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ESSAYS

BANAL TIME: WAR AFTER GRAND NARRATIVE

GRAHAM MACPHEE

My heart sank. I thought: My God! [Kissinger is] in the same state of mind as the rest of them. . . . They each thought that history started with his administration and that they had nothing to learn from earlier ones. Yet in fact each administration . . . repeated the same patterns . . . without even knowing it.

—*Daniel Ellsberg, Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers (2002)*

I

The very ubiquity of the POW/MIA flag across the United States makes it easy to miss.¹ Flown over state and federal buildings, post offices, parks, toll plazas, military posts, and private homes, its image is echoed on pins, bumper stickers, car decals, license plates, bracelets, bandanas, T-shirts, caps, knives, and other consumer goods.² Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that its ubiquity makes it easy to forget. Historically, the POW/MIA movement contributed to a new popular attitude to military involvement in Southeast Asia that allowed the Nixon presidency to extend the war in Vietnam and launch invasions into Cambodia and Laos (Franklin 1993, 48). It helped foster this mood by enabling the dissipation of temporal

connection, the links between what had been done or gone before and the present of recognition. As Jonathan Schell observed as the war came to a close, “many people were persuaded that the United States was fighting in Vietnam in order to get its prisoners back. . . . Following [Nixon’s] lead, people began to speak as though the North Vietnamese had kidnapped four hundred Americans and the United States had gone to war to retrieve them” (1975, 76).

As various commentators have noted, the affective disposition signaled by the turn to the plight of prisoners of war dissolved the sense of temporal connection required by historical inquiry and the investigation of political responsibility.³ But what is so striking about Schell’s observation is that it suggests that the dissipation of history and causality enabled by this new disposition did not simply result in an ahistorical moment or perpetual present, a vertiginous loss of meaning and identity.⁴ Instead, the sense of loss, disorientation, and anger which it engendered intimates *some kind of story*—or perhaps better, intimates a hunch, a powerful but fuzzy sense of meaningfulness fleetingly intuited or half-glimpsed: that of the righteousness of the hurt and betrayal evoked by the “kidnapping” of hundreds of Americans by a foreign force, and the urgency of resentment against those who would deny the very fact of this feeling, its immediacy here and now in lived experience. I will argue that this new temporal nexus is not the atemporal disruption or suspension of narrative imagined by contemporary theory, but the banal time of endless war.⁵

The premise of this essay is that the banal time signaled by the affective disposition of “POW/MIA” exceeds the opposition between grand narrative and the disruption of the time of representation that has become axiomatic for contemporary theory.⁶ This banal temporality can be traced in the rhizomatic, lateral penetration of POW/MIA within everyday American culture, but it can also be observed in the conditions of apperception exhibited by the decision-making of practical intellectuals within the political and military bureaucracy. It is this dis- and re-articulation of temporality, I contend, that is recognized with such a jolt by Daniel Ellsberg on reading the entirety of the Pentagon Papers.⁷ As Ellsberg recounts, what shocked him out of his own complicity in the planning and justification of the war in Southeast Asia was not the study’s detailing of the empirical evidence, the facts, of recent military operations: the later volumes of the study, he recalls, “held few surprises for me” (2002, 274). Rather, it was the volumes covering 1945 to 1960, and especially those covering the immediate postwar period, that provoked his reconceptualization of his own role in the bureaucracy and his ethical and political decision to leak the Pentagon Papers (256). What prompts Ellsberg into

action is not the revelation of a “secret” about the savagery or illegality of current operations, nor an insight into the extent and profundity of the suffering inflicted by US military power.⁸ It is rather the stunning realization delivered by the early volumes of the Pentagon study—that “*it had all happened before*” (2002, 300; emphasis added).⁹

To think through this banal time I turn not to a text that engages directly with the American war in Southeast Asia or the series of invasions, interventions, proxy wars, or covert operations that have followed in its wake, but to Christopher Nolan’s neo-noir movie *Memento* (2000). Through the experience of a protagonist who cannot form new long-term memories, *Memento* dramatizes the apperceptive condition described by Ellsberg, in which “the same patterns” are “repeated . . . without even knowing it” (2002, 347). As Greg Grandin demonstrates in his insightful recent study *Kissinger’s Shadow*, Henry Kissinger’s “imperial existentialism” rejects historical analysis as a disabling master narrative that locks agency in the prison house of determination. “Reporters and academics might have been obsessively digging up facts that proved the United States overthrew this democratic government or funded this repressive regime,” Grandin writes, but Kissinger “persevered in insisting that the past shouldn’t limit the country’s range for options in the future” (2015, 13). As Kissinger said himself: “In reaching a decision, [the statesman] must inevitably act on the basis of an intuition that is inherently unprovable. If he insists on certainty, he runs the danger of becoming a prisoner of events” (quoted in Grandin 2015, 32).

I argue here that Kissinger’s opposition—between a cumulative, deterministic temporality that makes decision “a prisoner of events” and “an intuition” unencumbered by temporal connectivity—finds a discomfiting echo in the abstract opposition of master narrative and the temporality of disruption that has become so sedimented within contemporary theory that it functions as an almost unacknowledged structuring principle. In the terms of this assumption, the narrating of historical connectedness can only be construed as a totalizing violence; while conversely whatever disrupts, subverts, destabilizes, or resists such violent master narratives is in and of itself liberatory. Or as Homi Bhabha put it so succinctly, “freedom’s basis” is “in the indeterminate” (1991). But what if indeterminacy is also subject to determination, albeit in ways that it cannot recognize and towards outcomes it cannot chart, evaluate, or anticipate? And what if such unacknowledged determination can only be brought to appearance in the distortions and warps revealed in the temporal connectivity that we have already ruled out as ineluctably complicit with the violence of grand narrative?¹⁰

II

In *The Deaths of Others*, John Tirman catalogues how America's declared wars of the postwar period have "led to the killing of an astonishing number of innocent people" (2011, 11). This assessment leads him to pose a series of guiding questions:

Why: why were civilians so badly mistreated? Why does this mistreatment persist under US political and military leadership? And why are Americans so indifferent to these massive human tragedies? (Tirman 2011, 6)

These questions may seem obvious (if by no means otiose), yet as Tirman notes their interrogation "has been missing from public discourse and academic studies alike." "Most academic treatments of war," he writes, "look at causes, behavior of states, military strategies, effects on other states, and the like." And while "some interest in analyzing genocide is surfacing, . . . it has little to do with America" (7). Equally, he remarks that "the very topic of culpability for civilian deaths is essentially out of bounds in the echo chamber of Washington political discourse, and thus the idea that civilian casualties are unsettling to the American public and that the resultant outrage serves as a check on military behavior is nonsense" (13). In reference to the study he commissioned for the MIT Center for International Studies in 2006, which "found . . . 650,000 'excess deaths' attributable to" the US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath, Tirman reports that "the public indifference was glaring, and in my view needs to be investigated in tandem with the indifference of policy elites" (10, 11). It "is not in dispute," he avers, "that American elites and the broader public do not seem to care much about innocent bystanders in the wars we begin" (6).

As regards policy and practice, Tirman concludes that "there has been, in effect, a two-tiered system," which presents "a policy that avows to uphold the Geneva Conventions" while simultaneously pursuing "an unacknowledged practice with priorities that frequently victimize civilians, people who are discardable because they are 'gooks' or 'hajis' or, simply, 'savages'" (2011, 11). Significantly, however, while he is confident in his conclusions about the data and the clear disparity between policy and practice, Tirman is more cautious in answering the last of his guiding questions, as to "why . . . Americans [are] so indifferent to these massive human tragedies" (6). For answers he points to terrain that those of us who work in cultural history and critical theory will be more familiar with. Namely, that such indifference results in part from the organizational power within discourse of the master narratives of nation and imperial civilization and the ontologies or essentialisms they underpin: "the old tropes of the frontier [and] the civilizing mission of American force,"

in Tirman's formulation (12). Under the determinative power of these narratives of presence, self-identity, and closure, "the topic of culpability for very large-scale civilian suffering is deflected by reference to the essential rightness of the war, its ultimate benefits to those very populations under siege, and the good intentions of Americans abroad" (8). But while these ontologies of certainty and essence are surely in play, Tirman cannot find in them a sufficient answer that will satisfy the affective "indifference, or diffidence" that is so striking to him. For the vista he surveys is not one where Enlightenment discourses of reason, or nation, or civilization—with their universalizing claims to representation and narrative coherence based in the onto-theological—are paramount, even if they continue to fulfill a supporting role. Rather, what presents itself most insistently and urgently to Tirman's view is "an absence of discourse," an absence that is alternately "reinforced by or causative of public indifference" (12).

Given that the contribution of Enlightenment discourses of nation and civilization fails to fully account for the affective condition of "passive denial" that he identifies, Tirman points to the need for thinking a supplement or excess beyond the discursive parameters of master narrative. Such narratives are indeed involved to some extent, it is made clear (see 2011, 344–54); but they cannot on their own provide an explanation or basis for analysis that would adequately grasp the specific character of this condition. Taking the terms "cultural" and "political" as synonyms for such grand narratives and as external to the processes of subjectivity (understood as the "psychological"), Tirman argues that "the denial is not merely cultural or political; it is psychological—avoidance of the trauma of so many dead, wounded, and displaced, and even reactions leading to blaming the victim" (12).

What seems especially valuable about Tirman's analysis is its identification within this historical condition of "denial" and "blaming" of a dimension that goes beyond the master narratives of nation and civilization, "the old tropes of the frontier [and] the civilizing mission of American force" (2011, 12). And it is this element that I want to address here by turning to the banal time of POW/MIA. I do not, however, follow his sense of the easy separability of the "cultural" and "political" on the one hand and the "psychological" on the other. Indeed, the temporality of denial and blame that I identify here is deeply bound up with cultural and political histories that are not acknowledged or remembered.

As Steven Casey recounts, the POW/MIA issue emerged as a result of the Nixon administration's "Go Public" campaign begun soon after the new president's inauguration in 1969, a publicity initiative that was designed to "marshal public opinion" against the domestic antiwar

movement. The administration “wanted a positive rallying cry to energize [its] base,” and “the issue of American POWs seemed ideal” (2014, 197). In light of election promises to pursue “the quest for peace” (Franklin 1993, 45), Nixon sought to justify the expansion of the war in Southeast Asia “by emphasizing that the United States would fight until every prisoner was returned” (Casey 2014, 197). H. Bruce Franklin argues that the crucial step in retooling an ostensibly humanitarian issue into a pretext for the potentially endless extension of the war was the fusing of two distinct categories, that of “prisoner of war” (POW) and “missing in action” (MIA). A large proportion of those listed as MIA were in fact internally categorized by the Pentagon as “killed in action/body not recovered” (KIA/BNR): that is, such combatants were known to be dead but due to the nature of combat conditions their bodies had not been retrieved or were not retrievable (1993, 13). While to popular audiences the category “missing in action” implied that the fate of each individual was still uncertain and so held a range of different possible futures, in fact the Pentagon knew full well that many classified as “missing” were dead, and were not and could never be prisoners of war. But the list provided by the United States to the Vietnamese at the Paris talks in 1969 quite deliberately conflated what had until then been quite distinct categories: “We are holding the Communist authorities in Southeast Asia responsible for every individual on this list whether or not he is *internally classified by the services as captured or missing*” (quoted in Franklin 1993, 68; emphasis added). At a stroke, uncertainty was restored to all those categorized as “missing”—even those known to be “killed in action/body not recovered”—since *all* were now potentially “captured” or “prisoners of war.” The futures of those known to be dead were retroactively reawakened and refigured as open and still negotiable. At the same time, this uncertainty erased the historical circumstances of each death by delinking it from the nexus of events in which it took place. In fusing the categories of POW and MIA, the fact of absence was retrospectively recast within a new temporal configuration, becoming a perpetual present or eternal moment of possibility suspended between life and death. As such, the demand made upon the Vietnamese became impossible, since it involved accounting for the ahistorical and uncertain futurity of those already dead: the removal of uncertainty would require the retrieval of bodies shot down and lost over the sea, abandoned years ago in remote jungle, or obliterated by high explosives. The war could *never* be concluded, for how could there ever be “peace” without “honor”?¹¹

If the POW/MIA issue was engineered by the Nixon administration and closely calibrated to the extension of the war, it very quickly provided a nexus for popular dynamics that would exceed such official organizational

direction. The National League of POW/MIA Families was formed in May of 1970 (NLPMPF 2015a) during the administration's invasion of neutral Cambodia, and was at the outset funded and encouraged by figures close to the administration (Allen 2009, 33–40, 57–60; Franklin 1993, 50–57). It was the League that commissioned the POW/MIA flag, with its bowed head in silhouette against barbed wire and a watchtower and its legend “You are not forgotten,” which began to circulate widely in early 1972 (NLPMPF 2015b). But once the prisoners of war were returned in Operation Homecoming the following year and discrepancies (deaths in captivity and unanticipated returnees) were accounted for by the Vietnamese authorities (Allen 2009, 94–95), a core of POW/MIA activists refused to accept Pentagon determinations of death for those previously listed as MIA (140–54). And they demanded that officials “cease using such phrases as ‘all POWs returned’” (97). As one sister of a combatant listed as MIA wrote to Nixon, “I still can’t realize that we only got so few back. I feel they are holding back more” (quoted in Allen 2009, 97). With the unwinding of the project of endless war in Southeast Asia, the public relations strategy designed to garner support for it now became a liability, fuelling distrust of the very administration that had sought to manage popular feelings of hurt and loss.

What retrospectively proved that betrayal was *anterior* and not subsequent was President Ford’s “support for the ‘earned re-entry’ of draft evaders and military deserters” (Allen 2009, 138). For the POW/MIA activists, the refusal to serve was especially significant as it was a betrayal of the missing by the nation that had occurred prior to combat and the possibility of capture. The draft evaders were therefore intimately and irrevocably linked to the fate of the missing, since these were the very forces that had *already* betrayed those left behind *even before their loss*. Their rehabilitation by Ford was then a doubling of betrayal, a repetition and retrospective endorsement of an anterior act of treachery. As the League’s executive director wrote to the President, it is “inconceivable that our Commander-in-Chief would show greater concern . . . for those who *chose to leave the United States* . . . than he does for over 1,300 US Servicemen who are still unaccounted for in Southeast Asia.” “Our men,” the letter insists, “have earned their re-entry whether they be alive and walking or in a casket,” unlike the “dodgers and deserters” prioritized by the government. Therefore, amnesty should only “have been considered [after] (1) the return of all POWs from Southeast Asia, (2) the fullest possible accounting of all Missing-in-Action, and, (3) the fullest possible repatriation of the remains of all servicemen who died, serving our country” (quoted in Allen 2009, 138).

The uncertainty or openness to futurity accorded to the dead (“whether they be alive and walking or in a casket”) fixes one moment in the past (the moment of “*cho[osing] to leave the United States*”) as definitive and unable to be atoned for or expurgated. The nation is already marked by inauthenticity and treachery in the form of those who left the country to avoid the draft, and they must be excluded from the nation indefinitely, until all uncertainty is resolved (“the fullest possible accounting,” “the fullest possible repatriation”). Thus, the indeterminacy instituted by the POW/MIA complex both erases history and fixes the future by instituting a temporality of perpetual repetition. Redefined as indeterminate in the typographical slash that conjoins POW and MIA, each “killed in action/body not recovered” death is removed from the events in which it occurred and recast as potentially open. Conversely, each case of draft evasion is removed from its context of occurrence to be recast as a moment that is irredeemable and perpetually the same. The indeterminacy of the POW/MIA complex requires a process of accounting or empirical verification, but this process is itself impossible to conclude and must be repeated endlessly, again and again.

Politically, this indeterminacy underpinned both the initial potency of the POW/MIA issue for the administration and the movement’s subsequent hostility to all attempts by subsequent administrations to direct or contain it. Successive administrations (notably under Reagan) and various Congressional figures repeatedly sought to harness the persistent sense of betrayal articulated by the League, shaping foreign relations around the issue, holding official investigations, and according POW/MIA iconography privileged legal status.¹² Yet for all this official endorsement, the result domestically has been to multiply feelings of anger, resentment, distrust, and cynicism that hold establishment politics in contempt. As Michael J. Allen remarks, in escaping its initial sponsorship by the Nixon administration, the POW/MIA complex was transformed into the engine of a powerful sense of hostility to establishment politics that has “sparked an aggrieved nationalism [which] has yet to abate” (2009, 140).¹³ But if this is an “aggrieved nationalism,” it is one that proves profoundly unsettling for the temporal schema of the grand narrative that has become so deeply embedded in contemporary theory and for the conception of the nation that has been built upon it.

III

Famously, Homi Bhabha rewrites the nation as master narrative by describing two incommensurable temporal modes.¹⁴ The first is “national

time,” the “homogenous, visual time” that is “associated with the nation’s imagined community,” the “people” (Bhabha 2004, 205, 206). Such a “visualization of time” operates as a “structuring process” or grand narrative. In this connection, Bhabha quotes Mikhail Bakhtin’s characterization of the dominant narrative temporality in Goethe’s writing: “the necessity of the past and the necessity of its place in a line of continuous development . . . finally the aspect of the past being linked to the future” (quoted in Bhabha 2004, 205). In this necessary narrative sequence, with its rigid chain of cause and effect, “national time becomes concrete and visible.” But according to Bhabha, the revelation that “the nation’s visual *presence* is the effect of a narrative struggle” enables the emergence of a different temporal mode that “interrupts the self-generating time of national production and disrupts the signification of the people as homogenous” (205, 212). The recognition of “the nation as narration” deconstructs such “visual presence,” exposing the violence and suppression inherent in the nation’s placid claim to be merely the self-expression of a “homogenous” people (204, 212).

This other, deconstructive mode emerges from within “national time,” as the moment of disruption inherent in narrative’s inability to be self-identical and present to itself (Bhabha 2004, 205). Strictly speaking it is not a mode *of* temporality as such, but is rather the suspension of temporal drive and connectivity: it is the “process of iterative ‘unpicking’” in which “new forms of identification . . . confuse the continuity of historical temporalities, confound the ordering of cultural symbols, [and] traumatize tradition” (265, 257). It is “a pulsional incident, the split-second movement when the process of the subject’s designation—its fixity—opens up beside it”; it is a “supplementary space of contingency” that “does not require a temporality of continuity or accumulation; it requires direction and contingent closure but no teleology and holism.” Thus, according to Bhabha, the homogenous time of the master narrative of nation is perennially disrupted, opened up, undone, by the “pulsional . . . split-second movement” that inheres in its own claim to narrative mastery (265). And “this narrative inversion or circulation . . . makes untenable any supremacist or nationalist claims to mastery, for the position of narrative control is neither monocular nor monologic” (215).

It is, however, difficult to square the projection of the nation implied by the affective disposition of POW/MIA with the master narrative of “national time.” Bhabha’s framework depends on a “monologic” temporality of “narrative control” that is to be deconstructed again and again in a “pulsional . . . split-second movement” (215, 265): this temporal disruption ruptures the homogeneity of the nation secured through “the continuity

of historical temporalities, . . . the ordering of cultural symbols,” and the necessity of “tradition” (257). But the affective disposition of POW/MIA does not call on the imaginary of the nation narrating itself as full presence.¹⁵ There is no claim to a “narrative control” that is either “monocular” or “monologic” (215) because this disposition abjures that there *ever was* a nation that could narrate itself as whole and integral. The betrayal of the nation is not subsequent but, as we have seen, anterior, *always already* there—in the antiwar protesters, draft evaders, media commentators, establishment politicians, and intellectuals who have already betrayed the missing and who are now belatedly (*Nachträglich*) enabled to narrate the “nation” as (and to) themselves. The impossibility of the nation’s self-identity—of the nation as the self-expression of a homogenous “people”—is consciously thematized, *not* deconstructively revealed. Which is why all accounting for discrepancies, the return of remains, or official determinations of death are irrelevant and beside the point. That no verifiable evidence of secret captives has ever been produced and no plausible rationale for the retention of an elaborate secret prison system by impoverished and war-damaged postcolonial states has ever been adduced does not in any way hamper the POW/MIA complex. Because there is no truth “out there” to be discovered—it is rather a feeling or disposition “in here,” half-glimpsed and half-remembered, partial and unverifiable, but with that deep undertow of intuition that is more affectively powerful than epistemological certainty.

This affective power can be seen in the way that the POW/MIA nexus reverses the poles of victim and perpetrator and all but erases the deaths of others. It is not possible to know the exact number of deaths resulting from the American war in Southeast Asia due to the circumstances in which it was fought. But as Nick Turse reports, “the most sophisticated analysis yet of wartime mortality in Vietnam, a 2008 study by researchers from Harvard Medical School and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, suggested that a reasonable estimate might be 3.8 million violent war deaths, combatant and civilian”—although “there are good reasons to believe that even this staggering figure may be an underestimate” (2013, 13). Deaths resulting from US military intervention in Cambodia are estimated at between 600,000 and 800,000, and those for Laos at 1 million (Tirman 2012). Vietnamese government records, although incomplete, indicate that there are still 300,000 Vietnamese military personnel listed as missing (Turse 2013, 12). It is estimated that 180,000 people in South Vietnam were arrested under the CIA’s Phoenix program, and at its height in 1968 and 1969 about 7,000 were probably killed (Tirman 2011, 52). Thousands of noncombatants were

held in South Vietnam's Con Son Island prison complex between 1954 and 1975, and over this period around 20,000 died there, "many of them from torture and abuse" (Tucker 2011, 232). Since the war, deaths continue to be recorded in all three countries as a result of unexploded munitions, while the Vietnamese government claims that 500,000 children have been born with birth defects as a result of toxic chemicals used as defoliants (275).

The continuing ubiquity of the POW/MIA flag stands in sharp relief to the widespread indifference to these realities (Tirman 2011, 174–75, 337–342). Central to the affective disposition of POW/MIA is the construction of an injured sensibility that speaks simultaneously as both national hero and victim of the nation's betrayal. This sensibility was extended to cover all of the US dead in President Ronald Reagan's eulogy at the Vietnam War Memorial in 1988: "For too long a time, they stood in a chill wind, as if in a winter's night watch. And in that night, their deeds spoke to us, but we knew them not. And their voices called to us, but we heard them not" (quoted in Tirman 2011, 181). Limning the affective disposition of POW/MIA, Reagan's speech not only erases the histories of US violence (now inflicted exclusively upon US combatants) but evaporates alterity so as to direct the call for recognition entirely within. This redistribution of the poles of perpetrator and victim defines violence within a temporal construction of betrayal that is unhomely. Violence is done to a wounded and incomplete subjectivity (the "they") by a people (the "we") that has failed to narrate itself as nation through the medium of "their deeds" and heroism ("we knew them not" and "heard them not"). Yet those so betrayed cannot be construed as the "real" or "authentic" nation that would strive to recall its prior fullness, the lost presence to which its telos seeks return. For this wounded, nonidentical subjectivity is always already subject to violence, it has *always already been* betrayed by the nation's failure to assume the "narrative control" that would constitute it as nation (Bhabha 2004, 215).¹⁶ And this is the temporal basis for the intense and violent anger of this affective disposition. There is no home, no origin, no nation to be recovered, or restored, or returned—for it was *never there*.

Yet if this affective disposition cannot claim the narrative authority of the nation, it is not simply the punctual disruption of "nation time," the opening of a "supplementary space of contingency" that would undo the connectivity of historical remembrance and tradition and so "mak[e] untenable any supremacist or nationalist claims to mastery" (Bhabha 1993, 265, 215). For *there is* a kind of atmospheric meaningfulness or situational implication of meaning at work here, a premonition or intuitive feeling that enables a mode of analogical association or linking of temporal events that is neither master narrative nor pure contingency and dispersal. Rather, it

might be traced or adumbrated as the implicit “logic” or directionality of its habituated, sedimented intuitions—or what might be termed the little stories or *petits récits* that it tells itself (see MacPhee 2011a, 198–99; 2015, 252). Such an affective disposition may not be enough to narrate a coherent vision of the nation, to establish “the necessity of the past and the necessity of its place in a line of continuous development” (quoted in Bhabha 2004, 205). But it would be well able to sustain reiterations of anger, resentment, and violence against targets that need not be understood or identified with certainty, but would merely need to be apprehended as signs, or marks, or half-glimpsed memories of the always already betrayal of the nation.

IV

Christopher Nolan’s neo-noir *Memento* (2000) has attracted academic interest for its exploration of time and memory, most notably in terms of philosophical considerations of moral responsibility in light of its extreme qualification of individual agency (see Kania 2009). Productive though that focus may be, my consideration of the film here is slightly different. I am less concerned with its portrayal of the moral culpability of the individual agent per se, and more with the potential for violence it locates in banal time after grand narrative.

The film is centered on the disorientating experience of its protagonist Leonard Shelby, a former insurance investigator who is driven to seek vengeance for an earlier “incident” (Nolan 2001, 176), a home invasion in which he believes his wife Catherine was raped and murdered and he was left brain damaged. In Leonard’s testimony, while his memory of events prior to the assault is intact, the resulting physical injury has caused anterograde amnesia, which means he cannot now make new long-term memories and can retain short-term memories for only ten to fifteen minutes. As he explains to the clerk at his motel, “I know who I am and all about myself, but since my injury I can’t make any new memories. Everything fades. If we talk for too long, I’ll forget how we started. I don’t know if we’ve ever met before and the next time I see you I won’t remember this conversation” (114). However, this residual sense of self, and the memories of his life prior to the incident he associates with that sense of self, provide him with a purpose—revenge. Contrary to the official investigation, he believes that a second assailant, a John or James G, escaped the crime scene undetected, and he single-mindedly seeks to track them down and kill them.

Around this memory of loss and betrayal, Leonard constructs an elaborate system to try and sustain his continuity of action, ranging from

habits and repeated protocols to a plethora of objects and mementos that John Sutton calls “exograms” (2009, 69): prosthetic memory aids that include captioned Polaroid photographs, file cards, charts, an annotated police report, and most strikingly an array of messages tattooed on his body. Leonard is joined at different moments by two characters who claim to be helping him in his pursuit of vengeance: a policeman or former policeman named John Edward “Teddy” Gammell, and Natalie, a femme fatale figure who Leonard comes to feel has undergone a similar loss.

What makes the experience of viewing the film so powerful and its interpretation so challenging is the way in which its structure incorporates something of Leonard’s temporal dislocation. *Memento* has a double narrative structure, with alternating scenes shot in color and in black and white. The episodes filmed in color proceed in reverse order, beginning with Leonard’s killing of Teddy—the final event in the story—and ending with his earlier killing of the drug dealer Jimmy Grantz, Natalie’s boyfriend: each in turn is identified by Leonard as his perpetrator, his John or James G. These color scenes also incorporate short memory sequences from Leonard’s point of view—flashbacks to the night of the assault and fragmentary memories of his wife Catherine. The black and white episodes proceed chronologically, and involve Leonard explaining his condition over the phone by narrating the story of Sammy Jankis. In Leonard’s telling, Sammy Jankis was a case he investigated prior to the incident who had a similar memory problem, but which was refused payment because Leonard defined it as psychologically rather than physically based. While initially difficult to locate in time (Leonard is dressed shabbily and lacks the scars we seen in the color episodes), we learn by the end of the film that the black and white sequence immediately precedes the events shot in color and shown in reverse chronological order. In fact, the story takes place over just three days, although the plot or discourse interweaves episodes in a temporal loop or “hairpin” that makes the events feel temporally distended and the chronology difficult to reconstruct.¹⁷ In the opening episodes, where the connection between black and white and color sequences is yet to coalesce, viewers lack access to the past we need to understand situation, action, and character, and like Leonard inhabit a present that is disconnected from the prior contexts we might draw on to lend it intelligibility. Without the connectivity to prior events we usually assume in mainstream narrative cinema, we are left struggling to make sense of the situation before us, even though the immediacy of action is clear enough.

The film itself offers for consideration two ostensible ways of overcoming the dispersal of meaning and the disorientation of subjectivity in time. Or

rather, it offers two dimensions of narration that we can recognize as aspects of grand narrative. The first is the narrative contiguity and connectivity of memory, precisely what the protagonist now lacks. But for Leonard, this absence has become liberatory, freeing investigation from the historicizing interpretation that retrospectively remodels the facts to conform to its unfolding parameters. In reply to Teddy's warnings about the malleability of viewpoint without the scaffolding of memory, Leonard declares:

Memory's not perfect. It's not even that good. Ask the police; eyewitness testimony is unreliable. The cops don't catch a killer by sitting around remembering stuff. They collect facts, make notes, draw conclusions. Facts, not memories: that's how you investigate. . . . Memory can change the shape of a room or the color of a car. It's an interpretation, not a record. Memories can be changed and distorted and they're irrelevant if you have facts. (Nolan 2001, 135)

The problem with memory in this sense is that the very connectivity that would provide the conduit to bring the past into the present "as it once really was" reshapes that past in terms of the parameters of the present. Such a historicizing interpretation renders the past as a necessary anticipation of the meaningfulness of the present, and so flattens out the very difference of the past that it had hoped to capture. But, of course, this first dimension of narrative mastery seems to have been definitively ruled out of court by the film because it appears unavailable to Leonard: he cannot appeal to the historicizing continuity of memory because of his anterograde amnesia. It stands rather as a marker for an alternative mode of experiencing temporality that is said to have been lost.

The second approach to ordering meaning in time arises by way of Leonard's appeal to "facts," which at first sight sounds like a straightforward empiricism but which in truth offers something quite different. "There are things you can know for sure," he tells Natalie: "I know the feel of the world. . . . I know how this wood will sound when I knock. . . . I know how this glass will feel when I pick it up." But as he continues, he begins to describe "knowledge" as the return or restitution of another time, and therefore as a "kind of memory":

LEONARD: Certainties. You think its knowledge, but it's a kind of memory, a kind you take for granted. I can remember so much.

(RUNS HANDS OVER OBJECTS)

I KNOW THE FEEL OF THE WORLD . . .

(BEAT)

. . . AND I KNOW HER.

NATALIE: Your wife?

LEONARD: She's gone and the present is trivia, which I can scribble down in notes. (Nolan 2001, 144)

The second position, which Leonard claims for himself, is not the temporally replete empiricism that might be inferred by his language of "facts" and "certainties." As Leonard narrates, without a temporal framework of meaningfulness, such a naïve empiricism reduces "the present" to "trivia," a vista of disconnected "facts" to be "scribble[d] down in notes." If it is to escape temporal dispersal and be meaningful, any sensory perception must be anchored in a point of origin, a defining ontological commitment that subsists prior to the disconnection and dispersal of the present. What secures his self-identity as subject and supplies the "facts" that confront him with meaning is the originary memory of Catherine before the incident, a memory that remains fixed and invulnerable to the passing of time and so fixes him: "I know her." This is not, then, naïve empiricism but rather a phenomenological hermeneutic grounded in "a kind of memory"—one understood not as continuity in time but as the return or restitution of origin. "She's gone," Leonard affirms bitterly, but his claim to interpretation, to be able to make the "trivia" of the present cohere and be meaningful, lies in his ability to recall the memory of his wife as origin into the present. Such a restitution of origin provides the ontological grounding that would transform the trash of the present—his Polaroids, scribblings, tattoos, charts, and other exograms—into a constellation pregnant with meaning.

Yet if Leonard is denied memory's element of contiguity and linkage, then such a restitution of the past within the present becomes problematic. How is the ontological commitment that is kept invulnerable in the past to be retrieved and made commensurable within the dispersal of temporality? And how is the Leonard from before the "incident," anchored in the ineradicable memory of his dead wife, to be squared with the disorientating muddle of sensory signals that constitutes his lived experience now? Leonard's answer is through habit, the repetition of protocols, procedures, and performative patterns that allow him to continually reestablish a continuity of action and purpose in each new now. He takes a Polaroid of his residence, his car, the people he encounters, checking them when he wants to drive somewhere or when he meets someone, writing short captions on the photographs to prompt his response. He follows a pattern of reintroduction and familiarization with each new conversation, probing for clues and leads. Valuable information is then recorded on scraps of paper or file cards and later assimilated within the leaked police report, a dog-eared file that in its increasingly

disordered lattice work of annotations, interpolations, and crosshatchings has become his research compendium. As Leonard explains on the phone to his unseen interlocutor:

I was an *investigator*. I'd investigate claims to see which were phony. . . . I had to see through people's bullshit. It was useful experience, because now it's my life. When I meet someone, I don't even know if I've met them before. I have to look in their eyes and just figure them out. My job taught me the best way to find out what someone knows was to let them talk. . . . Throw in an occasional "Why?", but just listen. And watch the eyes, the body language. . . . It's complicated. You might catch a sign but attach the wrong meaning to it. If someone touches their nose while they're talking, experts will tell you it means they are lying. It really means they're nervous, and people get nervous for all sorts of reasons. It's all about context. (Nolan 2001, 127; emphasis in original)

Most dramatically, once a series of clues and leads coalesce into certainty, it is added to the baroque typographical array of details, prompts, maxims, and warnings that are tattooed onto Leonard's body. What is inscribed there, according to this hermeneutical procedure, is not simply the disparate marks of unconnected moments of lived experience, but a constellation of restitution or return, the reconstitution of the memory of origin out of the broken shards of temporal dispersal in the present. Leonard's intuition is that as facts are gathered, inscribed, and overlaid, the resulting constellation will lead him to the missing John G, the perpetrator responsible for robbing him of the past whose loss now authorizes and authenticates his quest for vengeance: "He took away the woman I love and he took away my memory. He destroyed everything; my life and my ability to live. . . . That's what keeps me going. It's all I have" (135).

Except that it is not quite so easy as all that. How is it that Leonard can develop protocols and procedures that relate only to his condition after the incident, such as training himself to check his pockets in sequence for his Polaroids? How is it that he recognizes his tattoos (or indeed his other exograms) as clues that relate to his search for John G, rather than as bizarre mutilations or signs of torture (or random messages from an unknown deceiver)? And how is it that Leonard even knows he has a "condition" and is able to rehearse a potted account of it for every person that he encounters? In each case, these would appear to involve some element of the long-term or persistent memory of situations or behaviors that occurred *after* he suffered his anterograde amnesia, the condition that is supposed to make the formation of such persistent memories impossible. And doesn't the development of new protocols, routines, and patterns of

behavior involve a kind of temporal continuity and contiguity? Indeed, Leonard himself describes learning by repetition as a way of “physically . . . making new memories” (Nolan 2001, 179). In which case, these continuities would be open to the very objections that he explained to Teddy in his rejection of the historicizing interpretation of memory: that “memory can change the shape of a room or the color of a car,” that “it’s an interpretation, not a record,” and that “memories can be changed and distorted” (Nolan 2001, 135). But then how can he be sure that the memory of origin—that is supposed to be inviolable and unchanging, and which is to give his life purpose and events meaning—is the past as it really was, and not something conditioned or learned by repetition, routine, and habit?

Leonard seeks to ward off such questions through the story of Sammy Jankis and the distinction he draws in its telling between the “physical” and the “psychological” basis of what appears to be the same disorder (Nolan 2001, 141). According to this distinction, Sammy’s inability to respond to “conditioning” or “learning by repetition” (136) showed that the cause of his disorder was psychological, a function of the work of memory proper. In contrast, Leonard defines his own ability to generate new procedures and protocols of behavior as a function of physical modes of conditioning or training through repetition—modes that he claims function “not by memory” understood as a psychological capacity “but by instinct,” understood as a strictly physical dynamic (137). “Conditioning didn’t work for Sammy, so he became helpless,” he recounts to his phone caller; “But it works for me. I live the way Sammy couldn’t. Habit and routine makes my life possible. Conditioning. Acting on instinct” (141). However, this distinction proves fatal for Sammy’s diabetic wife. Taking his condition to be “psychological” and therefore reversible, she attempts to jumpstart Sammy’s memory by asking him repeatedly to administer her insulin injection in the hope that the mortal danger of an overdose will force a recrudescence of temporal connectivity. Her wager is lost as Sammy’s memory stubbornly refuses to cohere and he unwittingly administers the fatal dose.

However, *Memento* adroitly and subtly scuppers Leonard’s attempted solution. Not only does the film collapse the distinction he wants to make between memory proper (as psychological) and what he defines as the physical modes of “habit,” “routine,” “conditioning,” and “acting on instinct” (141), but more tellingly it drains away any possibility of memory’s restitution of origin. In the pivot scene that comes at the end of the discourse (but midway in the story), Teddy tells Leonard that his wife Catherine survived the incident (218), that *she* was diabetic, and that “Sammy didn’t have a wife” (219). So the backstory constructed so

painstakingly both by Leonard and the viewer disintegrates. Of course, Teddy may be lying, as we have seen him verifiably lie moments before: he pretends not to know Leonard and calls himself a cop while in the chronologically prior scene he had claimed to be an informer and subject to the manipulation of a local police officer (216, 207). Regardless, this doubt forces us to scrutinize the links we have made or imagined in order to decipher the plot and make the film meaningful, revealing the uncertainty already apparent in Leonard's memory of Catherine. At various moments through the discourse, we have witnessed in lightning-quick flashbacks Leonard's own hand both injecting his wife and alternatively pinching her thigh; we have seen him remember her blinking after the apparently fatal assault; and most troublingly, he remembers an image of them together in bed when he is tattooed with a declaration of the death of John G, a tattoo that appears nowhere else in the story world of the film.

In returning to his remembrances of Catherine, we realize that his memories of her before the incident are not intact, inviolable, or unchanging. And whatever weight we are to give to Teddy's unsettling claims, it is clear that Leonard's memories of his wife, that are to structure his revenge and give meaning to the disconnection of lived experience, are far from providing the point of origin or full presence which would anchor his phenomenological hermeneutic. Although Leonard imputes an idealized status to his wife and their marriage, as Andrew Kania observes, "the images that accompany his recollections belie these descriptions." The footage we see of her is spare and repetitive, and when Natalie invites him to "close your eyes, remember her," the weave of memory is hazy, indeterminate, and threadbare. Kania remarks that "Catherine is almost never depicted smiling; rather she seems sad, or even lost—much like Sammy's wife after his accident." It is possible, he notes, "that these memories are from *after* the incident, when Catherine was having trouble dealing with Leonard's condition" (2009, 171). Notably, Leonard's discursive account of the texture of his memories of her and their life together skirts emotional contact, psychological insight, and empathetic understanding, claiming only the barest minimum:

You can only feel details. Bits and pieces which you didn't bother to put into words. And extreme moments you feel even if you don't want to. Put it together and you get the feel of the person, enough to know how much you miss them, and how much you hate the person who took them away. (Nolan 2001, 125)

Despite Leonard's claim that recollection can return "the feel of the person," this is not the restitution of origin, of the wholeness of the past as

the ground that would anchor and make meaningful the dereliction and dispersal of the present. Rather, it resembles more closely the habituated memory or intuition (“I know how this glass will feel when I pick it up”) that he tells us “makes my life possible” (144, 141). And in the scenes where Leonard hires an escort to reenact his awakening without his wife on the night of the assault, we witness his conditioning of his own habitual memory—not to recapture the warmth or closeness of their relationship but to reinforce or reimagine the incident as the temporal marker of Catherine’s loss. The memory that is so affectively tenacious is not the restitution of origin in its fullness and self-presence, but the retention through conditioning and repetition of the “feeling” of absence and the anger at the half-memory of betrayal: “enough to know how much you miss them, and how much you hate the person who took them away” (125).

V

If action and decision cannot be orientated within a grand narrative anchored in the restitution of origin, *Memento* suggests that they may nonetheless be determined and configured in the banal time of conditioning, repetition, habit, feeling, and intuition. Or in the language used earlier in this essay, in the affective disposition engendered by a hazy but bitterly felt sense of the loss of a narrative mastery that was never there.

Leonard is not, at least in this respect, like Sammy Jankis, cut adrift in a perpetual present without continuity or connectivity and so “helpless” (Nolan 2001, 141)—unable to decide or act under his own direction. Leonard *does* make fateful decisions: in crossing out the warning on Natalie’s photograph and writing in his intuition of her empathy; in deciding to annotate Teddy’s picture with “DON’T BELIEVE HIS LIES”; in burning the Polaroids of Jimmy’s corpse and of himself after killing an earlier John G; in tearing up the file card recording “TATTOO: I’VE DONE IT”; and most irrevocably, in writing Teddy’s car license number on a file card under the legend “TATTOO: FACT 6.” “I am not a killer,” Leonard tells himself while still retaining the short-term memory of killing Jimmy Grantz, “but right now I need to be” (223). In the unfolding of events we have already witnessed, we know that these decisions will lead to the identification of Teddy—John Edward Gammell—as the next John G, the next (and latest) object of Leonard’s justified anger and violent revenge. And in the moment of decision, so does Leonard.

How are we to understand the temporal genesis of such decisions? What contexts of deliberation and judgment are operative if Leonard’s decision is not organized by an originary grand narrative, as the inviolable return of the

self who had loved Catherine? For the Leonard who makes these decisions is not that person; and yet he is not “helpless” like Sammy Jankis, deprived of continuity and so agentless. As we have seen, decision does not take place as an indeterminate “pulsional . . . split-second movement” (Bhabha 2004, 265), but emerges within the sedimented intuitions that accumulate through the practices and protocols of repetition, conditioning, and habit exhibited time and again through the film. In which case, decision is conditioned by the implicit “logic” or directionality of Leonard’s habituated intuitions, by what we have called his affective disposition. As Teddy smirks: “Like you’ve told yourself. Over and over. Conditioning yourself to believe. ‘Learning through repetition’” (Nolan 2001, 218). But although Leonard’s decision is conditioned by the past, *it cannot recognize its own happening as* conditioning, habit, and routine, its own process as the patterning and orientation of intuition. And because it cannot acknowledge the past of its determination, it cannot evaluate the outcomes of this determination. As Hannah Arendt notes, “relentless activity allows responsibility to evaporate”: for responsibility “can only develop in the moment when a person reflects—not on himself, but on what he’s *doing*” (2013, 59–60; emphasis added). In Arendt’s sense, Leonard is an image of “functioning” (44).¹⁸ As she explains in an interview with Joachim Fest, “functioning” is a response to the atomization and decay of social texture in modernity, which produces the feeling of being “powerless, however strong you may be.” Functioning offers the “feeling of power that arises from acting together” (43) while simultaneously “eliminate[ing]” all the “discussing things together, reaching certain decisions, accepting responsibility, thinking about what we are doing” that is involved in acting together in the political sense (44). In the moment of his killing of Teddy which opens the film, Leonard will once again be unburdened by the memory of his own prior acts, repetitions, and decisions. And so he will be able to dispatch the perpetrator, whose guilt is known intuitively, with the innocent ruthlessness of the wronged victim *as if for the first time—jamais vu*.¹⁹

Leonard’s ability to make decisions suggests a more complex conception of temporality than contemporary theory’s abstract opposition of the necessary temporal continuity of grand narrative and the liberatory temporal dispersal of its disruption. His decisions are not the free and spontaneous productions of the self-identical subject of master narrative, but nor are they the irruption of contingency and indeterminacy that contemporary theory has imagined as its other. Absent the determining connectivity of events promised by historicism and the overarching restitution of origin recalled by a phenomenology of authenticity, there is nonetheless a kind of temporal connectivity here that escapes the

blanket denunciation of continuity and memory in grand narrative: in the retention of past operations and iterations and the accretion of an affective habitus or disposition over time—"call it muscle memory, whatever," suggests Leonard offhandedly at one point (Nolan 2001, 136). And while it offers neither epistemological certainty nor ontological grounding, such an affective disposition is not without a kind of meaningfulness, albeit one that cycles willy-nilly through anger, empathy, innocence, and guilt. As Leonard confides on the phone to his unseen confessor: "with my condition, you don't know anything . . . you feel angry, guilty, you don't know why. You could do something terrible and not have the faintest idea ten minutes later" (200).

The banal time of *Memento*'s ruthlessly innocent violence may shed some light on the perplexing concision of Hannah Arendt's discussion of the "banality of evil" in the postscript to her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. There she writes that,

Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain." Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. . . . He merely, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*. (Arendt 1965, 287)

It might reasonably be objected that in this formulation Arendt reduces perpetrators like Eichmann to automatons or cyphers defined only by a "lack of imagination" (287), denying them their all too human motivations, foibles, nuances, and agency by perversely contrasting them to literary figures whose complexity of character and psychological depth has been the subject of scholarly debate for generations. Or as Ronit Lentin presents this objection elsewhere in this special issue, Arendt's "banality thesis negates the possibility that perpetrators of atrocities . . . are complex human beings, performing intentional acts, rather than demonic or banal creatures" (246). But in light of the banal time of *Memento* traced here, such a reading can be seen to restrict banality within the abstract opposition of master narrative and temporal disruption, as the other pole—emotionless, absent of meaningfulness, and deprived of decision and agency—to the master narrative of the "demonic"—where all complexity, guilt, and innocence would be said to reside. But as *Memento* suggests, banal time is not the other of grand narrative, not its lack or absence or disruption or deconstruction. And Leonard is not without suffering, complexity, innocence, or guilt. As Teddy says to him in one of the film's most powerfully ironic moments, "You're not a killer, Lenny. That's why you are so good at it" (Nolan 2001, 223).

NOTES

- ¹ This is in contrast to the current protests about flying the Confederate battle flag on public buildings. While one flag is currently overshadowed by the controversy over the other, the one's visibility and the other's invisibility are linked by their shared syntax of display: as public markers of affective dispositions whose signifying power lies in the public claim that they are denied publicity.
- ² Among other items, Amazon currently lists for sale a "POW/MIA Not Forgotten" one-piece infant bodysuit in sizing for 6, 12, 18, and 24 months and with color options in white, light blue, and light pink.
- ³ See Franklin (2001, 48). A similar point is made also using Schell's observation by Tran (2010, 276) and Perlstein (2014, 13).
- ⁴ For Fredric Jameson, this absolute loss of meaning and identity was to define the very condition of post-Vietnam America, which he was to generalize aesthetically as "postmodernity": "the breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time. . . . thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescrivable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material . . . signifier in isolation" (1991, 27). For a critique of Jameson's aesthetic conception of politics see MacPhee (2002, 87–95).
- ⁵ For a fuller account of the theoretical assumptions built into the abstract opposition of grand narrative and temporal disruption see MacPhee (2011a).
- ⁶ An early and influential statement of the current orthodoxy is provided by Derek Attridge and Geoff Bennington's collection *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*. As they write in their introduction, post-structuralism is to be conceived as an absolutized "resistance to totalization and synthesis" (1987, 9). As Bennington makes clear in his contribution to the volume, what is being resisted is "the Left" (18). For a more nuanced vision of the relationship between Derrida's thinking and the Left Hegelian tradition, see Beardsworth (1996, 46–97).
- ⁷ The official title of what became known as *The Pentagon Papers* is the *Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force* (1969). The entire report is available online at www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers. The excerpts printed in the *New York Times* in 1971 were published in book form by Bantam as *The Pentagon Papers* that same year. For a more current illustration of the recurrence of these conditions of apperception in the decision-making of the political and military bureaucracy, see Ben Kiernan and Taylor Owen's comparison of the US bombing of Cambodia and of Afghanistan (2010).
- ⁸ Which is not to say that Ellsberg did not care for the civilian and noncombatant casualties inflicted by the US in Southeast Asia, as he makes clear for example in "Murder in Laos" (see especially 1972, 270–71). In his memoir *Secrets*, Ellsberg notes that, "ironically, the realities from which we were drawing our conclusions were known to most people in the world. They were hidden only from those who believed the public lies of the US government" (2002, 281). This situation was recently repeated most strikingly in the run up to US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

⁹ Ellsberg records that “no other volumes of the papers . . . had so great an impact on my perspective toward the war” (2002, 274). However, this shift in his perspective also needs to be set alongside his personal experience of the activism of a generation of draft resisters (see 271–72). He writes, “for me as an American to read, in our own official secret documents, about the origins of the conflict and of our participation in it was to see our involvement—and the killing we had done and were still doing—naked of any shred of legitimacy from the beginning. That strengthened and extended backwards in time the conclusion I had drawn in May, in Ohio; the immorality of our deliberately prolonging the killing by a single additional day, or bomb, or death” (256).

¹⁰ The editors of *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* argue that that in order to address the global inequalities of power and resources, we may “need to keep alive particular metanarratives” and the collective subjectivities they sustain (Loomba et al. 2005, 34). For an earlier statement of the problematic nature of Bhabha’s nomination of “the indeterminate” as the “basis” for “freedom,” see MacPhee (1996).

¹¹ Richard Milhous Nixon ran in the 1968 presidential election promising to achieve an “honorable end to the war,” which later became the slogan “peace with honor” (McMahon and Zeiler 2012, 628). Nixon asked rhetorically “Can the President of the United States sitting in the office with responsibility for four hundred POWs . . . withdraw all of our forces as long as the enemy holds one American as a prisoner of war” (Schell 1975, 76). As Ellsberg recounts, “What lay ahead, as I saw it: an endless, expanding war” (2002, 347).

¹² The POW/MIA issue delayed the restoration of diplomatic and economic relations between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam until 1995. As H. Bruce Franklin notes, this delay allowed the United States to avoid providing the reconstruction aid that the Nixon administration had promised in the Paris Peace Agreement, so crippling the economic development of the impoverished country (1993, 122–23). As Franklin notes in the 1992 election, “no national candidate ever made an issue of America’s ongoing economic and political war against Vietnam” (192–93).

The National League of Families POW/MIA flag is legally designated as “the symbol of our nation’s concern and commitment to resolving as fully as possible the fates of Americans still prisoner, missing, and unaccounted for in Southeast Asia” according to the United States Legal Code, and is required to be flown over specified government building on certain days each year; see 36 U. S. C., § 902 (2002).

¹³ The POW/MIA issue was an important driver for Ross Perot’s third party presidential challenge in 1992 (Franklin 1993, 188–89). The movement also had a significant impact in damaging the presidential election bids of Senator John McCain and, in concert with the Swift boat veterans group, Senator John Kerry (Allen 2009, 292–301).

¹⁴ I develop this reading of Homi Bhabha’s position in more detail in MacPhee 2011b, 100–106.

- ¹⁵ Jonathan Tran describes the POW/MIA movement as offering “not only a myth but a counter-myth that fissures every claim of totality by questioning the greatness of a nation that would forget for convenience” (2010, 279).
- ¹⁶ As Michael J. Allen writes, “caught in the middle of a war without end, [the prisoners of war] and their families became stand-ins for millions of Americans who had lost faith in the war but were unable to escape it” (2009, 61). An anticipation of this configuration of temporality is provided by Walter Benjamin in an essay written in 1930, “Theories of German Fascism.” Here he introduces the concept of the “postwar war” (*Nachkrieg*): “the victor retains the war, the vanquished misplaces it. . . . The victor annexes the war for himself, makes it his own property; the vanquished no longer possesses it and must live without it” (1999, 315). For a reading of the temporality of the “postwar war,” see MacPhee (2000).
- ¹⁷ For a diagrammatic representation of the sequence of scenes, see Kania 2009, 3–4; and Klein 2001.
- ¹⁸ This account of banal time is the corollary of the reading of Arendt’s conception of banality that I develop in the introduction to this special issue: see especially 8–13 above. In Arendt’s view, “the pleasure in this mere functioning . . . was quite evident in Eichmann” (2013, 44). “He wanted to go along with the rest, . . . he wanted to say ‘we,’” she observes, “and going-along-with-the-rest and wanting-to-say-we like this were quite enough to make the greatest of all crimes possible” (43).
- ¹⁹ Alan S. Brown explains that, “whereas déjà vu involves an experience of inappropriate familiarity, one can also experience the opposite illusion of recognition: *inappropriate* unfamiliarity, or *jamais vu*. More specifically, a *jamais vu* experience involves an objectively familiar situation that feels unfamiliar, such as walking into your bedroom and momentarily having no sense of familiarity associated with the setting. Whereas the translation of déjà vu means ‘already seen,’ *jamais vu* means ‘never seen’” (2004, 103).

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