# The Facial Closeup in Audio-Visual Testimony:
# The Power of Embodied Memory

By Michael Renov

The non-indifference of responsibility to the point of substitution for the neighbor is the source of all compassion.
Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (166)

I am ordered toward the face of the other.
Levinas, *OtBoBE* (11)

Close-ups are film's true terrain ... the magnifying glass of the cinematograph brings us closer to the individual cells of life, it allows us to feel the texture and substance of life in its concrete detail ... [it] enables us.. to see the minute atoms of life... For what you truly love you also know well and you gaze upon its minutest details with fond attentiveness.
Béla Balázs, *Visible Man* (38-39)

In the remarks that follow, I take as my object audio-visual testimony both as free-standing recordings of life stories of Holocaust survivors collected by, among others, the Shoah Foundation, the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University and Yad Vashem, and as testimonial interviews or first-person confessional accounts contained in the documentary film. I am particularly interested in the functions and effects of the facial close-up or medium close-up that is the framing template for much testimonial footage.

If the testimonial close-up is my <u>object</u>, the <u>inspiration</u> for this inquiry is to be found in the writings of two notable 20th century Jewish European intellectuals: Béla Balázs and Emmanuel Levinas. The pairing is entirely my own in that these two men lived and wrote, so far as I know, entirely unaware of one another and with few if any shared affiliations or scholarly overlaps. Both pioneered important and influential strands of thought (early film theory in the case of Balázs, ethical philosophy in the case of Levinas). Both were formed amidst powerful intellectual debates alive across Europe before and after World War I: Balázs in dialogue around modernity, culture and revolution with Karl Mannheim, Georg Lukács and Béla Bartók among many others of the Central European café society; Levinas studying and in conversation with philosophers Maurice Blanchot, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in Germany and France. A generation apart (Balázs born in Hungary in 1884, Levinas in Lithuania in 1906), they shared an appetite perhaps an obsession for a deeper

understanding of their time and for the broader human condition. They both fought briefly in and were shaped by the experience of two world wars: Balázs in the Hungarian army during World War I, Levinas in the French army during World War II and as a German prisoner of war for nearly five years.

I will return to the ideas of Balázs and Levinas shortly for my intent is to show how these two thinkers can help us understand the profound impact audio-visual testimonial material can have on its audience. But I want to begin by offering some description of the material in question. It would be a mistake to generalize too broadly in describing the structure or aesthetic conditions of Holocaust testimonies across the Shoah Foundation, Fortunoff and Yad Vashem instances. (It is even less likely that any over-arching assessment can be made of the testimonial trope in the documentary film given its prevalence.)

Nevertheless, as regards Holocaust testimony institutionally produced and archived, methodologies for eliciting testimony, duration of the material produced and content standards (e.g., formulas for inclusion of overall life events, pre- and post-Holocaust family life, sharing of artifacts) may vary. But it is generally true that aesthetics are downplayed. In the case of the Shoah Foundation interviews, the cinematographers were instructed to maintain a constant medium close-up or mid-chest frame line and to avoid zooms or reframings except in unusual circumstances. The same embrace of a zero degree style can be found in most testimonial sequences in documentary filmmaking and for good reason.

The films of Errol Morris are a notable exception in that Morris frequently opts for boldly colored backgrounds and occasionally canted angles for his interviews. Yet we know that Morris believes in the power of direct address achieved through the Interetron, a teleprompter-like device of his creation that allows the interview subject to maintain eye contact with Morris while looking directly at the lens. The eye contact between subject and filmmaker is extended to the audience so that we too gaze into the eyes of the subject. The close-up compositions and direct-to-camera eye lines intensify the sense of face-to-face encounter.

But in general, for testimonial footage, formal elements, not just framing but lighting, mise-én-scene and musical accompaniment, if obtrusive, are thought to distract the eye or ear from the testimonial telling which is often fragile, painful, elliptical. The emphasis is placed on maximum receptivity and open listening which is felt to be at odds

with formal or stylistic elements that may seem to take center stage. And yet I want to argue that the close-up – not the even-keeled, pseudo-objective medium shot but the facial close-up – is the compositional choice best suited to strengthening the bonds of engagement and compassion that may arise from audio-visual testimony. The prospects for empathy and even spurs to activism in genocide prevention may well be strengthened through the use of the close-up, the cinematographic magnifying glass once extolled by Balázs.

I would like to show a very brief excerpt from a Shoah Foundation testimony as a way into our examination. This interview with Jakab Farkas was conducted in 1997. A survivor of Birkenau and the final forced march in advance of the Soviet Army, Farkas had earlier escaped death by selection by jumping three times from the roof of his barracks – the first two attempts resulted in his recapture and beating. Farkas survived the death of his parents, habitual brutality, desperate hunger and disease, and the destruction of his village indeed his life world. Living in Pennsylvania in 1997 as a hard-working American and family man, he displays an armored implacability familiar from Rod Steiger's portrayal of Nazerman the pawnbroker in the 1964 Lumet film of that name. He speaks of the hardships and deprivations with little outward sign of emotion. But it is in response to questions about his parents that traumatic memory erupts and finds embodiment. We learn early on that no photographs of his parents have survived. They are represented *only* in memory. Farkas's reply to the interviewer's gentle query, "Tell me about your mother," stands as testimony not only to his own experience but to the power of the audio-visual to render sensible the experience and memory of those who have suffered beyond measure. "Words cannot describe her," he says as he pauses to wipe away his tears and regain his composure. [CLIP #1]

Although we see Farkas only in medium close-up, our attention is drawn to his face, his mouth, his eyes. The involuntary responses of his body (available to the eye and ear of the spectator) emerge as a rich and multimodal expression of memory and emotion that words alone cannot capture. Were to have only a written transcript of the interview, the tearful eye and the tremulous voice would entirely escape signification.

As Balázs says, the close-up is "the deeper gaze," the "magnifying glass" that provides a window into the mysterious inner workings of the soul. In his book *Visible Man*, published in 1924 and thus one of the earliest and most sophisticated investigations of the still nascent

filmic medium, Balázs wrote that the close-up offers access to facial expressions "more 'polyphonic' than language."[1] In his effort to isolate and examine the specific character of the cinema in contradistinction to the already existing arts (which, as a man of culture, Balázs knew well), the Hungarian cultural theorist was not alone. Others, such as perceptual psychologist and film theorist Rudolf Arnheim in his 1932 volume *Film As Art*, sought to distinguish the defining characteristics of the silent cinema that allowed it to incorporate and even supercede its aesthetic predecessors. This appeal to particularism, the defining characteristics of a given art form, is a recurring tactic for theorizing the various strains of modernism that arose in Europe between the wars.

In his claim that facial expressions are "more 'polyphonic' than language," Balázs resorts to the rhetoric of comparison and supercession (familiar from Ricciotta Canudo'a 1911 manifesto that claimed that the cinema synthesized the six arts defined by Hegel – dance, architecture, poetry, sculpture, painting, music – emerging as the seventh and "liveliest" art.) And yet I would argue that the reference to polyphony is more than thin analogy for Balázs who contrasts literary inscription with the intuited understanding derived from human expression writ large across the screen. It should be recalled that Balázs had more than a passing acquaintance with music given his experience as the librettist for Béla Bartók's only opera, *Bluebeard* (1918) as well as for Bartók's ballet *The Wooden Prince* (1916).

> The succession of words resembles the successive notes of a melody. But a face can display the most varied emotions *simultaneously*, like a chord, and the relationships between these different emotions is what creates the rich amalgam of harmonies and modulations. These are the chords of feeling whose essence is in fact their simultaneity. Such simultaneity cannot be expressed in words.[2]

Balázs here points to a complexity of affect and emotional display that outstrips the capacity of language as a linear signifying system. One might see this pronouncement as little more than a restatement of the platitude that "a picture is worth a thousand words" but it is a far more nuanced claim. Balázs writes at length about scenes from silent films of the day starring his favorites, Asta Nielson, Lillian Gish and Pola Negri. Shot in close-up, these heroines of the early screen were capable of expressing a depth and a multiplicity and indeed a simultaneity of emotion that convinced the Hungarian critic of the

cinema's unique character. In writing of Gish's performance in D.W. Griffith's *Way Down East*, Balázs suggests that

> We would need many printed pages to describe the storms that pass over this tiny, pale face. Reading them would also take up much time. But the nature of these feelings lies precisely in the crazy rapidity with which they succeed one another. The effect of this play of facial expressions lies *in its ability to replicate the original tempo of her feelings.* That is something that words are incapable of. The description of a feeling always lasts longer than the time taken by the feeling itself. The rhythm of our inner turbulence will inevitably be lost in every literary narrative.[3]

Balázs was convinced that the cinema's truest vocation was in the film's capacity to depict facial expression with great subtlety and in exquisite detail, "isolated from any context that might distract our attention.. something that is not possible on the stage."[4]

Let us transpose this notion of "inner turbulence" to the terrain of Holocaust testimony. For Balázs had in mind the dramatic performances of silent cinema goddesses not survivors of trauma. And yet the language of simultaneous, conflicting, "fugitive" emotion is well-suited to an analysis of survivor testimony. Here too gesture or embodiment – especially facial expression – displays a capacity to convey memory, suffering and trauma outside of and beyond language. In a second book, *The Spirit of Film* (1930), Balázs wrote in detail about what he called "microphysiognomy" – the domain of brow, eye, chin, flared nostril – and the emotive potential the close-up can unleash. "In directing its aim in close up at those minute surfaces of the face that we ourselves do not control, the camera can photograph the unconscious."[5] Photographing the unconscious may offer access to the otherwise inaccessible, that which lies beneath consciousness and evades language. This is far from Freud's talking cure; in fact it is no cure at all. But I would also want to argue that the close-up can offer something more than the mere spectacle of suffering. It can afford "proximity" to the other, a visceral and enduring (if archived) vehicle for understanding and ethical encounter.

Moreover, according to Balázs, the close-up can take us out of the time/space continuum and into another register of experience. "For the close-up does not just isolate its object ..it raises it out of space altogether. No longer bound by space, the image is also not bound by time. In this psychological dimension of the close-up, the image becomes concept and can be transformed like thought itself."[6] Here Balázs is thinking of the way that the close-up plucks the object out of

its spatial surroundings, intensifying our perception of the dramatic proceedings. The same can be said for the close-up's relation to temporal continuity: in arresting our attention, the object is temporarily removed from the linearity of time's passage, at least on a psychological level. This was especially so in the silent cinema in which the close-up could produce a kind of tableau vivant (a frozen moment), rendering visible an excess of emotion that existed beyond the flow of narrative.

Photographing the unconscious, providing the deeper gaze, accessing the human soul, arresting continuities of time and space: herein lies the special possibilities the close-up may provide for the audience of survivor testimony. Without question, we long for language as well, to absorb the narratives, to hear the concrete details of the eye witness, in short to know something of the <u>content</u> of experience. But the embodiment of experience, the gestural repertoire and microphysiognomy of the survivor – these are best represented via the visual register with the close-up emerging as a device particularly well suited to producing a visceral understanding and possibly engagement for audiences. The close-up should not be considered as a replacement for language (indeed the close-up is often of one speaking so that the saying and said are intertwined) but rather as its vital supplement. Too frequently its possibilities have been ignored.

But I have yet to speak of the Levinasian order. Why invoke the name of the great ethicist and Holocaust survivor? Emerging from the ranks of phenomenology, Levinas sought to revise existing notions of ontology ("being") that privileged (as in the cogito) the sovereign order of the self as originary, the bedrock of Western thought from which all else followed. In a series of books and essays, Levinas mounted an argument for the primacy of being's *other* and in so doing focused on the "otherwise than being." According to this view, the primacy of the self is overturned by a primordial responsibility for the other that is said to predate being and indeed be its very precondition. Subjectivity is said to have an antecedent structure which is a relationship with the Good, which is over and beyond Being.[7] Ethics replaces ontology as first philosophy. According to this view, self and other are inextricably bound up in one another. The subject is figured as a kind of existential Moebius strip: "Its bending back upon itself is a turning inside out. Its being 'turned to another' is this being turned inside out. A concave without a convex."[8]

The responsibility one bears for the other is unlimited and "comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory' ..prior to or beyond essence."[9] Reductively stated, justice (responsibility to the other) trumps freedom (the majestic primacy of the self). Indeed the "for another" of which Levinas writes is understood to be an act of substitution (you for me/me for you) that founds all of signification, the process through which one thing comes to stand for another. We are, says Levinas, a *hostage* to the other and are, through our obligation, commanded and ordained to approach the other, to make him our neighbor. His philosophical writing approaches the condition of poetry: "..[Regarding] responsibility ..I am obliged without this obligation having begun in me, as though an order slipped into my consciousness like a thief, smuggled itself in."[10] This responsibility, the source of Goodness and thus of Levinasian ethics, is "incumbent on me without any escape possible."[11]

Levinas thus writes of the necessary "exposure to outrage, to wounding," a vulnerability beyond protection, an involuntary election, an offering of oneself even in the "unconveredness of suffering,"[12] an "exposure to traumas,"[13] a "denuding beyond the skin, to the wounds one dies from, denuding to death,"[14] the duty to satisfy "an unpayable debt."[15] An important notion for Levinas is "proximity," a "distance diminished"[16] by which he means the necessity for a nakedness, an exposure that arises from a face to face with the other. In that face to face, the "*toward another* culminates in a *for another*."[17]

I would propose that the Balazsian close-up is the cinematic figure that best effectuates the proximity and exposure to wounding, the demand to answer the call to become the one-penetrated-by-the-other[18] in Levinasian terms. As we consider the ethical necessity of opening ourselves up to audio-visual testimonies, the close-up may well be our best means for engaging with what Levinas has called "the supreme concreteness of the face of the other man."[19]

I want to conclude by showing a second excerpt, this time from a documentary film called *Rebirth* produced by Jim Whitaker in 2011 that follows the recovery of five survivors of the 9/11 tragedy in New York. Shot over an eight-year period, the film sets out to document the uneven, incomplete, sometimes reversible process of human healing even as it documents through time lapse photography the physical reconstruction at Ground Zero. Here we see one brief sequence with a young man whose mother who worked on the 103rd floor of one of the Twin Towers in the offices of Cantor Fitzgerald has perished. Whitaker opts for the facial close-up in this sequence and

throughout the film and for reasons I hope have become clear through this presentation. In this excerpt and throughout the film, we are asked to bear witness to much more than words can say, to the expression of grief and emotion – polyphonic, turbulent, exposing us to a vulnerability beyond protection, to the wounds one dies from. [CLIP #2]

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[1] Béla Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory,* trans. Rodney Livingston, ed. Erica Carter (New York: Berghan Books, 2010), 41, 34.
[2] Balázs, 34.
[3] Balázs, 35.
[4] Balázs, 37.
[5] Balázs, 103.
[6] Balázs, 134.
[7] Alphonso Lingis, "Translator's Introduction, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), xii.
[8] Levinas, 49.
[9] Levinas, , 10.
[10] Levinas, 13.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Levinas, 15.
[13] Levinas, 48.
[14] Levinas, 49.
[15] Levinas, 52.
[16] Levinas, 16.
[17] Levinas, 18.
[18] Levinas, 49.
[19] Levinas, 59.