

On The Road To Virtue
Meyer Brownstone and the Documentation of Human Development

by
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A supporting thesis paper in partial fulfillment of the
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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

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Peter Conrad

ABSTRACT

On The Road To Virtue is a research project consisting of a thirty-minute documentary film and this supporting thesis paper. The entire project is built on the archival documentation of Meyer Brownstone from his visits to the Salvadoran refugee camps in Honduras in the 1980s. Through a cinematic examination of the visual and audio evidence, as well as Brownstone's commenting on it, we consider his memory of interacting with the refugees and contemplate their own efforts to retain agency in their lives. The film uses three primary vehicles — archival documentation, personal interviews, and enactments —to create a storytelling structure which encourages reflection on the direct testimony of the Salvadoran refugees and on Brownstone's images, while assessing his evidentiary accounting of life in the refugee camps. The supporting paper and the film both reflect on his commitment to promoting human development in the camps and elsewhere, through the establishment of participatory democracy structures, the maintenance of sustainable living practices, and the insistence on free speech and movement. The film also conveys the fluid relationship between historical events and their contemporary remembrance while this thesis paper critically reflects on the implications of these ideas and the related artistic approaches used to present them in the film.



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This project was almost six years in the making. As often happens, the film eventually realized bears little resemblance to the film I started out making in late 2011. Entering Ryerson's Documentary Media MFA program in 2015 was a decision calculated to challenge myself, to expand my understanding of the documentary form, and to emerge with a completed project. *On The Road To Virtue* is the result of an intense and satisfying engagement with faculty and colleagues in the program.

Special thanks to my thesis supervisor, Gerda Cammaer, and to my thesis advisor, Alex Anderson, for encouraging me to interrogate every decision in the project while trusting my creative instincts. Thanks as well to Katy McCormick, program director, and the entire Documentary Media faculty for presenting a wide range of engaging courses which helped reshape my thinking about what documentary can be and how I might invigorate my practice with new approaches.

Over the past six years, various people have supported my work and encouraged me to complete the project including Diana Moeser, Cesar Ramirez, Christina Pare, Juan Luis Suárez, Monica Jäggi, Lou Hawkes, Amanda Grzyb, and my brother, John Conrad.

Heartfelt thanks to Meyer Brownstone, the central participant in the film, for his willingness to share his many stories and archival materials, and for trusting me to share these stories accurately and compassionately.

There is one person I can't name who was the reason the project started in the first place. The unfortunate fallout of the civil war in El Salvador and the history of the Salvadoran refugee camps in Honduras is that the dynamics of the conflict continue to play out in very real and

personal ways for many Salvadorans whether they returned home after the war or resettled in other countries. Those ripple effects present risks associated with sharing personal stories that can be too great to justify a public airing of one's experiences, so maintaining anonymity and privacy is the safest way forward. But his ongoing support and initial willingness to share his story with me, even though it did not end up in the film, significantly shaped my understanding of these events and helped craft the final film.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'P' and 'C'.

Peter Conrad
August 2017

INTRODUCTION

Meyer Brownstone's work as an international observer is a relevant and compelling subject for documentary expression in the early 21st century. As many countries reassess the value of global engagement while flirting with nationalist isolation, Brownstone's passionate commitment to international cooperation and human development remains a beacon for navigating such precarious times. At the heart of his commitment is documentation — personal observation, photographs, sound recordings, and written testimonials — which provides a strong evidentiary foundation for compassionate social intervention and effective policy formation.

In his documentation of the Salvadoran refugee camps in Honduras in the 1980s, Brownstone gathered evidence of difficult living conditions and witnessed the refugees' resilience as they advocated for their own interests and worked to establish sustainable communities. His work in those camps is an example of his commitment to establish truth — or at least *a truth*¹ — based on rigorous evidence, a commitment that has been central to his professional activity. Gathering documentation in the refugee camps resulted in a collision between idealism and reality. That collision and its aftershocks form the heart of the film *On The Road To Virtue*.

This paper will interrogate the context, form, and methodology of that film. Contextually, I will explore Brownstone's professional background, the historical and political backdrop to the civil war in El Salvador, and the genesis of the refugee camps. I will also reflect on my personal position in relation to the film's story focus and aesthetic. Regarding form, I'll explore my choice to integrate several documentary modes into the film as a way to support multiple storytelling goals. I'll also examine the effectiveness of using still images as a principal visual source in a

¹ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 118.

film. Lastly, I'll discuss methodological challenges I encountered while making the film which shaped the creative direction of the film. Even though I explore each of these areas in its own chapter, ideas and themes will undoubtedly recur and expand throughout the paper, given the integrative nature of the filmmaking process.



CONTEXT

The Observer as Witness

Meyer Brownstone has a rich personal and professional history worth exploring in a documentary. Now 95 years old and living in central Toronto, he's an international observer, academic, and former high-ranking provincial civil servant in Saskatchewan. While holding an academic appointment at the University of Toronto, he was the research supervisor for the royal commission on bilingualism and biculturalism between 1963 and 1968, and was the 1986 recipient of the Lester B. Pearson Peace Prize.² After leaving government in Saskatchewan in 1964, Brownstone began to work internationally as a consultant on local government for the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, first in Jamaica and then in Tanzania.³ He served as chair of Oxfam Canada from 1975 to 1995, but was much more than a figurehead. In his capacity as Chair, he visited many regions, including Chile and Nicaragua.⁴ Because of his substantial impact both within Oxfam and beyond, both domestically and internationally, he retains the title of Chair Emeritus.

² Harry Gutkin and Mildred Gutkin, *The Worst of Times, The Best of Times*, (Markham: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1987), 151-152, 157. Brownstone rose to become the deputy minister for municipal affairs in Saskatchewan.

³ *Ibid.*, 151. Brownstone spent a year in Jamaica on behalf of the United Nations; following independence in Tanzania, at the behest of Julius Nyerere, he joined a commission there on decentralization.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

Brownstone's commitment to human development⁵ emerged from his socialist education in the North Winnipeg community of Jewish immigrants in which he grew up.⁶ North Winnipeg was a hotbed of radical Jewish intellectuals in the early-to-mid 20th century, and Brownstone was steeped in their teachings.⁷ When he went to work for the provincial government in Saskatchewan in 1947, he took this grounding in radical socialism with him. The national state management programs he helped develop for the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) governments from 1947 to 1964⁸ were based on ideas he and others had been introduced to in Winnipeg. As his work in government evolved, with successes as well as setbacks, Brownstone became more insistent that socialist programs be built on a commitment to decentralized, participatory democracy.⁹ After he moved into academic work and international engagement, this idea remained central to his thinking and to his activities in Africa, Latin America, and Central America.

⁵ In this context, “human development” means the implementation and maintenance of participatory democracy, equitable access to health care and sustainable food sources, gender-equitable social practices, socially-just dispute resolution mechanisms, and the freedom of speech, assembly, and movement.

⁶ Henry Trachtenberg, “Jews and Left Wing Politics in Winnipeg’s North End, 1919-1940” in *Jewish Life and Times, Volume VIII: Jewish Radicalism in Winnipeg, 1905-1960*, (Winnipeg: Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada, 2003), 132. See also, Gutkin, *The Worst of Times*, 146-147.

⁷ Gutkin, *The Worst of Times*, 147.

⁸ Ibid., 149-151. Through his role on the Economic Advisory and Planning Board, Brownstone helped establish public ownership in many areas of the Saskatchewan economy, including Canada’s first provincial medicare program which launched in the early 1960s.

⁹ Ibid., 153. Brownstone articulated his core philosophy which he applied to policy development and general government administration: “One of my concerns about socialism is its tendency to centralize, and to have too much faith in technocratic expertise and process, rather than providing for public interaction and decision-making by the people themselves. ... If a socialist system continues such political slavery, removing the power of decision from its citizens, then it hasn’t solved any problems.”

From Land Reform to Civil War in El Salvador

The complexity of politics in Central America has galvanized Brownstone's interest over several decades since he first visited the region in the 1970s. It's a region in which the interests of the landowning class have mostly overruled those of Indigenous people, peasant farmers, and the urban poor. In El Salvador, local oligarchies have controlled much of the valuable arable land since the 1880s, when the government introduced decrees recognizing only private land ownership and allowing the absorption of communally available land into private commercial estates.¹⁰ Subsequently, the owners of those estates resisted any reform initiatives to give peasant farmers access to enough land to sustain themselves and to participate in the burgeoning coffee economy. Without that access, peasant farmers were forced to work as seasonal agricultural labourers on the larger-scale coffee plantations, move to regions of the country without arable land, or leave the country altogether.¹¹ As Liisa North characterizes it:

... a 'vicious cycle' of underdevelopment was set into place in El Salvador, in contrast to the 'virtuous cycle' of expanding economic growth based on the widespread ownership of productive property encountered in North America during the same historical period.¹²

The concentration of land ownership within *los Catorce*, the small clique of families controlling the export-oriented coffee economy, entrenched economic and political inequality in El Salvador in the late-19th and early 20th centuries. There was social unrest through this period, but the government established local police forces, and in 1912 a National Guard with rural police units, to suppress it. The role of these units was to protect the economic interests of the

¹⁰ Liisa North, *Bitter Grounds: Roots of Revolt in El Salvador*, (Toronto: Between The Lines, 1981), 17-19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

ruling oligarchy. They did this by assisting with the physical expansion of the coffee estates, driving squatting peasants off those lands, and monitoring the supply of day labourers from among dislocated peasants.¹³ This coercive and repressive dynamic played out through the 1920s as export revenues soared, but a more substantial peasant rebellion occurred in 1932 after the collapse of coffee prices during the Great Depression squeezed landless peasants even further. The rebellion was viciously put down by the military, local police forces, and the oligarchy's own paramilitary units. Thirty thousand peasants were killed.¹⁴ *La Matanza*, as it became known, triggered the overt establishment of a military dictatorship after a period of exclusionary civilian dictatorships controlled by different factions within the ruling oligarchy.¹⁵ This began a decades-long run of military-led administrations which protected elite economic interests and fostered a state-oriented professional class which supplied personnel to the military and police structures whose job it was to protect the entrenched status quo. But resistance to this state of affairs did not disappear. Indeed, by 1960, a moderate opposition promoting agrarian reform had emerged with burgeoning grass-roots support. The Christian Democratic Party led this opposition, gaining political power at the municipal level and in the national Legislative Assembly before the end of the decade.¹⁶ For the 1972 presidential election, the CDP joined a coalition of opposition parties, resulting in the seeming victory of their candidate, José Napoleón Duarte. But the ruling party ignored that result and installed their own candidate, Arturo Molina. After a failed coup attempt

¹³ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴ Ibid., 27-29. North argues that the privatization of land in El Salvador and the establishment of the export-oriented coffee economy had a strong anti-Indigenous, racist cast to it, one that "... effectively denied citizenship ..." to rural peasants.

¹⁵ Ibid., 22-24.

¹⁶ Ibid., 66-69.

to oust Molina by more progressive members of the military government, a period of intense repression ensued, signalling the end of efforts to reform the political and economic systems. The repression only intensified later in the decade as military, paramilitary, and police forces killed opposition politicians, student demonstrators, peasant leaders, and increasingly-radical clergy throughout the country.¹⁷ It's within this context of repression that several guerrilla organizations were formed, including what became known as the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN), the political and military organization around which the rebel side in the civil war would eventually coalesce.

The intense repression and violence led to a U.S.-backed coup in late 1979 to install a reformist junta with both civilian and military members. But that intervention failed to quell the repression.¹⁸ In 1980 alone, there was a wave of gruesome “death squad” killings in San Salvador, as well as the murder of Oscar Romero, the outspoken Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, and also the Salvadoran Army massacre of peasant civilians at the Sumpul River. After the guerrilla “final offensive” failed to topple the government in San Salvador, the country descended into all-out civil war,¹⁹ an outcome not destined but certainly influenced by a century of exclusionary economic and political policies, often enforced by brutal military repression.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70-75.

¹⁸ Mark Danner, “Staying on in El Salvador” in *El Salvador: Larry Towell*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 12-13. Danner provides a succinct overview of the lead-up to the civil war, and highlights the connections between the Salvadoran government forces and the United States.

¹⁹ Danner, “Staying on in El Salvador”, 13-15.

The Genesis of the Salvadoran Refugee Camps

Starting in 1980, following a well-established peasant migration pattern,²⁰ thousands of Salvadoran civilians in the northern and western departments of El Salvador fled for Honduras, staying in villages or establishing themselves on open rural land. As a response to this migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) established the first Salvadoran refugee camps in 1980 at Colomoncagua and La Virtud, Honduras.²¹

Meyer Brownstone visited these camps on numerous occasions over a three-year period from 1982 to 1985, as well as a camp at Mesa Grande which was established in conjunction with the closing of the camp at La Virtud.²² He led missions primarily on behalf of Oxfam Canada, but also on behalf of other humanitarian organizations such as the Canadian Council for International Cooperation, the American Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). He was in charge of all of these missions, largely because of his standing as Chair of Oxfam Canada, even if a particular trip did not involve Oxfam specifically. In all instances, Brownstone interacted with administrative representatives of the UNHCR as well as other service organizations, including the Catholic aid agency, Caritas, and *Médecins sans frontières* (MSF). The point of these missions was to gather information and to share with outside agencies and governments the refugees' declared positions on matters such as camp

²⁰ North, *Bitter Grounds*, 61-64. This longstanding migration pattern led to a four-day war in 1969 between El Salvador and Honduras, when Honduras expelled 300,000 Salvadorans who had previously moved across the border. Because of the war's occurrence shortly after three closely-played World Cup qualifying matches between the two countries, it's often referred to as "The Soccer War."

²¹ Médecins sans frontières, *MSF Speaks Out: The Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras 1988* (December 2013), 34-35.

²² Molly Todd, *Beyond Displacement: Campesinos, Refugees, and Collective Action in the Salvadoran Civil War*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 131. The camp at Mesa Grande remained in operation for the duration of the war which persisted until a peace treaty was finally signed in January 1992.

relocation, military violence, or daily living conditions. Brownstone submitted reports and communicated the substance of his findings to a variety of governmental and societal audiences, both Canadian and international. In that context, he used his extensive documentation — images, sound recordings, written testimonials, and paper drawings — to substantiate his observations.²³

The camps were administered by the UNHCR based on agreements with the Honduran government,²⁴ while a national refugee commission set up contracts with various organizations to provide services. For example, the University of Honduras was contracted to supply medical services which it did in conjunction with MSF and Caritas.²⁵ One central issue in terms of the effectiveness of this arrangement and the maintenance of international standards in line with the Geneva Convention on Refugees²⁶ was that Honduras was not a signatory to the convention.²⁷ This essentially meant that it was under no obligation either to take refugees in the first place or to administer camps following international guidelines. Because of this:

UNHCR personnel associated with the Honduran mission had no juridical framework that would allow deeper intervention or more concerted action In large part due to this, voluntary aid agency evaluations of the UNHCR ranged from neglect and unconcern to dismissive and patronizing.²⁸

²³ “Meyer Brownstone / Oxfam International fonds” in *Archives and Research Collections, Carleton University Library*, <https://archie.library.carleton.ca/index.php/meyer-brownstone-oxfam-international-fonds>. The online version of the archive contains hundreds of slides and photographs, numerous audio cassettes, as well as text documentation and a book from Brownstone’s field work in various countries from the 1970s through the 1990s.

²⁴ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 113.

²⁵ Magdi Ibrahim, “Rapport de mission,” *Médecins sans frontières*, December 1988, 3-4.

²⁶ Charlie Hailey, *Camps: A Guide to 21st Century Space*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009), 324. The Geneva Convention on Refugees came into effect in 1951.

²⁷ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 117-118.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

Brownstone was among those most critical of the UNHCR's performance in Honduras, which can also be attributed in part to a sense of itself as a "state within a state" or a "superagency,"²⁹ but it was evidently working within an imperfect geopolitical context, often the case when refugee camps are established. In *Camps: A Guide to 21st Century Space*, Charlie Hailey sets "necessity" as the motivation for establishing refugee camps, places that people don't usually choose for themselves nor that others normally force upon them. He acknowledges that this middle ground carved out by necessity can impair the functioning of refugee camps:

Lodged between circumstances of control and autonomy, loss of mobility and suppression of liberties often complicate the objectives of these camps to meet safety and other imperative needs.³⁰

Meeting the needs of refugees was also adversely affected by the political nature of the refugee aid structure in Honduras. A number of organizations delivered services but operated from widely divergent viewpoints across the political spectrum. This created a bureaucratic level of combat that threatened the functioning of the overall system.³¹ Of course this in-fighting most adversely affected the refugees who had not only been displaced from El Salvador, but were forced to "... unbecome ..." ³² in the context of a complex global aid system:

UNHCR administers camps to protect but is not always able, or required, to assist refugees. This makes the camp a zone of indistinction, semantically and practically, where identities might be lost, either in opposition to a region's

²⁹ Ibid., 120-121.

³⁰ Hailey, *Camps*, 322.

³¹ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 118-120. Todd details a fight for control of the contract to coordinate aid services in the camps between the Evangelically-oriented World Vision and the progressive Catholic aid agency, Caritas (Catholic) and CEDEN, a Honduran evangelical aid committee. Eventually, after a three-month dispute about its initial decision, the UNHCR eventually decided to coordinate the services itself.

³² Ibid., 5.

already established citizenry or through policies that substitute new guidelines for living within standardized contexts.³³

As events played out in the camps, the Salvadoran refugees refused to accept this indistinction or to be pawns in the political battles of aid organizations. They exercised agency in inventive ways to best represent their short- and longer-term interests. They created strategic partnerships with supportive aid agencies, often working actively to discredit organizations that dismissed their involvement in camp operations. They also developed alliances with sympathetic international workers and observers, such as Brownstone, who helped them confront the UNHCR on security violations and took their messages to global audiences through their own social and political networks.³⁴ The refugees' steadfast determination to defend their own well-being did lead to friction with service providers, such as MSF,³⁵ as well as to confrontations with the Honduran military guarding the camps, but it indicated that their grasp of collective representation and political engagement preceded their arrival in the camps.³⁶ Brownstone captured this insistent agency in chants, statements of collective resistance, and political songs: some of his most powerful and striking documentation.

³³ Hailey, *Camps*, 325.

³⁴ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 116-117, 123-126.

³⁵ Ibrahim, "Rapport de mission," 12-14. See also Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 125-126. Among other medically-related issues, control of the nutrition centres in the camps was a source of tension. The refugees wanted those centres to remain open and to operate under their control, while MSF advocated closing the centres to combat what they saw as excessive drug use in the camps. This was one of the issues the refugees used to discredit MSF, an organization they'd had a fractious relationship with since the early 1980s when MSF refused to sign a letter opposing relocation of the camps away from the El Salvador-Honduras border.

³⁶ Todd, *Beyond Displacement*, 7.

Bridging from Individual to Collective Memory

Remembering that resistance in the wake of the civil war — indeed twenty years after its end — is part of a larger movement to remember the war’s atrocities. It has taken the form of collective memory projects and physical memorials across El Salvador. Perhaps the civil war is one of Pierre Nora’s “... moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned, no longer life, not quite death ...” which compels Salvadorans to establish their own *lieux de mémoire*.³⁷ Brownstone’s documentation belongs to this collective memory effort. As an informed observer of a critical moment in El Salvador’s history, his accounts, images, and recordings provide a vital perspective on the refugee experience of thousands of its citizens. Thus the film that collects them becomes a digital *lieu de mémoire* to accompany the provocative and controversial murals proliferating across El Salvador.³⁸ But how do we bridge between the individual memory and the collective, if that is even possible?

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag argues that there is no such thing as collective memory.³⁹ What anyone perceives as collective memory, she says, is really only the compilation of many individual memories.⁴⁰ Sontag suggests that collective memory is as spurious a notion as collective guilt, which essentially says that a group of people can be guilty of something for which the responsibility clearly lays with individuals, even if numerous individuals. Similarly, she argues, memories can’t be held by a group of people that clearly emanated from an

³⁷ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” in *Representations*, 26, Spring 1989), 12.

³⁸ Rachel Heidenry, “El Salvador: The Politics of Art and Memory” in *Pulitzer Centre*, 15 February 2012, <http://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/el-salvador-politics-art-and-memory>, paragraph 9.

³⁹ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Picador, 2003), 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

individual or even numerous individuals. But she also says that photographs have the ability to contribute to a collective understanding of the past,⁴¹ taking on the role of cultural touchstone, something that people use to recall experiences they may or may not have had personally, but felt they had at a cultural level. This effectively transforms an individual record of a moment into what seems like a collective experience or memory, just as a sense of guilt can spread from the truly guilty to the broader society, however logical or rational that may be.

For Sontag, the singular merit of collective memory is “instruction” or “stipulation” of important events and people.⁴² But the meaning of those efforts, their eventual effectiveness in governing behaviour, is nevertheless built upward and outward from individual experiences and recollections. This isn’t to minimize or dismiss the efforts of citizens in El Salvador to build memorials as a way to prevent such conflicts from occurring again. But as we elevate a photograph or an experience to a level of collective engagement, it’s worth remembering that it always starts as the documentation of specific circumstances and individual moments; in the case of a photograph, with the clicking of the shutter by one person observing a chosen situation or moment.

By combining unique accounts of people and situations into a tapestry of recollections, *On The Road To Virtue* walks a middle ground between individual and collective memory. It includes a number of individual stories but also relates circumstances that belong collectively to all the refugees who lived in those camps. As well, the refugees’ chants, songs, and statements to the international community included in the film seem closer to storytelling of collective

⁴¹ Ibid., 85. Sontag writes, “Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan. And photographs help construct — and revise — our sense of a more distant past”

⁴² Ibid., 85-86.

experience, if not at a societal level, at least at the level of a group of campesinos. The communication of these songs and statements adds to their status as shared narratives, but it also shows how the refugees saw themselves as a community. Simultaneously, the film is the individual memory of Meyer Brownstone, formed from recollections and documentation he offers as his contribution to a shared narrative. This middle ground encourages a dialectic between levels of memory and layers of meaning. So, while collective memory may not exist as such, the dissemination of photographs or other objects contributes to the creation of a shared narrative, regardless of whether that narrative contains explicit instruction. The fact that the narrative exists is its own form of instruction.

The Civil War with Myself

In 1993, I photographed, edited, and produced *English for Yu*, a thirty-minute documentary that followed three women who fled the civil war in Bosnia for new lives in Canada.⁴³ Over twenty years later, I'm again exploring subject matter concerning refugees. There are compelling underlying psychological and aesthetic reasons for my continued interest in civil war and refugee migration.

In her book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam suggests that darkness is a queer aesthetic that presents an opportunity for creative expression. She refers to Quentin Crisp's affinity or acquired fondness for darkness as a starting point for artistic work:

This particular ethos of resignation to failure, to lack of progress and a particular form of darkness, a negativity really ..., can be called a queer aesthetic. For Crisp, ... failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end; in true camp fashion,

⁴³ Peter Conrad and Radmilo Sarenac, *English for Yu*, (Kitchener: Rogers Television, 1993). The film was nominated for Best Social Issue Documentary at the inaugural Hot Docs Festival in 1994.

the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic.⁴⁴

The animation and punk rock universe of Halberstam's analysis is a far cry from the world of Central American refugees, but her notion of "[f]ailure loves company"⁴⁵ presents a provocative position from which I can operate as a queer man. As a social outsider, I can assess the significant failures of society that led to civil war — civil war emerging generally from internal societal tensions and a breakdown of political order⁴⁶ — in a way that someone more invested in the existing social order might not. I can also align myself with them as a political outsider, not so much because of common ideology, but because of a shared status as geopolitically expendable.

In more personal terms, the notion of refugee aligned with an internal sense that, by coming out as a gay man, I was declaring that untested outsider status and abandoning the society into which I was born. The civil war with myself prior to coming out — coming out equaling a truce or the creation of a new country — mirrors the civil war that the Bosnian participants in *English for Yu* fled in the early 1990s. Two decades removed from coming out, these ideas are now connected in subtler ways to my overarching interest in the relationship between history and

⁴⁴ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 96.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 120-121. Halberstam frames her essential philosophy this way: "Renton, Johnny Rotten, Ginger, Dory, and Babe, like those athletes who finish fourth, remind us that there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner. ... The concept of practicing failure perhaps prompts us to discover our inner dweeb, to be underachievers, to fall short, to get distracted, to take a detour, to find a limit, to lose our way, to forget, to avoid mastery, and, with Walter Benjamin, to recognize that "empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers" (Benjamin, 1969: 256). All losers are the heirs of those who lost before them. Failure loves company."

⁴⁶ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Civil Wars: From LA to Bosnia*, (New York: The New Press, 1994), 19-20. Enzensberger argues for the molecular nature of civil war, that it is internally derived, although he admits to the superpower interference in various wars around the world, including Latin America in the 1970s and up until the end of the Cold War. So the war in El Salvador can be seen as a mix of the two influences: significant internal impetus aided by external meddling.

memory, both of which are replete with notions of flight, refuge, and solace: we take solace in memory and can find refuge in past events, situations or accomplishments, but we also flee from the past, both collective and personal. So, there is fluidity embedded in this engagement, a fluidity which I represent in the film through the intercutting of Brownstone's commentary and domestic sequences with archival images and sound clips. The film moves seamlessly between past and present, but also between light and dark — between Brownstone's approach to his visual documentation and my aesthetic.

Overall, we see a generally “protective” approach to the way Brownstone photographs the refugees: often in groups, mostly posed for the camera, and eschewing details of their private poverty. That approach stands in sharp contrast to my natural tendency to veer toward darker material and perspectives. Brownstone's photographic approach aligned with his participatory philosophy and his desire to preserve the campesinos' dignity, but his commitment to fostering human development often came up against the harsh reality of global politics and confronted a scale of human suffering beyond his ability to mitigate.⁴⁷ This confrontation never dulled his willingness to continue the struggle, as he was fully aware of the horrors that humans were capable of, but his photography skewed toward documenting situations in ways that would promote positive change. However, my queer perspective pushed me to interpret those same situations more darkly to draw attention to the forces in the world that butted heads with Brownstone's ideals:

⁴⁷ Gutkin, *The Worst of Times*, 157. Brownstone discusses several circumstances including his work in Central America, but also his family's experience before and during the Holocaust. In Tanzania, he was disappointed by Nyerere's limited implementation of the recommendations of the decentralization commission. Reality and idealism butted heads often in Brownstone's experience, but those collisions didn't deter him.

Art from the dark side refuses humanist narratives about enlightenment, progress, and happiness, and it reminds us of the violence, the density, of human experience. This is what we forget when we insist upon positive images in popular representation and when we focus only on political recognition and acceptance in our politics.⁴⁸

Thus, in an unexpected way, my aesthetic dovetails well with Brownstone's approach to documentation. By choosing to include darker experiences from the Salvadoran refugee camps and Brownstone's life, I created a dynamic juxtaposition to the moments and situations that Brownstone most wanted to highlight. He doesn't avoid or suppress the horror and brutality of the camps, but the balance of his approach still tips toward the resilience and perseverance of the refugees. Thus, Brownstone's larger goal of promoting and supporting positive human development remains the film's primary focus, emboldened and shaped by the darker forces it struggles to overcome.



⁴⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 109.



FORM

Participatory Practice

Stella Bruzzi reminds us that "... documentaries are inevitably the result of the intrusion of the filmmaker onto the situation being filmed"⁴⁹ but how one shapes the content that emerges from that intrusion determines the film created. In some situations, the intrusion is obvious and is used as a structural element in the film,⁵⁰ but in *On The Road To Virtue*, ethical issues necessitated an approach that allowed that intrusion to occur in production but concealed its unfolding in the edited film.⁵¹

The three documentary modes at work in the film were mostly deployed at three different stages of the film's construction. First, I used the participatory mode to gather interview content. Second, I used the expository mode to construct a coherent narrative out of those interviews. Third, I used the poetic mode to arrange and sequence images as an adjunct to the expository narrative. The participatory mode remained active in post-production as Brownstone assessed the flow of his edited accounts and the accuracy of the archival images chosen to support them.

The participatory mode proved a good choice for the first phase of gathering content because it allowed for a dynamic interaction between the filmmaker and participants. That interaction also offers a potential opportunity to comment on the documentary form itself. By definition, the filmmaker engages their subject and, if the resulting content is used in a relatively direct way, the

⁴⁹ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 11.

⁵⁰ The films of Nick Broomfield or the Maysles Brothers come immediately to mind as using this intrusion as the entry point for their commenting on reality and their storytelling form.

⁵¹ Peter Conrad, "*When the Witness Says No: From The Revocation of Access to Creative Documentary Storytelling*," (unpublished, 2016). Ethical issues focused primarily on the possible creative use of participant material while concealing participant identity.

filmmaking process becomes at least partially embedded in the film. While this is normally associated with the reflexive mode,⁵² it also rightfully belongs in a conversation about the participatory mode. My use of this mode doesn't necessarily imply a primary interest in the construction of documentary, it simply indicates an interest in foregrounding the filmmaker/subject relationship.⁵³

But even when that interaction or intrusion is largely hidden from view, the film is still participatory in nature because the content that resulted from the participatory practice is central to the film eventually created. Meyer Brownstone and the people he recorded in the Salvadoran refugee camps are the central voices in *On The Road To Virtue*. As Bill Nichols points out, this substantial textual communication by social actors, rather than relying on expository narration or filmmaker commentary, is a hallmark of the participatory mode.⁵⁴ The film is largely structured around Brownstone's accounts, as he relates various stories about the camps or the geopolitical context of the civil war, but the archival content featuring the refugees maintains a prominent position. Brownstone used an evidentiary, journalistic approach to gathering this content, effectively establishing a participatory practice of his own. This is clear from his diaristic recordings in the documentation,⁵⁵ and from the images we see that show his connections with the refugees.⁵⁶ Because Brownstone speaks for himself and provides sufficient context and

⁵² Paul Ward, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), 19.

⁵³ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁴ Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 44.

⁵⁵ Peter Conrad, *On The Road To Virtue*, (Toronto: Conrad Entertainment, 2017). The sequence starting at 3:23 gives a good sense of Brownstone's thorough journalistic approach to his documentation, particularly the sound recordings.

⁵⁶ Conrad, *On The Road To Virtue*. The image at 13:15 of Brownstone with a potter surrounded by a group of children is a good example of his rapport with the refugees.

perspective, his interview content works well as a central textual source. Similarly, because his documentation in the camps was so rigorous, it stands equally well on its own terms. Together, they eliminate the need for any sort of third-person narrator or graphical presentation of contextual facts.

In this way, *On The Road To Virtue* employs a strategy similar to the one Susan Meiselas used in her film *Pictures From A Revolution* in which she returned to Nicaragua to reconnect with the people she had photographed during the Sandinista revolution in 1978-1979.⁵⁷ Meiselas's approach worked for her because she had the initial experience of being there and capturing photographs previously. The film's journey was her journey, a first-person exploration of the intersection of her individual experience and Nicaragua's collective experience. Although Brownstone didn't physically return to Honduras in *On The Road To Virtue*, his recollective journey offers a similar contrast between his individual experience and the collective experience of the Salvadoran refugees. Meiselas used a first-person narration to drive her film, and Brownstone's interview content functions similarly. In both cases, their first-person accounts work because they were both principal actors alongside the people they photographed. It's a storytelling approach that adds immediacy and credibility.⁵⁸

Archival Reinforcement

Constructing a first-person narration from Brownstone's interview content builds a bridge between my use of the participatory and expository modes in the film. Although the film doesn't

⁵⁷ Susan Meiselas, Alfred Guzzetti, and Richard P. Rogers, *Pictures from a Revolution*, (United States: GMR Films, 1991), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0102665/>, also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oD85nbi5vtQ>.

⁵⁸ Ibid., the sequence from 6:43 to 8:18 is a powerful example of how well Meiselas's first-person narration works, given her initial experience during the insurrection.

follow a linear expository structure, it includes expository episodes which enable Brownstone to share substantive stories and give the film political and historical weight. Brownstone insisted on including sufficient detail about specific camp situations, people, and events. With that requirement growing out of the participatory practice used to gather the interview content (which continued with rough cut reviews in post-production), the expository mode became the most effective way to bring together these “... fragments of the historical world...” to ensure the delivery of coherent accounts.⁵⁹

Given Brownstone’s work and his philosophical disposition, *On The Road To Virtue* rightly concerns itself with his commitment to gathering evidence. The film foregrounds Brownstone's archival material in order to anchor its argument on the importance of documentation. In the case of the Salvadoran refugees, the archival material of their statements and songs is our direct link to them, and the original recordings are their link to us — a way for them to speak for themselves to the international community at the time of their containment, and to speak to us now in the absence of contemporary interaction with them.

The refugee statements also perform an important narrative function: they help to substantiate Brownstone's accounts of the camps and soften any flaws of memory. Similarly, Brownstone’s own historical accounts validate his later recollections, and the archival content links us to his historical self, as he recorded his thoughts during his trips. Thus, there is a verification mechanism built into the film, designed to reinforce its own evidence and argument.

⁵⁹ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010), 167. Nichols describes the expository mode as best suited to conveying a rhetorical argument. It’s this essential feature that underpins the various segments of the film in which Brownstone makes specific points.

The 1998 Polish film, *Fotoamator*, directed by Dariusz Jablonski,⁶⁰ uses archival content in a similar way. It starts with an archive of photographs found in Vienna in 1987 which shows life in the Łódź ghetto in Poland during the Nazi occupation. Those images were taken by Nazi accountant, Walter Genewein, who was also an amateur photographer. Jablonski combines Genewein's photographs with archival footage of Łódź and an enacted narration, then juxtaposes them with interview segments featuring Dr. Arnold Mostowicz, a doctor who worked in the ghetto. Mostowicz witnessed the eradication of the ghetto and the movement of the Jewish population out of Łódź to their eventual deaths at Auschwitz and other camps.⁶¹ The archival elements visually reinforce Mostowicz's perspective, adding an indexical assurance to the film, while the enacted voiceover based on Genewein's accounting records deepens our understanding of Nazi activities in the ghetto.⁶²

The indexical nature of Brownstone's audio recordings and images is readily apparent, largely because of the thoroughness of his documentation. This thoroughness grew out of a longstanding commitment to gathering evidence shaped by his years in government administration, an arena in which he learned the value of decentralized participation in social decision-making.⁶³ In the context of the camps, recording interviews, taking photographs, and collecting children's drawings was his form of decentralized participation. Those testimonials

⁶⁰ Dariusz Jablonski, *Fotoamator*, (Poland: Apple Film Productions, 1998), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0188996/?ref_=ttawd_awd_tt.

⁶¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fotoamator>; also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C5%81%C3%B3d%C5%BA_Ghetto.

⁶² Jablonski, *Fotoamator*, (Poland: Apple Film Productions, 1998), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzMPBrNOx4I&spfreload=10>. An example of the mix of elements in the film can be found in the sequence from 4:05 to 7:15.

⁶³ Gutkin, *The Worst of Times*, 151, 153.

from direct participants or witnesses of conflict became the foundation of the reports which emerged from the missions. But after their initial use, those witness accounts were subsequently boxed away in Brownstone's basement, where they stayed for decades, another plea from oppressed people forgotten by history. Bringing them into a film rescued them in a sense — through an “intervention” as Charles Merewether might call it⁶⁴ — from the sometime consequence of the archival process: social forgetting instead of collective remembrance.

Through his participation in the film, Brownstone was keen to ensure that the archival refugee testimony took its rightful place in the historical record of the civil war in El Salvador. But the lack of individual identification of both the people he interviewed and those he photographed presents a substantial issue. Brownstone does recall the Canadian and American aid workers and politicians, but most if not all of the Salvadorans remain nameless. This doesn't negate the value of their witness accounts, but the pervasive anonymity of the refugees in the documentation contributes to the “indistinction” that Charlie Hailey attached to the refugee experience.⁶⁵ The crowd shots and chants, the photographs with shadowed faces, the music performed by groups of musicians:⁶⁶ these archival elements give us a sense of the absence of identity, at least of individual identity. Countering that, there are a number of images in which

⁶⁴ Charles Merewether, “Archive of the Fallen” in *The Archive*, (London: Whitechapel, 2006), 160-162. Referencing the work of three South American artists — Rosangela Rennó, Eugenio Dittborn, and Milagros de la Torre — interrogating various national archives, Merewether summarizes the outcome of these engagements: “In the wake of a long period of violence and unrest, the concepts of identity, freedom and justice, as defined by government, have become a guide to measuring the possibility of democracy. Their artistic expression represents an intervention in the archives of a nation. As these images bring identities into the light and expose us to the stories they embody, they are mute witness to the fate of the individuals who, by entering the public record, have been written out of history.”

⁶⁵ Hailey, *Camps*, 325.

⁶⁶ Conrad, *On The Road To Virtue*. The images at 2:58, 4:04, 7:06, 18:47, and 19:52 are good examples of images in which the refugees are presented in large numbers with its incumbent anonymity.

Brownstone gives highly specific descriptions of particular people and their situations,⁶⁷ even though he doesn't always identify them by name. Ironically, the lack of individual identification offers the viewer an opportunity to imaginatively engage the images beyond an indexical reading.

Poetic Presentation

The film's concentration on documentation grew naturally out of Brownstone's passionate insistence on it. The significant deployment of archival material reflects his commitment to witness and advocacy, while playing an important role in supporting Brownstone's narrative accounts. Using archival content helps illustrate expository accounts and supports a certain linearity that comes with those accounts, but that approach leaves one of the main motivations for the film unfulfilled. The relationship between communicating history and the act of remembering it required its own form of engagement, so I looked to the poetic mode to provide a structure for that exploration.

Early documentary filmmakers experimented with poetic approaches because they valued feeling or style as the main point of their films. *Regen* is an early example of such a film. Shot by Joris Ivens in 1929, it depicts Amsterdam before, during, and after a rainstorm. There is a simple linearity to the film in terms of chronology, but Ivens concentrates more on creating atmosphere by capturing spontaneous moments and letting the rain dictate the film's direction:⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Conrad, *On The Road To Virtue*. The woman growing flowers outside her tent at 11:16 and the old man singing songs for Brownstone at 25:22 are good examples of image scenarios with very specific descriptions.

⁶⁸ Joris Ivens, "Making *Rain*," in *Imagining Reality*, ed. by Mark Cousins and Kevin Macdonald, (London: Faber, 2006), 76-77.

The actors are the rain, the raindrops, wet people, dark clouds, glistening reflections moving over wet asphalt, and so forth. The diffused light on the dark houses along the black canals produced an effect that I never expected. And the whole film gives the spectator a very personal and subjective vision.⁶⁹

This personal vision aligns with Nichols' description of the poetic mode's primary characteristics: although documenting a moment or situation is still an important foundation, it is not the primary motivation for using the poetic mode.⁷⁰

Fifty years after *Regen*, Godfrey Reggio used a poetic structure in his 1988 documentary *Powaqqatsi*. Eschewing dialogue or narration, Reggio relied on complex thematic montages to comment on the transformational nature of life in the southern hemisphere.⁷¹ His main point was to show how traditional ways of life south of the equator were impacted by technological systems adopted from northern societies. Reggio constructed sequences based on light, patterns of movement, and colour relationships to poetically communicate his thesis.⁷² The overall effect is not of a story being told, but of a visual impression being given, an argument being made through images — something he did well throughout the *Qatsi* trilogy. In a similar way, *On The Road To Virtue* uses a poetic approach to visually comment on the nature of memory. While there is narrative flow within sections of the film, the unfolding of the overall film doesn't adhere to a

⁶⁹ Ivens, "Making *Rain*," 77.

⁷⁰ Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 129, 162. Nichols sees the poetic mode as an outgrowth of the avant-garde in terms of its elevation of personal voice: "The filmmaker's way of seeing things took higher priority than demonstrating the camera's ability to record what it saw faithfully and accurately. Visible evidence served as a vehicle for poetic expression."

⁷¹ *Powaqqatsi* means "life in transformation" in Hopi. *Qatsi* is the root word meaning "life."

⁷² Godfrey Reggio, *Powaqqatsi*, (United States: Golan-Globus Productions, 1988). The sequence from 50:53 to 55:01 is a good example of how Reggio evokes pattern relationships to connect images from diverse situations.

rigid linear logic. It's driven more by Brownstone's memory impulses and the random ordering of images in his slide viewer.

The work of poetic filmmaker Jonas Mekas is also instructive, given some interesting parallels with Brownstone. Both were born in the early 1920s, grew up in the interwar period and began to establish themselves in their respective fields immediately after World War II. Mekas, his brother Adolfas, and other avant-garde filmmakers explored new cinematic forms at the same time that Brownstone and his associates were developing new ways to manage social and political structures: in some respects, their post-war efforts seemed to emanate from the same wellspring.

In an essay on Mekas' life and work, Bruce Elder outlined how, after World War II, the American avant-garde was eager to establish a more spiritual or reflective approach to cinema:

The new cinema would borrow from the authentic language of the spirit, the language that speaks of the internal world, the language of poetry. It would be a cinema of metaphor, of resonant, ambiguous imagery, a lyrical cinema, a cinema as intimate as poetry. It would have to be, as Emerson proposed for American poetry, a cinema of personal vision.⁷³

That personal vision came through in Mekas' unique mix of handheld visuals, often rapidly-cut, and spontaneously-recorded voiceover.⁷⁴ His films express an experience of memory that is both randomly chaotic and fluidly authentic.

Mekas and Brownstone also share a familiarity with refugees: Mekas was himself a refugee from Lithuania, migrating to the United States after spending a year in a Nazi labour camp;

⁷³ Bruce Elder, "Notes Towards a Sketch of Jonas Mekas," in *Stendhal Gallery*, <http://stendhalgallery.com/?p=1973>, paragraph 6.

⁷⁴ Mekas' films, *Lost, Lost, Lost* and *Reminiscences from a Journey to Lithuania* provide good examples of this approach. Mekas has posted excerpts of these and other films on Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/217911753> and <https://vimeo.com/207441589>.

Brownstone is a first-generation Canadian, but witnessed the fallout from his parents' ghetto and refugee experiences. Mekas describes how his experiences during World War II, and as a displaced person after the war, fuelled his desire to find a new approach to art and cinema:

Everything that I believed in shook to the foundations — all my idealism, and my faith in the goodness of man and progress of man; all was shattered. Somehow, I managed to keep myself together. But really, I wasn't one piece any longer; I was one thousand painful pieces. ... I felt I had to start from the very beginning. I had no faith, no hope left. I had to collect myself again, bit by bit.⁷⁵

In this state, he joined other artists he encountered in New York who similarly longed to throw off their "civilized inheritance" and build a new way of imagining and expressing themselves.⁷⁶ In the phrases, "I was one thousand painful pieces" and "I had to collect myself again, bit by bit[.]" Mekas gives hints of how his artistic practice would evolve, while providing valuable insights into the psychological state of a refugee. These descriptions then acted as cues about how to poetically deploy Brownstone's archival images and recordings in ways that would evoke the refugee mindset.⁷⁷

One of Mekas' innovations was to record spontaneous voiceover narration while watching an edited version of his film footage, a poetic reaction to his own constructed version of reality.

Bruce Elder suggests a motivation for Mekas' recordings:

The temporal coincidence of the diaristic recording of the event with the event itself holds out the promise of a way to heal the breach, to overcome division between the self and the world [that] war had opened up.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Elder, "Notes Towards a Sketch of Jonas Mekas," paragraph 16. Elder quoting Mekas.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Elder quoting Mekas.

⁷⁷ The interviews I conducted between 2011 and 2014 with JH, the former Salvadoran refugee previously connected with this project, provided another valuable direct perspective on the refugee experience.

⁷⁸ Elder, "Notes Towards a Sketch of Jonas Mekas," paragraph 18.

This diaristic practice is another parallel between Mekas and Brownstone, who recorded many such entries during his visits to the camps, some of which are included in the film.⁷⁹ Perhaps those diaristic recordings served a similar purpose for Brownstone: "... to overcome the division between the self and the world ...[,]”⁸⁰ between his political ideals and the reality he encountered. For both men, the recordings offered a way to engage challenging intellectual and emotional terrain, and to render a poetic interpretation of their experiences that resonated with their personal histories. It's such possibilities which made the poetic mode an engaging structural choice for *On The Road To Virtue*. As Paul Ward suggests, the poetic mode is not only a way to explore "... the fragmented nature of subjectivity ...[,]”⁸¹ it's also a way to emphasize the incomplete, the ambiguous, and the uncertain, not only in the subject matter of the film, but in the form of documentary itself.”⁸² Engaging Brownstone's experiences as well as the complex political and social history of the camps without having to create unwarranted resolution made the poetic mode an attractive choice for crafting the film's overarching structure.

Still Photographs as Moving Images

On The Road To Virtue makes extensive use of archival photographs. In doing so, the film relies on the power inherent in still images to deliver both explicit and implicit messages:⁸³ not only to return us to the circumstances they are documents of but to evoke emotional responses

⁷⁹ Conrad, *On The Road To Virtue*. Examples of Brownstone's diaristic recordings can be found from 2:23 to 2:56, 4:23 to 4:35, and 12:19 to 12:38.

⁸⁰ Elder, "Notes Towards a Sketch of Jonas Mekas," paragraph 18.

⁸¹ Ward, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality*, 14.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸³ Barthes, Roland, "The Photographic Message," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 196-199. Or, as Roland Barthes would say, the denoted and connoted messages in photographs.

beyond their indexical context. This assumes that photographs embedded in a film retain the power they have as individual images. Supporting this assumption is Walter Benjamin's assertion that much of the traditional power that art objects have doesn't apply to photographs:

To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice — politics.⁸⁴

Thus the photograph's reproducibility assists in the transfer of its core functions from one medium to another, while simultaneously embedding its political status. The existence of Meyer Brownstone's images initially as slides and latterly as prints and scanned digital files — things that are all easily reproduced — makes them, in Benjamin's thinking, equal political objects. Regardless of the form in which we encounter them in the film then, they carry similar political energy. In all instances, the circumstances they depict are situations we can't deny.

The inherent political nature of Brownstone's images connect him to other photographers who used their cameras for similar purposes. During the Crimean War, Roger Fenton documented the encampments of allied forces, creating the West's first photographic impression of a theatre of war and its participants.⁸⁵ The social impetus that fuelled Brownstone's work is evident in Jacob Riis' photographs of tenements in late-19th and early-20th century New York

⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955), 226.

⁸⁵ Roger Fenton, *Roger Fenton: Photographer of the Crimean War*, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954). Illustrations 13, 29-32, 35-37, 48, 51-54, 56-57, 62-63, and 81-84 put a human face on the combatants and create a strong impression of the circumstances in which the war was fought.

City,⁸⁶ as well as in Lewis Hine's work documenting child labour conditions in the New South.⁸⁷ The photographers of the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s⁸⁸ offer a strong comparison in terms of intent: to use images to raise social awareness and shape government policy.⁸⁹ Larry Towell's more recent photographs in El Salvador during and after the civil war also present a similar social conscience to Brownstone's.⁹⁰ An important proviso is that Towell and the photographers of the FSA were professionals, whereas Brownstone used photography as an adjunct to his work as an international observer. Even so, the motivations and goals for his images were the same as these photographers. From Susan Sontag's point of view, there should be no distinction between amateur and professional photographer, particularly when it comes to assessing the quality or value of a particular image:

Naïve or commercial or merely utilitarian photography is no different in kind from photography as practiced by the most gifted professionals: there are pictures taken by anonymous amateurs which are just as interesting, as complex formally,

⁸⁶ Jacob Riis, *How The Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1971). People in Riis' photographs often looked toward his camera in the same way that people in the refugee camps looked at Brownstone's. In both cases, the images are portraits as well as documents of living conditions. Examples of this in Riis' photography are on pp. 120, 123, 125, 127, 130, 135, 139, 175, 198, 206, 219, and 222.

⁸⁷ John R. Kemp (ed.), *Lewis Hine: Photographs of Child Labor in the New South*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 13. While the overall collection speaks to Hine's philosophy, the images on pages 35, 37, 51, 54-56, 71-75, 79, 81, 87, and 105 are strong specific examples of the need to reform the child labour laws.

⁸⁸ Françoise Poos (ed.), *The Bitter Years: The Farm Security Administration Photographs Through the Eyes of Edward Steichen*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012). The photographs of Walker Evans (pp. 80, 101-103) and Dorothea Lange (pp. 158, 159, 168, 173-175) are oft cited, but the work of other FSA photographers such as Arthur Rothstein (pp. 71, 104, 155, 160) Marion Post Wolcott (pp. 64, 81, 87) and Ben Shahn (pp. 58, 75, 95, 115, 116) are also worth recalling.

⁸⁹ In Brownstone's case, he influenced policy development internationally through agencies such as the UNHCR and ICVA, but also through direct consultation, particularly regarding the structures of local government. In Canada his influence was felt at all levels of government.

⁹⁰ Towell, *El Salvador: Larry Towell*. The images on pp. 29, 30-31, 40-41, 51, 52-53, 56, 57, 60, 70, 78, 88-89, 91, 92-93, 101 are particularly evocative of the social fallout from the civil war.

as representative of photography's characteristic powers as a Stieglitz or an Evans.⁹¹

For Sebastiao Salgado, this “characteristic power” has the potential to generate real solutions. In John Berger's collection of essays, *Understanding a Photograph*, Salgado talks about his hope for the photographs he took during an extended global journey through regions marred by conflict and mass migrations:

If the person looking at these pictures only feels compassion, I will believe that I have failed completely. I want people to understand that we can have a solution. Very few of the persons photographed are responsible for the situation that they are now in. Most of them don't understand why they are in the road with thousands of others. ... They are not the reason for their being there; it is other things. And about these other things we have to choose.⁹²

While the specifics are different, Salgado's characterization of his subjects applies equally to the refugees in the Salvadoran camps and to Brownstone's intentions for his own photographs: to make clear the situation of the refugees and to advocate for different ways of organizing society. Both photographers challenge their audience to decide what kind of world they want to live in.

In terms of spectator action, Susan Meiselas disputes the notion of wanting anything particular to come of her having taken a photograph:

... I don't think I made the picture to demand intervention. It wasn't intervention by “you” for *him* as a victim. It was that “they” lived that history and it was their consciousness that was already carried within that body. And so, in a way, the picture wasn't for you to *do* anything. It was just to try to understand where “they” were, the place from which they were acting.⁹³

⁹¹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 132.

⁹² John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 173. Quoting Sebastiao Salgado from a conversation with Berger.

⁹³ Susan Meiselas, “Body on a Hillside” in Jay Prosser et al (eds.), *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 119.

In its own way, this still amounts to doing something: to changing one's perspective on a situation, perhaps leading to other shifts in one's consciousness about the world. So, despite Meiselas not needing specific concrete action, the photograph has already intervened in our lives. This is the power of photography. Once you have viewed an image, you are implicated in its existence. Whether we take the pictures, have them taken of us, or view them, Ariella Azoulay argues that a "civil contract" of expectations exists in those image relationships:

This contract binds together photographers, photographed persons, and spectators. ... all of them know what is expected of them and what to expect from the others. This shared set of expectations is ... an assembly of civil skills that are not subject to nationality, but rather to borderless citizenship, to the modern citizenship of individuals⁹⁴

Azoulay argues that people understand that photography transcends their territorial citizenship, and that when they participate in a photograph, they are moving beyond those boundaries into a transnational human space.⁹⁵ Brownstone is fully aware of this dissolution of boundaries, as are many of the refugees he photographed in the camps. He leaves it to the viewers of his photographs to understand that they are implicated in the same transformation.

The stateless world of images creates an egalitarian relationship among photographer, photographed, and spectator, but the physical world of contested land and warring factions assigns the photographed refugee a "double exclusion" as characterized by Charlie Hailey,⁹⁶ a scenario in which their movement is constrained and their rights curtailed when they're forced to live beyond their identified homeland in a situation that emerges from that country's political and

⁹⁴ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 26.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁶ Hailey, *Camps*, 326. Hailey characterizes this exclusion as follows: "... refugee camps host a double exclusion, in which their residents are not only displaced from their home country but are also lodged in a foreign country that in many cases cannot sustain the camp's environmental and social pressures."

economic implosion. The challenge for photographs of those people and situations is to intrinsically promote the viewer's shift from territorial outsider to implicated equal, in line with Azoulay's "borderless citizenship" — a position in which the spectator is no better than the person being photographed or the person capturing the image.

This challenge is even more complex when those images are used in a film, a quite different setting from individual images or a book of photographs. In a cinematic context, the filmmaker's intention complicates a spectator's engagement of the images by imposing visual sequence and thematic context which the individual images don't inherently have. It is at this point that photographs surrender some of their inherent qualities to the larger goals of the filmmaker.

Except that they don't. Technically, photographs cease to be photographs once they're embedded in a film, but I assert that viewers continue to imbue these "moving images" with the same characteristics they attribute to still images; they continue to read them as photographs. Similarly, camera animation does change the content of the video frame, but its primary effect is to alter the viewer's spatial relationship to the still image they have retained in their mind from its first impression.⁹⁷ Because the viewer reads the image they're seeing as a photograph, animation of the frame has the subconscious effect of drawing them closer to the image, rather than changing the image itself, even though the opposite is in fact occurring. The camera animation thus serves political and emotional purposes: it implicates the viewer more completely

⁹⁷ The temporal dimension of cinema also changes the viewer's engagement of the images contained in the film. The viewer can no longer determine the length of time they will explore or interrogate each image. That decision has been surrendered to the filmmaker, creating a certain loss of control for the viewer, a loss akin to a refugee's loss of control over living conditions and location, although lacking similar consequence.

in the refugees' situation and forces the viewer to confront their spectatorial obligations. Even in a cinematic context, Azoulay's civil contract remains active and relevant.

Mixing modes in documentary is not unusual, but it led to several compelling outcomes in this film. Using a participatory practice to gather Brownstone's personal stories encouraged him to share strongly journalistic yet intimate accounts; the first-person narration crafted from those accounts through the expository mode enabled viewers to grasp the historical motion of events in the refugee camps; and the poetic sequencing of images pushed viewers to confront their moral implication in the situations photographed while reflecting on the ebb and flow of memory.





METHODOLOGY

My choice of documentary modes also had methodological implications. For example, my decision to use a poetic structure to reflect the fluidity of memory influenced the way in which I gathered interview content late in the production phase. Similarly, the development of the expository first-person narration sequences influenced the evolution of the poetic structure as the content of those sequences was clarified in post-production. This story distillation was fuelled by Brownstone's ongoing participation in shaping the film, well after his interview content had been gathered. While managing these modal relationships, particular issues arose which required solutions.

Ethical Hiding

When I first undertook this project in 2011, it involved two principal participants, Brownstone and JH, a former Salvadoran refugee who had lived in the Mesa Grande camp. Between 2011 and 2013, I captured several conversations between the men as they reviewed Brownstone's slides and chatted about their parallel experiences. Unfortunately, JH decided to withdraw from the project in the winter of 2016. My journey through the process of changing the film's focus once JH withdrew is elucidated elsewhere,⁹⁸ but a lingering question was whether I would be able to salvage content from their initial conversations, much of which was lively and dynamic. The ethical issue centred around how to use that content without revealing JH's voice and image in line with my agreement with him not to use any of his material in the film. Brownstone's stories during their interactions were often thoughtful and powerful, so I hoped to

⁹⁸ Peter Conrad, *"When the Witness Says No: From The Revocation of Access to Creative Documentary Storytelling,"* (unpublished, 2016).

use many of his comments. Using the visuals of them conversing was out of the question because of JH's presence on-screen,⁹⁹ but there was room for optimism on the audio side of the equation. Brownstone has a very deliberate, thoughtful, and precise way of talking, with many pauses in his sentences, so it was relatively easy to edit his statements for pace, and to edit around any interjections or statements from JH during their conversations. The result of this dialogue editing is a successful impression of a single-subject interview with Brownstone, even though the reality of the original production situation was quite different. With the audio material deemed salvageable, the focus shifted to a visual solution. The challenge was to use visuals that would hide the Brownstone/JH interview visuals and also connect thematically with various topics raised during the film.

It fell to Brownstone's photographs to satisfy this requirement. Given the ethical imperative, I couldn't utilize the still images as just occasional b-roll to complement interview or participatory shots of Brownstone, as I might have done in a journalistic documentary. They would have to become the film's main visual element, indeed the centrepiece of the film's entire argument. Fortunately, Brownstone's images were numerous and strong enough to shoulder this responsibility. In many instances, the images conveyed a strong evidentiary quality. They dovetailed well with his accounts, matching his sharp, accurate memory of particular situations and people. They also blended effectively with the archival audio which supported and expanded Brownstone's recollections. This blanket deployment of still images enabled me to use as much of Brownstone's content from those initial conversations with JH as I wanted, without compromising the ethical agreement with JH to leave him out of the film.

⁹⁹ Much of that conversational footage was captured as a 2-shot, so JH was often visible even when Brownstone was talking.

Poetic Archive

The other consequence of this need to hide JH's conversational visuals was the impetus to consider something other than a journalistic approach to the film; in effect, to push me out of a certain filmmaking comfort zone. The decision to use the images as the central visual component opened up possibilities for a poetic structure, particularly in terms of the movement from image to image and from story to story. Freeing myself from a journalistic approach meant the film didn't have to make linear connections; the juxtapositions could be based on any number of considerations, either sound or image-driven, including colour relationships and composition.

The quality of the archival images raised another issue that had both technical and aesthetic considerations. Would I choose to photoshop or otherwise change Brownstone's slide images to make them "clearer," setting aside tenets of authenticity in favour of a vague notion of visual clarity? Brownstone himself thought many of the images looked better after photoshopping because the people were easier to see in images that were otherwise captured in low-light conditions. For him, it helped his documentation regain its evidentiary primacy. From my perspective, the images themselves carried an aesthetic integrity that I didn't want to tamper with, partly as a way to honour Brownstone's original photographic approach, but also to let the happenstance of the documentary moment tell us things beyond what the photographer might have intended. For example, the image of a woman recounting stories of crossing the border from El Salvador to Honduras, her face under-lit in a dark tent, may seem visually problematic if you're trying to read the expression on her face, but the darkness of the image and its low-light setting convey something else about the nature of the testimonial process and the stories she is

telling or, potentially, not telling.¹⁰⁰ This darker aesthetic appealed to my queer sensibilities, so I decided to leave the images as I found them. To my mind, the analogue imperfection of the images best reflected the ambiguity of memory and the complexity of the situation the Salvadoran refugees faced. It also intimated the horrors these people experienced and witnessed but couldn't bring themselves to talk about.

Allowing the archival slide images and audio files to be imperfect also aligned them with the film's thematic embrace of aging. The richly saturated Ektachrome slide images, replete with specks of dust and wayward strands of thread or hair, show their age openly. The strong colours suggest an intensity that the memory of significant events often holds. By way of contrast, the clean, contemporary colour palette of the digital media showing Brownstone reviewing his documentation suggests a man still actively engaged in important events and tasks. The juxtaposition of the two aesthetics encourages a reflection on the allure of memory, and on the preconceived notions we have about aging, particularly the inaccurate presumption of a diminishing interest in the wider world.

The next methodological challenge was to build sequences from Brownstone's images and from the stories he shared during the interview production process. Many of his accounts have the feel of expository narration which made aligning the "correct" or at least appropriate images with them relatively easy. For example, his accounts of the chicken farmer, the shoemaker, and other "productive enterprises" have obvious image corollaries.¹⁰¹ In other instances, particularly

¹⁰⁰ Conrad, *On The Road To Virtue*. Primarily, the image at 25:13 is the one I'm thinking of here, but the same characteristics apply to the image used at 24:53.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. The "productive enterprises" sequence starts at 12:42. The chicken farmer appears at 13:06 and the shoemaker is at 14:34.

when longer archival sound clips were used — the refugee statements to the international community, for example¹⁰² — I created visual sequences of several images to support audio clips with a single voice; this helped indicate both a lack of certainty about the identity of the speaker and the idea that the declarations were communal sentiments, shared by many in the Salvadoran refugee camps.

In other instances, the expository context of the relationship between sound and image is stripped away, leaving the viewer to engage an image and its associated situation more poetically. For example, after Brownstone recalls the destruction of the La Virtud refugee camp, I cut to an close-up image of a girl in a group setting, slightly blurred, with a shocked look on her face.¹⁰³ The exact context of the image is not explained. The viewer might connect it to the story that Brownstone has just finished telling about the destruction of the La Virtud refugee camp — and it may be a connection that I am encouraging — but it is ultimately a poetic moment; the viewer is forced to consider possible contexts for the image, to weigh the implications of those possible scenarios, and then decide for themselves what meaning to attach to the moment.

The images used in those poetic moments also function as a connector from one expository sequence to the next. Such moves required a cinematic logic, if not the logic of a journalistic argument. In connecting some of the sequences, I often (but not slavishly) used the sound of the slide viewer changing slides to trigger a shift to a new thought, subject, or theme. Sometimes these shifts were logical, other times they were more emotional or poetic, driven by other considerations in the images or archival sound clips. Using this slide viewer sound — which was

¹⁰² Ibid. The two prepared refugee statements with supporting images run from 5:33 to 6:04 and from 18:35 to 19:04 in the film.

¹⁰³ Ibid. See this image at 21:35 of the film.

embedded in the original interview recordings — reminded the viewer of the source of the narration content and the participatory process at the heart of the film.

I also integrated some of the archival audio testimony into Brownstone's enacted sequences as a way of evoking the mind of memory: the idea that these archival sounds might be within him while sifting through the images. In all instances, aligning the archival voice clips with Brownstone's slide images amplified the authenticity of each element and reinforced their legitimacy as documentation. As well, hearing Brownstone's own narration voice over the enacted sequences of him reviewing his images increased the sense of an internal dialogue unfolding in the film. The intercutting between archival images and those enacted sequences added to the film's poetic resonance. The shifting between archival and contemporary time reinforced the fluidity of memory while expanding the life and consequence of the images, beyond the moment of their original occurrence.

Listening to Brownstone for long periods of time helps to make the film more intimate but comes with its own set of problems. The viewer is inextricably drawn into his personal history, into his connection with the Salvadoran refugees, and into their shared world view. But subjecting the audience to only one voice for too long a stretch, with no other central participant to alternately occupy their attention is a risky choice. So I deployed archival sound elements — refugee statements, songs, Brownstone's diaristic recordings — at regular intervals in the film to add sonic variety but also to ensure that historical participants were able to speak for themselves.

With respect to the archival audio files, the analogue recording quality added variety to the sound design of the film and offered a contrast to the higher fidelity digital recordings of

Brownstone's interviews. The only adjustments made to the archival audio files related to reducing high-frequency hiss and low-end rumble in the post-production process, in order to minimize the impact of any edits made for compression or clarity. Otherwise, I retained the low-fidelity quality of the recordings to help evoke the historical time period, and supplied subtitles regardless of language to promote textual clarity.

Brownstone recorded a number of musical performances in the camps, both vocal and instrumental. I featured them prominently in the film to reinforce the political topics and events that he referenced in his accounts, but I also wanted them to function contextually in the conversation around memory. To that end, I enlisted a composer, Ken Vandevrie, to score instrumental elements that suggested a continuance of those historical musical performances, but also spoke to the subtle ways in which our memory of events changes over time. So, the scored elements used similar instruments to the archival music pieces in some instances — acoustic guitars, particularly — but otherwise employed a wider range of instruments to imply an organic movement away from the original musical ideas. So the score isn't tone-deaf musical mimicry; it's an evocation of the original recordings with a view to affectively connecting them to Brownstone's current revisiting of the documentation and to his ongoing remembrance of his experiences in the camps.¹⁰⁴

The musical score also serves as an indicator of various themes at work in the film. For instance, when the film moves to a discussion of photography, we created a specific musical motif. When that motif is used a second and third time later in the film, it serves as a cue for an

¹⁰⁴ Kaitlin M. Murphy, "Memory Mapping: Affect, Place, and Testimony in *El Lugar Más Pequeño* (2011)" in *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 2016, Vol. 25, No.4, 584. Murphy calls this interplay a dialectic: "Memory is a dialectic between experience, narrative, and the affect that gives feeling, meaning, and life to the memories."

elaboration on that theme.¹⁰⁵ The reprise of this and other motifs anchors the score formally and adds to the film's sense of structural unity without suggesting any particular thematic resolution.

All of these elements of course play into the film's overall storytelling pace. In light of Brownstone's age — 94 at the time of post-production — I created an edit tempo that reflected Brownstone's usual storytelling cadence and the rhythm of his daily life. The tempo also reflected a certain fluidity inherent in memory and in the act of sifting through the artifacts of memory. In line with the poetic mode, this pacing assisted viewers in reading the film and the juxtapositions it presented.

For antecedents in this context, I looked to the National Film Board documentary *House Calls*.¹⁰⁶ It observes three elderly patients of a Toronto doctor who advocates for house calls as a crucial component of Ontario's health care system. In several scenes, we see the doctor's elderly patients completing actions in real time — slowly climbing the stairs, walking a hallway, or carefully making a pot of coffee.¹⁰⁷ This real-life observation, without artificial quickening in editing, conveys a sense of the pace of their lives, suggesting a relationship between life pace and storytelling tempo.

Similarly, we observe Brownstone slowly reviewing his slides and image prints, as well as moving about his house — visual companions to the deliberate, thoughtful pace of his audio commentaries. The central challenge in editing Brownstone's voice was to accurately reflect his

¹⁰⁵ Conrad, *On The Road To Virtue*. This musical motif buttressing Brownstone's references to his photographic practice is first introduced at 7:33, then returns again at 11:42 and 22:42.

¹⁰⁶ Ian McLeod, *House Calls*, (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 2004).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. Relevant observational sequences run from 3:07 to 3:53, 10:27 to 11:17, 16:51 to 17:53, 19:37 to 20:30, and 26:23 to 28:11.

own storytelling pace while not adversely affecting the flow of the film: any compression of his stories had to maintain his natural cadence while masking cuts for time and clarity. Leaving hesitations and breaths in his voice track, for example, added to the seeming transparency of the voice editing, while hopefully drawing the viewer further into Brownstone's thought process and emotional world.¹⁰⁸

Visual Representations of Memory

In the decades between Brownstone's gathering of his documentation and the completion of *On The Road To Virtue* in 2017, substantial revolutions in image and sound technologies occurred. In the film, I used various physical devices to draw attention to those shifts. For a digitally-centred 21st-century audience, these technologies read easily as historical forms of communication and thus functioned effectively as analogues for the passage of chronological time. First we see his slide viewer and the slides themselves, packaged in archival plastic sleeves. Then we see the slide images in print form. More modern computer technologies serve to bring the historical story firmly into the digital realm: Brownstone reflecting on the image of the tortured Honduran worker on his office computer monitor is the principal example of this shift.¹⁰⁹ Throughout the film, we encounter most of his slide images in full-frame digital video, using a cinematic convention of filling the frame with a still image to engage the viewer more

¹⁰⁸ Conrad, *On The Road To Virtue*. The sequence in which Brownstone describes his family history from 15:05 to 16:22 is a good example of successful dialogue editing and compression that doesn't sacrifice cadence or natural storytelling flow.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. See the sequence from 9:09 to 10:06 for this shifting display of technologies. In the case of the Honduran worker image, I referenced several technologies within this sequence as a way of indicating the depth of memory and feeling associated with that experience.

directly with the “content” of the image rather than with its form.¹¹⁰ The digital imprint is further embedded by animating some of these images in order to intensify emotional response and moral implication.

Fotoamator, the Polish film referenced earlier about life in the Łódź ghetto during the Nazi occupation, uses a similar creative visual presentation of its archival elements. Dariusz Jablonski shows us an historical slide projector with accountant Walter Genewein’s pictures moving through it, helping to further anchor us in the time period of the film story. The depiction of the slides moving through the projector joined by the metal frames containing them also reminds us of the archival source of the film’s content, as do the shots of the archive folders in which Genewein’s accounting materials are kept.¹¹¹ When we see Brownstone working his camera in his living room and listening to his audio cassette player, we’re reminded of the technologies he used to document his visits to the refugee camps. Including the wide range of technologies used to capture and present images through the life of Brownstone’s documentation helps connect the film to its original historical context but also subtly reminds us of the transience of communication media and the fluidity of memory.

¹¹⁰ In early edits of the film, I considered showing some or all of Brownstone’s images in their full original frames, complete with their ragged slide edges and occasional slide development issues. The result of this approach was to foreground the process of photographic capture and display, rather than the content of the images themselves. Another consequence was that it also left much of the video frame empty (or black) depending on the shape of the slide positive. When Brownstone indicated in post-production that he expected certain substantive story outcomes in the film, it became clear that filling the video frame with the content of his images was the smarter direction. While that decision required me to make choices about what part of the original picture to include in the video frame, my default position was to include as much of the image as possible in all instances. I developed a process in Premiere Pro that set all the images at a particular percentage of their original size, thereby ensuring a consistent framing approach that retained some degree of neutrality. This is not to deny that I made creative, albeit sometimes subtle, framing choices in many instances, but I limited the number of times in which I radically altered the original framing of Brownstone’s images.

¹¹¹ Jablonski, *Fotoamator*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvUdffAhFH4>. The sequence from 8:38 to 8:57 shows how Jablonski juxtaposed the slide projection visuals and the archival documentation.

One of the central decisions in the filmmaking process concerned how best to convey ideas about memory and its construction. I eventually decided to use the interior of Brownstone's home to represent his overall memory, and the various rooms in his house to indicate memories of different kinds or time periods. From our first meetings, I understood that Brownstone was a "memory container," by which I mean a holder of considerable historical and narrative information, a product largely of the range and depth of his professional experiences. But it was also clear that, in a visual context, his home was a physical repository, exuding memory and experience with no additional set decoration required. The walls and tables are covered with framed photographs and a plethora of cultural objects gathered or received as gifts during many working trips abroad — what Halbwachs might have called "... a mute and motionless society."¹¹² If one needed physical evidence of memory, both familial and professional, it was available in every room. So the visual richness of Brownstone's home and its connections to his personal and professional memory led to my decision to capture the film's contemporary storytelling sequences there.¹¹³ In an early cut of the film, I included a sequence in which Brownstone left the house, but I eventually decided against even that departure, to reinforce the continuance of his remembering.

Brownstone's house presented particular settings in which to explore his archival images. Choosing specific rooms for various sequences helped communicate the idea of different wells of memory within him. For example, he uses the slide viewer and cassette recorder in the kitchen,

¹¹² Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) 129.

¹¹³ Murphy, "Memory Mapping," 586. Murphy characterizes the relationship between person and place this way: "... people create deep and rich attachments to the places which they live in or frequent. These attachments are reinforced by the patterns they follow in those places, ... and the various events of their lives experienced in those places. The stories of our lives, positive and negative, are intrinsically tied to place, and those places in turn are imbued with meaning."

thumbs through prints in the sunroom, looks at framed photographs in the workroom, scrolls through digital versions in his office, and peers at slides on a light box in the master bedroom. In all instances, each assessment of the images is a memorial act for Brownstone; every review of an archival recording is effectively an extension of the Mesa Grande memorial service he attended in 1985, a return to witnessing the “... collective intimacy...”¹¹⁴ of the refugees in the camps. The various aesthetic decisions discussed here helped shape the film into its own version of collective intimacy, through a rich interweaving of layers of memory and acts of remembrance.



¹¹⁴ Murphy, “Memory Mapping,” 583. Here is the context for Murphy’s reference to collective intimacy: “These stories *matter*, not because their trauma needs to be quantified for an archive, but rather because they are equally the material of intimate lives and shared, flowing through, around, and across their community. The ghosts, the remembering, the stories — they weave the map of connections that is the affective, collective intimacy of being the ones still living, surrounded by so much death.”

CONCLUSION

In an interview he gave to Roger Samson in 1998, Meyer Brownstone made a statement about “looking at dying” and wanting to “die with equanimity.”¹¹⁵ These comments came after his account of the Mesa Grande memorial service in 1985, as he wept in recollection of the devastating and unnecessary loss of life among the Salvadoran refugees. He talked of not wanting to leave his family and friends in a similar state of suffering. The idea of dying with a sense of peace within himself and leaving his family with a positive legacy connected naturally to the philosophy of dignity to which he ascribed and that he acted on specifically in his dealings with the Salvadoran refugees.

Relatively early in his life,¹¹⁶ he determined his belief set and decided to live — and die — by those convictions. It’s what John Berger called “... the parity which can now exist between the self and the world: it is the measure of his total commitment and his total independence.”¹¹⁷ Berger was referring to Che Guevara in the wake of his death and the publication of the photograph displaying his dead body in Bolivia. Through the photograph and the actions of Guevara’s life, Berger imagined a man freed by the power of his convictions and committed to social transformation, not only because it is possible, but because it is necessary: “Guevara chose to identify himself with these forces. In doing so he was not submitting to so-called ‘laws’ of

¹¹⁵ “Meyer Brownstone/Oxfam International fonds.” Brownstone interview with Roger Samson, CD # 3, This interview is not yet available online, but on the CD itself, Brownstone recounts the Mesa Grande memorial service from 13:13 to 17:53. His comments about “dying with equanimity” start at 18:36.

¹¹⁶ Gutkin, *The Worst of Times*, 146-147. Brownstone talks of growing up in a community of Jewish radicals whose ideology was imprinted on him at a young age. Certainly by the end of his teens, his philosophy and outlook on the world were set.

¹¹⁷ Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 15.

history but to the historical nature of his own existence.”¹¹⁸ Brownstone, like Guevara (at least in this instance), has come to terms with the fact of his eventual death and is freed by the knowledge of its inevitability: “It is reasonable to suppose that after a man such as Guevara has made his decision, there are moments when he is aware of this freedom which is qualitatively different from any freedom previously experienced.”¹¹⁹ A similar freedom has played out in Brownstone’s life, enough so to create the equanimity he sought: to die with a sense of peace, knowing he has done what he could to promote social transformation and human development.

The freedom that comes with the acceptance of inevitable death is a surrender to one’s mortality, but also a giving over of one’s individuality to the collective. In Meyer Brownstone’s life, and particularly in his engagement with the Salvadoran refugees, he contributed his particular skills and passions to causes that the refugees were dedicated to as a group: the dignity of individuals, the right to self-determination, the improvement of living conditions, and the just resolution of social disputes. In recollecting his interactions with them in *On The Road To Virtue*, Brownstone released his individual memory, contributing it to a larger narrative of historical events and ways of being that lays beyond his own: a shared narrative of experiences and ideals. That larger narrative may not amount to collective memory as such, but because of his rigorous documentation, it is a narrative that will be harder to silence or ignore.

There’s a similar freedom that comes with self-acceptance and from living openly and honestly with oneself. *On The Road To Virtue* provided me with an opportunity to interrogate the artistic side of my queer identity and emerge with a deeper understanding of how a dark, queer

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 16.

aesthetic is a fundamental part of my art. Future projects will undoubtedly explore more obvious queer story themes but this project gave me a stronger awareness of how closely my aesthetic instincts are tied to my core self. I haven't completed my artistic journey, but through this film and research process, I've travelled some ways further down that virtuous road.

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