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The talking witness documentary: remembrance and the politics of truth

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This article argues that the conventional talking witness documentary, by relying on memory of experience as evidence, employs an inherently conservative politics of truth. Using a recent Kurdish video, *5 No.lu Cezaevi/Prison No. 5* (Çayan Demirel, 2009), as a case study, it considers the opportunities and limitations of the talking witness form, as well as its appeals. The essay pays special attention to the documentary's use of 'mimetic' affective engagement to break into the moral and conceptual space of trauma, and the harrowing experiences of men and women who were incarcerated in the notorious Diyarbakır prison in eastern Turkey in the aftermath of the 1980 Turkish *coup d'état*, thus endeavoring to, at once, fix and disseminate memories of a violent past that run counter to state-authored versions of that history.

Keywords: evidence; experience; historical documentary; testimony; trauma; witnesses

On 6 February 2010, I was invited by several students to a screening of a recent Kurdish documentary, *5 No.lu Cezaevi/Prison No. 5* (Çayan Demirel, 2009), at Satur-Dox, an alternative site programming Saturday night documentaries in an Istanbul art gallery. Many of my students and colleagues stopped by my office or emailed to say that I must see it. The video was being welcomed with open arms. At Satur-Dox the crowd was so large that they needed to arrange a second room. More people attended that screening than any other in the three years of the venue's operation. Eleven months later, the feature-length documentary played at a commercial movie theater on İstiklal, the main entertainment street of the European section of Istanbul. Originally scheduled for one week, it was held over for three. The video drew a total of 6000 people at an arts festival and at a commercial theater in the city of Diyarbakır in the east of Turkey, a predominately Kurdish city, the symbolic home city for Turkish Kurds, and

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where the prison is located. It won the best documentary award at the 46th Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival and at the 21st Ankara Film Festival, and, in 2009, from the Cinema Writer's Association/Sinema Yazarlari Dernegi (SIYAD).

Prison No. 5 tells of the experiences of the men and women who were incarcerated in the prison in the aftermath of the 1980 Turkish *coup d'état*, those who survived and are willing to talk about it. It relies on testimony, the memories of witnesses, people who had first-hand knowledge of torture, executions, and so-called accidental deaths. By drawing on their memories, and by attributing absolute authority to their lived experience (through the on-camera attestation of violence and suffering), the documentary seems to be offering us a new truth: a truth which runs counter to the state-sanctioned truth, a truth that is to become part of the public record, for all time. Michel Foucault speaks of such memory as counter-memory, a residual or resistant strain that withstands official versions (Davis and Starn 1989, 2; Foucault 1980, 139–64).

One cannot doubt the work's social relevance. Yet writing about this documentary has been difficult for me, particularly because no matter how much acclaim it has received, no matter how grateful people are that it was not banned, and no matter how much it is seen as doing good work (fulfilling a political need), this documentary is essentially, in its formal construction, far from radical.¹ And therefore, I have been wondering if there may not be a limit to how much social influence it might have.

First the context: Turkey is a country that is often accused, even in its own public opinion, of social amnesia.² The process involved in the founding of the modern Turkish Republic on the ruins of the Ottoman state was also the scene of unprecedented and institutionalized 'forgetting'. Esra Özyürek explains: 'Erasing the everyday habits and memories of the immediate past allowed the [nascent] Turkish government to establish itself as the founder of a new era' (Özyürek 2006, 4). In the mid-1920s, the Islamic lunar calendar was abandoned in favor of the Western Gregorian calendar, and Latin script was adopted in place of Arabic script. The new alphabet made it impossible for the younger generation to read anything written before 1928. Soon the script reform was coupled with language reform, further distancing younger generations from their Ottoman past. In addition, all Turkish citizens were required to drop their tribal, clan, and location names, as well as their religious titles, and adopt surnames, as was customary in the West. This divided clans into smaller groups, made it harder for young people to know their genealogy, and severed them from many older connections. These moves created, in Aysel Öncü's words, 'a homogenous empty time upon which the biography of the new nation could be written' (Öncü 2000, 299). And, importantly, the effort to construct a unified Turkish national identity also included leaving behind memories of the multicultural and heterogeneous Ottoman Empire. This targeted Greeks, Jews, and Armenians, but also Kurds, who, in state rhetoric, were referred to as 'mountain Turks', and later as 'eastern Turks'.

But of course, Kurds and Turks have memories. And even the attempts of the new Republic to foster 'forgetfulness' did not erase memories. Yet there still exists a subtle and complicated politics involved in expressing memories, in articulating them in public life. I will return to this in a moment. What makes it difficult to situate this documentary in contemporary Turkey is not that the junta's brutality was unknown or forgotten, but that the violence is the secret everyone knows; it was that way in the early 1980s, and still is now.³

Many memoirs by those who were incarcerated have been published. And there have been fiction films.⁴ A recent TV serial even mentioned the incarcerations and torture.⁵ These works were far from impartial. *Prison No. 5* was greeted enthusiastically, in my opinion, precisely because it does not have the objectivity that many expect from a documentary. Its first-person testimony and its history are explicit, legible, and, significantly, it is from the point of view of the victims. It was seen to be telling the truth about the evil hidden in plain sight.

Meltem Ahıska writes of 'different registers of telling the truth' in Turkish national history. What one speaks about in an 'intimate' register is what everyone knows but rarely speaks about publically (Ahıska 2006, 11–12).⁶ 'If the official truth is static and falsified and not able to accommodate the diversity of lived experience, then the other [intimate] register of truth acknowledges this and creates ways of informal falsification' (Ahıska 2006, 22). These two registers of truth cannot be reconciled, as they are interdependent and, because of their dialogical relations, reinforce each other.

Turkey's 'refusal to know the complexity and heterogeneity of the social', as Ahıska notes, reduces it to a national idiom. This in turn justifies the secrets of the state, which should not be spoken aloud or exhibited to an external gaze. So a distinction must be made between the inside and outside (Ahıska 2006, 26).⁷ A documentary that announces publicly the clandestine truth everyone knows, then, would appear to be performing a vital and fundamental function.

But this raises a number of crucial questions. What happens to collective knowledge when national traumas are constrained by the vicissitudes of representation? What part does that mediation play? What is the potential of a documentary's revision of public memory to contribute to the field of contested memories in which we produce our concept of 'nation'? Our understandings of and allegiance to the 'nation' are culturally constructed, and the nation itself is a cultural artifact, an 'imagined community', to use Benedict Anderson's phrase, that rests on the myth of social affinity (Anderson 1983, 4–7). The utopian belief in that imagined community, or a nationalism that promotes the expression and realization of a utopian will, in Bhaskar Sarkar's words, the 'proud and thunderous "we" that energizes and legitimizes many a national constitution' is, at best, a tenuous entity (Sarkar 2009, 3–4). The cleft in nationalism that comes with the knowledge of the state's betrayal can threaten that utopian will.

Although Turkish nationalists, Kurdish nationalists, and leftists were incarcerated, tortured, and killed in the aftermath of the 1980 military *coup*, it

was mainly Kurds and leftists who bore the brunt of the violence, and this, too, was not unknown. Yet to declare it out loud had been seen as a threat to Turkish solidarity. This documentary has perhaps garnered so much attention because it brings that violence and suffering into public visibility at a time when, as never before, this has become possible. Recent shifts in nationalist ideologies and programs, in particular the nationwide referendum that will make possible the civil prosecution of military personnel,⁸ as well as the criticisms of torture and human rights abuses that the prospective admission to the EU has engendered, and the latest concessions to Kurdish language and culture have all contributed to an emergent openness to this past.

Let me point out some statistics for those readers who are not familiar with the 12 September 1980 *coup d'état*. The *coup* put an end to several years of political violence between, among others, leftists, nationalists, and fundamentalist Muslim groups. But it did so at a great social cost. According to Erik J. Zürcher, in the first six weeks, 11,500 people were arrested. By the end of 1980, 30,000 were incarcerated, and by the one-year anniversary, 122,600 arrests had been made (Zürcher 1997, 292–94). It is generally thought that 650,000 were taken into custody in the four years that followed the *coup* (many of them simply for belonging to an organization); 1,683,000 were registered as suspect. During the interrogation of detainees in police stations, garrisons, and prisons, torture was widespread. In most cases, those charged were tried by military courts. Nearly 3600 death sentences were pronounced. *Prison No. 5* begins with a set of statistics announcing that 50 of those sentenced were hung and 299 others died in jail.⁹

In this essay, I will be paying special attention to the form *Prison No. 5* takes, the means it uses to reconstruct and recreate 'history'. I will be considering talking-head testimony as something to be looked *through* and something to be looked *at*, and much of what I will be saying is relevant to other talking witness documentaries, a popular form outside of Turkey as well (especially in documentaries made for television). This video, then, serves as a starting point, a springboard, to reflect on the opportunities and limitations of the talking witness form, its appeals, and its politics of truth. Because of this, I am not as interested in what the interviewees say in *Prison No. 5*, neither the representational nor the expressive aspects of the spoken, as what is made of the direct sound interviews and how the video tells its story. As James Young has pointed out, any historical inquiry should attend not only to what happened, but also to how it has been passed down to us (Young 2003, 283). It is this second aspect, how these documentaries tell their history, how they pass on history, that concerns me here.

Prison No. 5 has no voice-over narration, and its first-hand testimony is punctuated and supported by archival footage. There are occasional inserts of eastern landscapes, drawings by Zülfükar Tak,¹⁰ watchtowers, and clanging prison gates. I will be concentrating on the main means the video uses, the eyewitness testimony of the women and men who were there and who want to share their experiences. But share with whom? Who are the intended recipients?

Although witnesses speak of the difficulties many of those incarcerated and their Kurdish visitors had speaking Turkish, the spoken language throughout the video is Turkish. The title, too, is in Turkish.¹¹ So one might assume the maker wished to address majority audiences, people who belong to what Karen E. Till has called (in another context) the ‘society of perpetrators’, a society that must face its violent past (Till 2005, 122; see also Demirel quoted in Ziflioğlu 2009). What those audiences see and hear are not dispassionate, generalized accounts, but the specifics of the event through the heartfelt words of people whose lives were directly affected. The spoken word is used to communicate ‘things that have always’, in Teshome Gabriel’s thoughts, ‘to some degree, exceeded visual representation: the lived experience, residuals, the viscera’ (Gabriel 1998, 76). And through the testimonies, a state institution of confinement is turned into an institution of exhibition. The display of state power is now openly visible for the public gaze. This is a reversal of the surveillance and disciplinary mechanisms that suffused Turkish society in the early 1980s. The bodies of the tortured and the exercise of power are no longer hidden, but writ large for all to read (see Bennett 1988, 73–4).¹² The very people who were interrogated in that prison, the ‘unruly populace’ who were treated as objects of political subjugation, have now become voluntary subjects of knowledge, purposeful subjects aware of their own voices. Furthermore, in this documentary, they are honored for their sense of agency and their ability to tell the ‘real past’, even though they may not have been previously recognized for that in their personal lives. Audiences observe testimony about abuses and atrocities, traces of national trauma (a ‘wound’ to the nation). The senseless, yet routine, horrors prisoners experienced, many extremely painful to talk about, are communicated sometimes assertively, sometimes haltingly, with choked-up pauses and tears. Hands cover faces as memories are too difficult to negotiate. There is a political agenda to the work: the talking witnesses – and the testimonial act – are meant as tools of justice. The secret everyone knows now has a place in the public mind and eye.

Thanks to these men and women, events and actions in the past that were previously known via whispers and innuendo, muted by the traumatized victims’ reluctance to discuss the past, or the state not wanting to take responsibility for it, are now out in the open. And thanks to these women and men, the fractured stories that the younger generation grew up with and which fueled their imaginations and fantasies, but which never added up to a complete picture, are now transformed into something more concrete. And, because of the comfortable indexicality of those talking heads (the fact that the camera and microphone were present to record the witnesses’ testimony), the stories are endowed with life (Hirsch and Spitzer 2008, 138). The strong correspondence between sound and image, a conventional realist esthetic, means that the witnesses also have a persuasive iconic presence. Avishai Margalit writes of witnesses of nightmares of evil and suffering as having a ‘special sort of charisma’. ‘The charisma comes from having a special kind of experience which is elevated to some sort of high spirituality that makes the witness a moral force’ (Margalit 2002, 178). Certainly

this is part of the power of the documentary. We may know the facts already, we may learn nothing new, but now we have an indelible image and a permanent record that cannot be ignored.

The documentary makes use of 'mimetic' affective engagement to break into the moral and conceptual space of the trauma, endeavoring to, at once, fix and disseminate memories of the past. Along with the words spoken, the quality of the voice, the cadences of speech, the sobbing, the sighs, the silences . . . the non-semantic sounds that come from the faces all contribute to the emotional impact of the testimony. We generally refer to these works as 'talking head' documentaries, but it might be more precise to refer to them as 'talking faces'.¹³ The camera generally remains static on the interviewees in *Prison No. 5*, but the performances themselves, the delivery of the testimonies, are quite moving. The effects on the teller of conveying the memories are apparent. Clearly memory does not take place in a void. Yet the present conditions under which they are being remembered are not part of this story, nor are the effects of the memories on the ultimate storyteller, the collector of memories, the documentary maker. The middle agent, the video maker, the agent who has brought the memories to us and has shaped them into a history, is missing. Memory becomes history. And shared memory, rather than actual experience, becomes the pretense of truth and the ground for moral claims.

This is interesting for what it tells us about evidence. But it is also interesting for what it tells us about the desires that spectators bring to a documentary. We want compelling individuals and chilling facts, sensational evidence. We want the witness to remember and to be here now to tell the tale. We want, as Geoffrey Hartman has written, 'I was there', and, equally, 'I am here', not only to tell us about it but also to display the humanity of the victim, the humanity of surviving (Hartman 1997, 69–70; see, too, Spence and Navarro 2011, 84). These witnesses have been asked to perform their memories about their trauma and pain, on camera, for the spectator's benefit. And, as Jill Godmilow argues in a different context, the spectator seems to have a certain synthetic intimacy with them.

Talking witness documentaries forge an implicit contract with the audience that is based on our desire for the real and our good faith. They knit us into a moral community of 'we', a collective we who are united by our compassion. This seems based on the liberal assumption that goodness will come from understanding that evil took place. And that knowledge will make us better people. It is also based, of course, on the notion that the audience believes that these witnesses are conveying truths.

Jacques Derrida insists that inherent in bearing witness is a call to the addressee of the witnessing to believe the testimony. According to Derrida, witnesses do not deliver proof, they deliver 'having-been-present', responsibility and sincerity, an assumed knowledge based on their first-hand experience. He writes that we have no other choice but to believe – or disbelieve – attestation. '[V]erification or transformation into proof [. . .] belong to some [other] foreign space' (Derrida 2000, 194).

Memory is *assumed* to be reliable, even though we all know that memory fades over time, and even though we know that memory can be distorted by our beliefs, desires, and interests. The childhood game of ‘telephone’ illustrates how unreliable even our short-term memory is. We are suspicious that even talking about an event can also affect our memory. Do we remember the event itself or our stories about it? We know, too, that memories are constantly being revised, rewritten, overlaid with commentary, narrativized.... When memory enters language, it is changed in the process (Hirsch and Spitzer 2010, 402).

This is not meant to call memory into doubt as an aid to the construction of history. Surely it is the simultaneous desire for contact with the past and its unattainability that make memories and the talking witness documentary so attractive. Although memories cannot deliver a past, they can sound an echo, an echo in which the moment of the events recalled reverberates with the moment of the narrative that reports it.

The memories expressed in *Prison No. 5* are valuable not only because they break the conspiracy of whispers and innuendo to tell us of events, but also because they tell us what those events mean to the people who recount them. As people look back on their lives, their memories are vital sources of their feelings, beliefs, and values. Hence they can reveal not just what people did, but what they felt about what they did, why they responded to events as they did, and what those events have come to mean to them. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli contends that subjectivity is as much a part of history as the more visible facts (1981, 100). He also maintains that oral histories, and I think we can substitute oral reminiscences, tell us less about events than about their *meanings* (1991, 50). So testimonies, if we know how to read them, can be very valuable.¹⁴

But as Young observes, survivors know of events both directly and at some remove. ‘The survivor’s memory includes both experiences of history and of memory, the way that memory has already become a part of personal history’ (Young 2003, 280). Memories themselves have histories, and they are narrativized within power relations. We need to recognize the role their experiences have played in the survivors’ lives, and also the role their own narratives have played in their lives, the complex interweaving of memories and self.

Yet in *Prison No. 5* we know little of the dynamic of memory, little of the history of those memories, and nothing of the power relations that produce them for this video. Although certainly aware of the camera, and performing for it, the informants appear to be discussing what is on their minds, rather than responding to questions asked. The interrogator is off-screen and unheard, and the ‘hierarchy of control that guides and directs the exchange’ is invisible (Nichols 1991, 52).¹⁵ We get no insight into the process through which the memories have been solicited, collected, and made available to audiences. Memory is reduced to the facts and emotions that the documentarian feels are necessary to tell this history in a meaningful, authoritative manner. And the contingent truths of the historian’s narrative, the result of the intersubjective

dialogues, the *pas de deux* between disparate voices, are missing, hidden under the weight of the witnesses' memories, the survivors' testimonies.¹⁶ The dialogue between the video maker and the viewer is also subdued, as the authority of the memories, the evidence of memories, becomes the realization of the real.

Even as we acknowledge the value of memory, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that come with the 'truth telling' of this type of documentary. We know that memory is subject, in Pierre Nora's words, 'to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting' (Nora 1996, 3). We want to remember so we won't forget, and there is a need to testify so that others won't forget. The promise, then, is in the telling, the transmission of memories, so that those memories can be part of how we know history. But what is generally not clear in the talking witness documentary is that the history with which we are presented is a reconstruction 'always problematic and incomplete' (Nora 1996, 3). The testimonial documentary stakes a claim to history, yet it rarely exposes the history, variability, and partiality of its own production of meaning. We are seldom aware of the intellectual dynamic of the work's history.

Unlike the more modernist, multivalent hermeneutics of *Nostalgia de la luz/ Nostalgia for the Light* (Patricio Guzmán, 2010), *S21: La machine de mort Khmère rouge /S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (Rithy Panh, 2003), or *History and Memory* (Rea Tajiri, 1991), *Prison No. 5* (and, I would suggest, most other talking witness documentaries) does not see the notion of historical knowledge as a problem. It confidently substitutes one history for another. It never challenges conventional historical understandings of evidence. Nor does it include the search for meaning as part of the story. Nor does it critically and self-consciously incorporate into the story the difficulty of discovering and telling the whole truth – or even a small part of the truth – about an event. Rather, by implication, this type of documentary points out the need for information in order to reconstruct what happened (on the popular, if not the official, level), and, with untainted realism, with all the rhetorical force of photographic likeness, it seems to be conveying that information to us through the memories of those who testify. History is knowable and eyewitness testimony is evidence that can bring the past to us. We might describe its use of testimony as a positivist faith in truth and historical knowledge, a discursive transparency that hides its own power behind a naïve epistemology. The above-mentioned works are also concerned with representing reality 'realistically'. But conceptions of both history and realism are being interrogated. The history they confront is not the history envisioned by nineteenth-century mimetic realism.

In *Prison no. 5* there is little uncertainty of meaning. Evidence is strong and unambiguous, and declares its own importance. Former inmates tell us of having been forced to sign false statements suggesting that deaths that resulted from torture were the result of accidents. We might think of new evidence as generally filling in gaps in the record or shedding new light on a phenomenon. And it would be nice to think of this new evidence as revealing the circumstances of these violent deaths, heretofore suppressed, excised from popular memory. In this case,

however, the new evidence does not reveal previously unknown information. If it transforms our understanding, it does so not through new facts, but through vivid, affecting information that allows us to see the phenomenon differently: through the eyes of the survivors.¹⁷

Yet this new evidence is not treated as redundant or supplementary. It is treated as authenticating the past. Its claim of pedagogical legitimacy is based on the authority of experience. This evidence depends on a referential notion of evidence: evidence as simply a reflection of the real.¹⁸ And this authorized appearance of the 'real', to paraphrase Michel de Certeau, serves to camouflage the practices that determine it and organize it (de Certeau 1986, 203; cited in Scott 1991, 776–7). In effect, de Certeau goes on to say, representation disguises the praxis that brings it to us (*ibid*).

Any historical documentary reports on present sources of historical knowledge and organizes the evidence in some fashion, into some sort of narrative form. Evidence, therefore, should be recognized as such in relation to a potential narrative, 'so that', as Lionel Gossman notes, a 'narrative can be seen to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative' (Gossman 1989, 26). But in the talking testimony documentary, how each informant's past is narrativized is generally hidden in the editing process. The recorded recollections in testimonial documentaries are excerpted to provide the information that is needed to reconstruct what happened. In *Prison No. 5*, they are arranged into a fairly linear chronology. The way that each witness' story was told is lost. What would have been the story of each survivor has been reduced to a sequence of memories – memories of experiences.

In the talking witness documentary, the authority of experience serves as the starting point, as well as explanation and conclusion. It treats testimony not as an opaque site of political struggle, but as transparent factual evidence. Experience seems to be uncontested, true because the subject lived through it. ('I hold the truth; I was there; I will tell you what the state-authorized textbooks don't tell. *It really happened!*') The discursive nature of testimony – indeed, the discursive nature of memory – is ignored because to discuss it would be to undermine its status as an unquestionable ground for explanation. Any separation of meaning and experience would deny the relevance of testimony and draw attention to the discursive practices employed.

Experience itself is unquestioned and unquestionable. Yet, to quote Joan W. Scott, 'it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience' (Scott 1991, 779). It is because experience constitutes us as subjects that we need to scrutinize it critically. We should not take it for granted as a foundational truth.

As Scott comments, when experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, questions about the constructed nature of experience, about discourse and language, about cognition and reality, are left aside, as a result reproducing rather than critically confronting the ideological systems that see meaning as transparent. Truth and falsehood, then, are simultaneously differentiated and

consumed according to the same economy, their social institutions mirroring one another. Both operate within a system that is structured according to a moral economy of good and bad, proper and improper, presence and lack, self and not-self. Instead of analyzing the workings of this system, this project of making experience visible reproduces its terms (Scott 1991, 777–9). The well-meaning, seemingly liberal, talking witness documentary, no matter how worthy its project, paradoxically uses a psychologically, spiritually, intellectually, and ethically conservative form.

An important part of that form is the perceived necessity for a strong, clear narrative line, thus implying the necessity for a certain amount of coherence. Here, again, a contrast with the documentaries mentioned earlier – documentaries with intricate, self-conscious, and fragmented narratives – might be constructive. Unlike those, in the talking witness documentary's search for legibility and persuasiveness (and there are political reasons for wanting to be persuasive), conflicting accounts, vagueness and ambivalence, rather than being interrogated, are generally excised. It is usually assumed that if one informant contradicts another, one account must be omitted. Consequently complexity is eliminated as well. But isn't this contrary to the subjectivities that memory has to offer?

In the search for certainties, story is reduced to necessary information. Context is negated. Derrida's notion that witnesses deliver 'having-been-present', and that we have no other choice but to believe – or disbelieve – the attestation, is based on the notion that testimony is empirical evidence. Competing accounts would throw this epistemological perspective into question. They would splinter the definitive, logical history into rival, malleable histories.

Competing accounts might also reveal the *act* of remembering, that memory created at the moment for a specific purpose, materialized in fleeting moments, shaped for a particular occasion. In *Prison No. 5*, the occasion is muffled: the witnesses seem to be thinking about the events that they recount, unprovoked. Remnants of the dialogue, the social interaction that motivated the memories, are eliminated in the editing.

Yet it is the necessity to report, to externalize the memory that brings forth the recollections (see Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer 1999; also Spence and Paça Cengiz 2012). As Susan Engel puts it, 'One creates the memory at the moment one needs it' (Engel 1999, 6). She also remarks that '[m]emories must find an audience to become part of history' (Engel 1999, 154). It might thus be helpful to see the act of testimony as performative, in the sense that it both constitutes and enables historical memory. Besides thinking of testimony as a form of historical evidence, we might, as Roxana Waterson does, think of it as an event in its own right (Waterson 2007, 61), an event that takes place in the present. As such, these testimonies do not simply report on or describe the past reality, they have the potential to intervene in the course of human events in the present.

But what can this social intervention accomplish? *Prison No. 5* is an unquestionably significant documentary, a powerful and eloquent political

oratory. Because of its politics of truth, however, I wonder if there might not be some limit to the kinds of social impact this well-meaning documentary might have. It delivers an unquestionable truth, a past that is clear and forceful. The logic of the talking witness may be limited precisely to bringing force and clarity to the event. It is seldom able to get deeper into the subject to explore the structural reasons behind the event, the inner workings or logic. The documentary's communicability, the utopian potential to inform, takes precedence over analytical complexity. But is knowledge about the past enough to ensure that it will not happen again?

In *Prison No. 5*, there is no structural analysis. Personal memory of personal experience substitutes for historical inquiry. The documentary laments the past events. But can it contribute to understanding them? Or does it, as Godmilow suggests about the 'liberal documentary' in general, produce not useful knowledge, but desire – desire for a 'better, fairer world'? Yet doesn't this desire, ironically, celebrate the inherent absence of that ideal? The witnesses, therefore, might be seen as performing a kind of healing service for the spectator. We are edified by their memories, their suffering. *Prison No. 5* is not only welcome, but also satisfying.

So what? What do we expect from a documentary? The possibility of a documentary contributing to or mobilizing people for social transformation is in itself a debatable concept (see Ruby 2000, 199). If information about wrongdoings has the possibility to change consciousness, how can we appraise that change? What does the fact that *Prison No. 5* was so welcomed tell us? Theater attendance or DVD sales may reflect a documentary's reporting skills. An award may be a sign of its artistic excellence. But can we measure engagement? Can we even isolate motivations to evaluate them?

Homi Bhabha long ago referred to an article Robert Stam and I wrote as Brechtian (Bhabha 1983, 22; Stam and Spence 1983). He was right, of course. As Brechtians, we felt that a film or video's form, its textual strategies, were political, and could affect the way spectators connect with the work, and therefore how they processed the information in it. The aim was to produce active spectators who were encouraged to think critically and to draw conclusions, to be transformed into participants, so to speak. Why should they check their brain in the cloakroom? Brecht felt that his concerns were 'eminently practical'. He hoped that his spectators would change society (Brecht 1964, 41).

Bertolt Brecht was writing about theater. What about documentary film and video? For Brecht, theater should be 'committed' and explore social issues. But it should also be popular and enjoyable. Do we claim that for a radical documentary? For a talking witness documentary? After all, the witnesses are not 'quoting' characters (as Brecht demanded), they are drawing on the memory of their experiences, in this case trauma, to tell us what once was. We do not expect a Brechtian dissonance in a talking witness documentary, we expect transparency, an indexical relation with reality. Robert A. Rosenstone writes of the historical documentary as constituting its facts by 'selecting traces of the past

and enfolded them into a narrative' (Rosenstone 2006, 70). A talking witness documentary, however, deals in affect. It is not simply an arrangement of facts. It is a *telling* of facts, in the form of conveyed memories. And the telling is a construction of the past that draws on the subjectivities of the teller, 'always positioned, ideological, and partisan' (Rosenstone 2006, 72), but also emotional. The feelings we see and hear are not the past; they are the way the past is being experienced in the present, or near present, of the documentary's recording. The talking witness documentary's project of making experience accessible remains within the epistemological frame of normative history and its understanding of evidence. Its referentiality is certainly contrary to Brecht's formal strategies. And its transparency precludes the kind of critical examination of the workings of ideology that Brecht espoused.

So it's not Brechtian. Are there not other ways of being radical? Or does the fact that the talking witness documentary has no historical analysis, no scrutiny of the inner workings or logics of events, no critical questioning of how history, evidence, or meaning are constituted prevent even that? I would argue it does. Maybe the most we can expect from a conventional talking witness documentary about trauma is to adamantly establish that the harrowing violence existed and reveal the feelings the victims have about the experiences they have gone through. But we can never really understand the historical processes that have produced their experiences and positioned them as subjects.

Perhaps, then, *Prison No. 5* was so welcomed and acclaimed not because it was so radical, but because it contributes to the ongoing project of transforming the way we imagine our community and our communion. Personal recollections, no longer private, are available to be appropriated as a common discourse, as national history. The 1980 *coup d'état* marked a moment of rupture for citizens of Turkey. Speaking about the repression that ensued remained a difficult task even after the passage of three decades: corporal and psychic losses and the widespread sense of betrayal impose deep breaches in the solidarity necessary to the imagined community (see Sarkar 2009, 9). *Prison No. 5*'s compelling testimony turns memory into a shocking collective experience. It is meant to generate empathy in the spectators, a rhetoric of pathos and affect, but also, more importantly, a rhetoric of communion. The feelings we take away from the viewing experience not only contribute to our knowledge, they bind us to an affective community. They may even help to create an imagined community, fostering some kind of affiliation and fellowship among people who have little or no physical contact (Benedict Anderson again) but care about such issues and long for communion. The large number of people who were in attendance when the documentary was screened at Satur-Dox and in the movie theater on Istiklal, both Turks and Kurds, suggests not only the need to acknowledge the sense of betrayal, but also the imagined potential of this coming together. And perhaps my difficulty with this essay suggests my own conflicts over notions of betrayal and the imagined potential of belonging to this community.

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Notes

1. The tradition of banning films is deeply entrenched in Turkish society. *Prison No. 5* tells us that during the four years of the junta, 937 films were banned for being 'inappropriate'. Although this documentary exposes the state brutality in a jail in Diyarbakır, it was not banned like the documentary maker's previous video about the massacre of Kurdish Alevis in the province of Dersim in 1938. Ayşe Çetinbaş has suggested that, unlike the previous documentary, this documentary confronts the military's account of events and places blame (personal email correspondence, April 21, 2011). The tensions between the military and the Turkish government have been heightened in recent years.
2. See editor's 'Introduction' to Özyürek (2006).
3. Yet even as the victims' voices and subjectivity are spoken aloud, chronicled into the historical record, we must concede that some people would prefer not to have to acknowledge that these injustices ever took place. And many would like to move on to something else. But as Theodor W. Adorno pointed out not long after the end of the Second World War, 'The attitude that it would be proper for everything to be forgotten and forgiven by those who were wronged is expressed primarily by the party that committed the injustice' (Adorno 1986, 114).
4. See, for example, Yılmaz Güney's *The Wall/Duvar* (1985).
5. *Bu Kalp Seni Unutur Mu?* [Would This Heart Forget You?], October 13, 2009 through February 9, 2010, on SHOW TV, an independent commercial channel. It was canceled after 16 episodes because of 'low viewership'. I thank Mary Lou O'Neil for keeping me informed about this show.
6. She draws on Michael Herzfeld's language in *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (Herzfeld 2005).
7. In Amy Mills' ethnographic research into how memories of its cosmopolitan past function in the Kuzguncuk neighborhood of Istanbul, one of the residents alluded to the mid-twentieth-century departure of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews (after the 1942–43 wealth taxes that disproportionately targeted non-Muslims, the 6–7 September 1955 state-led anti-minority riots and destruction of property, and the 1964 forced deportations of Greek citizens): 'It's known but never discussed' (Mills 2010, 101). I was once helping a student in Turkey with an application to an American graduate school in cultural anthropology. She was proposing to study a European separatist movement. The proposal was well written, yet there was one section that I did not understand. It was a story about a relative who used to tease her father about something. When I told her that I was confused, and thought it might also be confusing to those who were reading the application, she hesitated, silent, her eyes downturned. Then I remembered another story she had conveyed, of a train ride from her father's homeland in eastern Turkey to the homeland of her mother west of Istanbul. And I asked 'Is your father a Kurd?' With eyes still looking downward,

never meeting my own, she replied, slowly, articulating each word carefully, 'I cannot criticize my country'.

8. At the time of writing, the prosecution of General Kenan Evren and General Tahsin Şahinkaya, surviving leaders of the 1980 *coup*, seems highly likely. (See, for instance, 'Coup leaders must be tried as example: Gül', *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 2, 2012.)
9. Part of the legacy of the 1980 *coup* was also a disavowal of history. The military government not only dismissed all members of parliament, every mayor and municipal council, they closed down many newspapers and some trade unions and abolished all political parties, confiscating their possessions. And in their zeal to break with the past, they, according to Erik J. Zürcher, 'even tried to destroy that past itself'. The archives of the political parties disappeared (Zürcher 1997, 293). Nearly 20 years of the archives of the National Senate were destroyed as well (Ahıska 2006, 15).
10. The drawings were from his memories of incarceration.
11. The film, however, does include several songs in Kurdish. In the fall of 2011, an Istanbul Kurdish-language theater company, DestAR Theatre, mounted *Disco No. 5*, a one-man show that also dealt with brutality in the Diyarbakır prison. It projected non-dialogue excerpts of the prison from the film intermittently. I am grateful to Çetin Sarıkartal for telling me about the play.
12. It is also an inversion of the dynamic Foucault traces in *Discipline and Punish*, one in which the scaffold and the bodies of the condemned are withdrawn from the public gaze as public punishment is replaced by institutions of confinement. 'The scaffold, where the body of the tortured criminal had been exposed to the ritually manifest force of the sovereign, the punitive theatre in which the representation of punishment was permanently available to the social body, was replaced by a great enclosed, complex and hierarchised structure that was integrated into the very body of the state apparatus' (Foucault 1977, 115–16).
13. This point has been inspired by a talk Susana de Sousa Dias gave, 'Talking Voices and Looking Heads: Documentary Devices in Question', at the Visible Evidence 18 conference, New York City, 14 August 2011.
14. For more on this issue, see Davis and Starn (1989).
15. Bill Nichols calls this a 'masked interview' (Nichols 1991, 51). Since the video maker is evident in the editing, we might think of this, as Nichols does, as a presence by absence (Nichols 1991, 54).
16. Mehmet Özgür Candan's *Geçmiş Mazi Olmadı/The Past is Not in the Past* (2011) is an interesting contrast. The documentary interviews Tümay Hanim and her family. The two daughters and son-in-law were incarcerated in an Istanbul prison after the 12 September 1980 military *coup*. How the family remembers the events and the effects their memories have had on their lives in the past 30 years is the major part of the story told. Although Candan does not appear in the work, one always has the feeling that the family members are speaking, openly or reluctantly, to someone.
17. To some extent, the video is haunted by those who did not survive, its coherence a necessary but ultimately misleading artificiality.
18. Noel King describes *Union Maids* (James Klein, Miles Mogulescu, and Julia Reichert 1976) as 'a series of witnesses [...] unanswerable in their existential authenticity; they are constructed as incontrovertible within a textual system which effectively forecloses any possibility of dialogue and analysis', suggesting that experience is unproblematic (King 1981, 14).

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