

On the Impossibility of Believing in the Documentary

Dariusz Jabłoński's *Photographer*

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Let us concentrate first on the meaning of the word “document”. It suggests that it is possible to record reality “as it is in fact”. Unfortunately, it takes a brief moment to realise that documents can be forged and even those which have not been tampered with can ideologically distort facts. What is more, documents translate a complicated event into a preconceived form. They rely on an internal logic incomprehensible to non-bureaucrats. In a way, documents provide a novel description of the world serving specific goals, but – and there is no doubt about it – they are made in order to be perceived as a genuine record of the past (even forging documents is meant to convince us to believe this or that version of events). In the case of the Holocaust, documents both reveal and obscure what happened. They facilitate reconstruction of the fate of individuals (paradoxically, due to the fact that they were not perceived as individuals), at the same time posing a mystery as to the intentions of their authors. Even if we think of bureaucrats as tiny cogs in the machinery of annihilation, there is a nagging question: what type of people could calculate income and deaths in a single document? The answer is hard to swallow as we would easily recognise their motives as our own. Some of them were art lovers, found delight in music, were preoccupied with their own career, etc.

The word “document” is by no means reserved solely for different genres of paper work. In common parlance, we call photography “a document” of what happened, and film footage is understood in a similar manner. In Polish the word “document” is used interchangeably with the phrase “documentary film”. Historically the changing understanding of testifying to reality affected the reception and production of documentary films. In some periods staging was used while preparing to shoot (e.g. in Robert Flaherty’s famous films ¹) whereas later any interference with the recorded material was totally frowned upon. This second school is known as *cinema verité* and in essence is the philosophy of non-intervention in the filmed material, while a filmmaker is said to adopt the vantage point of “a fly on the wall”. The prolonged domination of films recorded under this convention came to an end as documentaries inevitably relied on the basic elements of film art such as takes or editing while the pretence of accurately representing reality was to a large extent naïve ². “Deconstructing the myth” rehabilitated certain techniques of understanding, among others, interviews with talking heads and placing the visual in the narrative context. Additionally, semiotics and deconstruction proved that there is no

stable and irrefutable relation between the image and its meaning. These perspectives point to the necessity of finding a context for understanding and tying the process of understanding to the audience. Director Dariusz Jabłoński (*Fotoamator*, distributed internationally as *Photographer*, 1998) strives to add the historical and human context to an unknown image of the extermination.

Colour slides from the Łódź ghetto (called Litzmanstadt during the occupation) discovered in Vienna in 1987 have significantly enriched the iconography of the Holocaust³. There are abundant graphic representations of the Shoah (Marianne Hirsch claims that the numerous archives hold approximately 2 million photographs from the period⁴), but only a few images – severed from their historical context – have left their imprint in the collective memory. It suffices to mention photographs of the gate of Auschwitz with the famous slogan *Arbeit macht frei*, the railway spur in Birkenau with its merging tracks, or the bulldozer operated by a British soldier pushing corpses into a mass grave after the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Disassociating the above-mentioned representations from their concrete historical reality serves the needs of postmemory, which is the only option available to those who do not know the Holocaust from their own experience but through familial or cultural representations. Postmemory – due to a limited number of constantly repeated images – can be organized around concrete visuals. This has been the case of the gate at Auschwitz I, which became a universally recognised symbol of the Holocaust, even though for the majority of prisoners it was not the true gate to the world of Auschwitz. What is more, later on it no longer served as the entrance to the camp as the latter's enlargement placed it inside the concentrationary complex.

In the overwhelming majority of cases Holocaust photographs were taken by the perpetrators and reflect their point of view. In reference to these images it is legitimate to compare the photographic lens to the barrel of a gun⁵, as both cases entail an intention to suddenly and irreversibly freeze life (the motif of double death – adopted in Holocaust studies from studies on slavery – refers to the already sealed fate of every victim, doomed to destruction even before their execution took place). The double death of the photographed transpired, not infrequently, at the very moment of execution⁶. Moreover, the victims were forced to pose either in the standardised, mugshot manner for the identification documents or prior to execution. The photographs were also taken by Jews themselves, including at such improbable locations as the cremation pyres manned by the Sonderkommando in Birkenau. These documentary efforts made under threat of death provide a new type of Holocaust representation as the perpetrators' tunnel vision is being exposed in the photographs of their Jewish victims. The perpetrators did not stop at the production of the images as they were part of the planned audience for such representations (it is they who are the addressees of these images and not the survivors or, even less us, the postwar generation). Marianne Hirsch sees a proof of this phenomenon in a photograph of German soldiers who, in the wake of a pacification operation, look at photographs taken during a previous action. Such compulsive documentation can be linked to German pride felt in participating in the masterplan, whose aim was to "free the world of the Jews" and for this reason alone had to be recorded. The victims were not only deprived of their lives but also the possibility of creating their own representations and preserving existing documents. The production of

images was to be the sole domain of the “master race” as well as their interpretation and reception.

“The most glorious success in the history of Germany” – making the world *judenrein*, that is, free of the Jews – necessitated radical steps. German representations break almost every imaginable taboo⁷, but the passage of time and exposure to other disturbing images has deadened our sensitivity. These images fail to invoke the horror felt by twelve year old Susan Sontag (in 1945) or nine year old Amy Kaplan (who found her father’s camp photographs in a drawer in 1968). Sontag was right to point out that photographs can undergo a process of desensitisation and even the most upsetting, when frequently seen, stop causing moral angst⁸. This is probably the reason why we are so moved by the colour slides made in the Łódź ghetto by Walter Genewein. Their novelty value consists not only in enriching our perspective on the past with two aspects: colour (understood as something more than a technological possibility) and the gaze of an executioner’s middleman, a man who did not kill anybody, occupied with the “mere” bookkeeping of a Holocaust enterprise. There is another aspect too.

The discovery of the colour slides from the ghetto challenges our perception of the past – we automatically expect black-and-white film stock or prints for this period. This choice is not just limited to representations from the period (due to technological limitations), as contemporary artists have also made a conscious choice to eschew colour (the black-and-white medium has been utilised by Art Spiegelman in *Maus*, Steven Spielberg in *Schindler’s List* and Henry Bean in *The Believer* – but in the latter only in wartime flashbacks). For some critics, linking the Holocaust to colour is as bad as linking it to humour (these are two reasons for levelling criticism at Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful*). Furthermore, colour is linked to processes of aesthetisation, that is, a translation of the extermination into the language of aesthetics despite the anti-aesthetic qualities of the genocide. Additionally, before the final victory of colour in the history of cinema it was reserved for films depicting fairy lands, while black-and-white stock placed the film in a concrete historical reality⁹. On the other hand, wartime German colour feature films shirked representations of the situation on the front and deployed such genres as *historical costume films or escapist melodramas/musical comedies*¹⁰.

In the interwar period there were two competing understandings of documentary film: firstly, Hollywood’s offerings – which can be dubbed “for entertainment” as products were sold in sets (a documentary, newsreel and feature) – which made documentary films just another tool of amusement, and secondly, those films focused on showing social inequalities or the horrors of war (which did not shy away from showing disturbing scenes recorded by the camera). Walter Genewein’s choice did not happen in an aesthetic vacuum; however, when compared with images produced by Nazi soldiers (when talking about Genewein I prefer to use the moniker “an ordinary German”), his slides stand out as being full of restraint or oozing an idyllic atmosphere.

Jabłoński’s film starts in colour as if taking heed of Genewein. An elderly man speaks in an archive, claiming that he sees the ghetto in the colour slides, but it is by no means the ghetto etched in his memory. He asks what he is to trust: Walter Genewein’s photographs or his own memory? The same streets and houses are visible, but he fails to comprehend the meaning of the colours. This question is of key

importance for the present interpretation of the film as it sheds light on the mechanisms of memory but also the production and reception of representations of the Final Solution. After a brief colour contemporary introduction the film switches to black-and-white. We observe cobblestones in close-up for a prolonged moment but at the end of the shot the camera tracks towards the survivor Arnold Mostowicz. From now on black-and-white and colour images alternate. The façade of a tenement house in a colour slide is followed by a late-1990s shot on black-and-white stock. Jabłoński's documentary is an example of a trend in documentaries of turning to historical colour footage of the war in the late 1990s¹¹. The predominant black-and-white footage of the past has been replaced with the equivalent colour stock, and sometimes colour images of the past have no black-and-white equivalent¹². One thing that is very interesting is that these two types of stock differed in their distribution patterns because colour footage was frequently recorded for private purposes on either 8 or 16mm film with no intention of being released to the general public.

Walter Genewein communicates with the audience only through mediated messages. The first time he identifies himself is in a letter to AGFA, the film company, in which he asks as "an experienced photo enthusiast" for colour positives to better render "the achievements of his post". Arnold Mostowicz provides a counterpoint to Genewein's voice over (obviously it is not an archival recording, but a German actor reading out the letter – this device is to enhance realism). The survivor admits that for him the ghetto was something unreal, uncanny, something beyond imagination. Both protagonists introduce themselves from the postwar perspective: Genewein in a letter from prison, in which he pleads for release due to ill health (we learn this only towards the end of the film), and Mostowicz after more than 50 years. Genewein identifies himself: "I'm an Austrian, Catholic, I have a wife and children, I want to say that the ghetto was not a concentration camp but a small Jewish town". This introduction clearly demonstrates that he was conscious of the horror of the extermination and started to comprehend what he participated in or, conversely, that he failed to grasp it, but used the post-Nuremberg distinction between concentration camps and ghettos, or death camps and labour camps. Mostowicz claims that he served as a doctor in the ghetto, but due to failing health he quit his practice after the war and became a journalist and a writer instead. This is the starting point for two parallel narratives in the film: Genewein's professional advancement and survival as a doctor, as he testifies to the destruction of the "Jewish city" (which initially had as many as 320,000 inhabitants). The accountant commenced his career in Łódź in July 1940 after having been summoned from Berlin. This history is similar to the stories of many other "ordinary Germans" (to borrow a phrase from Christopher Browning or Daniel Johan Goldhagen). At that time, this was his prime – he was climbing the professional ladder, implementing the ideals of the bureaucratic state. For the survivor this story hardly resembles a tale of success. Mostowicz narrates his story from the shade, talking about the longest shadow in his life, from which he is still trying to extricate himself.

The Łódź ghetto was established as a production plant for the German army and civilian purposes. Economic considerations were the rationale for the existence of the closed Jewish district, which was the longest operating ghetto in Europe occupied by Germany. An official document describing work conditions illustrates the fact that the ghetto had been perceived in economic terms – working Jews re-

ceived double food rations which had to be eaten in the workshop in order to rule out embezzlement such as “giving food to family members”. Additionally, subordinating physiology to production led to the blotting out of family ties. Alienation took place on all levels, Jewish workers were not only alienated from their bodies (which were tools for the benefit of the Reich), but also from their own families (David Sierakowiak’s diary – a chronicle of hunger disease and its detrimental impact on the strength of family ties – illustrates such estrangement ¹³).

The incorporation of the inhabitants of the Jewish district into the plan of total exploitation and annihilation comes to the fore in Mostowicz’s anecdote. The event seems uncanny to him. It probably took place in November 1943, early one morning. Entering a horse-drawn cab, he heard a noise as if somebody was striking a hammer on the cobblestones. Suddenly, two groups of people emerged where two streets crossed, their clogs clattering on the stones on their way to work. This anecdote lays bare the mechanisms of how memory works. Mostowicz fails to remember the location of the event, but recalls such details as the fact that the horse moved its nostrils on hearing the sound of the clogs.

The economic success of the ghetto was linked to Chaim Rumkowski – the Elder of the Jewish Council in Łódź. Rumkowski, just like the Germans, can be heard in voice over. Adopting the Nazi perspective, bent on production, he speaks about a disgraceful aspect of life in the ghetto – that is to say, crime. This pronouncement is juxtaposed with a slide from the ghetto and an audio recording of a sentence handed down for stealing four potatoes from outside the fence by hooking them with a piece of wire. According to this verdict, avoiding death from starvation amounted to a criminal act. The evidence for the internalisation of the German perspective shocks when compared with a verdict passed by the Jewish court in conjunction with an official report by a German gendarme who shot a Jewish woman for the attempted theft of a turnip from a passing horse-drawn carriage. Firing two bullets was called “fulfilment of official duties”.

The experiences of the ghetto are difficult to convey after the war, but even during the occupation the horror of the situation did not strike everybody with the same force. Mostowicz talks about rich Western European Jews who came to the ghetto as if for a picnic, totally oblivious to the gravity of the situation. They invited each other from one bunk bed to another as if their social standing had not changed, and shared food. Their obliviousness mirrors somehow the naivete of the accountant’s colour slides, devoid of pathos, while the idyllic in the images is seldom disturbed by the drama of death. If I were to look for exceptions to this rule, I could mention a hairdresser’s face with his “obituary” written on it (we owe credit to Rachel Auerbach for the use of the word “klepsydra”, that is, obituary, in her diary from the Warsaw ghetto) – a sign of death from starvation. This face is shown in close-up until it becomes just a blur.

In all probability, we cannot speak of Genewein’s naivete but of a specific way of seeing the world, a specific interpretation underlying his slides. Perhaps, efforts at documentation relate to a totally different facet of life under the occupation. Slides taken at an exhibition of commodities produced by workshops ¹⁴ located in the ghetto reflect pride derived from a properly managed enterprise ¹⁵. A similar pride can be seen in a document signed by Genewein, relating to the museum of Jewish production (it is fitting to highlight the role of the verbal commentary that accompanies the most



Photographer, dir. Dariusz Jabłoński (1998)

frequently presented photograph; it seems that the language of the quoted documents aptly characterises Genewein’s way of thinking. Furthermore, we can assume that they also reflect his intentions as a photographer)¹⁶. The documentary juxtaposes the amount of produced goods with the production costs – deportation statistics for six months. Simultaneously, Genewein relates the changes in the manner of accounting as the soaring productivity of the workshops has called for a more effective way of bookkeeping. These two pieces of information contribute to the narrative context of the images, placing them in the highly rationalised social reality, where factors such as profit and accounting are more important than any translation of the figure from the “costs” column into ethical categories.

Hiding or obscuring the truth could be observed among the Jews, too. Mostowicz informs us that workers sorting clothes in the ghetto did not want to face the truth, even when they were busy sorting clothes belonging to their relatives, who had been sent to Chełmno (Kulmhof) to die in the mobile gas chambers¹⁷. This resistance to knowledge persisted despite the early circulation of information about the death camps. Mostowicz addresses the filmmaker standing behind the camera. Such an address to the listener or the viewer stems from the realisation that telling the truth is impossible in the absence of a well-defined audience.

The accountant’s narrative is interwoven with letters to AGFA inquiring about the unrealistic rendition of colours in the slides. Colours have shifted towards brown and red, and finally just red. Students of Freud would automatically turn to the notion of the uncanny¹⁸, that is, an event or phenomenon which has a rational explanation, but its appearance leads to the suspension of rationality. If somebody believes in the correspondence between the real world and its hidden dimension, they can claim that Genewein’s slides “see” more than he does. In a way, they destroy the excessive optimism of the accountant’s world while he sensibly demands the removal of the faulty vision by the manufacturer of the photosensitive material. He asks why whites have turned pinkish and other colours have gained a reddish hue. There are a few letters to AGFA, which testifies to his high expectations of the photographs taken – he expects a truthful rendering of the world. He believes in photography understood as an indisputable record of reality. This wish prompts a question: “What is the reality Genewein believes in?” Is he an adherent of Nazi ideology? Or an “ordinary” man working diligently regardless of the prevailing social system?

AGFA replies that the misrepresentation of colours was due to technological problems which have already been rectified ruling out their repetition in the future; they also ask him to send the outstanding payment. This exchange of letters provides an instrumental answer to an instrumental question. Technology shuns mystery and tolerates no understatements. Furthermore, technology is meant to provide profit. For the manufacturer of the positive film it does not matter what happens to be in front of the lens as the ultimate goal is to offer a product which will satisfy customers' demand for an unquestionable image of the world "as it is".

The Łódź ghetto can be understood in terms of profits produced for the German military and civilians but also, as Mostowicz is right to point out, many Germans (both civilians and soldiers) blessed the existence of the Jewish district as it offered employment protecting them from transfer to the eastern front. Unfortunately for the inhabitants of the ghetto, the Nazi extermination frenzy did not lose its impetus despite the military defeats on all fronts, resulting in the liquidation of the ghetto on 25th August, 1944.

Towards the end of the film Genewein pleads for parole due to ill health, arguing that prison rations make it impossible to keep to his diet (he is a diabetic). The letter reappears – it is quoted in the opening of the film when Genewein denied the ghetto the status of a concentration camp. Regarding the letter, we can doubt his intentions (he claims to have been imprisoned after being denounced by an "unfriendly informer"), but our reservations might be too harsh. Probably, like numerous Nazi war criminals, he does not question what has happened, but is blind to a causal relationship between his work in the ghetto and the genocide. Between the lines we can read his acknowledgement of Nazi crimes (he mentions concentration camps, however, they are seen as the total opposite of his own experience, something to protect him from responsibility).

Before the final credits we see short biographies of the main protagonists in white lettering on a black background – Hans Biebow (commandant of the Łódź ghetto) was sentenced to death and hanged; Chaim Rumkowski – probably burned alive with his family in the crematorium in Auschwitz-Birkenau; Arnold Mostowicz – a doctor and a writer living in Warsaw (died on 3rd February, 2002); Walter Genewein died a respected citizen in 1974. It seems that his postwar life had not necessitated a radical change from him, he remained as conscientious and law-abiding a citizen (in his own understanding and in the eyes of German society) as he had been during the war. Had it not been for the slides from the ghetto, we would never have heard of this "ordinary accountant".

Let us consider the methods of testifying to reality adopted by Dariusz Jabłoński. The juxtaposition of colour slides and black-and-white stock shows that seeing catastrophe in colour is out of place and provokes intuitive resistance. Black-and-white stock is by no means archive material (it depicts Łódź in the second half of the 1990s). Arnold Mostowicz offers a guided tour of the archive. This device brings to mind the subtitle to Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*¹⁹, with a claim that only a witness can have access to these terrible events (in part because it is impossible to usurp their position. He/she cannot even be sure of their own memory or senses. Additionally, they may encounter difficulties expressing their experiences). This uncertainty surfaces when Mostowicz recites lyrics of a song about Rumkowski – his story starts with a seemingly

automatic recall of the lyrics, only then does he move to events from the ghetto or introduces himself. Mostowicz is a special witness as his medical practice gave him access to information about the ghetto. What is more, he is aware that this practice was tied (or should have been) to higher moral standards. This awareness has informed Mostowicz's postwar life, highlighted in a story about a meeting called by Rumkowski in order to consult the ghetto's doctors about the decision to deport 24,000 children from the ghetto (without a shadow of a doubt, the Germans were not interested in the opinion of the Jewish council, they demanded consent). Rumkowski managed to lower this number to 20,000 and asked the doctors about the proposed course of action. The majority of doctors admitted that the German request should be complied with and the children sent away. A few people protested while the rest abstained. At this point, Mostowicz poses a rhetorical question, anticipating a potential inquiry about his own stance: "You could ask me now what I had done". He admits to not having uttered a word. He tries looking for extenuating circumstances (knowing all too well that there is no justification): none of his relatives was in the Łódź ghetto and the case had no personal dimension to him. At a critical point in his narrative he points to the camera operator, searching for an audience willing to take pains to comprehend his position in the ghetto at the time.

There had been events which pierced the protective psychic shield. The ex-doctor regards the letter sent by his father from the Warsaw ghetto as the most painful event of the war. In the letter he is rebuked for an unemotional account of the death of his father's beloved brother and having forsaken family feelings. When Mostowicz received the letter from his father, the latter was already dead. Despite the fact that the doctor kept filling in death certificates for family members in Łódź and was convinced that everybody was bound to die, he cannot stop thinking how much he hurt his father (despite his best intentions).

The juxtaposition of black-and-white footage with colour stock can be traced throughout the history of documentary film. I have Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* in mind, in which black-and-white archival material from the concentration camps was juxtaposed with colour footage recorded in the lush green surroundings of a former concentration camp. The difference lies in the fact that the documents presented by Jabłoński are in colour, which is at odds with our habits of perception²⁰. As a consequence of this decision other documents from the period are also shown on colour stock, e.g. daily newspapers. Their ontological status is equated to the colour slides. This device is discontinued after the liquidation of the ghetto – at this point black-and-white identification photographs appear (for *Kennkarten*) with stamps on their borders. The photographs stand in for the people who perished, but they were already sentenced to die at the moment of photographing (by means of deindividualisation and being branded with their ethnicity). On the other hand, when these photographs are shown outside of their context (not as a part of an ID card), they counterbalance the optimism of Genewein's pictures. Both types of representation freeze life, but the accountant overlooks vital aspects of life in the ghetto (his photostory is a narrative of personal and collective success as Genewein belongs to a different interpretive community than the postwar audience and the Jews from Łódź sentenced to extermination). There is a pressing need to provide context as the images are not going to tell us any story without being incorporated into a narrative. Without it, the people in both sets of photographs would remain com-

pletely anonymous, severed from their historicity and concreteness. Jabłoński's endeavour is to provide a historical and personal context in order to "disenchant" otherwise incomprehensible images.

I would like to employ Raul Hilberg's historical diagnosis²¹ as a context for understanding (or being unable to comprehend) the accountant's motifs. Hilberg stresses that Holocaust perpetrators were not simple or crazy but well-educated. Their actions were not aberrations but an implementation of the mechanisms of civilisation that applied thorough control over social reality. Seen in this light, Genewein differs from the SS officers or Wehrmacht soldiers, but probably due to the fact that he was sent to supervise the finances of the ghetto and not to carry out "special tasks" or front-line duties. His aesthetic perception of the world irritates our understanding of history; it is *easier* for us to understand the joy of soldiers after mass executions than to comprehend images devoid of any horror. The need to confront such images is unavoidable as the viewers, saturated with images of violence, have lost their ability to feel shock. This aesthetic camouflage is the visual manifestation of the negligible distance between contemporary viewers and the photographer from the ghetto. His love for photography mimics our love of snapshots, which consciously avoid any unpleasant or disturbing topics. They serve to maintain a positive self-image of the family and undergo self-censorship²².

Bauman stresses the rational character of the Holocaust²³, excluding it from an age-old sequence of pogroms. He claims that it is the complete opposite of the *Kristallnacht*, which was an isolated explosion of irrational hatred. Reliance on feelings could not have guaranteed genocide. The true meaning of modern genocide consists in the thorough, administrative elimination of emotions and application of pure rationality. This rationality belongs to gardening culture (with a high degree of goal-orientation). Modern culture nominates itself as a gardener, identifying individuals to be eliminated in order to prepare the ground for the ideal society of the future. Unwanted people were not killed out of hatred, but because they ceased to perform a useful function in the world image. This is the reason why Genewein could ignore the high death rate in the "costs" column (as well as the necessity for further deportations).

According to Bauman, the Holocaust constitutes the triumph of civilisation over animal instincts and not the coming of the beast (this myth is due to the Western myth of progress). Such a model of civilisation led to a substantial suppression of personal aggression. Furthermore, Bauman correctly describes the tiny cogs in the machinery of destruction – such as Genewein. He demonstrates that they were guided by technical responsibility while rejecting the issue of moral responsibility. Occupying a middle position in the hierarchy, Genewein turned the exploitation and destruction of the Jewish population into statistical categories – the only ones comprehensible to modern bureaucrats. Unable to ethically assess his professional actions, he did not apply moral categories to picture taking. While not a direct perpetrator, he took photographs from a specific cognitive distance. It would be a mistake to expect him to empathise with the inhabitants of the ghetto, on the other hand, generic scenes recorded on positive film do not bring to mind the metaphor of the lens being the barrel of a gun.

The last slide from the collection discovered in Vienna has been catalogued as No. 393 and shows a Jewish bathhouse. The concentration of a multitude of naked

bodies in a small space evokes inescapable associations, but it is an image in which people wanted to believe and were made to believe. This image connotes gas chambers (this truth was hidden from the victims led to their deaths in order to avoid panic). It seems that an unavoidable association with a gas chamber refers to an image which does not exist (a few representations break this taboo, but most representations known to me observe it – e.g. *Schindler's List*). The photograph discards the idyllic version of the Łódź ghetto only by virtue of the knowledge of historical context. Without the audience this fragment of the film would prove incomprehensible as they are being sensitised to the realities of the closed district.

Let us return to Walter Genewein's concern with the proper rendition of colour in his slides – we can recognise our own aesthetic concerns. The contemporary obsession with the monstrous is absent in these images. He did not have the intention of photographing nightmares (in this respect he was different from executioners who found delight in being photographed with the aftermath of the execution). Perhaps there is no hidden motive for Genewein's photographing the ghetto. And yet, this knowledge extends beyond the boundaries of our understanding. We are at a loss delving into the motives of his passion for still images (he took pride in his work and merely wanted to immortalise its results in his slides). On the other hand, when we pause to think about the character of his work the ghastliness of the photographs becomes evident (in this sense the difference between them and execution photographs is negligible – aesthetically, they are beyond comparison, but they do share the wish to document participation in the greatest achievement of Nazi rule).

Some viewers approach a film expecting to learn lessons about life. They may admire a film because it conveys a profound or relevant message ²⁴. This sentence has been taken out of context – from an explanation of why it is important to interpret films, paying attention to their formal elements. In the case of *Photographer* even the most meticulous analysis is not going to give an answer as to the main lesson propounded by the film. We cannot say what lesson is put forward in Jabłoński's documentary. The task of comprehending Genewein's motives is beyond our reach. On the other hand, we realise that some of his longings and endeavours are also ours. Finally, we are in the dark trying to answer the question posed by Mostowicz at the beginning of the film: "Where is the truth?" Discovery of the unquestionable meaning of the message is not possible as Genewein and Mostowicz appeared as protagonists in two different stories: the former in the history of his own career and the latter in the destruction of his nation. This fact explains why Genewein was not preoccupied with the high mortality as a cost (or the need to continue with deportations). It also sheds light on the absence of death in the slides as the photographed Jews participated in the economic masterplan of the chief accountant. When they were recorded at rest, they were just an aesthetic element of the cityscape, a curiosity immortalised by virtue of the fleeting whim of the photographer.

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- ¹ On the strategy of Flaherty's filmmaking see Eric Barnouw's *The Documentary. A History of Non-Fiction Film* (Oxford 1993 /second edition/).
- ² Compare: B. Winston, *Documentary: How the Myth Was Deconstructed*, "Wide Angle" 1999, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 70-86.
- ³ Discovery of the slides was an event in itself, but the photographer was not instantly identified. The first reproductions I know of were printed in *Lodz Ghetto. Inside the Community under Siege*, ed. by A. Adelson and R. Lapidus, with an afterword by G. Hartmann, New York 1989. The slides were brought to the publishers in 1987. The authors claim that the colour photographic material had been produced in Germany by AGFA since 1936 and that a few photographs of the Warsaw ghetto were also discovered. Slides from the Łódź ghetto – placed in glass frames – were purchased from an antiques dealer who received them from *an undisclosed source*. Recently, two books about the Łódź Ghetto were published in Polish: *Fenomen getta łódzkiego: 1940-1944* (ed. by P. Samuś and W. Puś, Łódź 2006) and *Getto łódzkie – Litzmanstadt Ghetto: 1940-1944* (Łódź 2009). The former reproduces Genewein's photographs in colour, but none of the photographs has been attributed. Genewein's self-portrait is printed together with portraits of Jewish photographers from the ghetto. *Getto łódzkie* is graphically sophisticated but all the reproductions (including Genewein's slides) have been rendered in black-and-white. Ghetto photographers Mendel Grossman, Lajb Maliniak and Henryk Ross have their portraits printed at the end of the book, but Genewein's likeness is nowhere to be seen. Instead, there is a reproduction of a November 1941 announcement banning private photography in the ghetto and requiring all cameras to be sold to the administration (p. 287).
- ⁴ M. Hirsch, *Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory*, "The Yale Journal of Criticism" 2001, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 5-37.
- ⁵ Hirsch refers to an essay by Christian Metz, *Photography and Fetish*, in: *Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. C. Squiers, Seattle 1990, p. 158, after M. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 22 and 36.
- ⁶ M. Hirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- ⁷ David Shneer's groundbreaking scholarship into Soviet Holocaust photographs raises new questions regarding the iconography of horror. Jewish photographers documenting the freshly discovered sites of mass violence such as ravines, ditches, fields or pits created a new genre dubbed "the Nazi atrocity photo essay" (*Through Soviet Jewish Eyes: Photography, War, and the Holocaust*, New Brunswick 2012, pp. 143-49.) Investigators frequently tower over exhumed bodies of victims in a manner similar to perpetrator photography: *If I hadn't found this photograph in the commission files, I might have thought it was taken by Nazi soldiers, who gained voyeuristic pleasure from posing before their crimes, smiling and sometimes sending the photographs back to their families in Germany.* (147)
- ⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 6-7. It has to be noted that Sontag revised her position on the topic, initially expressed in *On Photography*, in her last book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York 2003). She attempted to retain the pain and unease of the audience.
- ⁹ A short analysis of the meaning of colour in film and photography can be found in: D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, *Film Art. An Introduction*, New York 1990, p. 200-201.
- ¹⁰ D. Alt, 'Front in Farbe': *Color Cinematography for the Nazi Newsreel, 1941-1945*, "Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television" 2011, vol. 31, no. 1, p. 44.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 43-60.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, p. 43.
- ¹³ D. Sierakowiak, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Łódź Ghetto*, ed. A. Adelson, trans. K. Turowski, Oxford 1996.
- ¹⁴ The name "shop" was used to refer to artisanal "factories" in the ghetto.
- ¹⁵ Janina Struk points out that such a preoccupation with the economic aspect of the Jewish district was shared by the Jewish photographers who *photographed workers in factories and workshops and their products, to demonstrate their efficiency to the German authorities and to encourage orders from German companies* (J. Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*, London 2004, p. 86).
- ¹⁶ Interpreting intentions in the photographic record of the past has turned out to be a productive practice in other contexts as well. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer encountered several hurdles in the interpretation of a photograph of Hirsch's parents walking down the main street in Chernovitz, unmolested, in 1942 or 1943 (Compare: M. Hirsch and L. Spitzer, *What's Wrong with this Picture? Archival Photographs in Contemporary Narratives*, "Journal of Modern Jewish Studies" 2006, vol. 5,

- no. 2, pp. 229-52). These two authors made an additional contribution to the understanding of street photography as a genre in which Jewish subjects were represented before and during the war (M. Hirsch and L. Spitzer, *Incongruous Images: 'Before, During and After' the Holocaust*, "History and Theory" 2009, iss. 48, pp. 9-25). They underlined the concrete historical-geographical context at odds with the institutionalised framework of a photographic archive of the Holocaust at the USHMM, where the photographs did not pass muster. However, the circumstances of Romanian rule in the city contributed to the production of images unimaginable in other parts of Europe at the time.
- ¹⁷ In Chełmno the Jews were killed by exhaust fumes rerouted to the goods compartment of trucks sealed after the victims had been pushed inside.
- ¹⁸ Ulrich Baer undertakes an iconographic analysis of the slides and their use in Jabłoński's documentary, entering into a debate with historians who tend to view the photographs solely as the result of Nazi ideology (U. Baer, *Revision, Animation, Rescue: Color Photographs from the Łódź Ghetto and Dariusz Jablonski's "Fotoamator"*, in: *Spectral Evidence. The Photography of Trauma*, Cambridge, MA 2002). The critic writes about the slides being *in uncannily realistic color*, listing the hues of different objects: the *sunflower-yellow* of the stars stitched to clothing or *mail carriers in the ghetto sport[ing] a powder-blue band* (p. 151), only to remark that this rainbow of colours has a very limited historical significance. Genewein's complaints about the *unattractive reddish-brown hue* have been read as an indication that traditional associations of the use of colour such as *life, realism, and the present* should rather be seen as *the proverbial blood on the Nazi photographer's hands and slides*. (p. 154)
- ¹⁹ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books 2002.
- ²⁰ Marek Hendrykowski writes about a film produced during the war (*Film jako źródło historyczne*, Poznań 2000): George Stevens, an American director and the head of the special Motion Pictures Unit from 1943, directed a documentary in colour in liberated Berlin. According to Hendrykowski, this material was never shown publicly, it was recorded in the convention of home movies with a handheld camera and depicts a private dimension of history. However, the film was finally released on VHS in 1994 as *D-Day to Berlin* and is currently available on DVD.
- ²¹ Cited by Zygmunt Bauman in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca 1989.
- ²² A thorough study of amateur photography can be found in: R. Chalfen, *Snapshots. Versions of Life*, Bowling Green 1987.
- ²³ Z. Bauman, op. cit.
- ²⁴ D. Bordwell and K. Thompson, op. cit., p. 62.