

The Great War: The Persuasive Power of Photography,
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 27 June to 16 November
2014

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de la passivité de la vision et qui nous ouvre à la présence du monde. Félix Dufour-Laperrière nous y invite franchement, imposant parfois un silence total – ce qui est rarissime au cinéma. À plusieurs reprises, la caméra se concentre sur des mouvements tout simples, mais magiques, produits par le tangage du bateau : va-et-vient d'un rideau, par où pénètre une lumière aveuglante ; apparition et disparition de grands traits lumineux striant la cale vaste comme une église ; élargissement et amenuisement du rivage... En leur faisant frôler la fixité photographique – toujours déjouée par ce mouvement qui est au fondement du cinéma –, le réalisateur (issu du cinéma d'animation, il faut le rappeler) réussit à ralentir les images, mimant ainsi l'expérience intérieure liée à la contemplation.

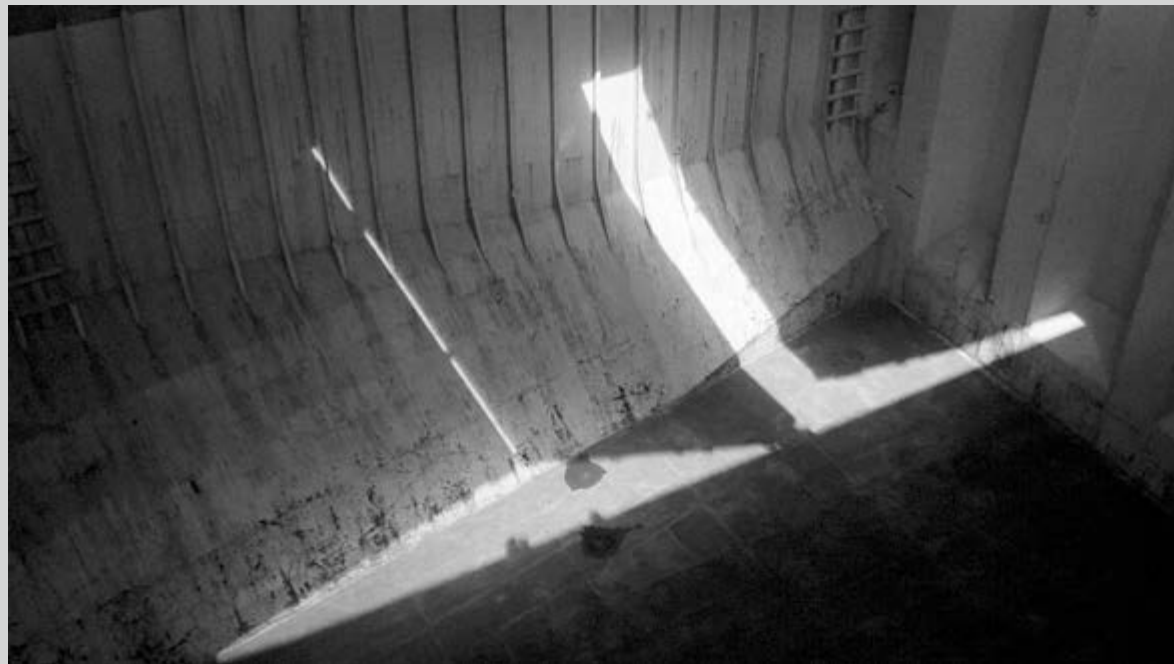
Pour conjuguer les différents types de temps, il fallait faire preuve de partis pris esthétiques nets. Les plans fixes, souvent longs, nous immergent complètement dans des pans de réel. Le travail sonore d'Olivier Calvert, produit essentiellement à partir de bruits captés sur le bateau, relie avec sensibilité les scènes les unes aux autres et nous fait voyager de l'objectivité à la subjectivité, notamment par la transformation de sons synchrones en sons métaphoriques, comme ce bruit scandé de corne de brume qui devient une sorte de mantra vibratoire. S'ajoute à ces choix celui du réalisateur de ne pas traduire les rares paroles prononcées par les membres de l'équipage ; leurs conversations, perdant ainsi leur aspect anecdotique, peuvent être saisies dans leur musicalité et leur

aspect rituel (on sait que ce sont des prières, des consignes de travail, des encouragements sportifs...).

Au parcours entre les différents temps répond une traversée d'espaces physiques contrastés. On va de l'intimité silencieuse des cabines exiguës au vacarme de la vaste salle des machines, du mystère lié à un tigre de porcelaine sur un autel miniature à la frayeur que suscite l'orage violent avançant vers le cargo. À la toute fin du périple, lorsque

l'on voit, à travers les yeux des Indiens, apparaître dans la brume les clochers québécois sur la côte nord du fleuve Saint-Laurent, le film d'atmosphère se boucle en récit : celui d'une rencontre purement physique, spatiale et temporelle, avec l'ailleurs et avec l'autre. Le réel est soudainement redevenu surprenant par sa présence. Et l'on comprend que rien, surtout pas la supposée mondialisation, ne saurait en effacer ces constituants précieux que sont l'altérité et l'étrangeté.

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Charles Guilbert est artiste, écrivain et critique (charlesguilbert.ca). Ses réalisations artistiques ont été présentées au Québec et à l'étranger, notamment au Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, à la Manif d'art de Québec, au Casino Luxembourg et au Metropolitan Museum de Tokyo.
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Photogramme du film *Transatlantique*, 2014, Montréal, 72 min

The Great War: The Persuasive Power of Photography

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
 27 June to 16 November 2014

The Great War: The Persuasive Power of Photography contains over four hundred images, ranging from private portraits to almost-life-size enlargements of battlefields and scenes from the front. The exhibition addresses the multiple means by which photographs circulated during the war years, while at the same time underscoring the profound sense of loss and devastation experienced by a generation and its descendants. Poignant, lyrical, and, at times, grisly, the photographs offer glimpses into the sheer magnitude of this moment from our collective past.

Photography had been in existence for over seventy-five years at the outbreak of the First World War. From its inception, the medium had been employed to record both the battlefields around the globe

and the faces of soldiers. Just as the cumbersome equipment of the early years was a determining factor in the kinds of images that could be created, so too were the rules of modesty, decorum, and restraint – careful consideration was paid to how the public might react to certain scenes, as well as to conveying and circulating the values of honour, dignity, and valour. From the beginning, it was clear that the medium was a powerful message. Censorship was tightly adhered to, as it was crucial that those at home remain steadfast in the conviction that victory was close at hand; although their loved ones were in harm's way, they clung to the belief that soldiers were well looked after by those in command. Letters home and personal diaries contradicted the majority of the official

images, which showed smiling, jovial young lads who seemed to be having a grand time.

The confluence of advances in photographic technology, access to information through forms of mass communication, and the burgeoning use of the camera by amateur photographers in the early years of the twentieth century created a new visual landscape and a greater appetite for wartime images: photographs were created and disseminated not only for official purposes, but also by the press and for circulation in private hands. Photography pervaded all avenues of military life, although still according to tight constrictions: photographs in personnel records; images of training facilities, military equipment, camps, and numerous group portraits; aerial photographs for

reconnaissance purposes; illustrations for news items that were sent home and to the front; and personal treasures that helped to span the distances by keeping the faces of loved ones close while they were gone for long years.

Included in *The Great War: The Persuasive Power of Photography* are a series of modern prints, created for the exhibition, from war-era autochromes by French photographer Léon Gimpel. Gimpel's images, taken in 1915, depict a group of Parisian children, some of whom likely had male relatives on the battlefield, acting out skirmishes of their own in their neighbourhood streets. Dressed in costume and wielding toy weapons, the children play at war, drawing their inspiration from stories that they have overheard in adult conversations. The images are at once whimsical and sobering, evidence of how the Great War permeated the imaginations of everyone, including children, who could not fathom the depths of the devastation but nonetheless were captivated by its omnipresence.

Photographs from war zones belie the medium's claims to the unerring power



Fernand Cuville, *Russian Soldiers at the Convent of Les Cordeliers*, 1917, inkjet reproduction of original autochrome, 9 x 12 cm, Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, Montigny-le-Bretonneux. CVL00046, © Ministère de la Culture / Médiathèque du Patrimoine, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

of truth-telling: they cannot adequately capture the enormity of the events in question, and yet, in its aftermath, they serve as vital evidence to piece together what transpired. They signal events but they cannot contain them, however strong the desire for such closure. Photographs are encapsulations – moments that are selected, framed, and lifted out of time and space. They exist both *in* history and *out of* history and serve as much as evidence as invention. They occupy a curious terrain of permanent present – and yet, by virtue of their content, they offer the viewer a glimpse into something that once was. As visual arguments, they propose a point of view that requires a willing viewer who understands their signs and symbols. As aesthetic objects, they command a presence in their own right, while simultaneously serving as traces of action that transpired in the past.

The National Gallery installation includes a re-creation of an exhibition held in 1917 at the Grafton Galleries, London. The Grafton show was one of several events organized through the Canadian War Records Office, the brain-child of Sir Max Aiken, who would become Lord Beaverbrook. Aiken considered photography essential to documenting Canadian involvement in the Great War and held firmly to its persuasive powers

for promoting the war effort. Visitors to the Grafton Galleries were treated to the spectacle of huge reproductions of images of war, including one that took up an entire wall, reminiscent of a movie screen. The goal was to make viewers feel like they were part of the action and to rally emotions to the ongoing cause. Accompanying the exhibition was a checklist of images, and patrons could order copies of the photographs.

In the contemporary installation, the photographs call to mind not only modern large-scale photographs in which the artist is clearly playing with and calling into question the seductive abilities of scale, but also reference mass advertising campaigns in the

form of billboards. Added to this context is the knowledge that several images were in themselves re-creations of events or staged scenes, or else were printed using multiple negatives from different points of view. At the time of the initial presentation, this sometimes-elaborate *mise en scène* would be understood simply as the most economical means by which it was possible for the photographer to produce the images, given the realities of carrying a camera *in media res* onto the battlefield. Viewed with the luxury of distance, however, the images lose some of the immediacy of action. Their seductive powers necessitate a measure of complicity. Each successive generation of viewer, having less and less direct

interaction with the actual events, imbues the images with greater significance, as the key to understanding; yet by this very contradiction, the photographs operate more as fictionalization than simple facts. Nostalgia and history are strange bedfellows.

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Johanna Mizgala is the curator of the House of Commons Collection and a PhD candidate in cultural mediations at Carleton University. Her interest in commemoration and the persuasive power of photography stems from a longstanding investigation of memory and photography, of longing and loss, and of identity politics.
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Panoramic Camera Company, 122nd Overseas Battalion, C.E.F. – Port Carling, Muskoka, Ontario, 1914–18, gelatin silver print, 24 x 90 cm, George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa