



# The semiotic and cultural description of audiovisual texts

Understanding people's views and visions.

A semiotic and cultural approach of amateur audiovisual productions. Part III

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## **The analysis and interpretation of « Moving Memories » -**

**a montage of amateur films made by Japanese  
immigrants in the United States between 1920 and 1936**



**The domain of study**

- ❑ Today, we'll be working together on a rather exceptional filmic document.
  - ✓ We'll be seeing a series of films made by Japanese amateur filmmakers between 1920 and 1936.
  - ✓ The Japanese filmmakers were part of the Japanese immigration movement to the United States' west coast (California and Washington).
  - ✓ The series of films are part of the film collection of the [Japanese American National Museum](#) in Los Angeles – film collection documenting the history of the Japanese community in USA.



## The domain of study

- ❑ Some few words concerning **Japanese immigration** and Japanese community in USA:
  - ✓ This Japanese immigration to USA began in the last decades of the 19th century due to economic reasons.
  - ✓ The Japanese community in the United States:
    - had prospered greatly during the first few decades of the 20th century
    - before being persecuted and sequestered into camps following the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 by the Japanese army.
  - ✓ Like many other communities, the Japanese community in the United States:
    - is also fighting to have others recognize the wrongs it suffered in the past,
    - to preserve its cultural heritage,
    - and to have a much better representation in public life, namely in American media.



## Chapter 1

- The montage of the amateur films produced by the Japanese immigrants -



## The montage « Moving Memories »

### Références, liens

1) The montage  
« [Moving  
Memories](#) »

2) [Support  
d'analyse](#) pour  
description plus  
détaillée de la  
vidéo amateur

- ❑ Before starting to vision the filmic document, some small explanations.
- ❑ This course is intended to provide a refined and explicit analysis of **one sequence belonging to the edit/montage** in question, as well as the various filmic shots that compose it.
- ❑ The systematic exploration and interpretation of a video montage from a **“culturalist”/intercultural perspective** will be done around the following three axes:
  - ✓ 1/ Analysis of the filmed **scenes** and “typology” of scenes.
  - ✓ 2/ Interpreting, explaining, and commenting the filmed scenes.
  - ✓ 3/ The importance of this filmic montage for the problematics of **“media, cultural diversity, and interculturality”**:
    - **specific goal**: put forth an interpretation of the edit/montage that considers its role in building a certain vision of Japanese immigration to the U.S.A
    - **overall objective**: is to better understand how a film develops one vision of historical and social reality to its audience.



## The montage « Moving Memories »

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- In concrete terms, we are going to proceed through the following steps:
  1. First of all, you will all simply watch the filmic document and then discuss it amongst yourselves.
  2. Next, we will re-watch intensively the first sequence of the montage and analyze it in detail.
  3. Finally, we will discuss a small questionnaire I have prepared for you and which should help you to produce a well argued description and interpretation of the whole montage (= group work)
  4. This analysis you are asked to send to me in from of a written report till the **end of November 2009**. It will constitute the basis of my evaluation and, if well argued written, be published on the course web site.



## The montage « Moving Memories »

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- At this stage, you are just going to watch the video montage without taking any notes.
- Simply watch it as a “normal spectator” would, one who is trying to understand and make an overall opinion of what he/she is watching.
- Then, get into groups of two persons and discuss the elements from your first viewing that you thought were important. We will then briefly discuss your ideas and impressions.
- Note: don't be surprised by the occasional commentary. The montage was prepared for the 2007–2008 seminar "[International Migrations](#) " by Monica Raisa Schpun (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, E.H.E.S.S.) in Paris.
  - [Access the online version of this edit/montage – Enjoy!](#)



## **Chapter 2**

**- Some explanatory commentaries -**



## The montage « Moving Memories »

### Références, liens

1) The montage  
« [Moving  
Memories](#) »

2) [Support  
d'analyse](#) pour  
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- ❑ Some commentaries:
- ❑ The montage “Moving Memories”(created by Robert A. Nakamura; produced by Karen L. Ishizuka) shows us scenes from the daily live of the Japanese community during the first half of the 20th century:
  - ✓ family life,
  - ✓ work,
  - ✓ school,
  - ✓ social life,
  - ✓ celebrations,
  - ✓ athletic competitions,
  - ✓ etc.
- ❑ The montage is composed of:
  - ✓ black and white films
  - ✓ that are accompanied by “overlaid” music (added later)
  - ✓ with a few voiced-over commentaries here and there.
- ❑ The entire filmic document is presented as a montage by the [Japanese American National Museum](#) in Los Angeles, California.



## The montage « Moving Memories »

### Références, liens

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- ❑ The whole montage “Moving Memories” is composed of eight main episodes + 2 paratextual sequences:
  1. **Generique**
  2. **1<sup>st</sup> episode:** presentation of “Moving memories” by R.A. Nakamura (reference to Japanese tradition and contribution to modern USA)
  3. **2<sup>nd</sup> episode:** Home movies from Georges Keiichiro Sayan (mainly: family life, private scenes)
  4. **3<sup>rd</sup> episode:** Home movies from Kurakichi Nishikawa (mainly: agricultural work and prosperity);
  5. **4<sup>th</sup> episode:** Home movies from Naokichi Hashizumi (mainly: family life and urban scenes)
  6. **5<sup>th</sup> episode:** Home movies from Masahachi Nakata (work life, private scenes, commemorative scenes, recreational scenes, urban life scenes)
  7. **6<sup>th</sup> episode:** Home movies from Setsuo Aratani (working scenes, social happenings, community life scenes)
  8. **7<sup>th</sup> episode:** Home movies from Hiromi Inouye (community scenes)
  9. **8<sup>th</sup> episode:** Home movies from Reverend Sensho Sasaki (community scenes)
  10. “Sayonara”.



## The montage « Moving Memories »

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vidéo amateur

- ❑ Each episode includes a **selection of filmic shots** done by **one single amateur filmmaker**.
- ❑ This detail is important, because it means we must differentiate two analytical levels that it is imperative not to confuse:
  - ✓ **1st analytical level:**
    - the “**filmic shots**” by an amateur filmmaker depicting various sciences of daily life of the Japanese community during the 1920–1936 period.
  - ✓ **2nd analytical level:**
    - the “**montage**” done by a person or a team from the Japanese American National Museum. This refers to the entire succession of filmic shots and their linear organization, which was done by the directors of the montage.



## The montage « Moving Memories »

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- ❑ In other words:
- ❑ 1/ the *filmic shot* may be considered as an historical document showing us –
  - ✓ *how certain representatives* (obviously from a rather affluent upper-middle-class) of Japanese immigration from the early 20th century up to 1936
  - ✓ *saw themselves and community life* in the United States.
- ❑ The filmic shot *does not show* us social *reality “as it is”*
  - ✓ but rather *one vision* and a model based on that vision fashioned by
  - ✓ the *knowledge, values, desires, interests, etc.* of the person(s) that made it.



## The montage « Moving Memories »

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vidéo amateur

- 2/ on the other hand, the *montage of selected shots* must be considered
  - ✓ as a document that shows us how one **interprets, reconstructs** the **past**,
  - ✓ and **writes/rewrites it** (to use a term of French historian Michel de Certeau) with respect
    - to the **present** of the author of the montage and
    - with respect to the “**contemporary culture**” that constitutes his/her cognitive and affective referential framework.



## Chapter 3

- The sequence « Home movies from Georges Keiichiro Sayan » -



## « Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan

### Références, liens

- 1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »
- 2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- Systematic description of the 2<sup>nd</sup> episode:
  1. The **scenes** composing this episod;
  2. The **composition of the scenes**: actors, roles, activities, objects, ...;
  3. The **edit/montage** of the first sequence;
  4. The role of the **narrator** (« voice over »);
  5. The **thematic interpretation** of the first sequence: **figurative** level, the **cultural** level and the « **pathemic** » (emotional) level;
  6. The distinction between « **realised text** » and « **potential text** » or the distinction of what is « shown » and what is « not shown ».



« Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan

Références, liens

- 1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »
- 2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- ❑ Access to the sequence « [Home movies from Georges Keiichiro Sayan](#) »
- ❑ Scenes:
  - ✓ Some **13 scenes** (for a more detailed description, consult the document « [Scenes and shots composing the sequence ...](#) »)
- ❑ Typology of scenes:
  - ✓ **Domestic scenes**
    - Playing/amusements and sport
    - housework (domestic work)
  - ✓ **People scenes**
    - family scene
    - scenes with elder generation
    - scenes with young generation
    - scenes with domestic workers
  - ✓ **Symbolic scenes** (flags)
  - ✓ **Deictic scenes** vs « **referentially objective** » scenes
    - self-presentation in front of camera



## **Chapter 4**

**- Some commentaries -**



## « Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan

### Références, liens

1) The montage  
« [Moving Memories](#) »

2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

Some observations:

#### ❑ Visual captation of pro-filmic situation:

- ✓ dominance of the relationship « 1 pro-filmic situation <-> 1 visual shot » :
  - a rather simple "intellectual" construction: no real filmic development of a situation into a diegetic « scene »,
  - as this would be the case for example, in documentaries, fiction films, etc.

#### ❑ Music/sound

- ✓ no real development of the contest between the pro-filmic situation /shot and the sound level (orchestral music):
  - music is here primarily to "paint" a mood, an emotionality that is applied, in an **undifferentiated** way, to everything we see (and hear).



## « Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan

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1) The montage  
« [Moving Memories](#) »

2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- ❑ The level of the **narrator (voice over)** :
  - ✓ **Two movements:**
    - the first (scenes 3 and 4 included) where narrator gives his/her interpretation,
    - and then a second (from the scene 5 on) where the narrator is absent.
  - ✓ The narrator provides a **framework for the understanding/ interpretation of what we see** –
    - either by commenting on the various scenes or providing information not conveyed in the images: historical context, the fate of a particular person, etc.. )
  - ✓ Once this work is completed, he leaves the edit/montage –
    - and the audience can appreciate on its own the rest of the images accompanied by music as a kind of proof of what the narrator has already told them...



## « Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan

### Références, liens

- 1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »
- 2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- Relationship between “people filmed <-> camera”:
- ✓ 1 – Some shots show **some real staging for the camera** (and thus reveal posterior decision-making):
  - the three girls who form a group,
  - the group of teenagers posing for the camera,
  - the elderly couple advancing towards the camera.
- ⇒ =“staging” of the pro-filmic situation for filming
- ✓ 2 – Some other shots: **some people discover they are being filmed** and direct their gaze (approvingly) towards the eye of the camera
- ⇒ = pro-filmic situation changed by the presence of the camera, the **possibility of being filmed**
- ✓ 3 – Third category of shots: the **people are unaware of the filming**, the camera interprets “freely” the filmed situation...
- ⇒ = pro-filmic situation “as is”



« Home  
Movies » from  
G.K. Sayan

Références,  
liens

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- ❑ The edit/montage : (shot by shot and scene by scene)
  - ✓ Double syntagmatic (linear) construction of the principle sequence:
    - 1 / establishment of the social framework (family, level of affluence, leisure);
    - 2/ progressive construction of a double social relationship
      - 2.1/ between "master" and "maid"
      - 2.2/ between "youth" and "adults" (i.e. – metaphorically – between "success" and "what guarantees the reproduction of social success")



## Chapter 5

- The filmed situations (objects, people, activities, ...) -



« Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

The filmed situations

Références, liens

- 1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »
- 2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- ❑ The principal types of filmed situations (objects, people, ...) of the first sequence and its 13 scenes, are :
  - ✓ 1 – General (social) setting
  - ✓ 2 – Actors assuming specific roles
  - ✓ 3 – Activities
  - ✓ 4 – Location
  - ✓ 5 – Time
  - ✓ 6 – Artifacts, objects
  - ✓ 7 – Expressions



« Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

The filmed situations

Références, liens

1) The montage  
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- ❑ 1 – General (social) setting :
  - ✓ the domestic life
  
- ❑ 2 – The actors assuming, each one a specific role (defined below):
  - ✓ The child (children);
  - ✓ The young girl (in a group of two or three);
  - ✓ The young man;
  - ✓ The father/the mother (the parents);
  - ✓ The adult;
  - ✓ The elderly couple ;
  - ✓ The workers
  - ✓ ...



« Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

The filmed situations

Références, liens

1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »

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❑ 3 – Activities :

✓ “*Leisure*”/”*not finalized*”:

- playing in the garden, rolling in the grass, going out (for a stroll?), pushing a push-chair, ...

✓ “*Mutually reinforcing*”:

- getting into a group, showing the group, hugging another person, smiling (at someone, something or the camera)

✓ “*Domestic work*”

- hammering, shoveling, carrying a box, sewing, ...

❑ 4 – Locations :

✓ garden, in front of houses, streets of a residential area

❑ 5 – Time :

✓ day



« Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

The filmed situations

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- 1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »
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❑ 6 – Artifacts, objects :

✓ Clothing

- *female* – *unmarked* vs. *elegant, fluid, modern*
- *adult male* (unmarked vs. *elegant*, creased trousers, long- and short -sleeved shirt , hat ...)
- *child* (shorts, shirt, ...)
- *sports* (for judo/karate)

✓ Non-functional Object (push-chair, ...) vs Functional object/Tool (box, hammer, shovel, needle, fabric, ...)

✓ Buildings

- house – exterior; covered hall; ...

✓ Created Environment

- garden, park



The montage  
« Moving  
Memories »

Références,  
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1) The montage  
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□ 7 – Expressions :

✓ Facial expressions:

- smiling, squinting (smile)

✓ Gestures and posture:

▪ *Non-finalised expressions:*

- movements of greeting, holding one hand in the other, hand resting on the shoulders of someone…;
- slow walk becoming an upright posture;
- position behind another person and one person moving slightly backwards in relation to another;
- female bodies moving in synchrony;
- rolling on the ground; …

▪ *Finalised expressions:*

- work routines
- « purposeful movements »



## Chapter 6

### - The thematic dimension of social roles -



« Home  
Movies » from  
G.K. Sayan –

The social roles

Références,  
liens

1) The montage  
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vidéo amateur

- ❑ The « figurative » dimension of social roles:
- ❑ We discover in this sequence:
  - ✓ A **typical family setting** that is *also* a setting with domestic help. Indeed, there are:
    - on the one hand, “**the masters, the lords**” and
    - on the other “**the domestic help, who work**”.
- ❑ **Two main social roles:**
  - ✓ the role of the “**master**” (who is not working, having fun and posing, ...)
  - ✓ and the role of the “**domestic help**” (who are working)



## « Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

### The social roles

### Références, liens

1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »

2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- ❑ The world of the "master":
  - ✓ **differentiated staging**, nuanced couples (H / F), groups, individuals of all ages (children, the elderly, youth, ...)
  
- ❑ The world of the "domestics help":
  - ✓ there is **no such well differentiated staging**: one woman, two women, three men shown separately
  - ✓ Note: in the other sequences of the montage "Moving Memories", the role of "**the socially deprived**" (represented by the workers, ...)
  - ✓ is typically staged via the "**mass**" –
    - the mass of people "who work the land, who carry the wood, who saw wood, etc..)



« Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

The social roles

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- ❑ Contrarily, the role of "master" is in fact represented / composed by an **orchestra of actors** (while this is not the case for the role of domestic help!)
  - ✓ The **child** : “master of the future”;
  - ✓ The **young girl, the young boy**: a character who has to transfer this role from de generation to generation;
  - ✓ The **father/the mother (the parents)**: who take care of the success of the social reproduction of the “master” role;
  - ✓ The **adult**: who is the representation itself of the (social, economic, … success) and hence the symbol of the “master”
  - ✓ The **elderly couple**: who represents the tradition, the (long) history of the “master”, a sort of its “ennoblement”.



« Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

The social roles

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liens

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- ❑ How to determine these social roles:
  - ✓ by the "circulation" (A.J. Greimas) of objects between actors:
    - who has which (functional, non-functional, clothing, ... object(s)?
  - ✓ by activities that occupy people:
    - who exercises which activity?
  - ✓ by occupancy of places:
    - who occupies which places?



## Chapter 7

### - The thematic dimension of *cultural affiliation* -



« Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

The cultural affiliation

Références, liens

- 1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »
- 2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- ❑ Important theme in this edit/montage:
  - ✓ the “Western style” of the people in the edit/montage (= another sociocultural theme).
- ❑ This is a **general cultural theme**, i.e. in the sense that it expounds the problem of:
  - ✓ cultural rootedness,
  - ✓ acknowledgment of a **specific identity**,
  - ✓ invitation to be considered with respect to a given set of **references** (cultural references), ...
- ❑ In this edit/montage, the “Western style” is represented through items such as:
  - ✓ the **housing**
  - ✓ the **clothing**,
  - ✓ the **urban surrounding**,
  - ✓ the **(leisure) activities**,
  - ✓ etc.



## « Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

### The cultural affiliation

### Références, liens

1) The montage  
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- ❑ Once more again, in order to **determine an “abstract” cultural theme**, to demonstrate that it “really” exists in an audiovisual text such as this edit/montage
  - ✓ We have to examine specific classes of **figurative themes**, of figures such as
    - **Artifacts, buildings, tools and instruments;**
    - **Activities and social practices;**
    - **Bodily expressions and verbal expressions;**
    - **Social networks;** ...
- ❑ But the next question is the following one: *this “western style”* --
  - is it only a sort of **“superficial, visible adaptation”** ?
  - or also a **psychological, an “inner” one** ?
- ❑ How to handle such a – “psychological” – question ?



## Chapter 8

### - The thematic dimension of *pathos* -



« Home Movies » from G.K. Sayan –

The pathos

Références,  
liens

1) The montage  
« [Moving Memories](#) »

2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- ❑ The thematic organization:
  - ✓ the “**pathos**” of the actors (places, objects, expressions, …)
  
- ❑ **Invariant theme** : Family and domestic **happiness** and the **absence of violent opposition**
  
- ❑ Another theme – the **pathos** (the “**emotion**”) one can experience through the (figurative) presentation of the actors representing the role of the “master”:
  - ✓ the **children** -> joy, "the little wild ones“
  - ✓ the **young teens** (girls and boys) -> “levity and carelessness but restrained” (going out together, forming a group but one that doesn't squabble (as toddlers do...))
  - ✓ the **adults** -> protection, gravitas, …
  - ✓ the **elderly** -> accomplishment, stature, …



« Home  
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G.K. Sayan –

The pathos

Références,  
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- ❑ Question: how to determine this kind of « proprioceptive » themes?
- ❑ Once more again in analyzing carefully iconic and plastic « items » as well as figurative themes:
  - ✓ the expressions (facial, gestures ...) : who shows himself in what way?
  - ✓ the activities : who does what?
  - ✓ the “circulation” of objects: which objet “belongs” whom?
  - ✓ ...



« Home  
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The pathos

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- ❑ The problem here is, once more again :
  - ✓ the “passage” from the **iconic** and **plastic percept** to the **figure** and then
  - ✓ from the figure to the “abstract” (**pathemic**) theme.
  
- ❑ Example: *“Smile in the direction of the camera”*
  - ✓ 1: **twisting** of the mouth, synchronous movement of the head and fixing the gaze
  - ✓ 2: the visual figure of the **smile** that is directed towards someone, a target
  - ✓ 3: (connotative – affective, emotional, … – ) stance standing for (graceful, discrete, tactful, ..) **“openness”**, **“cordiality”**, **“heartliness”**...



## **Chapter 9**

### **- The potential text and the realized text -**



## The potential text and the realized text

### Références, liens

- 1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »
- 2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- ❑ The **potential text** vs the **actual text**
- ❑ This is to ask the question:
  - ✓ What the text **does not show** (does not stage), what it **excludes**.
  - ✓ But what it could – **potentially** – have shown
  - ✓ and what that might mean in terms of **changing the meaning** of the text and of the visions and perspectives transmitted by the text.
- ❑ **Examples** of such “thematic exclusions”
  - ✓ Presence of **other ethnic communities** in the montage “Moving Memories” ?
  - ✓ People from the Japanese community **received in other communities** ?
  - ✓ **Socially antagonistic situations?**
  - ✓ **Reasons of immigration?**
  - ✓ ...



## The potential text and the realized text

### Références, liens

- 1) The montage « [Moving Memories](#) »
- 2) [Support d'analyse](#) pour description plus détaillée de la vidéo amateur

- ❑ The “potential text”:
  - ✓ is the “**universe**” composed of all those themes that are more or less possible with respect to a given text;
  - ✓ the realized text is one possibility of the potential text based on the **selection** and **exclusion** (and also **forgetting**) of themes
  
- ❑ The “**thematic exclusion**” or again the “**thematic forgetting**” that characterizes a text:
  - ✓ is a crucial question for understanding the role of the audiovisual text in the production and transmission of cultural vision and of representations of oneself and the world.
  
- ❑ The **questioning** of the “thematic exclusion” or “forgetting” in a text also helps us:
  - ✓ to understand better the **constructive/constructural nature of an audiovisual text**
  - ✓ and to (critically) “**deconstruct**” (cf. Jacques Derrida) the visual evidences as what they are, viz.: human constructions based on ideologies (knowledge, values, assumptions, conventions, …).



## Appendix

- The group work -



## Group work

The group work:

- ❑ The whole « class » divides in **small groups of two students**;
  1. each group **visions several time** the whole edit/montage « Moving Memories »;
  2. tries to **analyse critically** this edit/montage with the help of the questionnaire;
  3. and produces a **small written report** that has to be sent to me till the end of november 2009.
  4. once evaluated, these reports will be **published on the web site** of this course.
  
- ❑ In order to realise this « home work », three resources:
  1. Questionnaire to guide the critical viewing of this edit/montage.
  2. Guide for working with a video clip.
  3. Guide to write ups (in word format).