

Università degli Studi Roma Tre

XXXI Convegno Internazionale di Studi Cinematografici

40 + 40 = 80 Years of Images about the Shoah (1945-1985-2025)

a cura di Ivelise Perniola e Francesco Pitassio

17 - 18 novembre 2025

Dipartimento di Filosofia, Comunicazione e Spettacolo

Via Ostiense, 139

Museo Fondazione Shoah

Via del Portico d'Ottavia, 29

Le immagini per dire. Esporre, comparare, studiare le immagini della Shoah

Lunedì 17 novembre ore 17:30 -18:30

Traces from the archives: a German propaganda film about the Warsaw Ghetto

Alexander Zöller (Filmuniversität Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF)

Our collective visual memory of the Holocaust is largely based on an established set of audio-visual material: photographs and moving images that are drawn upon to illustrate the (apparent) reality of the genocide, even if their actual context is inconsistent and their authenticity compromised by the intentions of those who operated the cameras. More often than not, the existing imagery from the inner realm of the genocide is that of the perpetrators, who went to considerable lengths to document their crimes: arrests, deportations, ghettoization, and the camps. For better or worse, this material continues to be circulated widely: despite the problematic nature of many of these photographs and films, they are a staple in documentary films, where their context and production background rarely is made transparent to the viewer. As the number of living survivors dwindles, we are confronted with the question of whether this audio-visual record will further gain in prominence going forward. Taking the German 1942 propaganda film from the Warsaw Ghetto as an example, it becomes apparent that the original historic elements – reels of highly flammable nitrate film that are prone to decay and decomposition – contain information that is easily lost through duplication onto new analog film stock, or when digitizing the film. A close reading of these ephemeral traces helps to understand the film's production background, as well as its journey across various institutions after 1945. The author argues that the archival record for these primary filmic sources is deserving of further scrutiny and their preservation in their authentic form a crucial requirement to their understanding: merely assuming that film archives can and will guarantee this into the future may not be enough.

Alexander Zöller is a post-doctoral researcher at Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF. He is part of the '(Con)Sequential Images' project which traces the context, production background, and history of appropriation of certain 'iconic' film materials from the Nazi era: films and film footage that continue to be circulated widely, impacting and shaping our collective visual memory. His dissertation, due to be published next year, reconstructs the history of the German Reichsfilmarchiv (1934-1945) as one of the primary points of origin of many of these film materials, and the challenges associated with their preservation in postwar archives both in Germany and abroad.