
Santiago Fillol

santiago.fillol@upf.edu

Assistant Professor.

Communications Department.

Universitat Pompeu Fabra,

Spain

Submitted

April 4, 2016

Approved

August 5, 2016

© 2017

Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

doi: 10.15581/003.30.3.1-11

www.communication-society.com

2017 – Vol. 30(3)

pp. 1-11

How to cite this article:

Fillol, S. (2017). The Culprit of the Image. Genealogy of the act of putting forth a culprit to witness the horror in cinema.

Communication & Society 30(3), 1-11.

The Culprit of the Image. Genealogy of the act of putting forth a culprit to witness the horror in cinema

Abstract

In 1945 the battalion where the future filmmaker Samuel Fuller was serving entered the concentration camp at Falkenau. Upon discovering the horror, the American captain ordered Fuller to hide in order to film how the soldiers taught German civilian villagers a lesson by forcing them to face the piles of corpses. The gesture of placing a culprit in the foreground in order to be able to look at the void of meaning caused by the horror in the background is a defining mark of two controversial contemporary documentaries that deal with the genocide of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (*S-21*, Rithy Panh, 2003), and the mass killings of the dictatorship in Indonesia (*The Act of Killing*, Joshua Oppenheimer, 2013). This article suggests a possible genealogy of the gesture, also showing the critical rereading developed by modern cinema regarding the possibility of producing such images.

Keywords

Representation, holocaust, testimony, classic causality, Modern cinema, critical images contemporary documentary.

1. Introduction

S21 (Rithy Panh, 2003) and *The Act of Killing* (Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012) are the two contemporary documentaries that have possibly generated the most debate around the formal limits to witnessing horror¹. These contemporary works have one gesture in common: in order to document the horror of their stories, their images focus on the figure of the executioner who perpetrated the terrible genocides the films deal with.

1. *S21* was broadly distributed and discussed in France, and has been studied in depth in Sylvie Rollet's work on the ethics of the documentary gaze before the horror. Oppenheimer's controversial film, backed by Werner Herzog and Errol Morris, generated important debates in top publications such as *Cahiers du Cinema* (#688 – April 2003), and was considered one of 2012's best films by *Sight and Sound*, The British Film Institute's prestigious publication. See, for example: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/true-surrealism-walter-benjamin-act-killing>

In *S-21*, an old member of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge represents, before Rithy Panh's camera, how he used to open the now empty cells of the centre of detention, torture, and extermination, S21. He demonstrates how he used to beat the prisoners as he took them out, and how he tortured them. In the mimesis of horror established by the Cambodian regime, his gestures reveal the point to which those acts were internalised and mechanised. Rithy Panh takes distance from the subject, but turns him into the central motif of his images. A few minutes earlier, he was filming Vann Nath, one of the few survivors of the extermination, showing the torturers a picture he himself had painted. His painting depicts the tortures the Khmer Rouge inflicted on prisoners like himself, and, using the canvas like a teacher's blackboard, he explains, point by point, the humiliations he suffered to the torturers as they watch, silently and obediently. Panh's shot is distant, but his central motif is evident: Vann Nath lecturing the executioners before the images of horror.

In *The Act of Killing*, torturers of the Indonesian dictatorship also return to the sites of horror, this time adorned by a spectacular *mise-en-scène* that is typical of genre films. This farce, agreed upon beforehand by Joshua Oppenheimer and the executioners, appears to be the only option available to him if he is to film and reveal them: the reconstruction and aestheticization of their brutality. The chosen option is, to say the least, questionable. Oppenheimer declares that it was the only way of showing how the murderers now live in full impunity, and are even "treated as heroes" by politicians and the local mass media². One of the film's first sequences shows Anwar Congo on an ordinary terrace, showing us how he tortured and murdered communist suspects using a piece of wire. He calmly explains in great detail how he used this method to avoid getting the floor dirty and having to clean up afterwards. Looking at the camera, he later explains that he has tried to forget all of that by drinking, taking drugs, and dancing *Cha-cha-cha*. He even dances a few steps before the camera. The background of horror is diluted in the banalities of the murderer, who colonises the scene.

There is a shared gesture in these two controversial examples of contemporary political documentary. The filmmakers distance themselves from a direct representation of horror, but, in order to be able to look at that harrowing and painful gap in meaning, need the presence of a culprit to sustain the image³.

The present article intends to study what the origin of that gaze could be: where does this device come from, one that places a culprit on the scene; a figure to stand before the background of horror? What figurative logic does it follow? Are these contemporary works heirs to a particular tradition?

In order to attempt a reply, an analysis of the constitutive experience of the first filmmakers who turned their gaze towards Nazi concentration camps will be carried out. In this sense, Samuel Fuller's biographical testimony, Alfred Hitchcock's advice on editing the British documentary *Memory of the Camps* (Sidney Bernstein, 1945), and the official documents left behind by George Stevens, military representative for the USA in the unit of filmmakers in charge of filming the liberation of the extermination camps (SPECOU), are particularly enlightening.

² "I think the film is primarily about today. It's about a kind of impunity that spills over into celebration. And in the celebration of atrocity, we find a really troubling allegory for the jingoistic celebration of torture..." Taken from: <http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-joshua-oppenheimer-the-act-of-killing/>

³ In 2013 Rithy Panh premiered *L'image manquante* (2013), where he "re-presents" the horror using plasticine figurines and models, reusing the archive footage that survived the Cambodian regime. nevertheless, the focus of his representation remains the figure of the culprit, a premise that Joshua Oppenheimer carries on in his latest work *The Look of Silence* (2014), where a family of genocide survivors confronts their brother's murderer. Both works are fairly similar continuations, almost spin-offs of the essential device presented in their earlier films, *S21* and *The Act of Killing*. For this reason, this article will only focus on their first films.

Finally, some key films from European modern cinema will be analysed in order to see how they dealt with the documentation of horror, as well as the relationship the contemporary documentaries by Rithy Panh and Joshua Oppenheimer have with this complex tradition.

2. The Classical Take on Horror

In 1945, the battalion where the future filmmaker Samuel Fuller served entered the concentration camp at Falkenau. In *A Third Face*, his autobiography, Fuller tells his experience of facing the horror, which also turned out to be his first as a filmmaker. Fuller speaks of the huge impression that not only the piles of corpses and famished people caused on him, but also the indifferent proximity of the German village, where people lived peacefully in "pretty houses with flower pots on their windows" (Fuller, 2002: 215). The core of Fuller's tale significantly shifts from the horror of the camp to the incredible situation of the villagers, who had lived as if nothing was happening nearby. Captain Richmond, head of his battalion, went to the village of Falkenau with a squad and brought distinguished figures of the community together: he interrogated the mayor, the baker, the butcher, etc., about their indifference towards the people dying on the other side of the village. The civilians swore that they had no idea about what had been happening there, and declared themselves to be against Hitler and Nazism. Fuller pointed that neither the captain nor the soldiers believed the testimony of the civilians and, sick of so much hypocrisy, the captain decided to teach the villagers a lesson. He ordered a delegation of illustrious representatives from the village to go to the camp, threatening whoever disobeyed with execution. He wanted to make sure that German civilians saw the horror they denied. The young Fuller had a Bell & Howell 16mm camera that his mother had given him to document his experiences at war, and his captain ordered him to hide on top of a wall to film the entire process. Without knowing it, Fuller was about to shoot his first film. We quote, word for word, the first person narrative of that staging:

I started shooting footage of Captain Richmond giving upstanding citizens of Falkenau his orders. They were to prepare the camp's victims for a decent funeral, then take them to the burial site on a wagon. That way, they could never say again that they didn't know what was happening in their own backyard. I filmed a couple dozen corpses being taken out of that putrid hut against the camp's wall and laid out one by one, wrapped in white sheets on the ground, then piled on the wagon. When the wagon was full of corpses, the townspeople pushed it out of the camp to the specially prepared burial site. POWs, mostly teenage Hitlerjugend, helped place the shrouded corpses in a mass grave. One of our chaplains said a brief prayer. Earth was then shoveled into the mass grave. As paltry a consolation as it was, these Nazi victims were buried with dignity.

My twenty minutes of 16-mm film had recorded the sober reckoning of those civilians. The spectacle was heart-wrenching, leaving me numb. I'd recorded evidence of man's indescribable cruelty, a reality that the perpetrators might try to deny. However, a motion-picture camera doesn't lie (Fuller, 2002: 217).

As we can see, the nucleus of the story revolves around the gaze of the villagers -whose morals emerge before the horror-, far more than on that of the young filmmaker. To bear witness to such a horror, the Americans set up a fiction that was not at all innocent, which was constructed to teach a lesson. Faced with the excesses of the camp, they staged a scene to admonish the civilians of the village. The traditional way of looking at the horror of the world, searching for causal correspondences in cut two shots together, to make connections ("now they won't be able to say that they have not seen the horror"), could not handle such an overwhelming reality. His captain's *mise-en-scène*, filming the Americans teaching a lesson from an elevated and privileged viewpoint, to show the world "the moment when

German civilians became aware of the horror"; that moment, shot with a camera that hides from those being lectured to, produces a stereotyped performance of horror rather an experience or testimony. Could the Germans really gain awareness at gunpoint? What about Fuller's images? When and how do his images gain awareness?

Although unintentionally, through his experience as a soldier who was to become a filmmaker, Fuller also documented the end of a classical way of seeing as it shattered against images that were disproportional for its tradition.

Something similar happened to Alfred Hitchcock in 1945 when, encouraged by his friend Sydney Bernstein, he saw the documentary images shot by British soldiers in the liberated concentration camps⁴: Hitchcock suggested not to cut the long panning shots that connected the horror of the camps to the adjoining villages. Hitchcock thought it was necessary for both the horror and the blind world next to it -its tacit culprits- to coexist in the same shot. As the evidence of the images stated "how could this have happened?", Hitchcock suggested maintaining the long and slow panning shots that pointed towards the civilians: these images that we don't know how to look at happened next to the everyday life of these people who didn't wish to see it either. His advice marked a way of dealing with a logic that was still foreign to a classical gaze. It wasn't possible to just look at the horror (images of the massacre, of the skeleton-thin, divested of any humanity), because those who looked did not possess, or sense, the process of achieving a way of looking, of "taking a stance", that might allow them to face and encompass those shots without going back to the old classical tradition of finding some "causal connection" to uphold their gaze. But that union wasn't a connection. There was no editing to them; their gaze could only face the images by panning their heads from left to right, confirming the evidence that prevented the possibility to reflect. The images made by classical filmmakers as they looked into the void of the holocaust couldn't comprehend the figurative logic, or the thinking, that had produced such images. Those pans only highlighted their obvious monstrosity.

Many years later, Fuller admitted that those reels shot on the sly had been his first documentary film. The staging -and fictionalisation- created by Fuller's captain didn't affect the horrifying process of extermination that had produced the horror, and pushed the civilians to look at something they were also incapable of comprehending. With greater violence than Hitchcock and Bernstein, Fuller and his stubborn captain continued to highlight and place a patch over the self-evident truth that their eyes were incapable of facing.

The images shot by Fuller, exhibited and projected at the Shoah Memorial in Paris for the first time in 2009, correspond with the tale of the Falkenau camp. They do not differ from what he himself narrated. Those shot by George Stevens at the liberation of Dachau are more abundant, and the documentation of the horror within them is more crude and direct than Fuller's. It is important to remember that Stevens, as opposed to Fuller, was explicitly sent by the American government to document proof of Nazi crimes: Eisenhower had given Stevens the mission to create a special film unit during the war. Stevens, who had been filming Fred Astaire musicals before then, recruited a special team of professional cameramen called SPECOU (Special Coverage Unit) for the task, which included 45 members: hence the greater number of images from Stevens' "unit". His team had very detailed instructions and protocols, as the documents exhibited at the Shoah Memorial reveal.

⁴ Hitchcock's recommendations were narrated by the film editor Peter Tanner. They have also been referenced in various studies, among which the following stand out: Sánchez Biosca, V. (1997) Hier ist Kein Warum. À propos de la mémoire et de l'image des camps et la mort. In *Protee. Théorie et pratiques sémiotiques*, XXV, n° 1, p. 57-59; Didi-Huberman, G. (2003) *Imágenes pese a todo*. Barcelona: Paidós, 202-203.

Apart from the images shot in 35mm black and white film by his unit's cameramen, Stevens himself filmed several sequences with his personal 16mm Bell & Howell camera (using Kodak colour film). He shot the corpses found in the wagons of the train between Buchenwald and Dachau, which is where the images of his soldiers filming the horror come from (he asked to have this material sent to his home address, set apart from the 35mm reels destined to be used as evidence of the horror). Stevens' personal sequences, easily distinguished due to their colour, also included images of those who were deported whilst cooking, indifferent and immune to the corpses around them. Stevens' gaze appears to find a weak but causal thread, without which he couldn't face the horror of this atrocious connection. Upon understanding the various origins and purposes of these documents and trying to rebuild their history, it is possible to make out how those ways of looking, and the refuges they created, took place. The hypothesis we are attempting to formulate here is that, regardless of whether their intentions and guidelines were domestic or professional, they faced the horror from the only tradition they knew: the classical and causal one. The "reflex actions" of their gaze were classical reflexes that looked for a "causal" shot to edit together with a "consequence" shot. And it is this particular tradition that broke under the extreme reality it was documenting. In this sense, historian Christian Delage, curator of the essential exhibition of the Shoah Memorial, makes an enlightening commentary:

Stevens and his crew remained in Dachau the first week of the month of May of 1945 and shot a great many minutes of film each day. They found out about Germany's surrender on site, on the 8th of May. The first saw were the train wagons full of corpses parked outside the camp. Their reflex, upon arrival, was a professional one. They slowly opened the depth of field, turning to a deeply engrained film grammar that build upon a succession of wide, medium, and close-up shots, from the entrance of the camp to the hospital. All the cameramen manage an optimistic ending to their work – it's a "liberation" after all –, giving value to their presence, which is also witness to the authenticity of the images they take (Delage, 2010: 10).

Just like captain Fuller, Stevens ordered his cameramen to film how the neighbours and citizens from Dachau were being taught a lesson. The following is from the military files that account for the material shot on the camp:

Around twenty neighbours from Dachau were taken to the countryside, and, in groups of five, were made to stand before the corpses. Six of them were women, and their reactions were more extreme: five of them continued to cry after having walked away from the corpses. All the neighbours seemed horrified by what they saw, and declared that they would have never imagined such things could be taking place there. All this was shot using special lighting inside the graves, where a G. I. sergeant would walk the neighbours towards the corpses [...]. One of the women was upset that she was being filmed, and another, crying and distressed, said "you should be showing this to the wives of the SS" (Delage, 2014: 32-33).

These testimonies are the direct transcriptions of daily written reports and accounts of the material they shot, kept by Stevens' unit. Like in a conventional shooting script, the soldier filmmakers ordered and classified the material for the high commander who was to edit it. In this case, in contrast to Fuller's captain, Stevens' unit did not shoot the civilians on the sly. Although they lit and carefully prepared the room where they would be forced to face the horror (the horror documented by the Americans time and again, with the civilians and the guilty placed in the foreground, before the harrowing images). The cameramen

⁵ These reports of the filming at the concentration camps have been published, together with the letters Stevens himself sent to his superior, in a book that collects this valuable material: Delage, C. (2014) *George Stevens. De Hollywood à Dachau*. Paris: Éditions Jean Michel Place, 32-33.

were given precise instructions regarding the precautions to be taken in order to guarantee the veracity and authenticity of their takes, as proven by the register of the Field Photographic Branch directed by John Ford. Everybody knew that, depending on each case, the images could be confiscated and used as proof of Nazi crimes during the post-war trials. John Ford himself edited the images shot by Stevens' unit, which were then presented as proof of crimes at the Nuremberg trials. These trials were filmed by John Ford, who prepared a particular lighting system to shoot the Nazi criminals in the dock on the sly as they watched the images of horror being presented as proof. The lighting was subtle, it highlighted the faces of the entire dock but didn't stand in the way of their watching the film. It marked them without blinding them. Faced with the terrible images of the camps that were being projected, the audience at the trial had another focal point to rest their eyes on or look away to. This traditional setup encouraged the audience not to look at the horror, but at the murderers watching the horror.⁶ One more example, taken to the extreme, of the masterful causal mechanism that the Hollywood approach built to document (and thus face) the horror... to shift the gaze itself *offscreen*.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben takes the risk of thinking through Auschwitz's relevance today beyond responsibility and guilt, radically questioning some of the consequences of the trials on Nazism (the trials where Hollywood unfolded its spectacular devices to formulate the horror by pointing out an evident culprit).

[...] it is possible that the trials (the twelve trials at Nuremberg, and the others that took place in and outside German borders, including those in Jerusalem in 1961 that ended with the hanging of Eichmann) are responsible for the conceptual confusion that, for decades, has made it impossible to think through Auschwitz. Despite the necessity of the trials and despite their evident insufficiency (they involved only a few hundred people), they helped to spread the idea that the problem of Auschwitz had been overcome. The judgments had been passed, the proofs of guilt definitively established (Agamben, 1999: 19).

Through critical thinking, Agamben tries to assess what continues to slip from our imaginary of Auschwitz, and for this reason discusses the "closure of judgment" that comes from these trials. Just like in the classical device, they attempt to regulate and give closure to their discomfort by establishing a cause and consequence of that horror: German civilians are made to face the horror, Nazis are made to face the horror, but without coming to terms with what is inescapable in those images.

Primo Levi, who was there, felt a similar unease: he feared that his own tale, through repetition, would end up setting up the guidelines for horror, and replacing his experience; that the trials and the establishment of guilt and responsibility might resolve something that was impossible to resolve, because it was impossible to communicate:

I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses [...] We survivors are only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom." Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the 'Muslims,'⁷ the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception [...] We who were favoured by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of others, indeed of the drowned; but this was a discourse

⁶ A direct testimony of the trial can be found in Delage, C. *Op Cit.*, p. 56-59.

⁷ "This word 'Muselmann', I do not know why, was used by the old ones at the camp to describe the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection." See: Levi, P. (1996) *Survival in Auschwitz*. New York: Touchstone, p. 88.

"on behalf of third parties," the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally. The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death. Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy (Levi, 1988: 83-84).

Through his writing, Levi battled to integrate the most unfathomable aporia of his experience into his testimony, into his language, without taking refuge in causality. He managed to publish the first edition of *If This Is a Man*, with great difficulty, in 1947. His was one of the first voices to allow us to look at the horror itself, to try to think about its constitution before establishing any culprits⁸.

3. The Modern Take on Horror

In cinema, a decade had to go by before the tracking shots of *Night and Fog (Nuit et brouillard*, Alain Resnais, 1954) could exist, moving forward and backward across the empty space of the camps, cracking inevitably in an attempt to grasp the mechanics of an unprecedented representation. These tracking shots that made the eye confront a void in meaning were edited by Resnais in stark contrast with the archive of bewildered gazes shot by the allies. Resnais took no refuge when it came to selecting the information of horror from the archive: the piles of teeth, hair, shoes... set to Jean Cayrol's voice, traversed by history, counting, naming, and wondering time and again, "who is to blame?".

Those images, that voice, are an open wound. Something that never closes, something that has no place in our experience. "Resnais freed the horrifying archive footage of its testimonial value, turning it to question the capacity of find a way of looking at it."⁹ *Night and Fog* takes that lack of proportion on board and puts it into practice. In Fuller's images -both the original ones from 1945 and those recreated for his last fiction film, *The Big Red One* (1980), his second, biographical film on the Holocaust-, there is a sort of patching used to appease conscience. Eyes that don't know how to look and, instead of looking towards the void in meaning, film the civilians of the village looking at it instead. They film the culprits in order to close or safeguard a crack that is impossible to seal through their eyes. These were classical gazes, reaching their expiration date in 1945.

Resnais' essential oeuvre took Hitchcock's advice to a new level, deducing the form that cinema would have to take in order to escape from the mere recognition of horror and begin to think it. By putting into action and filming the creation of a way of looking that stares at the "burning" point of the image instead of looking for a culprit within it, a task that Didi-Huberman sees as the primordial function of any image that tries to bear witness¹⁰, the work of Resnais opened the way towards film modernity's critical and reflexive way of questioning the possibility of looking at horror. That is to say, questioning the image itself in order for it to experience the horror, so that it could "touch the real", as Didi-Huberman expounds.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Theodor Adorno insisted that after Auschwitz, "the administrative murder of millions made of death a thing one had never yet to fear in just this fashion. There is no chance any more for death to come into the individuals' empirical

8 Symptomatically, after his experience in the camps. he was asked by Einaudi publishing house to translate Kafka's *The Trial*: he translated it using the German he had to perfect during his horrifying survival. His learning of the language and its dark imaginary, in the *lager*, had been terribly disproportionate (and at the same time adequate) to carry out that translation...

9 Rollet, S. (2011) *Un Éthique du Regard*. Paris: Hermann Éditions, p. 68.

10 Didi-Huberman, G. (2013) *Cuando las imágenes tocan lo real*. Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes, p.27.

life as somehow conformable with the course of that life" (Adorno, 1973: 362). Adorno's sharp thoughts address the possibility to continue to think, to continue to imagine (as an act inherent to the image) after Auschwitz. They address the survival of thought and the capacity to give form to images of horror, affected by it in the same way as the deaths that escaped from Auschwitz were. And this affront also touches the panning shots that Hitchcock meditated upon, the shots taken by Fuller on the sly, and all the gazes emerging out of classical cinema: "If negative dialectics calls for self-reflection of thinking, the tangible implication is that if thinking is to be true-if it is to be true today, in any case- it must also be a thinking against itself. If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims" (Adorno, 1973: 365).

This is the inheritance of the Shoah, palpable in a precise articulation: thought must think against itself so as not to cover with music that which tosses and turns in the background. The images of classical filmmakers, looking for culprits and cause-consequence connections in order to format the images of horror, to safeguard them from a critical and direct gaze, escape this sharp *Adornian* premise: "if thinking is to be true-if it is to be true today, in any case- it must also be a thinking against itself". This is, precisely, the axiom that the essential *Histoire(s) du cinema* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1988-1998) and *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985) picked up on as, like in Resnais' film, they tried to correct the documentation of some gazes that had not been capable of foreseeing, or dismantling, the logic of such a horrific process. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann felt forced to film the German technicians of the genocide with hidden cameras, integrating grainy material that was full of imperfections into his images. Lanzmann exposed the mechanics behind these devices in his shots. The directional antennae on the van parked outside the houses of those who were guilty of genocide, but still free, revealed the sort of hidden production that his images now required in order to account for the terrible mechanisms that the Nazi engineers explained in the aptly named "inter-views". In the blurry, almost ghostly technical defects of the images, those interviewed explain the logic that the gas chambers were built upon. It's the critical reversal of Fuller's captain's gesture: Lanzmann reveals his own filming devices, his hiding, in order to reveal the process of extermination that took place before the eyes of everyone, but remained invisible to the whole world. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, "the success of Nazism resided in their conviction that no one from the outside would ever believe what was taking place inside the camps" (Arendt, 1993: 207). Lanzmann's footage shows the process of filming itself, affected by the explanation of the methods of horror: the images show the grain on their very skin, as if it were an inevitable rash, caused by filming the engineers who industrialised murder. In *S21* and *The Act of Killing*, on the contrary, the "reflex act", the "tic", prevails: the gaze with which Fuller and the traditional filmmakers looked for a cause for the horror before turning their gaze and their images to face the experience. The gesture that allowed, from modernity onward, for images themselves to become a subject and agent of testimony, as seen in Rollet and Didi-Huberman (Rollet, 2011; Didi-Huberman, 2003), appears to have been forgotten altogether in these contemporary works.

4. Conclusion

A contemporary heir of modernity who did take on the post-Auschwitz *Adornian* axiom, with all its implications, was Harun Farocki. *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des krieges, Farocki, 1989), for example, condenses and makes

explicit the lesson learned by modern European cinema as a result of the Holocaust. At the beginning of this work, Farocki pauses on the photographs taken by the allies as they flew over German territory during the Second World War. His film analyses the interventionist point of view that, whilst searching for strategic targets to bomb (factories, arsenals, oil tankers, etc.), did not see or recognise Auschwitz in its aerial photographs. These viewpoints from another time, which didn't quite see, come back to life and "see" as they critically unfold in Farocki's shots. A few minutes later, he analyses the photograph taken by an SS member of a beautiful woman as she was being taken to the gas chamber. An instant of fleeting beauty captured on the edge of horror: an image that will preserve that face forever. And before those contrasting images, Farocki interrogates his own gaze: "how can these two extremes be placed together? Destruction and preservation?". Through these questions, Farocki acknowledges that it is not only about looking at images as historical proof, but thinking of the legacy that the Shoah's figurative process imposed on us; to think of its "inscription" in our own way of seeing those images, as stated in the title of his work (Rollet, 2011: 15).

Rithy Panh had to foresee the choreographies carried out by the executioners in their most important sequences, as they entered the empty cells and repeated their horrifying actions within them. The focus of his images was calculated through those fore-seen actions. His *mise-en-scène* focuses on that re-presentation, his image prepares for it, but there is no reflexive or critical distance in the image regarding the act of re-constructing this horrible past.

Anwar Congo, the murderer and protagonist of *The Act of Killing*, is a charismatic, outgoing executioner, and Oppenheimer yields the absolute centre of the scene to him. After dancing on the stage of their crimes, Oppenheimer shows the murderers comfortably sitting in a living room, watching a sequence on a television set, shot by Anwar himself, of him on the terrible terrace demonstrating how he tortured and strangled his victims with a piece of wire. Upon seeing these images, Anwar says he shouldn't have worn white trousers, that it looks as though he were out on a picnic, that he looks like he's overacting. Whilst looking at the images that reproduce and stage his awful acts, the murderer evaluates the quality of his technical representation (Benjamin, 2011: 35), without a word of the horror and its mechanics. In the living room where his performance is screened, Anwar Congo decides that reconstructions of bloody actions need to be represented through genre films; they need to be more spectacular in order to better connect with contemporary viewers; they must "Hollywoodize" the horror. And Oppenheimer places all his technical and aesthetic (he provides money, but he also frames) know-how at his disposal, using hundreds of extras, luxurious lighting, and other spectacular means to reconstruct the scenes that the murderers will re-produce with his help.

The mechanism apparently becomes more complex, but pointing to the guilty as a way of apprehending the horror, be it through horrifying parody as in Oppenheimer's case, or solemn ceremony of penitent reconstruction in Panh's images, seems to be the axis and main destiny of such intentionally abrasive shots.

Oppenheimer pushes this mechanism to the extreme by handing over the production (and reflection) of that horrific and spectacular production to the murderers themselves. On a film set, in front of a stereotypical backdrop, wearing grotesque makeup, the murderers of the Indonesian regime shoot the reconstruction of the tortures of suspected communists, playing the roles of both victims and executioners. On this occasion it isn't a victim (like the painter Rithy Panh) who teaches the culprits in the centre of the shot a lesson in order to bear witness to the horror. The culprits themselves appear to act freely, centre stage, under the submissive gaze of the filmmaker who hides his intentions of denunciation in order to produce his own testimony of the horror. If, in *S-21*, Panh had to rehearse horrible recreations with the culprits in order for his camera to document them skilfully and without

the affectations of direct cinema, Oppenheimer ends up going as far as handing the documentation over to the murderers. Both works place strategies and ways of filming the executioners before one's own gaze and its critical reflection before the horror. The quality of the images in these contemporary documentaries is sharp and without affectation, as if they were impervious to the abrasive reality they mould. The imprint of cinematic modernity does not show in these works, where the motif of the culprit prevails; the "cause" being the axis of the immense majority of its shots. Modernity's most piercing images demonstrated that the issue wasn't to understand, but to see "what was left of Auschwitz", through a way of looking at and creating images themselves (Agamben, 1999). And through this act, they themselves become witnesses to that experience, because they have lived through the complexity of having to give form to something that is beyond their capacities of documentation. Through these images, cinema questions itself before setting out to question anyone else.

References

- Adorno, T. (1973) *Negative Dialectics*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Agamben, G. (1999) *Remnants of Auschwitz*. New York: Zone Books.
- Améry, J. (2013) *Más allá de la culpa y la expiación*. Valencia: Pretextos.
- Arendt, H. (1993) *Auschwitz et Jérusalem*. Paris: Deuxtemps Tierce.
- Benjamin, W. (2011) La obra de arte en la época de su reproductibilidad técnica. In *Discursos Interrumpidos*. Madrid: Taurus.
- Delage, C. (2010) Filmer les camps. In: *Le Monde magazine*. N° hors serie.
- Delage, C. (2014) *George Stevens. De Hollywood à Dachau*. Paris: Éditions Jean Michel Place.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2013) *Cuando las imágenes tocan lo real*. Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2008) *Cuando las imágenes toman posición*. Madrid: A. Machado Libros - Círculo de Bellas Artes.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2003) *Imágenes pese a todo*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Fuller, S. (2002) *A Third Face: My Tale of Writing, Fighting and Filmmaking*. New York: A. A. Knopf.
- Frodon, J-M. (2007) *Le cinéma et la Shoah*. Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma.
- Kerner, A. (2011) *Film and the Holocaust. New Perspectives on Dramas, Documentaries, and Experimental Films*. New York: Continuum.
- Kleinberger, A. & Mesnard, P. (ed.) (2013) *La shoah. Théâtre et cinéma aux limites de la représentation*. Bruxelles: Éditions Kimé.
- Levi, P. (1996) *Survival in Auschwitz*. New York: Touchstone.
- Levi, P. (1988) *The Drowned and the Saved*. New York: Summit Books.
- Rollet, S. (2011) *Un Éthique du Regard*. Paris: Hermann Éditions.