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## When silence speaks loudest

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Can you treat the Holocaust as an appropriate subject for contemporary art? Not if you use it to give weight to an otherwise thin idea



Johanna ter Steege, filmed recalling her work with Stanley Kubrick on the never-made *Aryan Papers*

In 1976, the late film-maker Stanley Kubrick travelled to New York to try to interest the Jewish novelist Isaac Bashevis Singer in writing an original screenplay for a project on which he was working, about the Holocaust. Not a Holocaust survivor himself, Singer declined, saying he did not know the first thing about it.

The project was shelved until Kubrick read Louis Begley's short novel *Wartime Lies*, about a young Jewish boy and his aunt who manage to escape from Poland by pretending to be Catholics. In 1993, Kubrick made a deal with Warner Brothers to make a film called *Aryan Papers* (a reference to the documentation required to fend off deportation to the concentration camps). The film was developed and went into pre-production. Sets were located, costumes were designed, and Julia Roberts and Uma Thurman were considered for the main role of the aunt, Tanya. Eventually Kubrick settled on the Dutch actress Johanna ter Steege. Yet the film was never made.

Being of Jewish-European origin, Kubrick had been fascinated by the Holocaust his whole life, but was extremely sceptical as to whether any film could do it justice. When Frederic Raphael, who worked with him on the script of *Eyes Wide Shut*, suggested the subject of Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List*, Kubrick's acerbic response was: "Think that's about the Holocaust? That was about success, wasn't it? The Holocaust is about six million people who get killed. *Schindler's List* is about 600 who don't. Anything else?"

Kubrick, like many Jewish thinkers and artists of his generation, had a very real anxiety about how to represent the horror of mass extermination artistically, echoing the German critic Theodor Adorno's belief that to write poetry after the Holocaust was barbaric. Kubrick, according to his widow, sank into a depression while working on *Aryan Papers*. He also learned that Steven Spielberg had started working on *Schindler's List*. He therefore shelved the project and concentrated instead on *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Now the British duo of Jane and Louise Wilson, who were nominated for the Turner Prize in 1999, have made a new work - *Unfolding the Aryan Papers* - based on research they conducted during a residency at University of the Arts London's Stanley Kubrick Archive. The Wilson twins have worked together for more than 20 years on research-based projects that have focused on, among other subjects, the dilapidated former Stasi headquarters in Berlin, Greenham Common and, in their "New Brutalists" exhibition, the murky waters of colonialism. Using film, photography and sculpture, they have created theatrical and atmospheric installations that investigate the darker side of human experience.

This gallery installation concentrates on newly shot footage of Johanna ter Steege and stills from period images of the Warsaw Ghetto and other Holocaust images drawn from the pre-production period of *Aryan Papers*. The film opens with a shot of the back of ter Steege's blonde head. The voice-over relates her experience of working with Kubrick, of how he made a point of observing the way she stood and her gestures, especially those of her hands. She recounts how he seemed to have something definite in mind and was looking for not just an actress, but "a human being".

Shot in the faded 1930s grandeur of Hornsey Town Hall, with its marble main staircase, brass banisters, heavy wooden panelling and deco glass lamps, the Wilson twins' film concentrates on shots of ter Steege standing in the empty corridors and offices of this rather austere bureaucratic building, either in her petticoat or dressed in period costume.

But what does the piece amount to, beyond the pleasure of the elegant cinematography and watching an attractive older woman standing around in some nice clothes in an interesting building? The Wilson twins say that it is not really about the Holocaust, as they are "not qualified to make a film about something so dark", but rather the story of a woman and an actress, and the narrative of a film that was never made.

Yet there is something uncomfortable about this work, as if the Holocaust could be reduced to a period backdrop against which to make a piece of contemporary art. Although Kubrick's motivation for dropping the original film is not completely clear, it is obvious that he took the ethical problems concerning this historical subject very seriously. Johanna ter Steege may have been resurrected from relative obscurity by the project, but the ghosts of millions of women lost to the gas chambers hover in the wings of the film, unacknowledged and unseen.

Adorno worried that attempting to condense the incomprehensible suffering of the Holocaust into a few lines of poetry would "violate the inner incoherence of the event, casting it into a mould too pleasing or too formal", and considered silence as the only appropriate response to the tragedy. The Holocaust is one of the darkest failings of the human imagination. In *Unfolding the Aryan Papers*, a fairly thin idea is, with postmodern insouciance, given gravitas by association, diminishing this livid stain on our history to a stage set for a fashion show, and betraying those voiceless dead.

*"Unfolding the Aryan Papers" is at the BFI Southbank Gallery, London SE1, until 26 April. Watch it online at <http://www.animateprojects.org>*