

Scherlen, Allan, "Public Memory: A Film about American Memorials" Produced and directed by Ann Gerber. (Produced by FlatCoatFilms. Distributed by Cinema Guild. 2004) **Counterpoise**, 9:3 (Summer 2005) **[Video Review]**

Public Memory: A Film About American Memorials (Documentary Video) Produced and directed by Ann Gerber. Produced by FlatCoatFilms. Distributed by Cinema Guild. 2004, VHS, color. Purchase: \$295 (68 min.) or \$250 (58 min.), Rental: \$95. Public performance rights included.

How many of us ignore those town square statues of generals on horseback or the plaques that fly by on the highway along marking a battlefield or a birthplace? Monuments commemorating past events and historical personages are a common part of western culture, so it is not unusual for these stone and bronze objects to be taken for granted as decorative remnants of the past or lingering mementos of another era. But there is a much social history hidden both in the memorials that were chosen and in the absence of memorials for events that were either overlooked or deliberately ignored. Given the attention and controversy attending the development of the 9/11 memorial in New York, City, this is a timely and relevant subject for a documentary film.

Ann Gerber assembles an informative documentary film on the social significance of monuments and memorials in *Public Memory: A film About American Memorials*. She incorporates informed commentary from specialists in the area, such as Dr. Kenneth Foote, author of *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, Dr. Edward Linenthal, author of *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory*, and Dr. James Loewan, author of *Lies Across America: What Our Historical Sites Get Wrong*.

The documentary pursues a number of issues around public monuments and memorials, the most essential of which is, "What roles do memorials play in society and what do they tell us about our culture?" Interestingly, memorials often tell us more about the people who erected the memorial than the event the memorial purports to commemorate. Often monuments, we discover, lock in one particular vision of history, celebrating the success of those in power, ignoring causes of conflict and tragedy, shared blame, or mistakes in judgment. As Loewan points out in the film, we often purposely get the past wrong on the landscape. Our memories in terms of memorials are selective, amounting often to a kind of historical denial. Thus, for example, while there are many monuments to Confederate leaders in the South there are few, if any, memorials to African American experience in slavery.

As the film notes, a memorial was erected to the victims of the Nazi Holocaust within a few decades of the event. However, we have yet to see a memorial to the Native American victims who perished violently in this country. The film presents Chad Smith, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, who describes the Trail of Tears where 17,000 Cherokee were force by President Andrew Jackson to walk from their homeland in Georgia to the Oklahoma Territories as America's Holocaust. Where is the national memorial, he asks, to the approximately 4000 people who died along that trail?

The film examines a number of contemporary memorials that represent a new generation of activist memorials. This new approach to memorials attempts to both commemorate and educate. Such memorials invite participation by visitors and encourage more "collected" memories rather than codifying a single national "collective" memory of the event.

The first example of an activist memorial presented is the Clayton, Jackson, McGhie Memorial in Duluth Minnesota. It memorializes the site of a mob lynching of three black men which occurred in the early 20th century during the nadir of race relations in the United States. A grassroots committee with no monetary backing was able to convince a mostly white community that facing this memory publicly in the form of a memorial would serve to heal and prepare the community for a better future.

Another example presented in the film is the Oklahoma City National Memorial. The originators of that memorial sought advice both from within the community and from elsewhere;

ultimately creating what has been described as a living memorial. The empty chairs of the memorial give a sense of loss while providing a place for the living to reflect. The memorial provides various activities for the living to participate in while at the memorial. But interestingly, as the film points out, what is missing from this memorial, as is common with other memorials to victims of crime, is any kind of information about the context of the tragedy, the historical context of the criminals' motives. Here lies the difficulty with such memorials: We don't want to commemorate the criminals but we want to somehow convey that this event, as one commentator notes, did not just drop from the sky.

Issues around the Oklahoma City Memorial segue to questions facing those attempting to design a memorial for the victims of 9/11 in New York City. A central issue pursued in the documentary is how a 9/11 memorial can deal with the terrorists in relation to the victims. Should the terrorists be treated as victims too? How much historical context should be brought into the memorial?

Commentators in the film speculate that Americans are beginning to accept more alternative memorials, exemplified by the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial, that diverge from the traditional stone monolith or bronze statue. But they may not yet be ready for more progressive, so called counter-memorials, as have been built in Europe where, for example, a memorial is heated to the temperature of the human body; names of victims are turned face down or the entire monument is made to slowly disappear over time.

Gerber's film stimulates much needed reflection on the topic of public memory. It provides a starting place for reexamining which people and events from our past deserve memorializing and what memorializing means for different people. The film will hopefully awaken viewers to a heightened awareness of the importance of what they as members of a local, national or world community choose to memorialize and what they choose to ignore or forget. The video should be seen by students of public history, planning, and anyone interested in the significance of memorials in our environment.

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