

BEYOND THE WITNESS. HOLOCAUST REPRESENTATION AND THE TESTIMONY OF IMAGES. THREE FILMS BY Yael HERSONSKI, HARUN FAROCKI AND EYAL SIVAN. REBECCA KATZ THOR (2018). Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing, 2018. 183pp. Södertörn Doctoral Dissertations, ISSN 1652-7399.

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Conceptual explorations of visual archives, memory and forgetting in moving images may provide to an audiovisual historiography; an alternative knowledge production that adds to the work of historians. Cinema and gallery films may illuminate history as lived time, while scrutinizing the complexities of recollection and the struggle of memory work. Ideally, these are screen events and ‘thinking images’ that also manage to reflect upon the formative role of images in the production and reproduction of cultural memory.¹ The recent monograph *Beyond the Witness. Holocaust Representation and the Testimony of Images* departs from, and centers on, three specific examples of such artistic projects: *A Film Unfinished* (Yael Hersonski, 2010), *Respite* (Harun Farocki, 2007) and *The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal* (Eyal Sivan, 1999). These films result from different strategies of compilation aesthetics and exemplify different modes of address, but they all relate conceptually to Holocaust commemoration. Each example also pays special attention to the materiality of archival images and the politics of their preservation and re-use as proof or ‘visible evidence’. Rebecca Katz Thor accounts for the aesthetics of these films to argue for the critical potential of ‘the moving image as witness’, beyond documentary conventions and the excessive visibility and implied voyeurism of the filmic testimony in visual culture. Katz Thor proposes to ‘resituate’ the power of the image in relation to visual culture, documentary truth claims, and the predominant tropes of Holocaust commemoration. Her argument unfolds in close dialogue with the three films, whose individual production histories and original projects of

¹ ‘Thinking images’ is an expression used by Laura Rascaroli to highlight the reflexivity and critical inquiry typical of the essay film. Rascaroli, :

archival research also represent objects of study for her detailed film analyses. In *Beyond the Witness*, the ‘method of resituating’ crystallizes into (1) a line of thought grounded in theory and conceptual art, (2) an object of study, and (3) a method tried out in Katz Thor’s own analysis of the films. This is an unusually playful structure for an academic study, but the fallacy of its narrow scope is counterbalanced by the multifaceted theoretical discussion and the author’s own work in the archives, propelled by the archival research of Hersonski, Farocki, and Sivan. The originality of *Beyond the Witness* consists in the double exposure of each film as both a committed engagement with the history of a particular archive, and the film, that is, the particular result of the artist’s method of resituating that history.

The project of Hersonski was to research, invoke and imagine the circumstances surrounding the making of the never completed Nazi propaganda film *Das Ghetto* in 1942. *A Film Unfinished* reuses sequences from the original production in combine with Hersonski’s interviews with people who acted in *Das Ghetto*. Music is added to dramatize the bridging between the present and the past, and there is also the enacted testimony of one of the camera operators. Katz Thor contextualizes the production history of both the original film and Hersonski’s, to show how sequences from *Das Ghetto* previously have been cut out of context, recycled and presented as historical source material for educational purposes; a ‘documentary record’ oblivious of the original filmmakers’ intentions and intervention.

Harun Farocki’s *Respite* also acknowledges a film project that was never completed, sequences shot at the Dutch transit camp Westerbork in 1944 for a film commissioned by the camp commander, possibly with the intent to argue for the maintenance of the camp. In contrast to Hersonski’s conventional use of music and filmed testimony, Farocki combines moving images with still images, re-uses original text frames and adds his own commentary. The frames have been put in critical dialogue without the affective support of music or sound effects. Katz Thor underscores how *Respite* invokes and comments on the materiality of the

archive image, the implied power relations between the seer and the seen, the organization of the camp and the implied organization and framing device of the original Westerbork material.

The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal (Eyal Sivan, 1999) makes use of film images shot during the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. For this film, an impressive set of sequences from the famous video record was carefully selected and transformed into a narrative based on Hannah Arendt's account in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. In her analysis of *The Specialist*, Katz Thor also accounts for the about 358 hours of video material that was discarded in order for the chosen material to be enacted into an audiovisual courtroom drama where the already theatrical features of the trial and its political implications are brought to the fore.

In documentary cinema, material traces tend to be presented as proof of things having happened, but the indexical quality of photographs, film images, and recorded sound already enhance the uncanny impact of the trace as a 'disarrangement expressing itself' (Lévinas, 1971). Even in the most reflexive film narrative, where the claim to truth and objectivity associated with documentary are questioned and mocked, aspects of camera inscription and framing devices tend to invoke the vestige both as passage and mark, a compelling presence of absence. Katz Thor's detailed contextualization and analysis of each film also hint at the interrelation between the actual event and the imagined past, the unfolding sound-images of the film and the embodied time of film viewing. This aspect of the image as witness resonates with a longstanding debate on cinema and trauma, film and Holocaust commemoration in the predominant field of documentary studies (Sakar and Walker, 2010; Haggith and Newman, 2005; Renov, 2004).

The editing table provides a common denominator in Katz Thor's account of the three films: The editing table as the actual and metaphoric control desk of the editor/filmmaker/

storyteller/historian. *Frame* and *re-framing* mark the agency of the resituated image, as well as the practice to analyze it, because, Katz Thor contents, 'it is the frame that structures the image both conceptually and materially, in the moment when the image is created and in the moment when it is interpreted by the viewer' (Katz Thor, 41). With reference to Georges Didi-Huberman, Susan Sontag and Judith Butler, *Beyond the Witness* accounts for the politics of the image and the expressive potential of the immanent play with inclusion and exclusion at work in the playful framing exemplified by the three films. The overall argument of 'the image as witness' relies primarily on scholarly work biased toward the static frame of the photograph, something that initially puzzled my reading of the book. 'Still Images' is the title of an entire section that provides generous illustrations of the films' compiled archival sources. The abstract quality of these still images (and text frames devoid of sound, voice and the overall rhythm of montage) is eventually balanced in later sections where Katz Thor provides close readings that truly stress the creativity and agency of compilation aesthetics in the three films. At this point it is worth noting how the concept of *resituating* seems to resonate with related reflections in current scholarship on documentary theory. For example, Ilona Hongisto recently underscored the formal mechanisms and possible agency of re-framing as fundamental to her understanding of *fabulation in experimental documentary*: 'deframing and reframing endows the documentary with the capacity to imagine.' (Hongisto, 2015:). This would also align with Katz Thor's reference to the philosophy of Judith Butler; Butler who contents that the moment when the image becomes political is exactly when it points beyond the frame to invoke the unseen (Butler, 2009: 51). Katz Thor's sensitivity to audiovisual form highlights the potential of the image as witness when re-animated in a film. This is also where the complex interrelation between reused archival images, narrative and imagination in film most poignantly deviate from the frozen, fixed frame of the photograph. *Beyond the Witness* stands out as a welcome contribution to the philosophy of film and

photography, to media theory and cinema studies. It speaks to current debates on film, historiography and the possibilities and pitfalls of media commemoration in relation to historical events and the challenges of the political present.

References

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Night and Fog ('Nuit et brouillard', Alain Resnais, 1955) is an essay film, 'a film that thinks' (Rascaroli, 2017) about Holocaust commemoration while performing a gesture of audiovisual historiography. The film scrutinizes the authoritative voice of documentary form, the

distancing effect of historical representation, and the notion of the archival image as an object of the past. Instead color sequences of Auschwitz shot in 1955 blend with archival images, showing horrific mountains of eyeglasses and cut hair at the death camp and accompanied in counterpoint by the poet and survivor Jean Cayrol's text, which is grimly performed on voice-over by the detached voice of actor Michel Bouquet and orchestrated by Hanns Eisler's score. Resnais was commissioned to make a film in commemoration of the ending of the war. In response, he forged a reflection on image and memory, with the hope to make the viewers 'shaken by what is not seen'.² In the history of Holocaust cinema, this 30 minutes audiovisual poem refuses the enclosed structure of a historical narrative. As famously stated by Resnais' younger colleague, collaborator and filmmaker Chris Marker, 'You never know what you actually are filming'³, the meaning of images changes over time and the interrelation between photography, film and the production and re-production of cultural memory is a complex process, imbued with the politics and power relations of media culture in large (Wahlberg, 2008: 102).

² Alain Resnais quoted in Flitterman-Lewis (1998: 204-215).

³ Marker quoted from his film *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (1977)