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Documentary: Trauma and an Ethics of Knowing

Martin Lucas

Abstract

This essay re-evaluates the ethics of subject relations in documentary film in the context of films dealing with traumatic memory and disaster. Using a mix of personal insights developed in the context of making a film about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and an examination of notions of representation in the literature of documentary film studies, trauma studies and social science, the essay suggests that the case of disaster testimony and its witnesses, the keystone location of the witness to the disaster in the story arc is a position that needs to be re-examined. From a narrative angle, the disaster story is a representational limit situation, where meaning and language break down. From a social point of view the notion of the "use" of testimony as part of a narrative raises complex ethical questions as witnesses are deployed in film and literature. Looking at recent work in anthropology and trauma studies, I document how survivors of traumatic situations have tried to acquire agency in relation to their own stories and their use. The paper notes that such stories are now part of a growing set of discourses in juridical contexts (reparations) and political ones (truth and reconciliation commissions) and looks at how problems of social and personal trauma elide in the construction of larger narratives. It suggests that the urgencies of such contexts are themselves implicated in a traumatized interplay, one where an accepted historical narrative itself potentially resides in denial. Examining the role of archival images as another pillar of documentary storytelling suggests that rather than buttressing the legitimation of witness testimony, archival material holding an ethical demand for the maker to explore the cracks and crevices revealed in the facade of historical narratives to prod out points hidden by mutal denial and sheltered pain.

In this paper, I seek to extend a discussion of documentary filmmaking that involves the ethics of subject relations and of historical representation to incorporate the idea of an "ethics of knowing," an ethical duty to the construction of knowledge and structures of feeling in relation to personal and collective traumas that lie at the heart of historical memory.

My quest and the impetus for my research derive from the making of a personal, essay-style documentary, *Hiroshima Bound* (2015), which attempts to unpack America's collective memory of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The pillars of historical documentary, particularly the histories of war and mass death, are a triad that includes the archival image, survivor testimony and the return to the site of the disaster. How can these elements be used ethically? Rather than being

deployed to mutually buttress a fixed idea about history, can they help us to unpack the traumatic heart of historical events? And can that unpacking be done without creating new traumas or victims?

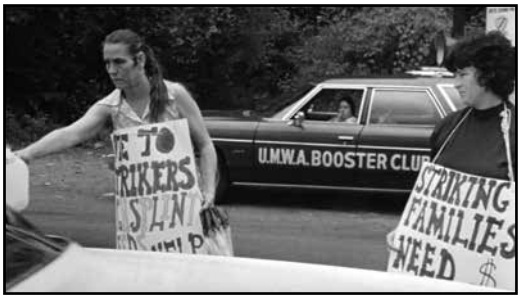
A typical strategy for a film that focuses on a disaster such as this one is to make a humanitarian appeal based on survivor testimony. We as viewers can empathize with the horrible experience of the survivors in a way that will remind us of the even more terrible fate of those who did not survive. The use of a strategy of survivor testimony offers several advantages in raising awareness of the horrors of war and crimes against humanity. One is the authenticity of witness accounts. The other is empathy, the fellow feeling that is one of the desired responses to a documentary film. But what are the implications of deploying survivors in a story when the story is one of disaster? As Maurice Blanchot suggests, "I call disaster that which does not have the ultimate for a limit: it bears the ultimate away in the disaster" (28). One could say that the disaster destroys everything, including the language necessary to talk about it.[1] How, then, should witnesses be treated? What is our duty, as documentarians, to them and their testimony, and to the way we use or deploy them in our films? How can we be true to an experience that is inexpressible but demands to be told?

My first experience with survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was with a group organized under the name "Hibakusha Stories" who made it their business to come to New York City to speak with students in middle and high schools. As soon as I heard of them, I contacted the group and arranged to film with them. Survivor testimony is a pillar of documentary film, used to bear much of the weight of storytelling, notably in documentaries with a revisionist historical agenda, from Marcel Ophuls' *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969) to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), because it serves multiple purposes. On the one hand, the subjects are witnesses, so their mere presence offers confirmation of the legitimacy of the point of view set out, particularly in an era where there is great value placed on the authority imbued by the accretion of individual experience in the form of "history-from-below." Following this, the subjects' description of events and their eyewitness accounts have an immediacy as well. The events are past, but the witness is now, bearing the unavoidable weight of the present moment. Add to this the emotional and dramatic weight of accounts of witnessing terrible events. Many historical documentaries will weave a tapestry of larger events out of such stories. One typical approach to "historical documentary" intertwines sections of interviews with archival material in a way that embeds the historical in personal accounts. Although the filmmaker can question the accounts of witnesses and even counter them, a common approach is to buttress a story, and hence authenticate an account of history. In *Crafting Truth*, Spence and Navarro look carefully at the way different elements of evidence, including archival material and testimony, are presented in documentary and suggest that, while there are films—such as Su Friedrich's *The Ties that Bind*—that "presume that history can contain irreconcilable perspectives…Given the choice between presenting straightforward testimonies and questioning their motivations on the screen, most filmmakers would probably opt for the former" (45).

As a storyteller, the idea of filming survivors of the atomic bomb, specifically filming them speaking about their memories and experiences, is part of a tradition that goes back to John Hersey's original article in the *New Yorker*, the first generally available account of the experiences of survivors of the atomic bombing, later published as *Hiroshima* (1946), which wove the stories of half-a-dozen Hiroshima citizens into a searing account of the specificity and long-lasting nature of the suffering that accompanied the first use of a radioactive weapon. This text was key in undercutting the discourse that emerged from official and mainstream media sources, a mix of

censorship and public relations spin that relegated the discussion of the bomb to geo-political and scientific considerations, at the expense of acknowledging the lingering human cost of using atomic weapons.

The strategy of luring an audience—whether viewers, listeners or readers—by offering an empathetic relationship with a sufferer is as old as storytelling itself. The relationship created is notably not an equal one. Casting interview subjects as "survivors" is very near to turning them into victims. This approach to documentary subjects has been criticized since at least the 1970s. While the critiques of artists such as Martha Rosler and Alan Sekula focused more on documentary photography than film-making, the inadequacy inherent in documentary strategies that rely on inducing empathy or compassion for victims was clearly indicted both in their art, in works such as Rosler's *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1975) and Sekula's *Aerospace Folktales* (1973) and their writing, which testified to the representational failure of social-issue documentary photography that went back to the 1930s.



In *Harlan County, USA* (1976) filmmaker Barbara Kopple emphasizes the role of miners' families in a union organizing effort based on a position "inside" the mining community.

"How do we avoid a sort of aestheticized political nostalgia viewing the work of the Thirties?" asks Sekula (864). In his critique of Eugene Smith's famous 1975 photos of the devastation caused by poisoning from a Japanese mercury mine, he states: "Eugene Smith in his *Minamata Project* offered more of a representation of his compassion for mercury poisoned Japanese fisher folk than one of their struggles for retribution against the corporate polluter…the subjective aspect of liberal esthetics is compassion rather than collective struggle" (864). He goes on to note a visual reference to the Pietà in Smith's famous shot of a fisherwoman and her child.

Although this critique was articulated in the context of documentary still photography, it is related to similar trends in moving image documentary. In his discussion, Sekula singles out Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County USA* (1976) as a story that emerges from "the filmmaker's partisan commitment to long-term work from *within* particular struggles" (877). This "within" position stands in contrast to the ideology of the observational "fly-on-the-wall" approach developed by Direct Cinema documentarians in the 1960s that was being challenged at the time. A prototypical example of a new approach to subjects, and the ethics of subject relations, was the CBC program *Challenge for Change*, (premiered in 1967), where cameras, editing equipment and training were offered to local groups (as in Bonnie Sher Klein's 1969 *VTR St-Jacques*), and the subjects were extended an invitation to be involved in the editing process. This was a strong gesture ethically, but it leaves the question of the role of the filmmaker dangling.

In Kopple's film, it is the miners' families, particularly the wives, who are shown to be integral to the struggle. These are not just workers, but families struggling together against the coal companies, and with each other within families as well. Kopple's approach can be understood only in the context of the then-evolving politics of second-wave feminism, and involve a more complex contract—one that requires her not only to do no harm, as Utilitarian ethics suggest, but to portray this struggle, in this case for union representation

against a mining company determined to thwart unionization, in a sympathetic and thoughtful way that provides a complex sense of the reality of their lives. Here, the maker will represent the struggle and the people involved in a knowing way—a way that represents them as they might want to represent themselves.

Readers may find a relationship between this rethinking and the kind of paradigm shift famously described by Thomas Kuhn. This parallel is reinforced by the description by Joel Robbins of a series of paradigm shifts for anthropology exactly in the area of the subject, where the object of study moves from the Other to the Suffering Other, which he suggests occurred in the 1990s. For Robbins, this shift solves a kind of epistemological problem because the sufferer from trauma can be seen (unlike the members of a traditional or even "primitive" society who constituted the subjects of study for anthropologists historically) as a universal subject. The suffering itself offers a way past the conundrum of the unknowability of the other, and more crucially a route around the problem of making claims about otherness that can be interpreted as supporting exploitation or domination of those so denominated:

> …in our current understanding any person anywhere can be expected to suffer traumas of essentially the same kind in the face of certain kinds of violence and deprivation. And because of the universal qualities of trauma, we as observers and witnesses are secure in our abilities to know it when we see it and to feel empathy with those who suffer it in "a sort of communion in trauma." (454)

It is fascinating to contemplate the complex links between this shift in social science and shifts in the artistic practice that is documentary filmmaking, but difficult to characterize easily. I suggest elsewhere that both are related to a larger group of practices, institutions and discourses that have sprung up around the victims of trauma. What differentiates art from science here? Clearly, science, even social science, can't live inside affect, or subjectivity. Anthropologists will look at the creation of groups producing culture, and try to derive significance. For artists, the sense abides in the work, whose very independence from both the documentarian and the subject offers both freedom, and responsibility, (sort of like responsibility for one's children, both total and useless).

Shigeko Sasemori relates her witness experience of the bombing of Hiroshima to a small group of American students in *Hiroshima Bound* (2015).

More importantly for this paper, the content of science exists in relationship to its methodology, that of art, in relation to form. Documentary filmmaking as an art will raise aesthetic questions, questions of representation.

But how can we guarantee the validity of representation, even when it comes from "inside" a situation? One difficulty is that as soon as the idea of representation emerges as an articulated political goal, as it did in the 1970s, it is a concept that finds it-

self in a bind, subjecting the represented to a depressing imperative, one articulated at the time by Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer. For Julien and Mercer, it is a serious problem that if you are Black you have to speak to race, and if you are gay, you have to speak to gender identity. In their essay "De Margin and De Centre" (1988), they quote a subject in *Word Is Out* (1978). The film, which was trying to represent a broad spectrum of gay and lesbian identities, ran into a problem. He quotes one of the subjects:

> What I was trying to say when I asked you if I would be the only Black lesbian in the film is: do you know we come in all shapes and colors and directions to our lives? Are you capturing that on the film? As a Black lesbian feminist involved in the movement, so often people try to put me in the position of speaking for all Black lesbians. (455)

As framed here, the critique is one of tokenism; a gesture is made toward representing all gay and lesbian people. The actual subject rejects her role as metonymy. In that "all," which is constructed from categories, lies a failure to account usefully or accurately for real differences.

But how to avoid the problem? I am making a film about the collective memory of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I need to film with a survivor. How can I do this without situating that person in my film as a victim of a bombing? Fitting individuals into the category of bomb survivor is a complex, nuanced and historically dynamic activity. In my own film, I started out—without thinking it through very carefully—by addressing the problem in terms of the actual context of discourse. I filmed a survivor, Shigeko Sasemori, who has decided to spend her life speaking with young Americans. Since I filmed her *in situ*, in a classroom with kids, she is not speaking to my film's audience directly in the typical interview format, inaugurated in Anstay and Elton's classic *Housing Problems* (1935).[2] In this way I hoped to position viewers slightly outside her historical narrative and to motivate viewers to think about her task, about why she has chosen it. On a larger scale, I wished to encourage viewers to think about a meta-narrative, as well as about how history is transmitted, or even constructed. On a formal level, Shegeko's discussions, in which gesture is the only visual aid, also offered a counter-proposition to the visual imagery most often linked to the use of the atomic bomb in World War II. On a personal level, I was aiming to create the rhetorical effect of her offering herself, qua pro-filmic event, as an active witness, rather than a passive victim or a stigmatized survivor *per se*.

As Leshu Torchin notes, groups of victims of war atrocities have a history of organizing and using media in campaigns of global witnessing. These go back at least to World War I and its aftermath, where Armenians organized a variety of campaigns to have the crimes of the Ottoman Empire acknowledged. Torchin details how the campaign used a variety of sophisticated media approaches that included political cartoons, testimonial forums, the making of a film, and more (21). This work is significant in that it defines the structures of a developing discourse around human rights and witnessing. While there are many players, including governments and NGOs, it is important to identify the role of witnesses in the creation of a public sphere—and, of course, the role of documentarians who both intervene in the public sphere on behalf of the discussion of social issues, and create a set of relationships between themselves, the issues dealt with and the social actors, beneficiaries, victims and perpetrators within a larger set of discussions.

One of the most useful areas of research for me while making my film about Hiroshima was in the field of trauma studies. Trauma studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field in the 1990s in part in response to poststructuralist critiques of representation. As Guerin and Hallas note, "Trauma studies have sought to redeem the

category of the real by connecting to the traumatic historical event, which presents itself precisely as a representational limit, and even a challenge to the imagination itself" (2007). As detailed in the work of scholars such as Lisa Yoneyama (1999), the complexities of the use of survivors' stories, often deployed by different groups including NGOs, political parties and governments for their own agendas, but also defining the survivors' own roles and helping them create their own forms of storytelling, offer a useful way of seeing the developing politics of narratives of disaster at least since the end of World War II.

Importantly for me, many of these narratives develop outside the space of film or literature—for example, in the context of peace forums, city memorial ceremonies, UN events and more. One very significant development in this regard is the creation of Truth Commissions to indict or offer alternative historical accounts of government misdeeds, typically the extra-judicial incarceration, torture and murder of citizens. Beginning with Argentina in 1983, Chile in 1990 and South Africa in 1995, these commissions have become important forums for testimony in countries from Rwanda to Sri Lanka. It is in the context of these sorts of forums that a critique of what I might call, following John Tagg, a "burden of representation" emerges. Tagg made a strong case for the idea that representational practices, particularly documentary photography, are only comprehensible in terms of the ideological stakes and the players employing them. He suggests that the evidentiary aura of the photographic process masks the power relations of image making and the contexts that images are inserted into. "This is not just something which goes on *around* the images. The photographs are not just a *stake in* but also a *site of* that struggle: the point where powers converge but are also produced" (148).

While it may seem a leap to take a discussion of the image qua image to one of testimony or survivor narrative, it is fruitful to look at the similarities in terms of the idea of the developing discourse of reconciliation as a site of struggle. One researcher, Kimberly Theidon, while working with women in Bolivia who suffered during the Shining Path uprising and subsequent counter-insurgency program under President Fujimori, noted key difficulties in the construction of shared narratives on a community level.

Theidon (458) talks about what women are asked to remember, and what men are asked. While men typically remember specific incidents, for example, of a massacre, women more often recall and recount the "rich narrative" of daily struggles for survival under conditions of repression and social unrest. Theidon also notes that in the context of truth commissions, notably in South Africa and Guatemala, women's narratives are "essentialized," that is, reduced from a broad experience of oppression, racism, injustice, sexism and more, to the fact of rape (458).

Another key area is that of war reparations, where testimony is part of developing legal cases against governments or other major actors. Here, notes anthropologist Yukiko Koga, even the body of the victim is enlisted into a larger narrative structure, as in the case of a group of Chinese victims of Japanese poison gas:

> During a preparatory meeting for a lawsuit against the Japanese government, Japanese lawyers urged Chinese survivors of the mustard gas exposure in Qiqihar to display their scarred bodies to illustrate their victim narratives.… In this process of turning survivors into victims, their injured bodies were transformed into iconic bodies representing national suffering within the economy of debt. (501)

This research suggested to me some of the ways in which narrativization—the turning of human experience, particularly the experience of suffering, into stories—carries with it real risks. The analogy is not perfect between these other forums, par-

ticularly ones with a juridical bent, and filmmaking. But very often the testimony of suffering in a documentary is part of the creation of a counter-narrative to an official history.[3] How, then, can we balance the compelling need to fight injustice with the very real possibility of reducing the subject to an icon, a symbol of a crime, rather than a human being for whom the heart of injustice is already characterized by the silencing of his or her story?

One important aspect of this question is that it does not emerge in an abstract time or space. As Yoneyama suggests, Hiroshima survivors themselves have rethought their position and offered new strategies of storytelling. In my film, I turned my camera on two women who had survived the bombing of Hiroshima. One woman, Shigeko Sasemori, mentioned above, was at Ground Zero; her exposure to the ignorance and indifference of Americans after the war led her to begin speaking with U.S. schoolchildren regularly throughout her life. Shigeko had made a choice at that time to frame her life in terms of her experiences as a survivor of the bombing, dubbed in Japanese *hibakusha*.[4] In the case of these survivors, Shigeko represents a shifting dynamic: she is someone who tries to go beyond essentialization to offer a richer version of the lived reality of war. This approach—speaking to groups of eight or ten children at a time—also inserts itself into a larger narrative of struggles around the geopolitics of the meaning of historical events. Following Tagg, one might say that not only Shigeko embraces a status as witness rather than victim, but by taking on the job she does, she makes the memory of the bombing a place for the production of meaning, rather than a void.

It is worth recalling that, in the postwar period, the role of being an atomic bomb victim was complex. Like those at the receiving end of many of the depredations of war, the *hibakusha* were creatures of shame, shunned both for their exposure to radioactivity and their role in reminding Japan of its abject defeat. As Robert J. Lifton's *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* made clear, one of the costs was a lifetime of complex trauma and marginalization for the tens of thousands of survivors. Nonetheless, their instrumental use as speaking subjects by anti-war and anti-nuclear groups, by governments and others offered these survivors a route to examining their situation collectively.

> The identity of the *hibakusha* as a one-dimensional speaking subject was constituted by prioritizing the speaker's ontological relationship to the bomb of his or her numerous other social relationships and positions. In contrast, the "testimonial practices" (*shōgen katsudō*) of the 1980s provided these survivors of Hiroshima with the means with which to intervene in the institutional processes that had usually interpellated them singularly as *hibakusha*. (85)

Yoneyama notes that the groups of Hiroshima survivors that sprang up in the 1980s reexamined the idea of being storytellers: "They did so with a great deal of self-awareness about the act of telling the past." She goes on to detail their efforts to rescue their experiences from "regimes of national and legal-bureaucratic procedures…[and]…the discursive paradigm of the peace and anti-nuclear movement" (86).

Yoneyama speaks about the new storytelling tactics that developed in the 1980s among the *hibakusha* as part of a need to generate what she calls "critical knowledge," her term for "knowledge that works to denaturalize the taken-for-granted realities of society and culture" (115). She links this "critical knowledge" to Foucault's discussion of "*subjugated knowledge*." In *Power/Knowledge,* he had this to say: "By subjugated knowledges I mean two things: on the one hand I am referring to the historical contents that have been buried or disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systematization." He then goes on to suggest that it is only "the immediate emergence of historical contents that allow

us to rediscover the ruptural effects of conflict or struggle that the systematization imposed…was designed to mask (81–82).

For me, tracking the history of the masking and unmasking, and their links to power and the trauma associated with its "ruptural effects," offer a route to rethinking subject relations in documentary. Foucault's "emergence of historical contents" suggests to me both the discovery of new archival material, or perhaps better put, the re-categorization, or acceptance of new kinds of materials into an archive, as well as the counter-propositions to the official history offered by voices such as those of the *hibakusha*. Here I would borrow from Jeffrey Skoller, who looks at avant-garde strategies including multiple temporalities and what he calls "side-shadowing" that reveal multiple perspectives on, and ellipses in, conventional historical narratives. For me it is important that the voices of the *hibakusha* not be understood as offering the truth to official lies or cover-up, an effort that I would understand as attempting to incorporate the subject into a new totalizing narrative of my construction, so much as changing our thinking about the relationship between personal experience and historical narrative.

This tension between, on the one hand, a desire for a kind of "narrative autonomy" on the part of the *hibakusha*, and, on the other, the filmmaker's desire to construct a story authenticated by witness was brought home to me when I actually went to Hiroshima to film. I arranged to meet Ms. Yoshida, a woman who had lived through the bombing of Hiroshima, at Ground Zero. Ms. Yoshida was the friend of a colleague's mother and had never before agreed to be in a film. As I interviewed her, it was clear that she was troubled, and I asked her whether this visit to Ground Zero was something she did on her own:

> Yes. Once in a while, people from foreign countries, I just take them to the Peace Memorial Exhibition. But I just ask them, "Just try to see." But I just wait outside. I don't want…It's very hard for me to look again and again, you know, about the same thing. So I just ask them to look at [the exhibition about the atomic bombing] by themselves. [laughs][5]

Ms. Yoshida was basically declining to play the role of the *hibakusha.* Her very polite refusal forced me to re-examine my own goals and strategies. What kind of experience, what kind of knowledge was I seeking to generate in my film? Is this just a situation where the need to enlighten the general public about the horrible effects of the bombing outweigh the qualms of individuals? Or, is there an ethical necessity to support the subject's autonomy and a duty to avoid re-traumatizing her that can outweigh these larger goals? And in what ways do these duties differ from the classic documentarian's social and political duty of "giving voice to the voiceless?"

In making *Shoah* (1985), Claude Lanzmann famously testified that he felt that a determined approach to eliciting victim memories was key to fulfilling the innate goals of the documentary work. There are several versions of a story he tells about his experiences with subjects. Here is one from an interview in *The Guardian*:

> [He] toured the world interviewing Holocaust survivors for his film, pushing them hard to recall their experiences. Interviewees such as Abraham Bomba, whom Lanzmann filmed cutting hair in his Tel Aviv salon. As Bomba worked, he told Lanzmann how he was forced to cut women's hair at Treblinka just before they were gassed.
>
> At one point in the interview, Bomba recalled how a fellow barber was working when his wife and sister came into the gas chamber. Bomba broke down and pleaded with Lanzmann that he be allowed to stop telling the story. Lanzmann said: "You have to do it. I know it's very hard." This was his principal method on Shoah: to incarnate the truth of what

happened through survivors' testimonies, even at the cost of reopening old wounds.[6]

But what about the wounds? Is Lanzmann like a tough physical trainer, working us through the pain to get the rewards of a stronger historical understanding? Or is he the epitome of the committed documentarian, knowing that the essence of his duty extends and transcends the "here and now" of his testifying subject's momentary emotional state? How about the barber? Was this a cathartic experience for him? A redemptive one? How can we evaluate the ethical dimension of the conflict between the documentarian's sense of historical duty and the well being of a troubled victim of past events? What is suggestive is that Lanzmann's story about the filming with the barber is a documentary legend, a key moment in the development of documentary practice.

The prominence that Lanzmann gives to the story makes it part of his stance as a documentary filmmaker, forcing us to look the author straight in the eyes, and understand her as protagonist of the ethical realm, apart from the obvious ethical challenge the film itself raises. Lanzmann's determined approach exists along several axes. He is showing firmness in the face of representing horrors beyond belief; to do so he needs to transcend squeamishness. He then needs this information to impact the audience with ethical gravity equal if possible to the dimensions of radical evil, emanating from the "naked story" of his screen protagonist. Recall this dialogue in *Shoah:*

> Podchlebnik: For me its not good to talk about it.
> Lanzmann: (to translator) So why is he talking about it?
> Podchlebnik: Because you're insisting on it.
>
> (00:11min)

This insistence is underlined by the daughter who says, "I had to tear the details out of him."[7] For the daughter, who has had to grow up with her father's silence this desire to know is palpable. It also underlines the role of the documentarian as the facilitator of her desire. But the documentary film-maker is in a very different position ethically from a daughter. And that difference derives in part from the complex nature of the subject's consent in a context of unequal power relations. In a discussion of the subjects of *Salesman* (1969), Calvin Pryluck states categorically:

Mordechai Podchlebnik explains to Claude Lanzmann that he does not wish to speak of his experiences in the Chełmno Extermination Camp. *Shoah* (1985).

> The right to privacy is the right to decide how much, to whom, and when disclosures about one's self are to be made…When we break down the defenses of a Paul Brennan or an Eddie Sachs [two of the subjects of the film] and force them to disclose feelings they might prefer to keep hidden, we are tampering with a funda-

> mental human right. And making the disclosures widely public only compounds the difficulty. (26)

For Pryluck the harm done to the subjects of a documentary film lie in the violation of their privacy, a harm that occurs when the film is shown. One could argue that Shoah was not made in the observational mode of direct cinema works such as *Salesman*, but the extensive intervention in the lives of his subjects suggests the potential for similar violations to occur. However, in the case of Lanzmann's subjects, at least some of them, it is possible to raise the issue of a more direct harm, that his insistence on disclosure of traumatic memory crosses a border into re-traumatizing his subjects, not just exposing old wounds, but wounding them anew.

Lanzmann's film is famous, in part, for its obsessive quality, one that emerges in its unusual aesthetic choices, including its extreme length, its refusal to use archival material, and its adherence to images of the sites of the Holocaust and witness testimony, all of which underline the notion of the Holocaust as a limit situation, unrepresentable except through heroic effort. Lanzmann is wrestling with the question, "What does it mean to be a witness?" and, equally, "What is the ethical as well as historical role of the documentarian?" As Agamben suggests in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, there is a core contradiction in that the events that should be recalled are exactly the ones with no witnesses but the dead. Lanzmann can be understood as solving this dilemma by realizing that the event is created *now,* and that paradoxically, it exists only in retrospect. There is no other place that this history *can* occupy except the space of the film itself and its viewing. Shoshana Felman characterizes this in her essay on *Shoah*:

> But the film is not simply, nor is it primarily, a historical document on the Holocaust. That is why, in contrast to its cinematic predecessors on the subject, it refuses systematically to use any historical, archival footage. It conducts its interviews, and takes its pictures, in the present. Rather than a simple view about the past, the film offers a disorienting vision of the present, a compellingly profound and surprising insight into the complexity of the relation between history and witnessing. (104)

For me the question of re-traumatized experience is key; to present us with a spectacle of someone being traumatized on screen may be an important way of reminding us of the indelible imprint of the horrors of genocide, but it is asking viewers to occupy an ethically problematic space where causing pain to subjects is a viable approach. One possible explanation for Lanzmann's willingness to push Bomba to recall his memories is that it is almost universally taken as a given that this kind of recounting is beneficial for the teller, allowing both a release, a kind of freedom, but also a vindication, a confirmation of the meaning of the teller's life. There are several origins to this notion. One of them is undoubtedly the Christian tradition of the confession, which going back to Saint Augustine, who offered confessional testimony as a route to understanding one's life as part of God's plan, or as part of history understood as the working out of that plan.[8] More generally in the Catholic Church of course, confession of sin offers a route to absolution. In modern times the psychoanalytic model of testimony suggests that speaking about disallowed or painful experience has therapeutic value, allowing the teller to move toward a freedom from neurosis.[9] And finally, there is a socio-political value for speaking out, one that suggests that testimony can be seen as part of a struggle for recognition of wrongs and the promotion of social justice. All of these motivations can add up to a compelling argument for the idea that the framing of testimony in the context of a documentary film is an un-alloyed benefit. However, as Winston suggests in an essay on documentary strategies for representing the Holocaust: "The justification for documenting trauma for an audience is to preserve memory and gain the experience of

history; but this can only be done if the bearing of witness is therapeutic for the traumatized" (109). Although the ethics of "do no harm" stand on their own, it is worth thinking about the kind of bargain made with the audience in the context of asking viewers to watch someone like Abraham Bomba. My sense is that the goal is a kind of monumentalization of an unrepresentable subject. To accomplish this via a re-traumatized subject puts us in a shared space with the maker that is a kind of "space of exception," where behavior outside of the normal realm is allowable. This seems contradictory; as a film, *Shoah* works as an event in the present moment, and yet the film also acts to take that moment outside of time.

In her essay "Education and Crisis," Shoshona Felman, then a professor of Comparative Literature at Yale, tells the story of an experimental graduate seminar on literature and testimony. In her class, Felman has her students view stories from the Yale Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies and finds that the students, as well as she herself, end up in a kind of traumatized mind space, "suddenly deprived of their bonding to the world and to one another" (48). It is as if they were the recipients of the terrible experiences recounted by the holocaust survivors, now handed on to them in a kind of historical legacy. This is important in several ways; if I follow a film-making analogy, Felman is the documentarian, the provider of the experience of the texts. And according to her account, she also enters into a space of trauma with her students after viewing the survivor testimonies. After some time, she decides the shared trauma can only be assuaged by a class project of writing to the trauma and a sharing of reactions and experiences. To follow on the documentary film-maker analogy, this suggests an open approach to the audience, one that creates space for viewer experience.

In the same class, before viewing the testimonial videos, Felman's students study several literary figures, including Mallarmé. For Felman, Mallarmé's poetry testifies to a kind of disaster, what she calls "The Accident," a traumatic event, the effects of which can be marked in the very language and syntax of the poet. "As the testimony to an accident which is materially embodied in an *accidenting of the verse,* poetry henceforth speaks with the very power…of its own explosion of its medium" (19). For me, this understanding that not only the subject, but the maker are dealing with traumatic material is essential to any ethical project.

Image and Testimony

In an essay that has focused up to this point on subject relations, I will now contemplate the role of the archival image. The testimony is speech, and yet the witness is also an eyewitness, a translator of things seen into things said. When working with a survivor group that has a specific strategy of meeting with students in middle and high schools in small groups to offer a historical account with no visual accompaniment but hand gestures, I need to acknowledge that their actions set up a kind of dialectic, a counter-proposition to a historical "regime of the visual" that includes government propaganda, mainstream media programming, and an image economy that is more and more one of abundance rather than scarcity, but is ironically still a space of exclusion as well as inclusion.

In my work I have come to understand the relationship between sound and image in documentary as one where neither should be dominated by the other. If I believe in a "narrative autonomy" for the survivor-subject, I also believe in a sound track that is neither subsumed to explaining how to read the imagery nor in a picture track consigned to illustrating a historical narrative.[10] On the other hand, if I believe in an ethics based on an understanding of testimony as a kind of subjugated, and hence traumatized knowledge, I believe no less strongly that this implies a similar ethical regard for the use of archival imagery.

For Lanzmann, archival stills and moving images related to the Holocaust are always taking us away from the direct encounter with the demands of testimony and witness; images are generic[11] in his world view, and unable to do anything but get in the way of the true lived experience of the survivor. And in fact, images from the gas chambers are rare.[12] In contrast, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the object of extensive coverage, both journalistic and scientific. The Enola Gay that carried the "Little Boy" bomb was accompanied by two other planes with still and motion picture cameras generating images for public consumption. The American government, dealing with a free press and fickle public opinion, was very careful to create an atmosphere of grave scientific doings and wondrous experimentation around its atomic weapons program. The *New York Times* reporter who covered the Manhattan Project, William L. Laurence, was at the same time the public relations director for the Project. While Laurence's reportage was distributed with alacrity, George Weller, the first Allied reporter actually on the ground in Nagasaki saw his extensive coverage completely censored (2006). All footage taken by Japanese sources was seized.[13] Although there was one Japanese journalist who took some half a dozen picture in Hiroshima on August 6th, 1945, and one Japanese Army photographer who took very eloquent photos in Nagasaki, it is the shots from above that predominate, at least in America's collective imagination.[14]

Hence, for any discussion of the visual legacy of the atomic bombings of World War II, the archetypal image is the mushroom cloud as seen from the cabin of a B-29 bomber. The cloud image is indexical, taken at the moment of mass death, referencing the event of the bombing; but also covering those events in a fog. While the cloud denotes a disaster, it conceals the human factor. How are we to unpack this complex sign? The power of obliteration suggests a brutal simplicity. How do we "read" the significance of that object, which in fact stands for more than its vapor? In the triadic semiotics of Peirce it is the interpretant, the site of the human subject where the sign (representamen) and its signification (referent) meet to create meaning that is central. But what if that reading is obscured to the interpreter? What if the sign hides meaning at the same time that it offers it?

In Marita Sturken's reworking of Freud's idea of a "screen memory," the camera image representing a moment—in this case a moment a few minutes after the detonation of an atomic bomb—can often screen out other, often un-photographed memories, and offer itself as the "real" memory, replacing realities too difficult, complex or painful to confront directly (1). This idea suggested that the "meaning" of the image is exactly the trauma it masks: messy, diffuse and used as exchange value in a problematic politics.[15]

As Akira Lippman notes in speaking of the citizens of Hiroshima who were vaporized, leaving only ghostly images imprinted on the city streets: "There can be no authentic photography of atomic war because the bombings were themselves a form of total photography that exceeded the economies of representation, testing the visibility of the visual" (95). Here again is a strange contradiction. An image that is an erasure, an obliteration, a non-image.[16]

Yet there are images. They are the work of the Strategic Bombing Survey. Initiated a few months after the dropping of the atomic bombs, the survey, which also looked at the bombing of Europe and other regions, was tasked with developing a scientific understanding of the effects of the Bomb. The bombing of Hiroshima was one such event, and the bomber dropped its payload more or less exactly where it was supposed to, in the center of the city. This meant that the survey team could work with specific knowledge of the direction of the blast and the distance in relation to any point it surveyed. Both still and motion-picture photography were central to their work. When a set of 750 of those images came into the

archives of the International Center of Photography, I was able to view them. What struck me was how eerily instrumental the images were. Particularly striking was the presence of citizens of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the frame, a presence that was incidental from the point of view of the photographers. The result was a kind of a brutal ignoring of humanity. In these archival images, which document the destruction of an entire city and its inhabitants, humans are an irrelevance. The scientific discourse allowed the survey cameramen to see the destruction of the city as a large physics experiment. This is a displacement, or *verscheibung*, a concept that Freud developed first in his work on dreams.[17] As Laplanche suggests, "displacement has a clearly defensive function…in a phobia for instance, displacement onto the phobic object permits the objectivation, localization and containment of anxiety" (123). That traumatic gesture became embedded in a post-war evidentiary trail. The bomb may be terrible, or awe-inspiring, but the amazing scientific effort in making it leads to a discussion of the documenting scientists and their moral qualms, and not to one of our own traumatized understanding.

Here, a strategy of re-presenting the images in a new context, potentially reveals not only the amount of destruction, the direction of the blast, the extent of the destruction, but also the psychological maneuvers of the photographers, and the cooptation of their efforts in the name of a discourse of objectivity and scientific evidence. If my goal is to offer an ethical route past trauma, I have to offer documentary as an independent art form, independent in particular from the common sense notion of referential transparency ascribed to the documentary image. Although it may at first seem contradictory to claim formal autonomy in order to cross the boundaries of science and art, I would have to say it is exactly that in claiming autonomy from the quasi-scientific (and even quasi-juridical) evidentiary claims of the image-making process that I can see across the boundaries that divide discourses, and take a stand as an artist, and more specifically, as a documentary filmmaker. As Winston suggests in his "The Documentary Film as a Scientific Inscription," documentary film, if it leans on unexamined scientific notions of the image as evidence or proof, can never be truly autonomous. Images can be seen as evidence, but for a filmmaker that evidence is of a complex and historically contingent set of layered interpretations and resonances between the viewer, the image, and the moment of representation.

One possible route to thinking of archival images in a way that acknowledges their complex links to an ethics of human memory and human history can be found in Chris Marker's *Level 5* (1997); this docu-fiction essay explores the historical legacy of the Battle of Okinawa, one of the bloodiest of the Pacific War. The film is structured around a computer game metaphor, which as Jon Kear suggests, "refers to a mode of engagement with the representation of the past that contests the ground rules of official history, one that is purposely eccentric, heterogenous, subjective, discontinuous, reflexive, and digressional" (133). Kear believes that the archival material itself be understood as a form of testimony, although a tricky one that bears both the authenticity of original witness, but also a palimpsest of the readings from the time of its making until now. Marker's film looks at a few of the iconic images from the Okinawa campaign, particularly the image of a woman throwing herself off a cliff, and another of the U.S. Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima. Marker decodes them, thinking through the taking of the image, the motivations, the readings, to suggest how all readings of history through images must be seen as layered and subject to mythologizing.

In my own work I tried to reinforce the resonance, de-anonymizing the archival material by quoting from the photographers who took the pictures, as well as looking at their pictorial strategies, attempting to link the images back to efforts

at narrativization as well as to their production as a form of witnessing and at the same time a form of displacement, a document of their difficulties in coming to terms with the horrors of the Bomb. As example, I had myself filmed in a film archive doing picture research to emphasize the dual nature of archival material, which always occupies a space both then and now.

We live at a time where the rejection of scientific evidence and the complex and nuanced routes to truth that science offers is rampant. In the US large portions of the population, and even government policy overtly reject clear information about global warming not just from documentary filmmakers, but also from broad swaths of the media, the scientific community and civic groups. This makes it more frightening to say that the ethics of documentary demand standing out from under the aegis of science, of notions of visual evidence, and embrace a different route to truth, one that acknowledges that the construction of knowledges around historical events is necessarily traumatized, that it is always a human knowledge, and that as humans we and our understandings are mortal.

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida suggests that the archive is always a problematic space, halfway between life and death, and full of ghosts. In a rather prescient way, he understood that the vast increase in information that emerged with the rise of the Internet (which he imagined being accessed through a "Magic Pad") means that we are compelled to re-engage with our "ghosts,"—information long buried and now returned—in a way that is unprecedented in history. Derrida's work suggests that archival filmmaking operates exactly in a space of trauma. And, that trauma famously does not respond to direct treatment. For me as a documentary film-maker, if I don't implicate the traumatic structure of my own understanding and practice, I run the risk of separating (and, perhaps, estranging) the means from the ends, of objectifying the subjects in my work. I also give a false sense that it is possible to stand outside history.

If I make films based on a theory of society as a space of traumatized knowledge, it becomes imperative to ask: "How do I treat subjects differently in terms of my practice and my approach to ethics?" I reference in the title of this essay an "Ethics of Knowing." What is that a knowledge of? As a social-issue documentarian I want to "give voice to the voiceless," but who can hear that voice, who can understand it? And what is my desire? Am I a do-gooder, another privileged liberal filmmaker? Why don't I just shut up, in fact? Aren't those affected—the ones in the Zone—the ones with the problem? Aren't they entitled to speak on their own without my framing?" Every filmmaker has to operate in a flurry of doubts, which in fact constitute the core of the ethical nature of one's practice. And those doubts aren't (at least from a pedagogical point of view) a negative constituent. They are essential and intrinsic to the system.

The word "trauma" comes from the Greek for wound. Laplanche describes it as: "An event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, but the subject's inability to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long lasting effects it brings to the psychic organization" (465). It is worth thinking that a physical wound, and a psychological trauma differ in an important way. "Scarred for life," we say, or "totally back to normal." The result of a physical injury will be either a healing, a return to standard functioning, or an impairment of longer or shorter duration. Psychological trauma, on the other hand, can be seen as being central to the construction of human identity and personality. The psychic pain we face threatens our very sense of self, but also defines the self. The knowledge that is trauma can be seen as what gives our lives its temporal dimension, since when we experience a traumatizing event we split; we have knowledge, the memory or experience of what happened, but that knowledge is not available to us directly. This suggests that in a context where I as a documentarian am dealing with traumatized subjects, and with traumatic subject

The French woman, played by Manuelle Riva, explains that she is acting in a "film about Peace," suggesting the symbolic representational role that the city of Hiroshima must take on. *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959).

matter, I have to act in the belief that the encounter will change me, will derail my own process. I, as a documentary filmmaker, am, in fact, like Shoshana Felman and her students, engaged with a traumatic burden and entering a space where the struggle to do the right duty to the subjects, their witness and testimony, challenges my own position "behind the camera" and renders me perhaps powerless, forcing me to reorganize my self as a person, in the most intimate sense of the word, and, for a brief moment, not as a function-documentarian—a subject defined by its symbolic role. I am not just acting as a human being instead of a documentarian, but rebuilding my self and my relationship with the world, generating a new relationship between the Real and Symbolic orders, at least in my own life, and in my own work.

In an insightful reading of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, Cathy Caruth notes how the female character, whose lover, a German soldier, was killed on the day of France's liberation from the Nazis, tells the story to her new lover, the Japanese man played by Eiji Okada, and, in doing so, betrays that love. "What the woman mourns is not only an erotic betrayal, that is, but a betrayal precisely in the act of telling, in the very transmission that erases the specificity of death" (26). This notion—that it is exactly the speaking of the specific death that constitutes betrayal—has important ethical implications. In this vein I am compelled to ask: What is it, in fact, that I am asking when I ask the survivor of the disaster to speak? As Caruth goes on to say, "The possibility of knowing history, in this film, is thus also raised as a deeply ethical dilemma: the unremitting problem of how not to betray the past" (28).

This notion of speech as potential betrayal may give a new sense of what is at stake for someone who offers testimony. Is that betrayal inherent in the process of storytelling? Will that part of individual experience that is tied to past events, and more critically, the specificity of relationships with the dead, always be doomed to be sacrificed in their revelation? For

Caruth, Marguerite Duras' text suggests that on one level the trauma of a survivor is the difficulty of distinguishing one's own status as living from that of the loved dead. The memory and the forgetting are both equally problematic. And as she suggests, there is a moral dimension at work:

> He: What's the film you're playing in?
> She: A film about Peace. What else do you expect to make in Hiroshima except a picture about Peace? (34)

For me it is exactly in the shared space of the film that I can explore these questions and discard generalization for new specificities. It is key that we are talking about a two-way street. I am an equal possessor of an understanding built on trauma. As Caruth says, "History, like trauma, is never simply one's own.…History is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24). A kind of traumatized intersubjectivity is at play. If it is not acknowledged, the results will be inauthentic, too heavily structured on mutual denial and in some way ethically compromised. For me this acknowledgement is at the heart of what I term "an ethics of knowing."

Jacques Ranciére's writings on cultural production suggest that even documentary, which sometimes seeks to promote direct action, is not causal, and rather than being identified as a political act should be seen as constructing ways of thinking about what politics might mean. As Nico Baumbach suggests in a work that attempts to link Ranciére's thought directly with documentary filmmaking:

> A painting, novel or film, he has made clear, to many of his interlocutors' disappointment, should not be identified as a political act in itself, its very identification as art or entertainment precludes just that, but like a theoretical essay or philosophical treatise, it constructs ways of thinking what politics might mean through new arrangements of common images and ideas. (59)

How does this distinction between speech and action matter? Basically, as a documentary filmmaker I am constructing or elucidating a "way of thinking," opening up both our relationship to history, and the potential of our future. Following Ranciére, the sounds and images I use to do so can either thwart or promote equality and hence the possibility of justice. One way to understand what Ranciére (and Baumbach) are suggesting with "what politics might mean" comes from what Ariella Azoulay calls a political imagination, "a political state of being that deviates significantly from the current state of affairs" (3), something she sees as emerging in the context of documentary photography and moving images. What could a world without, for example, atomic weapons poised in vast numbers for instant use around the globe look like? What kind of political structures and social relations could get us to that place? To construct the picture of such a world, I would suggest that it is necessary to re-examine the modes of production used in documentary filmmaking. In particular, I believe the manner in which documentary films produce knowledge and experiences interact in a complex way with the traumas that underpin notions of national identity, citizenship, and history, and that they do so in a way that demands a reconsideration of what we usually, as in a manner of everyday speech, consider to be "documentary ethics." If I can extend this argument, only by acknowledging the traumatic nature of history and our dispositional drive to overcome this trauma by counting and recounting history again and again, can we actually construct an ethical documentary with a valid relationship to our historically driven sense of reality.

Notes

[1]"To write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking—and since it cannot, in order to become its echo I have,

in a way, to silence it. I make perceptible by my silent meditation, the uninterrupted affirmation, the giant murmuring upon which language opens and thus becomes image, becomes imaginary, becomes a speaking depth, an indistinct plenitude which is empty" (28).

[2]Winston quotes Anstey, "Nobody had thought of the idea which we had of letting slum dwellers simply talk for themselves…" (44), and then goes on to note that this must be seen in the light of BBC radio documentary efforts of Felix Greene and others that preceded Housing Problems.

[3]Think of Pam Yates and Paco De Onis's *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator,* (Skylight Pictures, 2011), which is both a film about a court case and a study of how documentary is used to verify a court case of genocide.

[4]*Hibakusha* (被爆者) is the Japanese word for the survivors of the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The word translates as "explosion-affected people" and is used, often derogatorily, to refer to people who were exposed to radiation from the bombings.

[5]*Hiroshima Bound* (Icarus Films, 2015).

[6]https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/jun/09/claude-lanzmann-shoah-holocaust-documentary.

[7]It is significant that in this dialog the subject speaks to Lanzmann directly, but Lanzmann speaks not just through an interpreter but to them, keeping the subject distanced, and giving them an oracular quality.

[8]A clear explication of this idea of confession can be found in Gary Will's forward to Augustine's *Confessions: A Biography.* New York: Penguin, 2005.

[9]In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History,* Shoshana Felman explains how she showed testimony from the Yale Holocaust Archive to her students, "…two videotapes whose singular historical narration seemed to contain the added power of a figure, and the unfolding of a self-discovery: the testimonies of one woman and one man…The woman's testimony is…a testament to how she survived in order to give her testimony" (42-43).

[10]Intriguing support for this approach can be found in the work of anthropologist Jen Heusen, whose writing seeks to develop an "aural politics" as a form of sensible or affect-based politics built out of her research with Ojibwa women who have sought to transform their relationship to storytelling in the context of their situation as tourist guides at Wounded Knee. See: "On Hearing Together Critically: Making Aural Politics Sensible Through Art & Ethnography" *Ethnoscripts* 17.1 (2015): 74-95.

[11]As Winston notes, the images of the gas chambers are almost non-existent. The only extensive body of images (available as of yet) are those taken after their liberation. "Cinematographic representation is not possible simply because there is no cinematographic evidence of the processes of mass extermination…" (99).

[12]In an interview with Serge Toubiana, Lanzmann states, "There are no archives, properly speaking. There is no single photo of what goes on inside a gas chamber. There's not only no film, but not a picture, nothing." *Shoah* ("Claude Lanzmann on Shoah" 2013). Criterion Collection, 2010.

[13]Much of this information is available in Greg Mitchell's *Atomic Coverup: Two US Soldiers, Hiroshima and Nagasaki,* and the *Greatest Movie Never Made.* New York, Sinclair Books, 2011. See also Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell's *Hiroshima in America: 50 Years of Denial.* New York: Putnam's Sons, 1995. The story of George Weller, who reported from Nagasaki in September of 1945, can be found in Anthony Weller's *First into Nagasaki: The Censored Eyewitness Dispatches on Post-Atomic Japan and Its Prisoners of War.*

[14]The photographers are in the case of Hiroshima, Yoshito Matsushige, and in the case of Nagasaki, Yosuke Yamahata.

[15]It is worth noting here that one of the most important films to deal with atomic weapons, Bruce Connor's *Crossroads* (1976), consists exactly of the image of an exploding hydrogen bomb, repeated over and over. The repetition speaks both to the "return of the repressed" and to the inability to make meaning out of the event, as well as to the

bizarre need to conduct thousands of such "tests" throughout the 1950s and 60s.

[16]From Wilfred Burchett's account in the *London Daily News:* "Hiroshima does not look like a bombed city. It looks as if a monster steam roller has passed over it and squashed it out of existence."

[17]In this process it is as though, in the course of the intermediate steps, a displacement occurs—let us say, of the psychic accent—until ideas of feeble potential, by taking over the charge from ideas which have a stronger initial potential, reach a degree of intensity which enables them to force their way into consciousness (Freud 58).

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