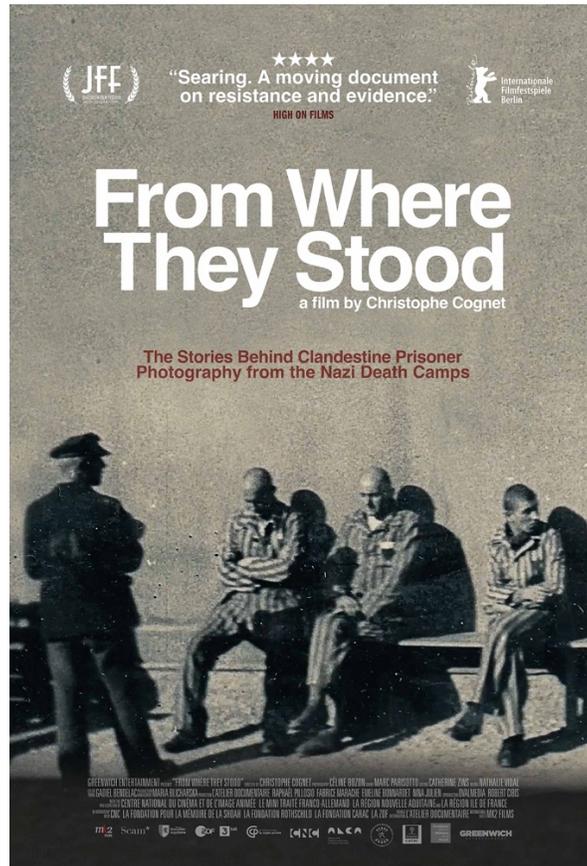


GREENWICH

E N T E R T A I N M E N T

Presents



Runtime: 110 min
Countries: France and Germany
Languages: French, Polish, and German

In Theaters July 15. On Amazon and Apple TV September 13.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PR CONTACT
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SYNOPSIS

A handful of prisoners in WWII camps risked their lives to take clandestine photographs and document the hell the Nazis were hiding from the world.

In the vestiges of the camps, director Christophe Cognet retraces the footsteps of these courageous men and women in a quest to unearth the circumstances and the stories behind their photographs, composing as such an archeology of images as acts of defiance.

INTRODUCTION

The discovery of the Nazi concentration camps, camera in hand, created an aperture for cinematic representation. In *THE BIG RED ONE*, Samuel Fuller stages his own discovery of the Falkenau concentration camp. In this scene, everything is suggested to the audience—eyes framed in close-up, the exchange of glances, and in between: just darkness. As the camp is discovered, we witness the soldiers's vivid emotions and the faces of the survivors, the only thing we are able to see in the darkness.

Let's explore this darkness: we have seen the photographs and the films shot by the Allies upon their discovery of the camps, that's how we visualized the camps and the Shoah. But what about the images that were captured by the deportees themselves?

The need to represent the camps from the inside, by the very victims of the Nazi system, is absolutely essential. It's about the spirit of resistance (in every sense of the word), but also the need to bear witness to the mistreatment, the appalling living conditions, the torture, and the assassinations that occurred in those camps. It's about countering the images of concentration camps as controlled by the SS, and addressing the very essence of the death camps, which were designed to be concealed from the outside world and to prevent any representation of what occurred inside.

These images are essential because they're the only ones that share a common experience—the photographers and the subjects of these photographs, all being in the camps together. This sense of equality is a determining factor in both the status and the very nature of these images—something the photographs, films, and drawings made by the Allies upon their discovery of the camps simply cannot achieve—the common fate that binds the one taking the picture and the one who appears in the photograph.

These works, clandestinely produced by artists imprisoned in the camps, have long been ignored. I devoted a film to them, released in France in 2014: *"PARCE QUE J'ETAIS UN PEINTRE"* (Because I Was a Painter), a meditation on these artists' "burdens", whether the burdens are emotional, philosophical, artistic, or archivistic. Focusing on the freedom from bias: how can a work be free from bias in the face of such terrible events?

In at least five of the camps (Dachau, Mittelbau-Dora, Buchenwald, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Ravensbrück), inmates were able to take clandestine pictures from the spring of 1943 until the autumn of 1944.

With this project, basically the second part of the same endeavor, I'm going to explore these photographs, which are exceptional in every way. What's at stake goes beyond the mere history of the camps's photographs. Rather, this is a form of archeological work around the very photographic act itself, an archeological work made "within" cinema. The goal is to find in each image:

- the event it stemmed from,
- the risk that was taken each time, the risk also being its very goal,
- the encounter it recorded,

—the very instant it was able to capture... and break away from, this fleeting moment of brilliance.

It's a matter of body, landscape, gesture, tempo, association, method, movement, and moment, as much as it is a matter of vision and image. And therefore it's a question of cinema.

No film has ever dealt head-on with the clandestine photographs taken in the Nazi camps. Not even the most famous and problematic of these photographs: those of Birkenau, which have been the subject of heated debate and controversy. Fifteen years ago in France, the most famous of these photographs pitted image historian Georges Didi-Huberman against Claude Lanzmann (among others). Without ignoring this issue— definitely food for thought—this project and the lines that follow are not meant to take part in this debate.

This film also wants to portray the men and women who took these pictures. Everything must start from them, from what we know about their background, their motivations, and their relationship to the image and photography.

That these men and women risked their very lives to produce these images, means we must look at these pictures—be ready to receive them—without any dogma and without prejudging the effect they will have on us, or what they're about to show us.

In the film, I play a "character" who, in the present day, leads a meditative and serious quest for these images and their power: the power of absolute disaster. Along the way, I reconstruct the stories of their authors, meet historians and curators, scrutinize the archives, and read and listen to the testimonies that remain, cross-checking them. I survey the remains of the old camps, try out real and imaginary compositions, and see if the various elements match... I reach out across abysses. Naturally, my part has to be as discreet and humble as possible: my "character" is only there to share the information he has gathered.

But make no mistake: although I have spent many years studying these events— the lives of those who suffered through them (whether or not they're survivors) and the locations where those events happened as well as their images and representations—the emotion and the concerns that drive this project have not weakened... on the contrary.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

A necessity.

Is this yet another film on the camps, on the deportation, the Shoah? Yes and no.

- Yes, because these events are still close to us (only two generations past) and concern tens of millions of people, but we are still far from fully understanding them.
- Yes, because as the witnesses disappear, these events merge with history, and our relationship to them is modified: so we have to explore and take stock of this new relationship.
- Yes, because research has evolved considerably: this film simply could not have been made ten years ago, back when the status of camps's photographs was different, and where other battles had to be waged.
- No, because this film does not focus, partially or fully, on the concentration camp narrative, and the universe of the Shoah. Its ambition is different; it tells another story, focused on the difficulties of secret, clandestine representation.
- No, because the main subject of this project is the work of the photographers.
- No, because our goal here is to question the status of these photographs in all their dimensions.
- No, because the intent here is to explore the power of the image as it confronted a universe which completely negated the possibility of its existence.

This time, and for the first time, we see in the same way the deportees themselves saw, through the images they produced: and only through the medium of film can such an endeavor be constructed.

On a human level

This film project roughly started twenty years ago, when I met Boris Taslitzky towards the end of his life. Boris was the Jewish, communist painter who survived Buchenwald, and whose mother was murdered in Auschwitz.

FROM WHERE THEY STOOD, and the research on which it is based, owes everything to the relationships I made with Boris and the other deportees I met afterwards: artists (such as José Fosty, Walter Spitzer, Yehuda Bacon, Schlomo Selinger...), photographers (Georges Angéli), writers (like Jorge Semprun), and all the others; including their families, and their children (many who are my parents's age). They're the ones who led me to visit the sites of the old camps and consult the funds dedicated to the collection and conservation of these images.

They also allowed me to meet the curators and historians who work on these topics, in France, Germany, Israel, Poland, the Czech Republic, the USA, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy. These meetings, combined with documentary research, allowed me to determine how questions arise about images in times of war, the representation of camps, and the Shoah.

Over the years, I've devoted three films to these themes: L'ATELIER DE BORIS ("The Boris' Studio", a portrait of Boris Taslitzky), QUAND NOS YEUX SONT FERMÉS ("When our Eyes are Closed", an essay on the clandestine art works produced in Buchenwald and built around a poem by Louis Aragon), and PARCE QUE J'ÉTAIS PEINTRE ("Because I Was a Painter"), as well as a book, ÉCLATS, published by Editions du Seuil in 2019, on the same subject as FROM WHERE THEY STOOD.

Rather than an "investigation", this film is a quest, staging the effort to bring together images, ruins, stories... and History.

Therefore, it's told in the present, with the knowledge that we now have on these events, with a relationship to History that is from my time, my generation, and with our current connection to war images. While FROM WHERE THEY STOOD comes after many similarly-themed films, these films that have not addressed the subject of the clandestine representation of deportation.

Sensible knowledge

Seeking to represent a daily life in hell is one of cinema's greatest challenges, from Abel Gance's J'ACCUSE (1919), to László Nemes's more recent film SON OF SAUL (2015), including films as different as Rithy Panh's S21: THE KHMER ROUGE DEATH MACHINE (2003) and THE MISSING PICTURE (2013), to Jean-Daniel Pollet's THE ORDER (1973), Kubrick's PATHS OF GLORY (1957), Chris Marker's LA JETÉE (1962), or Armand Gatti's ENCLOSURE (1961)...

Obviously, I also have in mind the films of Harun Farocki, IMAGES OF THE WORLD AND THE INSCRIPTION OF WAR (1989) and RESPITE (2007), which inspired me; as well as PASSENGER (1963), a beautiful unfinished film by Andrzej Munk, and ARCHEOLOGIA—a little-known short film by Munk's former assistant, Andrzej Brzozowski—made in Auschwitz in 1967, which simply associates, in a few shots, the work of the filmmaker with that of the archaeologist. This alliance of cinema and archeology was an important guide for me in this project.

But above all, I cannot forget Alain Resnais's NIGHT AND FOG (1956), which revealed the stakes linked to images and what remains of the camps. Neither can I forget Claude Lanzmann's SHOAH (1985), which shows how impossible any effort to represent the Holocaust is (as opposed to forbidding its representation.) So skillful is this film, that everyone feels something essential, true, and obvious is at play in the relationship between the sites, the testimonies, the history, and the images, however intellectual those are.

These two films, which stay with me constantly, pay homage to the clandestine photographers who believed in their images's potential to affirm their existence and that of the victims, beyond just the necessity for "testimony" or "proof."

That's why it was important to me to make a truly cinematic film, making use of materials and sensations. What matters here is not so much telling and/ or transmitting testimonies, as exploring the remains and weaving together the scattered fragments of a devastated world, so as to better experience its reality and its omnipresence.

It's also a question of space, scale, screen, time, duration, and rhythm, which cinema explores more powerfully than any other medium, by providing us with a more sensitive experience.

It's also a question of viewpoint: on a large screen, you cannot see the edges of the image, which allows you to fully enter the photographs.

And it's a question of imagination: these clandestine photographs allow us to try and imagine the events that took place.

More than anything, this film allows us to enter the hearts of the victims, their stories, their conscience, and their "fictions", meaning the way they viewed things, when confronted with disaster.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

From ashes to images

The photographic process forms an image by taking an imprint of the world it represents. Therefore, photographs are a physical, material trace of what was. At the same time, they're an opportunity to present again to our eyes the people and places that were photographed. It has often been noted that photography, like cinema, records (in the words of Jean Cocteau) "death at work". We forget that photographs are also the opportunity to revive—to "make present" again—the beings who are recorded there, even as ghosts and apparitions.

Thus, the narrative of this film is structured in a loop. It begins with what remains the most striking and loaded image: disturbing remains among the ashes; the crushed, unburned bones of the victims. And it ends, in the same locations, with the images of the very same victims, after going through the many efforts of reconstitution and representation that such an endeavor entails.

The film will pay attention to the dual dimension inherent in the photographs: matter and apparition, in its various forms.

Matter

There is an understanding of locations, places, in connection with the body which is unique and precise. As long as one has not visited a specific place, there is something about the events that happened in said location that one cannot fully understand. We're talking about a form of knowledge which is neither intellectual nor visual. We always have to bring an event, or a photograph, to this physical dimension.

I believe that Cinema can experience and "make us experience" the very concrete feel of a moving gaze, as well as the essential physical dimension found in photographs, which is the automatic result of a body in contact with a place.

Therefore, the film will often be framed by a mobile and hand-held camera, always held at human height; but it doesn't mean the shots will be improvised, or "captured" as we do in "direct cinema". On the contrary, this film needs reserve and formal rigor: the shots and the camera movements will be as restrained as possible. When necessary, they will be repeated, and we will replay the scenes several times in the sites of the old camps to reach the fairest (meaning the simplest, and the most obvious) visual and sound composition.

It can be tempting, especially in the ruins of these camps, to look for special alignments, effects of perspective, size ratios, and arrangements of mass. It would betray a fascination for the ruins, and a desire by the cameraman to show his know-how and give in to an easy aesthetic demonstration, rather than provide us with a real, in depth look at these places. It must be possible to find the "right" framing, while not ignoring the "harmony" in a shot, and without freely indulging in aesthetics considerations.

It all depends on one's relationship with the locations: it's from this relationship that we constantly need to draw inspiration, by not placing ourselves "above" or "in front" of those places, but "inside", and by opening your eyes to find our way.

Whether in these old camps, in the museums, or any of the other locations of the film, we will be sensitive to the atmospheric effects. Wind, fog, rain, and sunlight are images of passing time and memory. They create a "filter" between us and things and condition our gaze. They show the effort that one must provide to get to the location, be there, and bear witness. This is not anecdotal; it is the method of the film.

The sound of the film will only come from the physical environment of the sites, today, in the present: the diegetic sound of the landscapes and locations we pass through, the sounds of movement, photographs, albums and books being handled, as well as atmospheric sounds (rain, wind...). Therefore, no mixed sound will come from a sound bank or library.

These ambient sounds are like a passage, a possible point of contact with a certain form of eternity, out of time. These sounds are concrete; they must surround us, as if we were lost in them.

Apparitions

The narrative form, as described earlier, is not enough to convey the essence of our story: therefore, the editing of the film "will give time" to the photographs. We will look at them in silence, in their entirety, and in details. This is very important to me. We will come back to the same images several times, and our gaze on them will change as the film unfolds.

We will also present various versions of these images, through projections that will allow them to appear immaterial and "bare", in a way. A ray of light crossing them will give them another, icon-like status. We will make prints in several sizes and dimensions, and enlarge certain parts or details, so as to get as close as possible to the patterns (even reaching the opacity that an extreme enlargement provides), where all you can see is the grain of the picture.

We will also use various contrasts and exposures: as these variations occur, some details and areas will appear, while others will vanish.

We will make prints on transparent paper, to try to find visual coincidences.

We will modify them with image editing software.

And when possible, we will film the negatives.

We will also film the handling of these pictures: when they're with us in the remains of the old camps, but also their handling by those responsible for preserving them.

My research work also consists in finding the best prints that exist. The film must show the variations in these photographs: it must show how these images have been (poorly)

disseminated for 70 years, according to very different (and sometimes even contradictory) goals and interests.

In these moments when we “enter” the photographs, we will use a rostrum camera on an animation stand, which allows the movements inside the frames to remain “fragile” and to contain small mishaps. The idea is to compose manual movements, not executed by a machine or computer programming. It’s essential for the sensitive approach that I want to achieve with these images: I want us to stay in the present when we look at them.

In-between worlds

The "recomposition" of a Birkenau photograph is one of the challenges of this film, including in the methods of research for such shots. I only intend to carry out such an extensive staging operation for this one photograph, as its angle, axis and location remain enigmatic. On the other photographs, it would be too artificial, but it seems to me the best way to explore this one specific picture. I hesitated, preoccupied with moral considerations. However, the idea is not the reconstitution of this photograph "in three dimensions". The idea is not to have actors embody the victims and to capture their physical appearance but rather to pinpoint the victims’ locations and their orientation using people from the present.

Then it doesn’t seem as problematic. I also considered using life-sized dummies, but this solution seems trickier (their staging could make the whole endeavor rather clunky) and too abstract. Paradoxically, it would lead to imaginary projections and could make audiences believe that I want to recreate the scene, as in a kind of "performance". No, we needed clearly identifiable individuals, integral parts of the film, fully engaged in this effort to explore those clandestine images. They are there to pledge that my goal is not historical reconstruction or performance.

This is the intuition I had, one day, as I was walking alone around Krematorium V, in a light rain, photographs in hand, tirelessly trying to represent this place to myself. Quite unexpectedly, in a long shudder and for the first time, I suddenly "felt" the presence of these figures in front of the Krematorium. Nothing mystical there, it wasn’t a revelation or a vision, but the sensation of a resurgence. I found myself lost in space and time, in a place where, thanks to photography, the present remains of the Krematorium were superimposed over the presence of the victims who had passed there. The rain gave the atmosphere some sort of thin opacity, conjuring the feeling of a slightly trembling reality... of being "in-between worlds". And it wasn’t a flight of fancy on my part; it was a physical sensation; not an image but a flash, bringing me a sensible knowledge of these events, and no longer merely an intellectual one.

Since Cinema itself exists “in-between worlds”, by exploring these clandestine photographs, may this film convey an experience of this “presence.”

ABOUT CHRISTOPHE COGNET

Christophe Cognet is a director and screenwriter.

After studying cinema at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, he began writing and directing documentaries in Africa, and then in Europe. Curious about historical footprints and memory, his films question the power and mechanisms of images, and the creative possibilities behind them.

For over 20 years, through film, he has questioned art and images at the limits of human experience. This reflection was nurtured by the publication of several articles and books on the subject. *Éclats*, published by Les éditions du Seuil in 2019, is about clandestine photography in Nazi camps and inspired the making of *A pas aveugles*.

During his artistic residency at the contemporary art space Khiasma (near Paris), he wrote and directed performances based on *Miserrimus* by Soren Kierkegaard, with Agathe Bonitzer, Geoffroy Carey and Jérôme Imard).

His films have been shown in theaters, in cinémathèques (Los Angeles, Paris, Munich, Barcelona), on television (Arte, France2, Canal+, TV5Monde, Sundance-channel, RTP...) and in film festivals around the world: Rome International Film Festival, Bildrausch filmsfest (Basel), Jerusalem Film Festival, Fidocs (Santiago de Chile), Sao Paulo International Film Festival, Leeds International Film Festival, Miami Jewish Film Festival, Mumbai International Film Festival, Cracking the flame (Amsterdam), Festival Dei Popoli (Florence), FIPA (Biarritz), La Rochelle International Film Festival, FID (Marseille), États Généraux du Documentaire (Lussas), Bilan du Film ethnographique – Cinéma du réel (Paris), Amiens International Film Festival, Escales documentaires (La Rochelle, International Grand Prix winner for *Because I was a Painter*), etc.

Key filmography:

Screenwriter and director:

- *Sept mille années* (fiction, 15', 2017, with Mathieu Amalric and François Lebrun)
- *Because I was a Painter: Art that survived Nazi camps* (documentary, 104', 2014)
- *Les anneaux du serpent* (essay, 45', 2008)
- *Quand nos yeux sont fermés* (55', 2005)
- *L'Atelier de Boris* (documentary, 76', 2004),
- *La Planète perdue* (51', 2002)
- *L'affaire Dominici par Orson Welles* (52', 2000)
- *Gongonbili, de l'autre côté de la colline* (63', 1997)

Screenwriter:

- *Et j'ai tiré sur Cow-boys* (dir. Fleur Albert, fiction, Noodle Production, in production)
- *La sirène de Faso Fani* (dir. Michel Zongo, documentary, 85', 2015)

CREW

Produced by Raphaël Pillosio
Coproduced by Robert Cibis
Image Céline Bozon
Grading Gadiel Bendelac
Sound Marc Parisotto
Editing Catherine Zins
Mixing Nathalie Vidal
Production manager Maria Blicharska
Screenplay Christophe Cognet

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