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VIOLENCE'S FABLED EXPERIMENT

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for Harun Farocki (1944–2014)

PROLOGUE

Psychoanalysis has been able to show how, from the child's game, the higher and the highest pleasure-giving unrealities, namely, phantasy and art, emerge. Even in the highest forms of these pretended realities, as, for example, in the Greek tragedies, we are in a position to *enjoy anxiety* and *horror* because we abreact these primal affects, in the meaning of Aristotle's catharsis, just as a child now works off the separation from the mother, originally full of dread, in its game of willing concealment, which can easily and often be broken off and repeated at the child's pleasure.

The child's constant proneness to anxiety, which originates in the birth trauma . . . is transferable to almost anything . . .

Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth* (1924)¹

Rank's contention—which was originally my own—that the affect of anxiety is a consequence of the event of birth and a repetition of the situation then experienced, obliged me to review the problem of anxiety once more. But I could make no headway

¹ Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, New York: Robert Brunner 1952 [1924], p. 23, emphasis in original.

with his idea that birth is a trauma, states of anxiety a reaction of discharge to it and all subsequent affects of anxiety an attempt to “abreact” it more and more completely. I was obliged to go back from the anxiety reaction to the *situation of danger* that lay behind it.

Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926)²

In 1924, Otto Rank published *The Trauma of Birth*, an exacting work that built upon *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, his earlier psychoanalytic interpretation of common origin myths.³ *The Trauma of Birth* should have by rights been accepted as Rank's decisive extension of Freud's studies of history, culture, religion, and literature. The brevity of Rank's contribution does not belie its ambition to subsume the totality of the human sciences within the foundational framework that Freud's psychoanalysis affirms: Freud's understanding of trauma serves as an origin for all that follows (as far as human thought and civilization is concerned). To be sure, Rank's claim is either wildly grandiose, submitted in service of all of humankind, or the words of an acolyte seeking his master's approval (though, more likely, it serves both aims).

² Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, *Standard Edition* 20, p. 161, emphasis in original.

³ Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Interpretation of Mythology*, New York: The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company 1914.

But Rank had good reason for his argument in *The Trauma of Birth*, and in his mind he must have thought he was merely bringing Freud's general theory of trauma to its logical conclusion. As early as 1908, Freud himself had written that “the act of birth is the first experience of anxiety, and thus the source and prototype of the affect of anxiety.”⁴ *Totem and Taboo*, particularly its innovation of Darwin's “primal horde,” extends the claim of an originary “birth” trauma to the social through the drivers of myth, ritual, and religion.⁵ Indeed, as late as 1923, Freud would still claim that birth constitutes “the first great anxiety state” for all human beings, regardless of the circumstances of their individual births.⁶ For Rank, who viewed his theory as the obvious conclusion to which any good Freudian would arrive, it stands to reason that birth itself is the inaugural trauma that propels a human being into the world *as a human*.

Of course, careful readers of Freud are immediately struck by how *un-Freudian* Rank's birth trauma theory really is. Freud himself certainly noticed this and swiftly disavowed Rank's reductively universalist notion of trauma. There are many reasons for this. The fact that the Oedipal complex is completely erased in Rank's theory, reducing the role of the father in childhood development to a bit part in the family drama,

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900], *Standard Edition* 5, p. 400. This quote appears in a footnote that was added for a later edition published in 1909, but dated “Summer 1908” in the new preface for this edition.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* [1913], *Standard Edition* 13.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* [1923], *Standard Edition* 19, p. 58.

served as the primary intellectual motivation for Freud's rejection of this notion of a *literal* birth trauma. Personal rivalries and factions within the early circle of psychoanalysts around Freud also had a role in spurting Freud's disavowal.⁷ Ultimately, however, it is clear that by 1924 Freud understood trauma as a *secondary* event, in no way universal or singular, as the natural origin for neurosis or, indeed, for the human psyche as such. By the time Freud wrote *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trauma constituted a breach in what he understood as the "economics" of the psyche, an event that disrupts the quasi-homeostatic, transactive character of the mind and its functional role in deflecting or discharging intolerable excitations experienced by a subject in the world.⁸ "Birth trauma," if it exists at all, is only one source among many of potentially intolerable excitations, simultaneously internal and external, that must be bounded and eliminated by the subject. In other words, for Freud an un-abreacted trauma is the origin of a *neurosis* made manifest through observable *symptoms*, not the basis of the *human subject itself*, in universal, general terms.⁹

Freud nevertheless made Rank possible. Arresting a provisional element of Freud's fluid, speculative thinking, Rank pries open Pandora's Box, and the distorted, oddly comforting illusion that trauma stands as the

origin and essence of man's natural condition has only gained in popularity and force in the years since. Rank's presentation of trauma as the ground of subjectivity would be echoed repeatedly in the history of psychoanalysis—and often attributed to Lacan. The careful refinement of Freud's theory of trauma tends to be lost within contemporary versions of the concept. Thus, although Rank himself has been relegated to the status of an anachronistic curio of headier (Freudian) days, in secularizing a much older version of 'fallen' human beings as a universal, foundational trauma, as a kind of 'original sin,' he nevertheless appears to win the argument in the end.

We intend to take up one form in particular, namely the use of artifice and simulation produced through cinematic images, which intend to savagely wretch 'our' shared *interior* trauma to consciousness via the presentation of empirically *exterior* traumas in violently experimental forms of contemporary documentary and ethnographic filmmaking. The films under consideration in this book often deploy techniques that excavate and recreate traumas by deploying formal strategies that are themselves brutal, immersive, and potentially traumatic. Common to them is the attempt to use instances of historical trauma, presumed to be exterior to the spectator, as vehicles for accessing a shared interior trauma that is supposedly common to us all. If a connection between exterior and interior forms of trauma is successfully forged, this in turn serves to justify the wider coherence and relevance of the films, either along lines of healing or through aid-

⁷ Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, London: J.M. Dent and Sons 1988, pp. 470–481.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], *Standard Edition* 18.

⁹ For a summary of the evolution of Freud's concept of trauma, see the entry "Trauma (Psychical)," in J. Laplanche and J-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London: The Hogarth Press 1973, pp. 465–469.

ing and enlightening an audience otherwise assumed to be passive and worldless. As Ruth Leys suggests, the staging of a conflict between mimetic and antimimetic elements in this version of trauma renders the very concept of trauma a real, diagnosable condition, and, in effect, makes attending to trauma a performative “game.”¹⁰ We offer our critical engagement, at least in part, as a defense of the reality of empirically diagnosable and treatable trauma *against* the notion of a naturalized, universal trauma constituting the ‘human’ as such. Our concern here is with a traumatic unraveling as a product of cinematic intervention.

For us, the game in question is not so much a contest as an experiment. The book locates the remarkable tendency found in many celebrated recent non-fiction films to proceed according to what we call “violence’s fabled experiment”—such lore (and the contemporary ‘common sense’ that authorizes it) therefore serves as the singular problem that leads us to consider our otherwise disparate cinematic examples linked by the same broader phenomenon.

Rank and Freud seem fitting points of departure, as the dawn of modernism in the 1920s was the era from which we launched in our previous project. Our study

of Benjamin Christensen’s 1922 film, *Häxan*, accompanied the filmmaker through his vast library of source material in order to recreate the basis of his claims regarding the connection of *the witch* in early modern Europe to *the hysteric* of then-contemporary Scandinavia and Europe.¹¹ Christensen’s *Häxan* was a singular visual thesis within a rising tide of modernist thought—including methodological transformations in the human sciences—which attempted, among other things, to give evidence to forces unseen. *Realizing the Witch* was in no small way our attempt to puzzle through worries in contemporary anthropology and to think critically (precisely, exhaustively, historically) about what it means to secure evidence about ideas and beliefs imagistically. This is certainly a preoccupation that holds between that project and the one we undertake here. We do not, however, aim to adopt the same approach—there is no archive of materials meticulously gathered by each filmmaker for each film we discuss, no library that needs to be unpacked and read alongside our reading of these films (for all of Herzog’s legendary obsessiveness, it is good to keep in mind that it was Christensen, not Herzog, who passed out printed bibliographies to audience members at his screenings). Still, Christensen was committed to a thesis about the witch (ancient and modern) much in the way the filmmakers under consideration here are committed to their respective theses about nature and

¹⁰ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000, pp. 38–39.

¹¹ Richard Baxstrom and Todd Meyers, *Realizing the Witch: Science, Cinema, and the Mastery of the Invisible*, New York: Fordham University Press 2016.

humanness and the place of violence within these interwoven domains. And like Christensen's elaborate staging of scenes of torture, confession, and ecstasy, each filmmaker works by means of visual tableaux, through compositions that aim to represent something about the world that is just beyond what the world can offer on its own. And like our study of *Häxan*, we are committed to seeing how far the experiment takes us, no matter where it leads.

In the following pages, we give attention to the intricate weaving of nature and violence that shapes a concept of the human in the recent work of three filmmakers: Werner Herzog, Joshua Oppenheimer, and Lucien Castaing-Taylor. In the work of these filmmakers, the myth of man's original violence in the order of nature plays out again and again, sometimes ethereally, sometimes overtly, always as *experiments* intended to expose and intensify what they understand as the violence of our natural being. While we write through the details of several films, the book is ultimately about the process of thinking alongside filmmakers, sparring with their ideas, teasing out their meanings, and exposing what we imagine their intentions (conscious and unconscious) to be. Our tone is at times oppositional. We make no bones about it. Ours is an anthropological engagement with films and their content, a conversation with filmmakers through their works rather than with the filmmakers themselves as interlocutors in the ethnographic sense. These are works, created and placed in the world, and our inquiry moves through and within them. Said another way, we are errant

anthropologists who believe that cinema can expose the stakes of the world and bore deeply into our psyches, unearthing traces of what it means (or can mean) to be human. In essence, this means we are committed to the positive character of the image, accepting it as a legitimate object of critical investigation, anthropological or otherwise. We therefore hope that our engagement with these filmmakers through their works serves as an invitation to view and carefully *think with* these films, especially in those instances where our criticisms are explicitly damning.

The chapters are as follows:

Chapter 1, "A Prehistory of the Present," looks at the salience of *prehistory* as it links seemingly new cinematic formulations to a long Western tradition of metaphysics. The violence of man's break with nature, his fall into consciousness and history, and his impossible demand *to grasp* the violence of his descent in the present tense is a persistent theme in works of Werner Herzog. The chapter explores Herzog's interconnected documentary projects on primalism, nature, and our fragile modernity—notably *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), *Grizzly Man* (2005), and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010)—as well as his films that examine environmental degradation (*Lessons of Darkness* (1992) and *Where the Grass Ants Dream* (1985)). Each of these films possesses elements of man's failed redemption, caught in wild nature. The chapter follows a thread between

the dim redemption—man forsaken and abandoned—in Herzog's earlier non-fiction work and his most recent attempt at narrative film in *Salt and Fire* (2016), shot in Bolivia's Salar de Uyuni. On this lunar landscape and through dialogue that makes his actors seem like aliens playing humans, *Salt and Fire* is Herzog's eco-thriller of the late anthropocene. No doubt the same struggle within and against nature is found in earlier narrative films like *Fitzcarraldo* (1982): humans know nature because we harness what is base in nature, and like the *loa* of Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen*, nature turns the saddle and rides the rider. Herzog's steady outlook on nature is made clear in his now infamous formulation on the subject, recorded during the shooting of *Fitzcarraldo* by Les Blank in *Burden of Dreams* (1982), on the making of Herzog's film in the South American jungle:

Of course we are challenging nature itself and it hits back. It just hits back, that's all. And that's what's grandiose about it and we have to accept that it is much stronger than we are. [Klaus] Kinski always says it's full of erotic elements, but I don't see [the jungle] so much erotic [*sic*]. I see it more full of obscenity. It's just—Nature here is vile and base. I wouldn't see anything erotic here. I would see fornication and asphyxiation and choking and fighting for survival and growing and just rotting away. Of course, there's a lot of misery. But it is the same misery that is all around us.

The trees here are in misery, and the birds are in misery. I don't think they sing. They just screech in pain.

It's an unfinished country. It's still prehistorical. The only thing lacking is dinosaurs. It's like a curse weighing on an entire landscape. And whoever . . . goes too deep into this has his share of this curse. So we are cursed with what we are doing here. It's a land that God, if he exists, has—has created in anger. It's the only land where—where creation is unfinished yet. Taking a close look at—at what's around us there—there is some sort of a harmony. It is the harmony of overwhelming and collective murder. And we in comparison to the articulate vileness and baseness and obscenity of all this jungle. Uh, we in comparison to that enormous articulation—we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out of a stupid suburban . . . novel . . . a cheap novel. We have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery and overwhelming fornication . . . overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order. Even the—the stars up here in the—in the sky look like a mess. There is no harmony in the universe. We have to get acquainted to this idea that there is no real harmony as we have conceived it. But when I say this, I say this all full of admiration for the jungle. It is not that I hate it, I love it. I love it very much. But I love it against my better judgment.

Again and again, like Joseph Conrad's Kurtz, Herzog and his subjects are drawn deep into wild nature, and

are cursed by the knowledge they find there. And like David Maybury-Lewis, Herzog cannot help but to telegraph this descent at every opportunity, to preserve it for a posterity that is not guaranteed. All the same, we find ourselves eagerly returning to Herzog, again and again, with an affection that endures against our better judgment.

Chapter 2, “Trauma, Enacted and Reenacted,” considers two recent films by director Joshua Oppenheimer—*The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014). We argue that the display of seemingly ‘unrepresentable’ violence, rendered through reenactments of killings performed by the original perpetrators against Indonesian ‘communists’ in 1965–66, operates according to logics of trauma and shame. The films aspire to demonstrate complicity on narrative and affective terms, making a universally shared, shameful human condition visible to the audience—a claim that is mistakenly regarded as beyond critique. The filmmaker is not concerned with establishing a historical account of what occurred at the time; rather, his focus is on what kind of people the murderers *are* and, by extension, what kind of people *we* are. Oppenheimer is not the first to tell a story of genocide through its perpetrators, bystanders, and victims (consider Marcel Ophüls’s *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969) and Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (1955)), or to eschew historical framings and to refuse the potential to ‘represent’ events altogether (consider Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985)), or even to allow mass killers to author their own stories of barba-

ism (consider Barbet Schroeder’s *General Idi Amin Dada: Self Portrait* (1974)). But unlike others, shame is the axis of interpretation and understanding. Shame is the substance of Oppenheimer’s ontological claims: the films mark the dogged persistence of an ontotheology that ultimately seeks to render politics and ethics inoperative by ameliorating and transcending them. In this manner, the films constitute an experimental form of violent therapeutics that seeks to supplant classic rituals of sacrifice as the ‘trick’ that generalizes violence to a point of abstract universality.¹² The idea is to make reprisal unnecessary; the effect, unintended but very plain, is to nullify *actual* guilt and responsibility.

Chapter 3, “Beasts of the Land, Beasts of the Ocean,” considers the progression between two films by Lucien Castaing-Taylor: *Sweetgrass* (2009, in collaboration with Ilisa Barbash) and *Leviathan* (2012, in collaboration with Véréna Paravel). In each film, Castaing-Taylor pushes his experiment in sensory and affective cinema further and further—and with each iteration, wordlessness becomes more central. Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s film is not simply a critique of anthropology’s reliance on language or narrative, or even a critique of anthropology’s uneven treatment of non-human life; rather, *Leviathan* reestablishes cinematographic and ethnographic priorities in terms that are non-dialogic, to give the image (cinematic objects pre-

¹² “The function of ritual is to ‘purify’ violence; that is, to ‘trick’ violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals.” René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, London: Bloomsbury 2013 [1972], p. 39.

mised on 'emotive formulas' [*Pathosformeln*]) new life—this is a story of methodological (imagistic) rebirth told through the story of a second rebirth: the violent nativity of nature born by the absencing of humans from a world they once dominated. The chapter responds to the problem of nature by a displaced human figure and a radically open, broadly threatening, empty present. Castaing-Taylor does not attempt to picture nature as something that must be restored *for us*; rather, viewers are drawn into a world of radical alterity and constant becoming, of regeneration *without us*. The cinematic strategies of *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* intend to engulf the senses of the viewer—humans are overwhelmed, lost, crushed, and made extinct in what remains of 'their' natural world. The difference between Castaing-Taylor's and Oppenheimer's concepts of the human will be apparent, yet in depicting human forms of life as increasingly undifferentiated, reduced to tasks and primordial forms (animals, mountains, oceans), humans become complicit in their erasure—an erasure that all three filmmakers link (in their own way) to a base, human condition. The final chapter brings our argument regarding naturalism and the problem of the human in cinema full circle. Castaing-Taylor's is not a story of healing or redemption; he—much like Herzog and Oppenheimer—cannot seem to refrain from judging man as corrupted and corrupting, the quintessential 'bad animal.'

CHAPTER 1

A PREHISTORY OF THE PRESENT: WERNER HERZOG IN THE CAVE

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.

And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882)¹

“Sometimes Redemption is Out of Reach”

“Sometimes redemption is out of reach,” the tagline from Werner Herzog’s most recent narrative film, *Salt and Fire* (2016), crystallizes the idea of the filmmaker’s broader cinematic project: man is an animal who, through reason and folly, seeks but never finds redemption for his nature, and in his failure to either master or take leave of this nature, he is ironically pulled deeper into his origins. These origins for Herzog are to be found in the primordial, foundational violence of the planet and, by extension, the universe itself. This is

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, New York: Random House, Book 3, §108 [1882], p. 167

Herzog's ontotheology. Much as the God of the Old Testament brought the heavens and the earth into being in an instant and fully formed, the violent, planetary nature Herzog expresses in his documentaries takes the coordinates of a zero point from which the flawed, partial, unexpected, and ultimately meaningless human world emanates. The violence of our origins is eternal and indifferent, a generator of turbulent change for sentient creatures dimly aware of this world but unable, in any fundamental way, to alter its existence or their own. This chapter explores this idea—Herzog's cinematic thesis—through several of his documentary projects, notably *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), *Grizzly Man* (2005), *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), and *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010).² In each film, we hear Herzog repeat the same line with varied intonations: sometimes (perhaps always), redemption for humankind is out of reach, but in so reaching, we grasp something else, even our own prehistory.

² Careful readers who are familiar with Herzog's impressively long career as a director might object that there are a number of examples that do not seem to follow our thesis, particularly his earlier documentaries and even more recent films such as *Lo and Behold: Reveries of a Connected World* (2016). It is true that earlier films such as *The Great Ecstasy of Woodcarver Steiner* (1974) and *God's Angry Man* (1981) do not submit to this thesis in the relentlessly insistent manner of the later documentaries, although we would argue that elements of even these earlier films resonate with what we observe regarding his more recent works. Further, although *Lo and Behold* is at first glance largely a 'human' story, Herzog's mania for origins remains (quite a lot is made of the inauguration of the internet in 1969 and the fact that, at its core, it burst forth complete in its essence). And the universalizing, planetary vision that we focus on is strikingly evident in this film as well, particularly the sense that the internet comes to be figured as an uncontrollable and potentially *already* autonomous force violently transforming human life as the film progresses.

Much has been written about Werner Herzog's films and, with as much enthusiasm, his on- and off-screen personas.³ We do not intend to give broad treatment to Herzog's *oeuvre*—others have done so already, including Herzog himself. Instead, this chapter takes up one thread of the filmmaker's work. Said another way, Herzog pioneers issues we find uncomfortably settled elsewhere in non-fiction cinema. Here, the task we assign ourselves is narrow, submitted with the aim of addressing a single question: Why, over the past several decades, has Werner Herzog drifted into a mania for origins? We confess from the outset that we have traveled with him, buoyed in equal measure by joy and bewilderment. We are eager pupils of his weird pedagogy, a fact we freely admit.⁴ But as we will demonstrate, it is this mania for origins that his acolytes take up and try to answer by shocking, traumatizing, and stirring an audience from their supposed slumber, seemingly induced by their historicity and their supposed modernity. Herzog has had a remarkable influence on contemporary non-fiction cinema, and the filmmakers who follow Herzog closely in tone and visual language (including Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Joshua Oppenheimer) tend not to pictorialize a dream of humanness so much as dream this dream for their

³ See Roger Ebert's posthumously published *Herzog by Ebert*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2017; Brad Prager's *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth*, London: Wallflower Press 2007; or Herzog reflecting on himself, *Conquest of the Useless: Reflections from Making Fitzcarraldo*, New York: Ecco 2009 [2004] and *Herzog on Herzog: Conversations with Paul Cronin*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2003.

⁴ Todd Meyers, "Class Struggle," *Artforum*, August 12, 2016.

audience, to visualize the nightmare that origins and memory supposedly visit upon them in their presentist stasis.⁵ This is as much a cinematic problem as it is a political and ethical one.

The violence of man's break with nature—his *fall into* consciousness and history, and the impossible demand to grasp the violence of his descent in the light of his contemporary predicament—is the connective tissue that binds Herzog's documentary cinema. Thus, the *real* fall of man for the filmmaker is not to be located in Eden, Texas, or the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave, but in Galileo's laboratory and Descartes's library. "The Cartesian God is a truthful God," Alexandre Koyré reminds us, but for Herzog such a conception of God as truthful is not only wrong—it is pointless.⁶ Given the unmistakable negativity of the director's ontotheology, the breadth of his influence and popularity is remarkable—a small indication, perhaps, of an entire species that has self-consciously succumbed to the immensity of the universe. For Herzog, all that has been self-evident since Descartes, despite the Hegelian dream of human progress through history to its end, is the Fall. Thus, we find his central desire to grasp prehistory as the obscured unity within us all. This is what we mean

by *ontotheology*: our own nature, standing before us as an *other*.

The problem is that the director's totalizing vision often becomes brittle and eroded under the weight of his ontotheological universalisms, dried up when taken up in some other form by artists inspired by his truly unique filmmaking. The consistency of Herzog's vision is both impressive and daunting to engage, as the scale of his ontotheology is planetary in the cinematic sense and universal in its philosophical ambition. There is something deeply impressive about this, but the fact that one cannot even imagine humans as a *survival* of the cataclysmic origins of the universe does make thinking critically with Herzog a formidable task.⁷ Again, we say this while confessing our affection for Herzog's projects. Even at his worst, the embrace of recklessness and guile is still an embrace. But a sober warning nags us, echoing through our thoughts even as we yield to the seduction of Herzog's films: "the more recklessly spirit is posed as an absolute, the more it is in danger of retrogressing to pure myth and of modelling itself on precisely the mere nature that it claims to absorb in itself or even to create."⁸

⁵ "Modernity has its antiquity, like a nightmare that has come in its sleep." Walter Benjamin, "Convolute J: Baudelaire" [J82a, 4], in *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge: The Belknap Press/Harvard University Press 1999, p. 372.

⁶ Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1957, p. 100.

⁷ We mean 'survival' broadly in the sense that Edward Burnett Tylor used the concept. Our rationale for introducing this seemingly archaic notion is more fully justified and discussed in our analysis of Lucien Castaing-Taylor's recent films in Chapter 3.

⁸ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, London: Bloomsbury 2013 [1947], p. 122.

Endless Landscapes

You want to know what the philosophers' idiosyncrasies are? . . . Their lack of historical sense for one thing, their hatred of the very idea of becoming, their Egypticity. They think they are showing *respect* for something when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeterni*,—when they turn it into a mummy. For thousands of years, philosophers have been using only mummified concepts; nothing real makes it through their hands alive.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (1888)⁹

What terrain does Herzog's prehistory occupy? *Encounters at the End of the World*, funded in part by the U.S. National Science Foundation and shot during the arctic summer at McMurdo Station in Antarctica, is a film filled with brilliant visuals, twists in the edits and pacing, and is, by all accounts, technically excellent. The director is fixated on the social and biological geographies of this place. Herzog asks what it means to live here, in a land that lured and nearly consumed Ernest Shackleton, that engenders the ideal of remoteness from civilization. And what would it then mean to carve out and even to attempt to reproduce a civilization here? To this end, Herzog cannot help but to probe his

subjects to find out what type of people are attracted to this vast, harsh landscape, and to what end they seek it out. Herzog takes up the double task of excavating the psyches of the scientists in this de facto military occupation zone and excavating the landscape of creatures for answers in this time-zero of our primordialism. Take for example an exchange between Herzog and Samuel Bowser, a biologist who is in the midst of taking underwater samples from beneath the frozen sea ice:

Samuel Bowser: The creatures that are down there that are like science-fiction creatures, they range in the way that they would gobble you up from slime-type blobs, but creepier than classic science-fiction blobs. These would have long tendrils that would ensnare you, and as you tried to get away from them you'd just become more and more ensnared by your own actions. And then after you would be frustrated and exhausted, then this creature would start to move in and take you apart. So that's one example of one of the creatures.

Then there are other types of worm-type things with horrible mandibles and jaws and just bits to rend your flesh.

It really is a violent, horribly violent world that is obscure to us because we're encased in neoprene, you know, and we're much larger than that world. So it doesn't really affect us, but if you were to shrink down, miniaturize into that world, it'd be a horrible place to be. Just horrible.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, §2 [1888] pp. 166–167.

Werner Herzog: And this is a world earlier than human beings. Do you think that the human race and other mammals fled in panic from the oceans and crawled on solid land to get out of this?

SB: Yeah, I think undoubtedly that's exactly the driving force that caused us to leave the horrors behind. To grow and evolve into larger creatures to escape what's horribly violent at the miniature scale, miniaturized scale.

The footage of divers penetrating the luminous, amniotic world of creatures and ice formations that accompanies this dialogue is mesmerizing. And with the dark Lamarckism of Herzog's and Bowser's words in our heads, it is not hard to imagine this world as consisting of various scales both magnificent and terrible. But for all of its critical and technical success, the theological commitment of *Encounters* makes it one of Herzog's most straightforwardly problematic films. The director attempts to bookend *Encounters* with Genesis and Revelations, but birth and apocalyptic end are ultimately collapsed into sameness: the questions "where do we come from" and "where are we going" are conflated and mired in an epistemic murk unusual for the filmmaker. Herzog does not play nice, and when he encounters others who are faintly aware of the same aporia but who cannot really face it (in other words, everyone else), he simply mocks them without much mercy or complexity. So when Herzog pans up towards the sun, choir blaring, while a scientist talks

about the neutrino as "God," it is meant to be profound—but others who invoke similar, if less artful, clichés are insipid, lost in the blather of spiritual truisms. Herzog, intoning as "Herzog", cannot help but undermine the moments of his own creation, perhaps most famously captured in the image of a penguin marching not toward the sea but to the mountains, in madness and to certain death. While the director often toggles in his films between levity and profundity, this particular mode of swerving between the versions of Antarctica he chooses to expose seems motivated by a kind of frustration, a bitterness felt against being lost, and he is fairly obvious about it.

But Herzog's tendency to scramble intensities in his films is not really the target of our critique. This is not just another case of Herzog exposing the uncanniness of the world, and perhaps our uneasy place within it. Herzog would not be the first to position himself outside of the relationships and places uncompromisingly exposed by the camera—the narrator we find in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), just as foreign to his characters as to his audience, comes to mind as one who similarly intended to help us to see things out of time and place, to gain some purchase that we might otherwise miss by being too close, too intimate. No, this is not this issue. Rather, it is the temporal geography of *Encounters* where Herzog's overreach for origins can be found. Antarctica, in Herzog's version, is a place that exists in the 'here and now,' that holds ancient, primordial



1.1 Penguin marches to his death, *Encounters at the End of the World*, 2007

secrets, but fails because it can never relieve us of the trappings of the contemporary.

Consider *Encounters* in relation to another one of Herzog's landscapes: *Lessons of Darkness*. This film presents viewers with an antediluvian landscape, alive with bubbling tar and volcanic heat. Much of the film is either shot through a telephoto lens or with wild, inverted aerial photography traveling through plumes of black smoke above the ruined deserts of Kuwait, oilfields burned by retreating Iraqi soldiers in 1990–91. Herzog is Cassandra (foretelling doom, a doom beyond this doom, in a world where 'grass will not grow') and an alien visitor who attempts to make sense of this aftermath by way of an unearthly logic. Herzog wants to show a world where only traces of humans remain: the carcasses of oil



1.2 Driving to the island, *Salt and Fire*, 2016

refineries, the control room of a destroyed satellite tower turned into a torture chamber, now abandoned.

Not only are lands lost; so too are family members along with any language to express this loss. A mother who loses a son cannot speak; the child whose father was killed loses language. Trauma appears to colonize the void left by an absented language, something that reanimates the birth trauma that runs through his earlier *Land of Silence and Darkness* (1971). Rather, both *Lessons* and *Encounters* paradoxically stage a monstrous primordialism and a nostalgia for an untouched continent, an unclaimed zone where the incursions of humans, infected with the contagions of language and history, cannot be discerned. Strangely, Herzog often



1.3 Burning Kuwaiti oilfields, *Lessons of Darkness*, 1992

reframes spaces bursting with human remainders as “untouched”—the Chauvet Cave is asserted to be “pristine” in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, even as the viewer faces elaborate, beautiful rock paintings that evidence thousands of years of (early) human presence. The wild heterogeneity of what qualifies as pristine demands that we pause to ask a very simple question: What is the quality of a human’s touch?

In Herzog’s universe, places that go unmolested by us may, in fact, *receive us*. And yet through conquest, subjugation, the hubris of science, or a compulsion for discovery, nature’s welcome turns sour. This point is made explicit (if not clumsily) in *Salt and Fire* (2016), Herzog’s attempt at a fictionalized ‘eco-thriller’ set in the landscape of Bolivia’s Salar de Uyuni.¹⁰ The land is

¹⁰ If *Salt and Fire* had realized its ambition, it would be ripe for a reading of Georges Canguilhem’s 1976 essay on the complicated position of humans in the discourse of nature in post-human ecology, “Nature dénaturée et nature

dying, and in its death we see our own demise, somehow by our own hands. It is a parable told through kidnappings, scenes of real-time air travel, stunted dialogue, even more stunted sexual chemistry and extraordinarily beautiful vistas. What makes the film important is its ability to synthesize and simultaneously lay bare Herzog’s commitments regarding the anthropocene found across his filmography: *Salt and Fire* is a live-action prequel to *La Soufrière—Warten auf eine unausweichliche Katastrophe* (Waiting for an Inevitable Disaster, 1977), a film on the volcanic aftermath of the Isle of Guadeloupe, wherein Herzog debates the embrace or rejection of nature as sulphury death and murder. He returns to these themes in a more scientifically oriented mode in *Into the Inferno* (2016), which centers on the story of a French volcanology husband-and-wife team, Katia and Maurice Krafft, who, in 1991, perish in the heat of a pyroclastic flow. These films share the turbid moral landscape of Klaus Kinski’s rubber baron in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), desperate to portage a three-hundred-ton steamship over an Andean mountain, who, like his Spanish conquistador in *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (1972), defiles and defies nature, taming and being tamed by nature—finding himself lost, always lost.

naturante,” in *Savoir, faire, espérer: les limites de la raison*, Bruxelles: Publications des Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis 1976.

We Can Never Leave the Cave

Understanding is a defining characteristic of humanity, but even though we usually do not pay attention to it, humanity's understanding of itself and of the world presents a significant lacuna. In principle, no one perceived this lacuna; yet if understanding has a decisive value for man, it is the same as this lacuna. No one perceives it, yet the world is disappointing on this matter: the world is a trap for man, man is himself a trap for man.

Georges Bataille, "Prehistoric Religion" (1955)¹¹

Origins are interiorized in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, a film that travels through the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in southern France, and through Herzog's psyche. The cave, filled with what the director describes as "protocinematic images" from 30,000 years ago, is shot with custom 3-D handheld cameras that make the images 'feel alive.' The cave, completely sealed off for thousands of years, was opened like a durable snapshot violently overexposed upon its discovery in 1994, then quickly shuttered again to stave off decay. Herzog credits, perhaps even *blames*, these anonymous paleolithic artists for inaugurating the particular tragedy of Being by highlighting the styles and the realism and move-

ment of their depictions of animals (some images themselves separated by thousands of years), which can only happen in time and in consciousness.

The extensive scientific engagement with the cave is shown through interviews and reenactments with scientists and well-positioned enthusiasts, interwoven with long, contemplative shots of the paintings and caves. The effect is simultaneously awe-inspiring and plainly weird. A perfumer is shown attempting to "sniff out" the faint evidence of other similar caves; an "experimental archaeologist," dressed up "like an Inuit," huffs out a feeble version of "The Star Spangled Banner" to demonstrate an ivory flute dating from roughly the same period found in nearby caves in Germany; the Director of the Chauvet Cave Research Project gamely (but terribly) attempts to show the probable technique used by early humans to launch spears, hilariously persisting until Herzog orders him on camera to stop. Herzog's treatment of these simultaneously impressive and feeble attempts to enact the quotidian details of our origins is more sympathetic than in *Encounters*, but the message seems to be the same. Herzog, like Georges Bataille, is deeply impressed by the fact that prehistoric cave paintings of this type intentionally distort or simply avoid any attempt to reproduce a realistic human figure while still arousing a sense of human action and being. It is as if these 'original' people grasped the full scope of their place in the world, something we are too shallow or stupid to notice today. Or, to paraphrase Bataille to explain Herzog's position, prehistoric man sought, without shame, to flee his

¹¹ Georges Bataille, "Prehistoric Religion," in *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, New York: Zone Books 2005, p. 121.



1.4 Timothy Treadwell with his friends, *Grizzly Man*, 2005



1.5 Werner Herzog in Chauvet Cave, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 2010

humanity; today we embrace our humanity, the filmmaker scolds, *shamefully* to evade our origins, our animality, and our very nature.¹²

If this is so, where do we locate ourselves in Herzog's versions of beginnings? Herzog recognizes a kinship in these works and with the people he imagines created them, and through their traumas he sees their transcendence. In these images are traces and erasures—the end of (one version of) man and his beginning, or as Georges Didi-Huberman suggests in his reading of Georges Bataille's reflections on the drawings of Lascaux, a visual anthropology of encounter and form,

¹² Georges Bataille, "The Passage From Animal to Man and the Birth of Art," in *The Cradle of Humanity*, p. 65. For Herzog, the history of the cave remains a history of creativity, yet for Bataille our loss and separation from the animal contains a darker significance.

memetic or otherwise.¹³ Thus we find the central desire for a grasp of prehistory—prehistory as the "obscured unity" within us all.

Why is the unity of humans and nature so affirmative in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* when it so easily becomes cautionary in *Grizzly Man*? The tale of Timothy Treadwell and Amie Huguenard, killed and eaten by a grizzly bear in 2003, *Grizzly Man* is told through Treadwell's original footage over several summers in Katmai National Park and Preserve, Alaska. Treadwell attempts to commune with bears and other creatures, names them and, to his mind, forms a kinship with

¹³ Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe; ou, Le Gai Savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille*, Paris: Marculia 1995; see also Georges Bataille, *La Peinture Préhistorique Lascaux, Ou La Naissance de L'Art*, Paris: Les Grands Siècles de la Peinture, Skira 1955.

them, attempting to find purpose (to create distance from a personal past that was by his own account wasted) and to embark on a new way of living within and through the natural world.

Treadwell is sincere to a fault, and despite Herzog's apparent affection for Treadwell, he exposes a limit to his empathy in one crucial scene:

[Treadwell discovers a friendly fox killed by a bear]:

Timothy Treadwell: Oh, God! I love you. I love you and I don't understand. It's a painful world.

[And then Herzog, as the narrator, opines]:

Werner Herzog: Here I differ with Treadwell. He seemed to ignore the fact that in nature there are predators. I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility and murder. And what haunts me, is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me, there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears. And this blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell, this bear was a friend, a savior.

We are not asking Herzog to demonstrate, in cinematic terms, man's harmony or disharmony with nature. But

compare the treatment in *Grizzly Man* to Ben River's *Two Years at Sea* (2011), a film about a man, Jake, who lives in the remote Scottish Highlands. *Two Years at Sea* is shot in rich black and white, its form and visual language echoing the solitary, plotless life of this man—his Walden-esque existence, a meditation without a flicker of morality or judgment, rendered beautifully, slowly, reasonably, and without a narrator. Another comparison is Herzog's own *Rescue Dawn* (2007), where Christian Bale's physical transformation as a prisoner of war in Vietnam shares pace with his increasing disharmony with the camp and then the jungle (the dramatization of the real story of Dieter Dengler, a German-American pilot shot down in Vietnam in 1966, who nearly died of malnutrition and dysentery, the subject of Herzog's documentary, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* (1997)). As a prisoner, he is wasted, and in the salvation of escape into the jungle, he finds other forms of bodily insult—repetitions, circles. All this leaves us asking about *Grizzly Man*: How dependent is Herzog on affect for conveying the terms of his thesis? How much of the filmmaking relies on Herzog just blurting out his thesis?

We can never leave the jungle, nor the tundra, nor the cave—and while these statements are true for Herzog, they are true for different reasons, different failures of our humanness.

The Non-Redeemer

What is life?—Life—that is: continually shedding something that wants to die. Life—that is: being cruel and inexorable against everything about us that is growing old and weak—and not only about us. Life—that is, then: being without reverence for those who are dying, who are wretched, who are ancient? Constantly being a murderer?—And yet old Moses said: “Thou shalt not kill.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*⁴⁴

Into the Abyss (2011) tells the story of a triple homicide committed by Michael Perry and Jason Burkett, both in their early twenties, told through interviews with the murderers, family members, and friends, days before Perry was scheduled to be executed in 2010. The film does not so much look into the soul of the killer as it surveys the milieu of calamity and misfortune in the Texas community where the murders occurred. The film serves an obvious political purpose: it is a statement against the death penalty (Herzog has said as much). But what Herzog is able to do so brilliantly is to unearth, with very little empathy for the killers, layers of moral strata: the killers break from the history of their acts, and yet institutionalization offers them a chance to recover their humanity, which leads them



1.6 Death row inmate Michael Perry, *Into the Abyss*, 2011

paradoxically to question their actions while denying those actions ever occurred, and from which they recognize there is no salvation.

In *Into the Abyss*, the ethical terrain remains open and offers no way out. A recent (and truly inspired) version of this ethical opening is Kitty Green's *Casting JonBenet* (2017), a documentary that recounts the unsolved 1996 murder of child beauty pageant star JonBenet Ramsey through the auditions of amateur actors reading for various roles in a reenactment that is never to be. The actors speculate about the murder as they take on the roles of specific characters from the event, told between script readings and candid interviews about their own personal stories and motivations for wanting the role. The classic Herzogian problem remains, as Richard Brody points out: Do they really know what is going on, or are they caught in an aporia in which they

⁴⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 1, §26 [1882], p. 100

are now implicated?¹⁵ Like Fritz Lang's *M.* (1931), it is unseen action imagined offscreen (or in the case of *Casting JonBenet*, dramatized and out of time) where true horror resides.¹⁶

Herzog asks us if it is harder to imagine the senseless violence of Michael Perry and Jason Burkett (who extinguished three lives because they wanted a joyride in a sports car for a few hours), or the rise and fall of consciousness and history of a character like Kaspar Hauser in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974). *Enigma* is the dramatization of actual events in the early 19th century, in which a boy kept in a cellar with no human contact, and who, at seventeen, is brought to Nuremberg by an unnamed man, aided by a professor to learn to read and write, eventually becomes a scholar, only to be stabbed to death by the same unnamed man who had released him. Kaspar Hauser steps out of the primal only to be returned violently back to it, to his source. Can we find escape from our nature through growth and learning, or does our imagination (memory) always return us to a horror that we own, back to the cave, back to the cellar?

There is a place just out of Werner Herzog's cinematic reach where our collective story of beginnings can be

¹⁵ Richard Brody, "Casting JonBenet: A Documentary that Unintentionally Exploits Its Participants," *The New Yorker*, April 27, 2017.

¹⁶ Stefanos Geroulanos, "A Child is Being Murdered," in *anthropologies*, edited by Richard Baxstrom and Todd Meyers, Baltimore: Creative Capitalism 2008, pp. 17–30.



1.7 Making photographic memories in anticipation of Matt Riley's incarceration, *Salt and Fire*, 2016

found. Over and over the filmmaker searches for this place, and attempts to name it. In *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, the origin story is told as one of kinship with a people who sought to represent the world to themselves, to turn darkness into light. But what was the dark dream from which they awoke? *Into the Abyss* represents a limit case premised on the cruel immediacy of human want, something Herzog contrasts with the naive turn toward the animal world in *Grizzly Man*, Timothy Treadwell's failed experiment to fold the world of the bear into his own, or even more tragically, to become folded into the world of the bear. There is violence on all sides. Can we find our originating nature in the ambitions of paleolithic cave painters, or in the terrible, unchecked drives of unrepentant murderers, or along some other horizon? And if not, then where? Perhaps Herzog expects us to remain uncomfortably cradled in the knowledge that redemption for our origins is forever out of reach.

CHAPTER 2

TRAUMA, ENACTED AND REENACTED: JOSHUA OPPENHEIMER'S INDONESIAN MASSACRE DIPTYCH

Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame. Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth.

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970)¹

Joshua Oppenheimer's films feel wrong. *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014) exhibit an enduring intimacy between victims and perpetrators—and attempt to place distance between the consumers of filmic violence and the unseen hand guiding its reenactment. The films rely on a moral imperative to act and the terrible labor to witness. In them is an air of complicity. Oppenheimer leverages the liberal sensibilities he imagines of his audience against them: the director holds viewers in contempt for their 'passivity' in the face of the genocide perpetrated by Sumatran paramilitaries against 'communists' in 1965–66. The filmmaker wishes to highlight our collective inac-

¹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, New York: Vintage 2007 [1970], p. 48.

tion without exposing his own. By allowing them to recount their actions in horrifying detail, we are led to believe Oppenheimer is giving his murderous interlocutors enough rope to hang themselves. What we find instead are unchecked tropes of cruelty. *Killing* is a film born of indulgence, ostensibly documenting the killers making their own cinematic version of events (the film-within-a-film is provocatively entitled “Born Free”). *Silence* is a film conceived under the pall of an unmet need for repair, following a victim of the massacres as he confronts the murderers of his older brother. We are meant to marvel at the primitivism of the killers—their obscenity, their unawareness of our collective judgment. But these are not feeble old men on trial in the court of public opinion; they are heroes emboldened by the invitation to retell. It is impossible not to form a relation with the images in Oppenheimer’s films, and it is this relationship that we aim to examine in our brief reflection. Joshua Oppenheimer’s Indonesian Massacre diptych is not suffused with reenactments of violence but stands as primary enactments that must be understood as real in an original, *primitive* sense.

Are these films meant to educate? Are they acts of humanitarianism? Or are we to dwell on the ‘sensory’ elements of these films—to allow them to wash over us, putting Werner Herzog’s famous “nature is murder” dictum to the test through artfully composed images and ambient sound? Or are they intended as quasi-psychoanalytic play therapy? It is never clear. Oppenheimer’s treatment of violence as an open moral field, one filled with competing, volatile ‘truths,’ is

nothing new—consider *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988), *General Idi Amin Dada: Self Portrait* (Barbet Schroeder, 1976), *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), *Night and Fog* (Alain Resnais, 1955), *The Sorrow and the Pity* (Marcel Ophüls, 1969), *Into the Abyss* (Werner Herzog, 2011), or on the side of fiction, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986) or *A History of Violence* (David Cronenberg, 2005), which have all waded through some cinematic version of this ethically compromised morass. But Oppenheimer wishes to express something different; his are films of collusion.

Nick Fraser has called *The Act of Killing* “a high minded snuff film” that deploys “tasteless devices” in order to “whitewash the past.”² This is *not* what we argue. For our part, we embrace tastelessness. Taste and its absence can be instructive—consider John Waters’s *Pink Flamingos* (1972), David Cronenberg’s *Shivers* (1975), or Tommy Wiseau’s *The Room* (2003), or in non-fiction cinema, Lauren Greenfield’s *The Queen of Versailles* (2012). Oppenheimer’s films are not tasteless in an affirmative sense. Nor do we object to the fact that *Killing* or *Silence* might easily be counted among films Nikolaj Lübecker has characterized as “feel-bad films.” We broadly agree with Lübecker that such audience-focused films, including *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (Werner Herzog, 1970), *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003), *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, 2003), and *Redacted* (Brian de Palma, 2007), can provide the grounds for

² Nick Fraser, “The Act of Killing: Don’t Give an Oscar to this Snuff Movie,” *The Guardian*, February 23, 2014.

critical, ethical reflection.³ To be clear, we reject the misconceived dogma that designates atrocity and mass killing as unquestioningly 'beyond' representation. We also reject the notion that Oppenheimer's vulgar, excessive strategy by definition crosses a clear moral line in its attempt to represent seemingly 'un-representable' events.⁴ Responding to such dogma, Georges Didi-Huberman notes, "they prefer no reading at all to a fragile reading in spite of all."⁵ We take our chances with a fragile reading of what Oppenheimer offers us. After all, refusing to acknowledge "the eloquence of the devil" does not make him less eloquent.⁶ Thus, we do not make a categorical error by mislabeling Oppenheimer's films "pornography," largely because he dares us to do just that.⁷ In fact, much of the challenge of engaging Oppenheimer's work is to resist the urge to take debate 'off screen' or to remove the filmmaker from the activity on screen. Instead we wish to pull

³ Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2015. See also Todd Meyers and Richard Baxstrom, "Cinema Thinking Affect: The Hustler's Soft Magic," in *Parachute*, 121 (2006), pp. 98–119.

⁴ We should note that others have made such an effort: see Garin Nugroha's film *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* (Poetry That Cannot Be Buried), 1999; Lexy Rambadeta, Jr.'s short film *Mass Grave: Indonesia*, 2002; Curtis Levy's television series *Riding the Tiger*, 1993; and for a critical commentary of the lagging attention to Suharto's legacy of mass killing, see Edward S. Herman, "Good and Bad Genocide: Double Standards in Coverage of Suharto and Pol Pot," *Fair*, September 1, 1998.

⁵ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2008, p. 89; See also Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, "The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times," *Daedalus* 125, no. 1 (1996), pp. 1–23.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, "L'éloquence du diable," in *Auschwitz and Jerusalem*, Paris: Deux Temps Tierce 1942, pp. 33–34.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, London: Verso 2009, p. 87.



2.1 Adi Rukun talks with one of his brother's killers, *The Look of Silence*, 2014

Oppenheimer into the frame. The films rely on the director's distance and control, intending to institute a regime of mimetic identification that 'pictures' a natural world of trauma shared by the figures on the screen and by the audience.⁸ Control is at stake, or rather, control exposes his stakes, which are unmistakably rooted in 'witnessing' as a form of art and the violence of a forced restoration of speech.

The filmmaker's control of a narrative, his refutation of direction or effort to relinquish that command, and his ability to capture what results as it passes through the frame depends on a kind of cinematic naturalism.

⁸ "Mimesis is not resemblance understood as the relation between a copy and a model. It is a way of making resemblances function within a set of relations between ways of making, modes of speech, forms of visibility, and protocols of intelligibility." Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, London: Verso 2007, p. 73.



2.2 Anwar Congo is sickened by the thoughts of his actions,
The Act of Killing, 2012

Some critics assert that Oppenheimer had been tricked into ceding control of his own narrative to murderers who justify their crimes in *Killing*, and thus his retreat into a more established ‘talking-heads’ documentary style of *Silence* is a partial response to such criticisms. This perspective focuses primarily on Anwar Congo’s ‘redemption’ in the final moments of *Killing*. It is true that Anwar’s budding realization of his moral responsibility seems staged, but this should be no surprise as Oppenheimer never makes any attempt to hide that it is, in fact, *staged*. The question for us is not ‘Is this staged?’ but rather ‘What sort of truth effect is produced by this staging?’

Critics such as Danielle Mina Dadras and Robert Cribb dismiss the director’s Rouch-inspired method,

which starkly opposes truth to ‘acting.’⁹ This binary, however, has its faults. As we have argued in other contexts, the power of the reenactment does not stand in opposition to evidence or truth, particularly when deployed in cinema.¹⁰ So for us the question is never ‘Is it or isn’t it true?’ but rather: What sorts of truths do Oppenheimer’s films convey to an audience and what kinds of assumptions about cinema, the nature of human beings, and the world itself are at work in his restaging of traumatic, murderous events?

In interviews, Oppenheimer often laments the fact that “little is known” outside of Indonesia about what occurred in 1965–66 and that it is essential for “everyone” to recognize and respond to these historical events.¹¹ Yet his films intentionally avoid a historical

⁹ Danielle Mina Dadras, “The Act of Killing and How Not to Get Conned by a Charming Madman,” *popmatters*, January 16, 2014; Robert Cribb, “The Act of Manipulation,” *Inside Indonesia* 112, April–June, 2013.

¹⁰ Baxstrom and Meyers, *Realizing the Witch*; See also Joram ten Brink, “Reenactment, the History of Violence and Documentary Film,” in *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory and the Performance of Violence*, edited by Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer, London: Wallflower Press 2012.

¹¹ Actually, quite a lot is known outside of Indonesia about the two coups (the second coup justified by Suharto as a “defence of the country” against the first) and subsequent massacres in 1965–66. A very partial list of this extensive literature would include Benedict R. O’G. Anderson and Ruth McVey, *A Preliminary Analysis of the October 1, 1965 Coup in Indonesia*, Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project 1971; Daniel S. Lev, “Indonesia 1965: The Year of the Coup,” *Asian Survey*, February 1966; Rex Mortimer, *Indonesian Communism Under Sukarno: Ideology and Politics, 1959–1965*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1974; Harold Crouch, *The Army and Politics in Indonesia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1978; Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Indonesian Killings of 1965–66: Studies from Java and Bali*, Clayton, Vic: Monash Papers on Southeast Asia, no. 21, Monash University Press 1990, and “Unsolved Problems in the Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966,” *Asian Survey*, 42: 4 (2002), pp. 550–563; Geoffrey Robinson, *The Dark Side of Politics: Political Violence in Bali*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1995, and *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965–66*, Princeton:

narrative. Oppenheimer justifies this approach by designating his films as “documentaries of the imagination,” which is driven by the fact that the only people who can address the killings at length on camera are the unpunished killers themselves (and in *Silence*, the surviving relatives of victims).¹² This avoidance of context is not a symptom of his unawareness; it is clear that the filmmaker knows what he is talking about when he chooses to talk about it.¹³ And yet, his Indonesian diptych refuses the power of any such historical engagement as a means of gaining purchase on events as a form of universalist ‘truth-telling.’ It is as if the

Princeton University Press, forthcoming; James T. Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-Revolution Today*, Durham: Duke University Press 1998, and “Possessed” in *The Rope of God* [Updated Edition], Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2000, pp. 336–422. An overview of how the massacres have figured in cinema in general is taken up by Ariel Heryanto, “Screening the 1965 Violence,” in *Killer Images*, pp. 224–240. Analysis of the massacres of 1965–66 also turn up regularly in political books written for a wider popular audience, such as Naomi Klein’s brief account of the role Indonesian economists, who were trained in Milton Friedman-style neoliberalism in American universities (the so-called Berkeley Mafia), played in driving the extreme violence of the situation in the hopes of clearing away structural ‘impediments’ to the free market. Klein links the 1965–66 massacres in Indonesia to similar situations in Chile, Brazil and Argentina around the same time, offering these examples as early manifestations of what she has famously termed “disaster capitalism.” See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, London: Penguin 2007, pp. 67–70; pp. 270–271.

¹² Tony Raynes, “Review: The Act of Killing,” *Sight and Sound*, July 2013, updated March 19, 2015.

¹³ Benedict Anderson has provided an admirable synopsis of the massacres in their historical context and in direct conversation with Oppenheimer’s films. The director’s asterisked responses to the points Anderson makes demonstrates that he has an excellent grasp of recent Indonesian politics and history. In his thoughtful article, Anderson also notes that Oppenheimer is a “conundrum” for his interlocutors: “[A]n unseen interrogator, pal, witness, kid, judge, motherfucker.” We would argue the director stands in a similar relation to his audience. Benedict Anderson, “Impunity,” in *Killer Images*, pp. 268–286.

filmmaker, having immersed himself in the politics, culture, and history of these events, rejects the possibility of knowing something—anything—*real* from such domains. Rather, intersubjectivity is strictly narrowed and transcendentalized in desire, in feelings that are held to be universal and assumed to be the vehicle of a demystification of one’s ‘true self’ when recognized and interiorized by the audience.

Acting *Malu* (Shame)¹⁴

We are experts in shame, thus we leave to the obscene its chances.

Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card* (1980)¹⁵

Oppenheimer’s Indonesian diptych is thus not concerned with establishing what occurred or what individuals did at the time; rather, it is about what kind of people *they are* and, by extension, what kind of people *we are*. Such a demonstration requires cinematic figures that are available for comparison rather than the

¹⁴ *Malu* in Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language) can mean ‘shy,’ ‘embarrassed,’ ‘humble,’ or ‘shame,’ depending on context. *Bermalu* is stative, meaning ‘to have a feeling of shame.’ The verb form *memalui* can either mean ‘to embarrass’ or ‘to shame.’ Interestingly, *kemaluan* means ‘genitals.’ Given the thrust of our argument, it is important to bear in mind the constant ambiguity of what this word conjures.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987 [1980], p. 80.

revelation of facts that would bring actors to account, under the law. The guilt of the killers, like our own guilt, is already known to be true before the audience even sees examples of what they claim to have done. 'Guilt' is thus a shared condition and the foundational logic of the diptych, not its subject per se. In other words, we begin with guilt rather than arrive at it, which renders guilt, in both the legal and the emotional sense of the word, *irrelevant* to Oppenheimer's project, despite the fact that he often deploys a language of 'guilt' in discussing the meaning of his films. In turn, factual knowledge of anyone's actions on its own lacks any meaningful force for 'understanding' or 'healing.' How one is 'guilty' is beside the point because, in the larger scheme of things, we are all, in the end, guilty. And to be clear, nobody really denies anything in the Indonesian case anyway.¹⁶ What matters in Oppenheimer's version is how we feel about and display our universally shared condition to one another. Are we sorry? Or more precisely: Are we ashamed?

The director's explanation of his broader intentions to Maria Bustillos is typical of the naturalist framework he expresses in the diptych:

My films' impact does not derive from the fact that they have opened the world's eyes to impunity in Indonesia . . . [Instead] there's this uncomfortable moment of recognition, of resonance. A feeling of,

¹⁶ Cribb, *The Indonesian Killings of 1965–1966*, p. 12.

"Oh, no." Because this is also us. In *The Act of Killing*, we're brought so close to a man like Anwar Congo . . . you almost can physically feel him, that he's human, and you feel . . . "How am I like a perpetrator? How are we all like perpetrators?"¹⁷

This account makes sense within what Ruth Leys has called "a spectatorial logic of shame."¹⁸ According to Leys, this logic serves as the expression of a broad shift in the Western understandings of politics, justice, and the self that has moved away from concerns with guilt or innocence linked to the agency of actors or institutions to a focus on how violence or injustice speaks to who the individual subject 'is.' Leys is concerned with how this logic has transformed our understandings of the victims of torture, war, and violence within the longer history of the concept of trauma as it operates in legal, medical, and political discourses. This is crucial to keep in mind as Oppenheimer deflects criticisms of his purportedly objective, amoral exhibition of the views and interpretations of the perpetrators by positioning his films as vehicles of truth-telling and healing for the victims of the mass killings in Indonesia in 1965–66.

In essence, enabling the performance of mass murder, and working skillfully to ensure that these perfor-

¹⁷ Maria Bustillos, "A Portrait of Mass Murderers as Toothless Old Men," *Gawker*, February 28, 2016.

¹⁸ Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007, p. 3.



2.3 Anwar Congo behind the camera on the set of “Born Free,”
The Act of Killing, 2012

mances reach an audience likely to respond appropriately, is not, in Oppenheimer’s telling, intended to glorify the killers but to offer a “poem in memoriam for the lives that are broken,” which addresses an unmet “need for truth, justice, and reconciliation.”¹⁹ By revealing the murderers for who they ‘really’ are through their own re-staging and re-telling of events, Oppenheimer understands his project as enabling a process of healing that the victims cannot initiate themselves. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has written that “shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance. I mean theatrical performance.”²⁰ Oppen-

¹⁹ Henry Barnes and Tom Silverstone, “Joshua Oppenheimer on The Look of Silence: ‘It’s a memoriam for the lives that are broken’—video interview,” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2015.

²⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2003, p. 38.

heimer could not agree more. He infuses his films with a distorted, jejune Freudianism of trauma, repression and therapeutics fueled by the flagellating pleasures of crude “bourgeois disillusionment.”²¹

There are three issues of equal importance in our formulation here. The first, which we hope is by now obvious, is that Oppenheimer’s films can and should not be dismissed wholesale. They are powerful, but for all the wrong reasons. The second issue pertains to a defense of performativity by Sedgwick and others as a way for the victims of trauma to act and thus to work through their own experiences as victims. The third, and perhaps most germane to our argument, is empirical: the perpetrators in both films express themselves without the slightest hint of shame. Anwar Congo is possibly the one exception, but even he displays little. In essence, nothing really changes. This leaves us wondering who is expected to feel the shame of the performances in the films, and crucially, through what logic this shame is justified.

The answer to this anticipation of feeling is not so complicated. The logic of shame that we have identified is one that is essential for the *audience* to under-

²¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From a Damaged Life*, London: Verso 2005 [1951], pp. 60–61. Adorno offers here a critique that is the mirror image of Sedgwick and Oppenheimer, harshly criticizing Freud for abandoning ‘truth’ to the relativity of a repressed, shameful self. Both sides therefore agree on Freud, but obviously draw different conclusions from this reading. Our claim is that this distorted simplification, regardless of whether it is offered as truth or error, does considerable violence to Freud’s long and fluid engagement with the concepts of trauma and repression.

stand and share.²² The audience cringes, yes, but is meant to carry something more. While the display of legible emotions by the ‘performers’ remains important, the director’s anticipation of his audience’s ‘correct’ attitude toward his material is, in our estimation, the most vile aspect of Oppenheimer’s display. In the absence of a shared understanding between the audience and the director, which assumes the positive aspects of displaying trauma and inspiring transformative shame as a result, the films *would* in fact be pornography. To the contrary, Oppenheimer understands how to instrumentalize cinema as a tool to force repressed trauma to the surface in a way that permits the audience’s pleasure in observing this act to be ‘safely’ experienced as *unpleasure*, effectively refuting

²² It is clear that Oppenheimer has a Western audience in mind. This is not to say that a logic of shame underpinning modes of ethical public engagement is unknown in Indonesia. Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, widely popular Islamic self-help trainers and entrepreneurs have articulated a desire to develop a ‘culture of shame’ in Indonesia derived from a blend of pop psychology, quasi-scientific marketing and management techniques, and a light-touch Sufism that emphasizes the cultivation of ‘the heart’ (*Qolbu*) as a ‘moral organ.’ Shame almost uniformly refers to sexual ethics and the management of personal desire in these popular discourses, and this particular logic of shame has been extended to popular campaigns to ‘shame the state’ in reference to the public availability of pornography and a perceived lack of Islamic moral guidance from post-Suharto governments in Indonesia. Shaming the state does not extend to reckoning with the extreme political violence of Indonesia’s recent past, particularly as many of these self-help gurus maintain close ties with government and military leaders. In our reading, this religiously entrepreneurial version of shame is not the logic of shame that Oppenheimer deploys in his films. See James Bourk Hoesterey, “Shaming the State: Pornography and the Moral Psychology of Statecraft” (Chapter 5) in *Rebranding Islam: Piety, Prosperity, and a Self-Help Guru*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2016, pp. 149–174.

the simplistic accusation that the diptych is a form of murder porn.²³

Leys identifies two poles by which the reality of trauma tends to be understood: the “mimetic” and the “antimimetic.” She summarizes each pole as follows:

[M]imetic theory holds that trauma, or the experience of the traumatized subject, can be understood as involving a kind of hypnotic imitation of or regressive identification with the original traumatogenic person, scene or event, with the result that the subject is fated to act it out or in other ways imitate it. . . . [A]ntimimetic theory also tends to make imitative identification basic to traumatic experience, but it understands imitation differently. The mimetic notion that victims of trauma are completely caught up or blindly immersed in the scene of shock is repudiated in favor of the opposite idea that the subject remains aloof from the traumatic experience, in the sense that he remains a spectator to the scene, which he can therefore see and represent to himself.²⁴

Leys adds that contemporary understandings of trauma manifest themselves as a mixture of the mimetic and antimimetic. As therapy or theory, this would tend to be an unintentional tension. In Oppenheimer’s diptych, the blurring of these two poles is actively asserted

²³ Jacques Derrida, “To Speculate—On ‘Freud,’” in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987 [1980], p. 288.

²⁴ Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*, pp. 8–9. See also Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2000.

as *method*, where the immersive acting out of one's fault makes those individuals available for us to see and judge. The actors in Oppenheimer's films generally do not feel guilt, but this is not the idea. Our own shame in their actions ultimately wins out as a naturalized image of what is assumed to be a universal human condition.²⁵

The coercive element of Oppenheimer's method is brilliantly effaced by the director's careful manipulation of the mimetic and the antimimetic. Were he to remain squarely on the mimetic side, it would become plain to the audience that they are merely passive spectators to bizarre reenactments of mass murder through techniques of induced regression. Without the antimimetic, the logic of the exercise is plainly that of coercion and not the healing of a therapeutic encounter that the director claims for the films. This is why the 'redemption' of Anwar Congo at the end of *Killing* is so crucial to the director's project in both films.

Consider this exchange late in *Killing* where Anwar is viewing the video of a pivotal scene in which he plays the victim of torture rather than a perpetrator. Anwar watches as his immersion in the role of his own victims in 1965–66 causes a momentary rupture. In the scene,

²⁵ This is not to argue in any way that trauma as a psychological state or condition is somehow not 'real.' No doubt trauma, as a psychological condition that arises in response to extreme violence or stress, that produces *symptoms* and can be addressed as a *condition* specific to an individual subject, is real. It is our assertion that the way Oppenheimer makes trauma universal actually undercuts the factual criteria that constitute trauma as a diagnostic category, undermining the strategies for addressing trauma and the individuals who suffer from it.

Anwar is brutally interrogated, beaten, and eventually 'garrotted' by the method he earlier claimed he had invented as a 'better' way to decapitate condemned captives. While Anwar is not actually murdered as his victims were, the scene is powerful enough to immerse his memory into mimesis with his victims. Anwar, having switched positions, is now experiencing the act and its truth from his victim's point of view. Later, Anwar forces his grandchildren to watch it with him.

Anwar Congo: Did the people I tortured feel the way I do here? [Continues to watch—scenes of AC's torture intercut with close up of AC watching the screen, staring directly at audience] I can feel what the people I tortured felt. Because here my dignity has been destroyed and then fear comes right there and then. All the terror suddenly possessed my body. It surrounded me and possessed me.

Joshua Oppenheimer [offscreen]: Actually, the people you tortured felt far worse because you know it is only a film. They knew that they were being killed.

AC [puzzled]: But I can feel it Josh. Really, I feel it. Or have I sinned? [Tearing up] I did this to so many people Josh. Is it all coming back to me? [Pause] I really hope it won't. I don't want it to, Josh. [Vigorously shakes his head—calms down]

[Cut back to "Born Free" set—aftermath of AC's on-set break. He sits slumped in a chair, his face

“bloody,” his expression much the same as the previous shot—cut back to previous scene, emphasizing the correspondence]²⁶

This scene is critical as it simultaneously validates and disavows the overtly mimetic strategy the director deploys. On the one hand, the immersive reenactment seems to *work*. The terrible reality of the past, hidden in plain sight for all of these years, can be brought to life for us to see. This is not enough, however. Were Oppenheimer to leave things at that, then Fraser's accusation that *Killing* is nothing more than a snuff film would be empirically true. Instead, just at the point in which Anwar can, seemingly for the first time, feel his actions from the position of his victims, the director shatters this epiphany by driving home the point that Anwar can never actually know what his victims felt. Anwar can only know what *he* knows, feel what *he* feels. He can only realize *who he truly is*. This realization is validated not by identifying with his victims through the guilt of killing or surviving, but rather by openly expressing the shame in realizing who he actually is: *a killer*.

In the final scene of *Killing*, Anwar returns to the roof of the building where he did much of his killing in 1965–66. He is dressed up and solemn. Anwar wanders the roof and Oppenheimer's camera follows him. He recounts what we already know, but this time he does

²⁶ This exchange, and all quoted dialogue from the films in this chapter, takes place in Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language). The quoted dialogue is the subtitled, translated text.

so in more formal and grave terms, reflected in his use of a suddenly grammatically immaculate, assiduously passive third person Bahasa Indonesia.²⁷ He is confessing. As we have already noted, critics suggest that this scene ‘seems staged,’ but that is the point—all confessions are staged, collaborations between interrogators and suspects. The immersive, mimetic strategy is in full effect, however; now the audience must have some definitive proof of Anwar's awareness and shame. He struggles repeatedly not to vomit as he delivers his crafted, redundant confession; his measured account is punctuated with loud dry-heaves, occasionally spitting out saliva.²⁸ He sounds like an animal. As the film has framed the mostly unrepentant killers as animals throughout, this is meant to be satisfying. Anwar now feels what ‘we’ felt all along. He slowly exits the roof and the building, the camera continuing to linger on him as he goes. Only when he makes his exit does the camera stop. He is still a murderer, but he is free to go.

²⁷ It is common in Bahasa Indonesia to avoid a direct, first-person reference to ‘I’ when speaking formally or politely. This linguistic practice is most typically expressed through passive grammatical constructions and the use of the third person when referring to oneself. These conventions are often modulated or dropped when speaking informally. The fact that Anwar's speech in the final scene of *Killing* assiduously takes up these formal conventions associated with ‘proper’ speech is significant in that he signals his self-consciously serious intent while able to linguistically mark an expected distance between what is said and who is saying it.

²⁸ “If, owing to resistance, the patient delays his telling for a long time, the tension of the sensation—of the desire to vomit—becomes unbearable, and if we cannot force him to speak he actually begins to vomit. In this way we obtain a plastic impression of the fact that ‘vomiting’ takes the place of a psychical act (in this instance, the act of utterance), exactly as the conversion theory of hysteria maintains.” Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, 1895, in *The Standard Edition* 2, p. 296.

His realization of himself as a murderer is his punishment, enough to assure the audience, positioned as judges, to allow him to go. The film ends.

Oppenheimer repeatedly justifies the method of reenacting in his Indonesian diptych by claiming that the killers were the only ones who wished to talk, the ones who actively sought to have their boastful, grotesque pantomimes filmed 'for history.' There is no reason to doubt the director's account. Yet it is clear that he has set his subjects up to be portrayed as human beasts who must be exposed *as beasts*. *Killing* intends to awaken us to aspects of our 'nature' from which we believe ourselves to be free. This is not, however, the same thing as exposing a *debt owed*, a responsibility that would generate *guilt* when exposed or freed from its repressed state. This would accept that Anwar and the others assume responsibility and can repay a debt by being punished because they could have acted otherwise. *Killing*, however, fails to serve as an ethical instrument facilitating the repayment of such a terrible, perhaps unpayable, debt. Anwar's shame is displayed as a particularly virulent example of everyone's shame. *Shame is what he is* and, by implication, *what we are as well*, neatly canceling any specific debt owed and nullifying the very question of justice.²⁹ In this sense, the audience accepts that these unrepentant

killers *deserve* to be exposed as beasts, not because this would deliver 'justice' but because it serves as a mirror for the beasts we are ourselves presumed to be. This is not guilt or responsibility, but a kind of naturalist identity between viewer and viewed that allows Anwar's brutal exposure and 'redemption' to appear to the audience as a kind of positive action, that even a beast can realize that he is a beast, and that this is *good*.

Interrogations With No Questions

"Your acting was great, but you have to stop crying!"³⁰

Herman Koto, *The Act of Killing*

An immersive cinematic strategy of total exposure produces collateral damage. The director frames these terrible men as agents of violence in his diptych and we accept them as such, wholly distant from victims. But consider Suryono, identified as "Anwar's neighbor" in *Killing*, who enthusiastically joins in to help get their production off the ground. Later it is revealed that Suryono is no killer; in fact, he is the stepson of a Chi-

²⁹ This is a quintessential example of *bad conscience* as Nietzsche understood it. Notice the relation between 'guilt' (*Schuld*) and 'debts' (*Schulden*) in Nietzsche's distinction between a debased and generalized 'natural' violence and the possibility of ethical responsibility and punishment due to the fact that human criminals 'could have acted otherwise.' This critical question of guilt and its relation to ethics is consistently disavowed in favor of the display

of a shameful nature in both *Killing* and *Silence*. See Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Second Essay, §4, pp. 39–40.

³⁰ Quote from *The Act of Killing*. Herman Koto says this to his daughter when, upon wrapping the brutally realistic reenactment of the destruction of Kampung Kolam by the Pancasila Youth (*Permuda Pancasila*), his young daughter who has been playing one of the child victims of the massacre cannot "come out of character."

nese grocery shop owner who was murdered in the massacre. Suryono's reenactment consists of him, as a small boy, finding and burying his stepfather's corpse. "Why should I hide this from you?" he asks the real killers, nervously smiling. They coldly dismiss his contribution, offering a fairly elaborated aesthetic criticism of why "they can't use it." Instead, Suryono acts the part of a condemned man about to be beheaded via Anwar's special garroting technique. He is visibly shaking and upset even after "cut" is called.³¹

Or take the women and children who are drafted to play the auxiliary roles in the scenarios the killers devise for their film-within-a-film. Early on, a scene depicting a victim being apprehended by vigilantes is improvised by Anwar and his neighbors for Oppenheimer's camera. Even the impromptu scene powerfully conveys the terror of the original event. The neighbor women looking on have a hard time maintaining the 'fiction' of the scene; the tears of young children who are present demonstrate that they cannot do so at all. The problem of the immersive mimesis exceeding the limits of 'acting' reoccurs when Oppenheimer and the killers restage the destruction of Kampong Kolam. The addition of subtitled text reveals that every inhabitant of the original village was murdered

during one night in 1965 by the Pancasila Youth (PY). The restaging shown in *Killing* truly does seem to bring the village back to life, only to brutally extinguish it again at the hands of the actual PY members, secure enough to reenact their own murderous history. The extras feel the full weight of this scene and, again, many of them cannot break character once the filming is over. Anwar is stunned: "I never expected that it would look this awful."

Besides Anwar, not a single other individual in *Killing* appears to find the same self-conscious awareness. In fact, everyone else involved in the production remains immersed in the mimetically generated zone of mass death the production demands. The killers remain hopelessly unaware of themselves or accountable for what they did. Those around them who were themselves victims in 1965–66, or who simply had nothing to do with it at all, are consistently wrecked by their participation in the production. For Anwar, Oppenheimer has staged a series of auxiliary scenes that repeat the initial trauma and allow him to assimilate what was previously incomprehensible in the original event. He is primed to experience what Jean Laplanche has termed the "afterwardness" of trauma.³² This formulation originates with the early Freudian view that a trauma must, in fact, be constituted via two

³¹ The unfolding of this scene almost perfectly matches Freud's definition of a *traumatic situation*, as distinguished from a danger situation. What is striking is that Oppenheimer's setups do not elicit the recall of a remembered traumatic situation here and throughout the diptych—rather, these scenes are traumatic situations, marked by the *helplessness* of the experiencing subject. See Sigmund Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety," 1926, in *The Standard Edition* 20, p. 166.

³² The specific term that Freud uses for this effect is *Nachträglichkeit*, which Strachley typically translates in *The Standard Edition* as 'deferred action.' Laplanche takes issue with this translation in "Notes on Afterwardness," in *Essays on Otherness*, edited by John Fletcher, London: Routledge 1995, pp. 260–265. See also John Fletcher, *Freud and the Scene of Trauma*, New York: Fordham University Press 2013, p. 125.

or more events: the original trauma and the repetition (accidental or engineered by the analyst) of that primary event later.³³ For Anwar, this produces the symptoms Oppenheimer and his audience 'expect' to see. For the other participants, responses range from indifference to the abject panic of someone caught in the *initial* trauma. The brilliance and skill of the director in these scenes is unquestionable, demonstrating his capacity to stage situations that rise to the level of *human experimentation*. Symptoms proliferate as a result of Oppenheimer's experiment with violence; the promised 'healing' for those involved in the production, for the Indonesian people, or indeed for *us*, is nowhere in sight.

³³ This illustrates both the resonance Oppenheimer's diptych has with 'a' Freudian concept of trauma and his superficial understanding of this seeming 'inheritance.' The idea that an experimental restaging of trauma allows one to access a repressed, originary, *real* event does resonate strongly with the 'traumatic seduction' theory Freud wrestled with in the period of 1895–97. His subsequent rejection by 1900 of the seduction theory and its relatively simple cause-effect relation between primal event and later symptoms in favor of a concept of trauma that prioritized fantasy over a kind of experimental mimesis dramatically altered, in turn, Freud's later understanding of what 'trauma' is. While John Fletcher, taking his cue from Jean Laplanche's theory of primal seduction, convincingly argues that the complex temporal structure of 'afterwardness' never completely disappears from Freud's thinking on trauma, it is clear that Oppenheimer's basic premise that the 'healing' of trauma requires its repetition in the form of an active, mimetic experiment obviously distorts Freud's later thinking on this subject, as do most contemporary theories that posit trauma as such as primal and foundational to our very forms of living. See "Part II: Memorial Fantasies, Fantasmic Memories" in Fletcher, *Freud and the Scene of Trauma*, pp. 59–152. See also Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria*, and Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1895), in *The Standard Edition* 1.

Being *Malu*

Adi Rukun, the peripatetic ophthalmologist who serves as the protagonist of *Silence*, amplifies Oppenheimer's naturalist conception of trauma and human nature. *Silence* is organized around Adi meeting the men who murdered his older brother Ramli in a series of confrontations staged for Oppenheimer's camera. Like in *Killing*, nobody directly involved in Ramli's murder or the original massacre actually tries to hide the truth of what happened, begging the question: What 'lies' are exposed by a film in which the killers do not seem particularly interested in concealing their deeds? Only as the film progresses are details about Adi himself revealed to the viewer. We learn that Ramli was murdered two years before Adi was born. During the scene, Adi's mother expresses the deep anguish she and her husband experienced due to Ramli's murder, and it is revealed that Adi was conceived as a replacement son for Ramli. She says to Adi:

You look just like him. You are the answer to my prayers. I'd pray, "Please replace my dead son." [Looking at Adi] If you weren't born, I would have gone crazy. I thought my life was over. But two years after he died, you were born.

This draws a line between Adi and Ramli's killers much more directly. In effect, Adi exists because his brother was brutally tortured and murdered, born from the overwhelming violence of 1965–66. Thus, Adi

did not directly experience the killings, but in a perverse way he owes his very existence to them. In the logical structure of *Silence*, Adi serves as the locus of shame. This is not to say that we know without question what Adi is 'actually' feeling when he appears onscreen, and Adi never speaks directly about his feelings. And while the audience can infer powerful emotions under the restraint on Adi's face as he confronts the murderers, it is impossible to name the content of those emotions. What is important here is how the filmmaker has positioned Adi as monad, simultaneously existing in and wholly representing a single and complete world of trauma. Oppenheimer counts on us to already understand his motivation for seeking out those who murdered his brother, as a way to force them (and us) to recognize who he is.

Adi's role as the embodiment of a world of trauma, expressed in performative shame, helps us to understand the deeply ambiguous and troubling confrontation with the Hasan family, which serves as the climax to *Silence*. Years earlier, Oppenheimer had filmed Amir Hasan and Inong, very active participants in the Snake River massacre, explaining and reenacting in detail what they did. This old video footage is threaded through *Silence* as Adi views it, building as the film itself builds. Hasan and Inong's boasts turn from the general to the specific and we realize that they are describing how they murdered Ramli. The brutality of their torture and murder of the young man is absolutely horrific—we would argue as close to a calm embrace of the sadistic and the abject as perhaps ever

witnessed in cinema. Earlier in the film, Adi confronted Inong outside of his home while ostensibly fitting him for eyeglasses. Like most of the killers in the diptych, Inong freely admits his general participation in the murders, but angrily cuts the interview short when confronted with highly personal details. He senses a trap, not guilt, when confronted with specific acts. As Adi and Oppenheimer have come to shame him, not arrest or kill him, the encounter simply ends.

The extended confrontation with the Hasan family escapes resolution much in the same way. The family, confronted with detailed evidence of their father's actions during the massacre, deny any guilt over what took place. What distinguishes this confrontation from the one shown with Inong is the fact that, formally speaking, they are correct to deny guilt in this instance. There is no evidence that any one of the living members of the Hasan family directly participated in the murders. Amir Hasan's sons were too young at the time. It is quite likely that Hasan's wife knew what was happening, but somewhat unlikely that she directly participated. So why have Adi and Oppenheimer come? Clearly, the Hasan family has enjoyed a high standard of living, which, in part, is due to Amir Hasan's actions in 1965–66. It is equally clear that the head of the household worked to create and maintain the conditions of their own lives through a willingness to brutally kill members of the Partai Komunis Indonesia. Their lives, like those of Adi and his remaining family, are lives made legible through violence and shame. Adi has therefore come seeking recognition of

this commonality. Oppenheimer has come to film it, so that we can see it, and possibly recognize ourselves in those who were passively complicit.

Forgiveness is neither Experiment nor Therapy

In the radical evil of which we are speaking, and consequently in the enigma of the forgiveness of the unforgivable, there is a sort of “madness” which the juridico-political cannot approach, much less appropriate. Imagine a victim of terrorism, a person whose children have been deported or had their throats cut, or another whose family was killed in a death oven. Whether she says “I forgive” or “I do not forgive,” in either case I am not sure of understanding. I am even sure of not understanding, and in any case I have nothing to say. The zone of experience remains inaccessible, and I must respect its secret.

Jacques Derrida, “On Forgiveness” (2001)³⁴

An earlier scene provides the key to the motivation driving *Silence*: Adi and Oppenheimer visit the home of an old man, ‘famous’ for his ferocity during the massacres, and his adult daughter. At first, the pair do not

disappoint, as the daughter expresses pride in her father’s local fame as a killer and the old man chimes in with an absolutely evil story of beheading a woman and then bringing it around to a Chinese shop in town in order to frighten the people there. He also describes drinking the blood of his victims “so that [he] wouldn’t go crazy,” noting that typically “two glasses was enough.” The daughter, a little less proud on this particular point, grows uncomfortable with these details and claims that she “never knew this.” Adi reveals that his brother was among the murdered. Father and daughter noticeably stiffen; after a long silence, the daughter asks Adi to forgive her father, particularly as he is now a “senile” old man. The man, avoiding Adi’s gaze, does *not* ask forgiveness. He indicates that the revenge he has been expecting all of these years may finally be visited upon him. The daughter continues to talk, noting that she thinks she’s met Adi before and that, knowing each other now, they “are like family.” Another line is drawn. Tearful hugs and goodbyes are captured movingly by Oppenheimer’s camera. “Think of us as family,” the daughter repeats.

Adi and the daughter *recognize* each other. This is a model outcome for Oppenheimer, and in a situation where there is no clear political or legal avenues to address the mass murders that took place, this is at least something. But let us be clear: this recognition is predicated on the spectatorial logic of shame that we outlined earlier. Killers and victims are now a ‘family’ united in the shame of their common origins. Does this heal or change them? Perhaps. Who’s to say? It is

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, “On Forgiveness,” in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, London: Routledge 2003 (2001), p. 55.

quite striking, however, that the old man, *the actual killer*, neither recognizes nor welcomes Adi, particularly after Adi reveals who he is and why he is there. This failed recognition is attributed to his 'senility,' yet his telling of the murders he committed is cogent.

It is notable that the Hasan family also offers Adi an apology during their confrontation. After tense denials, interspersed with viewings of Oppenheimer's old videos of Amir Hasan, again and again putting the family on the spot, at times catching the widow in outright lies, the matriarch turns to Adi and says, "Adi, we apologize. We feel the same way you do." The apology competes with Amir Hasan's sons' denials that they should be held responsible for what their father did. While the family consistently tries to frame the relationship between themselves, Adi, and the filmmaker as one of 'friends,' they absolutely refuse to recognize Adi as sharing a form of life arising out of the massacres.³⁵ They are afraid of Adi in this moment as they

³⁵ Oppenheimer works quite deliberately to deny any legitimacy to the Hasan family's attempt to define their relationship to Adi in terms of 'friendship,' which is indexed in the language being used in the scene as a kind of 'acquaintance' lacking the ground for intimacy. According to the subtext of the family's speech here, they are claiming a very general connection by all being Indonesians rather than any greater shared link through history, kin, or locality. At times, the subtitled translations clearly indicate the director's bias. For example, at one point Amir Hasan's younger son is translated as saying, "Forget the past. Let's all just get along like the *military dictatorship* taught us." This seems to indicate the son's overt allegiance to the military and, given the younger son's overall demeanor, this is not a bad guess as to where his sympathies lay. This is *not*, however, what he actually said in this instance. Rather, he says, "Forget the past. Let's just get along like the *New Order* [Orde Baru] taught us." Referring to the Suharto government as the 'New Order' is a more general shorthand for referring to 'the government' and does not specifically index the Suharto regime as a military dictatorship. We agree with the judgment that the

fear that Amir Hasan's guilt, that *what he did*, is now being returned to them as *revenge*. While it makes sense to the Hasan family that they may be made to suffer as proxies for Amir Hasan's obvious guilt, they do not appear to feel the proper shame about their lives and privilege that the logic of *Silence* would expect of them. They cannot recognize Adi as a kinsman of these shared, shameful origins, and yet, strangely, the term 'family' comes to mark this distance.

This is obviously not the kind of healing the director aspires to. He tries again, after the shaken old woman offers her apology, to show more of his old interviews with Amir Hasan. The widow breaks down crying. The sons, now furious over her apology, angrily refuse to watch any more, bringing the encounter to a standstill. "Do you want this to end well or not?" the younger son hisses at Oppenheimer. Adi is silent, and everyone but the camera ignores him. His face is blank. The Hasans clearly believe that it is the director driving the confrontation and they turn to defend themselves from *him*. "I welcomed you here Joshua, but I don't like you

New Order should be classified as a military dictatorship. We do not, however, know if the younger son would agree with this or if this is specifically what he meant. It seems that he is instead saying that everyone should get along "as the *government* taught us," which is a more neutral utterance. Oppenheimer's subtitle serves to drive home the point that the younger son is something of a stooge for the military and for that reason would refuse Adi's attempt to talk about what Amir Hasan did. Nearly everyone in a wide range of contexts refers, however, to the Suharto government as the 'New Order.' While not an outright lie or mistake, this translation seems like a conscious choice to drive home how 'bad' the younger son is and in our view bends the fact of what he actually said a bit too obviously to the director's ends. Emphasis in the quotes was added.

anymore.” They disavow their friendship with him. The scene ends, unsettled.

Pretending They are Not There: Demons, Ghosts, and Accidents

Older son of Amir Hasan (OS): Because Joshua is making this film and my father wrote the book,³⁶ the wound is open. [To Adi, smiling] Otherwise, you wouldn't know me, right?

Adi: Of course I knew.³⁷ I knew all about this family. [OS's face collapses in a look of concern] All the vic-

³⁶ The reference is to the book *Embun Berdarah* [Bleeding Fog] that Amir Hasan wrote, detailing his involvement in the massacres of 1965–66. The book was presumably self-published, as the WorldCat database lists the title but no publisher. Hasan is shown discussing the book in the presence of his wife in the older footage that Oppenheimer shot of him. This footage catches his widow in a lie in this scene when she claims she did not know that her husband participated in the killings or wrote a book about it. Oppenheimer replays the older footage and Adi shows the family a copy of the book in this scene.

³⁷ This is a more complex expression than the English translation allows. Bahasa Indonesia has two words that can be translated as 'to know' in English, *kenal* and *tahu*. *Kenal* refers more to 'acquaintance' than to 'knowledge' and is what one would usually say when speaking of 'knowing' a person. *Tahu* is a more neutral expression, akin to the verbs 'to register' or 'to recognize' in English. Adi and Amir Hasan's Older Son both use the word *tahu* in this exchange, which is a significant choice of words to use in reference to persons in this heated context. The Hasan family uses the same word in denying any knowledge of Amir Hasan's role in the killings in 1965–66. Writing about a different situation where a woman 'confronts' the murderer of her husband, James Siegel sums up why the word choice is important: "[The woman] does not want to know [the killer] as a person, which could mean wanting revenge. She disregards him as a person, leaving him to the authorities. But for her peace of mind, she wants to see him. In other words, she wants to see him without knowing him, to see him without trying to see behind his face into his thoughts, motives, or feelings" (Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta*, p. 102).

tim's families know who the killers are. But that doesn't mean we want revenge.

Younger son of Amir Hasan (YS) [Agitated, aggressive; shown in tight facial close up]: Do you want revenge?

Adi: If I wanted revenge I wouldn't come like this.

YS: Who knows? Maybe that's why Joshua came!

Joshua Oppenheimer demands accounts of the massacres in the Indonesian diptych that seem at odds with how the victims of the violence themselves wish to express what happened to them. This distinguishes him profoundly from those for whom he purports to speak. It is clear that Indonesians are well aware of what happened in 1965–66. As Adi informs the Hasans, all the victims' families know. Neither the killers nor the Indonesian government have ever bothered to deny the facts either. Oppenheimer understands this silence in the face of what everyone already knows as proof of

So the Younger Son's fear that Adi wants revenge is not marked in the language Adi is using, and upon hearing Adi's denial he quickly shifts his focus. In a situation where the actual killer cannot be known or he cannot speak for himself, and yet the demand for a confession is what the director has come for, it is significant that the Younger Son finds Adi's answer plausible and turns his attention to the intentions of the filmmaker himself. Immediately prior to this exchange, Oppenheimer has assured the Hasan family that "he does not want to make anyone feel uncomfortable" and the Older Son insists "we are all friends here." The Hasan family 'knows' only Oppenheimer in the *kenal* sense of this term; it is the director, therefore, that by this logic may well be the one seeking some form of revenge against the Hasan family.

a kind of collective trauma that impedes justice and healing and calls for a therapist who can “encourage them to struggle for truth.”³⁸ It never occurs to him that it could be any other way—that his own ‘fear of looking’ is *not* what is at stake for his Indonesian interlocutors or that pursuing his experiment in bringing a particularly virulent form of violence to his audience might actually be taking risks that his interlocutors (subjects and viewers alike) neither want nor need.

One strong indication of the chasm between Oppenheimer and his interlocutors is the manner in which the film-within-a-film produced by the murderers in *Killing* is ignored, namely, the terms which the ‘inner’ film wants to express. *Killing* presents the scenes from “Born Free” to either advance its own narrative (particularly the more realistic scenes where Anwar is playing a victim) or inserts sequences where the amateur filmmakers depict supernatural, vengeful beings and bizarre, Busby Berkeley-like song-and-dance productions as a kind of surreal ornamentation inflecting the entire project. For a largely Western audience, the film the killers are themselves making serves to solidly index them as *weird* and *sick*—and amateurish, providing them cover to simultaneously identify with and disavow the individuals they see on screen. Sympathetic reviewers have understood Oppenheimer’s strat-

egy as a form of “intertextuality.”³⁹ This is not wrong. But such a reading effaces the seriousness by which these seemingly insane scenes were produced and keeps the audience at a safe distance from the central conceit that the auteur-perpetrators are more concerned with revenge being visited upon them due to their admitted guilt than with any need to exorcise trauma in the form of a violently cathartic cinematic experiment.

“It is initially tempting to read ghosts in Southeast Asia as symptoms of trauma,” Rosalind Morris has written.⁴⁰ Morris is sympathetic to the idea that the concept of trauma has something to offer in understanding violence, death, and the persistence of ghosts and supernatural beings in such zones. Her account of trauma and ghosts is quite distinct from what Oppenheimer presents in his diptych, however, as the ghost in her narration provides a figure through which the wound of being confronted with death is reframed within the register of the *accident*. As a figure expressing survival in the face of the inexplicable appearance with death, having to face the ghost or spirit provides

³⁸ Henry Barnes and Tom Silverstone, “Interview: Joshua Oppenheimer on The Look of Silence: ‘It’s a memorial for the lives that are broken’—video interview” *The Guardian*, June 10, 2015.

³⁹ Susan Falls, “Review of The Act of Killing,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, 1 (2015), pp. 111–112.

⁴⁰ Rosalind C. Morris, “Giving Up Ghosts: Notes on Trauma and the Possibility of the Political from Southeast Asia,” in *positions: east asia cultures critique* 16, no. 1 (2008), p. 236.

a path to historicizing what would otherwise be a meaningless encounter with a disordered world. Finding both order and meaning in the appearance of the surviving ghost, an ethical relation to futurity is forged.⁴¹

Morris offers her account from the perspective of victims of trauma and 'accident,' which is most certainly not the perspective of the killers in Oppenheimer's films. Yet "Born Free" appears to express this same logic with the polarity reversed. While the fragmentary presentation of these scenes makes interpreting them on their own terms difficult, it is unmistakable that the ghosts and spirits serve as vengeful figures for the murderers, giving *a face* to the now faceless thousands who lost their lives at the hands of these men. In a sense, it allows them to anticipate and name the revenge they believe will eventually visit them. With the exception of Anwar's engineered 'epiphany,' none of the killers or their families in either film seem particularly concerned with shame and trauma in the way Oppenheimer expresses it. Rather, they are concerned with guilt and revenge, and the fact that spirits (or, in the case of Adi, *doppelgänger*) are figures that serve as signs of a potential future that can be anticipated through a reading of the sign the figures represent to them.

The drive to give a face to the accidental, faceless jumble of the masses arguably fueled the murderous intensity of the original massacres. Referring to the more recent mass killings of criminals in Indonesia in

the 1980s, James Siegel argues that criminals, like the communists before them, are massacred to make them explicitly legible in *political* terms: "Massacring them draws them into awareness; it is an attempt to make something that otherwise exists only hazily, but with implications of force, memorable . . ."⁴² Contrary to the director's own reading of the situation, we can see that nearly every active agent in Oppenheimer's films (this would include Adi in *Silence* as well) is seeking to give a face to the otherwise faceless agent of violence that has, or may in the future, confront them for what has happened. This should not be mistaken for a desire to 'get to know them'; nor is this a therapeutic register, despite the cloyingly bad-faith 'healing' that Oppenheimer claims the films offer. Rather, it is a violently political zone where any demand for recognition is likely *still* to draw one into a *direct* confrontation with death.

Killing and *Silence* betray no interest in these facts whatsoever. Instead, Oppenheimer's Indonesian diptych is offered as an instrument for his audience to vicariously experience their own presumed anxieties and shame, shaking them out of their 'passivity' into some form of action. This is clearest when we consider the final scene of *Silence*. As in the opening scene, Adi is shown watching Oppenheimer's old footage of his brother's killers describing their murders in detail. Again, they continue to provide an improvised reenactment on the banks of the Snake River as they talk. It is now obvious to the viewer that Adi is witnessing

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 237–238.

⁴² Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta*, p. 8.

the very reason he exists at all, having been clearly established as the substitute son for his dead brother. He is, in effect, witnessing his own conception. He is a man born out of an abhorrent act of torture and murder and a living reminder of the pain and loss of Ramli. Rejecting the possibility that this image does *not* in any clear way speak for itself, we are meant to read Adi as a creature of shame. We in the audience watch Adi watch himself through the beautiful, abject tableau that Oppenheimer has constructed, but his *actual* life bears little consequence within the ideal outcome of this experiment.

The seductive beauty of Oppenheimer's diptych does, indeed, lead us to reflect on ourselves. Anwar's shame is 'our' shame; Adi's pain is 'our' pain. Nick Fraser is right: this indeed does not "feel right," and it is obvious that it is our own feelings that are at stake, not Anwar's or Adi's or those of "the Indonesian people" in general. The emotions and beliefs of Oppenheimer's subjects remain just as inaccessible to us now as when we started—and knowing their minds is not the point anyway. Nor is obtaining justice for them or from them. The justification for *Killing* and *Silence* would appear to be as a form of *human experimentation* directed squarely towards an audience that the director presumes to be traumatized, passive and worldless. This is hardly an emancipatory project. In fact, it resembles the late-capitalist demand for what Rancière has termed "the unbounded experimentation with our own lives," a form of engagement that intensively conflates "world" and "other" with "self" and ultimately produces an

acutely felt "shame without emancipation."⁴³ Inadvertently marking the historical situation of *our* present, one must ask: How else can one understand a project that actively seeks to reformulate political responsibility and ethics as existing within an aestheticized, universal vision of human nature defined by trauma? In excluding politics or history via a cinematically realized human figure dominated by traumatic narcissism, is there anything left other than the possibility of revenge—making everything personal cannot help but intimate the strong possibility of reprisal, regardless of one's therapeutic intentions—or the embrace of a vain melancholy? The director would undoubtedly dispute this, but *this is what he shows us* in his Indonesian diptych, unintentionally echoing a powerful claim by Allen Feldman: "The metaphor and diagnostics of traumatization have become a creeping philosophy of history that colonizes the political with a tropological inventory of terminal temporality—a history of political trauma as the end of history, of historicizability itself."⁴⁴

In keeping with the logic of Lübecker's criteria for "feel-bad" films, the experiment in Joshua Oppenheimer's diptych is ultimately oriented towards the presumed precarity and passivity of his audience.⁴⁵ Experimenting with this (contestable) hypothesis

⁴³ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London: Verso 2009, pp. 31–34.

⁴⁴ Allen Feldman, *Archives of the Invisible: Of War, Photopolitics, and Dead Memory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2015, p. 231.

⁴⁵ Within the broader "feel bad" domain, *Killing* closely resembles what Lübecker calls "assault" films; *Silence* more closely conforms to his description of "unease" films. Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film*, pp. 47–57; pp. 98–100.

within cinema is not, by itself, objectionable. In fact, we argue that such experiments constitute an incredibly powerful approach to filmmaking. Putting the audience at risk in this manner can produce dynamic avenues for reflection and, if we are able to disregard the suspicious dichotomy between thinking and acting, one might even find real change in the viewer. Our objections to Oppenheimer's Indonesian diptych are therefore not rooted in objections to putting an audience at risk. In fact, we disdain these films due to the fact that, in course of potentially putting his Indonesian subjects in literal peril, Oppenheimer does not actually put his audience at risk at all. In his films, the imperialism of our trauma is seemingly without limit, pictures of the infinitely receding horizon of a fallen, post-secular humanity, providing both distance from, and comfort in, the fact that we are 'all' somehow the killers of 1965–66. This not only erases an actual history of guilt and responsibility; it also, in the end, neuter the possibility of grasping and recognizing (however incompletely) actual trauma suffered by actual people. Can we really apprehend the pain or precarity of others only by appropriating it according to our own desire, misdirected as a generalized human nature, in order to possess it as our own? This would seem more an exercise in confirming a hypothesis known in advance than in being truly open to what might allow one to obtain justice, to grant forgiveness, or to survive in spite of everything, even when justice or forgiveness is simply beyond one's reach and renewed violence is never very far away. To give form, cinematic or other-

wise, to such aporias is indeed a risky business. It would seem that those others we seek to 'know' and 'heal,' represented within the passive circularity of the form of mimesis to which Leys draws our attention regarding contemporary understandings of trauma, are the ones required to bear the real burden of Oppenheimer's experiments in this field. *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*, in asserting an answer as to 'who' we are in advance of any question, can only insist on their own negative humanism of shame and abjection in their versions of violence's fabled experiment. Desperately insisting that to gaze at Adi's face, or even Anwar's face, only mirrors our own, they relieve us of the demand to actually look at them, to contemplate what happened and what they did, what is happening now, and how we might *actually* be connected, culpable, or even *guilty* ourselves.

CHAPTER 3

BEASTS OF THE LAND, BEASTS OF THE OCEAN: LUCIEN CASTAING-TAYLOR'S EMBRACE OF THE CATASTROPHE

[*Sweetgrass*, 1:19:13]

[Pat Connolly, a shepherd, in medium shot, standing in dead brush, back to camera, dog laying by his side, outside of thick brush—framed by deep blue sky, the Absaroka-Beartooth mountain range in far background—he is holding a mobile phone to his ear with his left hand while he relieves himself with his right]

... this fuckin' phone ... Hi Rio ... I'm on top of a mountain ... oh, it just ... aw, it don't work sometimes ... aw it's miserable up here ... yeah ... I, well, this is bullshit, mom! ... I'm running my guts out, mah dog is so sore footed he can't walk [verge of crying] ... my knee's all screwed up ... my knee is hurtin' ...

[Cut to mountains, immense in the far distance—a slow 360° pan]

... my dog won't even leave camp! [exasperated] ... I can't even get him to go with me! [crying now] ... he can't walk ... [exhales] ... this is, it's impossible! ... it's so goddamn rough that you kill a horse ... and I mean my horse is ribs and bones [composed] ... yeah! ... I'm just ridin' the shit out of 'em ... and Tommy dog, I'm [garbled] I'm helpless, I mean, I, he's the only dog I got ... well, Elaine left a three-legged son-of-a-bitch in here and ... [deep snort] ... just as well, I so ...

“Why did you do this to us?!”

[A] catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation.

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)¹

“Why did you do this to us?!” is the question raised by a University of Edinburgh student in response to a required class screening of Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash's 2009 film *Sweetgrass*. This film, and to an even greater extent *Leviathan* (2012), expresses what the filmmakers take to be the most basic, primitive condition of humanness: violence. *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*

merge content and form, placing before an audience cinematic objects that are about violence and are themselves violent. There's little that can be gained from straightforward descriptions of these films: *Leviathan* is and is not a film about a fishing boat that anchors in New Bedford, Massachusetts; *Sweetgrass* is and is not a film about sheep herders in Montana. Each film cultivates a sense of collapse, *homo laborans* engaged in the unwitting toil of their demise—a labor that tries and fails to create distance between humans and nature, or to reshape and instrumentalize nature. To demonstrate this, the filmmakers work on the body from the inside out. The trajectory from *Sweetgrass* to *Leviathan* demonstrates an ever-increasing willingness to push the ‘affect experiment’ to its limits through an experimental design that is elegant and simple: unleashing the raw potential of sound and image alone may reveal the truth of our own form of life, a form fastened to nature through violence.

Our question is the following: Should we go along with this? Or rather: Why do we go along with it so gleefully? Does the critical strategy of immersing an audience in violence (much of the time diffuse and hard to name, yet undoubtedly haunting) produce something other than the very worldlessness that the filmmakers themselves appear to decry in their discussions around the films? If this is an experiment, then our goal here is to see the experiment through to its end, and perhaps to make some judgment or at least find its limit. We do this while aware that the ability to

¹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador 2003, p. 21.

sort this out, through language, is precisely what *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* intend to render inoperative.

Leviathan and the Ethnographer

Interviewer: You are both anthropologists by profession?

Paravel: We used to be.

Castaing-Taylor: We are recovering anthropologists.

Paravel: We still are. But we're just trying to forget this dark side of us.

Interview with Dustin Chang (2013)²

Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel often express their relation to anthropology in conflicted terms. Originating with Castaing-Taylor's criticisms of what he derisively termed 'discursive' visual anthropology in the 1990s, films produced by Harvard University's Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL) have consistently sought to undercut any attempt to rely on speech in film or other visual media in the context of anthro-

² Dustin Chang, "Interview: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel on *Leviathan* and the Possibilities of Cinema," *Screen Anarchy*, February 26, 2013.

pological work.³ As Castaing-Taylor wrote in 1996, "so long as anthropologists continue to hold that language is paradigmatic for anthropology, then a 'pictorial-visual' mode of anthropology can only come into being by divesting itself of its distinguishing features. And if that is the case, then why bother?"⁴

Why bother indeed? We won't reproduce the lengthy critical commentaries on both films, except to signal that the overriding aspiration of the filmmakers is to produce works that are positioned explicitly in opposition not only to typical 'discursive' modes of anthropological filmmaking but also to the very notion that anthropology itself is an interpretive practice reliant largely on words in the service of securing knowledge about the diversity of the (almost entirely) human world. As Catherine Russell notes in her discussion of *Leviathan*, the SEL aims to produce "more experimental, embodied, and aesthetic" works than existing categories of research and film can encompass. Russell goes on to claim that there is something "monstrous" about such a project, clarifying that she means this "in a good sense."⁵ We agree that *Leviathan* is 'monstrous': the question of in what sense we mean this remains open for the moment.

We do not intend to take the filmmakers at their word that *Leviathan* represents something particularly

³ Castaing-Taylor founded the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University in 2006 and, as of 2017, remains its director.

⁴ Lucien Taylor, "Iconophobia," *Transition* 6(1) no. 69 (1996), p. 85.

⁵ Catherine Russell, "*Leviathan* and the Discourse of Sensory Ethnography: *Spleen et idéal*," *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, 1 (2015), pp. 27–34.

new, as a way of sensing the world through images. After all, it is not so easy to forget anthropology's dark side. Still, Castaing-Taylor and Paravel produce something in *Leviathan* that directly challenges the long-held notion of what an ethnographic film 'is' and what anthropologists can or should be doing in the contemporary world. This alone is truly a remarkable achievement: the classical notion of ethnographic film has remained seemingly unchanged since the consolidation of anthropology as a 'respectable' discipline within (what would become known by the mid-20th century as) 'the social sciences.' We agree with Anna Grimshaw when she states that the institutionalization and rationalization of anthropology as a discipline in the middle years of the 20th century has led to an unwarranted disavowal of previously fruitful overlaps with the creative arts.⁶ We suspect that nearly all anthropologists would identify themselves as 'recovering' if this were the whole story. However, at the peril of offending the self-image of the filmmakers, we insist that there *is* more to it and note *Leviathan's* limited affinity with efforts in the 19th and early 20th centuries to come to terms with the sensuous aspects of the image and the relation of expressive works of art to the cultures and worlds that produced and sustained them over time.

⁶ Anna Grimshaw, "Part I: Visualizing Anthropology," in *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, pp. 15–68.



3.1 Seagulls, *Leviathan*, 2012

Catherine Russell convincingly links *Leviathan* to Walter Benjamin's notion of "anthropological materialism" and his theory of experience elaborated through concepts such as mimesis and aura. For Russell, the film constitutes "a theory of experience" that "seems to tip the balance somewhat toward a sensual and formal abstraction beyond any capacity for cultural knowledge."⁷ We would add that much of how *Leviathan* works as a cinematic object relies even more explicitly on the concept of the 'emotive formula,' a series of emotionally charged visual tropes dependent for their power upon their relative consistency through time. Both *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*, while powerful and innovative within this contemporary context, can hardly be understood as radical breaks with the past or as works whose force stands outside of the history of

⁷ Russell, "*Leviathan*," p. 28.

academic disciplines such as anthropology or art history.⁸ In fact, what we find in these films is the *return* of aspirations that at one time resided at the very heart of these disciplines. Here we find survival and its opposite.

Naturalism, Survival, Catastrophe

The new, because it cannot take its place in history, is also that which is most ancient: an unhistorical occurrence to which we are called upon to answer as if it were the impossible, the invisible—that which has always long since disappeared beneath ruins.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980)⁹

The image of the sea in *Leviathan* is the access point to its power, just as the mountains give entrée to the herder's world in *Sweetgrass*. Both films achieve a sense of disruption from the beginning by opening not with 'humans' but *with the world itself*. By pursuing this cinematic strategy, the filmmakers effectively, if imperfectly, address the nagging insistence that an image cannot of its own accord express something singular about the world contained within it. Thus, *Leviathan*



3.2 On the deck, *Leviathan*, 2012

and *Sweetgrass* (albeit less aggressively) stand as contemporary examples of a type of vehemently naturalist filmmaking that Gilles Deleuze associated with directors such as Erich von Stroheim and Luis Buñuel, and that we earlier linked with Werner Herzog. Again, the key to our claim is the manner in which *Leviathan* tactically takes the viewer downward, fracturing any form of knowing that would yield *knowledge* of non-human entities or of nature's power itself. *Downward* is indeed the direction we travel, as *Leviathan* plunges the viewer directly into the depths of the image (which include the overwhelming, booming, at times nauseating swell of sound in the film). Viewers do not simply skim along the surface of these images; Castaing-Taylor and Paravel dunk us into the unquiet, dark originary nature that waits below: the crushing, opaque horror of Herzog's nature.

⁸ Christopher Pinney, referring to Dziga Vertov, Clement Greenberg, and cubism, makes much the same claim about *Leviathan*. See Christopher Pinney, "Aqueous Modernism," *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, 1 (2015), pp. 35–40.

⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1995 [1980], p. 37.

Deleuze is clear when he writes that the originary worlds of such films—as we see it, earlier films that share a kinship with *Leviathan* and *Sweetgrass*, like *Greed* (1924) and *The Exterminating Angel* (1962)¹⁰—run parallel with the real geographic and historical milieu that serve as their medium, and that such worlds are defined by a radical beginning, an absolute end, and a line of the steepest slope.¹¹ In other words, this is transparently a theory of *time* relative to the cinematic image, even if both *time* and *theory* are overtly disavowed in the works by their creators (after all, surely nature is not on the clock and doesn't require concepts to be). Taken in this way, the logic of *Leviathan* is overtly *naturalistic* in the manner Deleuze outlines. Throughout the film, its naturalism is made explicit through the repeated swooping of the camera up from the depths of the sea, which runs parallel to the violence of extracting all manner of sea life from these depths, onto the harsh, metallic-chaotic surface of the ship's deck. The fact that nearly all of the shots were produced from lightweight GoPro extreme sport video cameras, which were attached to sticks or on various points on the bodies of fishermen (rarely at eye-level, thus destabilizing any fixed point of view) allows for such naturalistic-unrehearsed images to be realized. Further, the end

coincides with the beginning, as the debris of what remains of the harvest—the blood, the decapitated heads and extracted guts, shells, whole unwanted creatures such as starfish—wash around the deck and drop back into the turbulent churn of the ocean: the audience's perspective floats down with them.

In contrast to what we see in *Leviathan*, *Sweetgrass* provides the viewer with a human figure. Still, in each film the ecosphere plays a central role: most of the footage was generated from a camera appended directly to a body (in this case, Castaing-Taylor's body); and, like *Leviathan*, *Sweetgrass* lacks any overt narration or explanation. Starting in the Spring with the lambing of the sheep, *Sweetgrass* traces the drive of the herd into the high country of Montana to graze during the summer months, followed by their return in the Fall to go to market. Through dreamlike, highly aestheticized images, Castaing-Taylor and Barbash show us the struggles of human lives inextricably intertwined with non-human lives within the rugged and often-unforgiving environment of Montana's Absaroka-Beartooth Mountains. By adopting this deliberate, detailed approach, the humor, hard work, and complexity of the lives of the herders (several of whom become visible as *characters* as the film progresses) comes into full view as worthy of attention and understanding. What also comes into view is a form of life (and livelihood) that is dying out, a fact made explicit during a conversation between the grizzled herder

¹⁰ Deleuze does not directly cite documentary or ethnographic films as examples of what he means by "naturalism." Drawing on examples closer to *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*'s status as non-fiction works, we would include films ranging from Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (1933), Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1963) and even 'art' films such James Benning's *Natural History* (2014), and numerous films by Stan Brakhage.

¹¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, pp. 124–126.

3.3 The herd, *Sweetgrass*, 2009

John Ahern and the pickup driver at the close of the film.¹² The driver asks, “What’s next?”

Commentators on *Sweetgrass* have correctly noted the similarity of this film with those of Castaing-Taylor’s predecessor at Harvard, Robert Gardner (particularly Gardner’s *Forest of Bliss* (1985)), but often neglect to extend this genealogy much further. Yet this particular film reveals Castaing-Taylor’s explicit debt to a foundational work in the ethnographic film canon, Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922). Faced with the violence of survival, humans struggle ‘to live’ in both films. Flaherty was explicit with his redemptive, salvage logic of *Nanook*. While Castaing-Taylor and Barbash would likely bristle at this particular claim, we nevertheless

¹² Ensuring that the implied reference to ‘the end’ is not missed by the viewer, the filmmakers provide the following text as part of the closing credits: “In 2003, over three months and one hundred and fifty miles, the last band of sheep trailed through Montana’s Absaroka-Beartooth mountains.”

argue that *Sweetgrass* is just as interested in showing the essential, natural aspects of the herder as Flaherty was in showing the Inuit as the last ‘natural’ man.

Paravel’s contribution (itself bearing the marks of her mentor, Bruno Latour) to *Leviathan* seems to mark a crucial difference between it and *Sweetgrass*. It is in *Leviathan* that Paravel and Castaing-Taylor conjure a different kind of visual anthropology in its most extreme form. But can the discipline of anthropology *take it*? In other words, with no identifiable figure, what is the anthropological object? Arguments suggesting that the film is emblematic of a new form of “embodiment”¹³ or “inter-species ethnography”¹⁴ miss a basic point about the necessity of the (partly represented, at times listless) human figure, who, when not entirely absent, is *emptied out*.¹⁵ We ask (and we suspect that the filmmakers are asking as well): After this emptying, what remains?

[*Sweetgrass*, 1:20:28]

¹³ Christopher Pavsek, “*Leviathan* and the Experience of Sensory Ethnography,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, 1 (2015), pp. 4–11. Eirik Frisvold Hanssen, “His Eyes Are Like the Rays of Dawn’: Color Vision and Embodiment in *Leviathan*,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, 1 (2015), pp. 20–26.

¹⁴ Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn, “*Leviathan*: An Ethnographic Dream,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, 1 (2015), pp. 49–53.

¹⁵ Alanna Thain’s suggestion that *Leviathan* constitutes a form of self-survey (drawing from Raymond Ruyer’s concept of *survoler*) on the part of the birds is provocative, but seems to elide the question of the human, which the film inescapably raises for a human scientist. See Alana Thain, “A Bird’s-Eye View of *Leviathan*,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, 1 (2015), pp. 41–48.

[Pat Connolly] . . . *I don't know what's wrong with my knee, it's clickin', I don't know . . . what's that? . . . I don't know, but whenever I walk it pops, you can hear it, just like breakin' a branch . . . it don't really hurt, it just grinds . . . it ain't hurtin' yet, but it's going to if I keep this shit up . . . I mean . . . I got to do somethin', 'cause . . . yeah?* [crying again] . . . *I had them goddamn sheep in a bowl, and they went out over a cliff, mother* [exasperated] . . . *I can't even climb up the goddamn thing! . . . so . . . I don't know, it's just, this is bullshit . . . I . . . I don't know . . . but I don't, I don't get to bed 'til eleven o'clock, by the time you bed them sheep, then I'm up at five, and if the dogs bark at all at night, and then I can't sleep durin' the day, you don't dare!* [exasperated] . . . [sniffs] . . .

Pathosformel

The sensuous image and the idea that emotive formulas persist across time have an extensive pedigree in art history. Although only now coming back into play as a legitimate concept, most often rebranded as 'affect' along broadly Deleuzian lines, the problem of how certain corporeal experiences are given objective form over time was one that animated a number of writers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There are many versions of the problem we can cite: Robert Vischer's distinction between "seeing" and "looking" as a way to account for expressive forms that become charged

with value and Alois Riegl's "empathy" theory, figuring the mimetic and the sensuous as a perpetual psychological disposition that in turn works to provide the force and value for cultural expression, are but two examples.¹⁶ The most explicit version of the emotive formula we detect in *Leviathan*, however, comes from Aby Warburg.

Warburg's notoriously fragmented, aphoristic writing on his version of the *Pathosformel* requires us to understand the context of its invention. Georges Didi-Huberman outlines Warburg's problematic as follows:

[T]he *survival of Antiquity* is to be detected in *historical life* itself, in, as it were, the hollow of the visible succession of events, their reverse side or lining, sometimes in the shock wave, and, thus, at the surface [pan]. The "movement of survival" must be understood as a counterrhythm to the "movement of life." The time of the *contretemps* has a parallel, it seems, in the realm of the plastic, visual, and corporal, in a dynogram of *countermovement*. And survival, it seems, is a symptom in the movements of life, manifesting itself as a countereffect which is neither completely living nor completely dead, but, instead, is the *other genre of life*, that of the things which have passed away and yet persist to haunt us. . . . Warburg

¹⁶ Robert Vischer, "The Optical Sense of Form," in *Empathy, Form and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, edited by Harry Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou, Santa Monica: Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities 1994, pp. 89–123; Alois Riegl, *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, New York: Zone Books 2004.

provided the answer to this great question—*what are the corporeal forms of temporal survival*—by developing the concept of “emotive formulas” (*Pathosformeln*).¹⁷

The “emotive formula” is therefore a way of conceptualizing the irruptive, violent force of a gesture, an expression, a movement that is both infused with passion and, in its perception, in turn produces a sensuous, passionate movement in the receiver. In effect, the form and content of images that express such gesture and movements are one and the same, complicating the task of deriving ‘meaning’ from them. By now we are very far from Panofsky’s iconology or theories of symbols and semiology. We find ourselves in a terrain of struggle with images that can be simultaneously singularized as objects in time and history and yet are animated by a force that is neither timely nor historical in any simple way. To suppress any element of such images—to choose a side—violates the effectiveness of the formula to grasp an expressive image. But what would it mean to *purposefully* choose a side?

The side disavowed today is the ‘movement of survival’: the constant ‘counter-effect’ haunting these irruptive, violent gestures and, seemingly against its will, launching contemporary forms of expression into a ghostly correspondence with the past. Remember, Warburg’s project was aimed toward understanding the recurrence of antique forms determinate of the

¹⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2017 [2002], p. 116, emphasis in original.

expressive values that famously characterize the European art of the Renaissance. This was, as Didi-Huberman puts it, “an anthropology of time.” More specifically, this is the “science of culture” articulated by the English anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor¹⁸—a science strongly devoted to the identification and study of ‘survivals’ in the course of cultural development and expression.¹⁹

Our assertion that a film like *Leviathan* would in any way (even when read through a trendy figure like Warburg) rely upon a discarded Tylorian anthropology for its force may initially seem odd. Closer inspection reveals a surprising correspondence between Castaing-Taylor’s films and the earliest days of modern anthropology’s call for a re-evaluation of Tylor’s foundational work. Even so-called cutting-edge contemporary

¹⁸ E.B. Tylor (1832–1917) was the first anthropologist appointed at Oxford University in 1883. A leading social evolutionist known primarily for his two-volume work *Primitive Culture* (1871), Tylor developed a theory of animism as the foundational element of all religious expression and deployed a theory of ‘survivals’ as proof of social progress over time. He is considered a founder of British Social Anthropology. Andrew P. Lyons, “Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917),” in *Fifty Key Anthropologists*, edited by Robert Gordon, Andrew P. Lyons, and Harriet D. Lyons, London: Routledge 2011, pp. 234–239. See also E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (two volumes), London: J. Murray 1871.

¹⁹ Didi-Huberman summarizes the link as follows: “[Warburg and Tylor’s] projects sought to overcome the eternal opposition—which Lévi-Strauss would continue to criticize a century later—between the evolutionary model required by history and the type of atemporality with which anthropology is often credited.” Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Surviving Image: Aby Warburg and Tylorian Anthropology,” translated by Vivian Sky Rehberg, in *Oxford Art Journal* 25, 1 (2002), p. 62. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Introduction: History and Anthropology,” in *Structural Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books 1963 [1958], pp. 1–30. The irony with which Didi-Huberman uses the terms ‘required’ and ‘credited’ in this passage should not be lost on the reader.

anthropology appears to rely on Tylor's philosophical bet to privilege the fragmented, nonsensical, anachronistic elements of a culture as foundational of culture. Concepts of 'survivals' and 'emotive formulas' allow us to better understand overwhelmingly singular works like *Leviathan* or *Sweetgrass*, composed of feelings and impressions, as working cinematic objects. Indeed, if we neglect how both films invoke survivals and *are themselves survivals*, they come perilously close to snarls of anachronisms, primordial objects that violently force themselves on audiences without any attempt to 'make sense' or 'make meaning,' functions of the moving image that Castaing-Taylor, Barbash, and Paravel explicitly reject, at times coyly chiding the audience for needing them in the first place.

Still Life

Naturalism . . . tends to a glorification of that blind power over nature which is supposed to have its model in the blind play of the natural forces themselves; it is almost always accompanied by an element of contempt for mankind . . . a contempt that is at the bottom of so many forms of semi-enlightened thinking. When man is assured that he is nature and nothing but nature, he is at best pitied.

Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (1947)²⁰

²⁰ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, New York: Continuum 1974 [1947], p. 170.

Anthropologists suffer from various maladies, including an excessive attachment to humanity, and also a terribly debilitating respect for meaningful propositionality.

Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel,
Interview with Gail Tolley (2013)²¹

Finally, after nearly 70 minutes, a recognizable human figure appears on the screen in *Leviathan*. This is the scene to which nearly all commentators cling—a 'life-line' within an endless ocean of affect that constitutes most of the film. After all that has come before, this image is startling. Of course human beings appear on screen before this, but always in a partial, blurred, impressionistic fashion. There are no human *characters* in this film per se. The sea, the ships and their machinery, the birds, and especially the fish and ocean life—caught, the life literally crushed out of them, rhythmically dismembered with guts and heads and tails tumbling back down into the depths of the sea—all of these figures violently envelop the viewer. But the fisherman, the *human* fisherman, stays stubbornly out of sight or appears hazy around the edges of the frame: a fleshy hand guiding a massive heavy chain out of the depths to the deck of the ship; the engine of a sharp instrument, hacking skates apart; a tattooed canvas,

²¹ Gail Tolley, "Interview: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, directors of *Leviathan*," *List Film*, November 18, 2013

framed so tightly that only the inked image a 'mermaid as stripper' comes into view. Even the shot that immediately precedes the appearance of a human at minute 70 gives the sense of an irrelevance of the human as *human*; a bird's-eye shot of the deck of the ship, with men as insects, scurrying about, reminiscent of Geofrey Barkas's *The Battle of the Ants* (1922), certain dizzying sections of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) and (perhaps too obviously) John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929) and *Granton Trawler* (1934).

And suddenly we are confronted with a man, looking directly at us, sitting in the galley of the ship. Idle. Motionless. We believe at first the man is looking at us. Sound, suddenly discernable as language for the first time, indicates that the shot is from the perspective of the television that the man is staring at silently. Evidence of a meal sits on the table, so perfectly sham-bolic in proportionality that the tableau appears to be a cruel burlesque of David Bailly's classic work of 17th-century Dutch painting, the aptly titled *Still Life* (1651). The exhausted fisherman is watching the popular Discovery Channel reality series *Deadliest Catch*: the episode is callously punctuated with advertisements for constipation remedies. The watcher (whom we watch) begins to fidget, trying to stay awake. He fails. *Leviathan* cuts to black, and then slowly we emerge again from the sea. The roar on the soundtrack returns.

The moment of relative calm allows reflection, a form of action which is otherwise *attacked* in the film. This, in turn, allows us to ever so briefly think about how these images might actually relate to other similar

images in the world. In this moment of comparison—of thinking and reflecting—the durability of the formulas Warburg sought to identify and deploy as criteria in judging art becomes clearer. Very often the compositional elements in both *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* that allow the images to resonate with the viewer have an explicit affinity with the *Pathosformeln* that Warburg used to explain how the seemingly fixed, static images of antiquity were able to become mobile both in the singularity of their time of creation and across time, forever oscillating between a point in history and the surviving aspects of human forms of life that do not appear to be situated in historical time at all. Speaking about *Leviathan*, Castaing-Taylor admits:

[W]e did have some references. They weren't deliberate, in terms of our intentionality, while we were making the film, but while we were editing the film, we were thinking more painters [sic], more than about other filmmakers. We were thinking about Bosch and Breugel and Escher and Turner—the history of painting began to emerge, and the representation of nature and humanity's role in relation to nature began to emerge during post-production, during the editing.²²

Castaing-Taylor cites a range of artists presumably familiar to viewers of the film, but he could have just as

²² Allan Macinnis, "The Aesthetics of Slaughter: *Leviathan* in Context," *Cineaction* 2012, p. 64.

easily drawn from works depicting an agelessly violent, merciless world that drew Warburg's direct interest: prophetic works from the age of Luther, such as Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia I* (1514) and the title page of Johann Carion's *Prognosticatio* (1521);²³ the 15th-century Flemish tapestry *Alexander's Ascent with the Griffins and Journey to the Depths of the Sea* (which Warburg associated with the medieval imagination of "airships and submarines"),²⁴ the flashes of serpent lightning common in Hopi religious iconography;²⁵ and especially *Laocoön and His Sons*, as prototypical a representation of humanity's agonizing struggle with overwhelming natural forces as is likely to ever be produced.²⁶ In keeping with Warburg's general concept, Castaing-Taylor appears to visually cite works of art from the past in his films as a means of invoking commonly held cultural forms for the purpose of confronting the 'reality' of existence. Unlike typical notions of how tradition works in the present, there appears to be no nostalgia for a time in which we all 'belonged,' no Herzogian mania for origins, and a palpable sense that

it is the *fear* that these images invoke that gives them a dynamism in the present.

Colleen Becker summarizes Warburg's understanding of the relation between *Pathosformel* and collective memory as follows:

The invocation and recognition of jointly held and familiarizing metaphors offers a means to collectively grapple with states of psychological crisis. The individual's capacity to apprehend emotionally charged forms also keeps their powers at bay, creating a necessary space between the subject and its object of contemplation, in which rational thought emerges.²⁷

The question for us, noting the obvious and insistent expression of *primitive* forms in *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*, is whether or not the brute sensory technique the films deploy wrests some distance for the viewer to, in any way, *rationaly* contemplate the images in the films.²⁸ As we shall see, the answer to this question is

²³ Aby Warburg, "Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of the Art and Humanities 1999 [1920], pp. 597–698.

²⁴ Warburg, "Airship and Submarine in the Medieval Imagination," in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* [1913], pp. 333–338.

²⁵ Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1995. See also Philippe-Alain Michaud, "Among the Hopi (Chapter 5)," in *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, New York: Zone Books 2004 [1998], pp. 171–228.

²⁶ See Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image* (pp. 139–145) for a summary of Warburg's *Nachleben der Antike* archive and the sustained engagement with *Laocoön and His Sons* found there.

²⁷ Colleen Becker, "Aby Warburg's *Pathosformel* as methodological paradigm," *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 9 (2013), p. 6. See also Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, London: The Warburg Institute, University of London 1970, p. 296.

²⁸ Encouraged by the filmmakers themselves, *Leviathan* is often described as an updating of Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* (1851). On the surface, the link seems to be plausible, if it were not for the fact that Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's *Leviathan* seems at times to produce precisely the opposite effect of Melville's *Moby Dick*. We note the following passage from Chapter 41 of Melville's novel: "All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in *Moby Dick*." Thus, the

ambiguous and somewhat different for each film, a sliver of daylight that exists between otherwise quite similarly structured cinematic works.

Primitive Culture

I look on bad conscience as a serious illness to which man was forced to succumb by the pressure of the most fundamental of all changes which he experienced,—that change whereby he finally found himself imprisoned within the confines of society and peace. It must have been no different for these semi-animals, happily adapted to wilderness, war, the wandering life and adventure that it was for the sea animals when they were forced to either become land animals or perish—at one go, all instincts were devalued and ‘suspended.’ Now they had to walk on their feet and ‘carry themselves,’ whereas they had been carried by the water up till then: a terrible heaviness bore down on them. They felt they were clumsy at performing the simplest task, they did not have their familiar guide any more for this new, unknown world, those regulating impulses that unconsciously led them to safety—the poor things were reduced to relying on thinking, inference, cal-

leviathan of Melville serves to make otherwise unknowable elements of our existence as humans graspable in an image. We suspect that Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's leviathan is deployed for precisely the opposite effect, to draw attention to a collective, human myopia. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1988 [1851], p. 164.

culatation, and the connecting of cause with effect, that is, to relying on their ‘consciousness,’ that most impoverished and error-prone organ! I do not think there has ever been such a feeling of misery on earth, such leaden discomfort,—and meanwhile, the old instincts had not suddenly ceased to make their demands!

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887)²⁹

So what survives in *Leviathan*? The answer the filmmakers give appears to be ‘life itself.’ Looking back to Castaing-Taylor's “Iconophobia” we find this:

What makes film so captivating is that it is something other, or more, than just language. Indeed, given the apparent affinity of film with life itself, moving images evoking moving life, hearing evoking hearing, and seeing seeing.³⁰

Invoking Husserl and Heidegger, Castaing-Taylor elevates film to the status of being able to express “the undifferentiated significance of the human condition . . . the *Lebenswelt*, the lifeworld.”³¹ Language can only distance us from the “truth” of the *Lebenswelt*, whereas cinema, through its conventions, allows this truth “to

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, New York: Random House 1967 [1887], §16, p.84.

³⁰ Taylor, “Iconophobia,” p. 85.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

survive.” Clearly, this is a kind of transcendental reduction of Tylor’s notion of a survival, an “iconophilia” that seeks to rend the essential truth of images from the deceit of words.³² For Tylor (and for Warburg) the survival could *not* be perceived as such without the development of a science capable of identifying anachronistic elements as *symptoms* and then relating them to one another across time and cultural context.³³ Extending Tylor’s insight, Warburg’s survivals, which would rightly bear the name *primitive*, depend on an understanding of what ‘primitive’ means at the present moment of expression.³⁴ Warburg’s nameless science was intended to provide precisely that form of judgment—hardly an “undifferentiated significance.” The

³² See Boris Groys’s concept of “iconophilia” in *Art Power*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2008, pp. 125–127.

³³ Tylor, *Primitive Culture* 1, pp. 1–26. Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, and “Dürer and Italian Antiquity,” in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of the Art and Humanities 1999 [1905], pp. 553–558. See also Philippe-Alain Michaud, “Appendix I: *Zwischenreich: Mnemosyne*, or Expressivity Without a Subject,” in *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, pp. 251–275; and Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, pp. 25–26.

³⁴ Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image*, p. 139. The archaic charge of this term should be obvious to the reader, particularly given its common association with a racialized hierarchy of peoples ranging from ‘primitive’ to ‘civilized.’ Tylor’s own use of this concept is certainly not innocent of a presumed evolutionary ‘ranking’ of sorts, but this is not the primary purpose of his version. When used today, the term is nearly always deployed as an epithet, which is directly contrary to how we use it here. While it might be safer simply to find a more acceptable synonym—Agamben variously uses “transmission,” “reception,” and “polarization” to translate Warburg’s concept of *Nachleben*, doing anything he can to avoid the direct translation, ‘primitive’—our position is that ‘primitive’ is the most precise term to use, provided it is understood apart from its common, pejorative use today. Giorgio Agamben, “Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science,” in *potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999, p. 93.

filmmakers, however, would seem to entirely reject such an aspiration, hence their proclaimed break with anthropology and (in light of Castaing-Taylor’s earlier writings) with the entire tradition of Western pictorial art.³⁵ To take them at their word, the very idea of an emotive formula, even one as charged and idiosyncratic as Warburg’s, is already going too far, distancing the image from the ‘life’ that it simply, somehow, *is*.

Thus, Castaing-Taylor, and by extension the entire undertaking of the Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL), begs the question what is meant by ‘life’ in work dedicated to elucidating sense without the trace of writing. And yet, if we pay close attention to the elements that ‘survive’ in *Leviathan* and *Sweetgrass*, this fuller picture indicates that the form of life that is given attention is *primitive life expressed in the here and now*. This bears out in two ways in Castaing-Taylor’s films: first, the focus on man’s close proximity to other animals; second, standing face to face with the animal, the violence of human labor analogous to the violence of animal survival—never to adapt or to come to terms, but to claw and scrape. Both man and animal in these films labor to survive in nature, with the direction of this survival—its rawness—projected outward toward the

³⁵ Castaing-Taylor approvingly cites the following statement from Jean Mitry: “Whereas the classical arts sought to signify movement with the immobile, life with the inanimate, the cinema must express life with life itself. It takes up there where the others leave off. It thus escapes all their rules as it does their principles.” (cited in Taylor, “Iconophobia,” p. 87). While the concerns with affect, movement, and life overlap with Warburg and Benjamin’s projects, Mitry’s understanding of how an image expresses ‘life’ seems very far from them indeed.

audience. This cinematic strategy allows the filmmakers, in turn, to express the affinity between man and animal as a 'natural' condition, a condition which is in itself a survival, extending and generalizing the Tylo-rian notion of the concept. Further, Castaing-Taylor and his collaborators have unwittingly adapted Hannah Arendt's widely contested distinction between 'work' and 'labor' to Warburg's renovated concept of *Nachleben*, relegating human labor to the zone of the *animal laborans*, a violent zone where the unceasing effort to transform and live within nature produces no durability, no memory, no *world* as such.³⁶

Many critics who have written about these two films have asserted that, if there is any analysis or message to be found in them, it pertains to 'work' in the contemporary world (Véronique Paravel and J.P. Sniadecki's *For-*

eign Parts (2010), a film about imperiled car repair shops and junkyards in Willets Point, New York City, certainly adds to this reading). Although both films focus on an elaborated production process, it is seldom noticed that both are focused on divisions of the food industry—an industry existing to make human survival possible but not oriented towards the production of things as such. Thus, the relentlessly circular, punishingly difficult enterprises of sheepherding and commercial fishing, taken to their literal conclusion, make it possible to survive but do not, in themselves, fashion objects that would outlive their initial, singular moment of use.

This is not to ignore the elements of the films, particularly *Sweetgrass*, that do allow the relations between human beings and the myriad forms of tools, technologies, and things that populate the zones of their enterprise—in fact, highly elaborated forms of technology make these particular labors (and the films documenting them) possible in the first place. But in Arendtian terms, have we simply exchanged work for labor and collapsed means and ends into an abstract quest for abundance in the present over all else? It would seem that we could just as easily make films like these about factory work or the trading floor of a stock exchange, but the basic struggle to survive remains even at a great distance from the confrontations with nature. So, in a society devoted to relentless consumption, is all work simply dominated by the labor of survival? If these films pose a political question—a type of question that

³⁶ Hannah Arendt, "Labor" (Chapter 3) and "Work" (Chapter 4), in *The Human Condition* (Second Edition), Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1998 [1958], pp. 79–174. Arendt associates 'work' with the fashioning of durable elements of human culture (*homo faber*), conjoining such activities with founding and sustaining politics, culture, and civilization. 'Labor,' on the other hand, pertains to the ceaseless, often brutal, and ultimately ephemeral effort to sustain life in the barest, most elemental sense (*animal laborans*). Arendt argues that the modern tendency to elevate labor over work or politics (an assumption found just as easily in contemporary neoliberal thought as in Marx) is a perverse reversal of the original (i.e. Greek) concept of politics. It is not our intention to defend Arendt's controversial interpretation of the division between labor and politics here; rather, we simply wish to mark the correspondence between Arendt's analysis and what we see in *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*. It is clear that Arendt has generalized the well-known agonism between labor and the *polis* found in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Protagoras as typical of ancient Greek thought without adequately considering the very different understandings of labor and human life found in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, to name but two contrasting works. See Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Part Four: Work and Technological Thought," in *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, New York: Zone Books 2006 [1965], pp. 263–318.

the filmmakers emphatically deny they are posing—this would be it.

Leviathan Now

Behold, the hope of [Leviathan] is in vain: shall not one be cast down even at the sight of him? None is so fierce that dare stir him up: who then is able to stand before me?

Job 4: 9–10

It is no accident that the paragon of the SEL is entitled *Leviathan*. This name breathes life into one of the most powerful figures across time. The sea, the Old Testament, Hobbes's god-like sovereign—an uncanny, sublime force that no culture, no civilizing process, no technology can eradicate from within us. It is the return of the repressed *par excellence*. Castaing-Taylor and Paravel effectively, brutally, strip away our most durable instruments of control, showing that our biological existence remains as precarious and incomprehensible now as it was from the beginning. In sharp contrast with the films of Werner Herzog and Joshua Oppenheimer, *Leviathan* obliterates the very notion of prehistory or nature as a stable, knowable element of our human selves. There is no before and after; there is only the *here and now*, in the most reduced, primitive form of survival.

“Who then is able to stand before me?” Given their focus on life, *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan* are ambiguous

in the response they provide to this ancient question. The answer Castaing-Taylor gives is “life itself,” but we find this answer to be an uneven one, as the film shows that individual humans cannot hold out against the relentless violence of the natural world. Answered outside of the filmmakers' meta-commentaries on their works, it is clear that the world endures and overwhelms life, survived only by thing-like traces of lives that came to stand before the Leviathan. Thus, the films, regarded simply as objects, are the most dynamic and radical of all the film objects considered in this book. Within the intense, ephemeral violence of raw survival, only the action of responding to the wonder of existing (at all) seems to produce something that can *persist*. This does not seem to be the intended point of *Leviathan*, but it is undeniable that the film itself exists as a thing (a work of art) beyond authorship, expressing violence intrinsic not to life in an abstract sense but in a textured, felt reality. While we imagine ourselves distant from this elemental violence, it survives in the form of grinding labor at the threshold of the fisherman's tools (nets, knives, hands) and the sea.

Sweetgrass offers more explicit evidence of the inability to survive by those shown on screen, particularly in the scene with Pat Connolly that is woven into our chapter here. Castaing-Taylor has claimed that the subjects of his films are “intellectuals” of sorts, and Connolly provides a prime example in the course of an exasperated rant to his mother, referencing the violence of his own labor and survival in a world that moves without him and that he nevertheless must

face.³⁷ The slow pan across the colossal mountain peaks only serves to visually literalize the weight of the finitude he communicates to his mother. In short, the film memorializes Connolly thinking his own extinguished existence. This action will not allow him to survive, but forms an image that may outlast him, joining with the forms of expression that Warburg, taking cues from Tylor, sought to better understand in terms of the ahistoric, emotive, primitive formulas, which gave such expressions the power to endure at the dynamic core of cultural life itself.

We find it puzzling that Castaing-Taylor and his collaborators explicitly seek to deny the force of actions like Connolly's thinking-out-loud to his mother when talking about the films, and more generally about sensory ethnography as a method. The desire to eradicate anything that may endure (particularly language) is evident in the difference between *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*, in that the violently immersive experiment that sensory ethnography seems to be predicated upon is taken to an even greater extreme in the latter film. There is little room for contemplation, on or off screen, of the world in *Leviathan*'s extreme experiment in the immersion of its audience in the stark, transhistorical violence of their own existence. In fact, contemplation is a futile, wasted action in the face of a world that is at best hypothetical, at worst an illusion—we are immersed, thrown back upon ourselves in the empty self-consciousness of feeling that we may be alive but

little more. Nothing more is possible. This is, at its core, the hypothesis that drives violence's fabled experiment.

This is also the point where Castaing-Taylor and his collaborators part company with Tylor and Warburg. Both men elaborated a 'nameless science' of culture and time that was not predicated on formal experimentation at all. Observation, comparison, performance (think of Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* here) and the proudly 'useless' action of thinking, of *philosophy*, lay at the core of their respective methods.³⁸ This is the most obvious reason for the rejection of such methods as 'science' in the course of institutionalizing and naming such fields. The same holds true for Walter Benjamin's anthropological materialism. Like Castaing-Taylor and the SEL, the revolutionary value of 'shock' is obvious in Benjamin, but not for the purpose of immersion as in *Leviathan*, but rather as a way to crystallize thinking, blasting "a specific life out of the era, a specific work out of the lifework" for this very purpose.³⁹ This is obviously an open way to proceed. In the end, however, sensory ethnography as a cinematic method, demonstrated by these two films, is ambivalent to the very revolutionary potential it claims, at times disavowing philosophical, *interpretive* useless-

³⁸ Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Madrid: AKAL Ediciones Sa, 2010. See also Christopher D. Johnson, *Memory, Metaphor, and Aby Warburg's Atlas of Images*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2012; and Philippe-Alain Michaud, "Appendix II: Crossing the Frontiers: *Mnemosyne* Between Art History and Cinema," in *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, pp. 277–292.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Concept of History" (Thesis XVII), in Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History,'* London: Verso 2005 [2001], p. 95.

³⁷ Macinnis, *Aesthetics of Slaughter*, p. 60.

ness in favor of a *useful* experimental method oriented towards freeing us from the need to do any of that (the SEL uses the term 'laboratory,' after all). Castaing-Taylor in particular seems torn. *Sweetgrass*, in its naturalistic cacophony, explicitly provides the ground for interpretation within the film and, at times, displays this thinking in the film's subjects (Pat Connolly as our example here). By contrast, *Leviathan*, "confront[s] the viewer with an unavoidable viscosity and submersibility," aggressively working on the viewer by literally *sinking* her in the filmic ocean that is the true subject of the work.⁴⁰ To us, this difference between the two films is a productive aporia that signals a danger to its audience that should not be minimized or underestimated.

Taylor, Warburg, and Benjamin shared the conviction that both the world and human beings are real and knowable across time; they did not fully embrace the Cartesian conclusion that the only guarantor of thought and generator of action is *doubt*. They also shared the conviction expressed by Rancière that the image is not exclusive to the visible or to raw affect, but rather that it is through the complex interplay of image, sense, and *word* that any *one thing* can emerge into sensibility.⁴¹ Further, in the form of Warburg's *Pathosformeln* (or something akin to it) certain themes or aspects emerge over and over within the plastic elements of visual, material, and *literary* culture—this, the argument goes, allows for a certain overcoming of, and

protection from, the ferocity of our finite, empirical existence. The brutal truth of nature directly confronting the subject is not ideal in these frameworks; the aggressive, immersive shock of direct address overwhelms any attempt for a spectator to think through who or what is confronting her. Crucially, the SEL, extending this profound doubt to any intermediate power or relay that might allow one to stand before *Leviathan* (knowledge, politics, history, that is, any action that may burst forth from a *grasping* of the world), seeks to amplify in experimental terms the violence that this disinheritance inflicts on subjects presumed in advance to be worldless as an end in itself. And, thus, we return to the issue of what aims these experiments on the violence of nature, *our nature*, are intended to serve. The filmmakers and ethnographers, at times appearing to be contemptuous of spectators as *spectators*, have us in the crosshairs. When images explode on screen, the question of whether these detonations wake us from our passivity of merely watching and thinking, or stupefy us in the face of the natural world, remains. Do we survive?

[*Sweetgrass*, 1:21:35]

[Pat Connolly] . . . *well, no, and it rained here all day yesterday, fogged in, it was a miserable son-of-a-bitch . . . aw, the sheep are just ter-, and they're terrible today,*

⁴⁰ Pinney, "Aqueous Modernism," p. 38.

⁴¹ Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 7.

they're jus' onery! . . . aw, it never quits blowin' . . . I gotta look out for Pat, too . . . cuz when I get to be old, this shit's gonna catch up with me . . . I just, I gotta do somethin' . . . and it's gettin' me, like, I'd, I'd rather enjoy these mountains than hate 'em, and its gettin' to that point, I'm, I'm just, I'm hatin' it . . . [inhales] . . . anyway, I've been sayin' a lotta prayers, and [phone beeps] it just, I don't know [more beeps] . . . I guess my phone's goin' dead, so

...

[Cut to medium close up, in profile, face obscured by hand and phone]

... bye!

[Lowers arm, revealing a strange, frozen smile]

POSTSCRIPT

The lock doesn't exist that could resist absolute violence, and all locks are an invitation to thieves. The lock is a psychological threshold.

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958)¹

Christianity was from the beginning, essentially and fundamentally, life's nausea and disgust with life, merely concealed behind, masked by, dressed up as, faith in "another" or "better" life.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)²

We have come to the end, but we cannot resist adding some punctuation to what came before. *Violence's Fabled Experiment* is an essay in three parts wherein we have attempted to show in the recent work of three filmmakers how the human is placed within the order of nature, or perhaps even more specifically, how the human is either made legible or suffers erasure through efforts that resist (failingly) primordialism or seek (and

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, New York: Penguin Classics 2014 [1958], p. 102.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, New York: Random House 1967 [1872], p. 23.

embrace) humanness in some base form, though in ways not always appreciated by those filmmakers and actors authoring such efforts. By now this refrain should be familiar to readers. But there are quieter melodies that may have gone unheard between the lines of the chapters, or references and resources that were in our thoughts but never quite made it to the page.

The significance (moral or otherwise) of nature and its relationship to human biological life extends into the cinematic priorities of a wide range of filmmakers and writers, including Harun Farocki, Alyssa Grossman, Dul Johnson, Georges Didi-Huberman, Alan Klima, and Rosalind Nashashibi, and along different disciplinary paths in the scholarship of Peter Galison, Lorraine Daston, Henning Schmidgen, Frédéric Keck, Stefan Helmreich, Michael M.J. Fischer, Natasha Myers, Cymene Howe, and Dominic Boyer, to name but a few. *Violence's Fabled Experiment*, however, is shaped by its own priorities, its own preoccupation with how the category of the Human and the category of Nature are at odds in the specific cinematic projects of Herzog, Oppenheimer, and Castaing-Taylor, which expose a peculiar and fraught set of conceptual commitments (to justice, to knowledge, to truth, to history) that form a theory of violence. For these auteurs, the temptation is too great: they see locks at every turn, and with cameras and other primitive weapons, they attempt to enact their own violence to penetrate these psychological thresholds.

Nature is a lock that invites opening one way or another. But what dangers do these filmmakers awaken as they hammer the keyhole again and again, if indeed on some level their aim is to unlock the universal, core character of our humanness? This is an old problem for ethnographic cinema. Take, for example, a famous 1965 exchange between the French filmmaker Jean Rouch and the Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène.³

Jean Rouch: I would like you to tell me why you don't like my purely ethnographic films, those in which we show, for instance, traditional life?

Ousmane Sembène: Because you show, you fix a reality without seeing the evolution. What I hold against you and the Africanists is that you look at us as if we were insects.

For Sembène, Africans rendered without history or cultural evolution become subjects of a kind of nature filmmaking, held in an insectarium, defined by their violence and mystery, given continuity where change is jagged. Rouch later defends his approach to ethnographic film by redirecting blame: "audiences," he maintains, "are too large, too ill-informed, and require explanation and context." These moments are certainly memorable, but the most critical one for our purpose is buried a little deeper in the exchange. In

³ Okwui Enwezor (ed.), *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*, New York: Prestel 2001, pp. 440–442.



Postscript 1.1 The Hauka, possessed, *Les Maîtres Fous* (The Mad Masters), 1955

response to the suggestion that films like *Les Maîtres Fous* reinforce racist tropes and colonial presuppositions, he counters with an argument based on familiar universalism: “I also believe that the unique ceremonies of the people in *Les Maîtres Fous* make a primordial contribution to world culture.”

Perhaps Rouch is not at his best in this dialogue with Sembène. Still, what is the scope and content of these “primordial contributions”? There is indeed a correspondence between universalisms in a film like Rouch’s *Les Maîtres Fous* and Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing*, but in Ousmane Sembène’s critique we can see plainly the problem as a formation of violence. In Oppenheimer’s films, thought and history are acknowledged and then disavowed, and the film itself moves from an object of anthropological inquiry to a well-rehearsed set of assertions about human nature (and thus, in the

filmmaker’s mind, human rights). Whereas *The Act of Killing* restates the cultural claims of Jean Rouch’s “world culture” through salvational principles akin to a Nietzschean version of Christianity, disguised and disgusted, Sembène’s critique is the starting point for a different kind of comparison. Let us take another example, this time between *Les Maîtres Fous* (and other ethnographic films by Rouch) and Jean Painlevé’s nature dramas. Painlevé’s films—films like *Les Assassins d’eau douce* (Freshwater Assassins, 1947) and *Le Vampire* (1945), thick with intrigue and death (the vampire bats are unmistakably SS officers in *Le Vampire*)—are expressions of the organism’s culture and milieu (a fish, a seahorse, perhaps man, in the world, their world), which is always first and foremost a place filled with competition for survival, and, often, dominance followed by demise. Painlevé was also making a “primordial contribution to world culture” in the romantic lives of octopi or the comedy of sea urchins. He consolidated the worlds of humans and animals by folding together their traits. So what is this ‘world’ of world culture? And who (or what) is given access and allowed to occupy this world, and by whom?

Not to dress the same wound over and over, but in the work of each of these filmmakers we find a troubled relationship between humans and the non-human world. To take another example from Jean Rouch, the naturalism of Rouch’s *cinéma vérité* was not just about the absence of a script (yet, as we know, never without plot). Rouch’s naturalism—perhaps his tendency towards ‘insectification,’ or maybe his genuine commitment to



Postscript 1.2 The kill, *Les Assassins d'eau douce* (Freshwater Assassins), 1947

tradition and culture—is far from Oppenheimer’s project if for no other reason than the radically different terms through which the character of shared humanness is forged. In the case of Oppenheimer’s films, these terms begin with an identification with victims and with the perpetrators, assuming they have a fixed nature which Oppenheimer intends to heal them out of. This is something Rouch would have never dreamed.⁴

To be clear, we do not regard violence in these films as a kind of Bachelardian *rupture épistémologique*—a dis-

continuity that exposes a conceptual divide or divergence that the three filmmakers use to tease out various tensions surrounding humanness within (or against) nature. No, if violence is an ancient story, then we should at least have it partially correct by now: the violence here is one that twists and deforms truths, not one that exposes a form that is, for lack of a better word, “true.”⁵ Oppenheimer’s project is a failure because, for all the transformations we are meant to see playing out on the screen (and in our/their hearts and minds)—for all its supposed revelations—nothing changes, and conclusions are drawn well before we even begin.

Werner Herzog and Lucien Castaing-Taylor shut the door on redemption altogether—but to be clear, they do so with no veiled nihilism, no flimsy humanisms staged to slowly erode, no tropes of healing that are later abandoned. Instead, there is openness (yes, even in *Salt and Fire*). Redemption has no stable syntax for Herzog and Castaing-Taylor: they refuse to play virtuous grammarians from the start. Still, their motivations are not always so straightforward, and to say that they often indulge in other schemes or contradict themselves at times misses what is so powerful about the openness they maintain (they crack locks not so much because they know what’s inside but simply to let it out). Herzog and Castaing-Taylor remind us to be curious and cautious. The tendency toward a decisive morality and universal humanism, on the other hand,

⁴ Paul Stoller, *The Cinematic Griot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992.

⁵ Page du Bois, *Torture and Truth: The New Ancient World*, New York, Routledge 1991.

is the solitary domain of Joshua Oppenheimer, and by holding to this universalism he seeks reparation and closure. What we have sought to do in *Violence's Fabled Experiment* is to expose this tendency, one that wraps humanness around violence, undergirding Oppenheimer's moral project—indeed his tepid moral outrage—and actively and critically to alienate this tendency from others that would allow us to meaningfully apprehend a violence that resists comprehension.

One final thought.

Here, we wonder, as Harun Farocki did in 2002, if it is possible to turn against violence with all the wrong motivations. If a project like Oppenheimer's is stirred in large part by moral outrage, what inspires the churning of this indignation? Or, asked differently, is it possible to participate in a complementary form of violence that flows from an ignorance of motivations altogether?

Once I saw a film called *Tarzan und die Nazis* (*Tarzan Triumphs*, William/Wilhelm Thiele, U.S. 1943). Tarzan couldn't care less what the Nazis did to the blacks, but when they harassed Cheetah (or was it Jane, or the child?), Tarzan was seized with rage and he entered World War II.

Harun Farocki, "The Green of the Grass" (2002)⁶

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⁶ Harun Farocki, from "The Green of the Grass: Harun Farocki in *Filmkritik*," in *Senses of Cinema* 21, July 2002.

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