War and the Beautiful: On the Aestheticizing of the First World War in Film – Yesterday and Today

Silke Fengler/Stefan Krebs

This paper is an enquiry into the medial construction and aestheticizing of the war in present day TV documentaries on the First World War. The analysis refers mainly to the exemplary 90-minute documentary "Der Moderne Krieg", which the German-French station, ARTE, broadcast last summer.[1]

Two temporal phases converge here: at the first phase it can be seen how film, as a new medium during the First World War, lent a hitherto unknown aesthetic dimension to the industrialized war events, which oriented itself at the same time toward traditional image forms and motifs. In the second, present-day phase, this film material is respliced and loaded with additional meaning. Both temporal phases are inseparably intertwined – both construe the modern myth of the clean war: each in its own manner, each according to its own era.

In general, the official pictorial propaganda put forth an effort to blot out the horror of the industrialized waging of war. Instead, it perpetuated the scenario of a pre-modern, romantic war (e.g. Hüppauf 1997: 887f.). One outstanding motif of German film reporting, as well as of war photography, was the front, i.e. pictures from life at the front line. On the other hand, a contemporary photographic iconography and aesthetic of destruction were also developed. Thus, the improved photographic technology and faster shutter speed made possible a new type of presentation of the dynamics of war, e.g. in the shots of soldiers using their equipment. Film technology was used for the first time for the construction of the reality of war as visual battleground. Thus, soldiers themselves participated in combat exhibitions that were staged especially for the camera (e.g. Paul 2004: 106).

---

[1] On the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War One ARTE broadcast the contribution "1914-1918. Der Moderne Krieg" by Heinrich Billstein and Matthias Haentjes (Germany 2004, first broadcast July 30, 2004, at 10:15 p.m. on ARTE).

Overall, wartime film material remained indebted to popular aesthetic conventions and delivered with its manifold staged scenes, which were filmed without sound, hardly a realistic view of battle events. The fictional portrayal of war in cinema films, starting in 1916, which wrote played-out scenarios into real war experiences, further blurred the difference between fiction and reality, turning war into entertainment.

In 1992, William Mitchell attempted to rehabilitate thinking in and about images with his concept of the pictorial turn. Gottfried Boehm (2005: 40f.), who first coined the term *iconic turn,* recovered the picture as an autonomic authority to the core of hermeneutics and philosophy with his conceptual recommendation. The demand went so far as to analyze, as much as possible, all contemporary visual fields – pictures of the mass media, from natural sciences, plastic arts, etc. – using a logic of images, to be developed gradually.

But how can an assumed logic of images be decoded? The focal point here is in the analysis of film material with respect to its specific formal language, and the contents and messages connected to it. We shall concentrate on the moment of the aestheticizing of the war, asking how it is mediated over the composition of pictorial contents and edition, but also over the later combination with audiovisual elements.

Firstly, contents and themes of the film images are to be determined and grouped according to selected aesthetic categories. These are foremost the categories *beauty* and *sublimity*. In the second phase of the enquiry, they are to be complemented with the categories of the *comical* and *tragic*.

Wartime reporting took up traditional iconographical stylistic methods and pictorial aesthetic conventions. The category beauty played a central role. Beauty in the aesthetic sense showed itself in perfection, purity, the right measure, clarity, order and symmetry of the individual pictorial motifs.

In propaganda film, but also in still life photographs of World War One beauty is represented in the classical subcategories of the *idyllic*, of the *picturesque*, but also *cleanliness* and *order*. The idyll of war coheres with its supposed picnic character.[2] A frequently recurring scene shows soldiers preparing or distributing food. In these images, the impressive abundance and plenitude of the food available is meant to show the wartime viewers the excellent efficiency of the supply lines at the front. The happy faces of the soldiers reflect the enjoyment of a simple meal in undisturbed nature. Just as the picture of a soldier calmly smoking a pipe,

---

[2] In the Crimean War, the photographer Roger Fenton took numerous photographs for the British Royal House which idealised war events as a picnic (e.g. Becker 1998: 73).

these images emphasize the impression of the picturesque. They are reminiscent of the genre painting of the 19th century.

The picturesque as an aesthetic category rests upon the variety- and contrast rich properties of a mostly untouched, yet bizarre natural landscape. This conventional model was in part reproduced with the help of new film technology, in part, though, an aesthetic of destruction all of its own was developed. In the aerial shots as in the panorama of destroyed forest landscapes the impression of harmony and calm is preserved. Thus, nature loses nothing of its beauty, in spite of the most brutal destruction.

Contrary to the factual chaos of war, the film images suggest a constant, perfectly preserved order that permeates both the everyday life of the soldiers and the waging of battle, i.e. the actual combat. Shells stacked horizontally or in many graded rows for storage show neat, straight lines in the pictorial composition.

The traditional commander's eye view of the battlefield, i.e. the view from an elevated point of observation of a field that disappears into the horizon, a field on which soldiers are at once no more than tiny figures, was also reproduced in wartime films. In an exemplary scene, one sees a chain of artillery projectiles stretching vertically into the picture and, on the horizon, row upon row of riders riding toward the front line.

In contrast to the aesthetic category of the beautiful, the sublime is not so much associated with feelings of joy or pleasure, as with those of terror, of fear or of disturbance. This emotional reaction is called forth by the *grandiose*, the *splendid*, that which *transcends* that which can be sensually experienced, or which is *majestic*. In order for the observer to experience the sublime, some distance from the image is necessary. Especially the sublime in its negative variation – the *threatening*, the *fearsome*, *death*, and *power* – incites wonder and fear at once in the observer; the aesthetic enjoyment necessarily requires that the observer be not immediately threatened by the experience. For only the distance, as a rule physical distance, enables him to gain some overview of the entire matter as well as the quality of individual aspects, while at the same time experiencing the sensual-emotional effects of the observed image (e.g. Sontag 2002).

As already in the case of the presentation of the beautiful, the images of battle equipment and the battlefield contribute little to the portrayal of the reality of the industrialised war. Artillery guns were as a rule portrayed as imposing military machinery. Whether the cannons seemed threatening and intimidating or offensive to the observer depended upon the camera perspective chosen. Sometimes the observer gazed quasi from the front into the barrel –

wherewith the threatening aspect of the weapon was immediately given. Usually, though, wartime propaganda filmed cannons either from the side or diagonally from behind, so that the camera gazed along the weapons barrel, or seemed to follow the line of fire.

The expressive images of exploding shells follow a recurring aesthetic of the immensely threatening: earth splattering up, and in its midst, a rising column of dark smoke. In the portrayal of artillery, the new medium film could still outdo photography: the quick loading of cannons by the artillery teams, the turbulent dynamics of the discharge and the impact of the shells develop their destruction aesthetic only in moving pictures. It is conspicuous in the differing film images that the artillery shells almost always impact on a field completely deserted by people; the effect of the shells on a human body thus remains hidden. This is firstly a hint as to the artificial character of the pictures. Secondly, the observer is thus not confronted with the actual reality of injury, death and suffering, but can yield himself over completely to the clean aesthetic enjoyment of the scene.

The proverbial firepower was also illustrated by pictures of the employment of the flamethrower. This new weapon seems especially threatening when the stream of flames moves toward the camera, and thus toward the observer. The viewer is thus given a perspective that is usually exclusively reserved for the mortally threatened victim of the attack (e.g. Hickethier 2001: 65). But instead of being exposed to the real terror of the column of fire spray accelerating out of the picture, the distanced observer experiences a queer thrill at the fascination of the power of arms.

Death on the battlefield was unwelcome in propaganda, and is therefore rarely shown in wartime films (e.g. Paul 2004: 126, 129). The images of dead soldiers all have in common that the camera remains mostly distant, and that the scenes appear rather peaceful. This effect was achieved by the use of extremely slow camera movement, or the resting of the camera in one position. Nor do any mangled corpses appear in these scenes, but rather dead soldiers who, corporally unscathed, appear to be sleeping.

Much less ambiguous are the photographs of horribly disfigured war victims, such as those published by Ernst Friedrich (2004) in his book "Krieg dem Kriege" in 1924. The pictures have their origin in the documentation of injuries for didactic and research purposes in medicine. The feeling of displeasure that befalls the viewer of these blunt pictures is transformed into a softened horror.[3] The spectators' emotions sway between pity for the victims and the apathy of the voyeur: the horrible becomes a spectacle (e.g. Sontag 2002).

---

[3] The concept of the softened horror is from Edmund Burke.

The TV authors rely in their portrayal of the First World War largely on historical film material. The portion of original footage, i.e. films and still photos recorded later in film, amounts to nearly three quarters of the entire broadcast duration. The compilation film[4] derives its claim to have portrayed the past as authentically as possible from the extensive use of historical footage. This effect is also intended by the reduction of the stylistic devices employed in the new type of contemporary historical documentary successfully introduced in the 1990's by the German TV historian Guido Knopp. These rely mainly on witness testimonies and historical film footage to tell history and to enable the TV viewers to gain a direct emotional access to historical reality. Other classical stylistic devices of the compilation film, such as expert interviews and the audiovisual citation of historical documents, sink into the background (e.g. Lappe 2003: 97).

If Siegfried Kracauer's paradigm (1993) is followed, the documentary film draws its authenticity from the depiction of supposedly non-staged, real actions. In its efforts to show past events the way they really were, modern historical documentaries aspire to objectivity. The supposedly unchanged reproduction of the original material is intended to lend credibility to the historical feature.

At first sight, the film footage of World War One seems then very well to open a window[5] to the war, to document its hidden reality. As the analysis of motifs and scenes above shows, however, instead of an authentic depiction of the reality of war, rather a veiling of it with an aestheticizing and glorification of war events occurs. This can hardly be surprising considering the origin of the film footage in war propaganda departments of the participant armies. Before this background, it appears secondary whether the reality of war can even be portrayed, as the propaganda film's depiction of war is bent on achieving exactly the opposite (e.g. Paul 2003: 60). This brings us in the following section, in which we turn our attention to the contemporary phase of documentation, to the question of how TV authors treat film resources.

Whereas the first part of the paper deals with the analysis of individual pictorial motifs, the television viewer is confronted with the film resource not as a single picture, but as a sequence. The process of pictorial editing creates narrative and aesthetic structures which themselves produce the narrative continuity of the documentary.

---

[4] In the production of compilation films, historical cuts, which have been extracted from their original context, are recombined on the editing table and thus placed into a new context (e.g. Hattendorf 1999: 203).
[5] This is in the sense of Leon Battista Alberti's window metaphor.

Editing is already a first interpretation of the raw material, and structures the viewer's reception in advance. The authors use only a very small variety of techniques: mostly the individual adjustments are simply connected with clean cuts. Doing without elaborate editing techniques, such as fading in and out or time lapse, reinforces the impression of fundamental authenticity. Only the cut frequency is adapted to the viewing habits and aesthetic expectations of today's viewers. A dynamic is lent to the wartime film material which is alien to its original form, especially by making sequences in which attacks are portrayed, to conform both to the fragmentary visual aesthetic of the younger audience and to contemporary ideas of the modern war.[6]

Whereas especially those scenes of military actions are made more dynamic through this splicing technique, TV authors resort to longer cuts and slow pans for their narrations of destruction on the battlefield and of the death or wounding of soldiers. Editing serves the fundamental rhythm of a documentary. The frequency thus conforms to the dramaturgy of the narrative.

Only through editing can the film reality be generated for the viewer of a documentary. So the TV authors can rely on firm conventions of combinations and standardized meanings. The viewer bridges two consecutively shown positions independently with his own imagination. Thus, the firing of a shell and the hit belong together in the context of a film, even if the two shots are completely independent of one another. The association is then the real narrative process, or the core of film narration. The viewer is given the impression of a closed, uninterrupted action, a continuous motion. This all fortifies the impression of authenticity, and gives the viewer an apparently immediate insight into the reality of war (e.g. Hickethier 2001: 145).

A prerequisite of this associative play on conventionalized images is that the television viewer is acquainted with a certain set of picture icons of World War One. Only someone who is already familiar with the pictorial connection between soldiers in gasmasks and blinded gas victims can follow the visual narrative. In the case of iconographic scenes, their recombination – as briefly touched upon – is only possible through the iconological bridging on the part of the viewer, independent of their original context. So the TV authors rely on the observer producing causal connections between images which are not present in the sources.

---

[6] In an especially succinct sequence the firing of a railroad cannon and a vertical shot of a gigantic explosion from above are spliced together. This scene borrows from the pictorial aesthetic of reports on the first Iraq war. There shots were mounted so that the discharge of sea-based cruise missiles and the target videos of American fighter planes were taken out of their original contexts and combined (e.g. Frohne et al. 2005).

This yields a certain haphazardness in the use of historical pictorial material. It can most easily be seen in the reuse of certain images at various places in the film narrative.

Instead of longer shots, the TV authors generally use a multiplicity of images from a single group for the visual production of their narration. Aside from catering to the aesthetic expectations of the television audience, a well-known rhetorical figure is also hidden within: accumulation (e.g. Borstnar 2002: 45). Through the juxtaposition of thematically similar consecutive shots the pictorial argumentation is fortified at the same time with the claim to a faithful portrayal of reality.

A soundless event seems incomplete, unreal. To the television viewer it seems an aesthetic inadequacy. Because the film footage was originally silent, due to the technological limits of its time, television authors employ standardized sound icons for the auditory illustration of their narrations, such as hoof beats, cannon sounds, marching boots and explosions. Especially the so-called synchronous noises which the viewer can localize in the picture serve to fortify the impression of reality (e.g. Hickethier 2001: 96).

But non-synchronized sound also often finds its place in the examined documentaries, being easy for the viewer to associate with the context of war events – as in the case of the shots and explosions often heard. The non-synchronous sounds often are of symbolic character, and support the narratives of the eyewitnesses.

Due to their ability to endow continuity, non-synchronous noises add an additional cohesion for otherwise disparate images. Thus one can speak of atmospheric sound, i.e. the military sound icons emphasize the realistic impression left on the viewer by the historic images of World War One.

The video aesthetic restraint exercised by the TV authors leaves the original aesthetic much leeway: the film images speak for themselves, and the glorification and romanticizing of war events which they convey remains mostly unbroken. In this way the aesthetic of war engraved in the wartime images is conserved – as is seen in the unbroken fascination with technology exuded by the extravagant and dramatic presentation of the war machinery.[7] Thus, the supposed reality of war – war as a game, contest or outing – also coagulates to historical reality (e.g. Mikos 2003: 147).

Wartime film material is presented in the documentaries we examined as an authentic source, and localized neither temporally, nor spatially, nor by situation in the voice-over

---

[7] It is conspicuous how often the TV authors place shots of railway cannons – the most immense artillery weapons of World War One – into scenes. The images are, however, empty of content, being localisable neither temporally nor spatially for the viewer.

commentaries. Although these commentaries often provide information on the economic or social dimension of the First World War, something which extends beyond the images themselves, the fact that the historical images shown are mainly propaganda is not mentioned.[8]

The depictions of the everyday war by veterans of World War One, just as the original pictures, are intended to convey credibility. In addition, historical witnesses offer the observer the opportunity for identification and contribute to the overcoming of the temporal distance from the events. The statements of eyewitnesses are embedded in a comparatively reductionistically composed narrative whole. Each sequence is opened with a panorama of a present day landscape or building that gives us a point of reference as the setting of a war event. The landscapes in question are filmed in color, just as are the eyewitness interviews. They zoom the observer into the event. The interviews alternate in each sequence with a series of consecutive original pictures. Sometimes the voice of the witness takes over the commentary of the subsequent images. By this means the historical footage often gains an additional credibility.

As communications science has shown, the visual impression in television documentaries always takes precedence over the commentary (e.g. Prase 1997: 62). Where these stand in contradiction to one another, the viewer will be much better able to remember the visual information in the long term. On the other hand, a commentary which is close to the image enables the viewer to remember the pictorial information better (e.g. Bock 1990: 78).

At various points in the documentaries there is a flagrant contradiction between the auditory and visual narration. This shall be briefly explained here with the use of one example: The statements of witnesses and commentaries on the insufficient state of provisions are combined with pictures of soldiers at the distribution of food and heaps of rations, waiting to be passed out. The narrations are in a way denied, falsified by the pictures. If we should choose to speak in aesthetic categories, then the tragic aspect of hunger and want is thrown into the comical by the incongruity of sound and image, and contributes thus to the playing down of the war. These sequences make it clear how the voluntary compulsion of the TV authors, who wish to strew their narration with historical film footage through and through, hinders the portrayal of the horror of war.

---

[8] Corresponding information is found neither in the opening credits or introductory commentary nor in the course of the documentary. Furthermore, an indirect critical assessment of sources is dispensed with entirely, e.g. such that wartime film material were presented as film in the film, or its origin identified in subtitles.

In summary, the TV authors allow themselves to fall prey to wartime propaganda through the extensive use of historical film footage. The propaganda film's presentation of the war's trade corresponds entirely to the viewers' expectations of the reality of war. So the individual motif groups, the front, sickbay and artillery, their aesthetic production and the myth of the clean war which lies therein find multiple counterparts in contemporary war reports. Even the aesthetic of destruction first developed during the First World War – its fascination with arms technology and its destructive power – differs little from today's war images.

On the other hand, some of the motifs shown in the documentaries are so strongly embedded in their time that they have become somewhat strange to the aesthetic perception of today's viewer. The scene of a soldier, like little Red Riding Hood, passing a picnic basket neatly packed with a clean white cloth into a trench to his colleague no longer seems idyllic and serene, but rather almost comical.

Regardless of the genre, there is in war reports – often due to a lack of visual alternatives – a hardly broken continuity of resorting to official propaganda images or images approved by military censors (e.g. Paul 2004: 365-403). By relying ever more, under the influence of Guido Knopp's productions, on the employment of historical footage in their narratives, the authors of contemporary historical documentaries make it all the more difficult for themselves to argue against the discourses engraved in these images.[9] If this procedure is compared to the historical documentaries of the 1970's and 1980's, an unambiguous break in content and in form can be discovered. This is all the more so in that the authors voluntarily renounce alternative stylistic devices that might make it easier to question the visual dominance of the apparently authentic film material and to tell a different history of World War One. With regard to the employment of pictures in historical science, the question remains whether a history of the war really needs illustration via movie footage and photography at all. Or do these not rather hinder the critical treatment? Susan Sontag (2003: 104f.) comes in this spirit to the following conclusions: "The first idea is that public attention is steered by the attentions of the media – which means, most decisively, images. When there are photographs, a war becomes 'real'. […] The second idea […] is that in a world saturated, no, hyper-saturated with images, those that should matter have a diminishing effect: we become callous."

---

[9] How difficult it is thus to paint a fitting picture of World War One is something we have tried to show elsewhere (e.g. Fengler/Krebs 2005).

List of references

Becker, Frank. 1998. "Die Anfänge der deutschen Kriegsfotografie in der Ära der Reichseinigungskriege (1864-1871)." *20th Century Imaginarium* 2: 69-102.

Bock, Michael. 1990. "Medienwirkung aus psychologischer Sicht. Aufmerksamkeit und Interesse, Verstehen und Behalten, Emotionen und Einstellungen." In Dietrich Meutsch and Bärbel Freund, eds. *Fernsehjournalismus und die Wissenschaften*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 58-88.

Boehm, Gottfried. 2005. "Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkungen zur Logik der Bilder." In Christa Maar and Hubert Burda, eds. *Iconic Turn – Die neue Macht der Bilder*. 3rd ed. Köln: DuMont-Literatur-und-Kunst-Verlag, pp. 28-43.

Borstnar, Nils et al. 2002. *Einführung in die Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft*. Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft.

Fengler, Silke and Krebs, Stefan. 2005. "In Celluloidgewittern – Die mediale Konstruktion von Wissenschaft und Technik als Paradigma des Ersten Weltkrieges." *Technikgeschichte* 72 (3): 227-241.

Friedrich, Ernst. 2004. *Krieg dem Kriege*. Reprint. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt.

Frohne, Ursula, Ludes, Peter and Wilhelm, Adalbert. 2005. "Militärische Routinen und kriegerische Inszenierungen" In Thomas Knieper and Marion G. Müller, eds. *War Visions. Bildkommunikation und Krieg*. Köln: Halem, pp. 120-152.

Hattendorf, Manfred. 1999. *Dokumentarfilm und Authentizität. Ästhetik und Pragmatik einer Gattung*. 2nd ed. Konstanz: UVK-Medien Ölschläger.

Hickethier, Knut. 2001. *Film- und Fernsehanalyse*. 3rd ed. Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler.

Hüppauf, Bernd. 1997. "Kriegsfotografie." In Wolfgang Michalka, ed. *Der Erste Weltkrieg. Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse*. München: Piper, pp. 875-905.

Kracauer, Siegfried. 1993. *Theorie des Films. Die Errettung der äußeren Wirklichkeit*. 2nd ed. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Lappe, Christian. 2003. "Geschichte im Fernsehen." *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 54: 96-103.

Mikos, Lothar. 2003. "Zur Rolle ästhetischer Strukturen in der Filmanalyse." In Yvonne Ehrenspeck and Burkhard Schäffer, eds. *Film- und Fotoanalyse in der Erziehungswissenschaft. Ein Handbuch*. Opladen: Leske und Budrich, pp. 135-150.

Paul, Gerhard. 2003. "Krieg und Film im 20. Jahrhundert." In Bernhard Chiari, Matthias Rogg and Wolfgang Schmidt, eds. *Krieg und Militär im Film des 20. Jahrhunderts*. München: Oldenbourg, pp. 3-76.

Paul, Gerhard. 2004. *Bilder des Krieges - Krieg der Bilder. Die Visualisierung des Krieges in der Moderne*. Paderborn et al.: Schöningh.

Prase, Tilo. 1997. *Das gebrauchte Bild. Bausteine einer Semiotik des Fernsehbildes*. Berlin: Vistas.

Sontag, Susan. 2003. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Sontag, Susan. 2002. *On Photography*. Reprint. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Curriculum vitae

Dipl.-Vw. Silke Fengler, M.A., History of Technology, Chair for the History of Technology, RWTH Aachen University.

Stefan Krebs, M.A., History of Technology, Chair for the History of Technology, RWTH Aachen University.