

Conference „Films from ghettos and camps: Propaganda-Clandestine messages- historical source“

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Compromised Films

If we imagine film history as a house it would have one chamber where prohibited, scandalized or stigmatized films are stored. Of course there is not only *one* single history of cinema, but many histories – each has their forbidden chambers, filled with the proverbial skeletons in the closet, constituting a source of national shame. In most cases these film skeletons are hidden in archives.

In the past these film skeletons were only accessible to archivists and historians. A central example are the so called Nazi times **Vorbehaltsfilme**, “films under reserve” in Germany and Austria. They can be shown only under certain conditions which is a scholarly introduction to the film and a discussion afterwards. Until the advent of the internet these films outside limited circles were merely known by title such as the documentary *Der Ewige Jude* using footage taken in Polish ghettos, the fiction films *Jud Süß* (1940), *Die Rothschilds* (1940), *GPU* (1942), *Anschlag aufBaku* (1942), or *Kolberg* (1945) which was re-released in 1965 in a edited version etc. Cf. a list on wiki: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vorbehaltsfilm>

The word Vorbehaltsfilm describes a corpus of over 200 Nazi propaganda films which were banned by the Supreme command of the **Allied Forces** („Nachrichtenkontrollvorschrift”). Until today some of them are forbidden in regular theatrical exhibition and banned as commercial product. Since the growth of **accessibility** to

movies on a variety of internet sites these forbidden films or sometimes only fragments have now become visible without major restrictions.

The prohibited nature of these films adds to their interest and enhances their distribution. The attraction of gazing upon the forbidden only boosts their circulation and with this, numerous myths growing around them. There is neither a stable body of knowledge nor a debated and approved range of interpretations of these blacklisted films. However, the treatment of these films is changing, more films are shown publicly to counteract their uncommented presence on the internet; the historical list itself is discussed, however, **annotated editions** have not been planned, yet, as far as I know. Ursula will tell us more about this.

It should be mentioned that the discussion in Germany has been happening without the involvement of representatives of the Allied countries or the countries which during the War were forced to contribute to the making of these films. After all the legislation which created this very list was initiated by the Supreme Command of the Allied Forces.

For a recent discussion of vorbehalt films which was sparked by the series of screenings of Vorbehaltsfilms at the Berlin Zeughauskino (2011-14; curator: Jörg Frieß) cf. the following articles:

Hanns-Georg Rodek who criticizes the current dealing with the remaining list of around 40 films. He also mentions the lack of transparency which films and why are still on the “under reserve” list and why Riefenstahl’s films are not on the list:

<http://www.welt.de/kultur/history/article13843450/Wie-viel-Gift-steckt-noch-in-den-V-orbehaltsfilmen.html>

The documentary film *Theresienstadt. Ein Dokumentarfilm aus dem Jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet* (1945) (1945) is not on the list,

either, which could be explained with the fact that it was never released for the public.

A film was made about Vorbehaltsfilms, called "Verbotene Filme" (2014):

http://www.salzgeber.de/presse/pressehefte/VERBOTENE_ph_Web.pdf

If you speak German as a preparation for the roundtable you also could check out this web page and listen to:

Jörg Frieß über Die Vorbehaltsfilme im Zeughauskino and Ernst Szebedit über den Umgang mit den "Vorbehaltsfilmen"

<http://www.dw.de/was-tun-mit-ns-propagandafilmen/a-15803651>

Please scroll all the way down.

Szebedit is the director of the Friedrich-Murnau-Stiftung which controls together with Transit Verlag the circulation of vorbehaltsfilms. Another party is the German state, represented by the Bundesarchiv.

At the roundtable we will return to the time after World War II when it was necessary to ban Nazi propaganda. All of the films made in Hitler Germany were divided into three categories. Films labelled with C (around 200 at the start) were banned in all four occupation zones in Germany.

At the roundtable I also would suggest that we discuss curatorial and other practices of dealing with ‚shameful‘ or discredited films in a broader context: films made under special circumstances, where inmates were coerced to collaborate as directors, producers, script writers, set designers and actors. Films made in the gulag or in prisons.

We could compare these **historical** examples with the Abu Ghraib

footage and other highly controversial **contemporary** visual material, which can be found on the internet.

The "ghetto" films we are discussing at this conference, were made possible by a specific type of forced labour, with the additional problem that some of the footage – such as the Theresienstadt “ghetto” films – was financed by expropriations of Jewish victims.

Here I would like you to consider the ways of dealing with these Czech-German- Jewish films today which are usually labeled as “Nazi propaganda”. Questions of authorship and copyright issues surface – framed by ethical considerations which

seem to be of considerable importance in this special case. As Friess says in his statement, in the discussion it is necessary to involve the victims. I would like to add: The discussion needs to be lead internationally, not nationally.

To whom do the Protectorate “ghetto” films “belong”, for instance? Given that the production of the documentaries in this location was financed entirely by expropriations of Jews from Bohemia and Moravia, some have argued that the film is the property of survivors and children of the victims. But the question arises, to what degree can this film be considered a valid document of the inmates, most of whom either in front or behind the camera were deported and killed after being filmed? In many cases we have rare moving images of individuals who did not survive the Holocaust but smile into the camera of the Czech operators who came into the “ghetto” in the summer of 1944; can we easily discard the footage with victim`s bodies and even voices recorded exactly 70 years ago as Nazi propaganda? And now the most difficult question: Can film material that was commissioned by the SS and intended for propaganda purposes ever serve to commemorate the victims? And, if this can happen under certain

circumstances, who should grant **digitalaccess** to these images?
How can an adequate publication of the films counteract the unmonitored circulation of these films on the internet which attracts an uninformed audience including Holocaust deniers:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIIMAJF3kic>

Cf- also attempts to take down certain films from youtube:

<http://www.computerbild.de/artikel/cb-Aktuell-Internet-Verbotene-Nazi-Filme-Gespraechе-ueber-YouTube-Sperre-9880861.html>

A form of digital access which would be respectful towards the victims and their families is needed. Another question arises: who will restore their **identity**?

To sum up: Can and should somebody "**own**" these "ghetto" films? On the one hand I think that Germany should own up to these orphan films which at a closer look have surprisingly many mothers and fathers, on the other hand the technical approaches of copyright might not be the right way to deal with this type of footage which is calling for historical context and careful commentary supplied by all parties historically involved in the production of the films?
