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# Documentary as Adaptation: The Case of Travis Wilkerson's *An Injury to One*

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**“Documentary as Adaptation: An Intertextual Analysis of *An Injury to One*”**

**By Walter Metz**

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Travis Wilkerson’s experimental documentary, *An Injury to One* (2002), about the Anaconda Mining Company of Butte, MT, and its orchestration of the 1917 murder of Frank Little, a Wobbly organizer, has been well-received by film critics. The criticism of the film has properly centered on Wilkerson’s combination of Marxist politics and minimalist aesthetic beauty. Writing for *The Village Voice*, for example, Ed Halter argues that the film is “a deft, ambitious exercise in old-school socialist agitprop crafted with the precise multimedia flair of a corporate PowerPoint presentation.” This essay proposes to read *An Injury to One* in a larger cultural historical context to tease out the specific combination of aesthetics and politics which gives the film its remarkable power. My reading will activate the film’s relationship to three primary intertexts that span historical, national, and textual boundaries: a fiction film (*Salt of the Earth*), a play (*The Threepenny Opera*), and a novel (*Red Harvest*).

Given the film’s engagement with American brutality toward organizing miners, *An Injury to One* can be profitably compared to *Salt of the Earth*, blacklisted director Herbert Biberman’s 1953 film about a mill-miner union’s successful strike in New Mexico. Such an intertextual encounter brings to light the relationship between McCarthyite America (Biberman’s pro-union film was denied both production technicians and projection by right-wing Roy Brewer’s IATSE union) and contemporary America (Wilkerson struggles to find funding and distribution in a political climate in which anyone discussing class politics is seen as some sort of Marxist dinosaur).

The film's aesthetic style, a mixture of documentary photographs with voice-over narration about Little's murder, and poetic songs which lament America's brutal treatment of its working class, is directly inspired by the narrative techniques of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, most famously enacted in *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). In this Weimar play, the fictional story of Macheath, the criminal, and Peachum, the bourgeois businessman, is mixed with political songs about social oppression.

Finally, *An Injury to One* presents a whodunit?, about the circumstances of Little's murder, and directly invokes the other major American narrative about these circumstances, Dashiell Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest* (1929). Hammett had served as a strike breaker with the Pinkerton Detective Agency in Butte at the time of Little's murder. The film tells us that Hammett was offered \$5,000 to murder Little; these events were to become the inspiration for the novelist's political radicalization.

*An Injury to One* relies on a set of sounds and images that draw from various techniques common to the modernist avant-garde. The film begins with a film leader countdown, complete with aurally manipulated tones to accentuate the numbers present visually on the screen, superimposed over stock footage of clouds, recalling most clearly Bruce Conner's avant-garde techniques as deployed in his masterpiece, *A Movie* (1958).

Then, a black title card announces *An Injury to One*'s "Preamble," suggesting both the structure of Brecht's plays, which begin with Prologues followed by a large number of section breaks, and perhaps more ironically, the preamble to the U.S. Constitution ("We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility... do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America"). The point of Wilkerson's film is that the

union would be more perfect, justice would be better established, and the domestic sphere would be more tranquil if the forces of capitalism would stop decimating the nation's unions.

The image for Wilkerson's Preamble consists merely of a color photograph, shot from a low-angle in extreme long-shot of power lines and a steel watch tower standing atop a hill, an image remarkably similar to our first sight of the company house at the beginning of *Salt of the Earth*. In Biberman's film, the camera stands atop the hill, looking down at the mine, but a similar steel watchtower and company buildings dominate the frame.

The music to accompany the stark photograph in *An Injury to One* consists of an aggressive picking of an electric guitar, deliberately methodical, strongly punctuated, and angry. Gradually, a few words at a time are superimposed on top of the color photograph. In rhythm with the music, the two minute preamble delivers to the audience, word by word, a lesson in vulgar Marxism:

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people and the few who make up the employing class enjoy all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production, abolish the wage system, and live in harmony with the earth.

While the political message is banal, it is the aesthetic delivery which is redolent of the avant-garde: this trickling out of words to make meaning is a technique of the structural experimental film developed in the 1960s. The masterpiece of this tradition is Michael Snow's *This is the Title of This Film (So Is This)* (1982), in which, one word at a time, all white letters on black title cards deliver a modernist meditation on the nature of reading.

At one point, the words get the audience members to reflect on what it means to be literally reading a film, joking that “This” is not a film for people who do not like to have others reading over their shoulders! Thus, *An Injury to One* masterfully balances its delivery of a political message, a vulgar Marxism, with an elegant poetics; what would otherwise be boring reading, using the aesthetic device of structural cinema, becomes an artistic experience of encountering the words as if for the first time.

In 1993, Michael Renov offered a plea for the development of a political poetics of documentary:

That a work undertaking some manner of historical documentation renders that representation in a challenging or innovative manner should in no way disqualify it as nonfiction because the question of expressivity is, in all events, a matter of degree. . . Moreover, the ability to evoke emotional response or induce pleasure in the spectator by formal means, to generate lyric power through shadings of sound and image in a manner exclusive of verbalization, or to engage with the musical or poetic qualities of language itself must not be seen as mere distractions from the main event. Documentary culture is clearly the worse for such aesthetic straitjacketing. Indeed, the communicative aim is frequently enhanced by attention to the expressive dimension; the artful film or tape can be said to utilize more effectively the potentialities of its chosen medium to convey ideas and feelings. In the end, the aesthetic function can never be wholly divorced from the didactic one insofar as the aim remains “pleasurable learning.” (35)

Thirteen years after Renov’s manifesto—in the age of high-profile, auteurist documentary films such as *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005)—it seems unlikely that there should be much argument about the artistic qualities of documentary cinema. However, what Wilkerson’s collision with Brecht brings into view is the need for a nuanced definition of just what “pleasurable learning” entails. My students certainly do not find *An Injury to One* pleasurable. Indeed, it is a maddening film, both in the sense of its leftward political extension of the documentary style of Ken Burns into that PBS

filmmaker's ideological doppelganger, but also in its refusal of traditional aesthetic beauty.

The proper avant-garde fellow traveler, I believe, for *An Injury to One* is Sally Potter's *Thriller*, a 1979 film celebrated by feminist theorists like Annette Kuhn for its feminist deconstruction of Puccini's opera, *La Boheme* (163-164). In this thirty minute short, the narrator, Mimi from the opera, comes to life and assesses that her author killed her in order that her artist boyfriend might suffer and therefore create great art. The voiceover-dominated soundtrack delivers this feminist analysis, but on the image track, on the other hand, still, grainy B&W images of the opera tease us into longing for what we would have seen had we been watching a film that believed in the pure, aesthetic beauty of opera. *Thriller* is most definitely a late 1970s film that emerged from Laura Mulvey's claim that a feminist cinema would have to destroy the pleasures of traditional cinema.

*An Injury to One* works differently: its angry voiceover narration (now a male Marxist instead of a feminist) and its images of the decimation of Butte work in harmony, as opposed to the word-image collision in *Thriller*. *An Injury to One*'s aesthetic technique is thus more appropriately linked to Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955), that seminal documentary which links color images of the present to black and white stock footage of the Holocaust in order to argue against entombing the Shoah in some safely distant past. However, both *Thriller* and *An Injury to One* share a crucial feature: they deliberately sacrifice traditional filmic beauty in order to focus attention on the political content which lies behind film's imagery.

Here, we begin to approach understanding what the Brechtian techniques allow Wilkerson to accomplish. Take, for example, his film's four interruptions with Brechtian "Songs of the Butte Miners." In the first song, as with the film's Preamble, an electric guitar picks away aggressively and rhythmically. Throughout the entire two minute song, we see only one contemporary color photograph, of a basketball hoop, an asphalt-covered lot, and what seem to be abandoned shacks, all at the base of a hill, over which towers the barracks and steel tower seen from a very different angle at the beginning of the film. As with the preamble, the words of the song of the miners are presented as text crawl on the screen, again, one at a time, in rhythm with the guitar:

Daddy don't go down into the mine  
Dreams very often come true  
Daddy my dear it'd break my heart if anything happened to you  
Go tell my dreams to all your mates for as sure as the stars will shine  
          something's happening today  
Dad don't go down into the mine  
Dreams very often come true.

This devastatingly moving poem shares its Marxist political sting with the Brecht/Weill songs. Take, for example, the fifth song in *The Threepenny Opera*, "The Song of the Heavy Cannon":

If it should rain one night  
And they should chance to sight  
Pallid or swarthy faces  
Of uncongenial races  
They'll maybe chop them up to make some beefsteak tartare.

John's gone west and James is dead  
And George is missing and balmy.  
Blood, however, is still blood-red.  
They're recruiting again for the army. (327)

Here, Brecht links the operations of Western capitalism to colonial violence, a gesture that Wilkerson's film also engages by analyzing Anaconda's role in the U.S.'s entry into World War I. At the time, the mine was spewing forth 10% of the world's copper supply!

Clearly, the Brechtian standard for "pleasurable learning" adopted by Wilkerson differs quite remarkably from Hollywood's sense of pleasure. One way of tracing this is to compare *An Injury to One* to its fiction film correlate, *Salt of the Earth*. While the politics of the films are remarkably similar—both passionately argue for the need for mining unions—their techniques are diametrically opposed. For all of Biberman's political differences from Hollywood, the "Hollywood Ten" filmmaker relies on comic melodrama to tell the story of the successful strike against the zinc mining company in New Mexico. For example, the film features a remarkable scene between an Anglo miner, Kalinski (E.S. Conerly) and the Mexican-American hero, Ramon Quintera (Juan Chacon).

The men have been forced by a court order to stop picketing the mine. As a result, their wives keep the strike going while they handle the domestic chores. The scene takes place in the back of their shacks, while they hang up the laundry together. They realize from this work that domestic issues should have been part of the union demands all along, something that Ramon's wife, Esperanza has been trying to convince him of since the film began. The scene plays like a mining version of the "Job Switching" episode of *I Love Lucy*, also an early 1950s text in which men come to realize that household work is in fact extremely difficult.

For all of its Brechtian trappings, however, the intriguing thing about *An Injury to One* is that its songs interrupt what is otherwise, in terms of documentary construction, a

very traditional, Ken Burns-style film which relies on historical photographs and evocatively-read expert testimony voiceover. This part of the film traces the history of the Anaconda mine and its role in the writing of the national sedition act which rendered radical unionism a traitorous offense. The historical narrative part of Wilkerson's film is framed by encounters with Dashiell Hammett. Immediately after the preamble, the first image of the film is of the original cover of *Red Harvest*, a novel which Wilkerson in voiceover describes as "revolutionary." Over stock footage of a gun firing, meant to simulate a gritty film noir image, Wilkerson tells us that, "Though the book is a work of fiction, there is no doubt in its real inspiration," by which he means that the I.W.W. leader in *Red Harvest*, Bill Quint, is based on the historical figure, Frank Little.

I am a Hollywood feature film specialist by inclination and training. When forced to teach documentary, I typically demand the deconstruction of the documentary/fiction divide, often building lectures on the relationship between an important documentary—for example, Fred Wiseman's *High School* (1968)—and an obvious fictional counterpart—say, Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* (1967). Both of these films defend young men's distrust the generation in authority. The case of *An Injury to One* and *Red Harvest* offers a similar collision between documentary and fictional impulses. In fact, I want to go so far as to suggest that *An Injury to One* is an adaptation of *Red Harvest*.

The study of adaptation in the cinema, while traditionally focused on the question of fidelity between a film and its source text, has over the past twenty years shifted in the direction of intertextuality. In this model, most recently codified by Robert Stam in his monumental three volume study, the film is seen as built out of a web of textual relations, in which stardom, genre, historical referents, and the like compete with the source text for

determining meanings. As a result, the field can turn not just to direct one-to-one correspondences between text and source—for example, Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and Annie Proulx’ short story—but also films and literary works with profound but by no mean obvious associational resonances, for example, Peter Jackson’s *King Kong* (2005) and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

While the plots of *Red Harvest*—about an unnamed narrator-detective who uses violence to rid the town of Personville of gangsterism and political corruption—and *An Injury to One*, about the Anaconda Mining Company—are vastly different, the two texts can be brought into analytical contact. What is important about this is that it extends discussions of intertextuality and adaptation—to date exclusively the domain of fiction cinema—in the direction of the documentary. If one stops to think about it, documentaries should have always been the stuff of adaptation of non-fiction writing—one thinks, for example, of Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* and Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me* (2004)—and yet this has not historically been the way documentary films get produced, and it most certainly has not been part of the documentary film studies’ methodology.

The major result of seeing *An Injury to One* as an adaptation of *Red Harvest* is the observation that both texts only use this material to *frame* their narratives. In each text, the character of concern in this regard—Bill Quint in *Red Harvest*, Hammett himself in *An Injury to One*—is a minor figure. Bill Quint appears briefly in the first chapter of Hammett’s novel. The much-aliased narrator pretends to be Henry F. Neill, “member in good standing of the Industrial Workers of the World.” Hammett immediately shows us

what an opportunist his narrator is: “There wasn’t a word of truth in it;” in 1929, Hammett disavows any affiliation with the Left (7).

*An Injury to One* thus becomes a radical adaptation, projecting a later Hammett back onto *Red Harvest*. This, in fact, is the way Wilkerson ends his film. After engaging in the detailed history of Little’s murder in 1917, Wilkerson jumps ahead to 1951 at “the height of McCarthyism.” He tells us: “The crime novelist Dashiell Hammett is jailed for refusing to name names. He had once served as an agent of Anaconda. Now he is labeled a traitorous Red.” A black and white photo of Hammett in front of a cloudy sky, made to match the barren look of the rest of the film, coupled with an inset photo of Lillian Hellmann is the image which accompanies the story of an Anaconda officer offering Hammett \$5,000 to murder Little. The narrator quotes Hellmann: “It seems one can date Hammett’s belief that he was living in a corrupt society from Frank Little’s murder. In time, he came to the conclusion that nothing less than a revolution could wipe out the corruption. Sometimes in complex minds, it is the plainest experience that speeds the wheels that have already begun to move.” In this way, Wilkerson’s film reads *Red Harvest* in a deconstructive light, taking what is a violent, pessimistic novel which glorifies vigilantism, rips it out of its 1929 context, and re-scripts it as a prescient work of a 1950s Leftist besieged by McCarthyism.

In fact, Wilkerson’s film is a delightful documentary because, unlike traditional examples of the form which use their experts as talking heads to tell us the unmitigated Truth, Wilkerson sublimates his sources into two end-title footnotes, using his own voice to argue with the historical evidence. For example, when describing the summer of 1917, he tells us that Anaconda inflated the price of copper for the war effort, forcing the

government to pay premiums, without kicking any of that extra profit to the miners. He explains: “This is what is meant by the old-fashioned phrase, war profiteering. “Such explanations of the First World War are now said to be inadequate,” Wilkerson the Marxist emphasizes, but only to reinforce his original argument: “The rate of mortality in the mines of Butte are higher than in the trenches of Europe. Xenophobia and a constant fear of violence pervade Butte.”

The film is beautifully aggressive in its manipulation of historical signs for its progressive agenda. For example, the vigilantes who murdered Little posted a sign on his corpse, “Others take notice! First and last warning!” Wilkerson appropriates this image for a title card late in the film, after which he tells the story of a flock of geese which died of corroded esophagi in the Berkley Pit, the remnants of the Anaconda open pit mine, which is now the largest toxic waste site in the United States. The message is quite clear: allow corporate America to run rampant over its workers, and ecological as well as human disasters will not be far behind.

The film is also forceful in its anger at the slippages between official histories and the company’s history. The film’s stark and minimalist images are in fact used to make this point, as many of the documents pertaining to Anaconda’s evildoings were burned and much of the extant documentation is in the form of company newspaper reporting. Again, Wilkerson’s film intervenes into this history with a vengeance. While the coroner’s report from Little’s autopsy was burned by Anaconda agents, Wilkerson’s film performs its own cinematic autopsy. Superimposed over an image of a tombstone and grave in an empty Montana field, a title card presents Wilkerson’s verdict: “Frank Little, 1879-1917, slain by capitalist interests for organizing and inspiring his fellow men.”

The final irony is presented on the soundtrack as the film's end credits roll. The voice of the recorded tour guide at the Berkley Pit tells us in a matter of fact presentation that flares and electronic devices are used to keep birds from landing in the poisoned water. Earlier, Wilkerson's film tells us that the water in the lake has a Ph of 2.5, the equivalent of battery acid, yet the new owners, ARCO Corporation, insisted that the birds died of "something they ate." The passionate voice of Wilkerson's film offers a much-needed antidote to the tour guide's banal presentation of evil.

Finally, *An Injury to One* intervenes into the very process of film history. While Hollywood cinema has built a mythological history of the West as one of expansionism from the East, it turns out that the settling of the Intermountain West was also the result of *eastward* expansion. *An Injury to One* is the only film I know of, besides an allegorical modern Western like *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1968), to chart such an eastward flow. Wilkerson tells us that in the 1864 Montana territory, "a colonial economy is adopted." Failed California gold miners founded a mining camp that would become Butte.

In this way, *An Injury to One* becomes, much like Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995), a revisionist Western in which a new—in Wilkerson's case, Marxist—picture of the West is projected. This is the purpose of the kind of political cinema I want to valorize: that which takes historical material, and in a passionate yet artistic way, turns it into "pleasurable learning." I hope to have nuanced Renov's original employment of this term, suggesting that even minimalist, modernist image construction can result in a wonderful balance of politics and poetics.

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