

Seeing the Camps – Exploring the Visual Memory of the Holocaust

An online lecture by **Dr. Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann** (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) on occasion of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Europe from National Socialism

When allied soldiers discovered the German concentration camps during their journey through Europe in the last months of the war, they encountered indescribable conditions. Disbelief and horror were common responses among the liberators to the scenery of sick, starved and dead prisoners. The survivors on the other hand were often too exhausted to express excitement and joy in face of the liberation they had hoped for so desperately.

Already the first discovery of a major camp in July 1944 was preserved on film. The movie *Majdanek – Cemetery of Europe* by Polish director Aleksander Ford also contained footage of the orphaned belongings and leftovers of those who were killed by the Germans at that site, which later became iconic for the visualization of the Holocaust. Months later, shortly after the liberation of Auschwitz at the end of January 1945, Soviet camera teams filmed the famous scenes of prisoners standing behind barbed wire fences, and of children showing the numbers, which were tattooed onto their arms, towards the camera.

Hollywood director George Stevens was responsible for the filming at the liberated Dachau Concentration Camp. Sam Fuller, later also a famous director, used his private 8mm film camera to record scenes at Falkenau, a sub-camp of KZ Flossenbürg. In presence of several camera teams, General Eisenhower visited Ohrdruf and ordered detailed documentation of the atrocities that should serve as visual evidence of the crimes and preclude denial. Later, footage from the camps was also screened at the Nuremberg trials.

The head of the British Ministry of Information, Sidney Bernstein, together with Alfred Hitchcock as an advisor planned the visual documentation of the Bergen Belsen camp. Although most of the footage became iconic through its use and reuse in other films, the documentary film about the German concentration camps was never finished and only reconstructed in 2014.

The online lecture reviews the visual memory of the camps that was significantly shaped by the liberation and atrocity films made in 1944/45 by the allies. It reconstructs the filming in the camps and explores how these images constituted a reservoir for visualizing the history and memory of the Holocaust. Tracing the impact of these images on documentary films, historical dramas and graphic novels, the lecture introduces approaches to analyze the visual memory of the Holocaust. In the light of the current situation, which forced many memorials to cancel ceremonies commemorating the 75th anniversary of the liberation, the lecture discusses the relevance and potential of the historical footage for future commemoration, and looks for new ways of reading and contextualizing these images in relation to the historical sites and survivor testimonies in order to continue *seeing the camps*.

Dr. Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann is a lecturer in the Department of Communication and Journalism and in the European Forum at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His major field of research, teaching and publication is the visual memory of the Holocaust, investigating films, photographs and digital archives. He is currently part of the consortium of the EU-funded collaborative research and innovation action “Visual History of the Holocaust – Rethinking Curation in the Digital Age” and explores with his team of researchers at the Hebrew University the afterlife of the allied liberation and atrocity films in

postwar popular culture. He is also author of several articles in international scientific journals and of the German language study "Geschichtsbilder im medialen Gedächtnis: Filmische Narrationen des Holocaust" (Bielefeld 2011).

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Online sources introducing the topic:

Video: Liberators and Survivors – The First Moments

<https://youtu.be/kOIHRQIQwU>

Video: Holocaust Survivors – Liberated but not free

<https://youtu.be/rfuqLIknClS>

Website: Liberation and the Return to Life

<https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/liberation-and-the-return-to-life.html>

Encyclopedia: Liberation of Nazi Camps

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/liberation-of-nazi-camps>