

***Arresting Images:
Inhabiting the Nazi archive
in Yael Hersonski's A Film
Unfinished***

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Abstract | The filmic appropriation of archival imagery has become pivotal within the new archival economy of memory. What is particularly striking about this transnational trend is that more than a reproduction of images of the past for illustrative purposes, at stake in many recent appropriation films is a post-memorial fascination with archival images and simultaneously a critical interrogation of their epistemological gaps, their conditions of production, and their role in shaping the memory of historical violence. Yael Hersonski's *A Film Unfinished* (2010), which refigures a Nazi propaganda film of the Warsaw ghetto, is a symptomatic case where the enigmatic appeal of archival images coexists with a suspicious examination of their constitutive flaws. Through close reading of the film, and a discussion of Derrida's notion of "archive fever" in relation to the Nazi archival culture, this article will inquire into the dynamics of archive imagery at play within contemporary cinematic practices, arguing that the disappearance of the witness has raised a renewed crisis of representation of the Holocaust, in which the archive becomes a critical but fraught centrepiece.

Keywords | archive fever; Derrida; Nazi footage; Holocaust; Warsaw ghetto; Claude Lanzmann; Yael Hersonski.

There can be no image that is not about destruction and survival.

Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light*

In *Sans Soleil* (1983), recently voted by a *Sight and Sound* poll the third best documentary film of all time, director Chris Marker formulated, through the voice of the film's narrator, what was arguably his most enduring obsession: "I will have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering which is not the opposite of forgetting but rather its lining". Of course, it was through images that Marker persistently probed the relation between memory and oblivion. As doorways into an irretrievable past, as traces of the inexorable passage of time, images record but also overlook, recall but also conceal. As mnemonic devices that help preserve and reconstitute the past, reservoirs that hold knowledge for the future, images, Marker never ceased to point out, are also lacunary objects that enable invisibility, uncertainty and forgetfulness.

Nowhere is this articulation between images, memory and oblivion more compelling today than around the figure of the archive. Indeed, amongst the manifold ways the past keeps bearing effects upon the present, the archival image has certainly gained momentum. While a growing concern with the operations of the archive can be traced back at least to the post-war period, the archival image – both photographic and filmic – has attained a renewed and unequivocal significance in contemporary visual practices, from film to television and contemporary art (Enwezor, 2008; Torlasco, 2013; Baron, 2014). Writing about the growing interest in recycling the audiovisual archive, media theorist Wolfgang Ernst suggested that a "new archival economy of memory" has taken over our social practices (Ernst, 2004: 264). This means not only that societies increasingly rely on their archives to engage with their past, thus producing a new regime of memory, but also that the figure of the archive itself has become an epistemological problem, an object of inquiry, already known as the archival turn. Defined by Ann Laura Stoler as a "sustained engagement with archives as cultural artifacts" (Stoler, 2002: 87), the archival turn implies a critical reflection upon the archive as a site of knowledge production instead of a merely extractive source of information. The archival turn thus presupposes a shift from the archive-as-

source to the archive-as-subject, an approach to the archive that moves beyond its storing functions to consider its discursive and epistemological implications. At the same time, the performative nature of the archive is also taken into account, e.g., the notion that the archive does not transmit pregiven meanings, rather brings forth meanings that come into being through its multiple usages.

Yael Hersonski's *A Film Unfinished* (2010), which refigures and problematizes a Nazi propaganda film of the Warsaw ghetto, is a symptomatic case. For almost half a century, an unfinished propaganda reel of the Warsaw ghetto, without soundtrack or credits, simply titled *Das Ghetto* and discovered by East German archivists after the war, was used in several documentaries and by institutions as a record of ghetto life. Shot over 30 days in May 1942 – just two months before deportations to Treblinka would begin –, this hour long silent film interweaved scenes of Jews enjoying various luxuries with images of profound suffering and despair. These images were subjected to a radical revision in 1998 with the appearance in an American air force base of another reel that included thirty minutes of outtakes, frames from the raw footage showing the extent to which those scenes had been deliberately staged. No documentation exists to clarify the Nazis' intended usage of the footage, but the juxtaposition of images showing wealthy Jews and impoverished people living in appalling conditions indicates that the purpose of the Warsaw ghetto film, as an Anti-Semitic propaganda piece, was to depict the Jewish race as socially corrupt and to convey the idea that death and starvation in the ghetto were caused by the cruelty of the Jewish upper class. Similarly to other Nazi feature films with an Anti-Semitic agenda, such as the false documentary *The Eternal Jew* (Fritz Hippler, 1940)¹, the

¹ Together with *Jud Süß* (Veit Harlan, 1940), *The Eternal Jew* was the most Anti-Semitic feature film produced in Nazi Germany under the supervision of Joseph Goebbels. While *Jud Süß* was devised as the Anti-Semitic version of Lothar Mendes' Philo-Semitic film *Jew Süß* (1934), an adaptation of Lion Feuchtwanger's 1925 novel *Jud Süß*, *The Eternal Jew* was presented as a documentary, combining footage from Polish ghettos (filmed shortly after the Nazi occupation of Poland), religious ceremonies and Hitler's Reichstag speech. Although the film begins with an animated text that informs the audience that the reel presents "actual shots of the Polish ghettos", showing "the Jews as they really look before they hide behind the mask of civilized Europeans", scenes were in fact simulated with actors who were performing under coercion. Following this commentary, the film proceeds with a succession of scenes that portray Jews as an uncivilized, parasitic people. Robert Reimer has claimed that while the film was intended at portraying the ghetto as the natural habitat of Jewish life, it actually shows the "effect of Nazi administration and the disruption of the lives of millions of Polish Jews" under Nazi occupation (Reimer, 2002: 135). This perverse portrayal of the ghettos was recurring in Nazi propaganda (see for instance *Der Führer Schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*, filmed in 1944 to portray Terezin as an idyllic city in order to deceive the International Red Cross) and seems to be at the core of the footage of *Das Ghetto*, even though its intended usage is not clear, as is the case with many other Nazi films left unfinished.

Warsaw ghetto footage was most likely intended to foster Anti-Semitic feelings among the German population and prove that Jewish people deserved to be eradicated.²

The intensification of the war effort and the beginning of mass deportations may have determined the rapid obsolescence of these images, making the film, after all, unnecessary. Nevertheless, the footage still brings out the disconcerting parallel between acts of conservation and acts of destruction, and the paradox inherent to wartime footage intended to capture and preserve for history the traces of a life already targeted for annihilation. In this way, the intended usage of these images could have been more prospective than that of a propaganda film for immediate dissemination. Indeed, the Nazi concern with the image of the Jews was projected into the future. As Ernst van Alphen has pointed out, liquidation was not enough for the Nazis; since the Jews, after the extermination, could live on in memory, that memory had to be cautiously orchestrated and managed by the Nazis (van Alphen, 2009: 68).

In *A Film Unfinished*, Israeli director Yael Hersonski reframes the entirety of the original footage of *Das Ghetto* through a complex web of viewpoints that shed light on the fabricated layers of those images. By rescreening the entire film through a present-day lens, Hersonski also recaptures the dynamics of destruction and survival inherent to Nazi archival imagery. In conceding these perpetrator images an afterlife whilst trying to confront them, *A Film Unfinished* thinks both with and against Nazi visuality, thus raising critical issues with regard to the “archival turn”, the appropriation of historical footage and the representation of the past in contemporary film. Through close reading of the film, and a discussion of Derrida’s notion of “archive fever” in relation to the Nazi archival culture, this article will inquire into the dynamics of archive imagery at play within contemporary cinematic practices.

Archive, Memory, Violence

“Nothing is more troubled and more troubling” today than the word archive, claimed Derrida in his seminal *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Derrida, 1995: 90). What is the source of this “trouble” and why does it remain a question of “today”? In his reflections on archival memory, originally delivered as a lecture at the Freud Museum in London³, Derrida diagnosed, in an almost prognostic fashion, the

² On the possible usages of this footage and its post-war “migration” through filmic imagination see Sánchez-Biosca, 2012.

³ The lecture took place on 5 June 1994 in London during an international colloquium titled “Memory: The Question of Archives”, held under the auspices of the Société Internationale d’Histoire de la Psychiatrie et de la Psychoanalyse, of the Freud Museum, and of the Courtauld Institute of Art.

constitutive paradoxes and the appeal of the archive that have become pivotal in our current visual culture. As Cathy Caruth recently pointed out, the archive is a question of today, a concern within this particular historical period, for it is linked to “the historicity of the twentieth, and now twenty-first, centuries” (Caruth, 2013: 76). Derrida’s original title, “Mal d’Archive”, might bring this historicity more clearly into light, since “mal” here means literally the evil of the archive or, as Derrida himself argues: “The disasters that mark this end of the millennium are also archives of evil: dissimulated or destroyed, prohibited, diverted, ‘repressed’” (Derrida, 1995: 91). The original French title thus contains a programmatic ambiguity: on the one hand, “mal d’archive” refers to the Evil stored in the archive, i.e., to the traumatic events of our recent history and their preservation in archival form; on the other hand, “mal d’archive” also terms “the illness of the archive” (Felman, 2014: 48), a malady or a symptomatic disorder that is both a desire for the archive, a yearning for a material remnant, and the desire to destroy, to erase the traces of the events stored therein. Indeed, building on Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” and “Civilization and its Discontents”, Derrida finds a destruction drive at the core of this archive fever:

There would indeed be no archive desire without the radical finitude, without the possibility of a forgetfulness which does not limit itself to repression. Above all, and this is the most serious, beyond or within this simple limit called finiteness or finitude, there is no archive fever without the threat of this death drive, this aggression and destruction drive (Derrida, 1995: 19).

This is precisely the defining paradox of the archive in Derrida’s Freudian reading: if the archive always entails a gesture of preservation, a mnemonic effort against disappearance, it is also the result of - or a defence against - the impulse to forget and obliterate. The archive is indeed made possible by death, destruction and oblivion. But the death drive is, at the same time, essentially “anarchivic” or “archiviolitic”, that is, archive-destroying (Derrida, 1995: 10). The archive thus takes place at the threshold of its own disappearance:

Right on that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction, and in truth menaces with destruction, introducing, a priori, forgetfulness and the archiviolitic into the heart of the monument. Into the “by heart” itself. The archive always works, and a priori, against itself (Derrida, 1995: 11-12).

This paradoxical nature of the archive, its self-undermining force, becomes even more “troubled” and “troubling”, to use Derrida’s own terms, within the Nazi period. If we

take the case of the Warsaw ghetto footage, it becomes clear that putting into images was parallel to putting-to-death. The Nazis filmed those they were going to eradicate in order to both symbolically annihilate them and to preserve – in fact to imprison - their image for posterity within the Nazi image-world. These images were taken precisely because those people were about to be eradicated. Preservation and destruction not only co-existed within the Nazi archival fever – they were, indeed, commensurate, the one catered and justified by the other.

The archival culture of the Nazi administration was thus fraught with contradictions: on the one hand, a process of “double elimination”, as Jacques Rancière termed it, was set in motion, pursuing “the elimination of the Jews and the elimination of the traces of their elimination” (Rancière, 2007: 127). The crematoria, for instance, were but the cruellest and most radical mechanism in this process of invisibilisation, forever erasing the traces of Nazi crimes. On the other hand, an archival impulse was responsible not only for documenting almost every step of the process (even if the Nazis tried to burn their archives towards the end of war, when defeat was upon them), but also for actively contributing to it – by symbolically destroying the image of the enemies of the Reich – and for guaranteeing their destruction for posterity. In other words, the Nazi preservation equalled destruction, reinforcing, through symbolic means, the material annihilation of its enemies. The archival memory of the Nazi regime thus produced, borrowing Caruth’s expression, “a memory that erases” (Caruth, 2013: 78), a memory that passes on a historical event that was erased by its own memory work. Coming back to Chris Marker’s words, remembering, within the Nazi archival economy of memory, was definitely not the opposite of forgetting but very much its lining.

Our knowledge of the National-Socialist past is thus indebted to the Nazi archival desire. As Didi-Huberman noticed, the Nazi administration “was so anchored in its habits of recording – with its pride, its bureaucratic narcissism – that it tended to register and photograph everything” (Didi-Huberman, 2008: 24). The archive was, from the onset, one of the foundational “technologies of power” for the Nazi regime, a disciplinary mechanism to regulate the behaviour of individuals in the social body (Foucault, 1997: 82). Oswald Pohl, who oversaw the concentrationary system, even issued a directive to all concentration camp commandants - which would become known as the “archive directive” - urging them to document the advancements of the camps through images.⁴ Since an operation of systematic destruction was underway,

⁴ Known as the *Archivbefehl* or *Pohlbefehl*, the directive issued in 1939 demanded that: “From now on, every stage of development must be captured in pictures. I expect from every person responsible an active

there was a pressing need to document not only the development of the Reich in every domain, but also the destruction of the enemies of the regime in order to create images that could be used to educate future generations of the Nazi empire. Indeed, as John Tagg has demonstrated, the archive is itself a product and an agent of disciplinary power:

What surfaces in the murky world of policing and in the regime of sense integral to the operation of disciplinary power also infests those other disciplines [...] whose grasping of meaning and pasting in place of the image depend on setting in motion the entire disciplinary apparatus of cell, surveillance, document, record, case, caption, mount, frame, index, file, and archive (Tagg, 2009: xxviii).

The archive, together with other technologies, such as the prison, the ghetto or the concentration camp, was thus part of the Nazi disciplinary power apparatus, a mechanism to implement an idealised social order, to produce subjectivities, to manage life and death, and ultimately to yield authority. In his etymological analysis of the word ‘archive’, Derrida also finds an authoritative effect at play. As he reminds us, ‘archive’ derives from the Greek *arkhé*, which names at once the “commencement” and the “commandment” (Derrida, 1995: 1-2), thus combining two principles at once: the principle according to history, where things begin; and the principle according to the law, where authority and social order are exercised. This “topo-nomological” quality (Derrida, 1995: 3), this intersection of place and law, is what makes the archive a *site of authority*. The etymological meaning of archive also stems from the Greek “*arkheion*”, initially a house, a “domicile”, in fact the residence of the *archons*, the superior magistrates, those who command and guard the law, who own the “hermeneutic right” and competence to interpret it. This etymological constellation suggests that the archive houses authority, that it contains the origin of the law, but also, one could argue, that it arrests knowledge, that it imprisons meaning and interpretation. In Derrida’s words, it is in this “house arrest” that archives take place (Derrida, 1995: 3).

Yet, this “arresting” function of the archive, the principle that sustains authority, is countered by an opposing quality. On the one hand, the Nazi archives were a way of imprisoning reality, of fixing for posterity a carefully managed interpretation of events. Through storage and symbolic appropriation, the Nazi archive contributed to the destruction of the enemies of the Reich and to the successful rise of the Nazi Empire. This arresting quality underlies what Derrida terms “archival violence” (Derrida, 1995: 12), a violence, one could argue, that is both structural and semantic, for the archive

cooperation so that we don’t neglect this aspect any longer” (quoted in Jacobeit, 1997: 33. Translation mine).

stores material remnants but also endows them with meaning. In other words, the violence of the archive manifests itself in its selective operation – in storing elements at the expense of others – and in its interpretative framework – in ascribing the stored elements with a dominant meaning. This is why, Derrida claims, “the archivization produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida, 1995: 16).

On the other hand, Derrida also points out that “there is no meta-archive” (Derrida, 1995: 67). As much as it “arrests” material remnants and semantic possibilities, the archive does not speak for itself and therefore depends on the interpretative effort of those who wish to understand it. While the archive works to produce authority and gain hermeneutic control, “in the same stroke it loses the absolute and meta-textual authority it might claim to have. [...] The archivist produces more archive, and this is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future” (Derrida, 1995: 68).

Allan Sekula, in his take on the photographic archive, also noticed this ambivalence between arresting forces and the open-ended nature of the archive. Defining the archive, in Foucauldian terms, as an articulation of knowledge and power⁵, Sekula points out that archives are not neutral, for they embody the power and authority in collecting and storing, and thus in commanding the semantic possibilities of the archive. At the same time, he also contends that visual archives tend to “suspend” meaning and use. Within the archive, meaning exists in a state that is both “residual” and “potential”, where the suggestion of past uses coexists with a plenitude of possibilities (Sekula, 2003: 450). As lacunary systems, Sekula claims, archives motivate a “desire for completeness” (Sekula, 2003: 450), the need to fill the many material and semantic gaps that constitute the archive.

At this stage, we may pinpoint three principles, drawn from Derrida’s reflections, which inform the Nazi archival culture:

1. The notion of “mal d’archive” can be understood as three different aspects: a) as the evil stored in the archive, or the archive’s capacity to store traces of a violent historical past; b) the archive itself as evil, as an agent of structural and symbolic violence; and c), as a malady, a disorder that combines a yearning for a material remnant and the desire to destroy.

2. The archive is in itself archiviolic and thus works against itself, for the preserving and destructive drives not only co-exist within the archive, but are also coterminous, feeding off each other.

⁵ For a comparative reading of the notion of the archive in Derrida and Foucault see Arvatu (2011).

3. While the archive, as a site of authority, claims to hold hermeneutical rights over its possessions, it is also incapable of speaking for itself, thus depending on future interpretations. Because the archive is open-ended and thus necessarily incomplete, the meaning is never closed. In other words, there is no meta-archive.

While these three principles shape Nazi archival culture, they may also explain the current archival economy of memory, particularly the case of filmic appropriation. Characterized by a fascination with archival images of traumatic events and simultaneously a critical interrogation of their workings, the current trend in appropriating archive imagery, I would like to contend, recognizes the arresting quality of archival images (arresting in its double meaning of “striking” and “imprisoning”) and therefore tries to interrogate and challenge their intended meanings. Because the archive is both a site of hermeneutic authority and an open-ended cradle of semantic possibilities (hence its “allure”), contemporary films increasingly resort to archive images not only to approach and get closer to the past, but also to resist and overcome their original usage. In the following sections, I will examine how this dynamics is worked out in Yael Hersonski’s *A Film Unfinished*.

An Archival Return

The current migratory movement of archival images definitely challenges the “house arrest” in which, according to Derrida, the archive takes place. By unearthing, appropriating and recasting archival imagery, current audiovisual practices are defying the domiciliation, or “consignation” of the archive, as Derrida also termed it, i.e., the act of depositing in a fixed, material site, but also of gathering together different signs according to an organizing principle. In fact, it is this very act of domiciliation, of fixation inside an organized shelter, that also allows for reproduction, circulation and destabilization. Yet, by removing archival images from their original housing, these practices of appropriation shake the foundations of the domicile and challenge its hermeneutical authority.

The reproduction of archival imagery across media thus accentuates the notion of the archive as a sliver (Harris, 2002), a fragment of a larger portion of the past. As lacunary technologies, archives contain traces of the past, but one will always yearn to know what was lost or denied access into the archive. In retrieving images from the archive and organizing them into a new order, appropriative practices further emphasize the fragmentary character of archival material whilst trying to fill their gaps through a new assemblage. After all, it is the very incompleteness of the archive that grants archival images an afterlife. As Achille Mbembe has pointed out:

No archive can be the depository of the entire history of a society, of all that has happened in that society. Through archived documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end. A montage of fragments thus creates an illusion of totality and continuity (Mbembe, 2002: 21).

It is such a search for a coherent story that motivates Yael Hersonski's *A Film Unfinished*, in which the director tries to understand why the film *Das Ghetto* was made in the first place, and why it never left the editing room. Yet, what distinguishes Hersonski's film from other appropriative gestures is that it actually reproduces the entirety of the Nazi ghetto footage, interspersing it with a complex web of viewpoints that try to shed light on the fabricated layers of those images.⁶ Hersonski thus interrupts the "totality and continuity" of the original Nazi film in order to look for new "links between the beginning and the end". Extracts from personal diaries, like those of the Head of the Jewish Council, Adam Czerniakow; the reports of the ghetto's commissar Heinz Auerswald; several journals compiled by historian Emanuel Ringelblum; excerpts from a taped testimony of one of the cameramen who worked on *Das Ghetto*; and the reactions to the footage of five survivors of the Warsaw ghetto who remember the filming – all these viewpoints are interweaved to confront and decipher the perpetrator images whilst allowing them to unfold in their entirety. *A Film Unfinished* thus thinks with and against Nazi visuality and this oscillation must be situated within a broader debate on Holocaust representability. In fact, Hersonski set out to make this film after translating an essay about Jean-Luc Godard's contention with Claude Lanzmann after the release of *Shoah* in 1985 (see Saxton, 2008). This debate is well known but worth recalling in order to map Hersonski's stance on archival footage and on the representation of the Holocaust.

Claude Lanzmann's refusal to include archival images in his films, most paradigmatically in *Shoah* (1985), where he resorts only to oral testimonies (*Shoah*'s initial subtitle was, revealingly, "An Oral History of the Holocaust"), definitely became a touchstone in Holocaust representability, even if a contentious one. Upon viewing

⁶ A close but quite different appropriative gesture is Harun Farocki's *Respite* (2007), which reproduces an unfinished Nazi film of Westerbork, a Dutch refugee camp established in 1939 for Jews fleeing Germany (in 1942, after the occupation of Holland, its function was reversed by the Nazis and it became a "transit camp"). The original film was commissioned in 1944 by the camp's commandant, Albert Gemmeker, and shot by the photographer Rudolph Beslauer, a Jewish inmate who would be deported to Auschwitz (this was a recurring strategy, also adopted in *The Führer Schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*). Farocki's film rescreens the silent and unedited material, and interrupts it through interrogative intertitles that consistently question the intended meaning of the images and the way we have come to visualize the Holocaust. For a insightful reading of Farocki's film see Elsaesser (2010).

Lanzmann's almost ten-hour long documentary, Godard declared that the film showed nothing at all. Lanzmann replied that after a year reading historical and theoretical research on the Holocaust in preparation for his film, he "understood nothing" (quoted in Saxton, 2008: 27). For Lanzmann, archival images are but "images without imagination. They are just images that have no power" (Lanzmann, 2001: 274). In his memoir, Lanzmann states that he knew from the start that he would not resort to archival footage (Lanzmann, 2012: 55). This radical position, which many authors have labelled as a "ban on images" (LaCapra, 1997: 236), is justified by the archival conditions of Holocaust images: since the majority of the footage from the ghettos and the camps was filmed by the Nazis, he considers that reproducing such images would only replicate and legitimize the Nazi gaze. But he also adds that although there are many images of the concentration camps, there are none of the exterminations carried out in death camps such as Majdanek, Chelmno, Sobibor or Treblinka. It is precisely this machinery of extermination, Lanzmann realized, that would constitute the central focus of his film. This is how Lanzmann explains how he arrived at his aesthetic (and ethic) formula:

What was most important was missing: the gas chambers, death in the gas chambers, from which no one had returned to report. The day I realized that this was what was missing, I knew that the subject of the film would be death itself, death rather than survival, a radical contradiction since in a sense it attested to the impossibility of the project I was embarking on: the dead could not speak for the dead (...). My film would have to take up the ultimate challenge: take the place of the non-existent images of death in the gas chambers (Lanzmann, 2012: 64).

For Lanzmann, images had not been able to breach into the core of the Holocaust experience ("death itself") and therefore constitute flawed means of representation. At the same time, he realizes the contradiction in his choice, since the survivors, as Primo Levi famously put it, cannot speak for the dead either, since "they did not touch bottom" (Levi, 1989: 83). But in his contention with Godard in regard to the "non-existent images of death", Lanzmann claimed that if such an image of death would exist, he would have rejected it anyway. Godard argued that given the Nazi's compulsive tendency to document everything, it is possible that in some archive or attic there is a reel of film recording the gas chambers in action. In response to Godard's hypothetical reel of the gas chambers, Lanzmann famously claimed:

If I had found an existing film – a secret film because it was strictly prohibited – made by an SS man showing how 3,000 Jews, men, women and children, died together,

asphyxiated in the gas chamber of Crematorium II at Auschwitz; if I had found that, not only would I not have shown it, I would have destroyed it (Lanzmann, 2012: 128).

For Lanzmann, only the voice of the witness is capable of conveying – the closest possible – the experience of the Holocaust: “a vast choir of voices in my film – Jewish, Polish, German – testifies, in a true construction of memory, to what was perpetrated” (Lanzmann, 2012: 54). Of course, Lanzmann’s banishment of archival images and his exclusive reliance on testimonies are not exempt from contradictions, as many interpreters of his work have systematically pointed out (Koch, 1989; LaCapra, 1997; Weissberg, 2012). In fact, one could argue that Lanzmann, too, suffers from a form of “mal d’archive”, a malaise that manifests itself through repression and haunting. Yet, what I would like to emphasize at this stage is the generational shift from Lanzmann’s rejection to Hersonski’s pursuit of the archive.

Indeed, Hersonski complicates the representability debate by reproducing Nazi archival imagery and at the same resorting to witnesses to scrutinize those images. What is at stake in *A Film Unfinished*, its historical subtext so to speak, is the imminent disappearance of the witness figure that used to be Lanzmann’s ethical and aesthetical cornerstone. In an interview published upon the release of her film, Hersonski confessed that she had always overlooked Holocaust representations because the presence of her grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, was a much more vivid reminder of the events: “The fact of my grandmother’s existence reminded me of what happened. It was all folded into her face. I thought all these sites and films were mediating something I didn’t need to mediate, because I had my grandmother” (quoted in Robinson, 2010: para. 2). Yet, when her grandmother passed away, that mediation suddenly imposed upon her life: “Her absence was one of the things that pushed me into the archives. And I started to reflect on what the archive can show us and what it can’t show us” (quoted in Robinson, 2010: para. 3). This assertion suggests an interesting shift. On the one hand, the disappearance of the survivor, of the direct witness to the Holocaust experience, motivates a desire for the archive. On the other hand, however, such a desire for the archive does not amount to a mere replacement of the survivor’s testimony by the knowledge gathered from the archive, rather resulting in an interrogative engagement with the archival material. Hersonski thus seems to overcome Lanzmann’s rejection of the archive whilst inheriting his distrusting stance. What Hersonski’s film brings to the fore is, thus, a renewed crisis of representation of the Holocaust experience in which the archive becomes a critical but “troubled” centrepiece.

Closure and closeness

A Film Unfinished is a movie about seeing, about the way we relate to images of the past and how they can operate as transgenerational mediators of memory. By repeatedly drawing the spectator's attention to the filmmaking and film viewing process itself – the recurring sound of the projector, the leader on the head and tail of each reel, the survivors watching the Nazi film inside a movie theatre –, Hersonski puts our relation with Holocaust images centre stage. Like *Shoah* was a movie about witnessing the Holocaust, Hersonski's film is about how to witness through images the catastrophe left behind. The film is thus constructed as a confrontation between the original Nazi footage and the multiple testimonies summoned by the director. In her reframing of the Nazi film, three gestures strike me as particularly worth reflecting upon: the Warsaw ghetto survivors watching the Nazi footage; the re-staging of the cameraman's testimony; and the deceleration of the original film.

Hersonski's motivation to reframe the entire Nazi film seems to be foremost pedagogic, an attempt at making viewers question the way they usually look at Holocaust images, but her rationale is not without aporias. In exposing survivors to the archival footage and filming their reactions, Hersonski directly engages and subverts Lanzmann's strategy in *Shoah*. Aside from the outright rejection of archival images, *Shoah* was and has been criticized for the intrusiveness of Lanzmann's interviews. Indeed, Lanzmann did not want survivors to tell their stories, but to actually relive their traumatic experiences in front of the camera in order to abolish the distance between past and present that the mediation of archival imagery, in his view, necessarily entails. In *Shoah*, survivors both play and are themselves, so that reality erupts on film. Hersonski confessed she also wished to turn survivors away from their usual role of storytellers "by changing the traditional scenery of the interview and creating a new interactive space in which they could also be viewers" (Hersonski, 2010). By exposing them to the footage, she attempted "to help them releasing some of the memories which [remained unspoken] by them" (Hersonski, 2010). The film hence replicates Lanzmann's traumatic awakening strategy but through the archival images he so utterly rejected.

In filming the survivors watching the Nazi film inside a movie theatre, Hersonski's film draws attention to the act of viewing perpetrator images, but also runs the risk of replicating the perpetrator's gaze. These survivors, who witnessed the filming of the Warsaw footage while in the ghetto, find themselves once again inside a film that, on the one hand, makes them project their own anxieties onto the original footage ("I keep thinking that among all those people, I might see my mother walking",

says one of them), and on the other tries to find direct correspondences between the images and what the survivors recall. For instance, when one of the survivors recalls her childhood in the ghetto, telling that she used to play in the courtyard, the film immediately turns to archival imagery of children playing in a courtyard in the Warsaw ghetto, forging a connection that does not exist, thus replicating the “fabricating” gesture of the original Nazi film. When another survivor is afraid she might find someone she knows, the movie cuts to Nazi footage in which the ghetto inhabitants look into the Nazi camera, as if looking back at the survivors hoping to be recognized.



A Film Unfinished (Yael Hersonski, 2010)



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By confronting Nazi archival imagery with testimonies delivered in the present, the film attempts to bridge two temporalities, creating a traumatic gap between them. Mary Ann Doane, who defined the filmic image as “the imprint or trace of a specific moment in time” (Doane, 2002: 119), had already drawn attention to the temporal shift in the act of screening: “It is the imprint not only of the content but of the temporal moment of the imprinting, of a “now” which has become a “then”, but which, in its screening, becomes a resurrected, revived “now”” (Doane, 2002: 223). In straddling the memories, emotions and anxieties of the survivors with the Nazi images rescreened in the movie theatre, *A Film Unfinished* “revivifies” the “now” of the Nazi filming and further arrests the survivors inside those images. While the film tries to point out the lacunae of both the survivor’s testimony and the archival images, it also makes survivors (and us spectators) inhabit the Nazi gaze, reinscribing the witnesses back into the Nazi image-world, thus reinforcing the “arresting” potential and the symbolic violence of the archive.

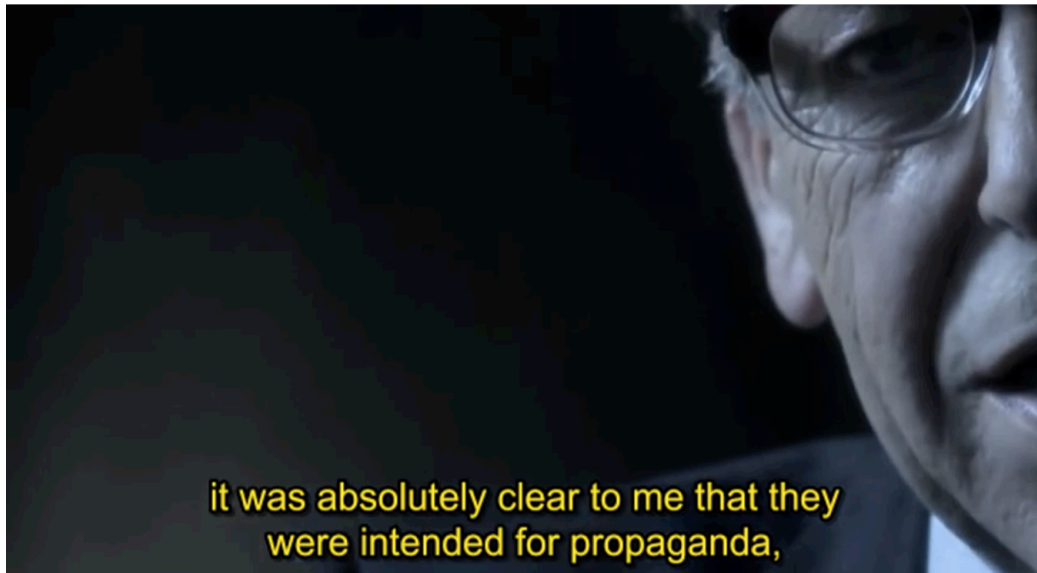
In his discussion of the violence of the archive, Derrida briefly referred to the “decisive paradox” inherent to the archive’s potential reproducibility:

If there is no archive without consignment in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction (Derrida, 1995: 11-12).

Whilst the archive already takes place at the structural breakdown of memory, as a storing device that works both against oblivion and as an agent of destruction, the “repetition compulsion” only adds to its destructive potential. In the case of *A Film Unfinished* there is a double repetition at play, for the reproduction of the archival imagery motivates the reliving of traumatic memories by the Warsaw ghetto survivors. Through this double anamnesis, visual and testimonial, the film as if tries to recapture “the originary moment of singularity”, as Mary Ann Doane termed it, the moment when impression and imprint are not yet separated. But in trying to recapture that moment, in its attempt to draw closer to the past, the film emphasizes the inexorable and traumatic caesura between “then” and “now”, creating a space of remembrance that remains arrested inside the Nazi image-world.

The second strategy I would like to focus on is the incorporation of the court testimony of Willy Wist, one of the cameramen of the Warsaw ghetto film, who testified in the trial of the ghetto commissar Heinz Auerswald. Hersonski resorts to the four transcripts of his court testimony to retrieve information on the filming of the

Warsaw film, searching for the “point of view of the man behind the camera”, as the voice-over calls it. Yet, unlike other documents used in the film, his court testimony is not read in voice-over, but re-staged by a well-known actor, Rüdiger Vogler.



Rüdiger Vogler as Willy Wist in *A Film Unfinished* (Yael Hersonski, 2010)

The staged testimony of Willy Wist has manifold implications. On the one hand, it visually distinguishes the cameraman's testimony from other testimonies read throughout the movie (Czerniakow's diaries, Auerswald's reports and the journals compiled by Emanuel Ringelblum), which grants him a special status as the orchestrator, the man inside the Nazi gaze. On the other hand, by restaging a testimony with a recognizable actor, it draws attention to the staged and rehearsed nature of every testimonial act, to the narrative elaboration that underlies any testimony, and to the degree of manipulation involved in every act of image-making. Once again, the film tries to parallel the epistemological fragilities of both verbal testimony and visual images. Yet, it does so by replicating the techniques of the Nazi gaze, which ultimately staged every scene of the Warsaw ghetto movie.

In addition, Vogler's face is not framed from the beginning of the testimony, so that before the spectator is able to recognize him, and as such to recognize the testimony as staged, there are several minutes of indistinctiveness, of bewilderment, as the viewer is not certain of the provenance or type of testimony he or she is watching,

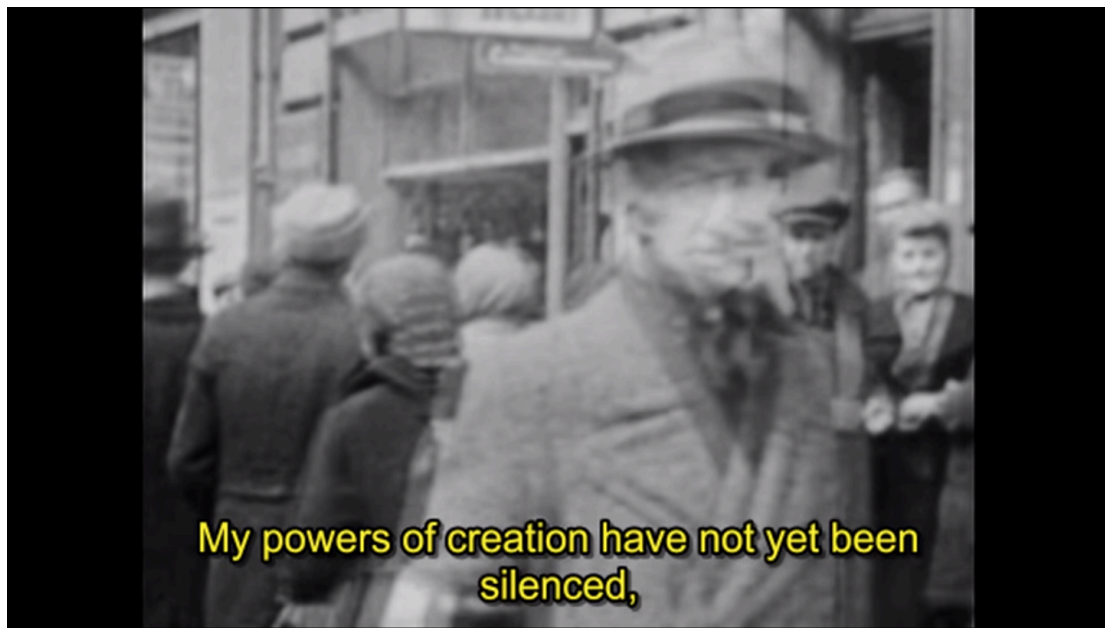
incapable of discerning whether the testimony is real (effectively articulated by Willy Wist himself) or staged. And if staged, why, given that the written testimony is factual. While the blurriness in which Vogler is initially framed may emphasize the artificiality and opacity of the Nazi gaze, it also glamorizes it through replication. Once again, the film chooses to duplicate the perpetrator's gaze, making us inhabit it, this time through one of its avatars, a cameraman. As with the survivors watching the Nazi film, the movie pursues correspondences, relations of causality between the cameraman's words and the archival images. When he describes himself shooting particular scenes – like the one of the bodies carried in wagons –, the movie turns to the ghetto images he supposedly refers to, turning the cameraman into a *deus ex machina* that ties the knots of the film left unfinished, endowing him with an interpretative authority that exhausts and crystallizes the meaning of those images. The film thus tries to get as close to the Nazi gaze as possible, to penetrate its obscure and gruesome logic, accepting and reinforcing its alluring quality. Borrowing Derrida's terms, one could argue that *A Film Unfinished* removes the archival imagery from its house arrest, from its original domicile, to house it back in, supplementing and reinforcing its hermeneutical authority.

Every aspect of the film is thus set in relation to the archival images, and all the scenes and takes of the Nazi film become deciphered and depleted by the testimonies, leaving no room for tensions between what is visible in those images and what the Nazi gaze left out. In spite of emphasizing the violent opacity of Nazi images, the movie conveys a paradoxical belief in the ultimate transparency, intelligibility and definiteness of images, in the possibility of deciphering their intended meanings and reconnecting with their historical referent. Something like Roland Barthes' claim on photography – that in the image there is an actual trace of the historical referent that can be retrieved and possessed.⁷

The third and final strategy I would like to concentrate on is the deceleration of the Nazi footage, the slowing down of the images through freeze-framing. Throughout the movie, Hersonski emphasizes certain moments by slowing down some takes and even freezing them in order to capture and fix the look of those who directly face the camera. These moments accentuate the gap between being trapped inside the Nazi image and resisting it. As if claiming their right to look, the individuals who stare at the Nazi cameras defy the one-way representation, expose the Nazi hostile gaze, and

⁷ "The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it... [the image] shares, by the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model" (Barthes, 1993: 115).

express the desire to counter the curtailing of agency experienced by the ghetto residents. There is one particular moment that emerges as an exception to the film's overall deference to the archive imagery, when one of the journals compiled by historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who assembled a counter-archive of resistance throughout the war⁸, is read in voice-over while the image of a passer-by is decelerated and frozen. In this take, the retardation of the footage is combined with a non-descriptive voice-over (an anti-ekphrastic moment so to speak), which creates a tension between the film and the film within-it. Although the voice-over is as conventional as the other occurrences throughout the film, the fact that it voices a "resistant gaze" creates a new and rare tension with the Nazi images, a sort of reading against the grain.



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⁸ Emanuel Ringelblum was an active member of the political movement the "Left Po'alei Zion" and the creator of the important Oneg Shabbat Archive, a secret archive kept by several members of the Polish Underground inside the Warsaw ghetto. The archive included all sorts of documentation on the persecution, deportation and murder of Jews. During the deportations, when the ghetto was liquidated, the keepers of the archive managed to hide it, sealing it inside metal containers and milk cans. The documentation was buried within the ghetto in August 1942 and in March and April 1943. The surviving Oneg Shabbat Archive is in the Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (ZIH Jewish Historical Institute) in Warsaw, and it represents today the most important source for the history of Polish Jewry during the war and the Holocaust.

This tension is much more effective as a critical interrogation of the Nazi images than the search for homologues between images and testimonies. Instead of exposing the fabrication of those images through relations of causality, the dissociation between images and words, and the freezing of the frames, interrupts and destabilizes the totality of the footage and leaves room to surmise what was left outside the frame and what was done to challenge it. In addition, the editing freezes the moments in which cameramen accidentally entered each other's frames, including Willy Wist himself, as if to trap them inside their own fabrication and turn the Nazi gaze against itself. These rare moments suggest how images both serve and resist intended representations, exposing a permanent conflict between enclosure and fluidity within visual images, between their arresting quality and their critical potential. One cannot help but wonder if this fluidity of the moving image, this difficulty in controlling their possible meanings, might be the reason why the Nazis gave up on the film altogether, as they did with several other film projects.

As a post-memorial interrogation of the visual remnants of the past, *A Film Unfinished* is both a prospective and retrospective exercise, for it reproduces images of the past to probe their testimonial potential for the future. Derrida himself did not cease to emphasize the "futurity" of the archive, as "a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (Derrida, 1995: 36). Derrida's emphasis on the archive's openness to the future and its provisional and cumulative quality conveys a belief in its potentially transformative capacity. Yet, in spite of its simultaneously backwards and forward-looking gesture, Hersonski's film, driven by a postmemorial concern, tries to get so close to the past that it ends up finishing the film left unfinished by the Nazis. The hermeneutic closure Hersonski's film attains thus curbs the futurity of the archive, curtailing its "promise" and transformative potential. By devising the entire film in compliance with the archival images, and by replicating the perpetrator's techniques, especially through the camera man's testimony and the survivor's reactions to the footage, *A Film Unfinished* falls prey to the "allure" of the archive, to its arresting quality, and to the "archive fever" Derrida referred to as "a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin" (Derrida, 1995: 57). The reproduction of the original footage is still subsidiary to the Nazi perspective that frames it, so that the viewer is made to inhabit a Nazi gaze even through the attempt to shatter it. As such, the re-framing of *Das Ghetto*, even as a gesture that refracts the archival material through different vantage points, bursts the contours of the primal footage without effectively un-framing it from the Nazi arrest.

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