

The World Rewound: Peter Forgács' *Wittgenstein Tractatus*

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A right hand glove could be put on the left hand, if it could be turned around in four-dimensional space.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.36111

When I came home I expected a surprise & there was no surprise for me, so, of course, I was surprised.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 52e

In his study of the “ontology of film,” *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell writes that “Wittgenstein investigates the world (‘the possibilities of phenomena’) by investigating what we say, what we are inclined to say, what our pictures of phenomena are, in order to wrest the world from our possessions so that we may possess it again.”<sup>1</sup> Cavell takes Wittgenstein’s investigation to propose, perhaps to characterize, the deepest project of film conceived not only as art but also (and more important) as a mode of being-in-the-world in which we inhabit a relation to the world—namely, “viewing.” Cavell’s remark specifically concerns Ludwig Wittgenstein’s posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*. But it points to a deep theme in Wittgenstein’s entire body of philosophical work.

1. Re-Viewing

How and why do we seem to know the world with perceptual clarity, practical familiarity, and existential certainty despite its contingency and ambiguity? How might we understand the world “again,” or afresh, in light of seeing its contingency as such—if we can do so at all? What would things look like as it were on the other side of the conventional habits and customs of seeing—and of “viewing”—that we ordinarily bring to them? To “possess the world again”: although Cavell does not pursue the matter in material or technical terms, it is worth asking how we might take the suggestion attributed to Wittgenstein (a fan of Hollywood cinema) quite literally in the case of film. How might film help us to possess the world *again*? In the form or mode of mere footage, especially film produced simply to document what’s going on in the world in front of the camera, it *already* presents us with a picture of phenomena. In what way, then, can it suggest that the things captured by the filmic index—ostensibly they were really there to be seen—might be seen to be quite different, or really could be otherwise, from what they are shown to us—and therefore seen by us—to be?

In this essay, I suggest that Peter Forgács’ remarkable film *Wittgenstein Tractatus* (1992) proposes a subtle approach to these questions. The film uses Wittgenstein’s terms. But for reasons that we must explore it goes beyond what Wittgenstein claims we can actually *say* about the motivating situation—about the possible otherwiseness of the world that is shown to and seen by us in film footage. In the end, then, *Wittgenstein Tractatus* endorses the particular capacity of film (especially in remaking film footage as it might be “found” in order to draw out its immanent recursions, reversions, and revisions) to *re-view* the world as seen (or found) by us: it is as much a filmic meditation on

Wittgenstein's thoughts about world-picturing as it is a Wittgensteinian meditation on cinematic or other pictorializations of our knowledge of the world.

As a collation of filmed footage, *Wittgenstein Tractatus* is an elusive—often cryptic—montage of ordinary but often suggestive and unsettling images. Almost all of them were derived from sequences of historical “found footage” located by Forgacs in private archives and public collections in Hungary. They are accompanied by voice-overs, subtitles, and interleaved titles entirely drawn from writings by Wittgenstein. To be sure, the film could be approached by way of established art-theoretical or film-critical frameworks. For example, in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* Forgács appears to be interested in certain classic texts of iconography, notably Erwin Panofsky's studies of the layering of the habitual, expressive, and conventional meaning of motifs.<sup>2</sup> I will return to specific parallels between *Wittgenstein Tractatus* and Panofsky's model of iconographic understanding (on the part of inhabitants of a lifeworld) and interpretation (on the part of its historians and critics or what we might call its reviewers). But I will concentrate on the philosophical point of reference indicated in the very title of *Wittgenstein Tractatus*. Needless to say, the film presents itself explicitly as an engagement with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—the title adopted in the English translation of his *Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* of 1921.

The precise nature of this engagement requires exploration. It would not be enough to say that the film sets forth certain propositions enunciated in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—though it does do this. Wittgenstein's words appear throughout the film, and the film deploys Wittgenstein's ideas (first promulgated publicly in the *Tractatus*) about the triangulations between picturing, language, and the world. In addition, however, the film *philosophizes* along Wittgensteinian

lines in a way that discourse—the spoken or written word, including Wittgenstein’s own words—cannot do, and cannot do for the very reasons suggested by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. To be specific, *Wittgenstein Tractatus* relays a philosophy in the way that the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* suggests philosophy might be possible but cannot itself *show* us or *do* for us so long as it remains discursive—and even if such showing and doing constitutes world-knowing as Wittgenstein understands it. In this sense, Forgács’ film does not so much supplement Wittgenstein’s philosophy as complement it in a manner that helps to complete it in the essential but specifically *nondiscursive* recursion required by Wittgenstein’s philosophical insight in the *Tractatus*—an intuition about philosophical representation that Wittgenstein himself (a mechanical engineer, architect, sculptor, and film buff as well as a teacher and writer) seems to have taken seriously throughout his life. Indeed, at several points in his life Wittgenstein embraced the notion that he could and should, and perhaps that he must, conduct his work of thinking—his philosophy—in nondiscursive media and practices of making, doing, and living.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, *Wittgenstein Tractatus* alludes to this context; indeed, the existential context of Wittgenstein’s practice evidently warrants Forgács’ own practice in *Wittgenstein Tractatus*. In this regard we must remember the manifest absence of the genitive in Forgács’ title: the film is not *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus* but rather *Wittgenstein / Tractatus*. The film does not *illustrate* the *Tractatus*; it is more like an *incarnation* of the mode of being-in-the-world, of knowing, that Wittgenstein recommends in the *Tractatus*.

Needless to say, however, my own remarks on these matters must translate the filmic philosophy relayed in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* back into discourse by relating the film to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*—trying to suggest *in* language what

had been conceived, along Wittgensteinian lines, as the essentially visual-pictorial constitution of world-knowledge. Striking and obvious structures and effects in the visual-pictorial field of the film can only be indicated clumsily—and by way of highly rhetorical devices—in speaking about them. But if language or world-knowledge is essentially pictorial or has an essential pictoriality, as the *Tractatus* urges, it follows that epistemology must in the end address picturing and perhaps might or must do so precisely as a picture—that is, as a painting, film, or other nondiscursive pictorial representation of language as pictorial. And in so doing it might be able to show not only what language speaks about but also how it does so—to show what language is in speaking of a world at all.

I will begin my description of these interrelations (in the next two sections of this essay) by addressing the ways in which the visual-rhetorical structure of *Wittgenstein Tractatus* finds a specifically filmic complement for the discursive-rhetorical structure of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. This will enable me to suggest (in the succeeding sections) how the kind of world-view relayed in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* might be the kind of view that would best justify and enable the philosophy stated in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: making us see the limits of the language that are the “limits of my world,” as the film tries to do, is to help us to see that the limits of my world are the limits of my language’s picture of it. We might conclude that in Forgács’ view the kind of visual-pictorial world-experiences relayed to us filmically in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* might have suggested Wittgenstein’s “picture theory of meaning” as it was discursively proposed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In this regard, *Wittgenstein Tractatus* proposes a phenomenal and historical context—a context of imaging and its uses, abuses, recursions, and reversions—for Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.

I will not speculate in any extended way on the possible circumstantial reasons for the striking contiguities between Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Forgacs' *Wittgenstein Tractatus*. In large measure the formal parallelisms and substantive interrelations—once identified—should speak for themselves. To be sure, Forgacs has often noted his intense and sustained interest in Wittgenstein's life and philosophy—an interest consolidated and communicated in *Wittgenstein Tractatus*. And a case could well be made that Wittgenstein and Forgacs have shared historical and cultural horizons—notably, Wittgenstein's experience of the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian empire during and after the First World War (and, toward the end of his life, the annihilation of his own family in the Holocaust) and Forgacs' experience of life in eastern Europe during and after the Second World War, throughout the Cold War, and in the more recent period of the disintegration and re-integration of the emergent post-Soviet polities. It is important to note, however, that *Wittgenstein Tractatus*—unlike other films by Forgacs—does not represent this history explicitly despite the fact that it deploys period footage. Instead, twentieth-century European history—a history that could definitively localize the found footage used in the film—subsists as one implied figurative horizon constituted in the film, one ground of its images.

Indeed, in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* Forgacs wants to consider how one might even begin to represent—to see, to show, to speak—historical events that in great measure might seem to be unspeakable (in every sense of the term) and certainly were largely unseen and unknown to participants documented by the found footage. The impending obliteration of unknowing victims—the imminence of their trauma and death recollected only by the happenstance survival of footage of their living existence—is one of Forgacs' recurrent themes in his re-use of

found footage in several of his films. But the point of the re-use or re-viewing in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* is not simply to *recollect* participants, subjects, and victims otherwise consigned to oblivion—a project conducted in many of Forgacs' other films. Rather, *Wittgenstein Tractatus* asks how human understanding *at the time*—how understanding *at any time*—might have seen things differently or even *could* see things differently. If a twentieth-century European history of the dislocation and destruction of families, societies, and nations has constituted the manifest subject-matter of many of Forgacs' films, *Wittgenstein Tractatus* meditates on the very grounds of these representations when mobilized by Forgacs—the film-maker standing for any and all observers of history—acting as their re-viewer. How can Forgacs—how might any film artist—claim insight into the possible *reversibility* of the history documented by the footage he has found? To revert to my opening quotation from Cavell, in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* we might take Forgacs to propose an ontology of film not—or not only—as the world *viewed* but also—and more important—as the world *re-viewed*. But what is this reviewing?

## 2. Re-Worlding

Like the text of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Forgács' film has been divided into seven parts. There is no continuous narrative in the film. But it has a rigorous structure; it becomes increasingly obvious—and increasingly subtle—on repeated viewings of the film. Each part of the film has been constituted from found footage showing seemingly ordinary people engaged in seemingly mundane activities. Each shot lasts only a fraction of a minute and

sometimes only a few seconds. And each shot tends to depict a single, simple event: a woman walks towards us with a dog on a leash; an elderly man gets ready for bed; a man seats himself at a café table and tips his hat to the camera. The identification of these people and the places and times depicted—that is, the historical origin of the found footage—remains uncertain throughout the film. Hungary before or after—or before and after—the Second World War seems to be the usual location, though one series of shots has been taken in ski country (the Austrian Alps? Switzerland?) or in Scandinavia (Wittgenstein’s house in Norway is explicitly recalled in this part of the film). The seventh and last part of the film includes several shots set in Budapest in the 1950s: horse-drawn carts mix with trams and taxis in the streets and television has appeared in the home.

Preceded by a short pause separating it from the previous part, each one of the seven parts of the film begins and ends with a freeze-frame of the initial shot or the final shot in the sequence of shots in that part. As we watch, the frozen image comes together like a jigsaw puzzle or mosaic being assembled (at the beginning of the part) or comes undone like a jigsaw puzzle or mosaic being pulled apart (at the end of the part). And as each piece of the puzzle floats into the frame or floats out of it, building up or reducing the whole image, we see the fragment of the image from *both* or maybe *all* sides—our “front” and its “back” (though in reality we can’t see what’s in back of what we’re in front of) or maybe all the way round. As the film unfolds—and as we can rewind it to pull apart the image that’s been put together or to put together the image that’s been pulled apart—we come to see that these framing sequences thematize the most general visual interests, and most prominent filmic effects, of the entire montage of shots.

The seven parts of the film are roughly equal in duration—about three or four minutes each for a total running time of thirty-two minutes. Whatever the image track might show us, each part of Forgács' film quotes—in interleaved titles, in voice-overs, and in overlaid titles and images—from individual passages in the corresponding part of Wittgenstein's text of numbered sentences. That is to say, the first part of the film quotes from the *Tractatus* 1 – 1.121, the second part of the film quotes from the *Tractatus* 2 – 2.225, and so on.<sup>4</sup> In the film this complex stratigraphy of words and images to some extent replicates the labyrinthine lemmata of the *Tractatus*—though in the end, as the film tells us in quoting Wittgenstein's words, *der Gegenstand ist einfach*—"the object is simple" (2.02).<sup>5</sup>

When Wittgenstein's words are quoted in the film, sometimes Forgács displays Wittgenstein's numeration of the lemmas of the text (e.g., 1, 1.1, 2.02, 4.002, 5.634, 6.36311, and so on). Provided with this information, we can see that as the film unfolds or unwinds it goes "deeper" into Wittgenstein's text and its nesting of propositions—further and further into its special and specific derivations. And it would seem to travel certain tracks *within* the text. The first part of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* consists simply of seven sentences numbered 1, 1.1, 1.11, 1.12, 1.13, 1.2, 1.21—sentences therefore indicated to have different levels or degrees of conceptual scope or "logical importance" (*logische Gewicht*), as Wittgenstein tells us in his footnote to 1, even if "all propositions are equally valuable" (6.4). The entire seventh part of the *Tractatus*, by contrast, is only one short sentence in length—as it were one-seventh the discursive size of the first part (even if its claim is the broadest of all). But in Forgács' *Tractatus* the first and the seventh parts of the text receive nearly as much film time as the second through the sixth parts of the text, which occupy several dozens of pages of

printed text. This is certainly as it should be. The movement from 1 to 7 and equally important the movement from 7 to 1 constitute the essential burden of Wittgenstein's text, pursued in an organization conceived to be lemmatic rather than narrative or argumentative: though not exactly in a series of syllogisms, one can "read" from statements that appear to be more general and comprehensive to statements that appear to be more narrow and derivative—and vice versa.

As Wittgenstein says at one point (6.54), his lemmatic labyrinth of sentences might be regarded as a "ladder" (*Leiter*). This statement has usually been taken to mean that the reader can discard the text once the ladder has been climbed—that is, once the text has been read and understood. To some extent Wittgenstein clearly intended his metaphor to be taken in this sense. But a ladder can—and sometimes must—be used to climb *down*—or to climb up and down again—and to move between or around various lower and higher levels of a structure. This route of reading might be more like a loop or a circle than a one-way street—a possibility Forgacs aligns with the material identity and screening of projected film stock. And it is unclear, of course, whether Wittgenstein meant or expected that his text *could* be fully understood in ordinary discursive terms; what a reader supposedly attains upon finishing a reading of the text—after climbing the ladder—has been a matter of debate. Certainly most readers' experience of the text of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (a phenomenon relayed filmically in *Wittgenstein Tractatus*) involves a complicated peregrination—moving back and forth and around an array of propositions (however they are sequenced and hierarchically ordered as a written text) that can be read, that can be scanned or "viewed," in several ways or even, in the most literal sense, in more than one direction.

Consider, for example, the first sentence of Wittgenstein's text, that is, the first of the seven most important lemmas (1): *Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*, "the world is all that is the case." A more literal translation—"The world is all, what the case is"—would relay a crucial connotation that tends to be lost in the published English translations. For Wittgenstein it's not only that the world is everything "that is the case"—a kind of impersonal general logicity characterized preeminently by its truth, however that might be defined or constituted. In his formulation Wittgenstein manifestly avoided the predicative structure absorbed into the English translation so that he could recognize what we might call a *juxtapositive* relation between the world and our representation of it: *die Welt* and *der Fall* occupy grammatically parallel positions in the statement of what is. All the world is / what the case is: *der Fall* was Freud's and the common word (well known to Wittgenstein) for a "case" (as in a Freudian case history) or better for an "affair"—as in those things and events (*Gegenständen*), however simple (*einfach*—single, homely, ordinary), pictured and preserved in found footage, and whether or not they might be a "case in point"—*ein vorliegende Fall*—of a general truth "in any case," *auf alle Fälle*. *Ein Fall* is also, of course, a falling—an actual waterfall or any kind of general failure or downfall. Indeed, Wittgenstein's verbal formulation of his first sentence would seem to have been carefully crafted as it were semantically—though not literally or typographically—in a palindrome. The formulation permits the parallelism and potential recursion suggested in the world-view developed in the further propositions of the text: the world is all what the case is; the case is all what the world is.

Most important, Wittgenstein's verbal formula—and not only as a logical or philosophical argument but also as an experience of *reading* or even *seeing* that tries to enable us to read or to see *differently*—encourages us to start (and also to end) with “what is the case,” what it is we see, when we ask what the world is—even though asking what the world is (i.e., what we see) might challenge our view of what is the case. As the linguistic structure (if not the argumentative substance) of the first sentence of the text might suggest, we are embedded in a continuous inescapable loop in which our representation or picture of the world, our image-statement of what is the case, recursively threads through itself; though the world can perhaps be seen differently at different times and in different contexts, it is always seen as what is (seen as . . .) the case. What is the case in or as the world, then, must be contingent on the seeing—our use of pictorial techniques, habits, and motifs or (following Panofsky) our iconology.

As such, the world could readily be (seen to be) otherwise in the same way that a picture—after a *change* of pictorial techniques, habits, and motifs—might be different from what it is initially seen to be and indeed seen to show: if what we take to be the case about the world were somehow revisioned or repictured or (to draw the metaphor from Wittgenstein's own favorite medium) *refilmed*, the world itself must be changed in the same sense in which we would say that apples painted by Paul Cézanne and by Henri Matisse, even if both painters had used the very same real apples as models, show us quite *different* apples. This notion—this feeling we have in relation to actual pictures and to our world-picture as such—seems to be captured in an enigmatic proposition quoted by the film at one point: “Feeling the world as a *limited* whole—it is *this* that is mystical” (6.45, my emphasis). At the same time as the picture gives “all that is the case”

(that is, the world) to us, we can feel (if we cannot actually see) the contingency of the picture or what might be called pictoriality—the fact that *as* a picture it must have certain limits, that is, a particular degree of resolution, certain occlusions or foreshortenings, and select devices of framing and focusing. We might suspect that the world continues *beyond* these limits: as we might say, the world is “out there.” Nevertheless, we cannot speak about this “out there” readily because our world-picture, our language, does not show it. Our awareness of the-world-outside—if we can come to have any such awareness *within* the picture-seeing that gives us the world—remains a “mystical” one.

How can we revision, repicture, or refilm the world when all of the world—everything that is the case for us—is constituted *by* the picture that we use to see it? Forgács’ film recalls and reiterates the quasi-palindromic linguistic, logical, and structural devices of Wittgenstein’s text (read for its literary or imagistic force as well as its substance) in order to *visualize* or *picture* Wittgenstein’s imagination of the world in the propositions of the *Tractatus*—namely, *as* visualized or contingently pictured—in a way that might be unavailable to its standard written exegesis. Although the standard written exegesis can *say* that the world—the world as a picture or as pictured—might be different from what it is, it cannot easily *see* or *show* this world if it is a world outside its own pictorial purview. For example, and perhaps most notable, as discursive language our knowing cannot *reverse* itself—except in literal typographic palindromes—without falling into a nonsense or unintelligibility (*der Fall*) that will not permit us to see and to show any world (*eine Welt*) at all. By contrast, as Forgács realizes in *Wittgenstein Tractatus*, in certain ways film might show the possible reversals, inversions, and recursions of world-picturing

suggested in the first sentence of the *Tractatus* and carried throughout its philosophy as its own world-view.

### 3. *Überwinden*

To help bring out the possibilities—and difficulties—for Forgacs' specifically filmic representation of Wittgenstein's philosophy, especially in relation to discursive representations, it is worth recalling Max Black's remarks on the order or sequential logic of Wittgenstein's text. For my purposes, Black's well-known commentary can stand for the wider reception and understanding of the *Tractatus*—a reception challenged by Forgacs' film.<sup>6</sup> Black begins with Wittgenstein's title in translation ("probably suggested by Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, it is said to have been proposed for the English edition by G. E. Moore"<sup>7</sup>). He ends with Wittgenstein's final sentence (that is, 7)—*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen*: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." Black here recalls the more euphonious—and more famous—English translation by C. K. Ogden: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."<sup>8</sup> Both English translations, however, lose an echo in the German—"whereof" or "about what" one cannot speak, one must be silent *darüber*, "over it" or "over there." Wittgenstein had summoned this connotation in the immediately preceding remark (6.54) when he asserted that his reader must "overcome" (*überwinden*) the philosopher's—that is, his own—propositions in order to see the world rightly. "Over there"—where we cannot speak about the world, even if (or maybe precisely because) we *see* it—we must be silent.

This picture of things (for the text represents what it imagines the world to be) tends to be occluded when it's said, as Black himself does at the very beginning of his commentary, that "Wittgenstein treats the famous concluding remark [that is, 7] as summarizing 'the whole sense of the book'."<sup>9</sup> This is certainly what the English translation of Wittgenstein's Preface says: "The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence." With the exception of the substitution of *reden* (to talk) for *sprechen* (to speak), the word Wittgenstein actually uses in 7, the final phrase of this remark in the Preface does reproduce (though textually it anticipates) the text of 7. But in his Preface Wittgenstein himself does not say, as the English translation would have it, that 7 "sums up" the "whole sense of the book." Rather he says *Man könnte den ganzen Sinn des Buches etwa in die Worte fassen: Was sich überhaupt sagen läßt, läßt sich klar sagen; und wovon man nicht reden kann, darüber muß man schweigen.* "One could comprehend the whole sense of the book somewhat in the words: . . ." Taking him at his word, then, the single sentence of the seventh part of the text cannot be so much a conclusion—in the sense of a derivation—or a *full* summary as simply one part of a serviceable understanding of what the entire book says. The *other* part of the book asserts that what one can say in general—for example, 1 to 6—can be "clear" (*klar*); *where* we can't speak clearly, *there* we must be silent.

Wittgenstein's last sentence (from the point of view recommended in the text it could also be the *first* sentence) prompts the well-known question with which Black completes his own commentary: "Is the 'Tractatus' self-defeating?" Black assumes a series of propositions that one might take to develop in sequential consequentiality *from 1 to 7*, for he wants to rescue Wittgenstein from the charge

that his text fails itself (*ein Fall*)—that is to say, that 7 *doesn't* follow from, and even undoes, everything leading up to it from 1 onwards.<sup>10</sup> Even if Black thinks Wittgenstein doesn't contradict himself, he has to assume a text in which contradiction could be a feature of its sentences in total relation to one another. This doesn't always sit easily, however, with the lemmatic conformation of the text itself. Presumably a sentence numbered 1.2 has “equal value” (as Wittgenstein puts it in his Preface) to a sentence numbered 4.2, and a sentence numbered 1.21 or 4.21 can be regarded as stating an aspect—or pursuing a particular implication or giving a partial elucidation—of 1.2 or 4.2, even though it would seem to have less scope or generality. Nevertheless it doesn't follow that 4.2 derives—as aspect, implication, or elucidation, let alone as logical consequent—from 1.2 through any number of intermediate sentences, even though 1.11 “follows” or better flows from 1.1 which “follows” or flows from 1. To “read” the first part of the *Tractatus*, for instance, one could read:

1—1.1—1.11—(1.1)—1.12—(1.1)—1.13—(1)—1.2—1.21

But with equal cogency one could also read:

1.11—1.12—1.13—1.1—1.21—1.2—1

To ask how sentences ordered in this way might conclude in narrative or argumentative sequence, and especially what they might prove or how they might be “summed up,” doesn't seem apposite to the assertion of 7 itself—“whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.” 7 seems

explicitly to draw our attention to the fact, obvious throughout the series of sentences flowing to this point, that there are many gaps—as it were “nothing there” over there—in their representation of a world said to have this very structure (see especially 2 – 2.225). More important, the text offers a showing (but cannot be a telling) of something endless or infinite, or maybe *nothing* endless and infinite, extending in all directions before and after and around and between all the sentences actually given. In the first short part of the text alone, for example, there’s a 1.11 but no 1.111, a 1.2 and 1.21 but no 1.22 (though there is a 1.12), a 1.1 and a 1.2 but no 1.3, and so forth. To notice these gaps or places of no-speaking or (from another point of view) to make these discoveries—*here* is a density of elucidatory representation, *there* is a thin overlay of general understanding, and *out there* we can’t speak at all, like a blank space on a map—we must continually *read back* through or *rewind* the text: after absorbing 1.13 following 1.12 following 1.11, we reconsider 1.1 (and maybe even 1) before flowing to what follows *it*, namely 1.2.

As Wittgenstein says in his penultimate remark in the text (6.54), his sentences (*Sätze*) can “at the end be known as nonsensical” (*am Ende als unsinnig erkennt*): after going “through” them and “on them” and “over them” (*durch, auf, über*), one can “get out of them” or “dismount” or “alight from” them (*hinausgestiegen; steigen* refers not only to climbing but also to riding). In parenthesis, Wittgenstein adds that the reader *muß sozusagen die Leiter wegwerfen, nachdem er auf ihr hinaufgestiegen ist*—“he must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.” The English translation just quoted conflates *hinausgestiegen*, Wittgenstein’s initial word, and *hinaufgestiegen*, his parenthetical elucidation; *steige aus* and *steige auf*—in the metaphor of a *Leiter*—would have to be climbing

down (the other side?) and climbing up (whatever side one's on?) respectively. According to the translation, a reader must "transcend these propositions"—the sentences of the text. Wittgenstein actually says, however, that *Er muß diese Sätze überwinden*—one must *overcome* these sentence. In fact, one must literally "overwind" or "twist over" them. In this *Überwindung* we might be able to see the world, "everything that is the case," more clearly. Re-viewing, then, might be conceived—as a material activity or literal function of consciousness—as a replaying that is not just another viewing but also a rewinding and overplaying. Something like this *Überwinden* is imaged—*shown* or almost *filmed*—in lemma 1. By the same token, in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* "overwinding" is not just the propositional content but the very representational mechanism of the film—a film devoted, at the same time, to the preservation of what is viewed as found.

#### 4. Turning Around

I belabor these points in relation to the text of the *Tractatus* and its reversion in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* because the particular directionality or orientation—and the general reversibility—of world-perspectives lay at the heart of Wittgenstein's philosophy and his constructive practice in written and other media.<sup>11</sup> (Indeed, Forgacs' film makes explicit pictorial reference to the house Wittgenstein built for himself in Norway—at one point we see an image of his hand-drawn sketch of the site, bearing various directional and cardinal indications—and makes many allusions to the operation, again in terms of the direction and possible reversal of movement, of the mechanical devices that had fascinated him since he'd been a student of engineering at Manchester University.) As film, Forgács'

representation turns out—we can use that verb advisedly—to be peculiarly capable of showing and of doing the philosophy that it engages. Replaying, rewinding, reversing: they constitute the *Leitmotif* of Forgacs' films—his *Leiter*.

Like Wittgenstein's text, Forgacs' film has constant refrains. Two ubiquitous motifs complement one another visually and relay the fundamental theme of changing and even reversing direction. First, we're constantly presented with shots and scenes of people going ("going on") in a particular direction—taking a road, following in line, making or riding a track. For example, the first part of *Tractatus* opens with a shot of the wheel of a cart or a carriage, seen from above, churning over muddy ruts in a road ("the world is all that is the case" [1]).<sup>12</sup> Next we see the cart trundling along the road itself, running through a flat farmland, then poled across a river by a ferryman; an intervening shot shows a rowman in a single scull rowing downstream ("the world is the totality of facts, not things" [1.1]). Second, these motifs are frequently followed, or inflected, by shots or scenes of a person or people dancing or otherwise "going or turning around." Different people doing different kinds of dances appear throughout the film. For example, the first part of the film ends with a brief shot of a man walking in a circle upside down on his hands followed by a scene of a group of men and women dancing in a round with joined hands (again, we're told, "the world is the totality of facts, not things" [1.1]). As these descriptions suggest, both motifs—going somewhere in particular, going round and round—embed images of going backwards (the rower sits facing away from the direction in which he's rowing) or being upside-down (like the man walking on his hands). More important, then, the motifs support the film-philosophical investigation of Wittgenstein's world-picture—his suggestion that if the world is everything that

is the case (in our picture of it) it could also be otherwise (in another picture or from another direction of view). As the film goes on—as it unwinds before our eyes—the viewer (especially in re-viewing) becomes increasingly aware of the possibility that these people could change their direction or orientation or even reverse or invert it and that what they’re shown to be doing could seem to be “going the wrong way” or “being wrong way up”—at least from *our* point of view as (re)viewers of the world in which *they* are pictured to us. We must grant, of course, that from *their* point of view they could be “doing it right.” And if from their point of view they are *not* doing it right, moreover, how would *we* see them to be doing it wrong from *our* point of view—when their *wrong* action might look *right* to us? We—like them—are embedded in a loop of reversions.

The middle sequences in the first part of the film suggest Forgács’ approach to these seeming logical impasses—even though it takes the entire duration of the film to secure the viewer’s sense that they’ve been seen there at all. After the sequence of the carriage traveling the road and ferried across the river in the first part of the film, we see a striking scene of what seems to be a dying pig rolled over and over on itself in its own blood and feces, prodded first by a human leg and foot encased in a polished jackboot and then by a leg and foot wearing a heavy workboot. In the fourth part of the film, Forgács briefly repeats a segment of this shot; here, the voice-over quotes Wittgenstein’s remark that “the horrors of hell can be experienced in a single day.”<sup>13</sup> The owners of the boots aren’t shown—the situation of the pig’s traumatic disorder remains vague—and we’re left to speculate on their historical Austro-Hungarian or other identity as suggested by the *conventional* meaning of jackboots and what seems, given the *apparent* actions or gestures of the people wearing the boots, to be the

humiliation, torture, and slaughter of a defenceless animal. Elsewhere Forgács has proffered scathing condemnation of German and Austro-Hungarian Nazism and Soviet-satellite Communism alike, and the scene—especially given its reiteration and commentary in the fourth part of the film—tempts us to accept an association with these contexts. But the facts of the matter might be quite different; we have no definitive means to say exactly what we’re seeing. In an interview with Scott MacDonald, Forgacs remarks on this sequence: “I don’t know how to be ‘true’ to archival material if you touch it with an intention to do more than restore it. Of course, one tries not to create lies, but one can use a film, or the meaning of a film, for purposes very different from whatever the original purposes were. In my *Wittgenstein Tractatus*, for example, the pig you see rolling on the ground is *not* killed or harmed, though you might assume the pig is about to be killed; the imagery was from a veterinary school documentation of a case of nerve disease in a pig.” Documentary facts aside, however, in *Wittgenstein Tractatus* Forgacs works hard to avoid or eliminate visual material in the found footage that might definitively identify and localize the situations and actors. To use Panofsky’s terms, we see them at the level of “primary expression” and with a degree of ambiguity that does not easily permit “secondary” or conventional interpretations. But willy-nilly we will make such interpretations—underscoring the very difficulty of constituting actual alternate *pictures* of what *could* be otherwise. Substantively, and precisely because we’re not completely sure of what we’re seeing, the scene of the pig’s trauma introduces elements of horror and foreboding into nearby scenes of ordinary—even joyous—human activities. Our certainty of contingency shades imperceptibly into our fear of catastrophe. At the least, unexpected recursions and reversals lie in wait for us at every turn.

In succeeding sequences in the first part of the film, for example, we see a group of dancers (though it's hard to tell, the dance seems to reverse itself partway through) and then a group of people—clearly they're friends if not relations or lovers—seated in row in a mountainside meadow, relaxing and having a meal. The camera pans from left to right across the group, showing each person in turn—smiling, smoking, looking at the camera, looking elsewhere. Then it reverses itself, though whether the person originally holding the camera has simply panned back or whether the filmmaker using the footage has rewound it partway through remains an open question. (It is difficult to resolve this matter even after repeated viewings of the film. The very fact that the film includes instances of the image-track as it were “going backward,” being played in reverse, makes it difficult to decide whether what seem to be continuous sequences of filmed events “going forward”—whether or not they include a *filmed* action of “looking back”—belong to the original participants, to the original filmmaker, to the film artist using the found footage, or even to ourselves, the latest viewers of the footage as reworked by the artist.) Either way, however, when the camera returns to where we thought it began seeing the scene it now reveals two women, one leaning intimately against the other (are they strangers? sisters? dear friends? lovers?)—women we *didn't* see in the initial scan, even though one of the other women in the group (we've seen *her* twice) appears to have been looking right at them. (“How hard I find it to see what is right in front of my eyes.”<sup>14</sup>) Though it's hard to tell, this group of men and women appears to be the same as the group of people dancing hand in hand, already noted, that concluded the first part of the film (“the world is the totality of facts, not things”[1.1]). We would need nothing more than all this—neither

the brief close-ups of Wittgenstein's face (taken from well-known portrait photographs) nor the occasional overlays of his handwritten texts nor the quotations from his writings—to grasp that the film tries to show (though it would be difficult or impossible to “speak” or discursively to describe) the contingency of the depicted world or to show the world *as* a picture, specifically, a *film-like-picture* in which its unpredictable reversibility can be shown.

##### 5. *Circulus Methodicus*: From Picture-Worlds to World-Pictures and Back Again

“When an acquaintance greets me on the street by removing his hat, what I see from a formal point of view is nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of colour, lines and volumes which constitute my world of vision.” With this example, Erwin Panofsky introduced his distinctions between “factual,” “expressional,” “conventional,” and “intrinsic” meaning in turn underwriting his theory and practice of the iconography and iconology of works of pictorial art.<sup>15</sup> Panofsky wrote thirteen years after Wittgenstein in response to many of the same ideological currents that shaped Wittgenstein's thought. Like Wittgenstein, he sought an antidote to the pervasive scepticism—in turn it might lead to moral paralysis or, equally dangerous, to irrational prejudice or fascist delusion—that one might derive from recognizing the essential contingency of human knowledge understood as world-picturing (or what Panofsky's interlocutors called *Weltanschauung*). Panofsky provided a positive answer to the question of the indefinite meaning of the man's gesture; it prefigures Wittgenstein's own later approach to the problem of the significance of behavior and speech in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

According to Panofsky, we have a natural method of understanding the man's gesture—of interpreting the material or physiognomic, the traditional, and the conventional aspects of his behavior and in so doing of localizing it historically and understanding it culturally. This ordinary method of negotiating the world pictorially can be formalized as *Kunstwissenschaft*—a discipline that retraces the ordinary functions of human consciousness in making sense of things we see around us in the world and in so doing (re)discovers—but need not be epistemologically defeated by—their historical contingency now seen as such.<sup>16</sup>

At the level of factual meaning, we see that the configuration in our world of vision is our friend, a gentleman in the street, and that the change of detail in it—in him—is an event, his removing his hat. At the level of expressional meaning, we perceive our friend's friendly intention; we apprehend this not by "simple identification" but "by 'empathy'."<sup>17</sup> In fact, Panofsky doesn't say whether the man has "a good or a bad humour, and whether his feelings towards [us] are indifferent, friendly or hostile." But in principle we will be able empathetically to grasp such "psychological nuances." According to Panofsky, both factual and expressional meaning are pre-iconographical: we require no knowledge of conventions or cultural traditions to understand them. Thus he wants to call them "*primary* or *natural* meanings." They devolve from our intrinsic abilities—identificatory and empathetic—to see what's going on in our world.

By contrast, the conventional meanings of objects and events—what Panofsky calls iconographical meanings—depend on our historically specific knowledge and our culturally particular situation. "My realization that the lifting of the hat stands for a greeting . . . is peculiar to the western world and is a

residue of medieval chivalry: armed men used to remove their helmets to make clear their peaceful intentions and their confidence in the peaceful intentions of others.” According to Panofsky, these historically and culturally particular meanings can be called “secondary or conventional”; they represent a local coordination of the primary meanings devolved from our ability to see the world. Someone who does not belong to the world of the post-medieval western world—Panofsky imagines an “Australian bushman” or an “ancient Greek”—might not and perhaps *cannot* see the greeting even though he or she might see the man lifting his hat to occur in an indifferent, a friendly, or a hostile way.

Now we might wonder whether and how an acquaintance could or would remove his hat to us in a *hostile* way—Panofsky has already said that we might empathetically apprehend this psychological nuance—if the post-medieval custom or tradition of greeting means “peaceful intention.” There could be a deep conflict, though Panofsky’s cultural history rarely addressed it, between expressional nuances and cultural conventions: by tipping his hat perhaps my friend really wants to blow me off. Indeed, some historical cultures might evolve a different convention in which one can acknowledge someone’s presence by lifting one’s hat *as* a warning or threat. Would this be a greeting at all in the post-medieval western world? Moreover, our friend in the street might *not* remove his hat when he meets us “were he not conscious of the significance of this feat.” Panofsky notices, then, that it might be odd to encounter the hat-removing in worlds that do not include the greeting *as* and *in* the hat-tipping—an oddity at the heart of Wittgenstein’s identification of the peculiarity and the contingency of our (picture-)worlds. (A typical observation: “Suppose

that 2000 years ago . . . someone had constructed the complete mechanism of the steam engine without having the least idea how it could be used as a motor.”<sup>18</sup>) Still, it remains an empirical and a logical possibility that hat-removing in its primary or natural meanings, both factual and expressional, might transpire in a way—and thus in a world—that differs from *our* post-medieval world of pseudo-chivalrous greetings. This world would be essentially different from ours. But it would *look* just the same to us in our world of vision in the morphological or formal configuration of the visual image and the change of detail in it. And here lies the epistemological problem: How would we know, and would it matter?

According to Panofsky, an essential meaning—the object of what he calls iconological analysis—resolves the primary and secondary meanings. In his account, the “intrinsic meaning or content” of a configuration ensures that primary and secondary meanings converge in a unified (“synthetic”) meaning. We know that our acquaintance lifting his hat to us is greeting us in a friendly way—that he is being our *friend*, that he is *greeting* us, and so forth—because his action “can reveal to an experienced observer all that goes to make up his ‘personality’.”<sup>19</sup> We know—we *see*—what we need to know of his “national, social, and educational background [and] the previous history of life and present surroundings” and even of “his individual manner of viewing things and reacting to world which, if rationalized, would have to be called a philosophy.”

Of course, perhaps we can only *see* our friend’s personality and philosophy—they can only be shown to us—in the fact that he greets us in a friendly way. And we have already noted that this friendly greeting can look just like its opposite—like a threat or warning. Panofsky assumes our experience of our friend as well as our ability to “coordinate a large number of similar

observations” about him—possibilities Panofsky builds into his thought experiment in advance insofar as the man in the street has been said to be our acquaintance. But can’t someone we’ve never seen before greet us in a friendly way? And can’t our acquaintance sometimes blow us off? Panofsky provides no reason to suppose that an “intrinsic meaning or content” solves the problem of what’s going on in what we see. In the end, and as he acknowledges, he can say only that “content” offers a resolution of the “form” of what we see in a *circulus methodicus*—a looping recursion of interpretation of our pictures.<sup>20</sup> Panofsky’s iconology proposes to interpret actual pictures, picture-worlds, on the basis of the presumption that the world in our seeing is a picture—a world-picture. The picture-world supposedly inherits and interprets the form of the world-picture (i.e., discovers its “content”). For this reason, Panofsky thinks, it can be understood with considerable confidence or what Wittgenstein later came to call “certainty”—even though the world-picture itself can be nothing but a picture-world that has conventionally resolved possible otherwiseness. But it is equally necessary to see—to show—that the loop must be *all the world is*: “everything that is the case” in or as the world (*Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*) lies in its constitution in recursions of re-viewing it. Here Wittgenstein’s perspective—especially in Forgacs’ pictorial formalization—recalls us to primordial questions of fact, culture, and value that Panofsky’s or other positive documentary projects of historical “contextualization,” however laudable, must often forget.

As if in a direct engagement with Panofsky’s iconology, in the final shot of *Wittgenstein Tractatus*—closing the seventh and last part of the film—a middle-aged man dressed in a street suit approaches a small round table in what seems

to be an outdoor café. We don't recognize the man; he hasn't appeared earlier in the film. The scene gives us few clues to his identity. He seats himself facing the camera, tips his hat toward it, and blows his cigarette smoke sideways out of his mouth—almost as if trying not to blow it in our eyes and almost as if we're in his way. It appears that he doesn't know and maybe doesn't want to know the person behind the camera. To revert to the psychological nuances recognized in Panofsky's thought experiment, the man might be studiously indifferent—possibly even slightly hostile. The tip of the hat seems sardonic. Indeed, we feel the force of the man's exhalation between pursed lips—almost hear the vigorous *hppphhh*. Just before the shot begins, a title gives us the full text of the final lemma of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (7): "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." The silence denoted here is not the silence of a silent movie or the found footage in Forgács' film, in which we don't hear the filmed human beings saying anything. Rather, the film investigates what "we must pass over in silence"—it might be unspeakable—in the fact that "what can be *shown* cannot be *said*" (4.1212). It's the easiest thing in the world to miss what the film shows in what it can't say about the world, about everything that is the case—that is, to overlook the fact that the world it depicts, and because it depicts it, might be entirely otherwise at the same time as it is nothing other (and for us can be nothing other) than what it is. In Forgács' hands, this insight becomes beautiful and optimistic—a matter of Wittgensteinian "faith" or "certainty" or of Panofskyan "confidence"—even as it might be ominous and horrifying. When he tips his hat to us, the man in the film incarnates an open range of possibilities.

## 6. *Circulus Methodicus*: Rewinding and Reversing the World

*Wittgenstein Tractatus* belongs to Forgács' broader project to figure the consubstantiality between everyday human happiness and an unsayable—and in some historical cases an unspeakable—futuraity and fatality shown to be entirely outside it, turning everything upside down or inside out. The film repeatedly proffers a congruence between the two major motifs already noted; as it unwinds or replays the found footage before our eyes—overwinding—we come to see that they're the same thing viewed "from within" or from one side and "from without" or from another side. On the one side, people join hands and dance side by side or in a line or in a circle. On the other side, a dying pig rolls over on itself in its own blood and waste, prodded by booted human feet. (The film solicits us to wonder whether we see the *same* boots on the dancers *and* what seem to us to be the torturers—but we'd have to rewind and replay to be sure. Even then, we would not be *entirely* sure—no matter what we thought we had finally been able to see.) In the opening shot in the fifth part of the film, a dying rabbit, neck or back seemingly broken, crawls round itself in a backwards circle as if trying to put its head back on: "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" (5.6); "whatever we see could be other than it is" (5.634).

As suggested already, however, it might be the easiest thing in the world to miss the deeper fact—distributed throughout the film footage as replayed—that an essential two-wayness or multi-sidedness and an inherent reversibility characterize the whole of the human dance itself: if the dance is not the *Totentanz* or Dance of Death, then maybe it must be, or will be; and if it is a *Totentanz*, then maybe it won't be or needn't be. (In one of the series of highly enigmatic shots that close the last part of the film, a Death-like figure—a street hawker in black

cloak and skull mask—wears a placard that says the same thing, “The Invisible Man Returns,” whether he’s coming or going!<sup>21</sup>) In *Wittgenstein Tractatus*, it’s the essence of the world we’re in that we’re never quite sure whether we’re seeing things “going forwards” or “going backwards” or “right way round,” whether there’s a “change of direction” in the middle of things or “another side” to them, whether things are “going the right way” or “going the wrong way,” what exactly and whether anything will “turn out.” “I am my world—the microcosm” (5.63): A woman enters a swimming pool—she’s walking backwards facing us—she comes around in a circle, always facing us—she steps out of the pool. At any point has she turned around to go another way? Or is she always turning around and backing up and going another way *as* she goes her way? (“The limits of my language are the limits of my world” [5.6].) Toward the very end of the film, an elderly couple prepares a bedroom for use; the old man undresses and goes to bed reading his newspaper (“the world is independent of my will” [6.373]). Is he going to die? The camera seems to zoom in and “go into” a photograph in the newspaper and within it to see scenes shown to be televised (a ping-pong game!)—and then to come back out again (*hinausgestiegen*) into the bedroom, where the old man’s wife is now shown to be dancing with a younger female companion—and touching hands with the old man sitting by her side. Have we gone back in time? Forward? In and out of interconnected worlds? Are we somewhere else altogether? Having a dream? (“Death is not an event of life: we do not live to experience death” [6.4311]; here Wittgenstein’s text continues, though it’s not quoted in the film, “Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits.”) The final fact of the matter always seems to be at, or perhaps just over, the horizon of what we see—the very edge,

or just beyond the edge, of what seems to be shown to be going on. The final horizon of this loop—death—must frame it absolutely. But this is not the same thing as supposing that death *defines* the directions of our life—its being *in* the world. The very unpicturability of our death means we cannot live toward it.<sup>22</sup>

To be sure, at several points in the film we certainly can and do see that what's said in a *language* of describing the world isn't at all what's shown—what's actually going on in what's depicted. For example, the early shot of a rowing man—because he's seated backwards, he seems to be going forwards in reverse—finds a supplement in a later close-up, seemingly drawn from the same or a similar sequence, of a man's action of rowing. On a shot of an arm and hand pushing the oar up, over, down, and around, Forgács has superimposed a graphic notation of a movement *going in the opposite direction*. The contradiction in representations is actually quite hard to see—"how hard it is to see what is right in front of my eyes"—and a viewer could easily overlook it. (At a recent screening, several well-prepared observers of the film—even after multiple viewings, replays, and rewinds—had difficulty seeing the effect.) But the cumulative effect of all the footage in the film provokes a sense that something's not yet wholly aright in what we've seen in relation to what's been said.

As I've intimated, Forgács deploys an inherent *material* and *logical* property of the picture-world of cinema to show the contingency of its world-picture. It's clear at points in the film that in making it Forgács has *actually* replayed the rewind footage, as it were running its backwards forwards—even though we think we're seeing something "going on" in one and the same continuous way.<sup>23</sup> In one notable sequence, we see a man dancing and leaping in a circle; the footage clearly speeds up (that is, fast-forwards) at a certain point and at another

point—even though everything seems to be one continuous shot—seems to be playing (though now at expected or “normal” speed) in rewind. This next-to-final shot in the second part of the film, like earlier shots, explicitly deals with pictures—“it is impossible to tell from the picture alone whether it is true or false” (2.224)—and implicitly with our world *as* a picture (“we picture facts to ourselves”). In another shot, a young woman standing behind a fence bordering the track at a train station looks one way, then the other: is she really doing this, or has the film “rewound” her movement? Is she expecting something to arrive from *both* directions—or do we see something like a reversal of her single and directed expectation? Is everything an effect, a trick, of the found footage—or of its manipulation by the film—or of our viewing? Similarly, a man and a girl standing at the same fence—they seem to be strangers to one another—seem to look toward the same point between them, though there isn’t anything there, then to look in opposite directions. Are they waiting for the same thing, or has the film, rewind-replayed, shown that they could be waiting for different things—or vice versa? (“What is thinkable is also possible” [3.02].) In the third part of the film, we see a series of shots of a group of people in a bright snowy landscape—they are skiing—they put on lotion, they rub the snow into their mouths, they stretch: “Their inner life will always be a mystery.” Or yet again, a man fires a revolver while a female companion clutches his arm (they seem to be at a house party in a country chateau, as if in a scene from Jean Renoir’s *Rules of the Game*); we see the man pull the gun from his inner coat pocket, extend his arm, a flash—and then the whole movement in reverse. Did he really pull the gun on someone or something? Or did he fire it and put it away? We’re never quite sure—even if and perhaps especially when we rewind and replay—that

we're seeing something all the way through, or the same thing different ways through, or different things the same way through, or the same thing both ways, or different things the same way. The film asks us to rewind and replay *as* the indefinitely extended condition of coming around to understand things next time around: maybe *then* we'll see, maybe *there* things will turn out differently.

In much of *Tractatus* it's as if the very same things are simultaneously being seen, or could be seen, from the *other side* of the film stock—the found footage—actually projected before us. Thus in the end *Tractatus*—like other films by Forgács that proffer more overt moral-political perspectives—tends to ask us what side we're really on. To some extent Forgács organizes this question in the film as a formal or structural matter—recognizing intrinsic problems in speaking, seeing, and showing. But it is palpably connected in an enigmatic and elusive way to immediate questions of our moral, social, and cultural affiliations, allegiances, and commitments—the identity of our “side” or “sides.” These commitments inherently contain the possibility of “being on another side,” of “changing sides,” and so forth. But at the same time they can also appear to be—they *must* appear to be—the “only way to look at things.” In this respect, *Tractatus* explores the conditions of possibility of the concrete psychic and political histories explored more explicitly and in relation to particular historical events in other films by Forgács, notably the dislocation and destruction of Central European Jewry and the rise of totalitarian ideologies recorded and remembered in the found footage. I can't take up this matter in any detail here. But it is worth remarking that *WittgensteinTractatus* does not present a readily-apparent *political* perspective; its multi-sided images are too ambiguous for any overt commitment to a specifically political “side” to be inferred by the viewer.

To be sure, the film appears to be sympathetic toward—to identify with—ordinary human beings conducting their ordinary affairs or (as Wittgenstein would have said) simply “going on” in their form of life. To some degree it mourns the fragile existence—seemingly the absolute loss—of these people and their worlds. Indeed, the people shown in the film don’t have to die for us to mourn them. As in other films by Forgács, *Wittgenstein Tractatus* enunciates a proleptic or anticipatory mourning: *we* already know—and in watching the film we dread to see—their destruction. Do *they* also know—do they dread—it too? Again as in other films by Forgács, the simplest and most mundane activities—a glance, a gesture, a word—seem to harbor movements of shattering consequence; they seem to relay forces of change so vast and pervasive and yet so subtle and impalpable that we cannot quite see them as they occur all around us. In such a world, in a world where the unspeakable might occur because it isn’t *sayable*, perhaps it is necessary to “take sides” after all simply in order to see and to say anything—even though this might come to the same thing as being utterly unable to see things in any other way and as saying things that can result in something unspeakable. It is this horrifying yet inescapable condition and structural consequence of moral identification, cultural affiliation, and political commitment as such—rather than any *particular* historical identification, affiliation, or commitment—that concerns Forgács: *things can’t be otherwise*.

When a man walks from left to right in front of us, swinging his arms left and right, his right arm swinging before him is on *our* right, and it’s also on *his* right. But if the action is the same for him, *our* right is *his* left. But if we mimic his action, walking left to right in front of him and swinging our right arms ahead of

us, from his point view *our* right is *his* left. Is it *all the same* to him and us? When a man lifts his hat up and down to us, his hat goes up for him *and* for us. But *his* “up”—is it a friendly greeting? a neutral courtesy? an obsequious obeisance? an irritated put-off? a sardonic put-on? a hostile condescension?—isn’t necessarily ours. *Wittgenstein Tractatus* exposes such incoincident congruences in their unavoidable recursion, asymmetry, and intransitivity—and thus, in turn, sceptically solicits the empathetic morality of the deeper human identifications they require. To understand the man we must know what it’s like *for him* to tip his hat in the way that he does—even though we’re on the other side. To discover this, we feel we’d have to lift our hat, and purse our lips and vigorously blow our cigarette smoke sideways—just as he does. But to do this *just like him*, to feel and to understand the gesture as he does and as it were from within his world, we’d already have to know what he’s doing within his own world, his picture of things—that is to say, we’d already have to be “on his side.” No mere rewinding and replaying—a mere mechanical *Überwindung*—can get us “over there” (*darüber*). The man’s “inner life will always be a mystery”: we can show this place only as another side of where *we* are.

In the end Panofsky identified this *circulus methodicus* only in order to dismiss it. He believed it could be controlled—even overcome—in the documentary, experimental method of cultural history. In particular, the historical-cultural localizations of iconological interpretation would try to guarantee an understanding of our hat-tipping man—Panofsky’s or Forgacs’—in our experienced observation of his personality and philosophy. But when Forgacs immerses us in the historical and cultural situation of filmed worlds, however vague their locations, ultimately he means to call up our primal empathetic

identifications—our visceral appreciation of the meaningfulness of people’s lives—precisely because he recognizes their limited vision. Like Wittgenstein before him, then, Forgács admits a leap of faith: since what I see could be entirely otherwise, what I see—it’s how things *must be* for me, the “totality of the facts” (1.1), the “limits of my world” (5.6)—partakes of the “mystical” in the fact that it exists at all in the seemingly particular and certain way that it does for me (*Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern daß sie ist*—“It is not *how* the things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists” [6.44]). In his filmic repossession of the world—rewound, overplayed, reversed—Forgács’ found footage, sometimes unsettling, often ambiguous, is always sacramental: “Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical” (6.45).<sup>24</sup>

In *Wittgenstein Tractatus*, the happenstance incidence, the astonishing preservation, the manifest unlikelihood of the found footage becomes a representation of human consciousness. In its blithe and deadly existence it is a reminder of everything that could have been pictured that was never actually filmed. In *my* world it’s the greatest surprise of all that the world—everything that’s the case, my affair, my failure, my downfall (*alles was der Fall ist*)—isn’t a surprise at all, for it would be a surprise beyond measure—certainly unsayable, maybe unspeakable—that the world *is* a surprise. As Forgács shows, however, it’s all there *in* the world at the press of a button.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), and *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> For Wittgenstein's activities in these nondiscursive media, see especially Paul Wijdeveld, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Architect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Forgács's film also sometimes quotes from writings by Wittgenstein other than the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, namely, the short remarks (mostly written in the 1930s and 1940s) selected by Georg Henrik von Wright from Wittgenstein's *Nachlass*; these were edited by Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman and first published in 1977 as *Vermischte Bemerkungen*. I have quoted them from the revised edition of the original German texts selected by von Wright, edited by Alois Pichler, translated by Peter Winch under the English title *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). The textual origins of these particular remarks are nowhere cited in the film.

In Forgács' original version of *WittgensteinTractatus*, the quotations from Wittgenstein, whether written or spoken, are given in Hungarian translation. I cannot evaluate this translation or Forgács' use of it. In the English-language version, also produced in 1992, many of the Hungarian titles have been preserved, but English titles have been added. Naturally this addition changes the sequence and layering of certain pictorial images in relation to accompanying text. Moreover, the Hungarian voice-over has largely been replaced by an English voice-over spoken by Forgács himself. At a few points in the English

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film there are brief quotations spoken in Hungarian by a female voice, as if to recall Wittgenstein's strange and self-revealing question—cited in the film itself—whether there might be “something feminine about this way of thinking,” namely, the way of thinking recommended by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, I quote the German text of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (it differs in small ways from the German original of 1921) published with a facing English translation by David F. Pears and Brian F. McGuinness (2<sup>nd</sup> imp. with corr., Oxford: Blackwell, 1963). This translation replaced the influential translation by C. K. Ogden (assisted by Frank P. Ramsey) published in 1922 and corrected in 1933—the translation used by Forgács in preparing the English version of his film. I have used Pears and McGuinness' translation. But as the quoted sentence reminds us, Pears and McGuinness' translation is not always literal or fully accurate. In 2.02, Wittgenstein clearly says “the object is simple.”

<sup>6</sup> Max Black, *A Companion to Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> Black, *Companion*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Black, *Companion*, p. 377. Forgacs uses this translation in the English film.

<sup>9</sup> Black, *Companion*, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> See Black, *Companion*, pp. 378-86.

<sup>11</sup> Photographs and discussions of these artifacts and activities can be found in Wijdeveld, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Architect*.

<sup>12</sup> My quotations cite the quotations from Wittgenstein's writings that the film offers alongside the image track in the interleaved or superimposed titles or in the voice-over. In the present discussion it isn't possible to distinguish between

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these methods of quotation, but a full consideration should differentiate the passages that are “spoken” by a human voice and those meant to be “read” (by our eyes) as part of the image track—the pictured world. The full calibration of image- and sound-tracks—and of saying and seeing and of picturing and hearing (both visual scenes and spoken words)—is extremely complex. In part the film aims to *show* the dense nesting of seeing and speaking.

<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 52e.

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 44e.

<sup>15</sup> “Zum Problem der Beschreibung und Inhaltsdeutung von Werken der bildenden Kunst,” *Logos* 21 (1932), 103-19, heavily revised and translated by Panofsky as the first part of “Studies in Iconology: Introductory,” *Studies in Iconology*, 3-17 (quotation from p. 3; italics in original).

<sup>16</sup> It would take me too far afield to consider the similarities and differences between Panofsky’s iconology (in its German and English variants) and Wittgenstein’s early “picture theory of meaning” and later doctrine of “language games” woven into a natural and cultural “form of life.” Despite striking convergences in their phrasing, I can find no evidence that Panofsky had read Wittgenstein in the 1920s or that Wittgenstein had read Panofsky in the 1930s or later. Panofsky opposed the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger—a feature of Wittgenstein’s thought that remains to be fully investigated.

<sup>17</sup> Panofsky presumably used quotation marks because empathy had played a controversial role in German and Anglo-American philosophical psychology since the 1890s. Typically it referred to the transfer of subjective states of

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irritation of the organism to its interpretation of objective conditions. As such, empathy is an identification, virtually a transference—but it is not “simple.”

<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 49e. For the best explication of “seeing-as” and “seeing-in” in pictorial representation, see Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 205-26; Wittgenstein’s principal discussion can be found in *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), Book II, section xi.

<sup>19</sup> Again, Panofsky enclosed a tendentious psychological term in quotation marks. Sometimes Panofsky’s iconology has been taken to be a disguised form of *Geistesgeschichte* or even *Volksgeistesgeschichte*—the interpretation of historically specific cultural conventions in terms of essential (even ethnic or racial) habits, sets of mind, or worldviews. But Panofsky used the term “personality” in a strictly psychological sense to denote the matrix of resolution of the potential disjunction and conflict in the network of relays of primary and secondary meanings acquired and coordinated in individual consciousness.

<sup>20</sup> See especially *Studies in Iconology*, 11, n. 3. For discussion of the *circulus methodicus*—in visual recognition and in *Kunstwissenschaftliche* retracing of its operations—see Whitney Davis, “Visuality and Pictoriality,” *Res* 46 (2004), 9-31.

<sup>21</sup> Although it’s one of the few examples of writing or “speaking” captured in the film’s found footage, the placard is not readable to the English-speaking viewer. According to Forgács, the street hawker is advertising the 1940 American film *Return of the Invisible Man*—sequel to the original *Invisible Man*, released in 1933 and starring Vincent Price—on the Grand Boulevard in Budapest. Though presumably the hawker is supposed to look like the bandaged Invisible Man in

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the films, he is dressed in the traditional garb of Death as we would see it in medieval wood-cuts or in films like Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*.

<sup>22</sup> This is not the place to address Panofsky's—or Wittgenstein's or Forgacs'—dispute with the founding terms of Heidegger's existential phenomenology and its interpretation of world-disclosure in relation to "being-towards-death." For intimations of the perspectives—as it were humanist—that Panofsky (and conceivably Wittgenstein and Forgacs) might wish to counterpose to Heidegger's, see Ernst Cassirer, "Heidegger and the Problem of Death," *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 4, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, eds. J. M. Krois and D. P. Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Needless to say, Forgacs' work here and elsewhere examines traditional or analog pictorial representations (e.g., painting, photography, and classic film) in view of effects constructed in, and by now fully associated with, computer-driven manipulations of *video* presentation—forward; pause; rewind; (re)play—in turn dependent on digitization. I cannot pursue this topic here, but we shouldn't fail to remark the historical world-making role of *television* as documented in some of the found footage used in *Wittgenstein Tractatus*—at least as the footage is re-viewed by Forgacs. One might say that in *Wittgenstein Tractatus*, as in several other films, Forgacs tries to repossess our world—a world now inherently self-televising—as it were *outside* television by attempting technically to overwind/reverse the one-wayness of institutionalized televisual broadcasting. For parallel projects in photography and painting, see Whitney Davis, "How to Make Analogies in a Digital Age," *October* 117 (forthcoming).

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<sup>24</sup> Wittgenstein writes *begrenzte*—bounded, fenced, frontiered, framed. My world is bounded and framed by my language, by the structure of the visual field, and by the logical/mystical configuration of “facts” or propositions—i.e., by pictures.

<sup>25</sup> The ideas developed in this essay germinated while I was a scholar in residence at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 2001-2002. I’m especially grateful to Peter Forgács for several discussions about his work and for answering my queries, and to Bill Nichols, Murray Smith, and Thomas Wartenburg for incisive comments on drafts of this essay. Steven C. Seid of the Pacific Film Archive, UC Berkeley, helped with technical issues.