

Unwritten History
Nancy Roth



“They used to say that history is written by its victors...” So begins the voiceover, the element that structures, frames and paces Dave Griffiths’ new film *Babel Fiche*. Because it is voiceover, we hear the words as thoughts rather than speech, specifically the thoughts of one of two people - a man and a woman - who appear on screen. How exactly do we know that they are living in a fictional future, reflecting on the archival evidence they are examining – microfiche - and that they are trying to come to some understanding of us, here and now? Why does one of them speak directly to us (“you”), the other to no one in particular, about us (“they”)? Why does one look out at the city through a telescope, the other at the past, through a microfiche reader? One of them wonders – within our hearing – about the meaning of “victors,” or “history”, now that so much has changed. With that, he effectively introduces the film’s subject matter, passing over the word “written” in silence.

The voiceover has an elegiac quality, a wistful sadness that sometimes edges into frustration as the archivists struggle to understand past events to reach us. “What happened?” we want to ask in return. “Why, when there is motion and sound capture, visual synthesis of things no one has ever actually *seen*, the technical metaphors for thought, for consciousness itself, are you so obsessed with those funny, awkward old microfiche? Has everything else disintegrated, disappeared? How? And what has happened to the historian’s stock-in-trade, the atlases, catalogues, chronicles, gazetteers, dictionaries and encyclopaediae - what happened to all the *paper*?”

Griffiths is attracted to the thought of Vilém Flusser (1920-1991), the Czech-born philosopher and writer distinguished for, among other things, his sensitivity to the way media shape and limit their users’ universe - their consciousness. Flusser’s characterisation of history as a progressive disenchantment of the world has had a particularly important impact on Griffiths’ thinking and filmmaking. This characterisation of history appears in a number of different frameworks in Flusser’s writing. Sometimes history is a progressive explanation (read: demystification) of images through language, sometimes of writing as a technology that exposes and solidifies temporal structures inherent in spoken language. He also described the way any he himself, in writing a sentence, actually forces a nebulous thought into a firm structure, specifically a line (Flusser, 2012), making it available to historical thought. But it is always about writing. The transition starts with the invention of writing at the time of Babel (Babylon), around 3,500 b.c. It involves a shift from the magical, ritual behaviour of people who share their experience of the world through images, to the

temporally, logically ordered, *historical* understanding of the world that characterises literate people. History, in short, *is* writing. Or, to put it another way, if it isn't written, it isn't history. Or to put it in yet another way, "Unwritten History" is a contradiction in terms - impossible, at least for historical consciousness.

Flusser is by no means the only thinker to equate 'history' with 'writing', or to associate writing with a particular form of human 'universe', a set of possibilities and limitations. He is exceptional, however, in his conviction that "technical images," – photography, film, sound recording, digital synthesis – support a form of consciousness unequivocally antagonistic to historical thought – and that writing will therefore soon become a curious, esoteric skill – nice, but not really necessary. Photography, the first 'technical image' marks the turning point. In the very succinct essay *Photography and History*, he put it memorably: "photographs are dams placed in the way of the stream of history, jamming historical happening..." (Flusser, 2002, 128). What follows is the universe of technical images, a new consciousness, ours - hard to grasp or describe exactly, because we are immersed in it. Like the new technologies themselves, he suggests, it relies on mathematical, rather than alphanumeric code; it organises time and space as a surface, rather than a temporal line; privileges breadth over depth, image over text. There is a symmetry about the thinking that suggests we may be experiencing a *re-enchantment* of the world, an idea Flusser approaches with deep caution, if not foreboding. For as he points out, submission to magical beliefs now, in the presence of increasingly powerful technology, has already produced more than one catastrophe - the mid-century rise of fascism in Central Europe being the instance most prominent in his own life experience.

Babel Fiche is in any case a veritable catalogue of what Flusser called "technical images": the film uses sampled, found, staged, synthesised sound and image, and employs a range of recent visual and acoustic digital technologies to integrate these into a coherent whole. The music was commissioned specifically for the occasion. Griffiths has really directed a team of specialist collaborators, as is often the case for film productions, raising the very questions Flusser did himself regarding 'authorship' in the universe of technical images (Flusser: 2011a, 95-104). The film's 'title' technology is a technique for animating images stored on the microfiche. Grainy and jerky, these sequences recall old film, with its strange capacity to suggest its own struggle to be, to 'speak' about the resistance of the material, the apparatus, the time. Seeing the animations as we do in the film, through the fictional archivists' magnifying lenses, it seems like we are animating the tiny grids as we look, making them 'come alive' just by becoming conscious of them.

So the film does not explicitly call attention to the technology and expect credit. No 'author' stands up to take a bow. Rather the film sets up the conditions for the technology to figure metaphorically - to 'stand' for consciousness, in the expectation that we will accept it. And we do. It seems entirely 'natural' that the

images should move in response to our attention; it takes some effort to see behind the fiction. In the same sense, it would be difficult *not* to understand the voiceover as the thought of the archivists. These things are easy: it's *history* that is hard. For we already inhabit the universe of technical images.

"The archive speaks" we hear in the voiceover. Given that film is such a predominantly visual medium, and that so much effort has obviously been expended on visual effects in *Babel Fiche*; the structuring force of spoken language in this film gives pause for thought. The archivists in *Babel Fiche* are highly literate people. They speak in complete, complex sentences, without repetition. They think from the beginning to the end of a sentence - in one direction - evidence of careful education in a literate culture (Flusser, 2011b, 32-33). Given the voiceover, a viewer may at first expect the film to *be* history, in the way documentary films often are, to rely on language for its structure, to let the words order and interpret the images, and to *go* somewhere - like a book. Such a viewer, having been asked, at the beginning of the film, to reconsider the terms of our relationship to the past, would expect to see and hear more details about the difficulties of using archival documents, to be shown various ways of thinking about them, possible solutions to the problem, decisions among reasonable alternatives, perhaps a proposal for another kind of history, another way of organising and distributing it. Such a viewer would never need to question the fact, the function of *history* itself.

Of course, none of this happens. Despite the prominence of language, *Babel Fiche* is quite consciously and emphatically *not* a book. It doesn't tell a story, make a list or develop an argument. Perhaps more like a photograph in a tray of developer, it keeps deepening, articulating a pattern that is roughly in place from the beginning. The archivists have different voices. At first it seems they might be in different times or places, and it's something of a surprise - but not a very troubling one - to find, eventually, that they have been working in the same space, living at the same time, all the while. Historical consciousness would surely be troubled by voices that don't 'belong' to any body, images of people and places that can't be named and placed in temporal or logical order. But most of us readily suspend judgement, let the images not be ordered, let the time be ambiguous. Any one of us may from time to time direct an open, broad question toward the past, something about how things might have been, how a certain thing came to be as it is. Historical consciousness is not gone. But the questions lack urgency, authority.

"A beautiful lie, that we were heading somewhere..." is the last phrase of the voiceover. It has a poetic rhythm, as if it could become a song, a good example of the way language can bridge gaps, make incompatible things conceivable, pronounceable, memorable. Between beauty and the lie, between an adjective and a noun, there is space for a longing, for wanting the beautiful to be true, or for the disjunction to just lie still, for the words to be adequate. But they aren't. It's as if the *film* 'knows' it and wants to confirm it with us. We know that the

archivists are in the future because of the kinds of questions they ask, the past perfect tense they use to address us (“...you must have seen the weather changing! If you had known, would you have tried harder?”). Something or someone, who is probably not exactly Dave Griffiths or any one of his collaborators, some voice that may even be resonating in our own minds, is asking if and how ‘we’ will be remembered now, in the universe of technical images. *Babel Fiche* opens questions about an unwritten history, a way technical images might bind us together, as history once did, in ways that exceed and outlast our individual limitations.

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