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## The Aesthetics of Trauma Authenticity and Disorientation in Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday*

Part of cinema's appeal, Robert A. Rosenstone has argued, is that it is able to satisfy an innate desire to see "history unfold before our eyes" (11). In *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960), Siegfried Kracauer is skeptical about the potential of historical film. For Kracauer, historical film depends on a claustrophobic alignment of the spectator's "potential field of vision" with the actual images that appear on the screen. In a film depicting contemporary reality, he argues, the audience is "free to imagine that the camera roams reality itself" because even where the staging of the film might be artificial, it is made to duplicate "real-life surroundings" (78). Kracauer illustrates this phenomenon with the example of Elie Faure's dream of an impossible documentary about the Passion of Christ. Apart from turning its spectators into "eye-witnesses to the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, the Agony in Gethsemane," this documentary would show what a historical film could not: the "seemingly insignificant happenings incidental to those momentous events—the soldiers shuffling cards, the clouds of dust whirled up by the horses, the moving crowds, the lights and shadows in an abandoned street" (78). Kracauer describes this effect created by the attention to arbitrary detail as the illusion of "endlessness"—a notion dialectical by nature as it depends on the capturing of finite fragments that signify a depth to the reality of the scene that the camera is unable to capture. Paul Greengrass's *Bloody Sunday* (2002) seems to approach this ideal film; through large-scale reenactment and attention to the arbitrary, it convincingly masks the seams of its artificiality as it recreates the events of the Bloody Sunday massacre. This article will focus on the relationship between the aesthetics of authenticity and its critical readings in terms of trauma, as well as explore the limitations of such an approach. There is no question that a community experiencing an event on the scale of Bloody Sunday will be faced with potentially long-term, traumatic

responses,<sup>1</sup> yet when dealing with its representation, the impulse to read the film's aesthetic construction in this way obscures a deeper ambiguity about its politics of history.

*Bloody Sunday* was first broadcast on January 20, 2002 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the massacre. On January 30, 1972, soldiers of the British Parachute Regiment opened fire on an anti-internment march organized by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) in Derry. Twenty-seven civilians were murdered or injured. This injustice was a glaring demonstration of the military establishment's failure to those it was supposed to protect; and more than this, when a tribunal headed by Lord Chief Justice Widgery (ordered by the Prime Minister Edward Heath) exonerated the soldiers' abuse of power, a chasm was effectively created between the official historical records and popular memory. Widgery's report (1972) concluded that the British soldiers had come under fire before shooting and that, although none of the victims were handling a bomb or firearm when hit, it was suspected that some had been in possession of such weapons during the course of the afternoon. Both claims were strongly contested by NICRA and the families of the victims—indeed, the aftermath of the massacre and its official whitewashing saw an increase in the recruitment of young men into the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In 2010, the Saville Inquiry overturned most of the conclusions of the report.<sup>2</sup>

In this way, *Bloody Sunday* is situated within a complex relationship between notions of realism and historical

1. See Hayes & Campbell for a salient study of the traumatic effects of the event on the Derry community.

2. In 1998, in the context of the Peace Process and against the background of the 1993 Downing Street Declaration's commitment to overcoming "the legacy of history," the Blair administration's ordering of a new inquiry was an important symbolic gesture. Lord Saville's report, published on June 15, 2010, found that paratroopers fired the first shot, and had fired on unarmed civilians.



1972

Mock coffins in Dublin after 'Bloody Sunday' in the Northern Ireland city of Londonderry, where 13 civilians were killed by British troops.

1920

Cards in Dublin for Irish revolutionaries imprisoned by the British, agitating for independence for Ireland.

of London: Underwood and Underwood



film. At the time of its broadcast, the narrative of the event existed outside of official (that is, officially recognized) history; yet, we should not forget that the counter-narrative of the event had, in many ways, already been accepted, corroborated in part by Greengrass's film being one of two films produced for British television to be shown on the anniversary.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, *Bloody Sunday* reflects a moment when the popular opinion of what actually happened was already in transition. With this in mind, it is worth exploring the implications of the film's aesthetic reconstruction

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of historical reality, considering that what constituted this reality was, or was believed to be, contested.

*Bloody Sunday*'s authenticity was important to early reviewers, who praised the way it captured the "look and feel of the real thing" and applauded its effort to grant audiences access to "the power and pain of history as it is happening" (Melarkey 24; Dashiell). Lance Petitt describes the film as having "raw footage" texture in the way it foregrounds missed action and obscured, "interrupted" dialogue, like when the camera wanders through crowds over the shoulder of Northern Ireland MP Ivan Cooper, wavering in and out of the frame as he jests with locals (55-56). This rawness is reflected in the editing too, with scenes cut in mid-dialogue or mid-action, often figured in the form of fade-outs to a black screen. The overall effect is one of disorientation and confusion as the viewer tries to piece together fragments of conversations and quick-cut images. Tony Keily argues that this strategy is part of an attack on the "revealing, intelligible patterns and closed-off stories" of the classical realist text aimed at pointing to the caesuras in the historical record (15). In a sense, Keily reads the onscreen disorientation as an expression of conflicting historical interpretations. In this way, the film points to an intriguing entanglement of the endless and the arbitrary, the authentic and the disorientating. It is worth quoting Keily's argument at length:

What Greengrass aims at...is the construction of 'gapped history,' or the de-composition of historical narrative. This can be translated as an acknowledgment that before *Bloody Sunday* there was Bloody

Sunday. And before events had a name, there was a series of actions that predated their codification by reactions to them...The strength of this representation is precisely that it pushes back the folds of commentary and history and reminds us of the raw events that had an irreducible shape all of their own. (Keily 15)

Indeed, by focusing on a representation of the day's confusion and resisting a final imposed interpretation, *Bloody Sunday* appears to offer the possibility of seeing the events anew, without the distortion of history's "codification[s]." Keily seems to suggest that by resisting closure, the film can somehow efface the boundaries between the representation and the real, and in doing so, recover a core of truth in the incoherence of reality.

A number of critics have interpreted this mixture of reconstruction and confusion in terms of trauma.<sup>4</sup> Renée Penney's description of the camera as witness during the scenes of the massacre provides a strong example:

In this scene, the camera becomes the memory body, the instigator of a phantasmic primary witness position. The pandemonium induced by the handheld camera that shakes out frames of fractured bodies and disorienting movement provides the most jarring emotional response in the film. ("Bloody Sunday")

It is curious to note that the two key elements that Kracauer focuses on to describe the sense of endlessness in his ideal film—the emphasis on disorientation and the incidental, and the impression of the camera freely moving through space—are central to this traumatic reading of *Bloody Sunday*. In this way, we can note how Penney's and Keily's readings implicitly depend on one another: Penney configures the camera as a free-floating traumatized subjectivity, yet this illusion of witness is dependent on the notion that the world witnessed is somehow objective. In other words, the temptation to speak of the film in traumatic terms is founded on the film's effectiveness in creating the illusion of the past's endlessness—to use Kracauer's term. The emphasis on witnessing relies on the same disavowal of the interpretative procedures inherent in the reconstruction of the world through which the camera moves.

Penney develops her reading of the camera as witness to implicate the viewer who is "asked to bear witness to the trauma to become a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event" ("Bloody Sunday").<sup>5</sup> This language of "bearing witness to" and "co-owning" the trauma is directly informed by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's theory of

4. Aileen Blaney, for example, writes that the film "work[s] through the persistence of historical trauma in contemporary Northern Ireland" by providing the opportunity for "informed viewers to revisit, and uninformed viewers to witness, scenes from the 'past'" (134; 118).

5. See also Blaney, Herron & Lynch.



traumatic transferral, and Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as a structural response mechanism associated with the experience of survival. For Felman and Laub, during the experience of trauma, "the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction" (57). The survivor becomes stranded in a paradox where s/he is possessed by an experience that has not been "experienced *in time*," and is, therefore, not fully known (Caruth 62). As the survivor does not possess the capacity to attribute psychic meaning to the event as it was experienced, the event becomes internalized "without mediation" and resistant to linguistic expression, resurfacing only in the form of flashbacks, which for Caruth, can be understood as a "literal return of the past" (59). Trauma becomes "a literal, nonsymbolic and nonrepresentational *memory* of the traumatic event," a memory that is outside of memory, in the sense that it is not individual memory but something approaching the real inscribed in the mind (Leys 71). For Felman and Laub, it is only through the act of testimony, which involves a transferral of the trauma between the survivor and the listener, that the knowledge of the event finally comes into being; through the act of listening, the hearer becomes a "co-owner" of the trauma, coming to feel "the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels" (57). From this perspective, a curious overlapping becomes visible between trauma theory's emphasis on the unmediated representation of the event in the witness' mind and its expression through symptom, and *Bloody Sunday*'s reconstruction of

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the witness position through an appropriation of the documentary aesthetic.

Derek Paget's discussion of dramadoc/docudrama is revealing here. Paget highlights a crucial dialectic between the "intertextual" and the "indexical" at the heart of the dramadoc/docudrama. He argues that such productions appropriate their authenticity effect by referencing the movements and textures of documentary, which simultaneously point to their origin in the real event (136). Reading Paget alongside Bill Nichols, we can refine our understanding of how this appropriation might work. Nichols argues that one of the central differences between fiction and documentary rests on an inherent disagreement in their relationship to realism: "In fiction, realism serves to make a plausible world seem real; in documentary, realism serves to make an argument about the historical world persuasive" (165). Indeed, for Nichols, this polemical aspect of documentary is essential. Documentary realism, he states, "is not only a style but also a professional code, an ethic, and a ritual" (167). The difference lies not in the misapprehension that documentary presents an unmediated recording of the world, but in the way that, through the editing process, an argument about the world is constructed through the juxtaposing of



seemingly incidental images. Jacques Rancière phrases this in another way when he notes that what distinguishes fiction from documentary “isn’t that the documentary sides with the real against the inventions of fiction, it’s just that the documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood” (*Film Fables* 158). In these terms, *Bloody Sunday*, through its appropriation of the look and feel of documentary, can be seen to perform a crucial doubling back on this relationship; as a work of fiction, it produces an image of the real in such a way as to suggest, not an effect, but a fact.

At this point, drawing on Rancière’s conceptualization of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, we might ask what gets lost in this mode of reading. For Rancière, aesthetics means:

a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolve around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (*Politics of Aesthetics* 13)

In Rancière’s terms, the civil rights march on January 30, 1972 is political in the sense that it asserted the right to speak of a party whose speech was heard only as “noise,” and it was thereby an active attempt to redistribute the boundaries of the sensible. It is interesting, therefore, to reflect on what *Bloody Sunday*’s aesthetic of trauma does or does not allow to become visible. As Kracauer suggested, there is always a limit to the illusion. In this respect, it is interesting to turn to an often overlooked aspect of the film’s design. Throughout, the film employs fades-to-black between scenes and often within a single scene, as if the film itself were passing in and out of consciousness—an idea that reflects Penney’s

notion of the camera as a composite, traumatized subjectivity. Indeed, Tom Herron and John Lynch read these gaps as part of the film’s “quality of stammering, of speaking with involuntary pauses or repetitions” that “marks the point of suffering, of an injustice that can barely be spoken even as it demands to be” (74). Once again, this highlights an ambiguity about the difference between an “involuntary” symptom and a voluntary aesthetic choice. These blank, black spaces perform a variety of overlapping functions.

The first function is to denote the passing of time. This is visible in an early scene in which Gerald Donaghy is seen fooling around on the couch with his girlfriend while babysitting for his sister. The shot is framed by the living-room door and is stationary. The scene, however, is split into thirds, fading to black twice—once to mark the time between the baby waking and Gerald’s girlfriend bringing her to the living room, and once to mark the time between this scene and when Gerald’s sister and husband arrive home. This function is the least contentious and warrants no fur-

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ther explanation, except to say that these ellipses create a passage of time that is important for the illusion of endlessness in that they suggests events occurring offscreen.

The second function is visible in the parallel press conferences of the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association and the Irish Army that opens the film. Here, the black screen fills the brief interludes between shots as the film cuts back and forth between each conference. For Herron and Lynch, this black screen “gives a powerful sense of the incompatibility of the different positions of the spokesmen of two organisations in conflict, as the blackness conveys a sense of chasmic distance between them” (70). These spaces can be understood in terms of ideological distance, and, indeed, this space holds the two sides apart throughout the film, except during the shooting itself, when the soldiers and the protesters come into direct contact.

The third function appears in the final sequence—another press conference, this time in the aftermath of the massacre—as Cooper attempts to communicate the injustice to the assembled media. Again, the screen fades to black numerous times within the scene, except here the respites are used to provide historical context. For example, captions appear stating, “Two days after Bloody Sunday the British

Government set up an Inquiry under Lord Chief Justice Widgery;” or, as Eamonn McCann reads out the names of the victims, the screen fades to black and the caption reads, “Lord Widgery accepted the British Army’s claim that soldiers came under fire from IRA gunmen as they entered the Bogside.” The appearance of these captions, widely used in historical films and documentaries, points to the limits of *Bloody Sunday*’s representational strategy: by attempting to capture the experience of being *there*, in the midst of the action, it forgoes expository details or contextualization with regard to Bloody Sunday’s position in the history of the Troubles and Irish civil rights. For a historical film, we learn very little history from it.

If *Bloody Sunday* is a history, it is not a history in the sense of a narrative reconstruction of historical events, but a history that resists such closures, remaining, as Pettitt describes it, “inconclusive, open-ended, unresolved” (56). It appears to be what really happened precisely *because* it recreates the confusion of the event and resists overarching contextualization. This is particularly revealing when, as Ruth Barton notes, the film “[omits] to have a camera on the spot when the first shot is fired” (172), which remains the very crux of the issue of Bloody Sunday. Indeed, in this way, we can begin to see how the “traumatic” effects of disorientation and blackouts also serve to evade historical judgment. While the stammering and silences of a traumatized individual can be said to be “involuntary,” the same cannot be said of a film. The blank spaces, shaky cameras, and inaudible conversations are not symptoms of what cannot be phrased, but choices not to phrase at all. In Rancière’s terms, political activity is whatever “makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse what was once only heard as noise” (*Disagreement* 30). *Bloody Sunday* refuses to turn the noise of history into discourse; rather, the blackness that permeates the film might be best read in the context of Colin Graham’s observations on a recurrent trope in post-Ceasefire Northern Irish culture, of “an ache which notices, knows, but can barely comment on the cauterisation of the dark complexity of the past, since to point to, or even test out, fragile post-consociational consensus would be to remember a future that is now consigned to history” (568).

If we consider that this violent history was itself a result of conflicting and irreconcilable historical narratives, this “fragile post-consociational consensus” can also be understood as having been “consigned to history.” The black gaps in the narrative allow the film to evade the crucial disagreements about history that precipitated the event. The emphasis on seeing the past in all its confusion enables the film to draw on the authority of history without ever having to commit to a statement about what that history is.

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