Untrained Eyes: GIs Shooting Movies at the Close of World War II

Unlike Army Signal Corps cinematographers, such as Hollywood Director George Stevens, the filmmakers I will be discussing today were not filming in an official capacity [aside: Stevens also shot personal footage, as we saw earlier in the week at the Austrian Filmmuseum screenings]. The filmmakers I will be considering today recorded moments of their own experience in movies that happened, by virtue of what they encountered in the spring of 1945, to be different from those made by any other amateur producers in cinematographic history [not an overstatement: first time that amateurs collectively documented something of the magnitude of the concentration camps]. Sandwiched between other footage of military camps, skirmishes, pastoral scenes shot from moving vehicles, bombed out buildings, local citizens, and each other, some of the military personnel who recorded moving images during the war chose also to turn their cameras on the most horrific and traumatic of their encounters: the concentration camp victims, dead and living. As it turns out, and as I have only recently learned, these amateur documentarians were not all GIs either: one film made by an American nurse, which I will discuss today, adds to the body of GI films that I have been examining over the course of the past decade.

In comparison to official military and newsreel images, amateur films of post-liberation concentration camps have received scant scholarly attention. Taken as a body of work, these films indicate a significant deviation from the representational history of amateur film. They mark a monumental shift in the potential use of the amateur cinematographer’s toolkit, with
implications for virtually every aspect of what had previously been used almost exclusively for entertainment purposes, even when performing a documentary function. Some informational applications of amateur cinematography developed on the American homefront during the war, but the amateur footage of the camps possess a unique status as both personal records and as historical documentation of a difficult subject. This footage also had a different exhibition trajectory, function, and status than the rest of the amateur war films shot by American soldiers (and a nurse!). In fact, considering these films—typically un-narrated and in-camera edited (important exception to this is Sam Fuller’s V-E+1 film, which we watched earlier this week)—the way that we experience them now as documentary footage seems to position them as a competing record with the official moving image record created, held, edited, and distributed by the American government and her allies [my focus today is exclusively on American amateur film; know nothing about analogous footage taken by other soldiers].

**Amateur Moviemakers**

As Charles Tepperman demonstrates in his recent book, *Amateur Cinema: The Rise of North American Moviemaking, 1923-1960*, amateur film culture, “responded to current events [such as World War II] in ways that were complex and contradictory.”¹ Amateur filmmakers had long considered their small gauge 8 and 16mm equipment as liberating them from externally produced modes of documentation. As early as 1926, founder of the Amateur Cinema League, Hiram Percy Maxim, articulated the potential of amateur film as “an entirely new method of communication,” hinting at uses that exceeded personal documentation and that could potentially subvert official modes.² In his seminal book, *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols discusses the challenging relationship between home movies and documentary film in a fashion that is
pertinent here: “If we lack familiarity with the historical events whose semblance attaches to the sounds and images we view, then these images may lack the referential power documentary requires of them…[A home movie], often close to raw footage in its lack of expository or narrative structure, has clear documentary value for whom it offers evidence…But in order to take on evidentiary value, the footage must be recognized for its historical specificity.” 3

Indeed, part of my aim today is to consider how historical meaning gets appended to personal footage of the camps, which is only ever legible to a certain extent; regardless of the nature of their subject matter, home movies are an externalized record of personal memory as much as they are documentation of the exterior world. The same, of course, could be said for any documentary moving images inasmuch as the way they are presented and narrated to their audience determines their meaning [Aside: George Stevens shot official footage for the Signal Corps as well as personal footage—why? Was it a merely an issue of ownership?]. Personal films never intended for wide spectatorship have a relative opacity when they are devoid of contextualizing information, that which makes a newsreel or documentary easy to comprehend. However, as we will see, the instantly recognizable nature of concentration camp iconography transcends some of this opacity in ways that I believe are unique to the personal footage taken of these places and the people they contained. What remains unknowable strikes me as appropriately so.

Filming the Camps

Almost immediately following their liberation, some of the Concentration Camps were treated as memorials and educational displays for allied soldiers, the international media, local citizenry, and German prisoners of war who were either urged or ordered to tour them and, in the
process, becomes witnesses. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who visited Ohrdruf (a Buchenwald subcamp) on April 12, 1945, urged Allied troops to see for themselves the conditions at these newly liberated camps, while Army Signal Corps and journalistic photographers were called in on an explicitly evidentiary mission to shoot both still and moving images. As Jeffrey Shandler argues, Eisenhower “was at the forefront of establishing the act of witnessing the conditions of recently liberated camps as a morally transformative experience.”

Eyewitnessing, filming, and homefront spectating were on the minds of every American journalist considering how the concentration camps would be understood by the American public. Writing in the New York Times on April 18, 1945, less than a week after Eisenhower’s visit to Ohrdruf, correspondent Gene Currivan described 1,200 German civilians brought from Weimar to what he described as a “forced tour” of Buchenwald: “They saw sights that brought tears to their eyes, and scores of them, including German nurses, just fainted away. They saw more than 20,000 nondescript prisoners, many of them barely living, who were all that remained of the normal complement of 80,000.” Currivan uses a variation of the word “saw” in virtually every paragraph, referring to the Germans as well as his own experiences at Buchenwald, which he frames in the context of chastening, reflection, testimony, and tearful remorse (see a punitive and redemptive narrative developing here).

Writing in the New York Times on April 29, 1945, movie reviewer Bosley Crowther argued that “the screen has not been able to evidence all the true, unvarnished facts” of what had transpired in Nazi Germany. Crowther continued: “But now that Germany has been split open, the hideous deeds of the Nazis exposed and the truth has been brought in cold, hard focus before the movie camera’s eye, there remains no physical reason why these deeds should not be pictured on our screens.” Of course, Crowther was referring to Signal Corps footage and
newsreels—specifically mentioning new newsreel footage of Nordhausen, which he hoped would be screened widely despite some exhibitioners’ concerns about “bad audience response” to the gruesome images. But the image Crowther evokes here—a country and its darkest practices being revealed to the world in full for the first time—is worth remembering, for it is certainly one of the prevailing impulses that drove the hobbyist war cinematographer to turn his or her lenses onto the scenes they encountered at concentration camps.

*Ohrdruf*

On April 12th and 13th, Sergeant Joseph Bernard Kushlis of the Third Army shot 8mm footage of Ohrdruf, which is the same Buchenwald sub-camp that inspired Eisenhower’s commands to witness and record, and about which I have written in a collection of essays about genocide and film [*bears repeating today because of the unusual amount of context we have for this footage*]. In a 1979 oral history Kushlis describes arriving and filming at Ohrdruf:

I went over there promptly with several of my buddies and I had a small 8mm movie camera with me, which I was permitted to take with me since I had joined the outfit late in the game as a replacement. … I had my camera with me and I have taken these pictures of Ohrdruf—the very emaciated, starved—obviously starved—bodies lying around, most of them shot through the forehead as the Germans retreated and left them … While I was there filming our officers in charge, of course, had already started civilians, picked up on the downtown streets and brought to the Camp, to perform the burial of these bodies … My movies do show these German civilians digging the long trenches for common graves into which these bodies were then put.
Kushlis’s retrospective memory of his footage reminds us of the complexities not only of witnessing, but also of collecting a personal record of the camps and the contingent possibility of an “outside audience” seeing and understanding it at a later point in time. Kushlis’ oral history narration provides context for his footage even as the footage functions as a conduit to his own memory of the camps; it endows the image with some of the “referential power” Nichols refers to, moving it farther away from the status of raw or personal footage.

Notably, Kushlis does not photograph any survivors in his film. In his oral history, he specifically addresses the ethics of his filming decisions: “I viewed the scene in utter disbelief. It did occur to me that there was probably a question of morality or decency in even photographing these unfortunate people, but I quickly resolved the question to my own satisfaction in realizing that here was history that should be recorded.”8 Kushlis perceived his own film as functioning outside of the home movie purview, and in the realm of public history. Similar versions of this justification recur in oral histories of other enlisted men who filmed the camps. Interviewees repeatedly narrate a transition from incredulity and traumatization to a sense of historical motivation to capture these images, however obscene. This apprehensive decision to document is reminiscent of photographer Margaret Bourke-White’s explanation of the role her camera played at Buchenwald: “I have to work with a veil over my mind. In photographing the murder camps, the protective veil was so tightly drawn that I hardly knew what I had taken until I saw prints of my own photographs. It was as though I was seeing those horrors for the first time.”9

[worth remembering that official documentarians were also navigating terrain of personal experience and recording; just with a different professional purpose motivating the photography]
Unlike many other amateur cinematographers who filmed scenes at the camps, Kushlis did not keep his movies to himself. After the war ended, he visited clubs, like the YMCA, where he would show and explain his war movies, in the process endowing them with the “referential power” to which Nichols refers. Barbie Zelizer has discussed the experiential power of journalistic representations of the camps: “one did not need to be at the camps; the power of the image made everyone who saw the photos into a witness.” But I think this is complicated when considering amateur footage, which may show kindred images but without its maker on hand provides little explanation for what is being seen. Kushlis explains that his audiences: “were all interested in seeing first hand what they had read about … Here was something taken by a strict amateur photographer in which there could be no doctoring of scenes and no faking of film. What I took was there. It was fact.”

Kushlis’s asserts a faith in photographic indexicality, that the viewing of amateur images amounted to a sort of indisputable firsthand experience, reminds us of the important perception of the amateur cinematographer’s implicit relationship to the idea of truth. Indeed, there was a considerable degree of skepticism in the spring of 1945 regarding the images circulating in newsreels and journalistic photography; many thought that such mass atrocities were beyond belief. The value of Kushlis’s footage resided, in part, in the fact that it was not official and therefore presumably not contaminated by political motivations. This was also the case with official documentary footage, as Susan Carruthers has argued: “Commentary accompanying both still and moving images needed to acknowledge possible doubts in order to refute them, a task often assigned to the figure of the formerly-cynical GI, a prominent protagonist in documentary, newsreel and press accounts of the camps’ liberation.” None of these images speak for themselves.
After its liberation on April 29, 1945 Dachau became one of the most documented concentration camps, including by amateur photographers. In early May, all of the major American newspapers ran stories about eighteen newspaper editors who, at Eisenhower’s urging, toured Buchenwald and Dachau. The collectively authored and published statement the editors made spoke of the “convincing proof” of what they had seen, some of which they deemed to be “too perverted to be publicly described” [idea worth keeping in mind]14 Also in early May, American newspapers reported that in the days leading up to its eventual liberation Heinrich Himmler had ordered Dachau’s evacuation “and the extermination of all of its inmates to prevent any witnesses to German inhumanity falling into Allied hands.”15 This notion of the Nazi impulse to destroy eyewitneses was echoed throughout newly liberated Europe as an urgent motivation for the allies to capture extant visual records and eyewitness testimony.

Major Sydney L. Burr was a member of the 338th Bombardment Group of the 8th Air Force who shot 16mm film during the war, including around three minutes of Dachau (which is viewable at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum website--PP). This footage begins with a sign indicating the location [very typical for amateur war filmmaking & for any travel home moviemaking or that matter] followed by a shot that functions as a tentative introduction to the more graphic images to come [PP]: a shot of train cars and soldiers in the deep field obscured by trees, making any detail difficult to discern [can tell that the soldiers are grouped together and looking into a railcar]. At this point it would be hard to know what Burr was filming--unless you had previous or outside knowledge, but the next shot takes us in to a closer look [PP] down the line of train cars, with soldiers walking around and dead bodies visible in the distance on the
ground. Burr cuts in to a lingering medium shot [PP] of emaciated corpses in one of the train cars with some of the bodies in identifiable camp uniforms, and in doing so places himself in the viewing position of the men we see in the first shot. This is followed by a series of much closer shots [PP] in which Burr slowly pans across corpses on the train cars. Following this are a series of medium shots [PP] showing bodies stacked in other train cars prior to a cut that significantly changes the view [PP] to the Dachau camp gates with what is presumably a crematoria chimney visible in the deep field, locating the film--and Burr--in a specific place, not unlike the opening shot of the Dachau sign, and also providing some architectural relief from the corpses that predominated the earlier shots.

This shot transitions us to a view of the barbed wire fence [PP] though which we see inside of the camp, which has many men—soldiers as well as prisoners—milling about, followed by a cut to an interior view [PP] showing many hundreds of liberated prisoners gathered around a military truck and, as the camera pans right, a band playing [PP]—according to Lindsay Zarwell, only footage they have in the USHMM collection showing an orchestra—likely a civilian one—in Dachau liberation footage—example of something that is potentially unique].16 Burr then cuts to an underexposed close up [PP] of numerous naked corpses stacked on each other, almost filling the frame, followed by a long shot [pp] of what appears to be a pile of clothing and another of clothing hanging [pp] on the side of building into which soldiers are going in and out. A cut bring us [PP] to an image of a dead man in uniform under water; a pan to the right brings us to another one, and a cut take us to dead bodies [pp] on the ground next to the water. With the camp visible to the left, we see soldiers walking away from Burr, at which point his filming of Dachau ends.
Burr’s film allows us to seriously consider what we get and do not get from amateur films of the post-liberation camps. Without any narration or context, we get a series of images of the dead and living; of the camp, inside and out. The footage is instantly recognizable as depicting a concentration camp, with the essential roles of dead inmate, surviving inmate, and allied soldier clear throughout. However, reading even one news report regarding the liberation of Dachau (this one in the *New York Times*) begins to fill in more details and to answer questions:

A short time after the battle there was a train of thirty-nine coal cars on a siding. The cars were loaded with hundreds of bodies and from them was recovered at least one pitiful human wreck that still clung to life. These victims were mostly Poles and most of them had starved to death as the train stood there idle for several days. Lying alongside a busy road near by were the murdered bodies of those who had tried to escape… Bodies were found in many places. Here also were the gas chambers—camouflaged as ‘showers’ into which prisoners were herded under the pretext of bathing—and the cremation ovens. Huge stacks of clothing bore mute testimony to the fate of their owners…The Americans stormed through the camp with tornadic fury. Not a stone’s throw from the trainload of corpses lay the bleeding bodies of sixteen guards shot down as they fled…The main part of the camp is surrounded by a fifteen-foot-wide moat through which a torrent of water circulates… Two guards fired into the mass from a tower, betraying their presence. American infantrymen instantly riddled the Germans. Their bodies were hurled down into the moat amid a roar unlike anything heard from human throats…Inside the barracks were more than 1,000 bodies—some
shot by guards in a wild melee last night, others victims of disease and starvation.”

What we see in Burr’s footage and what we read in the newspaper are revelatory—but acquire historical usefulness primarily when they are combined together. Burr’s film is a personal and very limited inventory of Dachau. In his three minutes, Burr captured what he clearly felt was the essence of the camp. This is, in fact, confirmed by the New York Times report, which catalogs and explains so much of what Burr filmed. Of course, had Burr been able to show us his film personally, he might have told us quite the same story. And, of course, he would likely have told us much more. [reminder: George Stevens also filmed at Dachau, both officially and personally]. Of course, the official newsreels reporting on Dachau offer explanatory narration, in some ways merging some of the iconography of Burr’s film with the reporting of the New York Times. Of course any of these films—amateur or professional—replicate only a small part of the experience of entering one of these camps. And, unlike Kushlis, we have no record of whether Burr showed his footage after the war; nor how he felt about the act of filming. Without any context, Burr’s footage is legible to a certain extent for anyone with familiarity about Dachau and the camps, but as a historical document its “referential power” is amplified by context, including its potentially unique capturing of the musical performance inside the camp’s gates.

A Nurse in Nordhausen

Captain Beatrice Wachter [PP] of the Army Nurse Corps shot 16mm Kodachrome color film at the recently liberated Nordhausen camp, which is also available in digital form at the USHMM website. This footage is the only reel depicting a liberated Concentration Camp that I
Women were, of course, participants in the war and in tending to the liberated camps in a variety of ways. As already discussed, Margaret Bourke-White photographed the camps. When Congresswoman Clare Booth Luce toured Buchenwald in April 1945 as part of a Congressional delegation, the *New York Times* reported that she “spared herself none of the grisly spectacles, and said she hopes the people of the United States will see motion picture records which have been made there.”19 After encountering a 6 year old, emaciated survivor, Luce was reported to say that “No one wants to believe these things, but it is important that people know they’re true,” essentially repeating the mantra that “seeing is believing” and making the case for the importance of cinematic records, even for consumption by what was still widely deemed to be the weaker sex.

While it is necessarily the case, given the historical moment, that American women saw less of the liberated camps than men, the existence of Wachter’s footage provides an interesting point of conclusion for this discussion. First, as a point of comparison we might consider the official Signal Corps black and white, 35mm footage of Nordhausen, which was used as part of the *Nazi Concentration Camp* film (and which may have been shot by George Stevens, whom we know documented this camp and shot personal footage there, as well).20 There are three notable aspects of this official footage that I want to mention here: 1) American soldiers are featured heavily in the footage throughout, as they go about the work of helping survivors, giving an air of possibility to the otherwise grim images, 2) although there are images of corpses, the emphasis of the footage is on the survivors, and 3) the burial ritual involving local citizens is featured heavily, providing a sense of ritualized behavior and showing American audiences a form of punishment.
Wachter’s footage is focused squarely on the dead camp victims. [PP] She repeatedly pans across fields of bodies [PP] and then cuts in to closer shots and again pans down lines of bodies [PP], giving a sense of the scope of the death that she was experiencing. In these initial shots we see only one soldier [PP] working amidst the corpses. Wachter also includes a shot of a mostly unclothed dead baby [pp] lying next to another child victim, panning slowly across this image. She captures four civilians [PP] carrying a stretcher with a body on it, but only in a quick shot before filming a long pan [PP] across bombed out buildings, men of the 6th infantry Division (PP wearing red six-pointed stars on their arms), civilians digging by the water [PP] with barbed wire visible in the distance, and then more corpses, including a [PP] dead child and woman. As in all of this footage, most of these bodies [PP] are in severely emaciated condition; as a nurse, the state of those corpses [PP] must have spoken volumes to Wachter about the conditions of the camp.

Where we have no written record from Burr about his experience filming, Wachter wrote a letter about her time at Nordhausen to her husband. Excerpts from this letter were quoted at length in an article [PP] about the “horror” she encountered: “I have seen the most horrible sights that I hope I will never see again as long as I live.”21 Wachter goes on to describe the bodies she encountered, “headless, no arms, burnt to a crisp—little children, some babies, a few women but mostly men.” She continued, “I see these rows of bodies, some naked, some with a few clothes on, in front of me now. God, how can such conditions exist?”

In her book Through Amateur Eyes, Frances Guerin discusses Nazi amateur home movies shot at Dachau in 1940, writing that “even though the Nazi crimes inside the camps are both beyond the visible frame and in the future relative to the film fragment [that she is discussing], for us today they are present, and they are frightening. Thus the extraordinariness of this footage
of Dachau Concentration Camp comes to life in our retrospective viewing, seventy years after the fact….And if indeed this fragment represents the private musing of its cameraman, once it is repositioned, in both time and space, it effortlessly shifts into the realm of a devastating public history.”22 Guerin’s gesture towards the transitory nature of, in this case, Nazi home movies, and in the cases under discussion here, American military personnel home movies, is pertinent and also problematic. In my opinion, the shift Guerin invokes from private to public is far from effortless. We live in a world in which it is commonplace for individuals to use their cameras—or phones as is most often the case—to document atrocity, whether as bystanders or as perpetrators. In 1945, this was a novel use for the small gauge camera, and these films reflect the experience of seeing trauma in ways that newsreel photography, in its narrated and narrative state, fails to do, especially since so many of these films’ makers are no longer around to narrate their filmic records.

Documentation of the Holocaust and of the camps took many forms, and the amateur footage that survives of them is among the most intriguing and frustrating. Wacsher’s contradictory desires are referenced above: she never wants to see such images again, even though she possessed film footage of them. She also voices a struggle with the memories which she “saw” in her mind—that visceral experience which those who advocated for concentration camp footage to circulate on American screens and in American living rooms and viewing clubs wished to replicate. All of this reminds us of amateur films’ irrepessible “referential power” for their makers, and the imperfect knowledge they now convey to modern audiences viewing footage shot by untrained eyes in the spring of 1945.

Contextual information can help to render this footage legible along the lines of the narratives told in allied newsreels, although I am not convinced that this is the only or best way
to view these films now. To suggest that newsreels make more sense of the Holocaust than these amateur films is a false privileging. Rather, I would like to end by suggesting that amateur footage of the camps offers a more appropriate representation than any other documentary moving image material of the camps after their liberations. The Holocaust has been discussed as an event about which there can be no real understanding and comprehension, and the amateur films I’ve encountered of the camps provide precisely that sense of horror, incompleteness, incoherence, and inexplicability that is appropriate when considering the representation of this most difficult of historic events. There is something in the incompleteness of the films and the lack of understanding they inspire in our contemporary viewing that makes them valuable both in their opaqueness and in the brief glimpses they give us of familiar, narrativizable aspects of the camps. They are both comprehensible, and, appropriately enough, beyond our ability to understand.

3 Bill Nichols, Representing Reality, 160.
6 Kushlis’s film is part of the Fred R. Crawford Witness to the Holocaust Project collection at Emory University. http://sage.library.emory.edu/collection-0608.html
9. Margaret Bourke-White, Portrait of Myself, 259.
16 Lindsay Zarwell, email to author, April 21, 2015.
18 http://www.ushmm.org/online/film/display/detail.php?file_num=5626 Wachter, like many other amateur cinematographers, appears in the frame in several shots throughout her reels, and it is unclear who was filming during those segments. Almost all amateur photographers appear at various times in their home movies.
21 Undated, unsourced article from collection of USHMM.