

Šabac: a cinematographic archaeology?

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Note: we would advise readers to watch the video (URL: <http://mediacentral.ucl.ac.uk/Play/9829>) before proceeding to reading the position paper below.

Abstract

Drawn from a longstanding collaboration between the authors, this contribution explores the common ground between filmmaking and archaeological investigation and in particular a shared interest in haptic experiences and the material properties of the world. This leads us to propose the use of the camera and the moving image it produces as valuable archaeological research tools. To illustrate this we present both a short film and brief discussion paper focusing on the Serbian town of Šabac as a Holocaust landscape and its link with a group of Jewish refugees known as the “Kladovo transport”. Based on this case study we aim to highlight the transformative potential of artistic interventions in archaeological questions, and indeed vice versa, to construct new modes of knowing.

Keywords: cinematographic archaeology, haptic experience, Holocaust landscape, Šabac, “Kladovo transport”

1. Introduction

Using the film camera as our main research tool we set out to investigate the recent and contemporary pasts of a Holocaust landscape in modern day Serbia. Approaching this from the perspectives of an artist/filmmaker and archaeologist respectively we find common ground in our interest in the physicality of the subject matter, its archaeological manifestations and the potential of the moving image to invoke haptic experiences of the material world. Responding to the JCA Forum’s ‘Beyond Art/Archaeology’ call for papers, our (artistic) practice-led archaeological investigation will demonstrate how such approaches can make valuable contributions to our understandings of heritage in a contemporary setting.

In this context we present an example from our collaborative practice as a case study highlighting several issues regarding the boundaries between disciplines, engaging with the material world and constructing alternative modes of knowing within academic and wider discourses. These may be of interest to others concerned with the role of creative practice in archaeology. As part of this discussion we will refer to the value of an archaeological perspective and the question regarding the disciplinary integrity of both artistic practice and archaeology within trans-disciplinary collaborations. We will end by reflecting on the need for a suitable terminology for artistically informed archaeologies and/or archaeologically informed artworks.

2. *Background*

Šabac is a town in western Serbia, situated on the banks of the River Sava (Figure 1b). The town's strategic location on the river has made it a frequent centre of conflict during the Habsburg/Ottoman Period – changing hands repeatedly between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries (Mendoza 2011, 210) – and the site of a major battle during the First World War (Mitrović 2007; Niberg 2006). However, our investigation is especially interested in the interplay between Šabac in the present and a very brief period of its past, between 1940 and 1941, when the town was initially the place of refuge and then of imprisonment for about 1200 Jewish refugees. This group later became known as the 'Kladovo transport', named after another Serbian town, on the River Danube (Figure 1). Its members, coming primarily from Vienna (around 800 of them), attempted to escape Nazi reprisals in Austria by embarking, in autumn 1939, on an illegal journey down the river Danube, in the hope of reaching Palestine via the Black Sea (Anderl and Manoschek 2001; Avriel 1975). However, they were held up in Kladovo, near the Serbian–Romanian border, for several months – as they were refused passage through Romanian territory – and were forced to spend the freezing winter of 1939-40 on board three ships there. As the Danube was becoming an increasingly dangerous place and to avoid the Jewish refugees coming in contact with the Volksdeutsche ('ethnic' Germans) who were travelling upriver towards the German Reich as part of their relocation from Bessarabia (Anderl and Manoschek 2001), it was decided in September 1940 to move the group back up the Danube and along the Sava to Šabac. There they could stay and move around with relative freedom until April 1941, when the German Wehrmacht invaded Yugoslavia. Shortly afterwards, German troops occupied Šabac and in the summer of 1941 the members of the 'Kladovo transport' were rounded up together with the small local Jewish population and a much greater number of Roma and interned in a concentration camp on the banks of the Sava; ironically, located only metres from what was their disembarkation point just under a year earlier (Figure 1a). From this camp most of the male members of the transport (along with the other male inmates) were brought to the nearby village of Zasavica and executed by firing squad in October 1941 (Anderl and Manoshek 2001; Babovic 2010). In January 1942, the women and children were transferred to another camp – Judenlager Semlin – near the Sava-Danube confluence in Belgrade (Koljanin 1992). From there they were taken and systematically exterminated with the use of a gas van between February and May 1942.¹

3. *The camera as archaeological tool*

For our investigation of this brief period of Šabac's past, related to the presence of the 'Kladovo transport', we decided to adopt the camera and sound recording equipment as our primary archaeological research tools. We investigated the places that we know the members of the 'Kladovo transport' frequented – the landing point on the Sava, the old mill,

¹ There were however, a small number of survivors, who either got legal certificates to continue their journey or managed to escape by other means (Anderl and Manoschek 2001; Fuchs nd.; Reich 2014) and who thus lived to tell the tale of their escape.

where many of them were accommodated, the synagogue where they worshipped and had organized a school, the library where they read newspapers to keep themselves informed, the movie theatre where they watched films, the streets that they walked, passing their time while hoping for news regarding a recommencement of their journey and finally, the concentration camp that represented the penultimate stop in most of their lives.

We are not using the camera to conduct a detailed survey or with the aim of thoroughly recording the visual data of the locations, nor for 'conventional' archaeological interpretation or representation, striving for objectivity (Bateman 2005). Instead we believe that aside from providing the (necessarily selective) information of what a location looks like, a moving image can also help to evoke the experience of a place. In order to explore this experience as a mode of learning, about the site and its history and as a mode of knowing, we rely on the artistic and especially cinematic discourse, as we feel that it is more equipped to tackle the relationship between an audio-visual representation and the senses (Elsaesser and Hagener 2010; Marks 2000, 2002) than other investigative media. From the camera frame to the duration of a shot, how it is edited into a film or video, we respond to the stimuli in different ways and on different levels. Thus the production of our film is clearly based on a range of subjective choices, only presenting a very narrow slice of what a first-hand experience of the actual place would be like. In this context, creative practices, like film, frontload the interpretation, rather than claiming to provide an objective record and subsequently interpreting it.

4. *Creative practice in archaeology and heritage studies*

Using artistic media in heritage studies more broadly, frequently involves non-verbal, sensory engagements with the world, whether aurally, visually or kinaesthetically. Traditionally such non-verbal and non-textual approaches are not rated equally highly as text-based academic outputs (eg. contributions in Ingold ed. 2011). However, we would argue they are equally academically meaningful and at least as socially relevant as the latter. As the academic discussions around creative practice (allowing it equal status within academia) in the last two decades or so have shown (Nelson 2009; 2013; Allegue *et al.* 2009), more than simply providing a methodology, creative practice and in particular 'artistic approaches', advocate for alternative modes of knowing.

Therefore, in our practice of investigating the places relevant to the journey of the 'Kladovo transport' through filming, we aim to foreground the haptic (Marks 2000, 2002; Sobchack 1992, 2004) and experiential elements invoked by this to the historical narratives that can be told about both Šabac and the 'Kladovo transport'. In order to do so within an academic context, our own experiences form an important part of the research, as they generate reflective and reflexive tools for unearthing the process of knowing in new ways. Following from Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*, artistic practice helps us ask not only the question 'what' is our subject matter, but also and always 'how' we engage with it (Foucault 1972, 5-6). In this sense, the more holistic engagement with knowledge offered by the

cinematographic mode helps to bridge the mind-body divide, as it places our bodies, including that of the viewer, right into the centre of the investigation.

The strata of evidence we investigate in our project also allow a working together of theory and practice and in particular an integration of landscape, material culture (including architecture) and text. While, as we have outlined above, we reject a narrative approach to the material, textual discourse nonetheless provides a vital element in our study, as in addition to the architectural and landscape evidence that we captured cinematographically, we also consulted the archives. In this context we drew on the writings, in the form of letters and diaries written by some of the members of the transport, as well as the words of local people who recorded the refugees' presence in the town, their arrest and ultimate extermination (Babović 2010; Jovanović 1979). Our interrogation of Šabac builds on playing off the material and landscape evidence against the voices and experiences of some of the people who were directly affected by the events. But even here we have chosen to foreground the experiential to the narrative. While the writings clearly tell stories, we have chosen to read them in the original language in which they were composed; i.e. (Viennese) German and Serbian respectively. This we hope allows the viewer a more immersive – and perhaps less intellectual – engagement with the material.

We believe that this cinematographic archaeological investigation of these layers of landscape and history – focusing on very thin strata archaeologically, which have nonetheless left a significant mark on Šabac and its inhabitants – can help us get closer to experiencing elements of this story than either traditional archaeological or historical approaches would allow us to. Nevertheless we see our approach as very much an archaeological one. We are not trying to (re)tell the history of the 'Kladovo transport', or of Šabac as a place during the Second World War, whether on a general or individual level. It is the archaeological 'evidence' in the form of the material manifestations of the locations that we investigated, and the question of human presence and absence in these places, that drives our practice. Put simply, our focus on landscape and material culture is what makes our approach distinctively archaeological. And similarly to the forensic architectural approach advocated by Weizman and colleagues (2010. 63), we view these landscapes and material remains as central 'protagonists in the unfolding' of past events.

Other disciplines, such as anthropology have long engaged with artistic expression and especially film has played a major role in ethnography (Grimshaw 2001; Ruby 1975; 2000). However, ethnographic films are often employed in a rather uncritical fashion, with the camera seen as a recording device not dissimilar to how still photography is frequently used in archaeology; as a means to visually represent a feature, site or monument (Bateman 2005). While our camera also records what is in front of it, the way in which we employ the medium of film, foregrounding a subjective perspective, is devised to help both experience and interrogate rather than provide an authoritative interpretation of the subject matter. This is achieved through engaging with film not only as recording technology but also, and primarily, as an artistic practice.

5. *A Creative Archaeology?*

From our perspectives, as a creative practitioner (fine artist and filmmaker) and an archaeologist, we do not find the term 'Creative Archaeologies' a particularly helpful way to characterise our collaborations. For one, it implies that 'other' (perhaps more traditional) archaeological approaches are not creative, which of course is not the case, as all archaeology requires creativity (cf Deleuze 1998, 15; Wickstead 2013).

While above we have referred to 'creative practice', we have done so as there is an established body of literature on this topic and employing this terminology. However, in order to avoid misunderstandings it might be best to refer to our interventions – such as making a film – as artistic rather than creative. So while all archaeology involves being creative, archaeology can of course be informed and inspired by approaches that we might call artistic. Equally, in its turn artistic practice can be archaeologically informed and inspired, both of which we are hoping to demonstrate with our contribution here. In this sense it could be said that our approach is both distinctively artistic and distinctively archaeological. But most of all we are interested in how the working together of artistic and archaeological modes of engaging with a subject matter can help find new values within (academic) knowledge.

If we use one very basic definition of what archaeology is about, such as King's (2005, 11) 'the study of the human past, using stuff' (although 'past' in this context is clearly a very relative term), then it seems clear that archaeology's key contribution is its concern with material culture and its investigation; especially in relation to humans. But equally, most artistic practices share this concern with the material nature of the world and work on bringing to the fore the human-material relationship. This is why we believe these sets of practices complement each other particularly well, but by extension, looking within such collaborations for the distinctly archaeological and/or the distinctly artistic becomes a futile exercise. In other words, in line with calls for complementing critical with creative approaches to the humanities (Buntain 2014; Epstein 2012; Wilson 1999), it is both impossible and meaningless to say where the archaeological ends and the artistic begins or vice versa.

While this is true for our shared practice and similar artist-researcher collaborations, we need to acknowledge the context within which most archaeological work takes place in the twenty-first century – i.e. predominately development led (Aitchison 2014) – and the limitations this may bring. In contrast to much archaeological research, aiming to strip back layers of time to understand what locations once used to be (Harris 1989; Lucas 2005), one of our key discoveries is that time-based media are capable of reinstating the temporalities of places (Ingold 1993). In our film, locations in Šabac are brought forth together in their 'multi-temporal present' (Olivier 2001), where the role of the film is to embrace the palimpsest of past events and to present it as duration.

As a final consideration we would like to reflect some more on the relationship between the historical and contemporary nature of our work and the social relevance of our engagements. In light of the fact that our investigation has given particular focus to Šabac

during a distinct historical period (some 75 years in the past) it could perhaps be described as historical rather than contemporary. However, while archivally we drew on texts written in or about the early 1940s, we filmed Šabac as it presented itself to us in 2015. Thus our study is at least to an equal degree about the contemporary as it is about the historical pasts of this place, reminding us that both archaeology (Harrison 2011) and the perception of the moving image (Doane 2002) are always in and of the present. But beyond this, it is also a 'story' about Serbia and Europe more generally in the twenty first century. Thinking about this contemporary context somewhat further, we cannot ignore the relationship between the events in Šabac and elsewhere across Europe in the early 1940s and current movements of refugees from the Middle East throughout the continent. Interestingly, many of them travel in precisely the opposite direction to the intended route of the 'Kladovo transport'. Like for the members of the 'transport', for many contemporary refugees, their routes lead them, largely incidentally, through Serbia. Their major stopping off point is Belgrade, where the Danube and Sava meet (Figure 2). Having already endured a long journey, here they take stock while hoping for news to be able to continue their journey across Europe. Our work is not an explicit or purposeful commentary on this situation and is not meant to be, but the parallels are unavoidable and have been on the forefront of our minds while working on this project.

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Image captions

Figure 1.

- a) Plan of the concentration camp on the River Sava (near Šabac) based on Jovanović (1979)
- b) Outline map of Serbia showing key locations mentioned and the Danube and Sava rivers

Figure 2.

Refugees (largely from Syria) in their makeshift camp in Bristol Park in the centre of Belgrade in September 2015