

*The Silent Village* exhibition and publication: Peter Finnemore, Rachel Trezise and Paolo Ventura in response to the 1943 film, *The Silent Village* by Humphrey Jennings. Exhibition curator and main author of the accompanying publication Dr Russell Roberts, Reader in Photography at the European Centre for Photographic Research, University of Wales, Newport. Ffoto Gallery, Cardiff.

On the morning of Wednesday, 10 June, 1942, the village of Lidice, about 20 kilometres North-West of Prague, in Czechoslovakia was destroyed in retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, controller and highest ranking Nazi official in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Acting on Hitler's direct order, the men of the small mining village were rounded up and shot in groups of five, until the SS Commander in charge, irritated by the delay in carrying out the executions, ordered that ten be shot at a time. By mid-afternoon 173 men lay dead around Horak's farm, a photograph taken later that day shows them strewn in lines across the ground, the walls of the farm lined with mattresses to absorb the bullets and limit ricochet fire. Two days later 184 women from Lidice were deported to the concentration camp at Ravensbruck, from where less than half survived. Separated from their parents 105 children were sent to Lodz where they were imprisoned and maltreated. A few weeks later they were shipped 70 kilometres away to an extermination camp at Chelmno and gassed to death. Only a few survived the war. In all some 340 villagers died as a result of the Nazi reprisal.

The village was not spared. Its buildings were set ablaze, the remains then knocked to the ground and smashed until not a trace of the village was left. The act was systematic, thorough and dispassionate, the desecration industrial in its method. Unsurprisingly, the entire process was filmed by Franz Tremel, the proprietor of a Zeiss-Ikon shop in Prague who later became a film adviser for the National Socialist German Workers Party. His footage and photographs show small group of German soldiers busily destroying the farmsteads, the mining gear and the industrial units; others show teams of Nazis posing in front of the shambles that was once Lidice.

Such is the bald historical context for this provocative exhibition in the *Ffotogallery Cardiff*. Intelligently curated by Professor Russell

Roberts, Reader in Photography at the European Centre for Photographic Research, University of Wales, Newport, the centerpiece of the show is the remarkable film made by Humphrey Jennings soon after the atrocity. Its awesome soundtrack penetrates the very heart of the fine gallery building in Penarth, adding a grim backing track to the work of Paolo Ventura and Peter Finnemore, which hangs in the gallery and the writings of Rachel Trezise, David Berry and Roberts himself which accompanies the exhibition in a well produced boxed-catalogue.

Jennings's film may dominate the space, both aurally and physically, but it is the haunting iconography of Ventura and Finnemore that linger long after. The film is a stunning piece of responsive documentary, passionate in its anger and heartfelt in its vicarious identification with the doomed Czech villagers.

As the Lidice reprisal became known across Europe, the atrocity was met with outrage and instantaneous acts of commemoration: towns across the world were renamed after Lidice to ensure that its name would not be forgotten; coal miners in Stoke-on-Trent founded an organization 'Lidice Shall Live' to raise funds for its rebuilding, American poets and European composers created original works to remember the massacre. In England, artist, poet and filmmaker Humphrey Jennings set out with the Crown Film Unit to make a short film that recreated the fate of Lidice. In autumn 1942 his crew arrived in the Upper Swansea Valley at the small village of Cwmgiedd, close to the town of Ystradgynlais, to create the film that would become *The Silent Village*. Using local villagers as the 'actors', the 36 minute film traces the inevitable tale of a population being insidiously overwhelmed by largely invisible oppressors. Skilful montage helps build the tension as the film isolates objects and certain details; loudspeakers, radios, the voice of command announcing first a 'Protectorate State' and then cumulatively menacing messages; deep shadow and restrained movement only serves to underline the threat that gradually pervades the film and overwhelms the villagers. Although a constant fear of reprisal dominates its second half, there is little overt violence, even the mass killing at the close of the film takes place off camera. A stirring rendition of 'Land of my Fathers' closes the film and reverberates around the galleries, an uncomfortable reminders of the perils of 'lost liberty, untimely

death and savage oppression.’ A number of stark silhouette sequences in the film – mostly those that show a castle built by English invaders under Edward the First – add a further layer of intention, drawing uncomfortable parallels with the history of English dominance in Wales.

Ventura’s carefully recreated and honed images would appear to revisit the morbid portraits of the Nazi soldiers and officers that destroyed the village; their distressed surfaces and scoring-out suggest denial and decay but these are clearly reconstructions, careful fabrications of toy soldiers, miniature farm buildings and the occasional model animal re-presented as ‘authentic’, retrieved decades later and presented as contemporary images. Their very artifice and their exacting craftsmanship, seems acutely appropriate in this setting, drawing uncomfortable resonances with the systematic destruction of Lidice and the many still photographs of Nazi soldiers posing proudly for the camera amidst the maelstrom of the burning village. Ventura’s images toy cleverly with the fetishization of the military past and the fascination of battle re-enactments, with its strange mix of vicarious pleasure and exacting simulation.

Finnemore’s work, by comparison, appears to offer only a very oblique take on the Lidice incident, but like much of his corpus of work addressing memory retrieval they benefit from close and slow scrutiny. Typically mournful, accidental and occasional they approach their subject obliquely; tucked away amongst the stacked pile of shabby video-cassettes and tapes in one photograph, for example, is a copy of Jennings’ film; in another an old tin for a roll of Agfa film is stamped ‘Made in Germany’, its contents unknown and more ominous for that fact. More obvious references to the doomed village are represented through images of commemorative stamps and souvenirs such as fridge magnets and ornaments. There is a profound visual intelligence here, but also, as Roberts comments in a penetrating catalogue essay, an impish humour is at work. It sits uneasily alongside images of decay and dustiness, caught in a tense dynamic of unwanted occupation, colonial dominance and contested histories.

Along with Ventura’s discomfiting portraits, Tresizes’ necessarily awkward short story, and Robert’s insightful analyses, this show

adds immensely to Finnemore's standing and to his continuing engagement with familiarity and obscurity, a gentle mapping of personal circumstance brought into shocking and sharp relief by the grim events at Lidice and its lingering aftermath

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