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„HOLOCAUST“-FIKTION

Kunst jenseits der Authentizität

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Playing the Holocaust and Playing with the Holocaust

In the past 20 years the introduction of new media has led to a revolution in our capacities to remember. But paradoxically, although most of these media facilitate remembrance effectively, they have also led to a major memory crisis. This sounds unexpected because the principles of mediating historical reality introduced by photography and historicism are now intensified through advanced electronic technologies such as computers, the internet and the mass media, as well as the explosion of historical scholarship and an ever more voracious museum culture.

This recently accelerated memory crisis undermines Holocaust remembrance and education even stronger than the remembrance of other historical events. For the history of the Holocaust has always been radically reduced to the idea that it should be remembered and that historical modes of representation should be used exclusively to represent the Holocaust. Imaginative approaches of the Holocaust are suspect by definition, because they are considered as historically irresponsible. Favoured genres which are supposed to do the job of remembrance appropriately are documentaries, testimonies, diaries, in short genres whose function is unambiguously historical. Relating to other historical events imaginative genres like the historical novel, docudrama or history painting can be effective and are respected as such, in case of the Holocaust, however, these genres are met with suspicion.

In this contribution I will discuss two recent examples of Holocaust art that violate the taboos surrounding Holocaust representation and Holocaust remembrance by using modes of representation that are radically imaginative and cannot be understood in terms of conventional historical modes of representation. I will discuss them in order to see if they are effective in their own way in countering the memory crisis, something which is especially relevant for the issue of the Holocaust. In my first case, the Holocaust is not represented but re-enacted and re-envisioned in playing. It is the art work *Lego Concentration Camp Set* (1996) by the Polish artist Zbigniew Libera. This set consists of seven boxes of different sizes with which a miniature concentration camp can be built out of Lego. My second case, again by a Polish artist, is filmmaker Dariusz Jabłoński's documentary *Photoamator (Photographer)* (1998). This documentary does not play the Holocaust, but plays *with* the Holocaust by not respecting distance towards the past of the Holocaust. The present is represented as past and the past as present. So, how historically responsible is this documentary?

Libera's *Lego Concentration Camp set* raises the following question: what is the function of toys in Holocaust representation? Since Holocaust art centres on the question of remembrance, I rephrase this question more provocatively: is there a place for playing the Holocaust in Holocaust remembrance and in Holocaust teaching? The issue of generation will be an important aspect of this question. For it is striking

that until these artists came along, representing the Holocaust playfully has been taboo, whereas all of a sudden it seems as if a later generation of artists can only relate to the Holocaust in the mode of playing. Some examples of this generation of artists are Israeli artists Ram Katzir and Roee Rosen, American artist Tom Sachs and French artist Alain Séchas. Given the centrality of remembrance in all Holocaust art, I want to examine why this phenomenon – the toy as memory play in art – occurs at this time, among later generations.

In order to understand if and how toys teach, and what they teach if they do, some reflection on teaching as a cultural activity is called upon. Therefore, I first briefly point out dominant conceptions of teaching and the role they play in Holocaust teaching and remembrance. Learning, according to the traditional conception, is linear, cumulative and progressive, and leads to mastery over the object of learning. Mastery over the Holocaust, indeed, is one of the main motivations behind Holocaust education. In order to prevent that something like the Holocaust will happen again, later generations have to have as much knowledge as possible about the Holocaust. It is through knowledge of it that one can 'master' the Holocaust. This conception of teaching assumes a collapse of two forms of mastery: to know and to dominate. If the past is known, the future can be dominated, kept under control.

But it is precisely this conception of learning as pursuing mastery over the object of learning that seems to fail in face of the Holocaust. Israeli artist Ram Katzir, for instance, complained about the over-familiarity with Nazi and anti-Nazi propaganda in the Israeli schools he attended. Even the most shocking images have been robbed of the power to move or create serious attention by being turned into just another school subject. In response to this education he felt the need to revitalize Nazi photographs by using them as models for a colouring book. Not mastery, but boredom seems to be the result of the Holocaust education Ram Katzir received.

Holocaust teaching and remembrance in Poland had a similar effect on Zbigniew Libera. He defended his art as follows:

Of course, I was born fifteen years after the war and sometimes people call my art 'toxic' and actually it is toxic. But why? Because I am poisoned, I am poisoned of it. And that's all.¹

Poisoning, like boredom, is the opposite of mastery. These conditions instead express a weakening of the subject by poison. As a result, this weakened subject can no longer master him/herself. Thus the subject is unfit to master the object of learning.

Conventional teaching consists for a major part of prohibition and suppression, in short taboos. A practice of over-repressive education as structured by prohibitions and suppression seems to have become also the explicit guideline or epigraph for Holocaust education. In the education of the Holocaust, prohibitions usually take the form of their binary opposite: they are articulated as orders or commands. According to Sander

1 Zbigniew Libera, "Discussion", in: *Bulletin Trimestriel de la Fondation Auschwitz* 60 (1998), 225–240, 225.

Gilman, those orders constitute a Holocaust "etiquette."² The moral imperative of the prescriptions for 'respectable' Holocaust education and studies is more than explicit in the formulations of Terrence Des Pres. Although he qualifies these prescriptions as a "set of fictions,"³ he also declares that "critics like ourselves [...] must, to perpetuate discourse, accept *some* degree of protocol."⁴ Appropriating, in a nice case of interdiscursive heterogeneity, in the voice of God in his use of the 'genre' of the Commandments, he describes the prescriptions that set limits to respectable Holocaust studies as follows:

- 1) The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality, as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history.
- 2) Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason—artistic reasons included.
- 3) The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonour its dead.⁵

No wonder that later generations get a bit restless under such weight. The Holocaust toy art under discussion seems to be the result of a conscious violation of these commandments and their complementary prohibitions.

Let me focus for a moment on Libera's *Concentration Camp Set*. (Abb. 1) First, Libera does not represent the Holocaust as "unique" but as an historical object that can be toyed with, which is exchangeable with, let's say, the Wild West, knights and medieval castles, pirates and pirate ships. Second, accuracy and faithful representation do not appear to have a high priority in this artwork. This lack of representational truthfulness does not imply that it can be accused of being the product of Holocaust denial. It is not untrue. In logical terms it is neither true nor false. For it is not a propositional statement. But something other than accuracy or historical truth value is at stake here. Third, the seriousness related to the Holocaust as a "solemn or sacred event" seems to have been actively ignored. Instead, this artwork makes us imagine (and feel) the pleasure certain toys can provide. It implies pleasurable activities: identification, and impersonation or play-acting. Thus they run against the grain of traditional teaching.

Identifying with the Perpetrator

In Libera's work the issue of identification is ticklish in a double respect. First of all, identification dominates the mode of looking, stimulated by the works, at the expense of representation. Second, the target of identification has shifted in a drastic and rather shocking way, from victims to perpetrators (Abb. 2). Presenting this art-

2 Sander L. Gilman, "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films", in: *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000), 279–308, 282.

3 Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust *Laughter?*", in: Berel Lang (ed.), *Writing and The Holocaust*, New York 1988, 216–233, 218.

4 Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust *Laughter?*", 233.

5 Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust *Laughter?*", 217.

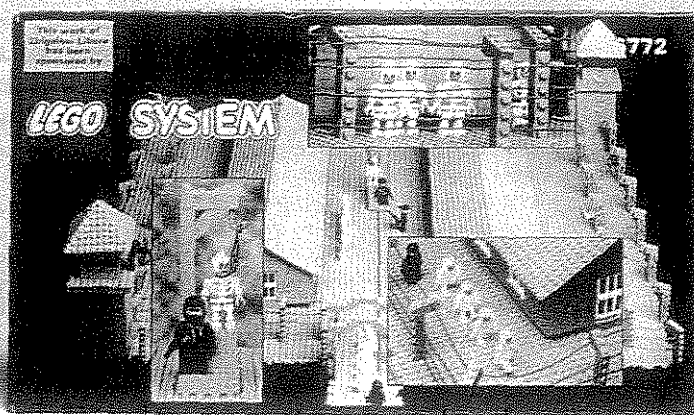


Abb. 1: Zbigniew Libera, *LEGO Concentration Camp Set* (1996),
mit freundlicher Genehmigung des Künstlers.

work as a toy stimulates the viewer to envision her/himself in a situation comparable to the 'real' situation. Identification replaces mastery. The toys function as means which facilitate this envisioning of oneself in the historical situation. Albeit on the basis of an imaginary identification, the viewer is stimulated to build a camp. So, *distance* to the past, the distance required for mastery and which in Holocaust representation is so tenaciously guarded in the preference for historical genres and solemn tones, is not respected but provocatively challenged.

But the use of identification as pedagogical tool is not problematic as such. Recently it has been applied in several Holocaust museums in order to make visitors imagine what it meant to be victimized. For instance, in the *Holocaust Memorial Museum* in Washington D.C. the itinerary leads visitors through a cattle car. The experience of being transported to the camps by cattle cars is not being told about or shown but is thrust upon the visitors. For some moments, one is inside a cattle car and identification with those who were transported to the camps by those cars during the Holocaust is almost unavoidable. In this museum, the kind of identification that is allowed and even stimulated, is identification with the victims, not with the victimizers. But of course, in the context of an outing to a museum, such identification is not 'real,' not total, but partial. Getting a small and short taste of the experience, a tiny bit of the poison, is the goal of such rides in the museum.

What if the object of identification consists of the victimizers instead? Libera's concentration camp set does not facilitate identification with the victims, but rather with the perpetrators. This is, of course, much more difficult to do as well as to justify.

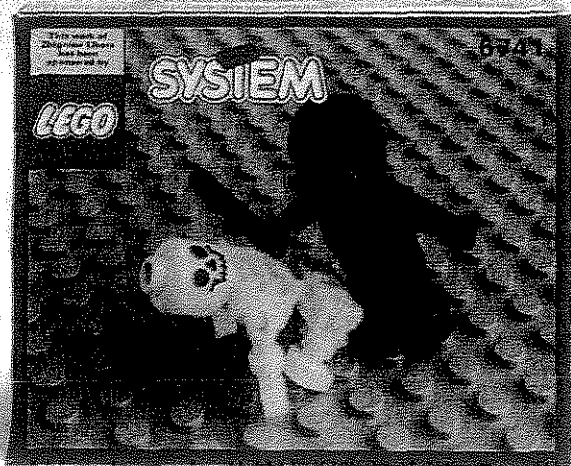


Abb. 2: Zbigniew Libera, *LEGO Concentration Camp Set* (1996),
mir freundlicher Genehmigung des Künstlers.

How does the toy artwork accomplish this, and how can it be argued to be helpful for the cultural remembrance of the Holocaust? One way to achieve this identification with an undesirable position is through making, shaping, forming the perpetrators. Libera's *LEGO Concentration Camp Set* stimulates visitors of the museum or the gallery to envision the possibility of building your own concentration camp. Again, we are put in the shoes of the victimizers, not of the victims.

In order to understand how the kind of mastery provided by toys differs from the mastery provided by 'learnable' knowledge, we have to analyze both modes of learning in terms of the generic discourse to which each belongs. 'Learnable knowledge' of the Holocaust takes the form of narrative. Especially personal narratives in the form of testimonies, diaries or memoirs are seen as instructive narratives that can teach later generations not just the facts of the Holocaust, but more importantly its apocalyptic inhumanity. It is safe to assume that all Holocaust education, including in the form of art, shares the latter goal. But Libera's work of art doesn't tell much about the past. It envisions playing the past. And I use the verb *envision* emphatically, because this work is not a real toy. Instead, it is an artwork in the form of a toy.

Processed, then, by adults acting – play-acting – like children. In the art under scrutiny, a shift in semiotic mode is at stake. The Holocaust is not represented by means of narration but in the mode of drama. Or rather, of a script for a drama. As such it effectuates the solicitation of identification, hence, the possibility to identify with the other. In the case of the Holocaust the other is the moral other, no longer an inevitably abstract evil force from the Beyond, but a person with whom one can even

feel complicitous. The question remains, however, why it is necessary to identify with perpetrators of the Holocaust instead of the victims. I will use Eric Santner's idea of the work of mourning to explain this. The work of mourning is a process of elaborating and integrating the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically and dialogically mediated doses. In the words of Santner:

The dosing out of a certain negative—a thanatotic—element as a strategy of mastering a real and traumatic loss is a fundamentally homeopathic procedure. In a homeopathic procedure the controlled introduction of a negative element—a symbolic or, in medical contexts, real poison—helps to heal a system infected by a similar poisonous substance. The poison becomes a cure by empowering the individual to master the potentially traumatic effects of large doses of the morphologically related poison. In the fort/da game it is the rhythmic manipulation of signifiers and figures, objects and syllables instituting an absence, that serves as the poison that cures.⁶

In Libera's Holocaust toy, similarly, the poisonous stuff needed in a carefully measured dose, is the "Holocaust effect": to play-act the camps instead of talking 'about' them or looking 'at' them.⁷

I want to wind up by speculating on why it is that this trend of 'playing' the Holocaust by means of toys, appears to characterize the art of this current second, third and fourth generation of post-Holocaust survivors and bystanders. How can this work contribute to the cultural necessity to shake loose the traumatic fixation in victim positions that might be partly responsible for the 'poisonous' boredom that risks jeopardizing all efforts to teach the Holocaust under the emblem 'never again'?

In the face of the over-dose of information and educational documentary material, clearly, there is a need to complete a process of working-through which is not yet 'done' effectively. The overdose was counter-productive. In the face of that overdose, 'ignorance' is needed. An ignorance, not in terms of information about the Holocaust events, but of everything that stands in the way of a 'felt knowledge' of the emotions these events entailed. Primarily, an ignorance of the narrative mastery so predominant in traditional education.

In that perspective, the toys with their childish connotations, 'fake' that ignorance that clears away the 'adult' overdose of information that raises obstacles to felt knowledge. 'Mastery' is then, no longer an epistemic mastery of what happened but a performative mastery of the emotions triggered by the happenings. Only by means of a working-through on the level where knowledge is not 'out there' to be fed to passive consumers but 'felt' anew every time again by the participants of a culture that must keep in touch with the Holocaust, can art be effective.

6 Sander L. Gilman, "History beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of the Trauma", in: Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the Final Solution*, Cambridge 1992, 143–154, 146.

7 For the term "Holocaust effect", see my book *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory*, Stanford 1997, passim.

The manipulation and intensification of authenticity

Against the background of the memory crisis described at the beginning of my text, attention is also needed for archival practices in material and digital archives. It is also in these practices that the conventional function of the archive of storing historical information in the service of recollection and memory is no longer effective. It is no longer enough to store and present this historical information. Archival material has to be presented in such a way that it is able to counter the threat of oblivion. The conventional opposition between historical and imaginative has become a real hindrance because what we need now is an aesthetic transformation of the historical. This means among many things that archives should no longer be considered as passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites. And memory is not something found and collected in the archive, but something that is made in the archive, and continually re-made.

To assess the social value of the transformations in archival practices, the question that remains is how effective archival and artistic practices are in countering the threat of oblivion. I would like to address this question by taking a closer look at a specific case, Dariusz Jabłoński's 1998 film *Fotoamator* (*Photographer*). This film is archival as well as artistic, it presents archival material in a highly original and creative way. This active and creative presentation of archival material is, I will argue, a successful attempt of re-establishing the memory-function of archives and of countering the threat of oblivion.

Jabłoński made his film on the basis of a collection of several hundreds of colour slides of the Jewish ghetto of Łódź in Poland. These slides made during the Second World War belong to the first generation of colour photographs. So, they are exceptional in a double respect: because of their subject matter and because of the fact that they have colour. The Austrian chief administrator of the ghetto, Walter Genewein, took them. (Abb. 3) Jabłoński's film consists for the major part of close-ups, zooms and pans of Genewein's slides. These images are accompanied by a voice-over who reads from letters written by Genewein and from his administrative records. He was not only recording life in the ghetto by means of his camera, but also as chief administrator of the camp by making endless lists. It is on the basis of these lists that we learn that the inhabitants of the ghetto produced 59.000 toothbrushes, 321.262 bras and 426.744 braces in the factories in which they were employed. But we also learn about the number of people who died in the ghetto, subdivided in victims of tuberculosis, of heart diseases, and of malnutrition. The different deportations and the number of vans which were needed to transport the belongings of the new inhabitants of the ghetto are mentioned. These numbers are alternated with information about Genewein's career, the promotions he made and the raises of his salary. We get an image of him as a perfectionist administrator and archivist. His records are utterly impersonal and distant and derailed in the most surprising ways. In his correspondence he also tells his addressee that he has decided not to use carbon paper anymore and to change to a semi-automatic administration device.

The voice-over of the impersonal administrator is in sharp contrast with the vividness of the colour slides which we see at the same time. This vividness is even

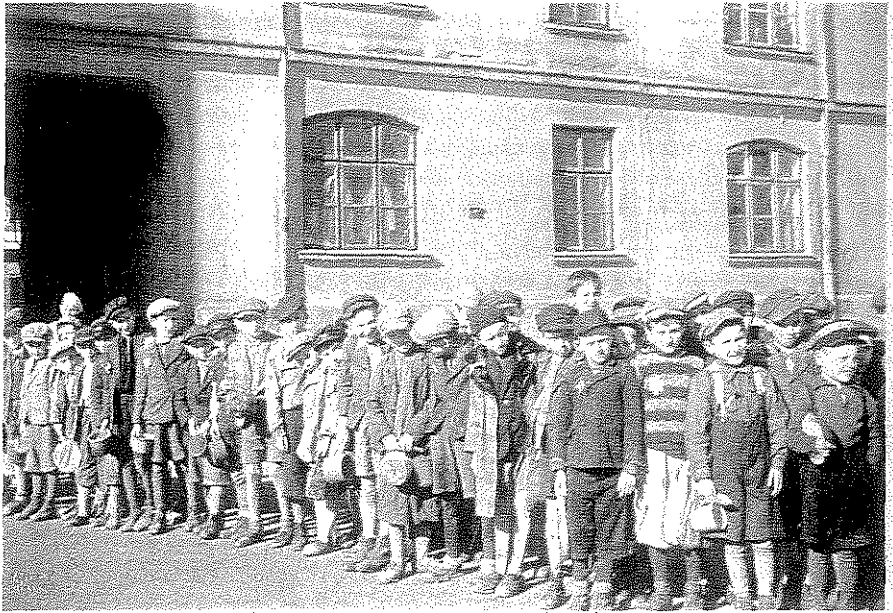


Abb. 3: Fotografie von Walter Genewein, © Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main.
Wir danken für die freundliche Genehmigung zum Abdruck.

enhanced by the addition of realistic background noise, such as that of traffic and the buzzing of voices. The scenes showing the colour slides accompanied by the voice-over of the administrator/archivist, are, however, alternated with moving images showing the surviving doctor of the ghetto, Arnold Mostowics. He is being interviewed about his memories of the ghetto. In fact, the film opens with footage that shows the doctor in an old archive, probably the archive which houses the former administration of the ghetto. These images are in colour, like the slides which are only later introduced into the film. (Abb. 4)

Before we get to see the slides, the doctor gives his reaction to these slides and what they convey:

It was a shock, it was a shock, it was a shock that they existed. Please understand, this was some 45 years after the war had ended. Suddenly I find out about the existence of several hundreds of photographs taken by Germans. And these were not ordinary photographs. Immediately these photos provoked a feeling of unease in me. Unease at the fact that although they showed the ghetto, it was not the ghetto. Although they were real, they did not show the truth.

The nature of the doctor's unease is not further explained at this point. A self-evident explanation is that his memories of his past ghetto experiences are not reconfirmed by the slides or that these slides do not show the whole truth of what happened in the ghetto. The slides show something different, less horrific than what we later hear him

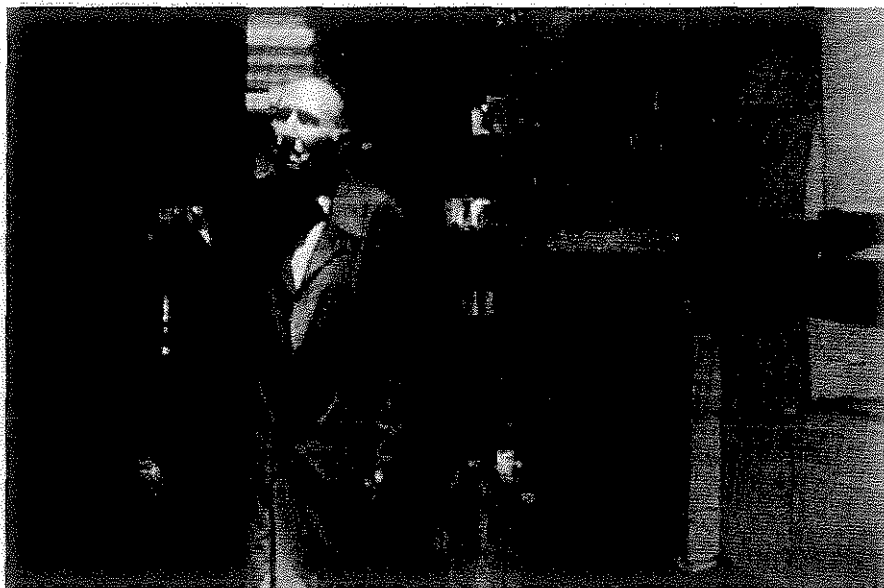


Abb. 4: Filmstill aus Dariusz Jabłoński's *Photoamator* (1998),
abgedruckt mit freundlicher Genehmigung der *Apple Film Production*.

tell. But the unease also seems to be caused by the colour and vividness of the slides. The way the slides are framed in the film suggests that the doctor responds to the fact that these images are too vivid to belong to the past, whereas his own memories of the ghetto do.

Immediately after this introduction of the doctor the moving images transform from colour into black and white. From then on, each time the doctor is interviewed, we see him in black and white. Also other footage that shows present Łódź is in black and white. (Abb. 5) This results in a rather confusing, but also penetrating situation: black and white connotes the present, whereas colour footage connotes the past. This is so confusing, because out of convention we associate colour or the lack thereof, with the opposite. Black and white has an aura of pastness, whereas colour refers to the present. Watching *Fotoamator* we constantly have to readjust our expectations of the significance of colour. For example, Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* makes use of this conventional distinction between black and white and colour.

But there is more to it: the colour slides showing the ghetto are accompanied with the voice-over of chief accountant Genewein. His sentences are in the present tense. He is not talking about the past but from the past. The doctor, however, describing or recalling the situation in the ghetto talks in the past tense. He is clearly talking from another temporal dimension than the time he is talking about. One would think that the vividness of the colour slides and the presentness of the accountant's voice-over is countered by the fact that the slides are stills and that time in it is frozen. But this ef-



Abb. 5: Filmstill aus Dariusz Jabłoński's *Photoamator* (1998), abgedruckt mit freundlicher Genehmigung der *Apple Film Production*.

fect is not accomplished because of the zooming and panning movement of the animation. Although the slides show frozen moments of time, what we as viewers get to see is always moving.

In this film, the movement of time is in all respects the reverse of what the conventional ontology of time prescribes. This is, of course, first of all because of the fact that the images contemporaneous to the ghetto are in colour. Film director Jabłoński is not responsible for this. But a variety of devices employed by him, intensify the effect of the colour slides and bring past time more definitely into the present and distance the present towards the past. When memory is in the literal sense of the word a form of re-calling, the film *Fotoamator* succeeds most effectively in bringing *back* this past into our present. It does it so effectively that this past looks even more present than those moments that are contemporaneous to the viewer's time.

It may be clear by now that Jabłoński's film is highly self-reflexive about colour, the lack thereof, and its effects. There is a recurring motif in the film that even foregrounds this issue of colour in unexpected ways. Chief accountant Genewein is quoted three times from letters, which he wrote to the photography company *AGFA*. He complains about a red-brownish shade, which covers all his slides. He asks for an explanation for this shade and for a solution to prevent it from happening again. The moments that his complaints about the quality of the colour are quoted are far from neutral. It happens at moments that the most horrifying slides are being shown: slides of famished inmates of the ghetto, or of the deportations. The contrast between what

the images show and what the chief accountant comments on, is enormous. He is literally blind for the horror that he documents and archives. Although the colour has now the effect on us that it makes the images vivid in unusual ways, for Genewein, the colour was not vivid enough. He could not see what he had registered.

But we, the audience of Jabłoński's film, see it extremely well. It is thanks to the active, creative archival practice of this film director, that the audience is affected effectively by what happened in the ghetto of Łódź during World War II. Jabłoński did not do anything with the authentic archival images. But he framed them in a way that is far from neutral, or passive. By presenting the footage showing the present in black and white he, in fact, manipulated the meaning of the authentic colour images. He transported them into the present in an even more intense way than they could do on their own. Although the fact that these slides already connoted the present because of their colour, by contrasting them with the living present in black and white, these images became more vivid than the present we are living in. This artistic, aesthetic transgression counters effectively the threat of oblivion caused by photographic and filmic images within contemporary media culture. Jabłoński does not model himself on the archivist as passive, neutral guardian of an inherited legacy, but as an active agent whose responsibility it is to shape cultural memory.