

**Memory and History: Early Film, Colonialism
and the French Civilising Mission in Indochina**

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The invention of the moving image in 1895 changed the relationship between visual representation, memory and history in a profound and enduring manner. By the first decades of the twentieth century, the fledgling cinema had developed the power both to document actual events as they unfolded in the real world, such as scenes from village life or the battlefield, as well as the power to narrate fictional and personal stories. A mass public medium, screened to fee-paying audiences, film opened up a new dimension of public and personal memory. The possibility of capturing events – historical, fictional and personal – realistically on camera and screening them to audiences raised a series of new questions. What are the differences between public history films that record past events, popular historical epics and private personal films about the past? To what extent might a film of personal and public events come to enhance or replace an individual's actual memory of these? How might documentaries use the cinematic medium to alter past events to accord with national priorities or to create an imaginary relationship with the past? What is the status of unofficial films, which have recorded the lives and memories of disadvantaged groups such as indigenous people or homosexuals, for the official historical record? What role do film archives play in the recording of history and memory?¹

Over the course of the twentieth century, film has come not only to play a central role in representing the past, but also of reminding us of the unstable nature of memory

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¹ Various film scholars have raised such questions about the nature of film and memory. See in particular James F. Moyer, "Film and the Public Memory: The Phenomena of Nonfiction Film Fragments," *Contemporary Aesthetics* (24 May 2007):

<www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID>

and history. Richard Terdiman argues that a significant obstacle to remembering the past is precisely because it *is* the past.² In memorializing the past, we bring the past into the present, thus creating a kind of “present past.” In this context, James F. Moyer has raised an important question about the difference between remembering and witnessing. Does film enable us to have an actual memory of an event that we did not witness? “When I watch some past event on film, I am watching it for the first time, not remembering it for the second. But is viewing past film, then, an act of fresh witnessing, as distinct from remembering?”³ Given that popular film is a mass medium, what role does it play in recording and perpetuating collective memories?

One of the most important discussions on the nature of collective memory in the modern period is Pierre Nora’s multi-volume *Les Lieux de Mémoire* [Realms of Memory] in which historians identify and discuss various sites of collective memory.⁴ In his influential article on this topic, “Between Memory and History,” Pierre Nora argues that the separation of memory and history to which he refers may well signify important changes in society.⁵ Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs’ work on collective memory,⁶ Nora argues that memories signify events that actually took place, whereas histories are the discursive representations of what historians believe we should remember. According to Nora, there once was a time when a kind of collective or lived memory existed. He sees, for instance, the “irrevocable break marked by the disappearance of peasant culture” as signifying “a fundamental collapse” of collective memory.⁷ Factors such as the breakdown of traditional cultures, industrialization, urbanization and the increasing complexity of modern living all undermine memory. Nora argues “there are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.”⁸ Sites of memory refer to national ceremonies, commemorations, archives and official historical records designed to unite disparate groups of people. As more and more of the rural world gradually disappeared in the West, memory changed from the “historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to remembrance.”⁹ One consequence of this is that society, groups and individuals seek to preserve all objects connected with the past, a past no longer passed down through the generations, in museums and archives; this process also creates a gulf or distance between memory and the past.

Nora emphasizes the importance of a *collective* experience of memory (itself difficult to demonstrate) as all individuals bring different personal histories to the experience of remembering – even in pre-industrial traditional societies. Susan A. Crane

² Richard Terdiman, “Historicizing Memory,” *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (New York, 1993), 3-32.

³ James F. Moyer, “Film and the Public Memory,” 2.

⁴ Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1: *Conflicts and Divisions*, vol. 2: *Traditions*, vol. 3: *Symbols* (New York, 1996-1998).

⁵ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

⁶ Halbwachs saw collective memory as “a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive.” Maurice Halbwachs, “Historical Memory and Collective Memory,” in *Collective Memory* (New York, 1980), 80.

⁷ Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 7.

⁸ Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 7.

⁹ Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 15.

has argued for the crucial importance of writing the individual back into collective memory.¹⁰ She states that there has not been enough discussion of the fact “that collective memory ultimately is located not in sites but in individuals.”¹¹ In Crane’s view, “All narratives, all sites, all texts remain objects until they are ‘Read’ or referred to by individuals thinking historically. Individuals are responsible for Nora’s will to remember.... These individuals may happen to be professional historians, but, more often, they may simply be people who are thinking historically.”¹²

Nora acknowledges the role of film in representing memory today: “Ours is an intensely retinal and powerfully televisual memory. We can link the acclaimed ‘return of the narrative’ evident in recent historical writing and the omnipotence of imagery and cinema in contemporary culture – even if, to be sure, this narrative is very different from traditional narrative, with its syncopated parts and formal closure.”¹³ Film, however, does not necessarily circulate narratives in a unitary or dominating manner. There are many forms of cinematic and televisual narrative as well as complex point of view structures offered to the spectator. Some colonial films, for instance, may represent events in order to endorse national priorities, whereas others may encourage Crane’s notion of the individual “thinking historically.” This paper will explore these different perspectives in relation to some of the first colonial nonfiction films made – films which to date have received very little critical acknowledgement or analysis.

In France, the year 1895 was remarkable for two events: the Third Republic’s establishment of the *mission civilisatrice* as official governmental policy¹⁴ and Louis Lumière’s invention of the portable motion picture camera and the creation of the first film audiences.¹⁵ Although at first glance these two developments may appear unconnected, by the 1910s the new cinema was to become a powerful ally in the representation and dissemination of the ideals and outcomes of the French civilising mission, as well as the colonial ventures of all the imperial powers. Alice B. Conklin defines the civilising mission as an attempt to transform ancient cultures into modern ones – with modern subjects – according to policies “formulated at home.” In this context, the colonies were not unlike “laboratories.” “One of the most important goals of such colonies, along with revitalizing the mother country, was the peaceful ‘evolution [*acheminement*] of inferior peoples toward civilization.”¹⁶ By the early 1910s the French government had become fully aware of the power of film to disseminate the ideals of the civilising mission at home. In his study of colonial cinema, David Henry Slavin draws attention to an official document of 1912 in which the government stated that “the

¹⁰ Susan A. Crane, “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory,” *American Historical Review* 102:5 (December, 1997): 1372-85.

¹¹ Crane, “Writing the Individual Back,” 1381.

¹² Crane, “Writing the Individual Back,” 1381.

¹³ Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 17.

¹⁴ Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Berkeley, 1997). In her analysis of the history and origins of the *mission civilisatrice*, Conklin states that: “By 1895, the *mission civilisatrice* had become the official ideology of the Third Republic’s vast new empire,” 11.

¹⁵ The Lumière Brothers were considered the founders of the cinema because they were the first to project moving images to a paying audience with their invention – the Cinématographe. Between the two-year period, 1896-1897, the Lumière cameramen produced nearly one thousand short films or *actualités* from around the world. These were screened at home and also in the colonies.

¹⁶ Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, 12.

geographical film ... helps link the colonies to the mother country ... and reminds us of the Frenchmen sacrificing themselves to an ideal ... Cinema will be the best emigration agency of the future.”¹⁷

By 1914, film was used in various ways to lend support to France’s colonial ambitions. Films that displayed the military might of France were screened in the colonies to assist in the pacification of the people. In that year, Marshal Lyautey screened a newsreel to Morocco’s leaders. “As a phonograph in the background played ‘La Marseillaise,’ a newsreel showed Bastille Day military formations on parade at Longchamps in the Bois de Boulogne, Paris; shots of naval squadrons, submarines, planes, railroads, and automobiles followed.”¹⁸ Slavin also draws attention to the fact that Albert Sarraut, the governor-general of Indochina from 1912 to 1919, established “a *mission cinématographique*” to make films that represented the country as peaceful and stable but backward and in need of capital investment from home.¹⁹ Although Sarraut’s attempt to build a film industry in Indochina failed, the “idealized travelogues,” which overlooked the exploitation of Indochinese workers and brutal punishment of political rebels, helped to cement support in France for the continuing implementation of the civilising mission.²⁰

Not all films made in the first decades after the invention of the moving camera were so transparent. This is true of the first colonial nonfiction films, the *actualités*, which the first camera operators shot on journeys throughout the empire. As their name suggests, these films sought to capture actual moments or glimpses of events from the real world. Richard Meran Barsam defines the nonfiction film as representing “an immediate social situation ... It is usually filmed on the actual scene, with the actual people, without sets, costumes, written dialogue or created sound effects. It tries to recreate the feeling of ‘being there,’ with as much fidelity to fact as the situation allows.”²¹ A major reason why these short nonfiction films are of interest is because they were not edited or incorporated into a longer form; they did not obviously fulfill the propagandistic aims of later colonial documentaries that gave overt support to the civilising mission.²² Stephen Bottomore argues that film historians have neglected this genre for three main reasons: the greater popularity of the fiction film; a lack of basic research; and the strong influence of “a particular model of film history” that privileges the artistic documentary, that developed in the 1920s, over other forms.²³ In recent years, however, film historians have turned their attention to the very early period of the cinema, to the colonial *actualités* and early travel films whose importance to the development of film history and narrative is becoming increasingly apparent. The colonial *actualités* also played a key role in the early evolution of film language – the

¹⁷ David Henry Slavin, *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939: White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths* (Baltimore, 2001), 59.

¹⁸ Slavin, *Colonial Cinema*, 59.

¹⁹ Slavin, *Colonial Cinema*, 59-60.

²⁰ Slavin, *Colonial Cinema*, 60.

²¹ Richard Meran Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (London, 1974).

²² The documentary film *La France est un empire* (Lemaire, 1939) presents a celebration of the civilising mission. Its dust jacket refers to “the good conscience with which France engaged in her civilizing mission, how colonization brought progress to the ‘natives.’”

²³ Stephen Bottomore, “Rediscovering Early Nonfiction Film,” *Film History* 13:2 (2001): 160-173.

evolution of the panoramic shot, the moving or tracking shot and the early formation of an urban globalised audience.

In 1895, the Lumière Brothers dispatched cameramen to North Africa and Indochina to bring back images of the world. They sought places that travel literature had made popular; they also wanted exotic scenes – in North Africa it was the oasis and camel trains and in Indochina it was images of opium dens. The *actualités* themselves were quite short.²⁴ The Lumière Brothers screened their films to curious audiences prepared to pay an entry fee to experience the novelty of watching the first moving images and to witness the unknown and exotic. They held their first public screening at the Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris on 28 December 1895. Other popular venues for the first film screenings were music halls and fairgrounds. The Lumière Brothers screened ten short films at the Grand Café, each one running for about fifty seconds. Early film programs were always mixed and would contain around eight to ten films – a collection of comedy, fiction, historical re-enactment, travelogue and documentary, many of which showed current events, military parades and scenes from France's colonies. Between 1896-1897, the Grand Café became a permanent cinema.²⁵ Colonial *actualités* were extremely popular. Slavin explains that, compared to other fictional genres, the Lumière *actualités* drew upon a different audience. He describes the response to Lumière footage of Algeria and Tunisia in 1897: "Unlike slightly disreputable and low-brow one-reelers or nickelodeons, such real-life scenes (*actualités*) attracted middle-class audiences and included documentaries that stimulated interest in the overseas empire."²⁶ Loutfi writes of early colonial films, "Although explicit political considerations seem to have been quite absent from these early colonial films, the images that they portrayed certainly contributed to the shaping of a French popular vision of the colonized lands and the people that was favourable to French interests."²⁷ Many of these films also depicted scenes of the civilising mission as it was being implemented in the colonies. The Lumière Brothers were not the only filmmakers to send camera operators around the world to capture the exotic and to film scenes from the daily lives of so-called "vanishing" peoples whose cultures were thought at the time, in the words of anthropologist, Franz Boas, to be "breaking down and disappearing under the onslaught of White civilization."²⁸ Other early filmmakers who established important collections include Thomas Edison, Pathé Frères, Franz Boas himself, Félix-Louis Regnault and Albert Kahn.

Early films shot in the French colonial lands of Indochina offer a rich source for analysis. This paper will explore films from two archival collections: *actualités* from the Lumière Brothers collection as well as a series of film rushes from Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète (1908-1931). Discussion will also draw on a 2009 documentary,

²⁴ The length of the *actualités* was determined by the size of the film can, which allowed for seventeen metres of film. Each one ran for approximately fifty seconds.

²⁵ See Richard Abel's, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896-1914* (Berkeley, 1994) for a detailed account of this period.

²⁶ Slavin, *Colonial Cinema*, 59.

²⁷ Martine Astier Loutfi, "Imperial Frame: Film Industry and Colonial Representation," in *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism*, Dina Sherzer, ed. (Austin, 1996), 20-29.

²⁸ Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, N.C., 1996), 78.

Far East: Expeditions to Empires, which is a twenty-seven minute episode taken from the BBC4 ten-part documentary *The Wonderful World of Albert Kahn*.

One of the first films of Indochina was taken in a village situated just east of Da Nang (Tourane), which is now the third largest city in Vietnam.²⁹ *Le Village de Namô – Panorama pris d'une chaise à porteurs* was shot by Gabriel Veyre, an experienced Lumière cameraman, in 1896.³⁰ It depicts his journey, filmed from the back of a *chaise à porteurs*, or sedan chair, as he travels through a village in Indochina.³¹ Situated close to a major harbour, Namô village would have offered ease of access to Veyre, who would have been naturally drawn to the area – its mountains and old French fort – as offering many filmic opportunities. As the sedan chair moves away from the village, we see what is in the background: thatched houses, trees, curious but cautious adults and a group of small children, at first hesitant, then running with free abandon and delight, towards the camera. There are adults, walking in the wake of the camera, and two men who carry another sedan chair. As the children run they move in and out of frame. One child, in particular, captures our attention as she is overcome with excitement. Because the camera is on a sedan chair, the movement is not smooth – rather unsteady, thus enhancing a sense of realism and immediacy. The renowned French film director Bertrand Tavernier provides a commentary in English.³² He describes the film's "sense of time, the period, the composition, the emotion" as "absolutely perfect." It is possible that *Le Village de Namô* may have been partially staged. In "Imperial Frame," Loutfi cites Felix Mesguich, one of the Lumière cameramen, who discussed the staging of scenes in his memoirs.³³ Loutfi also discusses the importance of movement in early cinema: "Capturing movement was the great innovation, the technological breakthrough brought about by the Lumière machine, and movement was what the viewers were demanding."³⁴ The camera's ability to capture movement also helped to create a sense of moving through time, memory and history. Walter Benjamin argued that cinema also possessed the power to diminish distance and bring everything closer – a key feature of *Le Village de Namô*.³⁵

Many of the first colonial *actualités*, shot around 1895-1900, offered images of what modernity had not yet altered: exotic strangers, primitive peoples, rural life,

²⁹ Da Nang was the site of the Siege of Tourane (1858-1860), a Vietnamese victory of the Cochinchina campaign. By 1860 however the French had gained the upper hand and the Vietnamese sued for peace.

³⁰ Namô Village is marked on a 1986 Vietnamese map as "Nam Ô" (Bailieu Library, University of Melbourne, Maps Collection – no. 16174).

³¹ The film's commercial title is *Namô Village: Panorama taken from a Rickshaw*. (See DVD, "The Lumière Brothers' First Films," Institute Lumière, 1996). The French title is: *Le village de Namô – Panorama pris d'une chaise à porteurs*. The French term for "rickshaw" is "pousse-pousse"; the "chaise à porteurs" of the title was used in remote villages and is more accurately translated as a "sedan chair." We are grateful to one of the readers of this article for pointing this out.

³² The version I am using is from the DVD collection, "The Lumière Brothers: First Films," presented by the Lumière Brothers Association and the Archives du Film du Centre National de la Cinématographie, edited by Thierry Fremaux, Director of the Institut Lumière, commentary in English by Bertrand Tavernier, 1996.

³³ Martine Astier Loutfi, "Imperial Frame," in *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism*, Dina Sherzer, ed. (Austin, 1996), 21.

³⁴ Loutfi, "Imperial Frame," 21.

³⁵ Tom Gunning, "The Whole World within Reach," in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, Jeffrey Ruoff, ed. (Durham, N.C., 2006), 39.

traditional costumes and rituals, dances and ceremonies. In *Le Village de Namô* there are only thatched dwellings, dirt clearings, and adults and children who appear both curious yet unsure of the strangers who have appeared in their midst. There are no signs at all of “progress” – although the invisible presence of the moving camera, a most recent technological invention, points to the unusual ways in which modernity was beginning to impinge on the lives of non-industrialised indigenous people living within the borders of France’s colonial empire. This remarkable short film was screened at the Paris World Fair of 1900, where it purportedly captivated audiences. Lumière films were purchased by theatre operators from around the world so *Le Village de Namô* and other Lumière nonfiction films may have received considerable public exposure in Europe as well as in the colonies.

In “Film and Public Memory: The Phenomena of Nonfiction Film Fragments,” James F. Moyer discusses nonfiction film fragments, a grouping of films that include both early *actualités* and fragments of film from later periods that depict fleeting glimpses of people in city streets or rural farms or newsreels shot during wartime or at other historically significant moments. He defines the nonfiction film fragment as a form of “witnessing” and describes the viewer’s experience of these fragments “in terms of memorializing the people and events it bears witness to.”³⁶ As with Pierre Nora, Moyer is interested in the authentic and the pure – although in contrast to Nora, who is critical of media as destructive of *milieux de mémoire*, he sees film as offering the possibility of experiencing “wholeness” in the enacting of public memory. He suggests that “Nonfiction fragments constitute a mode of perception that affords trustworthy historical witnessing. That is, the fragmentary status of some film is what paradoxically restores ‘wholeness’ to the person or place of which it is a glimpse.”³⁷

Distinguishing public memory from collective memory, Moyer states that film represents a form of public memory because it is “available for objective viewing” by the public at any time and because its subjects, the people who have been filmed “move in public spaces similar and often identical to – save in the temporal respect – our own, they appear and shadow us with unique success and especial insistence.”³⁸ Moyer refers to the famous scene from the Lumière film *La Sortie des Ouvriers de l’Usine Lumière à Lyon*: “Such people, beginning with those workers leaving the Lumière factory, are an immediate and insistent part of our public life and consciousness in a way no conventional historical text of the time, however publicly accessible, could ever be.”³⁹ In addition, although we were not there to witness events, we are aware that someone else was there – the camera operator, “that imaginary witness that the camera always suggests.” We “remember what ‘the camera operator’ witnessed – to remember now in his place. This is what film lets us do ... have ‘someone else’s’ memory.”⁴⁰ Moyer places great emphasis on the role of the camera-operator, as an intermediary between viewer and the world on the screen, in the creation of nonfiction film as public memory. He asserts that “Part of what makes film public memory is this bond between two (possible) witnesses occupying different moments in history. Film is a mechanical

³⁶ Moyer, “Film and the Public Memory” , 2.

³⁷ Moyer, “Film and the Public Memory,” 2.

³⁸ Moyer, “Film and the Public Memory,” 4.

³⁹ Moyer, “Film and the Public Memory,” 4.

⁴⁰ Moyer, “Film and the Public Memory,” 4-5.

reproduction, but it cements a profound human connection that exists not over time, but across it. Our connection to the subjects on film exists only because of our connection to our true brother in filmic memory, ‘the camera operator.’”⁴¹

In contrast to the Lumière film, *La Sortie des Ouvriers de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon*, *Le Village de Namô* is not shot in France but in Indochina, a remote colony of the French empire. The subjects do not “move in public spaces similar and often identical to ... our own”; hence they do not “shadow us with unique success and especial insistence.” Although *Le Village de Namô* is an example of a nonfiction film fragment, it inhabits such a different and foreign world that it does not fit easily with Moyer’s definition of public memory, which in this respect more accurately describes the reception of *actualités* made in France and screened to French and other European audiences. As more and more of the colonial *actualités* were screened at home (and audiences were keen to see films of foreign and exotic lands), much of this “strangeness,” however, would have either dissipated or come to represent a familiar attraction for the viewer. Viewers would have also been familiar with views of Indochina from travel brochures, photographs and postcards. In this context, *Le Village de Namô* would have encouraged viewers to engage in an experience of intercultural subjectivity. Thus the other important thing that these nonfiction film fragments do is to let the spectator respond to their subject matter outside of a dominant or guiding discourse; the spectator is relatively free to interpret the material for him or herself.

There is another sense, however, in which viewing *Le Village de Namô* might have offered the possibility of experiencing a “wholeness” in the enacting of public memory. The film invokes Nora’s *milieux de mémoire*, or “real environments of memory” in that the images are of a peasant culture that appears to be as yet relatively undisturbed by colonial intervention. The urban viewer might well imagine the villagers still retain a knowledge of customs and practices passed on through story-telling and ritual. In fact, this is part of the appeal of such films. *Le Village de Namô* was shot at the end of the nineteenth century, that very moment in history when, as Nora argues, traditional societies were eroding and the nature of memory changing. The camera vividly portrays an impression of a traditional community, not yet altered by modernity; it endows the scene with a sense of wholeness, while simultaneously conveying an impression, through the unstable movements of the sedan chair, of a world about to change. The very presence of the camera is a sign of such change. A central aim of the civilising mission was to recreate a familiar world and familiar public spaces (government offices, houses, halls, schools, hospitals, roads, railways, ports) in the strange and unfamiliar colony. Viewers might well have experienced a bond with the people on the screen as the presence of the camera operator, our surrogate, is so marked. Because the children rush towards the camera operator (and spectator), we also experience a strong sense of immediacy and shared delight in the actual moment, as the children appear to embrace the modern. The irony is that it is the camera, an invention of modernity, which captures a sense of Nora’s *milieux de mémoire*.

Another Lumière *actualité*, called *Indochine: Enfants annamites ramassant des sèpèques devant la Pagode des dames* (1903), depicts a scene of two European women standing on a verandah amusing themselves by throwing what appears to be rice to a

⁴¹ Moyer, “Film and the Public Memory,” 5.

group of children, who scabble in the dirt to seize the grains.⁴² Bertrand Tavernier describes this *actualité* as “a great comment about colonialism in fifty seconds,” “a very strong film, a very powerful document.” This film seems to represent the worst of colonization and has been criticized for this reason. The two women appear as bountiful colonists throwing tidbits to the children of an inferior, primitive nation. The scene creates a strong impression of inequality. Tavernier describes “the two women in white,” “the kids crawling on the ground.” There is also an Indochinese woman, with a baby on her hip, who stoops to pick up the objects. However, Tavernier’s narration prompts a closer viewing. At one point he says that the “women are throwing grains,” pauses and then adds “sapek.” The main coin of the region was the sapek, which was made of zinc or tin and strung together to form a ligature. A close-up view of the scene reveals that women in fact are pushing coins along a string, throwing them up and out to the eagerly waiting children. The women are clearly enjoying themselves – smiling and laughing. One steps down amongst the children: the other looks directly at the camera and laughs. There is a strong sense of fun and games. If the women are throwing coins, the meaning of the scene is clearly changed.

The scene also gives rise to another interpretation – the French practice of throwing *dragées*, or sweets, and sometimes coins, to children at special celebrations.⁴³ This was a custom, going back centuries, which signified prosperity, fertility and good luck. In modern times, the practice of throwing rice has replaced that of throwing *dragées*. In parts of southern France *dragées* and coins, which symbolize fertility, are today thrown to children who wait at the doorstep of the church. In the light of this explanation, we see how the Lumière film could be seen to capture a moment of cultural interaction – here a French custom is re-enacted for a colonial culture. However, because the setting is one that draws on an unequal colonial relationship, it is difficult to view this film today without considering its negative connotations (particularly given the confusion between rice and sapek); however, its more festive, positive aspects should not be overlooked. Representations of colonial interactions were often complex as this film clearly demonstrates.

The Lumière film *Déchargement du Four à Briques* (1901) depicts a very different image of the everyday life of a group of women and children in Indochina. It shows a group of around fifteen Indochinese women working at a brick factory. The manager is a white colonial – presumably French – dressed in the classic colonial outfit: white suit and pith helmet. He stands smoking a cigarette. As he departs, another man, possibly an Indochinese foreman, enters carrying a whip. The women pass bricks down a flight of stairs to others below, who carry and stack them in piles. Some appear to be children. The foreman does not use the whip, but the suggestion that he might adds a sadistic tone to the scene. The film suggests these women are either rebellious or lazy and need the threat of punishment if they are to complete their menial tasks. *Déchargement du Four à Briques* depicts the darker side of colonisation – its enslavement of people from colonial nations, forced to labour for the enrichment of the

⁴² From the DVD, “The Lumière Brothers: First Films,” presented by the Lumière Brothers Association. The DVD translates the film’s title as: “Indochina: Children Gathering Rice Scattered by Western Women.”

⁴³ We are indebted to Robert Aldrich for suggesting that the French custom of *dragée*-throwing might help to explain this scene.

colonial empire. There is very little sense of the continuation of a traditional way of life – rather we witness signs of the breakdown of a traditional culture. While many early travel films aimed to showcase the empire, this film falls far short of that ideal. Perhaps *Déchargement du Four à Briques* “cements a profound human connection” in Moyer’s terms “that exists not over time, but across it” because the spectator identifies with the cameraman, and feels a bond with him as the “imaginary witness” of this disturbing scene – a scene which would not have found its way into films of the period that set out to valorize colonialism and the civilising mission.

Shortly after the Lumière Brothers wound down their filmmaking operation, another entrepreneur, the French banker, philanthropist and idealist Albert Kahn, became involved in global filmmaking, but for very different reasons. Kahn, who set out to create a photographic and filmic record of human life on Earth, understood very clearly the power of the new medium. His aim was to create an “Archives de la Planète,” which he believed would ultimately promote international understanding and world peace. By the 1920s other filmmakers, such as D.W. Griffith, had begun to refer to film as a form of “visual Esperanto” in the utopian belief that the newest art form of the twentieth century would indeed help to bring about world peace. For nearly a quarter of a century, between 1908 and 1931, Kahn sent teams of photographers to over fifty countries to record in photographs and on film the daily lives of peoples – particularly those from traditional cultures which were dissipating under the impact of industrialization. The geographer Jean Brunhes supervised the venture. Kahn’s camera operators included Lucien Le Saint, Léon Busy, Frédéric Gadmer, Roger Dumas and Camille Sauvageot. Although the major part of the Kahn collection consisted of coloured photographs or autochromes, his camera operators also shot a significant number of short unedited films or rushes.⁴⁴ The rushes covered a range of topics, including the temple at Angkor Wat, dancers at Phnom Penh, Vietnamese peasants in rice fields, scenes from Mongolia, African children learning gymnastics, nuns teaching girls to sew, and scenes from the colonial exposition in Paris in 1931. Until recently, with the appearance of Paula Amad’s important and impressive study *Counter-Archive*,⁴⁵ the Kahn collection has been neglected in critical writing about the period. Amad argues that early film, such as Kahn’s rushes, possesses marked counter-archival properties in that it has a tendency to elicit curiosity in seemingly uneventful everyday happenings. Amad asserts that “film’s counter-archival properties – its propensity for capturing excessive detail, inciting unmanageable curiosity, suspending habitual modes of memory and perception, and most importantly, automatically collecting that which was usually overlooked or suppressed in the official archive... elicited both anxiety and fascination.”⁴⁶ Kahn’s Archives de la Planète introduces a new understanding about the power and role of the visual image in the act of recording history and the role of the personal in viewing and remembering.

There are at least two major differences between the Lumière Brothers’ *actualités* and Kahn’s rushes. First, the Lumière *actualités*, filmed between 1895 and 1905, were short, unedited film fragments, which ran for less than sixty seconds. Some of Kahn’s rushes were the length of the conventional *actualités*, while others were over ninety

⁴⁴ The collection included 72,000 autochromes and 180,000 metres of silent and largely unedited film.

⁴⁵ Paula Amad, *Counter-Archive, Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn’s Archives de la Planète* (New York, 2010).

⁴⁶ Amad, *Counter-Archive*, 165.

minutes long. They were also unedited, and Kahn chose to leave them as such. The other major difference was that Kahn never intended to screen his films to the public; they were only screened to select audiences of intellectuals and visiting dignitaries at his home (now the site of the Albert Kahn Museum) in the Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt. Paula Amad describes Kahn's projects as reflecting a humanitarian vision: "Kahn's mission, described by Émile Borel as furthering 'the *oeuvre* of mutual comprehension of peoples and international rapprochement,' obsessed him until his dying days."⁴⁷ His ambitious project ended with the Wall Street crash of 1929.⁴⁸

Kahn's cameraman Léon Busy worked in Indochina. An officer in the French colonial army who was stationed in Vietnam, Busy approached the Archive to become its official photographer. A talented amateur photographer, Busy took photographs and filmed scenes of everyday life mainly in the area of Tonkin. These cover many topics and include scenes of peasants navigating their small boats along a river bank, children swimming, a girl washing her hair in a river, peasants in the rice paddies and labourers on the docks, women walking in a group along an urban street, scenes from the Tet festival, ancestor worship, traditional dances and the famous temples at Ankor. Although there was underlying tension between the French colonialists and the Indochinese, this is not evident. Active opposition to France's colonial rule came from a new generation of Vietnamese youth who "carried out a constant campaign for a radical cultural and social modernization."⁴⁹ However, not unsurprisingly, Busy does not capture this in his films. Rather, Busy depicts scenes of everyday life and rural stability, presented as if little had changed over the passage of time – as such they point to a time when there was no need to record the rituals of daily life because they were still living traditions. Kahn explained the rationale for his project in this way: "To fix once and for all, the look, practices and modes of human activity whose fatal disappearances is just a question of time."⁵⁰

In her discussion of the controversial notion of the "vanishing native," Jennifer Lynn Peterson argues that the view that the native was already disappearing prior to colonization "smoothed over the nation's responsibility for its genocidal origins." She sees the native as represented as a "static being, who exists in another dimension outside history, frozen forever in an idealized form."⁵¹ The documentary series *The Wonderful World of Albert Kahn* draws on both the Kahn autochrome collection and his films, or rushes, to document daily life in the colony.⁵² The documentary emphasises Busy's close relationship with the people. Busy had lived in Vietnam for many years and knew the local language. Although Busy tends in the main to use film to capture scenes of daily life from a traditional perspective, signs of an encroaching modernity are visible in many films. This is particularly the case in relation to the invisible presence of the camera. In the sequence where a girl washes her hair in the river, we see her suddenly look up at the camera and gaze directly into its lens. A peasant navigating the river similarly turns

⁴⁷ Amad, *Counter-Archive*, 31

⁴⁸ See Amad's excellent account of this period in *Counter-Archive*.

⁴⁹ Pierre Brocheaux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley, 2009), 306.

⁵⁰ Paula Amad, *Counter-Archive*, 109.

⁵¹ Jennifer Lynn Peterson, "'The Nation's First Playground'" in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, Jeffrey Ruoff, ed. (Durham N.C., 2006), 93.

⁵² I am referring to the episode *Far East: Expeditions to Empires* (2009) from the BBC4 ten-part documentary, *The Wonderful World of Albert Kahn*.

around to stare in the direction of the camera. Tom Gunning refers to this structure of looking as incorporating a “double nature” whereby “the daily life of native people” is itself transformed into “a spectacle as the camera reveals” that the people being filmed are themselves “watching the filming.”⁵³ They acknowledge Moyer’s cameraman, making the spectator much more aware of his role as the “imaginary witness.”

Busy’s *Danses au Palais Royal de Phnom Penh* (21 mins) depicts royal dancers rehearsing traditional dances in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Amad discusses the way in which many of the Kahn films do not emphasise a typical tourist travel view in that they are “more willing to linger on the usually unrecognizable and ignored repetitive details of daily life.”⁵⁴ Amad refers to the dances at Phnom Penh as illustrative of this approach. “Far from focusing exclusively on the final picturesque performance (the tourist’s snapshot), the film is decentered and multifocal in its attention, taking in the audience of students watching, the teacher demonstrating particularly movements, and so forth.”⁵⁵ *The Wonderful World of Albert Kahn* singles out this particular film, placing it in a contemporary context. It draws attention to the 1970s period of the Khmer Rouge’s violent revolution when over ninety percent of the dancers in the Royal Ballet were either murdered or sent into exile. As a result, knowledge of the traditional dances was almost completely lost. Today, Busy’s film of the royal dancers in rehearsal is screened to young dancers dedicated to learning this traditional dance. In this way, Busy’s film, a modern invention, is used to keep alive a traditional art form, knowledge of which was once passed from generation to generation, and as such it belongs to Nora’s *milieux de mémoire* or actual environments of memory. Without Kahn’s *Archives de la Planète* these traditions may have been lost.

Possibly the most remarkable and unusual film Busy made for the Kahn archive is *Scène de Déshabillage, Tonkin* (1921). The film depicts a Vietnamese woman undressing and then dressing for the camera. Busy has deliberately shot the scene out of focus; Amad argues that this is probably to undercut the potential voyeurism of the scene.⁵⁶ The woman stands to the centre background, in a three-quarter-length body shot. The intention appears to be to depict a woman going through the daily motions of undressing and dressing. She is wearing traditional clothing, which she expertly unwinds from her body. When she has fully disrobed, she turns to face the camera, Busy drawing the viewer’s attention to the fact that this is a staged scene. Amad compares the scene to a Eadweard Muybridge study of the human body in movement. Amad argues: “Even though the film is formally dominated by the out-of-focus surface, what it clearly brings into focus is a self-consciousness regarding the pornographic potentialities of the scientific ethnographic gaze.”⁵⁷ It could also be argued that Busy’s film enforces Panivong Norindr’s argument that “Indochine” lives in the French imaginary as “a concept at the intersection of myth and phantasm.”⁵⁸ Norindr sees Indochina as “a particularly fecund *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) heavily

⁵³ Tom Gunning, “The Whole World within Reach,” in *Virtual Voyages*, 39.

⁵⁴ Paula Amad, “Between the ‘Familiar Text’ and the ‘Book of the World’: Touring the Ambivalent Contexts of Travel Films,” in *Virtual Voyages: Cinema and Travel*, Jeffrey Ruoff, ed. (Durham N.C., 2006), 108.

⁵⁵ Amad, “Between the ‘Familiar Text’ and the ‘Book of the World,’” 108.

⁵⁶ Amad discusses this aspect of the film in *Counter-Archive*, 284.

⁵⁷ Amad, *Counter-Archive*, 284.

⁵⁸ Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham N.C., 1996), 1.

charged with symbolic significance.”⁵⁹ Perhaps the image is out-of-focus in order to emphasise the myth that Indochina, represented by the woman, is ultimately unknowable?

However, the film also gives the female protagonist a marked degree of agency. More than any other nonfiction film discussed in this paper, *Scène de Déshabillage* registers the incursion of the modern into the traditional in its representation of Busy’s female subject as she, in a sense, hails the camera. Although we cannot see her clearly, we can see that as she stands upright, she looks directly at the camera/spectator, thus undermining the possibility of the viewer seeing her in terms of the stereotype of the native woman as fantasy object. She does not adopt an erotic pose but stands tall as she turns to face the camera. This moment of reciprocal recognition and intimacy seems to destabilise the inherent power imbalance between the white male and the colonized woman.⁶⁰ She brings Busy into the scene, forcing recognition of his unseen presence and her status as a subject in her own right. She also draws attention to the cameraman in the role of Moyer’s “imaginary witness,” thus “memorializing” her presence in public memory. This remarkable film, as with the other rushes in Albert Kahn’s Archives de la Planète, comes to us without editing and without commentary, thus endowing the images with an openness, an invitation to confer our own interpretation on the events as they unfold. As Amad astutely points out, these films were not collected years after their creation and then placed in an archive; they were in the first instance filmed in order to create an archive.

In viewing these early nonfiction films of Indochina over a century later, we can see that they retain an immediacy and freshness and continue to challenge the imagination. Because they are unedited and without commentary, our understanding of how interpretation works draws on a postmodern perspective: there is no over-riding, singular view. The spectator is encouraged to respond personally to what he or she sees. The act of perception is also interwoven with images from other nonfiction films from the archive, even incorporating scenes that the official history might prefer to forget as in *Déchargement du Four à Briques*. Memories of films (the “raw footage”) we have seen from the archive resemble a network of associations, which undermines the concept of a “pure” or singular memory. Nora’s discussion of memory and history both enriches and complicates the way in which we think about visual representations. These nonfiction films of everyday life in Indochina at the turn of the century invoke Nora’s *milieux de mémoire* while representing their own *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory, which have the power to interact, one with the other, as in the case of Busy’s *Danses au Palais Royal de Phnom Penh*. Visual representations of historical events have created their own archives over the course of the twentieth century, archives that operate at both an institutional and personal level. The ubiquitous nature of the moving image also means that signs and traces of memory are now everywhere – as Nora acknowledges. Changes in the relationship between memory and history in contemporary life, Nora argues, have resulted in the historian assuming an even more central role. The historian has become “*un lieu de mémoire*.”⁶¹ Changes have also occurred in relation to film. As Amad argues in *Counter-Archive*, it is important to acknowledge the increasingly creative and empowering role that new media, from film to the Internet, have made available to the

⁵⁹ Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina*, 1.

⁶⁰ For further discussion of Western representations of women in Indochina see Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee, eds., *France and “Indochina”: Cultural Representations* (New York, 2005).

⁶¹ Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 18.

individual in accessing global archives of past histories and in responding to cultural narratives, from early *actualités* to historical epics, about the history of the planet. These changes attest to the role that film and the media play during the process of viewing in the creation of intercultural subjectivities. They have also resulted in less emphasis on History as a singular discourse and greater focus on the many smaller narratives and individual voices that constitute memory and history today.