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Facing Forward with Found Footage: Displacing Colonial Footage in Mother Dao and the Work of Fiona Tan

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We shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it. Essentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day. (Bergson, 2005, p. 135)

In 1926, the Dutch cameraman Iep Ochse recorded a fascinating scene on the island of Bali, Indonesia: three toddlers cheerfully smoking a cigarette. The brief shot – it lasts eleven seconds – shows three naked children that fill the frame; they are seated facing the camera, the youngest sitting on the eldest boy's lap. The latter vigorously inhales and exhales, creating a cloud of smoke that fills the screen. He then passes on the cigarette to the boy on his right and lovingly grooms the lock of hair of the youngest child. [Figure 1] When this shot was used in a film for the Dutch newsreel production company Polygoon in 1940, the scene was accompanied by a spoken commentary, saying 'These babies take advantage of the fact that mother went shopping' (*Tropisch Nederland*, 1940). The scene is thus being explained as an example of innocent, naughty behaviour that occurs when mothers leave their children alone.

In her film installation *Smoke Screen* of 1997, visual artist Fiona Tan (Indonesia, 1966) deconstructs this reading of the scene. Tan edited the shot in a short compilation film

that is supposed to be played in a continuous loop. In the beginning, her film uses the traditional documentary format: we see the shot, followed by a title card that explains the place and estimated date of the recording. The second title card repeats the 1940s reading of the shot: babies taking advantage of the fact that mother went shopping. After that, however, the film becomes more ambiguous. Again we see the toddlers, now followed by the enigmatic title card 'Boys will be men'. How are we supposed to interpret this text? Is smoking part of a ritual marking the transition from childhood to manhood? Are we to reflect on the fact that these children have since grown up to be men?

The uncertainty about the meaning of the images increases further with the next title card 'With my own eyes'. Whose eyes have actually witnessed this scene? From the first title card we know that the shot is archival footage – 'Indonesia, maybe 1930' – so the scene cannot have been witnessed by the artist herself. But then who saw and recorded it? Or does the text perhaps refer to the viewer, who is confronted with the filmic documentation of the scene and thus sees it 'with her own eyes'? Finally, the film shows the artist herself, with a toy camera held before her right eye. Now the confusion is complete: is it a game? Does she re-enact the recording of the original situation with a toy camera? Are we now watching the artist watching somebody else who looked at these three Indonesian children? [**Figure 2**]

Then the film starts over again, and by now the viewer knows the texts and images are highly ambiguous. By constantly repeating the images of the toddlers and alternating them with different texts and the shot of the artist herself, the meaning of what we see becomes increasingly blurred. The contrast between the old, archival footage and the new, self-reflexive texts and images invite the viewer to adopt a more distant standpoint. From this standpoint the relation between the camera, the people filmed, the artist and the viewer is being questioned. Who are these children? Where does the footage come from? To what

extent was it staged? What has become of the kids? But also: why are we looking at it now? How do we relate to these images from colonial Indonesia?

Displacing Colonial Footage

In this article, I investigate the relation between archival footage, its displacements, and the effects of these displacements on the interpretation of these images and their link to the past. Central to this investigation are three case studies: the film and video installations *Smoke Screen* (16mm film installation, 1997, loop) and *Facing Forward* (video projection, 1999, 11 minutes) by the Indonesian-Australian artist Fiona Tan and the feature-length documentary film *Mother Dao: the Turtlelike* (Netherlands, 1995, 90 minutes) by the Dutch documentary filmmaker Vincent Monnikendam. Both Tan and Monnikendam work with colonial footage from the Dutch East-Indies produced between the 1910s and 1930s and kept in various audiovisual archives in the Netherlands, like the Royal Institute for the Tropics and the Filmmuseum in Amsterdam. They both use this archival material to create so-called compilation films: films that are entirely based on existing footage.

The discussion of the films is primarily focused on their effect on the contemporary viewer's engagement with the colonial past of the Dutch in Indonesia. The central questions are: How do Tan's installations and Monnikendam's documentary film construct our present-day memory of the colonial past? How can contemporary artworks like these address specific cultural and historical problems, such as the legacy of colonialism in our present time?

The compilation film can be seen as a specific technology of memory, one that uses montage, or editing, as a tool to intervene in the way we remember the past. Both Monnikendam and Tan employ montage as a tool in the deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural memory, in particular the memory of the colonial presence of the Dutch in Indonesia. Montage, here, operates on two levels: first, on the level of the compilation film itself; and

second, on that of the exhibition context. In order to analyse how the exhibition context influences the way in which compilation films function as technologies of memory, I compare a feature-length film that was shown in cinema theatres and on television to two works that were conceived as museum installations – a short, silent film installation (*Smoke Screen*) and a longer video installation with sound (*Facing Forward*). Although one can argue that each individual presentation changes the way these works are seen and interpreted, I here focus on the cinema theatre and gallery space as settings that are characterised by two distinct types of spectatorship. Of course, the displacement of colonial footage already commences at the archive, which attributes meaning to the material by means of selection, classification, description of and access to colonial footage (Stoler, 2002). In this article, however, I specifically focus on the reuse of colonial footage in the works of Monnikendam and Tan.

Before analysing these cases in more detail, I first discuss the compilation film as a specific technology of memory. Subsequently, in order to understand how the displacement and montage of archival elements can serve as an alternative way of connecting past issues to present concerns, I discuss the *Mnemosyne* project of the German art historian Aby Warburg. This discussion provides the theoretical backdrop for understanding the construction of colonial memory discussed in the cases below.

Compilation Films: ‘Editing as a window cleaner’

Contrary to the traditional historical documentary, compilation films use archival footage not as illustration of real events, but as images that draw attention to the constructed nature of media productions. Because of their self-referential nature, these films, which are also known as ‘found footage films’ or ‘archival films’, have the potential to critique, challenge and possibly also subvert the power of cinematographic representation (Wees, 1992, p. 39).¹

The main technique employed in these films is montage: the filmmaker takes shots from different films and reassembles them in a new order. The new order of the shots creates unexpected connections between them; connections that are often underlined by the use of titles, spoken texts or music. For example, in Bruce Connor's *A Movie* (1958), images of an officer staring into a submarine periscope are alternated with images of a scarcely dressed model reclining in a provocative pose – a sequence that is concluded with images of a torpedo speeding through water, followed by a nuclear explosion and walls of water engulfing a battleship and a surfer. In a mocking way, this sequence creates visual links between sexual desire and military aggression, while it simultaneously focuses attention on the conventional editing strategies that link individual shots through implied cause and effect relationships (Wees, 1992, pp. 43 and 45).

Compilation films literally displace the footage they use: images are removed from their original context and represented in a new one. This displacement entails a shift in meaning: in the new context the same images can mean differently. As Fiona Tan puts it: 'The recycling of film fragments or photos breathes new life into the images; they are liberated from the harness of their original context. Recycling makes it possible to see images in a new way. Recycling creates new images. Editing as a window cleaner' (2000, p. 127).² As such, the displacement and re-editing of archival material in compilation films can be a tool for remembering the past differently.

Remembering Art History: Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* Project

This technique has a precedent in the way in which the nineteenth-century German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) used photographic reproductions of art works to analyse the relationships between them. Warburg is best known as the originator of the discipline of iconology: a method for deciphering and interpreting symbolic references in art works. But

where followers like Erwin Panofsky developed iconology as a method with positivist or neo-Kantian ambitions, Warburg's iconology was critical, in that it stressed the *creative act* of interpretation. As art historian Philippe-Alain Michaud observes, 'Warburg replaced the principle of detachment governing the understanding of works with a principle of invention. Research did not simply reflect a theoretical attitude; it had to be imagined as a practice aiming to reactivate its object and experiencing its attraction in turn' (2004, p. 32).

In his vast library, which was moved from Hamburg to London in 1933 and is now part of the Warburg Institute, Warburg collected thousands of books. The organisation of these books was not a static arrangement – Warburg constantly regrouped them in order to reflect new ideas about the interrelation of facts. He thus used the physical arrangement of the books as an objectification of his thought; a method that helped him to fathom the psychology of artistic creation (Michaud, 2004, p. 235).

Warburg also collected thousands of black and white photographs of sculptures, paintings, prints, tapestries and other forms of imagery. For his *Mnemosyne* (Memory) project, which aimed to create an atlas in images (an 'art history without a text', as he himself described it), Warburg arranged these photographic reproductions on black panels, in order to find new and unanticipated interpretations of the relationships between works from different times and places (Michaud, 2004: 240). In this way, he used the technique of montage 'to activate dynamic properties [of individual art works] that would be latent if considered individually' (p. 253). The result is similar to the effect of cinematographic montage: 'The *Mnemosyne* panels function as screens on which the phenomena produced in succession by the cinema are reproduced simultaneously' (p. 260). According to art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, what was characteristic for Warburg's photographic panels was their exchangeability: the photographs could always be taken off the panels and endlessly be

recombined with other images, thus keeping their meaning open and avoiding a final point of interpretation (2002, pp. 459-60).

The method Warburg used in his *Mnemosyne* project resembles the way our memory works: images of past objects and events (in his case: photographic reproductions) are combined and recombined in constantly changing constellations. As a consequence, our interpretation of the objects and events from the past is constantly changing too; each time we approach them from a different perspective. Writing history thus becomes a subjective and creative process, where ‘the researcher gives meaning to something that has no meaning – not in *understanding* but in *reproducing* the world in the closed universe of representations’ (Michaud, 2004, p. 236).

From this perspective, there is little difference between Warburg’s method of reproducing the historical development of art and the way contemporary artists use the archive as a site for developing alternative memories or reconstructing forgotten pasts. In his discussion of Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean, and Sam Durant as exemplars of artists working from what he calls ‘an archival impulse’, art critic Hal Foster indicates that these artists present their archival materials ‘as active, even unstable—open to eruptive returns and entropic collapses, stylistic repackagings and critical revisions’ (2004, p. 17). The aim of these works is to ‘fashion distracted viewers into engaged discussants’ (p. 4). Artists do so by elaborating on the found image, object, and text and presenting them in a new form. A closer look at the works of Monnikendam and Tan will now demonstrate how compilations of archival footage can become technologies for reconstructing our memory of the colonial past.

Reconstructing Colonial Memories in Mother Dao

The film *Mother Dao: The Turtlelike* opens with a creation myth of the island Nias, just off the coast of Sumatra, where ‘Mother Dao’ is seen as the creator of earth and all life. Her

nickname, 'the turtlelike', refers to the slightly rounded shape of the horizon that resembles the shape of a turtle. The creation of the earth is represented by recordings of volcano eruptions and explosions; strong images that symbolise the birth of new and unspoilt land. Those images are followed by shots of various Indonesian peoples, from Sumatra to Papua New Guinea. The film seems to suggest that these were the first inhabitants of the new land.

Subsequently, we see the arrival of the colonial Europeans. First, there is only one man, on horseback—presumably a missionary, who explores a coastal path on the isle of Nias. Soon, however, he is followed by many more men in white tropical suits who start felling trees in order to be able to exploit the land. A shot of a colonial officer dressed in white, addressing the male population of Nias from a platform, introduces the central theme of the film: the unequal power relations that are the result of the European intervention in Indonesia.

The opening sequence is more or less representative for the rest of the film. Images of Indonesian landscapes, peoples, and rituals are alternated with images of the colonial presence in Indonesia—shots of plantations, factories, trains, and other signs of modernisation that seem to penetrate the land—and shots of the lifestyle of the European colonials that strongly contrast with the shots of the living and working conditions of the indigenous peoples. Although there is no clearly defined narrative in the film, the alternation of those different types of images results in a film that is highly critical of the colonial presence in Indonesia.

Monnikendam makes clever use of the propagandistic nature of the original footage. As in other compilation films, *Mother Dao* uses propagandistic imagery and turns it against itself: images originally celebrating the production processes in the tobacco factory now mainly show the dirty and dangerous circumstances in which the local workers have to do their work.³ We cannot help but notice the proud and smug faces of the supervisors, dressed in pristine white suits and hats that contrast sharply with the half-dressed and often dirty

workers. The film achieves this effect through montage: the unexpected and sometimes crude contrasts between the images of working conditions in factories and the luxurious and cheerful life of the colonials makes us aware of the contradictions and unequal power relations in colonial Indonesia. For example, the film contains a scene of the winnowing of kapok – images that are beautiful but that also demonstrate the dirty and unhealthy working conditions in this industry. These images are followed by a shot of the easy-going life of a colonial family, suggesting that these families sleep on the mattresses for which the locals produce the kapok.

In this way, the film forms a critical note in a culture of memory that has been dominated by romantic constructions of colonial history (Van Vree, 2005). The specific memory that Monnikendam attempts to deconstruct is exemplified by the newsreel *Tropisch Nederland* (Tropical Netherlands) of 1940, a remake of the presumably lost 1926 newsreel *Naar Tropisch Nederland* (Hogenkamp, 1988, p. 32) that contains a lot of the material Monnikendam reused for *Mother Dao*. This filmic report of a boat trip from the Netherlands to Batavia (present-day Jakarta), via various Indonesian islands, was made to raise the interest of the Dutch population for a life in the colonies. Combining images of modernisation brought by the colonials with images of traditional, local customs, the film expresses a romantic view of colonial Indonesia as a place where locals and colonials co-exist in a peaceful harmony. In *Mother Dao* Monnikendam deconstructs the discourse of *Tropisch Nederland* by presenting the same footage in different juxtapositions. For example, where in *Tropisch Nederland* shots of a missionary hospital are used to stress the modernisation of health care implemented by the Dutch (the commentary track indicates that ‘here, magnificent work is done for the benefit of the indigenous population’), in *Mother Dao* the same images introduce the dramatic climax of the film: close-up images of people with a skin disease and of dying babies, followed by shots of a local funeral ritual.

The film thus constructs a new view on the colonial history of Indonesia: the Dutch invaded an unspoilt country and brought hunger, death and destruction in the name of modernisation and progress. This reconstructed memory is supported by the use of sound. Monnikendam left out the explanatory voice-over that is so characteristic of traditional documentaries, and replaced it with old and recent poems and songs that are spoken in Bahasa Indonesia and expressing sadness and despair resulting from deceit, exploitation and striving for profit. In addition, there is a soundtrack by the Dutch composer Jan Dries Groenendijk, which combines sounds recorded in Indonesia with new, electronic sounds. In this sense, the film adds an Indonesian soundscape to the Western perspective of the images.⁴

Montage here functions as a means to deconstruct one memory of colonial Indonesia and substitute it with another. The film premiered at the International Film Festival Rotterdam on 2 February 1995. Besides a broadcast on Dutch television, the film was subsequently mostly screened in cinema theatres, in particular at various film festivals in the Netherlands and abroad. To what extent does this exhibition context influence the way in which *Mother Dao* functions as a technology of memory?⁵

As film scholar Ann Friedberg explains, cinema spectatorship has traditionally been characterised by the projection of a luminous image in a dark room, viewed by immobilised spectators who have a passive relation to the film they see once and in a linear fashion (1994, pp. 133–34). With the arrival of television and video, the conditions of cinema spectatorship changed: it does no longer rely on the dark room, it allows for a certain level of mobility, and it has become less linear, giving the viewer more control over the when and where of viewing (pp. 136–47).⁶ In particular, the remote control has turned every viewer into ‘a ready-made *montagiste*, cutting and pasting images from a wide repertoire of sources at the push of a button’ (p. 142).

Friedberg argues that contemporary cinema and televisual spectatorship is characterised by a ‘mobilized “virtual” gaze’, a gaze that travels ‘through an imaginary elsewhere and an imaginary elsewhere’ (p. 2). In this sense, viewing a film in the cinema theatre or on television is a means to travel virtually through time, in particular because of cinema’s ‘ability to be repeated, over time, imparting to each spectator a unique montage-consciousness’ (p. 103). It is exactly this ‘unique montage-consciousness’ that *Mother Dao* addresses: the spectator is aware that the filmmaker uses footage from another time and presents this in a new order that changes the meaning of the original footage. During the ninety minutes it takes to watch the film, the viewer is invited to reconstruct the filmmaker’s montage and to reflect on the possible earlier meanings of the footage that the filmmaker now deconstructs.⁷ Thus, watching *Mother Dao* on TV or in the cinema theatre can be considered *montage in time*, whereby the spectator’s reconstruction of the filmmaker’s montage results in the formation of a new, critical memory of the colonial presence of Indonesia.

Facing Forward in the Gallery Space

Fiona Tan addresses this particular travelling through time in her video installation *Facing Forward*. For this work she chose ethnographic footage from the collection of the Netherlands Filmmuseum and edited it into a film of eleven minutes. The film opens with a black and white shot of a large group of non-western (Indonesian?) men who face the camera as if they were having their portrait taken. In the middle, three white men (missionaries?) are seated, flanked by other white men in army suits and leisure wear. This opening shot is followed by other shots of (Indonesian) men and women staring silently in the camera. The flicker and the scratches in the images, as well as the fact that they are in black and white, suggest that we are watching archival footage.

The images are accompanied by a soundtrack consisting of a gong and a violin-like one-tone sound. We then see the title of the film, underscored by a five-tone piano sound that suggests mystery and anticipation. This minimalist soundtrack continues throughout the film. The film then takes us on a car ride to an unidentified Indonesian city where the passers-by are looking curiously into the camera lens. We hear a voice-over reading a passage from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1978) – a text about travelling through time and place. The voice-over cites Marco Polo, who explains to Kublai Khan: 'that what he sought was always something lying ahead, even if it was a matter of the past. Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places' (Voice-over commentary in *Facing Forward*, 1999; after Calvino, 1978, pp. 28-9).

In the rest of the film, this scenario is repeated. We see different shots of people from various parts of the world who appear to be made to pose in front of the camera. This impression is reinforced by the inclusion of shots of a white man operating a film camera who is wearing a headband decorated with four feathers. A shot of two African women wearing face masks epitomises the contrived nature of the footage: women who do not want their faces to be seen are being forced to 'face forward'.

At the end of the film, the images from the opening sequence are repeated, accompanied by the voice-over that resumes the narration from Calvino's text: 'By now, from that real or hypothetical past of his, Marco is excluded; he cannot stop; he must go on to another city, where another of his pasts awaits him, or something perhaps that had been a possible future of his and is now someone else's present' (Voice-over commentary in *Facing Forward*, 1999; after Calvino, 1978, p. 29). The film ends with a shot of two young girls shyly smiling towards the camera.

Like *Mother Dao*, *Facing Forward* focuses attention on the constructed nature of cinematographic representation. As in *Smoke Screen*, the repetition of images, accompanied by texts that complicate the meaning of the shots, encourages viewers to reflect on the meaning of the archival images and the colonial past they refer to. Contrary to *Mother Dao*, however, the deconstruction of the colonial discourse in *Facing Forward* does not lead to the formation of a new, coherent perspective on the Dutch presence in Indonesia. Instead, the work draws attention to the process of creating meaning itself. As the literary scholar Ernst van Alphen states, ‘Tan’s videos and films all reflect on how the medium functions as an agent that creates specific relationships between the viewer and the image’ (2002, p. 59). In doing so, Tan not only stimulates spectators to develop a specific interpretation of the images, but also to reflect on the gaze with which they regard the people portrayed: ‘The cultural other is subjected to observation; but the observing self is also included’ (p. 64).⁸

The emphasis on the subjective, open, and dynamic process of making sense of the past is supported by the fact that *Smoke Screen* and *Facing Forward* were conceived as installations for museum galleries.⁹ Contrary to cinematic and televisual spectatorship, where viewers are more or less required to sit still and watch the film as it unfolds over time, in the gallery space, both the images and the spectator are mobile. Boris Groys explains that ‘a video or movie installation in a museum neutralizes the ban of motion that determines the viewing of these pictures in a movie system. Pictures and spectators are allowed to move at the same time’ (Groys, 2001, n.p.; see Groys, 2003). According to Groys, this situation causes a certain tension, putting the viewer ‘in a state of doubt and helplessness’: the time-based nature of film and video installations neither allows the viewer to fully determine his or her own time of viewing nor makes it possible to view all the works in their entirety. It is this fundamental uncertainty that gives the works their aesthetic value: ‘The aesthetic value of the media installation in the museum mainly consists of picking the confusion, the uncertainty, the

missing control of the viewer about his time of attention in a museum exhibition—that used to give the illustration of total organization—as a central theme’ (Groys, 2001, n.p.).

Consequently, compared to the cinema or television spectator, the viewer of film and video installations in the gallery switches ‘from a passive position to a more interactive one, from an observer separate from the apparatus to a participant’, as Friedberg writes apropos of another context (Friedberg, 1994, p. 144). One can argue that in the space of the gallery, the viewer is invited to continue the editing process that the artist has started. According to film scholar Raymond Bellour, installations guide the viewer towards composing and recomposing the images and words that are being presented (Bellour, 2000, p. 8). Boris Groys explains this active participation of the viewer from the fact that the installation of film or video in the museum focuses attention on the medium itself: ‘It creates an ideal place for an analytic and linguistically-based reflection on video and movie pictures.’ This focus on reflection, Groys maintains, ‘causes the viewer to adapt the selective and analytic strategies of the respective artist and to become an active consumer of media himself’ (2001, n.p.). Since the viewer’s physical movement determines the way the images, words and sounds of the installation are recomposed, in the gallery space the montage in time that characterises the viewing of compilation films on television or in the cinema theatre, is extended to *montage into space*.¹⁰

Conclusion

As I have argued above, *Mother Dao* deconstructs the romantic and nostalgic view of the colonial presence in Indonesia and replaces it with a critical discourse, emphasising the unequal power relations and difficult living and working conditions of the indigenous population. In *Facing Forward* and *Smoke Screen*, Fiona Tan uses a different strategy: her installations focus attention on the process of attributing meaning to the archival images itself, inviting her viewers to reflect on their role in making sense of these images. What does this

analysis teach us about the way in which compilation films function as technologies of memory?

Cinematic montage offers the possibility of deconstructing earlier meanings attached to the images, meanings that remained unconscious in earlier times (as in the case of a propaganda film like *Tropisch Nederland*) or that have been forgotten. The compilation filmmaker uses editing and sound to draw attention to the production and reception history of these archival images. This is why the compilation film functions as a technology for remembering the past: 'The "historicity" of found footage, resonant with historical fact, memory, and emotion, emerges from the cultural politics of its production, and most important, its circulation as a symbolic commodity' (Zryd, 2003, p. 47). The result is a new, self-reflexive discourse on the past. As filmmaker and footage researcher Sharon Sandusky states, compilation filmmakers usually 'offer enough clues to allow the audience a window into how they think, thereby avoiding a second-generation brainwashing technique' (1992, p. 12). The viewer is asked to participate in the montage of the filmmaker by reconstructing his or her new configuration of the images.

When the compilation film is watched in the cinema theatre or on television, the viewer is bound to the filmmaker's ordering of the images and hence, the viewer's participation exists in reconstructing the filmmaker's new discourse. I see this as a form of montage in time, both in the sense of the linear montage of the images and in the sense of travelling through time, connecting the present of the viewer to the various pasts embodied in the footage. Yet, while cinema and televisual spectatorship allow for travelling through time, the viewer cannot actively change the order of the images and is thus bound to the filmmaker's new discourse.

In contrast, in the gallery space, the viewer is invited to actively continue the editing process that the filmmaker has started. The physical mobility of the viewer shifts the attention

from the montage at the level of the film itself to the way in which the viewer participates in the construction of the relation between the images, texts, and sounds. This can be seen as an extension of montage into space.

This double potential of the compilation film, montage in time and space, makes it a technology for remembering history in a dynamic and open way, connecting past issues to the present concerns of contemporary viewers. As Hal Foster indicates, the archival elements reused in contemporary visual art works serve as ‘found arks of lost moments in which the here-and-now of the work serves as a possible portal between an unfinished past and a reopened future’ (2004, p. 15). This connection between past, present and future is achieved through ‘affective association’ (p. 21). This is particularly prominent in Tan’s *Smoke Screen* and *Facing Forward*. Her use of close-ups or medium shots of people facing the camera stimulates our affective association with the people and their histories. The texts, sounds and new images that she uses at the same time support the formation of this affective relation and emphasise the difficulty of relating these histories to our present-day concerns.¹¹ This way of working echoes Aby Warburg’s employment of montage to ‘elaborate a type of thought that espoused the movements of intuition, ... a thought inseparable from the body and the encounters affecting it’ (Michaud, 2004, p. 232).

Tan’s installations involve viewers with the archival footage in a way that makes those images productive for understanding ourselves via the unknown other. Paradoxically, we can get closer to the past if we are more aware of the distance that separates us from it. The further Marco Polo travels, the more he is being confronted with his past, the less he understands who he is: ‘Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveller recognises the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have’ (Voice-over commentary in *Facing Forward*, 1999; after Calvino, 1978, p. 29). In this sense, *Facing Forward* invites us

to reflect on who we are, where we came from, and where we are going: we have to look back in order to face forward.

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Audiovisual works

Facing Forward, Fiona Tan (video projection, 1999). Black and white and coloured film, English commentary, soundtrack by Hugo Dijkstal, 11 minutes.

Mother Dao: The Turtlelike, Vincent Monnikendam (Netherlands, 1995). Black and white, Bahasa Indonesia with Dutch subtitles, soundtrack by Jan Dries Groenendijk, 90 minutes.

Smoke Screen, Fiona Tan (16mm film installation, 1997). Black and white and colour, silent, loop.

Tropisch Nederland. Met de filmcamera op reis door de geheele Indische Archipel, Polygoon (Netherlands 1940). Dutch commentary, black and white, 91 minutes 50 seconds (2674 metres/8773 feet). Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, collection Polygoon Opdrachtfilm, DOCID 637.

Notes

¹ Jay Leyda was the first to distinguish archive-based films as ‘compilation films’ – see his *Films Beget Films* (1964). Wees (1992; 1993) was one of the first to try and establish a clear classification for the great variety of films that use existing footage. However, his distinction between ‘compilation’, ‘collage’, and ‘appropriation’ films has not been adopted widely. Note that I do not share Michael Zryd’s distinction between found footage films – based on non-archived material, literally ‘found’ in private collections, commercial stock shot agencies, garbage bins, etc. – and archival films – based on material from archival institutions. I actually doubt whether, as he claims, ‘the archive is an official institution that separates historical record from the outtake’ (2003, p. 41).

² Sandusky (1992) offers a psychoanalytic account of how the compilation film – which she terms ‘The Archival Art Film’ – can function as a cure for the manipulation of our desires by what she calls ‘The Toxic Film Artefact’.

³ As Michael Zryd states, ‘Ironic recontextualization mines the subversive potential inherent in much archival footage’s source as official discourse, whether located in the sphere of government, corporate sponsorship, or the entertainment/news media industry. The footage

speaks anew as evidence – but less as evidence of an event than as evidence of the folly of the official discourses from which the archival footage springs’ (2003, p. 51).

⁴ Although the soundtrack helps to counter the Eurocentric perspective of the footage, in some cases it results in an embarrassing exoticism. As Delpout has pointed out, almost all images of the local population and their rituals are accompanied by an ominous sound composition that seems to emphasise the stereotypical image of the elusive and ‘dark’ side of the Indonesian peoples (Delpout, 1995).

⁵ It is worth noting that at the screening of *Mother Dao* at an international film festival in Japan in 1997 the audience definitely saw a different version of the film than audiences elsewhere, since the Japanese customs authorities ordered that a 12-second scene, in which male sex organs are visible, be cut before the film could be shown (The Internet Movie Database, 2008).

⁶ Friedberg discusses the impact of virtual reality devices on cinema and televisual spectatorship. Because she wrote her book before the widespread use of DVD and new media (the Internet, iPods, mobile phones), she does not take into account the radical control over the time, place, and order of viewing these media entail. As *Mother Dao* was broadcast on TV and shown in cinema theatres only, I think her argument on spectatorship is still pertinent to the analysis of montage at the level of the exhibition context.

⁷ See Sharon Sandusky’s discussion of Daniel Eisenberg’s compilation film *Displaced Person*: ‘*Displaced Person* asks the audience to consider that since the film material isn’t gone, perhaps the meaning behind it also remains. This leaves the audience with the project of confronting the underlying meaning, precisely because earlier generations did not’ (1992, p. 16) This search for earlier meanings in displaced footage is a means to retrieve what Mary-Ann Doane has called ‘subjective residues’ of cinematic texts that remain beyond the initial viewing. See Friedberg, 1994, p. 134.

⁸ The inclusion of the shot of the artists with a toy camera in *Smoke Screen* is of course a quite literal reference to the ‘observing self’.

⁹ It is worth observing that *Facing Forward* and *Smoke Screen* have mostly been shown as installations in museums and galleries. *Smoke Screen* has once been projected on a large screen attached to the front of De Balie, a centre for culture and debate in the heart of Amsterdam. It would be interesting to investigate the implications of this urban screen space setting for the viewing and interpretation of this work, but that falls beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁰ Fiona Tan’s video installation *Tuareg* (1999) is a case in point: a filmic image of a group of children is being projected on a transparent screen that is supposed to divide two separate rooms. In that way, the viewer can literally approach the same image from two sides: on the one side you see the image as it is, on the other side of the screen it is reversed. A different soundtrack on both sides underlines the changing perspective on the image evoked by the viewer’s physical displacement in space.

¹¹ Foster speculates that the attempts of artists working from an ‘archival impulse’ to connect things previously disconnected is motivated by a sense of failure in cultural memory, of society’s incapacity to remember the past – in spite of the omnipresent ‘memory industry’, archival art suggests that ‘this industry is amnesiac in its own way’ (2004, p. 21-2).