

*The Past and Memory  
in Archive of Lives:  
Justyna Łuczaj-Salej's Impressionist  
Historical Documentary*

In the history of the Polish historical documentaries devoted to the theme of World War II, there is no shortage of films whose provenance is tied to the discovery of unique archival materials – to cite for example *Po-lin. Flecks of Memory (Po-lin. Okruchy pamięci, 2008)* by Jolanta Dylewska or *Letters from the Barricade (Listy z barykady, 2008)* by Ewa Żmigrodzka as but two such films.[1] Among the archival materials used as a point of departure for the creation of a film image of the past, very often photographs are the main medium. In the case of iconographic films, photographs have become the fundamental and, at the same time, the most important component of the picture. The films made in the 1960s, *Fleischer's Album (Album Fleischera, 1962)* by Janusz Majewski and *Just Another Day for Gestapo Officer Schmidt (Powszedni dzień gestapowca Schmidta, 1963)* by Jerzy Ziarnik, can be said to have begun the tradition of the Polish historical photo-documentaries. Both, as Mikołaj Jazdon notes, “established a new method, as if integrated with the subject matter itself. Polish films on World War II became a specialty, ones that used photographic documentation from a range of sources”.[2]

At present, documentary films based on photographic materials are considered to be a separate stream of the Polish documentary school.[3] Archival photographs represent in addition a basic element of construction in such film documents as *Photographer (Fotoamator, 1998)* by Dariusz Jabłoński or *The Portraitist (Portrecista, 2005)* by Ireneusz Dobrowolski (despite the fact that they are not typically ‘true’ iconographic films). Polish historical documentary film makers recounting stories very often make use of photographs taken by the German occupying forces, often grouped into particular collections.

[1] Jolanta Dylewska found 19 short films in the form of home movies. These were filmed in the 1920s and 1930s by American Jews, who visited their relations living in Central European shtetls. The narration of the film *Letters from the Barricade [Listy z barykady]* by Ewa Żmigrodzka was constructed around the collection of letters of the Powstańczej Poczty Polowej (Field Partisan Post) offered for sale by the philatelic-numismatic auction house Ulrich Felzmann Brief-

marken Auktionen, Düsseldorf in 2008 and bought at auction by the Warsaw Uprising Museum.

[2] M. Jazdon, “Fotografie w roli głównej. O polskim filmie ikonograficznym ze zdjęć” [Photographs in the Main Role. On Polish Iconographic Cinema Based on Photographs], *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2006, no. 54–55, p. 216.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 224.

Such photographs have a wide ranging genesis and usually were part of the Nazi documentation or materials created for propaganda purposes – in some cases arising out of the personal interests of the Nazi photographers.[4]

In 1997, the American anthropologist Gretchen E. Schafft at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington chanced upon a unique set of collections from World War Two of documentation collected by Nazi scientists employed at the Institut für Deutsche Ostarbeit (IDO), Sektion für Rasse- und Volkstumforschung (Racial and National Traditions Research). These materials were 10 years later passed over to the Jagiellonian University Archive.[5] Among the research materials collected by the Nazis – packed into 88 boxes – there were slides, coloured as well as black and white photographs, psychological tests, sociological questionnaires, hair samples, fingerprints and the files of people subjected to research. All these in fact constitute a basis for Justyna Łuczaj-Salej's film *The Archive of Existing Cases* (*Archiwum istnieje*, 2009).

The documentary *Archiwum istnieje* tells a story of the work conducted by Nazi anthropologists searching among the population of occupied Poland for representatives of the Aryan race; research into the 'purity of racial blood', the 'racial quality' of those living in the General Government. For the purposes of the conducted research, German scientists collected among others, photographic documentation – those subject to investigations had a series of photos taken: en face, profile, and with the head lent back so that the neck was visible. Everyday life in the areas where the materials were collected was also photographed for research in the hamlets of Podhale and in the Tarnów Ghetto. Among the Nazi documentation, Justyna Łuczaj-Salej chooses mainly the photographs of children of various ages, then less numerous photographs of men, women and, more rarely, human hands and feet. The audience is struck in this instance most of all by the faces, which change as if in a kaleidoscope.

The film places the photographs taken by the Nazis into a new context, presenting them under a microscope as it were. This type of cinematographic operation allows the audience to look in greater detail at the faces of people that were photographed and thereby see their every expression and their eyes, thus reinstating the person, once captured on these photographs and now no longer presented as a mere 'subject' of racial research.

[4] As Mikołaj Jazdon notes: "War crimes, images of the Holocaust, were captured on the photographer's plate. In this context the victims rarely had an opportunity to record their fate on a photo. One of the faces of 'everyday fascism' is in fact the mass drive of thousands of Wehrmacht, SS, police and Nazi officials to record their wartime "journeys" with the aid of cameras, inserting into their albums the photos of executions, in which they took part. M. Jazdon, op. cit., p. 217. The function and significance of

such photos taken by Nazis is discussed in: J. Struk, *Holocaust w fotografiach. Interpretacja dowodów* [original: *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*, I.B. Tauris, 2004], trans. M. Antosiewicz, Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2007 [K. Mąka-Malatyńska].

[5] The Nazis dissolved the University and in its place created the IDO in 1940 established by Governor Hans Frank.

The director managed to find people who during World War II were subject to Nazi research and whose files were preserved among the collected materials. These in turn become the protagonists of the film document *Archiwum istnień*. The now elderly people sitting in front of a camera peruse the photographs from the Second World War. On some they recognise themselves, their family and closest friends. In this documentary by Łuczaj-Salej the past is confronted with the present, and commented on from the window of the present-day. The faces of people in the photographs are placed against the faces of people now of advanced age, and against the faces of those portrayed in the photographs as children and teenagers. According to the film director: “The film *Archiwum istnień* is not strictly speaking, a historical one, but rather an impressionistic landscape, an emotional journey”.<sup>[6]</sup>

Four elderly women, where the film is being shot, sit in exactly the same way they were captured in the Nazi photographs – the very same pose. In a moment, one of them takes part in a particular local vision – reconstructing events from the past, pointing to specific places and objects, and relates the tragic circumstances which during World War II were played out in the family home. This Jewish woman, well and truly advanced in age, peruses the photographs in which she, her mother and brother can be seen. She speaks to the camera on the wartime trials of her family and attempts to add further details, reconstructing the last road her mother took, trying to place herself in that time and visualise her mother going to her death...

The photographs taken by the Nazis, which after all these years – the protagonists of the documentary happened to see no doubt for the first time in their life – set into train the cogwheels of memory. The photographs, part of Nazi documentation for racial research, also begin to fulfil another function. Paradoxically they become in some instances an impulse for a sentimental journey into the past – evoking memories and evoking the past into the living present. Looking at the photographs therefore provides the opportunity for stories on the circumstances in which they were taken, but also to recall family and friends, the family home and childhood – not only the one marked by the traumas of war. In the male hand that was photographed, measured with the aid of a ruler, one of the women recognises the hand of her father: “and here’s dad’s hand; these were the hands that used to strike me”. Another woman recognises the foot of her mother: “mummy always wore an apron”. Yet another protagonist of the documentary, shuffling through the photographs, has her attention suddenly drawn by a jumper she used to wear in childhood and now remembers that in fact this very jumper was responsible for her school nickname ‘Hanusia Zielona’ [Hanusia Green]. Another elderly woman recognises herself and her sister in one of the photographs: “we embroidered these shirts” and finally another, recalls the sweater her father crocheted for her...

[6] NN, *Archiwum istnień* krośnianki Justyny Łuczaj in TVP Kultura, <<http://www.neon.info>.

pl/2011/02/14/archiwum-istnien-krosnianki-justyny-luczaj-w-tvp-kultura> [accessed: 18.11.2013].

These Nazi photographs, taken for the purposes of racial research, after well over a half-century assume a particular sentimental value for those captured in them. This surprising fact would appear to rise from the very nature of the photographs, from their ties to nostalgia and all that it is associated with. Susan Sontag writes:

All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.[7]

The process of the documentary's protagonists looking through the photographs at times releases emotions, similar to those when studying photos in the family album. In this particular case the women examine particular photographs and recognise themselves and their loved ones, and comment on particular elements of the pictures. As Marianna Michałowska notes, looking through family albums is "set in the ritual of telling stories", and is "carried out by pointing to people in the photographs and building the narration". Michałowska recognises these elements as essential for "the construction of the family picture".[8]

Justyna Łuczaj-Salej exploits the Nazi archival materials not only in relation to the visual dimension of the film documentary, but also the audio one. The director incorporates into her project the correspondence of Nazi scientists concerning the research conducted, its results and personal matters. The letters read off camera (read by Grażyna Szapołowska, Katarzyna Herman and Mariusz Benoit) also contain a reference to their author's characteristics and thereby build a psychological portrait of the Nazi scientists by showing their attitude to their work and so-called subjects under research. The correspondence demonstrates the racism of their authors, their scientific and pseudo-scientific jargon, as well as elements of fascist rhetoric. The most striking, however, are the euphemisms in the language used, the tone of those putting pen to paper in the context of Nazi crimes:

I would like to make a proposition regarding the registration of Jews. Because at present none of us is able to leave our place of work for any considerable period of time, would it be possible for you, if the suggestion that I have put forward, to in the first instance carry out the registration of a hundred families so as to save at least a part of the material, in case it were necessary to undertake certain steps.

At this moment a total reorganisation is being conducted. Among our Jews there is almost no one left and our materials already therefore have become highly prized. Please find attached to this letter a list of works on Jews – wishing you an amusing read.

The ironic, bitter finale of the film is the fragment of the letter read out by Grażyna Szapołowska, in which one of the Nazi scientists writes:

[7] S. Sontag, *On Photography*, Carl Hanser, New York 1977, p. 15.

[8] M. Michałowska, *Obraz utajony. Szkice o fotografii*

*i pamięci* [*The Hidden Image. Sketches on Photography and Memory*], Galeria f5 & Księgarnia Fotograficzna, Kraków 2007, p. 18.

How is the matter of the organisation of material progressing? The situation is that I need a complete set of materials from about 600 people, for I would like to complete my habilitation. I recall all those pleasant days in Tarnów and we all look forward to more amusement. Did you manage to find a woman's pair of Wellingtons? I'll have a look, maybe find some for you here – according to the 100 –year calendar, in August it shall rain non-stop.

The accounts of research in the Tarnów Ghetto found in letters and their results are set in counterpoint to the recollections found in the stories of the Poles. An elderly man tells the story of the bestial murder of Jewish children whose little heads the Nazis splattered against a nearby boulder. This evokes the memory of the luxuriantly growing raspberries in this place that, however, no one would pick, aware that “they are growing on Jewish blood”. The carefree tone of the letters that are mentioned, the portrayals relating to methodically conducted murders, are confronted with the document by Łuczaj-Salej in the complete drama of what the eyewitnesses have to say. In *Archiwum istnieje* further layers of meaning arise as a result of the complexity of the montage. In her documentary Justyna Łuczaj-Salej makes use of various fragments of Nazi documentary films in the so-called General Government Chronicles. It is this source whence the film commercial singing the praises of German dolls that have ‘real hair’ comes, which is added to *Archiwum istnieje*. The commercial for toys is set against the fragment of another film where the audience can see a frightened girl, whose long fair is being brushed.

The documentary film *Archiwum istnieje* by Justyna Łuczaj-Salej no doubt refers to the tradition of Polish artistic documentaries, where the informative function is of equal importance as the artistic, aesthetic, part of the tradition of the Polish iconographic documentary film based on photographs. The documentary manifests a particular concern for the plastic, carefully composed images (the director has a background in fine arts), as well as the thorough and intentional choice of photographs incorporated into the film. The archival film materials are presented in *Archiwum istnieje* in slow motion and as the director herself commented: “to achieve a new quality – a poetry, the deconstruction of realism”, so as to imbue them with fresh meanings.[9]

In the film under discussion other tendencies that characterise contemporary Polish historical documentaries are also visible – ones that concern both the choice of theme and the poetics of such films. One such, no doubt, is the striving to ‘wipe out’ the so-called white stains of history, filling in the picture of the past and the presentation of hitherto little-known or unknown facts. Contemporary historical film makers of documentaries devoted to World War II, just like Justyna Łuczaj-Salej, eagerly reach for subject matter and related episodes missing from the period of Communist documentary cinema or indeed ones strongly manipulated at that time by propaganda.

[9] The quote is from email correspondence that I conducted with the film director during this study.

The artistic form of contemporary historical documentaries is in the present-day determined to a large degree by the extent and means of using archival materials in a creative way. Such approaches are motivated not only by the desire to create a visually attractive film but also with respect to the ethical dimension. A considerable part of such materials from World War II that are exploited in contemporary documentary pictures was created by Nazi photographers and film operators. Film scholars researching these types of archival materials point to the lack of neutrality and to the presence of ideological bias<sup>[10]</sup> The processing of archival materials, their many and varied transformations (with digital manipulation of images, re-editing of original material, introduction of expert opinions that represent a counterpoint and participant witnesses to events – thus enabling the construction of further meanings in respect to the montage), are all in contemporary historical documents an attempt to deconstruct the oppressors point of view, the point of view of the executioner.<sup>[11]</sup>

Director Łuczaj-Salej not only chooses to subject the archival materials from World War II to specific film techniques but most of all uses them to gain specific ‘readings’ counter to the intentions of their creators, thereby initiating a process of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation. The photographs that appear in the documentary are ones created by the Nazis for particular purposes of racial research. These constituted the research material that documented physical traits such as the shape of the skull, or the colour of the eyes and hair for those who underwent the observation as ‘research subjects.’ In the film *Archiwum istnień* the director introduces these German photographs into other narrations (just as the Nazi propaganda film chronicles did).

The photographs that function in this film above all do so as a *corpus delicti*, representing proof of Nazi crimes, their criminal ideology (National Socialist eugenics, classification into *Übermenschen* and *Untermenschen*, and mass murderer on a grand scale that was officially sanctioned). Moreover, these materials become integrated into the stories of the documentary protagonists and become an impulse for recalling family histories and their own childhood. Finally, this collection of photographs lays the path to reach back into a common past, as well as individual memory, and as such constitute a historical record of the period during World War II – a record of images functioning as a catalyst for personal recollections.

[10] K. Mąka-Malatyńska writes on these issues in detail: *Widok z tej strony. Przedstawienia Holocaustu w polskim filmie* [*A View from This Side. The Holocaust in Polish Cinema*], Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2012, also T. Łysak in the article: “Życie pośmiertne propagandy nazistowskiej. Powojenne

filmy dokumentalne o getcie warszawskim” [*Nazi Propaganda: Life After the Grave. Post-war Documentaries on the Warsaw Ghetto*], *Kwartalnik Filmowy* 2006, nr 54–55, pp. 163–176.

[11] Ibidem.