

### Hidden in Plain Sight: (Re)Framing History in Ryan Garrett's *Things to Remember* (2008)

In the experimental documentary film *Things to Remember* (2008), Ryan Garrett unveils the “surreal experience of being hidden in plain sight through a series of interconnected expository vignettes, both factual and imagined.”<sup>1</sup> The film chronicles the covert occupation of the town of Oak Ridge, Tennessee by the United States government during the 1940’s development of the atomic bomb in response to World War II. Garrett explains that he “was drawn to the city as a historical reminder of our nation's own wartime secrets.”<sup>2</sup> *Things to Remember* revisits the history of Oak Ridge in an attempt to (re)frame our understanding of present-day conflicts in a new context. By lending the film a historical frame, Garrett underscores the idea that history is often constructed by and reflects the framework of contemporary systems of belief.

The film is divided into four sections and begins with “Preface,” depicting images from William Eggleston’s photographic catalogue *Los Alamos*, a series whose title was inspired by the Los Alamos Laboratory for the invention of atomic weapons. Automated voiceover reveals that Eggleston originally conceived the *Los Alamos* images to be exhibited with no commentary or hierarchy. This “democratic way of looking around, so that nothing was more or less important” helps viewers to understand why the images included in the series capture more than just the city of Los Alamos, New Mexico or its laboratory. Rather, they are snapshots taken from a road trip across the United States, offering regional photos of the mundane or commonplace images of everyday life. By titling the series *Los Alamos*, Eggleston offers an interpretive frame that informs each image of roadside Americana with the possible threat of nuclear armament inherent to Los Alamos, without exception to geographic location.

Opening *Things to Remember* with a focus on Eggleston’s *Los Alamos*, Garrett contextualizes his narrative within a similar framework. In the second segment, titled

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://ryangarrett.info/projects/things/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

“Condemnation,” the film turns its attention toward its main subject, Oak Ridge, Tennessee and the secrecy surrounding the town’s construction and operation. The (still automated) voiceover explains the government prohibition of public photography within Oak Ridge and its employment of James Edward Westcott as the town’s sole photographer. Westcott was instructed by the N.S.A. to archive the daily operations of Oak Ridge in a series of photos that are staged to be palatable for public consumption while at the same time obscuring the town’s more furtive government dealings.

*Things to Remember* revisits this subterfuge in the twenty-first century when we learn that one week after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, a camera was placed in the Y-12 National Security Complex at Oak Ridge. The camera was to take one frame of film per day of the compound. Only frames with compromised visibility, however, were permitted for public release. Those with clear visibility were destroyed and replaced with approved photos “manually chosen from the city’s archive.” Visually, Garrett frames the film’s narration at this point with a sequence of still images that quickly jump between shots from the Oak Ridge archive and a series of disembodied bird wings. The effect is one that shows the severed wings of the birds rapidly interspersed with sterilized scenes from U.S. history, visually reenacting the film’s narrative of historical obfuscation while at the same time possibly alluding to the impotence (in the image of the severed wing) of a city whose identity and history are bound up and hidden behind fences.

Yet the film’s next segment, “The World As It Were,” reveals that the Oak Ridge community felt anything but burdened by government occupation and confinement. Interviews with Oakridge residents affirm that much of the community considered the revelation of an atomic bomb in their midst an indication of the nation’s victorious effort to preserve “the world as it were in those days.” In fact we learn that under the N.S.A.’s perceived cloak of protection, the town considered itself a “utopian” refuge. Here, Garrett juxtaposes such nationalist sentiments with text and photographic footage extracted from the testimony of Yoshito Matsushige, a Japanese photojournalist who survived the bombing of Hiroshima and took the only five

photographs of the tragedy known to exist from that day.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps what is most compelling about Garrett's treatment of Matsushige's traumatic testimony is the visual disruption that occurs between the onscreen text and the voiceover narration such that what is being said does not match what is written. Creating a rift between text and narrative in this way, Garrett calls attention to the uncertainty of memory as historical referent. In doing so, he disorients the framework of the narrative such that Matsushige's testimony then becomes a text we can only interpret within the context of our own present perspective and shifting experience.

The trope of the framing is visually represented throughout the film by the turning pages of Eggleston's photographic catalogue. At different points in *Things to Remember*, we are shown images from *Los Alamos* that eventually are presented off frame or only partially revealed. The photographs serve both to structure and decenter the narrative frame, reminding us of "what is hidden in plain sight." In "Afterword," the film's final segment, the narrator (now speaking in a human voice) describes a solitary film resting in the archives of the Oak Ridge Public Library that allegedly documents a fire that broke out at the library in 1949, the same year the government removed its fences from the city and lifted its prohibition on photography. According to the narrator, rumor has it that an embittered town resident initiated the fire, upset by government abandonment. Visually, we are shown a black and white montage of shots from the aptly named *Library Fire* footage. The video's final narration explains that this "memorial to the loss of memory, now brittle and in latent stages of its own decay, is perhaps the earliest known film shot by a resident of Oak Ridge."

In *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, Eric Fernie writes "there is a sense in which all history is contemporary history, that is, that we can only be aware of the past in so far as it has survived into and is experienced in the present" (343). In this light, *Things to Remember* can be seen not only as a memorial to the past, but also reclamation of forgotten history through contemporary reframing. Certainly, the film takes on renewed relevance considering the very

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.inicom.com/hibakusha/yoshito.html>

recent and mounting accusations by American allies against the invasive use of surveillance by the U.S. National Security Agency. From this perspective, *Things to Remember* might best be framed as a possible cautionary tale for the masses.