Compulsive Cameramen*

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The posthumous film of the South Pole explorer Robert Falcon Scott, who filmed his own death as if he were screaming his death cry into a phonograph, was the second film of its kind. In the previous year, the film of Ernest Henry Shackleton's journey to the South Pole had showed far more dramatically, even though Shackleton escaped with his life, the struggles of a man who in his campaign of conquest transcended his own physical limitations. What is particularly remarkable about these films is not their images of hand-to-hand combat with murderous nature, nor their depiction of bravery, determination, and heroic solidarity—a good director could have invented all these scenes and staged them far more effectively. Nor is it that these are actual events—we have had numerous reports of men capable of staring death calmly in the eye well before these English seamen and geographers. What is unusual and new is that these men looked at death through the lens of the movie camera.

That is the new, objectified form of human self-awareness. As long as these men did not lose consciousness, they did not take their hand off the crank of their camera. Shackleton's ship is broken to bits by massive slabs of ice. It was filmed. Their last dog dies. It was filmed. The way back to normal life was blocked, there was no hope. It was filmed. They drift on an ice floe, and the ice floe melts beneath their feet. It was filmed. Captain Scott sets up his last tent and with his comrades goes inside as though into a tomb to wait for death. It was filmed. Just as the ship captain on the bridge and the telegraph operator at his Marconi apparatus are to stay at their posts, the cameraman stayed at his and filmed until his hand froze to the handle.

This was a new kind of self-examination. These men thought about themselves in that they filmed themselves. The interior process of accounting for themselves shifted to the outside. Their self-observation was mechanically preserved up to the last minute of their lives. The film of self-control that heretofore conscience had unreeled inside their heads wound up on the spool of the camera, and conscience, which previously mirrored itself only for itself, relegated this function to a machine, which preserved that mirror image for others to see as well. In this way subjective mentality is transformed into a social one.

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Of course the camera has the advantages of not having nerves and of being harder to confuse than the conscience. And the psychological process reverses itself. One doesn't film as long as one remains conscious; one remains conscious as long as one films. It is as though mental acuity is buttressed from without. Presence of mind becomes the presence of the camera. And in that presence one behaves as in the presence of a stranger, more disciplined than when alone. That is the mystery of self-possession, of which the Anglo-Saxons have given us so many imposing examples. Since they lose consciousness with such difficulty, they know nothing of the attendant ecstasy. But also nothing of panic.

A young woman behind us in the cinema asked her companion, Why did these men have to die? A level-headed and intelligent person, she was enraged. What was the point of all their effort, their suffering? Who profited from it? It was a pointless struggle, senseless heroism, energy wasted on nothing at all, she felt, and she was much too clever to believe in the exalted scientific goals with which her companion tried to excuse the poor English captain, and which, though they are indeed a factor, have no bearing on the sacrifices involved. One would have to explain the meaning of such senselessness to this rational little woman with different, even wholly irrational arguments. One could have said, for example, that through such foolhardy and impractical exertions man reveals his true humanity. All else is but a more sophisticated manifestation of the survival instinct, which in no way distinguishes man from the beasts. The human soul reveals itself most clearly and in its purest form in such follies, and that is why these films are so gripping and so splendid despite their ludicrous senselessness.

One might also have assured the young Viennese woman that these Englishmen were true earth dwellers. They have a conscious feeling for the earth, in the same way that one is said to have feeling for one's country, for example, one that implies a definite sense of responsibility: a person has to know where he is. They do not live in Vienna or London; they inhabit the globe, and they explore all the cellars and attics of their ancestral property. A person is never truly at home in any place until he has fully explored it. Also, one could have reminded the young, middle-class wife that, at the sight of this white infinity, where the polar night merges with the blackness of space, all of human civilization, with its great metropolises, suddenly strikes one as hopelessly provincial, like the Podunk of the planet. Is it not understandable, then, that a man who is aware of this greater truth but lives in the oppressive constriction of Berlin, Paris, London, or New York develops a yearning for the strenuous life that relegates the petty life of ordinary men to the shadows?

As for the pointlessness of such displays of energy, it must be said that a man is never aware of his goals from the outset, so that he might subsequently develop the strength for them. It is his new ability that sets new goals, and his increasing strength expands the boundaries of what is imagined impossible. The fire has to be burning before we can begin to see what can be illuminated.

That is the meaning of every human fire, even if its immediate purpose is not instantly clear to us. The pointless heroism of these English seamen was perhaps nothing more than an exercise demonstrating man's moral force. A person has to know what he is capable of; when worse comes to worst such a yardstick is crucial.