

Fact, Fiction, and Storytelling in Omer Fast's *The Casting* (2007)

In *The Casting* (2007), Omer Fast approaches memory through storytelling, recasting his subject's personal experience amidst the trauma of wartime in Iraq. Memories are fragmented, scattered, and interwoven in their presentation. As the video opens the onscreen actors remain still, as if mannequins frozen in time. Yet the motion of the camera and the narrative voiceover suggests that the viewer is witnessing a filmic tableau, not unlike looking into a diorama with its characteristically absent fourth wall. The effect heightens audience awareness, locating him or her as witness to the action that is about to unfold.

We soon learn the speaker is an American soldier that has returned home from Iraq and is auditioning for an acting role. He is asked, "How do you feel about improvising?" which leads him to digress into two separate stories from the past, played out on a split screen from multiple perspectives. One story involves an incident that occurred during the narrator's tour of duty in Iraq. The second story involves a blind date while on leave in Germany.

Throughout most of *The Casting*, the split screens portray dual images from a single story. For instance, while on a date the soldier is shown meeting the German girl's family at the dinner table, and simultaneously meeting her parents in the living room by the Christmas tree. Similarly, the second story depicts the soldier on the side of the road in Iraq taking aim at an oncoming car, side by side with images of the Iraqi victims of the shooting. By combining images in this way, Fast emphasizes the precarious and shifting nature of memory, most especially in times of trauma. Reconstructions of these memories are played out onscreen through the juxtaposition of various images signifying a singular narrative.

Visual imagery begins to dovetail between the alternating stories as the narratives bleed into one another. At certain points in *The Casting*, the stories and their corresponding images overlap such that it becomes difficult to discern where one story begins and the other ends. For example, at the 8.41 minute mark, the split screen reveals the couple in conversation on the left, and the “wailing” woman on the right, with voiceover transitioning between a description of the confusion after the shooting in Iraq and the soldier’s apologies to the German girl for “freaking out.” Interestingly, the point at which memory moves from the personal to the political is located at the intersection between the two narratives and their resonant images.

In an interview with *Museo Magazine*, Fast reveals that the story of the German girl cutting herself is a complete fiction invented in the process of editing.¹ Nowhere in the soldier’s narrative is the word “scars” spoken, but is actually a combination of the word “scared” and “cars” improvised by Fast to advance the story. In this sense, the opening question in *The Casting* (“how do you feel about improvising?”) takes on dual meaning as it implies not only the soldier’s narrative but the artist’s own project of storytelling. The image of the split screen then becomes the perfect medium to convey the recursive images and narratives that Fast manipulates. It would be really great to see *The Casting* as intended in exhibition form, with double-sided projection screens and the original interview with Fast all playing at once.

¹ <http://www.museomagazine.com/OMER-FAST>