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RECONSTRUCTING RECORD OF WAR

Brighid Lowe

University College London **Henry K. Miller** University College London

Brighid Lowe and Henry K. Miller describe Thorold Dickinson's journey from political engagement to pedagogy, through the story of Record of War, his 'confrontation of two films'.

In March 1938 Thorold Dickinson was in Spain, making films to support the Republican side, while back in London his friends celebrated the 100th performance of the Film Society, founded in 1925.1 In an article for Cine-Technician, written in his hotel room in Barcelona, he told of how the Film Society had been responsible for the British premieres of such notable films as Mädchen in Uniform/Girls in Uniform (Leontine Sagan, 1931), and 'many of the Soviet masterpieces', including Бронено́сец Потёмкин/Battleship Potemkin (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925). But for Dickinson, one of the Film Society's leading figures, the 'most startling (and sobering)' programme was Record of War, staged four months earlier, in December 1937 (Dickinson 1938b). 'The Abyssinian War, seen from either side alternately, was too much for the audience', he said. 'After two hours of relentless demonstration, they left the theatre, shocked and shamed into uneasy silence.'

What Dickinson had done on that December afternoon was to take an Italian film, *Il cammino degli eroi/The Path of the Heroes* (1936), and a Soviet film, *Abyssinia* (1936), and project them 'not successively, but dovetailed', alternating sections from each.² 'The winning side', Dickinson continued, had 'decreed that this presentation must not occur again.'

Within a few years, the winning side had

lost, and in June 1969 Dickinson restaged *Record of War* in a new context, as Britain's first professor of film, in Britain's first university film department, at the Slade School of Fine Art, part of University College London.

In the intervening three decades Dickinson had seen his feature film career come and go, peaking with Gaslight (1940) and The Queen of Spades (1949) in the 1940s. Before joining the Slade in 1960, he had had a stint running a public information film unit at the United Nations. The Slade Film Department began as a small experiment, reliant on external funding, with just two postgraduate students. Supported by the Slade's director William Coldstream, himself a former documentary filmmaker, Dickinson had pushed beyond what UCL had in mind for the department by turning the art school into a cinematheque. The screenings he put on in UCL's physics theatre attracted capacity audiences from across the university, as well as sympathetic outsiders, and included films that were out of distribution - or never before distributed in Britain. By the mid-1960s it was a vital centre of film culture, inspiring filmmakers, critics, artists, and others.

Dickinson's major pedagogical innovation, following the example of Eisenstein's teacher Esther Shub, was to teach by going through films on an editing machine, shot by shot, for the benefit of a select group of Slade students who would gather in his office. 'Taking a sequence from *Touch of Evil* [Orson Welles, 1958],' Raymond Durgnat recalled of his time at the Slade, Dickinson 'repeatedly froze the frame, precisely to trace the camera movements, the focus-splittings, the odd continuities, the dramatic pauses and the "beats" continuing through them. After only one such

Dickinson described this at the time (Dickinson 1938a, among other publications); and in retrospect (Dickinson 1984).

A brief history of the event is given by Henry K. Miller (2017a).

class it was crystal-clear that film was an art of suggestion, of rhetoric, or graphic-semantic construction, rather than operating along Bazinian lines whereby photography was the holy Shroud of Turin' (Durgnat 1981).

The idea of reconstructing *Record of War* grew out of Dickinson's special interest in the representation of history on film, pursued in particular by his research students Lisa Pontecorvo and Lutz Becker.³ After the arduous work of obtaining new copies of the films, the first reconstruction came in June 1969.⁴ Later that year he did it again, as part of a series called 'Britain's Involvement in Europe in the 20th Century', programmed in conjunction with a series of lectures by the leading historian A. J. P. Taylor.⁵

Almost 50 years later, in 2017, at Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image (BIMI), we set out to reconstruct *Record of War* once again as part of our continuing research into the history of film at the Slade – a centrifugal project that illuminates myriad aspects of twentieth-century visual culture from unexpected angles. As a form of 'live editing', we believed that *Record of War* epitomized the Slade Film Department in the 1960s, bringing together Dickinson's seminar-room pedagogy and big-screen curation into one extraordinary event, both historically engaged and aesthetically fascinating.

- This line of research and its connection with Record of War is described by Henry K. Miller (2017b).
- 4 London College of Communication, Thorold Dickinson Archive, TD/4/1/34: schedule for 'Documentary Cinema' screenings, Summer 1969.
- 5 London College of Communication, Thorold Dickinson Archive, TD/4/1/37: schedule for 'Britain's Involvement in Europe in the 20th Century', Autumn 1969. Famed as a controversialist, Taylor had argued in his 1957 book *The Trouble Makers* that 'Italy's attack on Abyssinia produced the most savage controversy ever known within the ranks of the Left.'



Photo courtesy of David Tett.

BL As a practising artist and lecturer, I think that a different understanding comes from 'showing' rather 'telling'. I couldn't stop thinking about how Thorold Dickinson first conceived of *Record of War*. He once called it a 'confrontation of two films', which to me meant that he was editing two films in his head to make a third film, a sort of reverse process of filmmaking: making through unmaking. I wanted actually to encounter that third film, not just imagine it, which is why I suggested we recreate it.

We are not part of a large, funded programme, which brings many disadvantages - lack of money, most obviously - but some more important benefits. Funding bodies provide false incentives, impose unwelcome hierarchies, and generally distort the means and ends of research for spurious purposes. We pursue small grants for specific purposes, and for Record of War we were primarily supported by BIMI, a small centre at Birkbeck College, University of London, run by Michael Temple and Matthew Barrington. Their criterion seems to be something like 'Is it interesting?' They gave us the green light in mid-2016, a year before the event, and before we comprehended all of the challenges it posed.

HKM Brighid is an artist and I'm a writ-

er, but there are no absolute demarcations between roles — it's a true collaboration. I had read about the 1937 *Record of War* in the course of researching my PhD thesis, which was a history of British film culture in the 1920s and '30s, and learned that it had been reconstructed at the Slade from Lutz Becker's contribution to Philip Horne and Peter Swaab's book about Thorold Dickinson (Becker 2008, 122–8). In 2013–14, with a grant from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, I had been able to research Dickinson's history programmes at the Slade, including *Record of War*.

But Brighid's idea of reconstructing it generated questions I'd never asked before, and the process of organizing the event led us to conclusions neither of us would have predicted. Processes that we would have imagined were new found us unexpectedly retracing steps Dickinson must have taken all those years ago; whereas when we thought we were merely reconstructing, we were in fact creating.

BL It's one thing to say, 'Thorold Dickinson took two films and dovetailed the reels', another to understand how he did it. We started with the assumption that since Dickinson would not have been able to cut up the two films, he must have edited them while they were running, flipping between two projectors — an idea which appealed to us. The key question was precisely where he made the 'cuts', or reel changes. But before anything else, we had to see the two films for ourselves, and this was not much easier than it had been in 1937, or 1969.

The Slade's copies of the two films had been donated to the BFI National Film Archive in the 1970s, but these were counted as 'master' material, and no digital copies had been made, so at first we were told we could not see the films at all. For us to be permitted to show them, we had to prove that there were copies preserved in their countries of origin, i.e. make enquir-

ies at LUCE in Rome, and — with help from Natalie Ryabchikova — RGAKFD, the Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Archive at Krasnogorsk. This was in the relatively placid climate of 2016, and no obstacles were presented to us, but I wonder whether the event would be possible now.

HKM We first watched the films one after the other, in the BFI's screening rooms in central London, in January 2017. Like Dickinson's Slade students, we saw them on an editing machine, not projected. We returned to them a few months later, this time to try to make sense of what we knew about the reel changes. The original Film Society programme note gives a basic idea of these, but I had found material in the BFI's paper archives that gave us more. Shortly after the original Record of War, Ivor Montagu's Progressive Film Institute (PFI) had prepared a version of Abyssinia for British release under the title Birth of an Empire. Montagu was one of the Film Society's founders, and it was under the auspices of the PFI that Dickinson went to Spain. Montagu was present at one of the Slade screenings in 1969. The BFI's file on Birth of an Empire, in the Ivor Montagu archive, includes a typed and annotated document that is clearly the 'script' for Record of War.6 We needed to see the films with this information to hand, and afterwards - having decided where the cuts had gone - produce a comprehensible set of instructions for the projectionists, Kelly Warman and Sebastian Buerkner, who we had not at that time met.

During this second viewing, we photographed or filmed the screen at the points where we had identified the cuts, and put these images into an instruction document for the projectionists. As it turned out, what

BFI Special Collections, Ivor Montagu collection, Item 188: Birth of an Empire papers.

we were asking them to do was far more complicated than cutting from reel to reel. To give an example, they would have to cut halfway through a reel, then return to the same place, which meant rewinding the film and spooling forward, very quickly, before the other reel ended. We rehearsed on the day before the event, which meant revising some of the instructions as theory met practice.



Sebastian Buerkner and Kelly Warman with their modified versions of our instructions. Photo courtesy of David Tett.

BL Even as an organizer, the effect of seeing these films 'dovetailed' was very powerful – there is a calculated, visceral shock when Dickinson cuts from the opening of the Soviet film, which portrays Abyssinia as a kind of Garden of Eden, to the bombast of *The Path of the Heroes*, with its focus on the machinery of war and the regime's 'civilizing' mission.

Neither film presents an Abyssinian perspective; they were both made by outsiders. To try to put the event in perspective we invited Neelam Srivastava, Senior Lecturer in Post-Colonial History at Newcastle University, to be one of our guest discussants, and I'm pleased to say that the event inspired a significant piece of funded research by Elisa

Adami, 'Decolonial Dovetailing', for University of the Arts London's Decolonising Arts Institute (Adami 2021).

Our other discussant was Lutz Becker, who had made a film inspired by the 1969 *Record of War* reconstructions, *Lion of Judah* (1981). Among other things, Lutz revealed something that we had begun to suspect in the months before the event, which was that Thorold Dickinson had not put his projectionists through the ordeal through which we had put Kelly and Sebastian. He had made a new print, presumably by 'duping' the films, and it was probably the same in 1937.

HKM One clue that had aroused our suspicions was that the paper archive showed that there were different numbers of reels in 1937 and 1969. So far as we could tell, the films 'as such' remained the same, but from our unusual point of view they had fundamentally changed. If the films had been digitized, our task would have been easier but less interesting: digitization smooths out problems, but can efface important questions. It is frustrating that film archives provide so little detailed information about their holdings' provenance and circulation, because there is a history behind the change in reel numbers – and many other aspects of the films - that remains mysterious to us even now. It is curious, to give another example, that the 'dupe' films do not seem to have survived.

What we had done was a total anachronism, it seems, and not a reconstruction at all, but instead a tribute to the projectionist's usually invisible art, against the corrosive digital tide.



Photo courtesy of David Tett.

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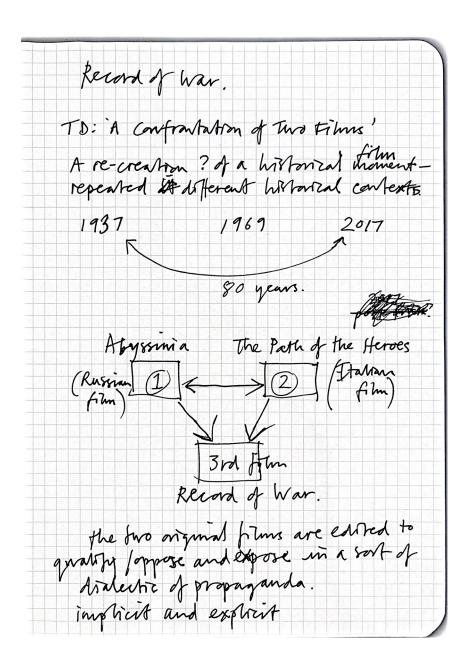
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Biographies

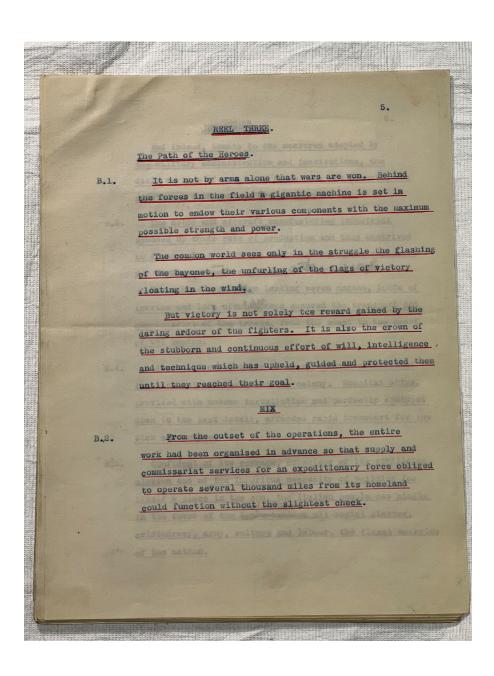
Brighid Lowe is an artist and Associate Professor at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London. In addition to her art practice, she collaborates on the Slade Film Project with Henry K. Miller, researching the Slade School's relationship to film as an art-form. Their research has led to the discovery of two missing films by the pioneering filmmaker, artist, and novelist Lorenza Mazzetti. Brighid Lowe is the director of a film, *Together With Lorenza Mazzetti*, currently in post-production and she wrote the foreword to the English edition of Mazzetti's book *The London Diaries* (2018).

Henry K. Miller is the author of *The First True Hitchcock*, published by University of California Press in 2022. His other books are *The Essential Raymond Durgnat* (as editor, 2014) and *DWOSKINO: the gaze of Stephen Dwoskin* (as co-editor, 2022). His research has appeared in *Screen*, *MIRAJ*, and *Critical Quarterly*, among other journals, and he is a reviewer for Sight and Sound. He teaches film at Anglia Ruskin University and the University of Cambridge, and is an Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London.

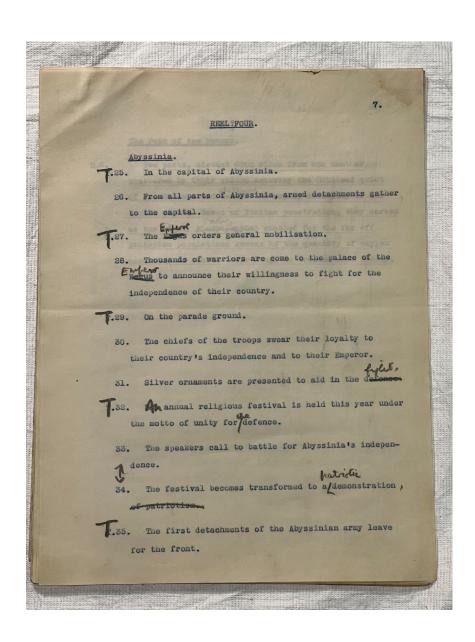
APPENDIX

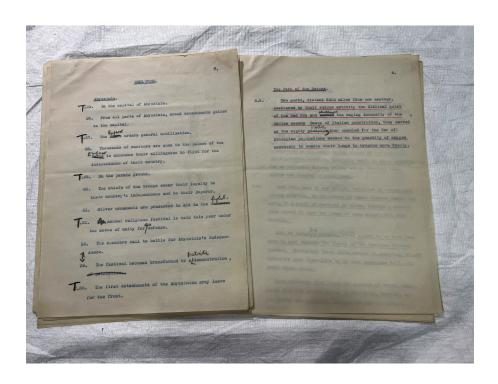


This page from Brighid Lowe's notebook documents the early stages of the research process for our 2017 reconstruction of *Record* of *War*.



These pages constitute part of the 'script' for the original *Record of War* event from 1937. Source: Ivor Montagu Archive, BFI Special Collections.

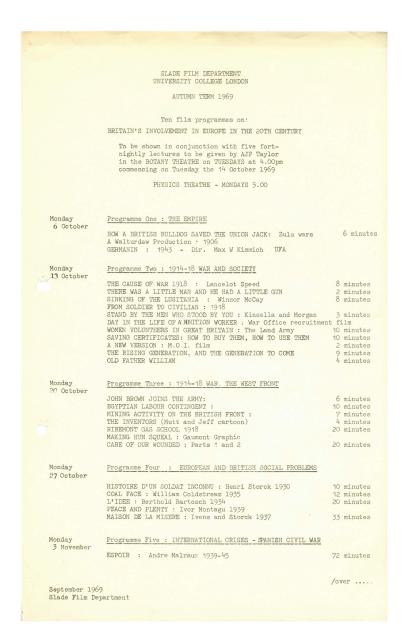




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	SLADE FILM DEPARTMENT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON	
	HISTORY OF CINEMA	68-9
	SUMMER TERM 1969	60
	DOCUMENTARY CINEMA	
	Physics Theatre Mondays at 5.00 pm	
Monday 28 April	VAN GOGH: Gaston Diehl/Robert Hessens/Alain Resnais (France) 1948 - 20 minutes NIGHT AND FOG: Alain Resnais (France) 1956 - 28 minutes GUEENICA: Alain Resnais/Robert Hessens (France) 1952 - 12 minutes TOUTE LA MEMOIRE DU MONDE: Alain Resnais (France) 1956 - 20 minutes	
Monday 5 May	NATIVE LAND: Paul Strand/Leo Hurwitz (USA) 1942	- 123 minutes
onday 12 May	FOUR DAYS OF NAPLES: Nanni Loy (Italy) 1962 - 1	19 minutes
Monday 19 May	LOIN DU VIET-NAM: Resnais/Klein/Ivens/Varda/Lelc (France) 1967 - 115 minutes	ouch/Godard
Monday 26 May	WHITSUN BANK HOLIDAY	
Monday June	A RECORD OF WAR: The Italian conquest of Abyssi 1935 - 36 from the Russian and Italian viewpoint	nia
Monday 9 June	THE WAR GAME: Peter Watkins (Britain) 1965 - 50 WARRENDALE: Allan King (Canada) 1966 - 100 minut	minutes
Monday 16 June	TIME IS: Don Levy (Britain) 1965 - 30 minutes OPUS: Don Levy (Britain) 1967 - 29 minutes FIVE SHORTS: Don Levy (Britain) - 1968 LA JETEE: Chris Marker (France) 1963 - 29 minute	s
April 1969	(These charts are PROVISIONAL and should be check with the weekly yellow sheet).	ed

This schedule for the Slade Film Department's course on 'Documentary Cinema', mounted in the summer of 1969, situates the first *Record of War* reconstruction among more recent work by the likes of Chris Marker and Peter Watkins. The planning document puts it in context among Thorold Dickinson's other programmes for the same term. The Tuesday screenings came under the rubric 'Narrative Film': Thursdays under 'Subjective Film'. Source: Thorold Dickinson Archive at the UAL Archives and Special Collections Centre.

Monday	Tuesday	Thursday	
28 Van Gogh/ Nigh and Fog/ April Guerinica/Tout la Memoire du Made	Il Vitteloni	8½	
5 Native Land/Power Among	Il Bidone	Hiroshima, mon amour	
12 Four Days in Naples	Journal d'un Cure de Campagne	L'Annee derniere a Marienba	
19 May Loin du Vietnam	A Condemned Man escaped	Muriel	
26 (Bank Holiday)	Mouchette	La Guerre est finis	
2 June A Record of War	Le Feu Follet	This Sporting Life	
9 The War Game/Warrendale	Hunger	Barrier	
16 Time Is/Opus/five shorts/ June Cuba Ši [?]	Round-Up	Herostratus	
	· · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·		



A subsequent reconstruction of *Record of War* from 1969 was staged as part of a season of films intended to complement a lecture series by the historian A. J. P. Taylor. Source: Thorold Dickinson Archive at the UAL Archives and Special Collections Centre.

Slade Film Department/History Department Programme Six : THE THIRTIES - INTERNATIONAL CRISIS Monday 10 November Monday Programme Seven : The Abyssinian Crisis
17 November A RECORD OF WAR : The Italian Conquest of Abyssinia 1935-6 The war from the Russian and Italian viewpoint. Programme Eight : Second World War - THE FALL OF FRANCE LONDON CAN TAKE IT - 1940 SIEG IN WESTEN - 1941 10 minutes 90 minutes Monday 1 December Programme Nine : BRITAIN AND THE RESISTANCE PRESENCE AU COMBAT ; 1945 Marcel Cravene THE SILEMT VILLAGE : Humphrey Jennings THE NINE HUNDRED : Jerrold Krinsky Monday December Programme Ten : POST WAR EUROPE A DEFEATED PEOPLE: Humphrey Jennings
MARCH OF TIME: Twelth year 6 issue 1947
THIS MODERN AGE SERIES: Shadow of the Ruhr
Second year 21 issue 1948
THIS MODERN AGE SERIES: Will Europe Unite?
Third year 28 issue 1949
THE SOVIETS NEIGHBOUR: Özechoslovakia
March of Time Twelth year 3 issue 10 minutes 10 minutes 17 minutes September 1969 Slade Film Department

	5 42.	(65.
		Issian
Mar	PART 3 ABYSSINIA - REEL 2, PART 1 (orig. Reel 3)	
- HAVININA	[Cut: the opening sequence dealing with the Italian mobilization and the peadlines etc. announcing war]	
STANGER BOS	T.25. In the capital of Abyssinia TTHE Card Sharf movements of Myssinian.	
	26. From all parts of Abyssinia, armed detachments gather to the capital.	
	T.27. The Emperor orders general mobilisation.	
	28. Thousands of warriors are come to the palace of the Emperor to announce their willingness to fight for the independence of their country.	
	T.29. On the parade ground. Hate cast.	
	 The chiefs of the troops swear their loyalty to their country's independence and to their Emperor. 	
	31. Silver ornaments are presented to aid in the fight.	
	T.32. An annual religious festival is held this year under the motto of unity for the defence.	
	33. The speakers call to battle for Abyssinia's independence.	
	34. The festival becomes transformed to a patriotic] demonstration.	
	T.35. The first detachments of the Abyssinian army leave for the front.	
2'nd	Mid Reel change. Train leaving.	
ALI	Mus point we are	
X	V	
med reel Russia	Halian reel change.	
		ď

These pages are from the later planning stages of the 2017 reconstruction. To decide where to change reels, we rewatched the films on an editing machine, with a typed transcription of the 1937 'script' to hand. The handwritten notes were made by Brighid Lowe while the films were running.

T7
New red.

Shark with arreagn and there. [Begins at the front.]

Italian

- The Air Force assured the punctual functioning, without any interruption of commissariat services right up to the most forward zones. For the first time in military history, whole detachments were fed by aircraft squadron.
- B.10. Swift link with the native motherland was constantly maintained and those in the battle had ever the comforting joy of getting their post.
- B.11. Other services were allotted the task of keeping the world informed upon the passage of events, as well as maintaining the cheerfulness and good humour of the troops. As sideline to its documenting role, the cinema organised recreational spectacles for both troops and natives: its lorries never hesitated to venture into new-occupied territory, or to the front itself.

[Ends with the mobile cinema showing parades in Italy to an audience in

Stru no fighting sharm - impr. cut out exposionst casualties.

Reel change here between

2 Habran Reels

3 754

3: from ABYSSINIA R2a to PATH OF THE HEROES R1b

Resume PATH OF THE HEROES R1 halfway through ABYSSINIA R2, on the departure of the trains. Play to end.

CUT ON THIS



TO PATH OF THE HEROES R1b

FIRST IMAGE



PLAY TO END.

We prepared ten pages of instructions for the projectionists, Kelly Warman and Sebastian Buerkner, showing where to change reels with screenshots. They then made revisions on the pages, which they pinned up in the projection booth.

Record of War - Reel Changes

6

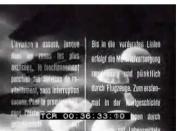
6: from ABYSSINIA R2b to PATH OF THE HEROES R3

LAST IMAGE OF ABYSSINIA R2



FIRST IMAGES OF PATH OF THE HEROES R3





PLAY TO END.