Any discussion of atrocity films must address “a fallacy of presentism,” in David Hackett Fischer’s words, characterizing a modern-day response to these images (1970: 135–40). Given public concern over the dwindling generation of eyewitnesses and survivors who can offer direct testimony of the Holocaust, exploring the specific issues of context and reception for so-called atrocity films seems more important than ever, yet they have received scant scholarly attention. In some cases, such as in the work of artist Alan Schechner, attempts to highlight the significance of context in viewing documentary imagery of the camps have met with public opprobrium. The political dimension of this footage does present particular challenges, given the unusual circumstances of how these films initially were produced, distributed, and exhibited. This chapter begins to chart some potential new directions to reimagine how early audiences might have encountered and responded to atrocity footage of the camps, organizing these potential directions around some of the more popular myths regarding how and by whom this footage was seen.

Popular memory of how Holocaust imagery first was screened, and of how these screenings forged a distinctly American public memory of the Holocaust, remains embedded within an actual and locatable history. Previous attention has been concentrated mostly on the visual, but this
chapter focuses on the relevance of time, with the images themselves a secondary concern. Time, as phenomenon and concept, reveals how audiences can understandatrocity footage differently according to various contexts of reception. An awareness of time puts critical distance between what is represented by the mythology and the representation that the mythology itself offers. This is not to suggest that documentary footage of atrocity is inauthentic or inferior to an unmediated encounter with sites of atrocity, though some extreme positions either denying or affirming the Holocaust have made this claim. Rather, this chapter focuses on how the context within which this footage is screened and seen produces new realities for public memory. These realities are not static but change and unfold over time.

At the simplest level, consider the duration of footage as bestowing cultural capital on footage. Early audience experiences with atrocity footage were brief, coming through short newsreels shown before a feature film, or in cities such as New York at theaters playing only newsreels. During World War II, the Roosevelt administration’s War Production Board limited each newsreel to a length of 750 feet, or approximately 8 minutes, and releases of new issues to every other week. On the eve of a public screening of official U.S. Signal Corps footage of concentration camps, New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther railed against these restrictions, claiming they inhibited the “social obligation” for theaters to present “such evidence graphically” of “horrors coming hot out of Germany” (1945: X1). By the late 1950s, and well after these restrictions had been lifted, film duration had become a cultural signifier of the epic American Holocaust film. Major American films of this period treating the Holocaust included The Young Lions (1958) at 167 minutes, The Diary of Anne Frank (1959) at 171 minutes, and Judgment at Nuremberg (1961) at 186 minutes, the latter encapsulating actual Signal Corps footage—a short film-within-a-film—within its epic narrative. Duration similarly has conferred importance on representations of the Holocaust on television. Although American television has engaged Holocaust-related themes since the 1950s, as the work of Jeffrey Shandler (1999) indicates, ABC miniseries such as QB VII (1974) and Holocaust (1978) paved the way for Holocaust-centric programming on American network television with running times of 390 and 475 minutes, respectively. ABC aired both of these miniseries over consecutive nights, rather than following the more common practice of scheduling a weekly timeslot. Such programming variations further connoted what was not ordinary television but a special event.

Time also leaves ideological traces within its disjunctures: between when the footage was shot and when it was seen; between when the footage
served evidentiary purposes for documenting atrocity and when this footage became a quotable visual text for use within other films, both documentary and fictional; between unmediated and signified suffering, and moments of mediated suffering as the signifier for atrocity, the latter either recreated by actors or captured indexically through footage shot during Liberation; and ultimately between Holocaust memory, and instantaneous or near-instantaneous depictions of a Holocaust aftermath, propelled by the 1961 broadcast in Israel of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi war criminal. The trial, shot live by four television cameras running simultaneously, became a watershed moment in which the Holocaust could serve as a newsworthy media event in its own right, replete with press conferences and daily excerpts appearing on nightly network news.

**Time, Mythology, and the Use of Atrocity Footage**

Inverting the typical paradigm emphasizing image over context, a consideration of time reveals a mythology surrounding films depicting Holocaust atrocity. Although certainly not a definitive inventory, three distinct myths drive the popular understanding of films shot during the liberation of concentration camps: the myth of “seeing is believing”; the myth of clear delineation between documentary and fiction films; and a presentist myth of the prior prevalence of atrocity imagery. Myths concerning the exhibition of atrocity footage are deceptive not because they are untrue but because of what they choose to select and ignore to be relevant to particular people at particular moments in history. For example, the paucity of atrocity footage appearing in American feature films of the 1950s is as striking as the prevalence in mainstream media today. To deduce from this that Hollywood callously avoided this footage, however, ignores the significance of newsreels in introducing American audiences to Nazi atrocities. Such assumptions mask the political economy of the film industry. In fact, as many theaters at that time were either owned by one of the major film studios or dependent on one for content, the vertically integrated structure of the industry streamlined the ability to get atrocity footage shot by the U.S. Army Signal Corps into studio-produced newsreels.

Similarly, European films and American-European co-productions played an integral role in introducing American audiences to the plight of Holocaust survivors and displaced persons. MGM, for example, co-produced Fred Zinneman’s *The Search* (1948) with Swiss Praesens-Film. The Oscar-winning *The Search*, shot in postwar Berlin, details the struggle of children displaced by the war to return to some semblance of a normal life. The narrative
focuses on the reunion between a mother and son who had been separated at Auschwitz. Only three years after Liberation, the film already had begun to treat the painful complexities of memory and the passage of time, especially in how the narrative portrays the young boy as he pieces together fragmented recollections of his mother. The disjunction between present and past is further elaborated in *The Last Stage* (1948), filmed on location in Auschwitz and featuring professional and nonprofessional personnel who survived Auschwitz and who recreate their experiences as camp survivors for this narrative film. The co-writer and director of the film, Wanda Jakubowska, herself was imprisoned at Auschwitz. Publicity for *The Last Stage* touts it as the first to document the conditions of the camps.¹

The disconnection between lived experience and its filmic recreation suggests, at least in the case of *The Search* and *The Last Stage*, that the representation of the Holocaust in cinema is more complex than simply a matter of absence from the screen. In one of the best-known documentaries about the Holocaust, *Night and Fog* (1955), issues of time and memory become central to the film as it smoothly cuts back and forth between present-day color footage of Auschwitz in ruins and black-and-white newsreels of a decade earlier. Rather than offer a linear chronology of events, the film evokes a sense of timelessness, in terms of the aftermath and the constant threat of forgetting what happened during the Holocaust as new atrocities are being committed. Like many of Alain Resnais’ later films, *Night and Fog* offers a world where past intermingles with the present. This perspective has garnered the film both controversy and accolades, as some critics contend that the film contains historical inaccuracies. Indeed, the film is often employed as a documentary to teach the Holocaust, with its most crucial motif—the unsettling possibilities it offers for chronology and memory—ignored in pedagogy.

These films, like almost any film about the Holocaust, pose challenges in terms of the footage itself, its factors of production, and how it was intended to be used; in terms of reception, pertaining to who saw this footage, under what circumstances, and when; and in terms of the imaginary, or how an audience of today might, or might not, imagine its own relationship to this footage and how it was seen by previous audiences. As Richard Slotkin observes with regard to cultural mythology:

all myth, to be credible, must relate the problems and aspirations of particular cultures to the fundamental conditions of human existence and human psychology. But the viability of myth depends upon the applicability of its particular terms and metaphors to the peculiar
conditions of history and environment that dominate the life of a particular people. (1973: 14)

For example, a mythology concerning atrocity footage may reveal more about how a post-9/11, post-\textit{Schindler's List} society would like to see itself in relation to the Holocaust than about what audiences in theaters encountered in 1945. Just as the Eichmann trials turned Holocaust memory into a modern media event, distinctly American memories of the Holocaust became the explanatory framework amid post-9/11 popular discussion for everything from comparisons between George W. Bush and Adolf Hitler to justifications for war with Iraq, replete with recollections of the Reichstag fire, accusations of Chamberlain-like appeasement, comparisons of mass human suffering, assertions of good and evil, and depictions of Iraqi liberation.

Both \textit{Schindler's List} (1993) and media coverage of 9/11 mark defining moments for a particular historical context in which public standards, aesthetics, and expectations of representations of atrocity were radically

\textit{Postwar films such as Night and Fog (1955) recombined archival photographs, newsreel, and Signal Corps atrocity footage into powerful meditations on memory and collective responsibility amid the passage of time. The Kobal Collection, Getty Images.}
renegotiated. Between the release of Steven Spielberg’s film in 1993 and the live coverage of the collapse of the World Trade Center towers in 2001, media saturation and the increasing acceptance of its simulations became familiar features of American public life. Perpetually negotiating and renegotiating the terms of Holocaust film with audiences reiterates extant standards and establishes new ones. Self-consciously drawing on the visuals of wartime newsreels, for example, Janusz Kaminski’s cinematography for Spielberg’s film helped set a visual benchmark for Holocaust films to deploy the very visual conventions of Signal Corps photography that grimly documented atrocity in the first place. This footage has become an instantly recognized signifier for the Holocaust, with its grainy black-and-white photography and extensive use of hand-held cameras documenting scenes of the emaciated, skeletal, and barely clothed bodies of survivors and the Allied bulldozing of rotting and nude corpses left by the Nazis into mass burial pits to prevent the spread of disease in the camps.

Appropriating such imagery, the onscreen violence and the nudity in Spielberg’s film became media events in their own right. They generated additional media coverage from students of color laughing at an execution scene to Republican Senator Tom Coburn rebuking NBC for broadcasting the film unedited over most of its affiliates. Despite these controversies, or perhaps because of them, audiences have come to expect a heightened graphic quality from Holocaust films. Such explicitness and a certain literality reinforce the notion of photographic truth that goes back at least to nineteenth-century discourses celebrating the triumph of the mechanical objectivity of the camera shutter over the imperfect subjectivity of the human eye or hand. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright note, the “paradox of photography” is the acknowledgment “that although we know that images can be ambiguous and are easily manipulated or altered . . . much of the power of photography still lies in the shared belief that photographs are objective or truthful records of events” (2001: 16).

**Time and the Manipulation of Atrocity Footage**

Given the widespread saturation of images depicting atrocity and a residual belief in photographic truth, decrying the lack of overt Holocaust imagery in films released during the wartime and immediate postwar era has recently become more fashionable. However, this attitude imposes an anachronistic set of contemporary standards on the past. As time can blind contemporary audiences to the impact Holocaust imagery originally had on historical audiences, such lack of understanding is symptomatic of an
ongoing cultural desensitization to these visuals that completely ignores the gravity of General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s decision to release this footage commercially. Such expectations that important events were media events belong not to past but to present-day audiences. Perhaps some wartime audiences might have found forthright recreations of atrocity in fictional film highly distasteful and exploitative. Or perhaps others saw the place of atrocity as being in newsreel footage and not in entertainment films. Or perhaps they did not even want a photographic image to capture the full extent of the atrocity.

A brief scene from Orson Welles’ *The Stranger* (1946) demonstrates how reactions to atrocity footage can alter over time. In a 1946 article in *The New York Times* entitled “A passing regret on the cinematic decline of Orson Welles,” Crowther excoriates Welles’ latest production, which briefly features some atrocity footage near the film’s climax. In this scene, an FBI agent played by Edward G. Robinson uses a film projector to show a disbelieving Loretta Young that her husband is in fact a Nazi war criminal. Genuine footage of survivors is intercut with faked newsreels in which Welles portrays a high-ranking Nazi. “The brief usage of some actual atrocity news film at one point would be most effective if the picture itself were in line,” writes Crowther. “As it is, the employment of this footage from a classic record of horror in a slick, unconvincing melodrama is meretricious in the extreme” (1946: 41). Given its brutal nature, even the sparing use of atrocity footage might backfire, bringing accusations of cheapening and debasing the gruesome nature of this footage and the power it held for audiences at the time. Today, inclusion of actual footage or recreations of events are common practices within the feature film.

The determination of such expectations is highly elusive, and American audiences probably harbored complex and even contradictory responses to this footage. However, we do know that atrocity footage existed within a context of other mediated representations of human brutality and suffering. Although the myth of “seeing is believing” presumes that American audiences’ first experience with atrocity was a visual one, it was neither the first nor the exclusive mode of how they learned of the Holocaust. The earliest reports of atrocity occurred in print. For example, a front-page story in *The New York Times* on April 18, 1945, describes in great detail the forced tour of Buchenwald taken by 1,200 German civilians. Even before this story appeared in print, Edward R. Murrow had reported on Buchenwald in his live weekly radio broadcast from London on Sunday, April 15, 1945, at 1:45 p.m. over the CBS radio affiliate WABC. Although Murrow stops short of the detail featured in *The New York Times* article, his broadcast catalogs
the familiar archive of atrocities that would appear in subsequent newsreel compilations: the contrast between what Murrow describes as “an evil smelling horde” and “well-fed Germans,” the tattooed numbers on arms, the description of human skeletons, the pervasiveness of death. Although Murrow’s broadcast did not establish this taxonomy of camp atrocities, it demonstrates the necessity of viewing subsequent atrocity footage within a constellation of different media. Radio more closely parallels television than film in the sense that it was a domestic medium. Public opinion polls of the time, such as those conducted by American sociologist Hadley Cantril (responsible for the groundbreaking audience study of Orson Welles’ 1938 radio production *War of the Worlds*), revealed that more Americans received their news from radio than from any other source (Cantril 1966 [1940]: 68–70).

A second and related myth surrounding Holocaust footage imagines a clear delineation between documentary and fiction films, which is a relatively recent development. One can trace the almost total acceptance of the documentary film as different from fiction at least back to the embrace of cinema verité in the United States beginning in the 1960s. Cinema verité eschewed older, more traditional documentaries, which made frequent use of studio-bound sets, employed the “voice of God” narrator, and relied heavily on staged recreations, in favor of using newly available, lightweight, and portable technology that better allowed for on-location shooting of events as they unfolded, without interference from a camera crew. Advocates of this cinematic form, such as filmmaker Richard Leacock, emphasized that at a certain point, the cinema verité filmmaker would become like “a fly on the wall,” able to capture events as if the camera were not even there. American popular culture so thoroughly appropriated cinema verité techniques that today these techniques virtually have come to define mainstream documentary practice. However, before the 1960s, blurring the lines between documentary and fiction rarely provoked an outcry, and the staging or recreation of action in documentary footage was regularly practiced without rendering documentaries of the time inauthentic.

Cinema verité reinvigorated the artifice of photographic image as unmediated reality. The work of artist Alan Schechner is instructive here, particularly his “Self Portrait at Buchenwald: It’s the Real Thing” (1991–1993), which was part of the Jewish Museum’s contentious 2002 art exhibition *Mirroring Evil* in New York. Schechner digitally manipulates a familiar photograph taken within one of the barracks at Liberation, inserting his likeness into the picture as one of the inmates wearing a striped uniform and holding a Diet Coke can. Beyond its admonition of an encroaching
commercialization of Holocaust imagery, the photograph reminds us of the ease with which seemingly objective images can be appropriated to enhance the power of fiction. The “real thing” just as easily refers to a commercial trademark as it does to our willingness to accept the surface reality of images simply because they appear to be real.

Schechner’s image warns of a current gullibility for documentary images, as opposed to an alleged naïvete on the part of earlier audiences. It is not that audiences at the time of Liberation were unable to distinguish between documentary and fiction, but that staged recreation and actuality could comfortably coexist within the same documentary at one historical juncture. It can be argued that before the advent of cinema verité, less emphasis was placed on the authenticity of the events depicted and more on the place and the players, as can be seen in Jakubowska’s The Last Stage. In pre-Liberation newsreels, staged reenactments were also a conventional documentary practice. In the December 1938 The March of Time newsreel “Refugee—Today and Tomorrow,” numerous takes were staged on location (presumably outside of Manhattan) of Jews fleeing to safety from the Gestapo. According to Raymond Fielding, scenes of the Gestapo headquarters were shot at The March of Time’s New York studios, with Staten Island serving as the surrogate backdrop for a concentration camp. On the other hand, some location footage of recent refugees being debriefed was shipped from London with a note from the cinematographer stating, “[T]his was not a re-enactment, but an authentic case” (Fielding 1978: 236–37). The acceptability of such intermingling of staged footage and actuality points to the greater weight documentary and particularly atrocity footage assumed after World War II in evidentiary proceedings. The use of such footage may well have ushered in a whole style of documentary filmmaking now known as cinema verité.

Legal and Political Uses of Atrocity Footage

After Liberation, the political use of atrocity footage as war crimes evidence in court proceedings helped establish a new form of documentary practice. Coming from foreign newsreel services and the U.S. Signal Corps, it augurs a style of filmmaking that looks like that of cinema verité. As courtroom evidence, this footage understandably shunned staging or recreating events and actions. As a standardized practice, however, the look and feel of these films have influenced postwar culture far beyond the courtroom. Scholars such as Barbie Zelizer (1998) and Dagmar Barnouw (1996) have analyzed how photojournalism and the Signal Corps footage
developed a consistent and influential point of view—through the use of camera angle and placement, composition, and framing—from the perspective of the occupying victors. This recent research suggests multiple possibilities for how audiences see images of atrocity: as seemingly transparent evidence as part of a conscious and overarching institutional practice, and as establishing a new benchmark for subsequent documentary filmmaking. In outlining the use for film as legal evidence in war crimes proceedings, the Allies articulated an aesthetic that conforms to more modern documentary conventions. A letter from the judge advocate of the European Theater of Operations dated April 27, 1945, specifies a set of standard practices for the U.S. Signal Corps to shoot and process “still and motion pictures . . . taken of liberated prisoners and Concentration Camps.” Anticipating the imminent filming of Dachau, the document calls for a range of coverage, including wide shots (“general conditions”) and medium shots and close-ups (“individual cases of atrocities”). It goes on to describe production practices. A war crimes officer will direct the shooting of evidence. After receiving the processed footage from London, the officer will review it before it is edited. “It is . . . both practicable and extremely desirable,” the letter states, that the films “be returned to the War Crimes Officer who supervised and directed the shooting of the scene in order that he may make an affidavit as to the accuracy of the scene depicted.” In establishing a production practice in which the camera supposedly functions not as active participant but as a transparent recorder subsumed by personal eyewitness, the memo foresees many of the same assumptions inherent in the cinema verité movement fifteen years later.

Atrocity footage appearing in New York by the end of April 1945 achieved some degree of exposure, though not on the scale that actual and recreated images of the Holocaust have achieved today. The history of newsreel exhibition in New York reveals some of the various pressures exerted on these screenings. On April 25, The New York Times announced that the U.S. Signal Corps had released footage of Ohrdruf and Holzen to the five major newsreel services for upcoming issues. The next day, the Times announced that additional footage had been shown to the press, but that a general screening would be postponed until the following week. By Sunday, April 29, critic Bosley Crowther was urging all theaters to screen the footage. “Some theaters may be reluctant,” he warns, “as many of them have been in the past, to exhibit the more frightful evidence for fear of bad audience response” (1945: X1).

Already in the same issue of the Sunday Times, two newsreel theater chains were advertising films depicting “Nazi Death Factory” and “Effects
of Atrocities.” On Tuesday, May 2, the *Times* reported that the first newsreels of Nazi atrocities were released to first-run theaters. Despite fears of an audience backlash, the *Times* reported that “patrons were determined to see” the films and quoted one theatergoer as saying that these were the pictures that “General Eisenhower and the Army want you to see.” Predictions that female audiences would stay away proved unfounded; one theater even reported an increase in the attendance of women to see the films. By Sunday, May 6, two theaters affiliated with the Trans Lux Newsreel chain advertised that the “first pictures of atrocities” would be screened before the feature. Embassy Newsreel Theaters cautioned that the footage “will shock all Americans, but it must be seen.”

Beyond anecdotal accounts of the immediate reception of the footage, determining its political meaning has proven problematic. Locating a complete and accurate list of early films that compiled atrocity footage is a difficult task as the newsreel—the medium by which American audiences were introduced to atrocity footage—has received less attention than other film genres. Many of the earliest compilations exist in numerous versions and vary in terms of language and even editing. The exhibition of these films is complicated by the fact that civilian audiences did not see them, at least initially, and that many of these titles were prepared only for the purposes of re-educating German civilians, of providing evidence of war crimes in military tribunals, and of orienting American soldiers stationed overseas. The intent for how these films should be used changed over time as well. For example, plans for compulsory viewing of atrocity films in German theaters quickly gave way to a policy of screening Hollywood narratives for German civilians to help build the country’s morale through entertainment. What this meant is that many of these films were never fully released, or even released at all.

Further research should explore the cultural context of film exhibition of this footage and the context of production of these images at the level of both institutional military practice and documentary style. In addition, it would be a worthwhile venture to investigate shifting audience expectations of authenticity and documentary, and how use of Signal Corps footage as courtroom evidence may have profoundly influenced subsequent documentary style. Thinking about the role of time—from the significance of duration to more abstract issues of cultural memory—is valuable in gaining some critical distance from images that now permeate a shared consciousness with regard to the Holocaust. Recognizing a moment when visual evidence of atrocity did not so thoroughly suffuse the culture may be difficult, especially after *Schindler’s List* and the televised images of 9/11.
That difficulty should give rise not to a certain arrogance assuming it is the visual that defines the importance of the Holocaust but to a humility recognizing the difficulty of seeing, both now and then.

Notes

Earlier versions of this chapter were presented in December 2005 at the American Jewish Studies conference in Washington DC and in April 2006 at the Cultural Studies Association Fourth Annual Meeting in Fairfax, VA.

1. For more on The Last Stage and other films of Wanda Jakubowska that treat the experience in Nazi concentration camps, see Loewy (2004).
2. For more on student laughter, see Cook (1998). For more on NBC’s broadcast, see Carr (1998).
3. I am grateful to Lisa Yavnaï of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies for sharing this document with me.

References


**Filmography**

*Diary of Anne Frank, The* (1959), Dir. George Stevens. Twentieth Century Fox.

*Holocaust* (1978), Dir. Marvin J. Chomsky. ABC.


*Last Stage, The* (1948), Dir. Wanda Jakubowska. P. P. Film Polski.


*QB VII* (1974), Dir. Tom Gries. ABC.


*Search, The* (1948), Dir. Fred Zinneman. MGM.

*Stranger, The* (1946), Dir. Orson Welles. RKO.