

Hidden Presence – Reflection

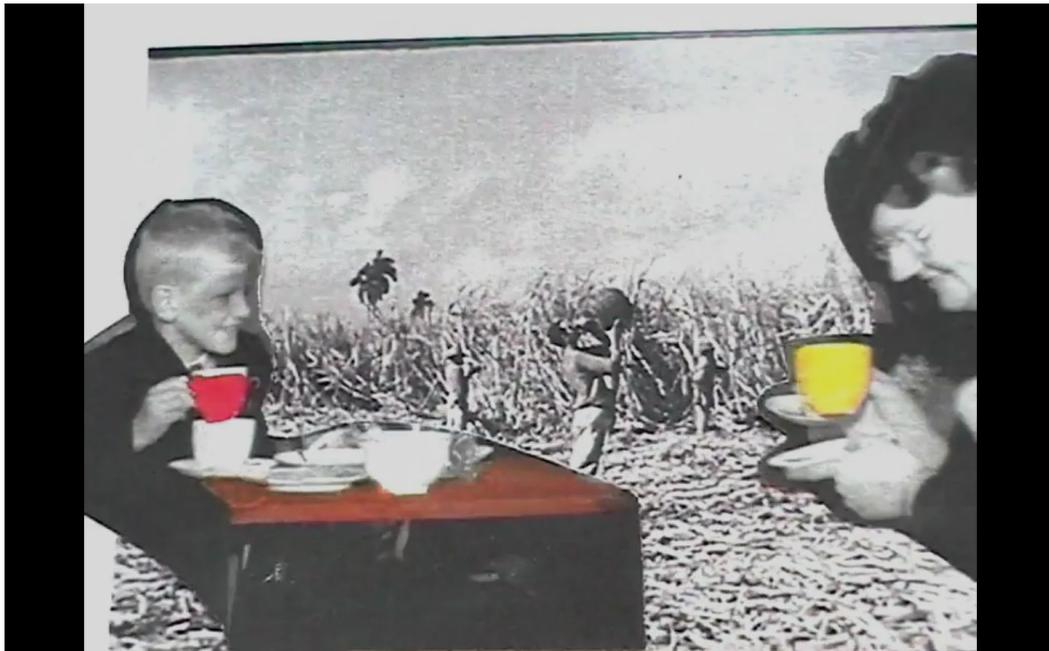
Dr Alex Southern

Wales Centre for Equity in Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

When I look at the artwork created by the young people on the Hidden Presence project, I'm immediately drawn to the stills which have been taken from archive footage and animated to create new, digital, moving images. One in particular catches my eye. The gif animation comprises two layers of moving image. One depicts workers on a sugar plantation; the other shows a young boy seated across the table from an older lady, drinking cups of tea.

The animation is thought-provoking and sharp, and for me, it raises the sometimes contentious issue of the place of archive film – and archives more widely – in re/presenting histories through images of the past. I do not know the provenance of the films, nor have I spoken with the young people of Caldicott School to ask what their intentions were in making the animation. I must take the artwork as it is now, bringing my own assumptions, prior knowledge and cultural 'baggage' to my interpretation of what I see.

My reflection on the animation begins with a reflection on notions of history.



Hidden Presence – Caldicott School

The term 'history' is perhaps ambiguous since it implies two distinct concepts: the past; and the writing, study and discussion about the past, or 'historiography' as it is also termed. While there are a finite number of past events, their potential interpretation is infinite since different people will offer their own interpretation of these events through the way in which they choose to read them, juxtapose them with others, insert them within historical contexts or create new contexts and use them to establish new narratives about the past. This in turn means that there is an infinite variety of narratives about the past, since we can each tell the story of an event in different ways. I might go to Paris and refuse to get in the lift of the Eiffel Tower because I don't like heights. My friend is braver and ascends to the very top. Later, my story of our trip to Paris is very different to hers. My Paris is loud, street level. Young men breakdance on the hot pavement to a stereo system that takes massive batteries, while tourists gather to watch. My friend's Paris is muted, still, distant and heat-hazed. Blue/yellow glass and white stone reflect the sun. Our descriptions of 'Paris' are different because our experiences were different.

The infinite variety in interpretation coupled with the sheer volume of past events means that there can be no single, definitive re-telling of history. The result is a wide range of differing interpretations and narratives about the past, even when presented with the same primary sources to analyse. Based on the assumption of multiple interpretations of past events, Keith Jenkins describes history as a "personal construct" in his book, *Re-Thinking History* (Jenkins, 2003, p.14). We look at the past through our own individual lens, bringing our assumptions, knowledge, understanding and attitudes about the world to create a historical narrative that is particular to our personal interpretation of the information we have gathered. Same Paris, different description.

We might gather some of that information from an archive – as the young people of Caldicott School have during their discussions of slavery and the life of Nathaniel Wells. The central role of any archive is to acquire, conserve/preserve, catalogue and make accessible primary source material. In the case of a film archive, that material might be film, video, digital media, and paper or electronic information relating to the production of the moving image media. Derrida argues that the process of archiving "produces as much as records the event" (Derrida, 1998, p.17), since the archives represent a *selection* of recordings about the past. While we rely on the archives to inform us about the past, through their collections, it is worth remembering that not everything that has ever happened has been recorded – on film or in any other way. Furthermore, not everything that has been recorded, has been handed to an archive to preserve for the future. The archives are not complete records of historical events, but fragments of the past that we must combine and interpret to create a history. There is no guarantee that the picture built from archive material will be complete, nor of its accuracy or inherent 'truth'. Since we each then interpret this information, the result is a subjective description of a chronicle of events, a story about the past. My Paris is loud, youthful, vibrant.

The pupils at Caldicott School have combined two different perspectives on sugar, using images from the archives, to create a compelling animation that makes me think about how we understand the past. Both are 'true' representations of moments in history, but neither gives us the full picture. So what are we to make of the imagery? In the foreground we see the young boy with his - mother? Grandmother? Auntie? I assume a familiarity that isn't present in the text. Something about the way they share. My analysis of their relationship is as much a function of my own understanding of family as it is a response to the image. Other viewers may make alternative assumptions.



Hidden Presence – Caldicott School

The pair are 'taking tea' – that most British of activities, itself evocative of the colonies and an Imperial past. Sugar is sprinkled on a bowl of cereal – an American invention, a symbol of opulence and convenience, perhaps out of place in the working class parlour, which I have already assumed is where the woman and young boy are seated. The liberal, post-rationing, spoonful suggests the 1950s. The smiles on the faces of our tea-drinking pair show enjoyment. Sugar for the characters in this archive narrative means pleasure. The delight of added sweetness after the austerity of ration books, queues at the grocers, going without.

The contrast between fore and background is stark. The close up framing gives way to a very long shot of the plantation workers bent double, under the bright white sky and in the sparse shadow of palm trees. The cane is being cut in the distance, beyond a carpet of chaff across which rides a foreman on horseback. Work yet to be done. A man quenches his thirst from a large jug. No tea service, silver spoon. Sugar on the plantation is

back-breaking. The image of sugar here represents exhaustion, slavery, injustice. A hand reaches through the frame, piling sugar into a brightly coloured bowl. The cheerful pink and blue of the foreground obscures and overcomes the intensity of the plantation in the background.

And repeat.

References

Derrida, J. (1998) *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jenkins, K. (2003) *Re-Thinking History*. London: Routledge.