Film and the Public Memory: The Phenomena of Nonfiction Film Fragments

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Abstract
Film theory and philosophy have in recent decades rightly critiqued earlier theorists' claims for the fundamentally realist nature of the cinema, and of photography generally. While cognizant of the problematic status of "realist" representation-of photography being somehow purely or naively representative-this essay nevertheless deliberately recuperates a realist discourse with which to value some forms of nonfiction film. The essay sees "nonfiction film fragments" as a form of witnessing, and tries to articulate our experience of such film in terms of memorializing the people and events it bears witness to. The essay goes even further in its claims on behalf of a realist cinematic memory, suggesting that nonfiction fragments constitute a mode of perception that affords trustworthy historical witnessing. That is, the fragmentary status of some film is what paradoxically restores "wholeness" to the person or place of which it is a glimpse. In a Bazinian and Cavellian mode of writing, this introductory essay to the phenomena of nonfiction film fragments aims as much to be evocative of our experience of film as public memory, as critical of it.

Key Words
film, fragment, history, memory, nonfiction

1. Film as Public Memory

Humans and events before 1895 cannot be seen living and happening. Since the films of the Lumière brothers, however, many have been recorded cinematically. We are familiar with ways this fact of cinema has had an impact on history: for example, film footage of war crimes was used as evidence at the Nuremberg trials. The footage allowed-still allows-the viewer to witness the crimes happening in front of her eyes. In this and other instances, the viewer finds herself having what greatly resembles a memory-an accurate memory of an event she did not see first hand. Does film make it possible for you to remember in "real time and motion" something you never saw? People and events of the twentieth century are screened before us as vividly and convincingly as that movie each of us screens in her mind and calls her past.

What would it mean to remember something you never saw? In one all too familiar sense, of course, human beings do this regularly, having always wished or concocted or succumbed to groundless remembrances. But this is at odds with the literal meaning of "to remember." By contrast, filmic "remembering" is not so easy to detach from literal remembering. A film is of the past-the *real* past-as is a legitimate memory. In the same way accurate memory can and does bear witness to past events, so too-perhaps more so-does accurate film. What disqualifies viewing past film from being an instance of literal remembering is this: we were not there to witness the event when it happened, by which we could say coherently that we

remember it later. When I watch some past event on film, I am watching it for the first time, not remembering it for the second. But is viewing past film, then, an act of fresh witnessing, as distinct from remembering? This too does not sound right. We can say of live video, perhaps, that we legitimately witness what it covers. But viewing past events on film is not strictly witnessing for the same reason it is not strictly remembering: we were not "there"-physically or temporally. To witness means at least to be present at or present with; film precludes both by requiring neither.

But if film is neither occasion for witnessing nor remembering, then what on earth is it for? Here we run into a theoretical problem-a century old and ongoing-concerning the nature of cinema. To say that non-fiction film-an archival fragment of the war, say-denies us the occasion for literal memory and witness is one thing, however uneasy this should already make us feel; but to call the occasion "figurative memory" or "figurative witness" strikes us as semantically weak and ethically wrong. Viewing events on film is so much like remembering them-because they are of the *past*-and so much like witnessing them-because they are real-that I am, and should be, reluctant to deny them the status of memories. Philosophers debate-themselves as well as each other-what viewing film means in ontological, and hence implicitly ethical terms. In a wonderfully ambiguous moment of *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell says, of that human presence so vividly before us on the screen: "It is an incontestable fact that in a motion picture no live human being is up there. But a human something is, and something unlike anything else we know."[1] Cavell, following André Bazin, commits himself to a realist ontology of film-that film, because photographic and mechanical, objectively records the physical world. Film is *transparent*-as Kendall Walton, another realist-carefully argues.[2] Other philosophers contest this account, or complicate the realist thesis by stressing, say, film's movement over its photographic basis.[3] The question is not settled, and probably never will be. I will not try to settle it here.

What I want to say is that some films, and some viewing experiences, do constitute a form of literal memory, and so a form of historical witness. Let us call filmic memory *public memory* to distinguish it from literal memory as we normally understand it, without compromising film's own literalism, transparency, realism-or whatever ontological term honors its accuracy. This public memory is not to be confused with collective memory. Collective memory may not be, and often is not, accurate; public memory, as constituted by some films, is always accurate. Collective memory is a cultural aggregate-the shared "memory" (or legend, or myth) of many people at once; public or filmic memory is only incidentally shared. Public memory is *incidentally* shared precisely because it is public-that is, available for objective viewing by none, one, or a million people. In other words, public memory is only incidentally collective-always *potentially* collective-precisely because it is so resolutely public and not already aggregated in many minds, meme-like, the way rumors and stories and national histories are.

To put this in experiential as opposed to ontological terms, the

memorial content of film constrains the viewer and is only so malleable or susceptible to lore. The filmic memory does not preclude lore, but it has served to disturb and displace it somewhat. For filmic memory is widely, even wildly public-public in a non-classical sense. It calls up and projects an image supporting the modern sense of a public as a loose assembly of anonymous individuals. Film-whose subjects are breathtakingly free of literature or cumulative description, are single creatures moving in indifferent landscapes, are bodies that come to us across natural spaces that have been suddenly thinned of the usual word-thick armature of community-marks a full emergence of the anonymous. This filmic landscape of anonymity, of name-free action, suffering, and display, in turn engenders in the broadening memory of each viewer a corresponding, ever-growing awareness of her own anonymity. She is now, because of the filmic memory, free or constrained to remember, not simply recite.

Filmic memory is public in this incontrovertible sense: it extends *back* before our individual births and *out* beyond the places of our individual lives. The memorial content of films is not private to any one life. Of course, film is public not only in terms of its content, but in terms of its audience too, and for the same reason. What has always granted film publicity exhibitionally is the same mechanism-the cinematographic apparatus-that allows it to achieve publicity contentwise. But the familiar fact of public access in viewing should not obscure the sense in which film is a form of memory whose people and things persist publicly, helplessly assume public form, always exist in and convey publicness. Put another way, not only does the public always (in principle) have access to the content of films; conversely, the content always has access to the public. The content inhabits-haunts-the public domain. Since people of past films move, gesture, and emote of their own accord, and since they move in public spaces similar and often identical to-save in the temporal respect-our own, they appear and shadow us with unique success and especial insistence. Such people, beginning with those workers leaving the Lumière factory, are an immediate and insistent part of our public life and consciousness in a way no conventional historical text of the time, however publicly accessible, could ever be.

Behind film's projectability there is still another aspect of its public nature that requires fuller articulation, because it also clarifies how film constitutes memory. Though we were not there to witness the events that we later watch on film, we imagine that someone else was. The camera is a surrogate for a human being-"the camera operator"-often a real person whose name we do not know, who was there looking through the viewfinder or pointing the camera on the fly. "The camera operator" is that imaginary witness that the camera always suggests. As physical object, the camera means that a real person could have been there beside it, or "in its place." A camera is the physical basis for the idea that film bears human witness. While the camera may see what the human eye may not (and vice versa), its physicality is what confirms the possibility of a human witness to those events. When we watch a film, we reflexively acknowledge the camera's reality. And we cannot acknowledge the camera's reality without imagining a "camera operator"-however automatic, isolated,

remote, submerged, under fire of bullets, or even endoscopic the camera may have been.

We are obliged to remember what "the camera operator" witnessed-to remember now in his place. This is what film lets us do (by forcing us to do)-have "someone else's" memory. Part of what makes film public memory is this bond between two (possible) witnesses occupying different moments in history. Film is mechanical reproduction, but it cements a profound human connection that exists not over time, but across it. Our connection to the subjects on film exists only because of our connection to our true brother in filmic memory, "the camera operator."

2. Nonfiction Film Fragments

Film as public memory means nonfiction film-especially what might be described as "nonfiction film fragments." The latter are usually and crucially literal fragments, millions of which were shot by cinematographers out of a photojournalistic response to big and small events, and which exist side by side in their original reels or have been pieced together in loosely thematic form. Others can be emergent fragments, many so construed because they stand out in period newsreels, documentaries, and propaganda films, conveying to the present individual faces, bodies, and objects alien to the filmmaker's now-dated narrative demands. Paradoxically, the idea of film fragments bears no relation to montage, except negatively to the extent the latter is initially antithetical to anonymous fragments. Montage is initially the enemy of the anonymous fragment, and of the fragment whose subject bears his own meaning or makes testimony on his own behalf. Montage overdetermines the fragment, giving the fragment no "space" in which to emerge as a fragment. In time, the fragment may resist and undo the montage in which it *finds* itself. "Fragment" conventionally implies incompleteness, and often suggests in aesthetic or even moral terms that the fragment should be re-integrated with the whole-but that is not the useful sense here, in the context of public memory. When it comes to collective memory, which is so frequently one-sided as reflection or valorization of the collective will, and thereby frequently oblivious, people's fleeting, fragmentary status is what saves them memorially in film from annihilation in the future's present. Fortunately, such fragments are probably the rule, not the exception, in past film; public film is a language in surprising accord with the language of personal memory, which requires and relishes the onslaught of fragments-a life *happened*-as much as it does its own secret, self-preserving lies and stories.

People and places as film fragments: these are what allow the paradoxically frustrating and restorative act of witnessing. The film fragment frustratingly makes us aware of the larger life or world of which it is a remnant-the lived life of which the face is a glimpse, the quotidian city of which the busy or bombed thoroughfare is a momentary view. While frustrating, these fragments for that very reason restore those cities and lives to a "whole," serious, and insistent status in our public memory. The film fragment staves off the oblivion of no memory at all, on the one hand, and the "oblivion" of a world only of films claiming biography or history, on the other. Film fragments

can emerge or "escape" from imposed stories, from old propaganda films or narratively tendentious documentaries, but largely due to the healthy presence archivally-and our healthy experience viewing-wise-of actually fragmented films. That is, an abundance of actual film fragments is what enables us to see, to liberate, fragments elsewhere. A wide and varied archive of extant fragments sets limits on narrative license. To the extent our filmic memory has been built at least partially by nonfiction fragments, we are better at bearing witness through that filmic memory more broadly.

Nonfiction film fragments are therefore indispensable to bearing historical witness. In a sense, film fragments' role in our public memory is equal parts disrupter and corroborator. Nonfiction film fragments *force* us to corroborate some facts; people can adjust their master narrative to account for such facts, and as narrators they are capable of great twisting to do so. But the widely viewable world of fragments makes it harder for them to sustain their version of events, and/or makes it easier for others to resist them. Nonfiction fragments secure memorial witnessing because they bear historically real people, places, and events whose brief filmic "stages" secure narrative *failure* by frustrating narrative license.

The relationship between film fragments and historical narrative-between the "witnessed" event and the story, account, or caption that makes historical sense of it-is nevertheless complicated. To say that film fragments are memorially self-signifying in a vacuum, without the words, the testimony, the *history* of actual witnesses and survivors-is misleading. As in the Nuremberg cases, film serves more to corroborate and confirm than to stand as articulate public memory on its own. Yet, the definitiveness of that corroboration, and its celluloid longevity, are extraordinary and new to historical remembrance. The definitiveness is due to the individual subject's fragmentary wholeness-her fragmentary exteriority to pre-existing narrative-that brings forth again and again a willing witness in each of us. As witnesses to film fragments we are willing to assent to a narrative because the narrative does not, cannot, produce the fragment. The fragment in its elusive wholeness calls out *repeatedly* in need of an eyewitness account worthy of it, rather than already bearing-as a character does-a narrative with it.

3. Experiencing Film as Memory

That they are *motion* pictures as well as fragments makes film fragments practically indistinguishable from our personal memories and an "extension" of them, amounting to a comfortably fitting mnemonic prosthesis. Yet if I stop to analyze my personal memories, I discover that their motion is elusive and short-lived; their fragmented quality is really what marks them. On the continuum of visual recording, my memories appear much closer to a compressed series of stop-action stills than to continuously flowing action. I cannot sustain the movement of past events in my memory of them beyond more than a few "frames." This is one reason why film fragments resemble human witnessing in a way narrative film does not and cannot. Now consider the familiar fact that a filmed person, place, or event is often absorbed so thoroughly

that it lives as a memory in a person's mind. This moving image, if a fragment, is remembered without losing any essential characteristic of the screened version. And the remembered film image is, as in the screened version, a memory of something past. It is not the film we remember, but the persons or places in the film. This cannot be said of a painting, poem, or other forms of representation. To live in the age of television and film is inwardly and accurately to view moments of the public past. We do this naturally, but it is unprecedented.

One result of this age of film is a vivid, unbanishable population of unknowns in our memories-a modern public making a tenacious claim on our decreasingly provincial memories. Similarly, there has been an enlarging of individual consciousness, and a massive infusion of shared referents into our language and speech. This unwieldy infusion of shared images-of images we *have* to share-may provoke the warping response of collective memory as well as dilute it. But collective memory has a competitor now, in a way it never quite had in days before the itinerant cinema of *Homo sapiens*. Our invocation of the past-a past we have lived through ("the sixties" for instance) or a past we have not ("the twenties")-is grounded and prompted by a stream of widely shared images, vivid public referents that give persons a staggering power of historical recall and an imagistic vocabulary that is extremely far flung. Almost anyone can speak confidently about certain features of World War I, because she has seen them. She has not experienced them, to be sure; still, she has seen them. Insofar as powerful memory is thought to be associated with experience, to draw on potent experience, then film may be considered less "memory" than "recognition." But film is of the past; to watch a film is to register loss and absence, and these burden the recognition with pathos it might otherwise resist. And since the film's images well up in individual consciousness, in the memories that carry them, "viewing" them inwardly is less a transitive act in which the viewer recognizes images than it is an instance whereby images living in the viewer wake and preoccupy him.

The public content of an old film, like that of a memory, moves recurrently as it once moved. This cannot be helped by the viewer (the bearer of the "memory") who experiences the asymmetry of his relationship to a scene that is as vivid and insistent as that of any memory. In this respect, past films can have the power-the uncontrollable characters and epiphanous force-of dreams, minus the waking disillusionment. It has often been noted how much fiction films resemble dreams, how much film generally shares with the nightly dreamflow the same fantastic or cathartic or insidious qualities. The nonfiction film fragments of the past are not fantasies, as dreams are, but they are dream-like in important respects: they simultaneously defy the possible and remain convincing. Like its counterpart the clairvoyant vision, the recalling vision of the movie brings forth people and events practically no living person could have seen before, and claims nevertheless convincingly, "this is real, this happened." The "haunting" quality frequently said of faces in old films is our way of describing the dream-like way-the unbelievable and frightening certainty with which-faces long dead and unknown

to us live before us in the present. Past films are factual dreams; the public memory is a vision from which you cannot wake, which is in fact one of its consistent messages, and one reason for its often melancholy effect.

Of course, newsreel and nonfiction film fragments have many of the same qualities that give fiction films entertainment value. They are movies-that is, they can be screened in the dark, and grant viewers a kind of voyeuristic privilege. They retain the allure that surrounded the magic lantern; and they transport viewers as a time machine might. Movies are time machines: through them viewers can visit the past. But nonfiction films allow something of the reverse as well: they allow the past to visit the present. The people and places in old films are uniquely persistent, often insistent. This marks a general and important difference between nonfiction and fiction films. Fiction movies, however old, manage to sustain their fantasy presently, suspending in the present our disbelief as any convincing artwork does. If they transport us, they take us back to the time of that audience adoring young Gable or Gish or Garbo. In nonfiction film fragments, there is little fantasy to be sustained, or the fantasy is always ruptured by real, living faces, long dead but living before us with a vividness that seems to break the seal of the past to disquiet the present. In fiction movies, the faces of the stars stay safely and gorgeously in the past. Our knowledge that the real actors grew old, grew steadily apart from their youthful twins of the screen, and that those sad, familiar, true biographies can be read in all their details, keeps their screen faces in the past. As for the people in nonfiction films, we know that they too have grown old or died, but their anonymity ensures their identity to, prevents their separation from, their faces on film. Such faces-such people-will recurrently haunt the present, recurrently move us to acknowledge their lives and wonder about their deaths.

The familiar, talismanic notion that the "haunting" objects of film are special, being granted a kind of grace by virtue of their being photographed, is disturbing when it comes to the horrific, despicable, or cruel. One feels accordingly a weak, numb resignation in the face of what is inevitably recurrent, of what brutally persists, in the public past. At the same time, a titillating aesthetic of horror, squalor, and evil has gained a wide vogue in the age of photojournalism. The latter as a field has struggled, often defensively, with a question about whether the photographer is objective journalist, artist, or activist. The term "documentarian" has been used in an attempt to suggest all three. There are many problematic issues-false attribution, displacing peoples' voices, invading their privacy, commodifying their suffering, representing them out of context-surrounding photojournalistic work and the nonfiction film, precisely because the subjects are real. As far as the nonfiction film is concerned, these problems are exacerbated by the fantastic power of the medium, its potential for use as propaganda or for feeding mass fantasies. The cruel and unconscionable can become tools for eliciting responses that are anything but reflective. They can be presented fantastically, fascistically, jingoistically, or can become treacherously banal by their inclusion amidst the mundane, their cinematically sure appearance alongside the rest of the world. Cecil Day Lewis wrote a sardonic poem

called "Newsreel," which opens in a voice like a macabre impresario's:

> Enter the dream house, brothers and sisters, leaving
>
> Your debts asleep, your history at the door:
>
> This is the home for heroes, and this loving
>
> Darkness a fur you can afford.[4]

I am not a great admirer of the poem, but it does capture the jumpy, almost comically surreal way of newsreels in their blithe condensation of the world:

> There is the mayor opening the oyster season:
>
> A society wedding: the autumn hats look swell:
>
> An old crock's race, and a politician
>
> In fishing-waders to prove that all is well.
>
> Oh, look at the warplanes! Screaming hysteric treble
>
> In the long power-drive, like gannets they fall steep.
>
> But what are they to trouble-
>
> These silver shadows to trouble your watery, womb-deep sleep?

Day Lewis' poem notwithstanding, sometimes the war images were received with horror and the propagandistic design of the films backfired. In spite of the hysterical nature of these films, audiences managed at times to come away reflecting on their world in ways that were impossible prior to the invention of the cinema. But the point here is that film as *memory* works in another mode, and implies another context than film as "news." The newsreel from the past, even a few years past, has lost much of its propagandistic or fantastic power-which draws so much from the timeliness of events, the political climate of the day, the attitude of a large audience confronting those images when they were new. An awareness that the people in those films are lost, unaccounted for, perhaps long dead-an awareness that the film is of the past-comes over the viewer. The people and events in the film-cruel or not-live as in a memory; their memorial significance, their continual emergence from the darkness of the past, ruptures the purposes, even ruptures the forced editing, that once drove the work as a tool for propaganda or fantasy. The contrast between this emergence and the dated purposes serves only to heighten the memory. Here is a case then in which memory undermines memory, in which a properly revisionist reflection challenges a shallower one. This tension frequently surfaces as humor, as public irony and mock nostalgia-a public shorthand for corrective memory at work, and itself subject to displacement or upsetting by the deeper consideration that lies underneath, that simultaneously invites and repels riskier probing, like a dark pool. There is, of course, no "bottom," never an end to the layers of historical and ideological

sediment. But we get a better view of the subject on film, a more respectful sense of her personhood, as we recede in distance from the time and place of the film's production. For the subject on film remains, and can be seen existing underneath or against our earlier need for "the new," for news, for something to generate in us a (potentially mobilized) reaction or response.

4. Film's Historical Weight

Such films' people and happenings persist beyond the horizon of the private: they come at us from beyond that small piece of literal and mental terrain in which each of us would otherwise live out his days. The existence-persistence-of this wider public record and testimony means that each viewer undergoes an odd introduction to himself as a chronicler of history. The viewer chronicles helplessly-in the way a chance witness cannot help witnessing. To be so far from events, so unlikely a witness to bomb drops, invasions, mass burials, coronations, revolts, treaties, and nevertheless have to bear their vivid memory, would be madness were it not a universal condition. The rise of a widespread consciousness of "the common man" in modernity is a coefficient of the common man's newfound capacity-as a viewer of films-for chronicling the past. To be cinematically aware of historical events, as opposed merely to living under their effects unawares or being victimized by them directly, is instantly to enter a relation with the wider world that at once raises the audience by making accessible a formerly inaccessible world. That the wide world, from its momentous to trivial events, persists so vividly as memory before the eyes and in the minds of ordinary viewers, affords ordinary men and women-as individuals and as a mass-a certain heaviness that comes from having such a prodigious memory. The language of nonfiction film helped draw ordinary people into the world intellectually, for the first time, precisely by granting them a distance and means to reflect on it. This language differs in degree from the contemporary film and video, from the propaganda film, news, and advertising, which try endlessly to outweigh the memory of past films or appropriate them outright, and which are used by the powers that be to mobilize, mold, and move ordinary men and women as parts and pieces of the world.

Speaking to this issue of the present endlessly "outweighing" the past, or appropriating it for its own purposes, Jean Baudrillard remarks that television "reproduces forgetfulness."[5] It defeats memory in its pretended attempts to preserve it. Dramatized accounts of the Holocaust, for instance, "convert the site of annihilation to a medium of deterrence." This deterrence takes the form of facile emotion, of fleeting audience sorrow; the drama supersedes all else, putting story before memory, letting the real site of annihilation remain unvisited, unreal, unknown. Part of Baudrillard's suggestion, as I take it, is that memory requires place: without place there can be no memorial. Here, documentary images and nonfiction fragments prove an invaluable antidote to dramatic "forgetfulness." They alone bring the site to us. The remembered site interrupts the medium of deterrence: the film's memory escapes oblivion by dragging with it the site on which initial annihilation and subsequent forgetfulness were perpetrated. To view such

sites, to confront them constantly as film allows, is to be confronted again and again with the scene and operation of original forgetfulness, with recurring reminders of forgetfulness at work, with places that are forever on the dark brink of being forgotten.

More complicated is how non-fiction fragments figure in the story Walter Benjamin tells about the transformation of art making that film, as mechanically reproductive, completes-or brings to a point ripe for a synthesis of film and proletarian consciousness. Benjamin says that the "aura" of the unique object perishes in film's mechanical reproduction: art's cult or ritual function, dependent on a singular object, gives way to exhibition value and commodity value, which demand an art of copies.[6] Film reflects back to the masses their own position as propertyless, as the consumers, not producers of commodities. Moreover, film's technical prowess, its wide optics, shows the masses as, indeed, a mass-that image of both their powerlessness and their power. Since film, to sustain itself commercially, requires a mass audience, the masses are constitutive of this new medium in a way that is unprecedented in the arts. Hence Benjamin celebrates film's potential for producing a genuinely proletarian awareness, for holding a mirror to the masses as they really are under capitalism. Film is an art form that the masses embrace; hence film alone is capable of producing a critique of reality that the masses will embrace. Benjamin does not construct this example, but he might approve of a film that shows people as endlessly reproducible forms at their jobs, drained of the "aura" of unique art images that mystify property relations.

But here the distinction between past and present film should be accounted for-a distinction of which Benjamin is aware. Films and photographs of the past-of the deceased, say-regain an "aura," and figure in survivors' rituals of remembrance, nostalgia, and prayer. A film with pictures of contemporaries-living people-will often commodify and "flatten" them in the way Benjamin implies, and our "consumption" of such images is often accompanied by feelings of ambivalence, the stirrings of critical awareness. We know such images are commodities to some extent, and their purveyors may appropriate them freely and do with them what they will. Our ambivalence, and their commodification, dialectically trigger an awareness critical of a system that alienates people from their own likeness and commodifies that likeness for profit. But when such people die, or when sufficient time and distance has passed so that their whereabouts are unknown, their presence in the film becomes a memory, calling attention to their loss. These Russian women in wartime-their faces in the winter light, their shawls drawn tightly around them-where are they? Where have they gone? I say: "I just caught a glimpse of them." Where have these persons gone? They are gone. No longer is their filmic presence a reproduction: it is a glimpse of *them*.

All film is destined for memorial status and the "aura" of the living, paradoxically, because people and objects decay while their celluloid reproductions do not. In fact, the subjects in the most contemporary film or video already have about them the faint aura of the residual, as their deaths begin, however dimly, to immortalize them. A cinematic politics along the lines

of Benjamin's will require theorizing cinematic memory as assiduously as it should cinematic reproduction. Benjamin's acolyte Theodor Adorno provides some clues to this; but to arrive at Adorno, we should first consider how greatly compelling cinematic glimpses are, when they show us the living dead.

Glimpses create conditions for morally serious voyeurism-a desire to look, and look again, at the dead. To ravish with one's eyes the youthful body of an aged or long dead movie star is to take part in one sort of necromancy; to watch the anonymous dead remain in a film's living light is another kind of obsession altogether, one that cuts closer to our own anonymous mortality and historical fragility. We tend to pore over old photographs and films the way elephants touch and fondle the bones of their own departed. To stumble upon ordinary "bones"-extraordinary in their very ordinariness-late at night when old newsreels possess the television, is the *chance* to look at the most unlikely faces and bodies, a chance that awakens our capacity for thinking about the most common, most unknown, most "distant" dead. There is much going on here. If fantasy is what fiction movies allow and require, then the even more complicated response of *schadenfreude* is what accompanies non-fiction viewing. The almost awed sense of privilege and relief we feel when watching members of our own kind in their historical predicaments is just what intensifies our historical compassion. Voyeurism in a mode of fantasy can tend to fetishism-to a fixation and dependency on the object, disrupting other concerns and capacities; but voyeurism in the form of the historical glimpse, that insatiable craving for glimpses, favors a different kind of obsession. The voyeur in fantasy wants to be "there"-and will rearrange just about everything in his mental life to imagine that he is; the historical voyeur does not want to be there so much as relish-morosely, even morbidly, perhaps-his *not* being there. This status of "not being there"-this historical luck, as it were-moves us not because it suggests our exemption from history, but precisely because it reminds us of our being in it. Appreciating historical luck is historical consciousness; film of the past brings about this consciousness as gently and far-reachingly as one could hope, but not without the pain that any meaningful awareness requires. By contrast, the contemporary video of history unfolding before us is, alas, sometimes "too close" or "too hot" for us to find compassion in our response to victims, who may be our enemies, or our enemies' friends, or confusingly without "affiliation" altogether. You might say, past film induces compassion because it flickers in the light of "species-being"-and this is what we crave by its "glimpses."

But a paradoxically related aspect of non-fiction glimpsing is the way solitude, even loneliness, figure in the experience. An aspect of solitude may seem at odds with film's optical sensitivity to masses of people, with the way film mirrors our mass membership, and with the fellow feeling that past film tends to induce. But film, if we are honest, succeeds because it lets us have it both ways: it lets us enjoy our mass-membership without the practical and messy particulars an active membership requires. All film affords this paradox, or, better yet, hypocrisy: there is something slightly embarrassing about sitting in the dark next to so many breathing strangers

while you "connect" with the human race on screen. This might be the modern definition of loneliness, of a shyness so acute and perverse that it must endure its most heartfelt fantasies of belonging while in the very presence of others. Past film, while nowadays viewed at home, on the small screen, hardly alleviates the embarrassment: the people we are "connecting with" are dead. Our sense of connection to the subjects of film, while not trivial or abstract, places no immediate practical demands, either. The point is, our compassion may be bound up with our solitude in a way that will never, and never want to, overcome it.

This solitary ambivalence is perhaps more palatable when we watch fiction films if only because it tends to be the very theme of those movies. Potent and indelible fiction movies generally affirm romantic solitude in a world of too many commitments, contracts, and compromises. Writing of *Casablanca*, here is Michael Wood:

> It is a picture of what isolation looks like at its best: proud, bitter, mournful, and tremendously attractive. The sadness in the picture and the faint moral censure the film tempts us to apply ("You want to feel sorry for yourself, don't you?" Ingrid Bergman asks Bogart. "With so much at stake all you can think of is your own feeling.") merely help us on our way to reveling in that consummate, paradoxical loneliness, the goal of so many unconfessed or half-confessed longings. We long to be lonely, that is, even as we go in search of others. . ."[7]

We long to be lonely and to be noticed and longed for in that loneliness-which would not quite be loneliness after all. How readily the fiction movie mimics and stylizes this need. It provides an occasion for transference-we transfer our loneliness onto the hero, who enacts it, performing it glamorously for all the world to see, in those alluring stances of "desolation" that compose the language of the popular cinema. But with nonfiction fragments there is no occasion for transference, because the subject on screen is already lonely, unnoticedly lonely, lonelier even than us in her sealed historical fate. In fiction, the star's "performance" of loneliness depends on our watching it, which stylizes and relieves it. But the subjects of non-fiction fragments are alone in spite of our glimpsing them. Our fellow feeling for them is inescapably a tragic sensibility, which, if it does not strictly depend on our solitude, our personal distance from them, certainly gains from it.

Only when we consider past film next to the vast pre-cinematic history it abuts does our otherwise tragic and solitary witness tend to develop a collective quality. Cinematic history, because new, becomes our history; the subjects of past film become us, in the sense that through them we are made aware of our time. Seeing cinema as historically new, as Benjamin insists on doing, keeps filmic memory a shared phenomenon and the occasion for a collective awareness. In this way the cinema does what Theodore Adorno bitterly thought modern art generally should do-provide the oppressed among us their "right to be remembered":

> One of the basic human rights possessed by those who pick up the tab for the progress of civilization is the right to be remembered. Contrary to the affirmative totality of ideologies of emancipation, this right demands that the marks of humiliation be committed to remembrance in the form of imagines. Art must take up the cause of that which is branded ugly. . . [A]rt has to make use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image.[8]

To follow this drift of Adorno's thinking about art into a reflection on film's critical role implies that the divide between pre-cinematic and cinematic history is deep. Pre-cinematic history is an obscure glass as far as having a view to the mass of men and women is concerned. The invention of the cinema produced an instant illumination of the wide world, its rough, quotidian, peopled spaces, its cities and landscapes in which the movement of people was always seen or implicated. With the advent of the cinema a drastic tilting has occurred, a tilting toward what may be called "the democratic" in the work of historical remembrance. The cinema conveys in a second-long glimpse the presence of the many. Echoing Benjamin, Stanley Cavell speaks of an underexplored possibility of the film medium to "let the world happen, to let its parts draw attention to themselves according to their natural weight."[9] This is opposed to the more frequently used method of "calling attention to persons, and parts of persons and objects." (Cavell notes that Dreyer, Flaherty, Vigo, Renoir, and Antonioni are masters of utilizing this underexplored possibility. Note that almost all of these men made large documentaries-the sensibility of which explains much of their fictional work.) I would go further: this "possibility" is almost inherent in raw cinema, as it is born of the world itself. It is practically intrinsic to the medium and is achieved whenever a camera is pointed at the world. It is why the newsreel and nonfiction fragment (the "non-directed" film) teem with laborers, soldiers, civilians, mourners, victims, the dead themselves-the parts of the world with the most "natural weight" by virtue of their number. To witness history with a motion picture camera is to capture a world, a landscape and human stage whose landless, displaced, and laboring are the heaviest "photographic weight."

5. Faces, Bodies

What is it that gives film remembrance its power? What is it about such motion pictures, as phenomena, that is so moving? One place to start is the human face.

Roland Barthes speaks of rare photographs as suffering a wound made by a detail which "paradoxically, while remaining a 'detail,'. . . fills the whole picture": the detail is an "accident" in which the photograph seems "to annihilate itself as a medium, to be no longer a sign but the thing itself."[10] Almost all faces in the public memory suffer such a wound: their own death. Many suffer a still greater wound: their own murder or annihilation. The vivid aspect of their aliveness, combined with their anonymity and circumstance, suggests their destruction. In some cases the destruction looms

ominously and probably has occurred by the time the face is developed on film and shown in its first projection. Because we watch the endangered face exist at once in its time and place and in the film's initial time and place-despite its projection for us decades later-we still can appreciate the looming shadow of that destruction. These anonymous faces indict the destruction. Faces have the effect of supplying their own testimony.

An orphan crawling out of the rubble in a bombed city; a mourner kneeling in a muddy field; a family straggling with their belongings along a road; starved soldiers or prisoners staring from trenches or behind fences-caught in just a glimpse or sweep of the camera-I remember as surely as I do their oppressors. When Emmanuel Levinas writes about the living face, he could as well be writing about the cinematic face: "The face is a living presence, it is expression. . . He who manifests himself comes, according to Plato's expression, to his own assistance. *He at each instant undoes the form he presents*."[11] Tension between form and form's continual undoing-the idea that the face enchants and disenchants, the oxymoronic idea of a *talking form*-suggests why the stranger's face should arouse unconditional respect, in the ethical sense. Before we subsume the beautiful or ugly face under our own fantasy or demand, it speaks, as it were, to interrupt or remind us of its independent being. And before its worthy demands as a being alienate or bore us, its form, its face, pulls us continually back to attention. As Levinas puts it even more succinctly and paradoxically: "The eye does not shine; it speaks."[12] Film, especially the nonfiction fragment, assists in making us sensitive to this *almost*-shining presence of implicitly overlooked faces.

Yet a powerful phenomenology of the cinema, especially that of nonfiction, requires the body as much as the face. It is a familiar cheap trick of wildlife films to anthropomorphize the animals; but it is interesting how film, almost of necessity, "animalizes" the people who are its subject. Film appreciates people's somatic condition, their bodily awkwardness. This animal component does not, of course, mean "animal" in the sense of "bestial," "brutish," and so on; rather it means "animal" as in a species, a life form of this earth with a body and limbs and a gait unique to itself. To watch a human being on film, however young and healthy he is, is to watch the movements of an endangered specimen, and, depending on the film's content-people in war time, even a single soldier firing a machine gun-is also an endangered species.

Yes, even a single soldier, whose side or back is to us-as is almost always the case in real wartime footage-suggests this ecological fragility. In Hollywood movies the opposite is true: it is almost always the face-an image of heroism and triumph, or anti-heroism and defeat-that we see firing. In real war footage it is the shoulders and back we see, taut and desperate as that of a cornered animal, but with the unmistakable profile of a human. Needless to say, certain realities of camera placement are a factor in such conditions, but there is also an ethical consequence that may be (unconsciously) chosen. To see a face firing would be too much to bear (and too false a hinting at triumph or heroism?), as if the insanely clenched grimace, the defensive, necessary hatred and devotion, would

crush any forgiveness or sympathy, as if the axis of gunner and target would be too close to undo or endure. Far from suggesting the demise of the human species by self-annihilation, as the profile does, it would simply suggest the descent of the human into bestiality. It would suggest an altogether different kind of doom: "Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster. . ." Paradoxically, the face, emblem of the human, is also the emblem of the inhuman.

6. Conclusion

In bodies and faces, the public memory of non-fiction film fragments is a cascade of the "living" dead. Unlike the crowds we try to negotiate or avoid daily, those of the non-fiction cinema slow their own falling. This form of resistance, if one can call it that-resisting modernity's blur "from beyond the grave"-is no consolation for the dead and another source of present melancholy in viewing such films. Adorno's bitter and ironic formulation of the "right to be remembered"-for how can we speak of the "rights" of the dead in any respectful way but bitterly and ironically?-attempts to ascribe a critical attitude in present viewers of the dead. Adorno speaks generally of "modern art's" task as a critical memorial device, yet film alone is equipped to fulfill it. "Equipped" is apt: cinematographic memory is a kind of techno-shadow of history's methods of mass displacement, imprisonment, and killing. That is to say, only film among representational techniques can keep up with so many discarded bodies and faces. In film there is finally a running file or record "equal" to the ceaseless activity producing it. Film is the method by which history becomes most acquainted with itself-the "ugly" process by which massive violent or exploitative power takes exquisite stock of itself. Looking through film's roving, flickering, capacious eye, then, is to look both outwardly and inwardly at this "mass effect" of destructive techniques: it is to witness them definitively for the first time and to resemble or complement them while doing so. That kind of double confrontation with history might help produce an awareness that can shock us "out of ourselves." That is, poring over film's file of anonymous dead, lost to war or grinding labor, may help in "remembering" the precariously living before they have to be remembered, before they have *only* to be remembered.

Endnotes

[1] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: Viking, 1971), p. 26.

[2] Kendall Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (December 1984): 246-277.

[3] For a summary of the main currents in the debate over film's ontological status, see Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi, eds., *The Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures: an Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 51-65.

[4] Cecil Day Lewis, *The Complete Poems of C. Day Lewis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 270.

[5] And the sentence after the next: Jean Baudrillard, "Holocaust," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser

(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 49-51.

[6] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 217-251-especially pp. 221-224, 225-226, 234-235.

[7] Michael Wood, *America in the Movies* (New York: Dell, 1981), p. 25.

[8] T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 72.

[9] And the next sentence: Cavell, 25.

[10] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26-27, 43-45. The marvelous work of Bert O. States first pointed me to these passages in Barthes. See, Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 11-12.

[11] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), p. 66. Italics are mine.

[12] Levinas, p. 66.

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