tell the story of the Roman campaigns against the Dacians (AD 101–106). From the Renaissance onwards, the sculptures on Trajan’s Column have been used as sources not only for the history of the campaign but also for that of the clothing and equipment of the Roman army. In the sixteenth century, the importance of processions in political as well as religious life, together with the development of the art of engraving, encouraged the production of a number of printed strips illustrating such events as the arrival of Charles V at Bologna for his coronation (1530) and the procession of the doge of Venice through the streets of the city on the occasion of major festivals. In the case of the imperial entry into Bologna, there

was even an equivalent of a soundtrack, a reference in the accompanying text to the shouts of ‘Cesare’ on the part of the bystanders.

Images of this kind, whether engraved or painted, as in the case of the Great Tournament Roll of 1511, are extremely useful in the reconstruction of what happened, though it cannot be assumed that they are complete records rather than summaries of what occurred. They are even more useful for the reconstruction of what should have happened, since rituals do not always go according to plan. Here as elsewhere, the element of idealization in the pictorial record should not be forgotten. The element of propaganda should not be forgotten either, since the engravings of Charles’s coronation, for instance, were commissioned by his aunt Margaret of Austria. Bologna was a papal city, and the relative prominence of the imperial and papal retinues was a matter for delicate negotiations at the time. The engravings give the impression that the emperor dominated proceedings, but to trust their testimony on such a controversial matter would be, to say the least, somewhat rash.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Bayeux Tapestry*

An exceptionally important strip-narrative, about 70 metres long, is the Bayeux Tapestry, and its testimony has often been used by historians concerned with the Norman Conquest of England and the events leading up to it. Modern accounts of the battle of Hastings, for example, generally describe the death of King Harold as the result of an arrow entering his eye. This detail derives in the first instance not from a literary source but from a scene in the Bayeux Tapestry (illus.



78 Detail of the death of King Harold during the Battle of Hastings, from the Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1100. Musée de la Tapisserie, Bayeux.

78) in which we see a warrior trying to pull an arrow out of his eye under an inscription declaring that 'here King Harold was killed' (HIC HAROLD REX INTERFECTUS EST). The story first appears in writing about the year 1100 but the written version may well have been inspired by a reading of the image, a memorable one in which even the inscription, as a recent commentator remarked, 'is aggressively penetrated by the thrusts of Norman lances and arrows'. Despite the inscription, the meaning of the scene is not completely clear. Some scholars have argued that the image does not represent Harold at all, and that the dying king is actually the figure on the ground to the right of the warrior. Alternatively, both figures may represent Harold, since the deaths of his brothers Leofwine and Gyrth are also shown twice. Double images of this kind are a common narrative device to represent the passing of time, the two 'shots' representing two different moments of the same story.

The testimony of the Tapestry cannot of course be accepted at face value. For one thing, as we have seen, telling the story in images would be impossible without the use of visual formulae. Their function is to ease the task of the viewer as well as that of the narrator, making certain actions more recognizable at the price of eliminating some of their specificity. It is also necessary to place the narrative in context. In other words, historians have – as usual – to ask who was telling the story to whom in this way, and what their intentions may have been in so doing.

The Bayeux Tapestry was woven in England, but the instructions probably came from Normandy. According to tradition, the Tapestry was commissioned by William the Conqueror's brother, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, and the prominence given to Odo in the narrative supports this story. The scenes which represent Harold's mission to William, culminating in his famous oath of fealty sworn on holy relics, have been described as 'deliberately framed' to display William's power and Harold's obligations to him. What we see is a story with a moral, 'the story of just retribution for Harold's perjury'. In other words, although the hanging appears to have been embroidered by English needles, it is a spectacular example of history written by the victors.<sup>24</sup>

#### *Film as Evidence*

For a more fluid narrative and a still greater 'reality effect' or 'illusion of actuality', we may turn to the cinema, to the contemporary films of the Boer War and the First World War, for example, and to the weekly newsreels which flourished from about 1910 to the 1950s, when tele-

vision took over their function on a daily basis. The potential of film as a historical source, like that of still photography, has long been realized. For example, in 1920, the Dutch Academy asked Johan Huizinga to advise them on the value of a project for an archive of documentary films. Huizinga, despite his visual approach to history (Introduction) advised against the project on the grounds that film made no serious contribution to historical knowledge, since what these images showed was either unimportant or already known.<sup>25</sup>

The best way to refute Huizinga's objection is to offer concrete examples. An archivist at the Imperial War Museum commented on a film about the Easter Rising in Dublin in April 1916 that 'one can see the extent of the damage, the demeanour and equipment of the troops involved and even the attitude of the Dublin populace'. British newsreels have been used as a source for the history of the Spanish Civil War, and a film taken by the British army at Belsen in April 1945 was used as evidence at the Nuremberg trials. At a time when the Holocaust is being denied in some quarters, the testimony of film is worth remembering.

Again, if tape-recorded oral history is taken seriously as a source, it would be odd to take videotapes any less seriously, like the testimonies about collaboration and resistance in Clermont-Ferrand during the Second World War collected by Marcel Ophuls in the 1960s, some of which were used in his film *Le chagrin et la pitié* (1971). As for social history, the example of the anthropological film shows how the new medium was used from the early twentieth century onwards to make a record of social customs. Franz Boas, for example, recorded the dances of the Kwakiutl people on film in 1930, while Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead filmed the Balinese a few years later. A leading maker of ethnographic films, Robert Gardner, claimed that they offered evidence 'of a direct and unambiguous kind, being reality instantaneously captured and suffering no distortion due to faults of sight, memory or semantic interpretation'.<sup>26</sup>

The problem, once again, is to evaluate this form of evidence, to develop a kind of source criticism that takes account of the specific features of the medium, the language of the moving picture. As in the case of other kinds of document, the historian has to face the problem of authenticity. Has a certain film, or a scene from a film, been shot from life, or has it been fabricated in the studio using actors or models (of burning buildings, for instance)? Even film shot on location may not be completely reliable as a record. For technical reasons Franz Boas, for example, was forced to film the night dances of the Kwakiutl by day, so what we now see is the record not of a typical dance but of a special 'command performance'.

In the case of film, the problem of detecting interpolations is a particularly acute one, given the practice of montage and the relative ease with which images of different places or events can be introduced into the sequence. This may be done in order to mislead the viewers, giving the impression, for example, that the owner of the Krupp firm of arms manufacturers was a friend of the Kaiser's. On the other hand, interpolation may be done in good faith. Robert Gardner's films of ritual warfare among the Dani of New Guinea give the impression of recording specific fights, but – despite his proud remark about 'reality instantaneously captured' – they are actually made up of shots of different fights combined into a composite battle. Even if the film is authentic, in the sense of being composed from photographs taken on location, problems remain. For example, rapid movement was difficult to photograph in the early twentieth century, so the British War Office Film of the Battle of the Somme used 'before' and 'after' scenes to replace the action itself.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of war films, the exact location is crucial. Is it the front or an area behind the lines that is being shown to the viewer? Were there restrictions on the movements of the camera crew? As for the images themselves, the focus, the lighting and the framing are so many means for emphasizing some features of the subject at the expense of others.

Another process of selection and elaboration takes place in the studio. Like journalists – and historians – the directors of films edit their 'text', choosing some images and omitting others. As in the case of the Bayeux Tapestry, formulaic elements may be chosen because they make it easier for viewers to follow the story. The director may also be subject to external pressures, whether they take the form of the political pressures of the censor or the economic pressures of the box-office.

In a way, the medium itself is biased in the sense of being well suited to the representation of the surface of events, rather than the process of decision-making that underlies them. In any case, film-makers have their own view of events. Take the case of *Triumph of the Will* (1935), for instance, Leni Riefenstahl's film of the Nuremberg Rally of 1934. Riefenstahl claimed to have made a documentary, but the rhetoric of the film is obvious enough. The director, herself an admirer of Hitler, made use of various visual techniques (described above, Chapter 4) to present the leader in a heroic light. The following chapter will explore somewhat further the idea of image-makers as interpreters of the past.