

**IN THE DEAD FIRE'S ASHES:
THE VIDEOGRAPHER AS HISTORIAN**

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American lynchings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries hold a special, spellbinding fascination to Americans, who continue to be drawn to and repelled by these acts of deadly, extralegal vengeance. Racial lynchings that took place in the Middle Atlantic states for many have an even greater interest, for they contradict the notion that these murders are explainable as a practice of white southern race supremacists. So what, then, can the lynching of George White outside of Wilmington, Delaware in the summer of 1903 tell us?

In the past few years two scholars and a filmmaker have attempted to reconstruct and make sense of George White's lynching. Produced in 2004 with a modest grant from the Delaware Humanities Council, *In the Dead Fire's Ashes* is a superbly crafted and emotionally powerful interpretation of George White's lynching. Filmmaker Stephen Labovsky learned about lynching while researching a film on N. C. Wyeth. Intrigued by the story, he obtained details from historian Dennis

Downey's article, "The Lord's Messenger: Racial Lynching and the Church Trial of Robert Elwood," which appeared in the Summer 2001 issue of the *Journal of Presbyterian History*. Downey then became an advisor for a forty-minute documentary that Labovsky produced in his home studio. The short comments that follow draw attention to some of challenges of documentary film production by contrasting the histories presented by Downey and Labovsky, and examining some of the choices that Labovsky made in presenting this story in film.

Why do this? The ongoing revolution in digital technology is transforming video into a medium that historians need to embrace as a way of reaching the great numbers of Americans who rarely if ever read peer-reviewed articles and monographs. As recording and post-production technologies continue to become more affordable and easier to use, more and more scholarship is going to appear in non-print and multiple media combinations. This digital revolution requires that historians improve their media literacy, and embrace the challenges and opportunities of authoring in video and multiple media. In the video documentary, the filmmaker, like the scholar/writer, shapes the text through acts of commission and omission. But where the scholar works only in written words, the filmmaker constructs his or her texts with spoken and written words, still and moving images, and sounds and silences.

In 2003–2004, Stephen Labovsky took on the challenge of bringing to the screen the lynching of George White, a historical event that still fascinates and perplexes. By then, Downey had published a second article on the event, "‘Mercy Master, Mercy!’: Racial Politics and the Lynching of George White" (*Delaware History*, 2003), from which I draw the following account.¹

On June 15, 1903, eighteen-year-old Helen Bishop was brutally murdered near her home outside Wilmington, Delaware, allegedly by twenty-four-year-old George White, an African-American farm hand who had been incarcerated twice before for unspecified crimes. Six days later, Reverend Robert Elwood delivered an impassioned outdoor sermon to three thousand people in Wilmington, and pulling out blood-stained leaves from the scene of the crime, exhorted them to mete out the justice that the local officials were failing to render.

The next evening, a mob of several hundred stormed the county workhouse and hauled White to a location near where Bishop was assaulted. There a crowd of "calm and deliberate" citizens burned White to death, as men courteously made room for women to see the event. Twice White jumped out

of the fire, and after his second attempted escape, a man chopped off his right foot and another bashed him on the head with a piece of fence railing. After White was dead, men emptied their revolvers into his corpse. When the ashes had sufficiently cooled, members of the crowd gathered body parts and other objects as souvenirs, including White's skull, which a Market Street saloon displayed in its front window. The lynching, one of several "spectacle" lynchings that took place outside the South in a period of several months, won national attention. Local authorities arraigned only one man—from Indiana—on charges of manslaughter, but the charges were dismissed as a crowd of several thousand boisterous residents waited outside of city hall. Later, a grand jury refused to issue indictments for eight men alleged to have led the mob.

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Photograph of Robert Elwood published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 24, 1903. Courtesy of Stephen Labovsky.

We then learn from Downey that the local press blamed the lynching on local authorities for failing to protect law-abiding citizens; and that the local ministry issued a statement against the lynching and Elwood, whose standing was enhanced by the episode. He became a highly sought after speaker before moving to a larger church in Leavenworth, Kansas. The reaction of local African Americans to White's lynching was predictably split.² Despite entreaties from other black leaders not to alienate sympathetic whites, Reverend Montrose Thornton of Wilmington's Bethel A.M.E. church railed publicly against the white man as "the demon of the world's races" and a "heathen, fiend, and monstrosity before God." Thornton helped organize a protest march through Wilmington that erupted into rioting after whites attacked the marchers and killed another black man. The lynching, we learn, also became tied up in the ongoing campaign to disenfranchise black voters in Delaware. Thornton's activism, capped by a "Negro Convention" in the state capital at Dover, helped derail that campaign.

So how did Downey make sense of it all? One of his more provocative conclusions is that both sides understood what took place as a betrayal of democratic principles: for whites the lynching was the appropriate response to a corrupt government's failure to protect law-abiding citizens; for blacks it represented the breakdown of law and civilization.

In his video documentary, Labovsky retells this story and offers his own interpretation of its meaning. His thoughtful and nuanced script does a superb job in setting the historical context and retelling a story that he brought to life with archival still and moving images, aptly chosen music, and historical re-enactments that were well-costumed by the Wilmington Opera Company. Labovsky also made excellent use of the four on-air experts—Downey, Roger Lane, David Levering Lewis, and Phillip Drey—three of whom he used at the end to provide the broader explanation of the meaning and historical significance of White's lynching.

So how does the documentary compare to Downey's article? *In the Dead Fire's Ashes* provides a more detailed history of White's criminal record, including a rape in Chester County, Pennsylvania, which strengthens the case that he, indeed, committed the crime. Labovsky devotes a greater percentage of his study to the story of the lynching, and less to the political dimensions of the story: locals' distress at political corruption, the multiple failures of their elected officials, and the efforts of the state Democratic Party to disenfranchise black voters. The filmmaker pays less attention to press coverage of

the event and leaves out African-American responses to the lynching, most notably the words and actions of Reverend Thornton. Labovsky, does, however, pack a tremendous amount of well-researched history into forty short minutes.

Creating order from the infinite perceptions, data, and facts that our senses register requires the forgetting and omission of vast amounts of information. When working on a documentary I am always much more acutely aware of this than when writing. Few historians recognize or appreciate the tremendous economy that filmmakers must exercise in their choice of words. The word limits for journal articles are dictated by space, and may be read fast or slow. Film, however, unfolds in real time, so filmmakers have to be very selective about word choice. (Labovsky's narration is about 3,500 words. The on-camera experts provide perhaps another 3,500.)

The word limitations imposed upon filmmakers by the medium are balanced by their ability to utilize still and moving images, sounds and silences. These force filmmakers to make interpretive decisions not required of writers. The need for economy heightens the importance of decisions related to visualization, sound, and voicing. Videotape is a powerful storytelling medium; a documentary on lynching has the potential to raise strong emotional responses among its viewers, both because of the audio-visual nature of the medium and because of the audiences it can reach. So the documentary filmmaker must avoid the temptation to reductionism and emotional manipulation.

One can see Labovsky's skill as a narrative historian in his description of Reverend Elwood's return to Wilmington and the impact his Sunday night sermon had on the events that followed. He devotes more than three minutes—an eternity in film—to a passage from Elwood's sermon, voiced over a group photo of unnamed whites, across which the camera slowly pans. These people are representative of those who listened and responded to Elwood's call to action. The extended scene, both gripping and chilling, provides viewers the time necessary actually to feel and contemplate the impact of the decision these people would make.

How would the filmmaker depict Helen Bishop's assault? Where the voice-over narration, drawn from contemporary newspaper accounts, describes a young woman whose body is covered in blood, Labovsky directed the actress to lie on the road in clothing that is spotlessly clean and in place. She has blood only on the hand in which she holds the penknife she used to defend herself. What impact would a dirty, disheveled, and blood-covered

young woman with a gruesomely slashed throat have had upon viewers' responses to the lynching of George White?

Depiction of the lynching also involves multiple acts of conscious and unconscious inclusion and omission. What did observers in 1903 actually see at White's lynching? And what visual documents are available that the filmmaker/historian could use to represent that event on screen? At least two Philadelphia newspapers published photographs of the lynching, the reform minded *North American* and African-American *Tribune*. Labovsky, however, did not use any of these. During some of the most chilling verbal descriptions of White's lynching, viewers see three burning torches held aloft in the night sky, which focuses attention on those words. An alternative approach would have been to visualize the lynching, using the photos and other images to shock and inflame viewer emotions. What did White's lynching actually sound like? No one was there to record the soundscape, so we can never know. What Labovsky does provide us, however, is a sound-effects track of voices that are alarmed and excited. How differently would viewers have responded to this scene had the filmmaker chosen a soundscape that emphasized the orderliness, normalcy, or festive atmosphere of the scene? This is exactly what observers and reporters described in their first-hand accounts—whether we should trust those descriptions is another matter—and that Downey emphasized in his historical interpretation of the event.

Understanding the use and impact of background music and sound effects requires that audiences exercise a form of media literacy not taught in most undergraduate history programs. What is, or should be, historical best practice for the use of sound documents, including the archival and contemporary audio recordings—music, sound effects, soundscapes, and so forth—that evoke such a wide range of emotional and cognitive responses? Labovsky uses only one archival sound document, an Allan Lomax recording of a southern chain gang, under a scene on the history of southern lynching. Using twelve aptly chosen pieces of music he demonstrates an obvious and sophisticated musical literacy, a literacy not typical of documentary filmmakers—or historians. How would the film have been different, however, had he used only recordings or music that was available in 1903?

Effective placement of sound is also part of the documentarian's craft. I found it interesting that while Labovsky made extensive use of music under the testimony of the event's participants and observers, he did not use music under his on-air experts, but did place it under the excerpt from DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folks*, at the end. I will leave it to others to think about why he

did this, and what influence, if any, it may have upon how viewers respond to the documentary.

Documentary filmmakers, like traditional scholars, must also make decisions about voicing and authority. Where the traditional scholar speaks through words on the page, which are then voiced by the reader, the documentary filmmaker must give actual voice to the words. Scriptwriter Labovsky used John Jackson, who we learn in his on-camera appearance near the end of the documentary is African American, to voice his script. This raises another question. In what ways, if any, does authoring in non-print media force scholars to confront questions of self and other in ways that the written word disguises and diminishes? Print communication strips away all visual and auditory information about identity. In sound and moving image media as in real-world interactions, race, ethnicity, class, age, and other social indicators are all there for us to hear and see.

So what does George White's lynching mean? What is its historical significance? What are the lessons to be learned about the nation and about ourselves? I suspect that Americans are still deeply divided in how they answer these questions. In both his article and as an on-air expert in Labovsky's documentary, Dennis Downey is quite eloquent and open-ended in his conclusions. In his article, Downey submits the idea that Americans involved in lynching believed that law and justice ultimately stem from and reside in the people; when the state fails to exercise its functions, many citizens believe they have the right to reclaim and exercise that right, both to restore order and to remind the state about the true source of its delegated powers. Labovsky used three on-air scholars—Downey, Lewis, and Drey—to offer three interpretations that are consistent in tone and findings. The final words, however, he gives to W. E. B. DuBois, excerpting a famous passage from *The Souls of Black Folks*. The four men offer words that most viewers will find wise and compelling. Missing, however, are the voices of dissent: of Delawareans, for example, on both sides of the issue, who lived through and were affected by the events. Here, again, questions about inclusion and omission become central. Who does get to interpret historical events? How inclusive or narrow should the filmmaker be in offering a range of perspectives? What other lessons might be learned if the conclusions of Reverend Thornton, for example, had been included? Or the words of Helen Bishop's father, the Methodist minister E. A. Bishop, who in answer to a question about his own reaction to George White's lynching is reported to have said, "I am well satisfied"?

These are but a few of the questions that this fascinating documentary brings to mind. And here, too, is what makes this and other films so valuable as vehicles for history education and scholarship. Northern lynchings engage people's interest because they raise so many questions that defy easy explanation. The film engages our interest because it is such a superb storytelling medium. Documentary films evoke past events through the use of artifacts and documents that are direct connections to the past. The ongoing digital revolution is eliminating the once imposing financial and technical obstacles to authoring in videotape and multimedia.

A growing number of colleges and universities offer documentary production courses to undergraduates who already possess impressive skills. Opportunities for collaborations with the growing number of skilled videographers abound. We are surrounded by opportunities. How well videotape can serve as a medium for scholarly discourse is dependent upon the filmmakers and scholars who use it to ask good questions, and master the art and the craft of documentary production necessary to engage others in the contemplation of the complexities of the past and the present.

NOTES

1. Another study, Yohuru R. Williams's "Permission to Hate: Delaware, Lynching and the Culture of Violence in America," 32 *Journal of Black Studies* (2001):3-29, was unknown to the filmmaker until after completion of his documentary.
2. This is consistent with the African-American community response Downey found in Coatesville after the lynching of Zachariah Walker in 1908. See Dennis B. Downey and Raymond M. Hyser, *No Crooked Death: Coatesville, Pennsylvania and the Lynching of Zachariah Walker* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).