over commentary. Quite often it is not to insist on a heterogeneity that attains to the structural disjunctions in consciousness produced by pseudo-normalizations like the nation-state.

14. The line of reasoning may or may call it, if so essayed hurriedly in the defense lawyers' arguments in the case of the Rodney King beating, The Los Angeles Police Department officers argued that Mr. King "was in control of the situation (and that they were not). They only 'resisted' to when Mr. King did. Wishing forwards becomes an exercise in wishing oneself into passivity, at least as agent of fate, or harm, of police policy and procedures. I discuss the Rodney King case in greater detail in Blood Bowl (University Press, 1984).
15. This contrasts with the work of films like El Chaval de Noche (Miguel Littin, Chile, 1980) and Death by Hanging (Nagisa Oshiba, France/ Japan, 1976) which work to expose the enormous investment the judiciary and the state generally have in guaranteeing that the individual criminal accept responsibility for his or her crimes. Without a sense of guilt, the premise of individual responsibility breaks down. When guilt is not evident, reconstitute it typically made to medicine and one or another concept of insanity as the explanation for a lack of guilt. Such recourse continues to remain localized at the level of the individual; it provides an alibi for sidestepping the more disruptive questions of collective guilt or systemic responsibility, precisely the type of question raised by Who Killed Vincent Chin?
18. Neither the film nor any subsequent commentary that I have seen notes the fact that the most prominent cause of the initial quarrel between Chin and Beamer was the effect of Japanese cars or workers on the American economy but the quality of a sniper's performance. Humane, a relatively new, African American performer, claims that it was Chin's dispersion and Beamer's defense of his dancing that began the argument that led to Chin's death. (She was called to testify at the original trial but did testify at the second, federal trial where Beamer was charged with violating Chin's civil right; her testimony and that of another do not in fact appear to have a major effect on the jury.) Chin's failure to appreciate Stedman's dancing together with assumptions Beamer may have held about Japanese workers and their denial of pleasure (even though Chin was Chinese-American and, of course, a patron of the Century Plaza But Its bly) complicates issues of racism with those of racism and class as they pertain to nightclubs, strip tease, audience involvement, heroin, and the body.
19. The term "web of conflict" comes from Georg Simmel, "The Web of Group Affiliations," Conflict, Chicago, Illinois: Free Press, 1955. Simmel's synchronic theory of conflict seems highly communicate with contemporary notions of the divided and split subject, with relations of affinity, and with a politics of identity. These all render classic concepts of a binary class struggle nihilistic. Her theory complements the diachronic theory of sedimentation: as one mode of production leaves vestiges of itself (such as patriarchy relations) within the mode that succeeds it. (Together, these theories also suggest parallel sedimentations and conflicts among forms of artistic production.) Such models call for the complementary concept of a dominant—that specific concentration of factors that transforms existing, conditional relations. In this case, the dominant would seem to be the global economy as it imprints itself in the tacit knowledge and schizophrenic worldview of one Ronald Beamer, Littin's model is often regarded as a conservative one since the competing forces within the conflictual web may cancel each other out, sustaining the status quo. Choy and Tajima demonstrate how such a web can be represented to promote a transformative intersubjectivity.

"I'll see it when I believe it"

Rodney King

and the prison-house

of video

Frank P. Tomasulo

Any given set of real events can be employed in a number of ways, can be the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given act or sequence of real events in intrinsi-
cally tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structuring of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that render them with meaning.

—Hayden White, The Content of the Form

Hayden White's notion of "employment" as a form of historical storytelling defeats a major approach to the contemporary study of history (and historiography). For White, the narratives imposed on "real events" constitute "appropriate ways of endowing human processes with meaning." Thus, history is defined as the discourse over events, rather than as those original events that prompted the discourse in the first place. Whether White
intended it or not, this reconceptualization has been taken to mean that discursivity is the essence of history and that the question of the truth value of the materiality of lived history should not be addressed. He even goes so far as to say, "It does not matter whether the world is conceived to be real or only imagined, the manner of making sense of it is the same." To the extent that scholars continue writing about historical events and the events themselves, historians becomes a replacement for history.

This paradigm has been particularly valorized by some members of the current generation of historians and media scholars, some of whom have even gone so far as to question the very use of the terms "fact," "reality," and "real event" to discuss history. As White, for instance, "Thinkers—between Voltaire and Hedgesger to Sartre, Jaest-Straus, and Michel Foucault—have cast serious doubts on the value of a specifically 'historical' consciousness, stressed the fictive character of historical reconstructions, and challenged history's claims to a place among the sciences."

For poststructuralist thinkers, history is never unmediated by discourse, and all events are narrativized as "stories" or "texts" that only partly represent historical occurrences. The accuracy or inaccuracy of these accounts is not subject to verification. Thus, knowledge is partially divorced from reality and is necessarily and totally subject to polysemous interpretations. New Historicism Domnich LaCapra has critiqued this approach on two grounds. First, he claims that it depends on "an indiscriminate reliance on techniques of fragmentation, decentering, and associative play;" for another, he questions the motives of the poststructuralists. Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard attempt to intensify a legitimation crisis in modern society.

Although Hayden White does not have those radical motives, one intent of historicism is to avoid the goal of trying to organize the events of modern life into a single coherent narrative pursuant to a single meaning. "It will be lived better if it has no single meaning but many different ones." In extreme variants of this polysemic schema, any one version of making sense of events is "truthful" as any other. Such currently fashionable conceptions of history as heretofor were entirely appropriate to an age that has been called "the society of the spectacle," a term that no doubt derives from the ubiquity of mass media representations in all avenues of contemporary twentieth-century life (that is, the era of late capitalism).

Indeed, increasingly, the postmodern world has been called upon to rely on cinematic and electronic evidence for its depiction and understanding of historical events. In short, our concepts of historical referentiality (what happened), epistemology (how we know it happened), and historical memory (how we interpret it and what it means to us) are now determined primally by media imagery. The newsreel footage of the explosion of the disastrous Hindenburg (1937), the paparazzi films of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (1963), the televised showing of alleged arsonist Lee Harvey Oswald (1963), the nationally televised riots outside and proceedings inside the Democratic Party convention (1968, "the whole world is watching"), the NASA-transmitted moon landing (1969), the surveillance camera recording of heiress Patty Hearst participating in a Symbionese Liberation Army bank robbery (1974), the televised Watergate (1973), Iran-gate (1987), Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill (1991), and O.J. Simpson (1994) hearings, and hidden governent videotapes of prominent individuals caught committing scandalous acts (John DeLorean 1985, Alcapo enemtongeants 1988, Marion Barry 1990) all suggest our increased reliance on media imagery to define and verify daily news events and the historically real in the modern epoch. If "seeing is believing," as the saying goes, then contemporary history in the era of global media capitalism is increasingly being "written" on film and videotape.

As Hayden White cautioned, however, "The analysis of visual images requires a manner of 'reading' quite different from that developed for the study of written documents." The mere fact that cameras are everywhere and the whole world is watching in the late twentieth century suggests a level of technological mediation that may make all the difference between these two models of historical inquiry. As Robert Guedes has observed, electronic culture experiences its historical moment as "everything that was lived directly has moved away into a representation." The "reality effect" of seeing quotidian historical events taking place within the heterogeneous space of a motion picture or television screen is decidedly different from that of the historian's clay tablet, cannonform, quill pen, or typewriter. The "indexical whiteness" of viewing real-life events on television—as they occur in real time, shortly after they have transpired, and/or in slow motion or freeze-framed replay—creates a strong tendency to assume such visuals are transparent, easily read off their surfaces. As Roland Barthes puts it, "Pictures ... are more impressive than writing; they impose meaning at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it." There is an assumption here that the spectator of media imagery is a passive, ahistorical effect-of-the-text, rather than an active, critical subject with real, historically specific attributes and attitudes such as gender, social class, intelligence, and race. Thus, mediated transmutations or reproductions have been regarded as veritable "historiograms"—that is, as defining units of public history—especially when those media images are not accompanied by overt narration or commentary.

The classical realism film theories of Andre Bazin—locally based on the phenomenological epistemology and ontology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and filtered through Bazin's mystical Catholicism—represent an attempt to define the relationship between the profilmic event and mediated media
discourses, Bazin believed that film's photochemical and photographic facts, its existential optical bond to the immanent reality taking place in front of the camera lens, made the cinema an "asynchronous to reality," especially when the spatiotemporal continuum of reality was preserved in a single, uninterrupted long take.

Two questions emerge from Bazin's ontology of film. Given its two-dimensional reproduction of a three-dimensional world, as well as the distorting capabilities of lenses, shot scale, camera angles, editing, and other techniques, how close to the "reality reproduced" does the paradox of cinema get? And is it true that "the objective nature of photographic cinema is a quality of credibility absent from all other picture making," that "in spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced?" 12

Indeed, Bazin went to the reductionistic extreme of saying that "the photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it." 13 This metaphysics of presence has been an important theoretical consideration in any analysis of documentary film, although Bazin means for it to apply to purely fictional works as well. Ironically, Bazin was interested in preserving the spatiotemporal continuum of life, not to join it (as does still photography) but to reveal and respect "the ontological ambiguity of reality." 14 Still photographs (and, by extension, the motion picture and video art) are as much icon signs as they are intentional ones, in Charles Sanders Peirce's terminology, because they do not only have an external bond with but also possess some of the properties of the object reproduced. 15 As Umberto Eco has noted, "And signs reproduce some of the conditions of perception." 16 As such, they are not pure substrates of a present or contemporaneous "reality," but prima facie manifestations of the world before the camera lens.

This point has been made repeatedly about film and video depictions of historical events, especially by many contemporary film and television scholars who advocate poststructuralism, deconstructionism, Derridan analysis, and/or psychoanalysis. Implicitly or explicitly, these academics have theoretically denied the very existence of historical "facts" and realities outside the realm of visual mediation and other mediating discourses. The critique of representation is "the fundamental slogan of poststructuralism." 17 In this realm, indeterminacy, polysemia, and the endless play of signifiers reign supreme. Even the ancient tradition of the "Western metaphysics of presence" has been called into question by Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and their followers. If, as they have asserted, what we regard as objective reality and meaning do not inhabit the things and events of this world, and if we have no direct knowledge of these things and events, then perhaps all we have is language, rhetoric, and discourse. Indeed, it is almost axiomatic in contemporary media scholarship that "history is at once the living trajectory of social events as they occur and the written discourse that speaks about these events." 18 Dominick LaCapra says essentially the same thing: "All forms of historiography might benefit from modes of critical reading premised on the conviction that documents are texts that supplement or rework 'reality.'" 19

Even Hayden White seems to concede this point: "The crucial question for any historical investigation is the evidentiary status of any given artifact, more precisely, its evidential status... The historically real, the past real, is that to which I can refer only by way of an artifact that is textual in nature." 20

"It is one thing to say that the material world (reality) may exist subject to infinite perceptual mediation and conceptual interpretation; it is quite another, however, to deny that 'reality' and 'facts' exist at all. Referentiality is not just a philosophical and artistic matter, but a spatial and social one as well. Reality is reality, whether mediated or not. As Bill Nichols points out, 'Material practices occur that are not entirely or totally discursive, even if their meanings and social value are.' 21 Denying the existence of existence is tautologically absurd. As Nietzsche avered, 'The world... exceeds all representations. This is a brute reality... The world, as the domain of the historically real, is neither text nor narrative. 22 Fredric Jameson seems to concur: 'History is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise... History is what hurts. It is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective projects. 23 Jameson's critique goes further: 'In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past is 'referred' finds itself gradually bracketed out, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but text.' 24

Amen to the truth, just for once! Buffalo Bill: Because I've got a better sense of history than that!

—Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson (1876)

Tike Robert Altman's Buffalo Bill, the extreme variants of postmodernist historiography critiqued above provide the observer of real life and media phenomena with no meaningful mode of making meaning other than the "meaning-effect." Jameson notes that "the signified... is now rather to be seen as a 'meaning-effect,' as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves. 25 Under the thrall of postmodernism, latter-day neo-Marxists have all but forgotten that the philosophical underpinnings for their ontology is in dialectical materialism, a system rooted in matter, reality, and historical facts. Jameson observes,
"The concept of the postmodern is an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place." This situation leads to a loss of historicity that can hardly be replaced by media representations; in fact, film and videotape only exacerbate this new textual approach to history—this total replacement of event with its writing.

a (black) man is being beaten, or history is what hurts

[Rodney King's] name may well become an icon in the social and political history of the twentieth century. Scopes, Sacco and Vanzetti, Erbel and julius Rosenberg, the Chicago Seven. Rodney King could join them one day—and it wasn't even he on trial.

—Newshour, 26 April 1995

The controversial American trials mentioned in relation to Rodney King in the Newsweek article all had something in common beyond their concurrence none of the evidence that supported the "guilty" verdicts in these cases was on videotape. In contrast, both the first Rodney King trial—in which four Los Angeles police officers were found "not guilty" of state charges of assault and excessive force in apprehending the suspect—and its "sequel"—a federal proceeding in which two of the defendants were found "guilty" of civil-rights violations—depended for evidence on a chance mimic recording of the original incident, in which a supine Rodney King received two Taser blasts of 10,000 volts, seven kicks, and fifty-six separate metal baron blows from the "swatting" police officers.

That videotape, in its raw black-and-white, grainy, shaky, and blurry form, was recorded by amateur videographer George Holliday on the night of March 3, 1991. Holliday shot from the balcony of his Lake View Terrace apartment (nineteen miles northwest of downtown Los Angeles) as twenty-seven Los Angeles police officers stop, detained, beat, and arrested African American motorist Rodney King after a high-speed (one hundred miles per hour) car chase. Later, Holliday sold his tape for $500 to a local television station, KTLA, which released it to Cable News Network (CNN) and thereafter to all the major American television networks for rebroadcast.

Most Americans saw only an eighty-nine-second fragment of Holliday's video recording of the event, which, at two, ran almost nine and a half minutes and was sandwiched between mundane scenes of Holliday family members playing Nintendo and the family cat licking its paw. Yet public judgments were made on the basis of this small video fragment that greatly affected the lives of the four police defendants, Rodney King, the L.A. police chief, the L.A. district attorney, South Central Los Angeles, and (possibly) a mayoral and presidential election. Furthermore, those public judgments led to the worst riots in the United States in this century, with a toll of forty-three people dead and $1 billion in damage. Holliday's attorney, James Jordan, was quoted as having said, "The George Holliday videotape is the most viewed and the most important videotape of the twentieth century."

As presented on numerous TV newscasts and at the first trial in Simi Valley, California, the Rodney King videotape marks a controversial site for interrogating some basic historical, political, and pedagogical pacts.

The vocabulary and mentality of poststructuralism have seeped into common parlance, relativizing everything and teaching that history is merely a text with no meaning beyond what can be read into it. The motto seems to be: when in doubt, doubt. Such systematic skepticism and polysynthetic indeterminacy about media imagery can be the intellectual harbingers of unexpected results, to wit: a jury that "unloaded" a racist beating at the lawful apprehension of a criminal perpetrator. After all, Hayden White has said that people should be "free to conceptualize history, to perceive its contents, and to construct narrative accounts in whatever modality of consciousness is most consistent with their own moral and aesthetic aspirations.

Attorneys defending the L.A. police officers at this first trial did just that: they were able to provide sophisticated "spin control" of the beating by repeatedly showing the infamous home video recording (in slow motion) and by telling the jury that Rodney King was behaving irrationally and was recklessly disobeying the officers' commands to stop moving—a classic instance of the "reading against the grain," "structuring absence" methodology valorized by many film and video scholars.

The "zero-degree" style of Holliday's small-format video recording sided and alerted in its use as an ambiguous object. Even if dictated by happenstance, the long-take aesthetic (occasionally punctuated by out-of-focus zooms) followed the preferred ethos of ethnographic and anthropological filmmaking in fieldwork situations—what Bauman called "self-effacement before reality.

The use of a single, uninterrupted shot effected the oversee presence of the videographer in favor of the transparent reality before the lens, creating a sort of "video vérité" observational mode. This nonintervention, seemingly straightforward and objective mode of production allowed the videotape to be used as a national Rorschach test of sorts, whereby each citizen reacted to the scene according to his/her own subjectivity and experience (often based on gender, class, and race). It must be remembered, however, that with any form of photography we behold someone's look at the world, and not the world itself.

Mediation, not only in the tape, but also of the tape, however, was always
occurring. Television anchors, print journalists, attorneys and prosecutors, politicians and police chiefs all wanted to explain the raw footage by projecting a story onto it. For example, defense attorneys at both trials used slow motion and freeze-frame analysis to "isolate specific blows to King to justify each one and then subvert the meaning of the rapid flow to provide the jury with an excuse for forgetting the 'excessive force' reality that comes from seeing the rapid series of blows." The defense attorneys essentially turned Holliday's long take into a montage by "deconstructing" and decomposing it into isolated parts. In addition, attorneys added voice-over commentary and narration as they interpreted the defendants' actions and Rodney King's reactions at every second. If contemporary theories are correct in suggesting that reality cannot be apprehended or if a useless construct, then there was no way to determine apodically whether or not Rodney King was beaten (let alone beaten unjustly) outside of the discourse that accompanied the trial.

One must go beyond the text of the videotape to the larger text of society at a particular historical juncture to understand the meaning of the King videotape and the first jury verdict. It has been argued that "a carefully controlled defense strategy...tapped into prevailing cultural assumptions about race, law enforcement, and justice. The video's possibilities for polysemic meaning were effectively squelched under the pressure of ideological practice." In short, the lawyers for the accused police officers wanted to minimize the incident from the perspective of beleaguered law enforcement authorities attempting to bring into custody an unruly and belligerent black youth. Defense attorney Michael Stone was explicit about using such a strategy, admitting that he wanted the jury to view the beating "not through the eye of the camera but through the eyes of the police officers who were at the scene." Similarly, the prosecution in the second trial attempted (in part by calling Rodney King to the stand) to have jurors identify with the beating victim, a sort of "Rodney King, I'm with you" strategy. In other cases, a transfer of identification was sought: the spectator (jury) was moved from the position of an objective observer to being inscribed as a "spectator-in-the-text." Beyond that, the historical fact of the beating was converted into an absolute, if undecidable, not in the Simi Valley and Los Angeles courtrooms, as well as in the courtroom of American public opinion.

Furthermore, the King video had to be converted specifically into a news

of those facts. Hayden White has indicated that "every historical narrative has its latent or manifest purpose the desire to resolve the events of which it treats." In the Rodney King trials, juridical spectators needed to be conditioned and instructed to see the tape and the beating from a particular moral viewpoint. To achieve that end, "juries were encouraged to read the King video not as they would a piece of news footage, but rather as they would a classical Hollywood film." In fact, during closing arguments, the defense lawyers referred to the police officers as the "thin blue line" that protected society from malefactors like Rodney King.

But read another way, the video text was not just a record of the specific beating incident that George Holliday taped. Rather, it was a social index of the institutional racism and police brutality in America's urban centers. Just as Adam Smith's "invisible hand" of the economy influenced the market-place, so George Holliday's "invisible (video) hand" exposed the formerly invisible (and not very "learned") hand of racist police power. As such, the return of the (racial) repression of the United States' wars, like Rodney King's wounds, became instantly readable sociopolitical texts, the body of evidence, so to speak, of a social injustice. Fredric Jameson seems to have predicted the King incident when he said, "Finally the body itself proves to be a palimpsest whose stases of pain and symptoms, along with its deeper impulses and its sensory apparatus, can be read fully as much as any text." Seytroun Fenzl's famous study "A Child Is Being Beaten" represents his most thorough examination of the motivations for repression. The fantasy of a child being beaten—and the pleasurable sensations connected to it—was a common one for the historical and observational neurotics who sought clinical treatment in Freud's day. In all cases, whether the fantasy involved the analyses of the beaten child (maestranza) or his/her brother or sister (sibling rivalry) the father was the figure doing the beating. According to Freud, people who harbor such fantasies in their adult lives develop a special sensitivity and resistibility toward anyone perceived to be a father or super ego substitute (e.g., a male police officer, teacher, or president). For Freud, in the case of the male beating fantasy, being beaten stands for being loved (in a genital sense).

What, however, if the Freudian scenario is not just an imaginary fantasy but part of the social entity in a racist culture? What if, instead of a child, a (black) man is being beaten by (white) male authority figures with phallic police batons—in full view of a video camera and eventually millions of television viewers? And what if the victim's name, King, is coincidentally linked to the famous civil rights leader who once said, "We will no longer let them use their clubs on us in dark corners. We are going to make them do it in the glaring light of television." What we have then is the return of the (social)
repressed, a manifestation of the Althusserian Repressive State Apparatus that society generally hides from view—the force, coercion, and violence perpetrated by the police, courts, and prisons. Thus, just as Freud believed that the dream was the "royal road" to the personal unconscious, the Rodney videotape became the royal (indeed, the "Kingly") road to the American social unconscious—where our central contradictions of race, class, and violence secretly lurk and where the laws of socioeconomic fatalism supervene.

In the first trial, the prosecution referred to the videotape as its "star witness" and as "an automatic indictment." In the second trial, dubbed "Rodney King II" by Los Angeles locals, both the federal prosecutors and defense attorneys relied heavily on the tape, although King also testified on the witness stand. One juror in the second trial was quoted as saying, "We went through the video forwards, backwards, frame by frame, slow motion, regular motion. I think its only basic speak for itself. I would have to say that's what basically convicted [the two police officers]." Another juror said, "We used the video like a frame to put all the pieces into. Without that video, there wouldn't have even been a trial." And a third juror added, "What we decided is to chuck all [the expert's] opinions. We said we're going to interpret the video ourselves. That's our job."*4

the prison-house of video

The status of documentary film as evidence from the world legitimates its usage as a source of knowledge. The visible evidence it provides underpins its value for social advocacy and news reporting. Documentaries show us situations and events that are recognizably part of a realm of shared experience: the historical world as we know and encounter it.

—Bill Nichols, Representing Reality

Fredric Jameson's observation that "history is what hurts" is literally true for both Rodney King and South Central Los Angeles. History hurt in the sheer facticity of the physical beating of one individual and in the material, social, and economic scars wrought on a minority community. King's bruises, the L.A. deaths, and the property damage were concrete and real cultural trauma, not a free play of signifiers—no matter how they were interpreted. But univocally mediated history also hurt, by creating a media morality play that transfused U.S. values and fractured the American social fabric.

The beating incident was not perceived by the machine but repeated by the machine. Here, a sort of Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle of Video was operative, in which the acts of recording, transmitting, and viewing the event on television changed the event. The role of the observing consciousness transformed what was perceived and conceived. Ultimately, then, through the confrontation of higher consciousness with the phenomenal, material reality shown on the televised videotape, each viewer assigned whatever degree of authenticity and value to the images he/she deemed appropriate, based on higher degree of identification with a particular demographic group.

One demographic group that reacted to the first King verdict was the Society for Cinema Studies (SCS), the international organization for film/television scholars. The group's annual conference in April 1992 coincided with the announcement of the "Not guilty" verdict and the riots that followed. A petition was drawn up, distributed, and signed by many in attendance:

1. The verdict to acquit four white Los Angeles Police Department officers contradicts powerful visual evidence—video evidence of excessive police brutality seen globally.
2. The reaction in the streets of Los Angeles and other cities is fueled by the jury's deliberate refusal to "see" this visual evidence in the way that most of us—regardless of color—saw these images.
3. But how did they "see" this video? They saw it repeatedly, repeatedly—depersonalized and powerless. They saw it in slow motion, analytically—as the defense supplied a "reading" of the appropriateness of each officer's reaction. This distanced how slow readings can occur, manifesting our outrage is that, even with visual evidence, Black experience of police brutality does not count.
4. As media educators, we must voice our outrage at this verdict and endorse all efforts to indict the LAPD officers for civil rights violations.

As a media statement expressing outrage, there is little to criticize in the SCS resolution; indeed, the statement was in substantive agreement with public statements issued by both then-President George Bush and Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates, who criticized the outrageous Simi Valley verdict. As an epistemological document, however, the bias for the moral judgments in the hastily drafted SCS document is freighted with problematic principles, not the least of which involves the reemergence of the specter of positivism that the media studies discipline had been trying to exorcise for years. It seemed particularly contradictory for the SCS to make such a statement because, as Vivian Sobchack notes, "Contemporary theory was
emphasizing the inaccessibility of direct experience and focused on the constitutive processes and mediating structures of language."

Putt, the idea that the King videotape contained "powerful visual evidence of police brutality" assumes that the legal case could be made solely on the basis of the surface appearances of the blows seen on the video—apart from the legalistic questions of whether proper Los Angeles Police Department procedures were followed or not. Second, the notion that "the way out of—is regardless of color—saw these images" (emphasis added) should be the basis for rendering jury verdicts is highly suspect, implying that juridical decisions can and should be made by referendum, without trial, on the basis of videotaped evidence. Third, it has never been proven—empirically or otherwise—that slow-motion examinations of violent scenes "dehumanize" spectators to the horror of physical brutality. Although it has been argued that slow motion minimizes the effects of a violent scene because in the real world a faster blow is a harder one and that freeze-frame viewing reduces the visual impact of violence by making the baton strokes seem less relentless, the slow-motion technique might have even magnified the baton blows, thereby exaggerating their violent force in the minds of jurors. Indeed, jurors who convicted two officers in the federal trial admitted that watching the videotape "forward, backward, frame by frame" fifteen to twenty times a day convinced them of the guilt of Sgt. Stacey Koon and Officer Laurence Powell.

Fourth, if "close readings can incur misunderstanding," then much of the theoretical superstructure of poststructuralist film theory needs to be modified, because if there is such a thing as a "misreading," then there must perform be a correct or preferred reading inherent in the text, above and apart from discourse. Whatever Jacques Derrida intended to convey, his maxim, "il n'y a pas de texte," (there is nothing outside the text), has become a rationale for intratextual mannerism (if not solipsism) and an endorsement of the unhindered play of polyvalent signifiers. The SCI statement seems to disavow close textual analysis as an anachronistic residue of bourgeoisie formalism but, as Dominick LaCapra has so astutely pointed out, "a text may also render its contexts in critical and potentially transformative ways that close reading may disclose." Finally, the idea that a videotape record provides access to or can act as the postmodernist arbiter of the absolute truth or ideologic reality (let alone juridical meaning) of what happened in front of George Holliday's zoom lens is a postmodern fantasy, contradicting decades of mediation theory in cinema and television scholarship.

The ultimate irony is that scholars who for decades had welcomed close textual analysis as a tool for spinning elaborate ideological readings and re-readings of film/TV texts suddenly had to confront defense attorneys on the opposite side of the political spectrum who used the same tools of visual analysis to convince a jury that their clients acted properly according to the LAPD's "escalating force" policy. When one's political or is greed, one's theoretical and epistemological petti prii change to accommodate inconvenient realities. In short, if academic believers in the ultimate indeterminacy of truth (and is especially skeptical about the role of media as guarantor of truth), how can one conclude with any certainty that Rodney King was the victim of a prototypical racist beating by the police?

This contradiction raises some very interesting issues of central importance not only to the television studies discipline but to the body politic as well. Those who question the reality of history are, in a way, condemned repeatedly to revise it. Although a healthy epistemological skepticism about written accounts and interpretations of the past is an important corrective to dominant ideology, extreme relativism toward history can undermine belief in even the most settled of historical facts, such as the existence of slavery or the Holocaust. Certainly, slavery and the Holocaust can be analyzed and interpreted endlessly, but denying their reality or attributing the discourse surrounding them solely to the ideological interests of Blacks or Jews is pure revisionism. Karl Marx's point that "men make their own history, but...they do not make it under conditions chosen by themselves," is ironically true of Rodney King, but poststructuralist historians and media scholars who espouse a constructivist view of the past seem to deny that "men make their own history"; they substitute the notion that human events make (up) history. Thus, if the postmodernist historian makes no meaningful distinction between the historical and the imaginary, thereby denying the efficacy of the tragic beating of Rodney King in favor of an illusive ficticity of media representations of that assault, he/she would be hard pressed to offer the "compeiling visual evidence" of the videotape as proof to support an irrefutable "guilty" verdict for the LAPD officers.

Most courtroom decisions (and historical events) are laden with ambiguities. The "absolute" truth sought in most fictionalized courtroom dramas represents a convention that reality-life jurors imagine as the goal of real-life cases. More often than not, Reality (Afgol Kuroku, 1966) becomes the practical model. But although the truly open-and-shut case is rare, jurors do make dispositions on a wide variety of matters every day, based on the rules of evidence and their own best judgment and experience. More important, most of the factual events were not in dispute in the Rodney King case (although the tape evidence of a blow by Officer Powell was inconclusive, even with video enhancement techniques). All parties agreed that King had been speeding and that the police officers had Tased, swearwed, beaten, and arrested him. What was at stake in the trial were the procedures and motives involved in
King's apprehension and whether the physical force was appropriate or excessive from the point of view of a "reasonable" police officer. These subjective matters were not explicit or "visible" in the videotaped image seen by the nation on the nightly news broadcasts. As Bill Nichols aptly points out: "A photographic image represents the visible event, not the motivation. Subjectivity eludes its grasp." Nevertheless, although the subjective states of mind of the participants may not have been amenable to video discretion, the subjectivity of the spectators is relevant to the issue at hand. Different interpretive communities saw the same tape differently (e.g., the Black and white communities, Los Angeles and Siri Valley, civilians and cops). Yet it is not necessarily a foregone conclusion what any individual member of any demographic group will perceive in a given situation. For instance, one African-American officer on the scene, Officer Love, testified that no excessive force was used against Rodney King.

**Conclusion:** "I'll see it when I believe it.

No apprehension is merely contingent and ephemeral... the object is present with a new content of sense, it is present to consciousness with the horizon of acquired cognitions.

—Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*

According to Husserlian phenomenology, subjects experience objects dialectically in the cognitive act, yet the object always already remains and exists independent of the subject. There is ample room in Husserl's theories for levels of mediation unthought of by Andel Batain. For Husserl, the perceptual and meaning-making operations of human consciousness are highly structured interpretive acts, although he conceded that perception is often based on what he termed "products of historically sedimented subjectivity" unless a preliminary bracketing step was taken.

Human beings rarely enter a situation, historical or otherwise, with a fresh, untainted perspective. In other words, people generally do not come to believe things after seeing them; they see things only when they already believe them—based on their prior life-world and media exposure. Thus, consciousness, even though it is never fixed, is also never arbitrary, as some deconstructionists would have us believe. More often than not, spectators based their individual reactions to the Rodney King video on their peripheral identities. Attitudes they had formulated well before they viewed the tape. There is a critical difference between deriving meaning from history and attributing meaning to history as a way of justifying one's own antecedent beliefs. Even if the historical "facts" represented on the videotape are conceded, the meanings attached to them are contestable, because "the facts are a function of the meaning assigned to events, not some primitive data that determine what meanings an event can have." If history is indeed "up for grabs," as Hayden White once suggested, then liberating people from the tyranny of facts by promoting a Cartesian systematic doubt or a Nietzschean hermeneutics of suspicion may be progressive. But if professional educators begin to empower individuals to open their eyes and minds to the possibility of alternative readings or "reading against the grain" of a text's overt meaning, they should be aware that such a pedagogical strategy may also lead to inadvertent consequences, namely, that their students may adopt political positions at odds with the prevailing wisdom or "political correctness" of their preferences.

The very basis of close textual analysis is to see beyond the surface appearances of media phenomena (the nightsticks pounding King, for instance) and to put images in social and historical context (black victims of racist brutality and/or guilty render of lawful authority). A text without a context is a pretext for misunderstanding political and historical events. Even though the status of historical knowledge has been problematic in the age of electronic reproduction, exaggerating the extent to which we live in a "media society" or "electronic society" has social consequences. If everything is a text without a referent, and a narrativized text at that, then it can hardly be argued that injustice and exploitation really exist. Reducing the King video to the play of the arbitrary sign disconnects it from any ontological ground. As Vivian Sobchack observes, "film makes sense by virtue of its very ontology. That is, its existence emerges embodied and finitely situated." Frederic Jameson's ontology also emphasizes a belief in reality: "I have argued for the presence and existence of what seems to me a palpable referent—namely, death and historical fact, which are ultimately not textu-izable." Jameson's rationalism is political. With the breakdown of historicity that accompanies a loss of the historical referent and the concomitant untruthfulness of representation comes a diminution of materialism as a philosophy and a weakening of political will to fight injustice. But, as Linda Williams observed: "The contradictions are rich: on the one hand the postmodern deluge of images seems to suggest that there can be no prior truth of the referent to which the image refers; on the other hand, in this same deluge, it is still the moving image that has the power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth."

With this dialectic in mind, it is important to avoid a simplistic and reductive conclusion that there is reality and there is media mediation and never the twain shall meet. Historical facts and cultural expression mingle and
interact on a daily basis, especially in the modern world. The media have become part of the material world, superstructure has become base. Guy Debord has expressed that notion most forcefully: "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."

As a commodity in the material world, the video image is equal to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image. To quote Janessen again, "Culture itself is one of those things whose fundamental materiality is now not merely evident but quite inescapable. ... Culture has become material, a social institution." Making history or making news on television has become so embedded as social practice that it has reached the ultimate fate of postmodern culture commodification. If history has become a commodity, then television news programming has become its sales pitch. It is both journalism and show business, history and dramatic entertainment.

Media representations need not be absolutely equated with historical facts in every instance. Distinctions need to be made between what is shown and what is edited out, and attention must be paid to the workings of ideology in a class society. Todd Gitlin proposes a conspiracy theory of media. "For the most part, television... shows us only what the nation already knows—or more precisely, enables us to gaze upon something the appeased sees think we need or want to know." If this claim is true, however, can we make the claim that what we live in a racist society with a racist master narrative when most viewers believe, having seen the televised tape of the beating, that Rodney King was unjustly beaten? On the one hand, there is Hayden White's explanation that "the outside phenomenal aspects, and inside of events, their possible meanings or significances, have been collapsed and fused... unstable, fluid, phantasmatic—we phantasmatic as the slow-motion, reverse angle, zoom, and return of the video representations of the Challenger explosion." On the other hand, perhaps the recent tendency to divorce events into a nihilistic aspect of postmodern nonmeaning has not been accepted by ordinary citizens, who draw on their own experiences of life and media rather than on the pseudo-historical hypotheses of scholars when evaluating events broadcast into their living rooms.

Media scholars need to realize that how people analyze and draw historical conceptions from TV newscasts is proactive and purposeful, based more on their horizon of expectation and what they bring to the experience than what they get from it. The notion advanced by Christian Matt that spectators' primary identification is with the technological apparatus of image-making (cameras, projection, TV sets) rather than with the on-screen characters and events needs to be reinvestigated. If one identifies narcissistically with the act of looking, then that gaze of consciousness assists us in establishing ourselves as subjects in the world, as well as subjects of the tube. But it cannot be forgotten that, as Julia Kristeva put it, "the knowing subject is also the desiring subject." That is, how we experience the world can be dependent on our attitudes. Put another way, our perceptions may be conditioned by our preconceptions. In phenomenological terms, any perception is also an intention.

Kaja Silverman has argued that "a cinematic text will satisfy the viewer's desire for reality only if both text and viewer inhabit what Jacques Lacanéville would call the 'same dominant fiction.'" The dominant fiction in the Rodney King affair may well have been that the legal guilt or innocence of the four officers on trial was the core of the meaning, while the structural problems of an entire society (crime and punishment, as well as social injustices) were displaced onto the individuals captured on videotape.

The French silent filmmaker Jean Epstein is said to have rhymed about the truth-seeking abilities of the new motion-picture apparatus. Epstein opined that the veracity of courtroom witnesses could be determined by training a slow-motion camera on them. Writing about the films of Erich von Stroheim, André Bazin expressed a similar view of the camera's ability of detection: "Reality lays itself bare like a suspect confessing under the relentless examination of the commissioner of police. [Stroheim] had one simple rule for direction. Take a close look at the world, keep on doing so, and in the end it will lay bare for you all its cruelty and its ugliness."

George Holliday's amateur videotape took a close (albeit fuzzy) look at the urban world and it laid bare the cruelty and ugliness of modern life on America's mean streets. Perhaps the day will come when some sort of video polygraph will be admissible evidence in a court of law (or even in the court of public opinion). Such a technological breakthrough would certainly represent a true Descartes "asymmetry of History." Until that time, however, fallible human beings will have to rely on fallible technology and their own experiences to judge the truth value of events in the world or the legal guilt and/or innocence of individuals and entire societies. And it may be well, as historian Maurice Mandelbaum suggests, that "any event is far too complex and ambiguous to sustain any single meaning." If complexity and ambiguity are our lot, people will continue to impose meanings based on their own life situations, for, as Hayden White admits, "[there] appears to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality."
51. Nicholas, Representing Reality, 135.
54. Janovery, Pascualmarx, 34.
56. The classical Marxist base-supersstructure relationship is a dichotomous one in which the economic forces and relations of production give rise to the ideological benefits of a given historical period. In the contemporary world, the two antagonisms intersect more dialectically, in the sense that the mass media, especially television, constitute a sense of reality for most people in the society and thereby determine social consciousness. See Raymond Williams, "Base and Supersstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," New Left Review 82 (1972): 3–16.
57. Deleuze, The Society of the Spectacle, sect. 4.
58. Deleuze, The Society of the Spectacle, sect. 4.
64. Ruskin, What is Gothic, 1:1.

part two

historical representation and national identity