

Between Seeing and Understanding: Teaching Documentary Film and the Holocaust

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DO DOCUMENTARIES TELL THE TRUTH? CAN WE RELY ON THEM AS SOURCES OF history? In my course Documentary Film and History, taught within the history stream at UNSW for level-three undergraduate students, these are the kinds of questions I ask students to consider, alongside questions of historical context, representation and memory. This is not a course specifically about Holocaust film, and indeed, only two weeks out of thirteen are devoted to Holocaust documentary. But as the most mapped and theorised event in debates around questions of historical representation and responsibility, memory and interpretation, silence and forgetting, ethics and testimony, the Holocaust is a touchstone of reference throughout the semester.

Courses that explore film are an increasing rarity in history offerings at Australian universities, despite its use as a learning tool in student classrooms and the ubiquity of film as a dominant mode of historical expression. This is especially so when it comes to the Holocaust and the Nazis, who seem to hold a bigger attraction for television audiences these days than their victims.¹ Whatever one thinks of

¹ For example, currently on Australia's SBS television network is a documentary called *Hunting the Nazi Gold Train* (Clifton and Koscia) while a cursory glance at Foxtel's History Channel reveals that at the time of writing, the third season of *Hunting Hitler* (Daniels and Lealos) is occupying prime time viewing. *Hitler's Olympics* (Kontur) is also showing, while *Magda Goebbels: First Lady of the Third Reich* (Vitkine) recently finished, as did *Hitler's Circle of Evil* (Hinchcliffe et al.).

these productions, it is true to say that the Holocaust and the Nazis continue to attract audiences and ratings, and that students who come to university have a ready databank of images in their heads associated with this most famous 'event' of all time. In fact, if asked to define documentary film, many students typically respond with examples about the Holocaust. The challenge that I come up against time and again in my own treatment of the subject concerns the ethics of representation, and specifically, the showing of atrocity footage. This is partly to do with my suspicion that the students of today are more inured to violent imagery, due to its prevalence in games, television news and social media (while paradoxically demanding more 'trigger warnings' by lecturers on content that might cause an emotional reaction in students) (Bristow et al.). But it is also partly to do with the question of whether the banquet of Holocaust television and its popularity as a source of fiction has led to a dangerous kind of banality, the banality identified by Tony Judt of 'overuse': the numbing, desensitising effect of looking at images of the Holocaust too many times, so that the horror they describe becomes almost meaningless.

The question of the usefulness of atrocity images in historical understanding is a longstanding one, and thinkers have long argued, following Adorno's famous dictum, that the genocide at the heart of the Holocaust was unrepresentable; few images of the extermination machinery, the gas chambers at work, actually exist. The Nazis attempted to eradicate all traces of the genocide and any visible evidence of their crimes, in effect, ensuring the 'erasure of its witnesses' (Felman 211). For this reason, scholars have held up Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*, a film that eschews the use of a single piece of archival footage as the primary articulation of the idea that the Holocaust should be understood as an 'event without a witness' and further, as 'an event without an image' (Wacjman 239). Lanzmann's decision to avoid atrocity footage in his film and instead to keep the camera firmly fixed on the present represented an important break with previous films about the genocide. In my own teaching practice, I have indeed found that Lanzmann's epic has a profound effect on students, making them active participants rather than passive spectators and engaging them with the problems of erasure, testimony, witnessing, bystanders and memory.

In recent years, there has been growing impatience with the privileged status of *Shoah*, and scholars have questioned Lanzmann's hyperbolic and provocative claims about the Holocaust's unrepresentability, his creation of taboos around images of trauma and his 'sacralising' of the genocide (see for example Saxton). There isn't room to discuss this far-reaching debate here, suffice to say that perhaps different representations play different roles in Holocaust teaching and that one doesn't necessarily trump or cancel out the other. Students also watch Alain Resnais's much earlier *Nuit et Brouillard* (1956), for example, which contains other kinds of ellipses, not least the fact that the genocide was a Jewish one, but

which also makes liberal use of extant archival images, in particular footage of the concentration camps taken at, and after, liberation. Students find the most horrifying moment of the film not to be the gross photographs of the piles of shoes taken from gassed victims, or mountains of hair, or even the pit of burning bodies. Instead, it is the scene in which Resnais's camera enters an empty gas chamber at Auschwitz, and the commentary directs the audience to the fingernail marks in the concrete ceiling made by those murdered there. They strain to see these scratches in the concrete, even as they strain to comprehend the atrocity that took place there. The film forces an interrogation, as Libby Saxton has noted, of the limits of vision and knowledge in the face of the Holocaust (91). Students are asked to think about how these fleeting images of violence might be used in ways that provoke a responsibility in the viewer, rather than simply manipulate emotion.

Recently, in relation to this question, I presented a talk at the Sydney Jewish Museum to a mostly older, wiser and more aware audience than is usual in the university lecture theatre. I spoke about another filmmaker whose work I also use in my teaching practice around the topic of the Holocaust and its representability (Balint). Peter Forgács began collecting home movies in the 1980s, many of them Jewish, from the 1930s and 1940s, building an archive of over 800 hours of footage and oral histories from which he has created fifteen films, which together make up his signature film series *Private Hungary*. As a teaching device about the Holocaust, Forgács's films are unique. Using the film material usually of one individual shot over a long period of time, he has crafted them into narratives that chart their private world against the temporal backdrop of their wider historical universe. These historical compositions not only evoke past worlds lost forever to historical events, but, more importantly, show the drama and trauma of history at the personal level (Spieker).

Forgács evokes what he calls a 'Hitchcockian melody' in his films, and this device is particularly evident in the final scenes of *The Maelstrom*, a film constructed around the Dutch home movies of Max Peereboom. In this primal scene, Peereboom has turned the camera on himself as he sits with his wife, Annie, and her mother around the kitchen table. What we see through Max's lens is simply a cosy evening scene where Annie and her mother sew, Max reads the paper and smokes. We have already been part of their lives for an hour, watching them marry, build homes, have babies who grow into toddlers, and then witnessing the rapid constriction of their lives under Nazi laws as they lose their jobs, their homes and their freedom. Through Forgács's intervention, we are made aware that this is their final preparations for their imminent 'relocation' to a 'work camp' in Poland. The children are put to bed. A narrator recites the items each deportee is allowed to take with them to Auschwitz: a cup, a mug, a pullover, two pairs of socks, two pairs of underwear, two shirts, two blankets, one napkin, one towel.

Watching this film, students find, as Forgács intended, that they are on the edge of their seats. They already know what is going to happen. The possession of historical knowledge has transformed them from spectators into witnesses. In other words, rather than passive observers we become active participants: it is we who conjure the images of gas chambers. 'It is like the suspense of a Hitchcock film', Forgács explains.

We know ahead of time that the innocent victim will fall into the hands of the killer. We want to warn him/her; watch out! And our palms are sweating. We can't help, and here—in my films—it anticipates real blood, real suffering, we always have that in mind even if we never see it. (cited in Nichols 9)

At the end of the film, we learn that Annie, Max, their children and every one of Max's large family, except the youngest brother, Simon, were murdered. Simon returned to Amsterdam at the end of the war and recovered the films, buried by a family friend.

During question time at the museum, one elderly gentleman asked a question. How, he said, could a film such as this, not be used in a completely different way? This footage, as all home movies once did, focuses only on the happy moments; there is no suffering, there is nothing to prove that people were persecuted. Couldn't Holocaust deniers make better use of a film such as this? At that moment, I could only think of a comment by Janina Struk in her book, *Photographing the Holocaust*, about the famous photo of the old woman and two children trudging the long track leading to the gas chamber at Birkenau.

Whoever they were, they have been condemned to tread the path for ever ... They had no choice but to be photographed. Now they have no choice but to be viewed by posterity. Didn't they suffer enough the first time around? (Struk 216)

I have found that Forgács's films of strong, vibrant people trying to live ordinary lives, to celebrate the ordinary moments, even as the world around them collapses, enables a better understanding of them as human for this generation of students than the brutalising images we associate more commonly with the victims of the Holocaust. Empathy is a difficult concept, its political potential fought over by philosophers and thinkers. However, it is also true, as this man's question reminds us, that films such as *The Maelstrom* are not enough. It takes a whole swathe of educational tools to put *The Maelstrom* into focus, to allow students to anticipate the full horror of the fate of the exuberant family of Max and Annie, and to begin to try to understand (a lifelong project) the Holocaust. But his question is an important one, and one we should be asking all of our students. Who is doing the

looking? How does this change the image? We should be thinking not only about the ethics of representation, but the ethics of spectatorship, something that teachers of film often neglect.

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