

# THE ART NEWSPAPER

Artists Interview News Poland

## Mirosław Balka: what “Shoah” means to me

The Polish artist on the influence of Claude Lanzmann’s epic Holocaust documentary

By Julia Michalska. Web only  
Published online: 27 January 2015

### **The Art Newspaper: What impact did “Shoah” have when it was first screened in Poland?**

Mirosław Balka: It’s important to remember that when “Shoah” was made there was no internet. You could only watch films in the cinema, on TV (shown once), or videotape. As far as I know, the film wasn’t available on video. So I eventually bought it in the US on DVD in the early 2000s. So what was the impact? It hardly had one, because the film existed in a cloud that you couldn’t really see. Of course the situation in Poland was much worse because, under communism, the sources of information were very limited. Real discussions around the Holocaust only began after communism collapsed in 1989.



"Real discussions around the Holocaust only began after communism collapsed in 1989"

### **How and why did the film influence your works?**

My first reaction to the film was the work *Primitive*, 2008. I looped three seconds of footage from the film, which shows Franz Suchomel, a guard from Treblinka, say, “Primitive, yes”. He was speaking about the relatively primitive nature of the Treblinka death camp compared with Auschwitz. This is the only film footage I have ever used. I’m not crazy about found footage; it’s a bit like stealing. But in this case it was a conscious act because Lanzmann [who used a hidden camera in the interview] had already stolen the image of Suchomel. In a sense, I stole a stolen image.

The other work, *I Knew It Had 4 in It*, 2008, is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. The starting point for this work was a conversation between Lanzmann and Mrs Michelson, the wife of a Nazi teacher at the death camp in Chelmno, about how many Jews had been exterminated there. She tries to remember the number, and Lanzmann reminds her saying: “400,000.” She

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

responds saying: "Yes, I knew it had four in it." So I filmed the number four with music by Sun Ra. First I started from the objective point of view, and then zoomed in closer and closer until it was out of focus and had disappeared. When I zoomed out, the number came back into view. It's a comment on memory and the realisation that you don't have to be close to something to see it.

**Your work *Bambi (Winterreise)*, 2003, a video of deer grazing in the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, also seems to have a visual affinity with "Shoah". Are these landscape shots influenced by "Shoah"?**

Bambi has more to do with Walt Disney than with Lanzmann. Disney's "Bambi" was released in 1942, the same year the Nazi conference in Wanssee took place and where the implementation of the final solution was discussed. I wasn't expecting to find the deer when I went out there, but when they appeared, the connection to Disney became very poignant.

**The film does not show Polish bystanders in the best light. As a Pole, did you find it important to react to the film?**

I look for the truth. Of course it was terrible to hear what these people were saying. But we should also remember that they don't know how to express themselves very well. And I think Lanzmann used their simplicity to get what he wanted to hear. The facts are of course true: Poles stood on the edges of this tragedy and had no reaction. But what could the reaction be? Lanzmann tried to say that the Holocaust could only take place in Poland. But I don't agree with that, I don't think it was a Polish speciality. I also think that a lot of the film was lost in translation. There are so many moments where the translator in the film re-interprets or misrepresents what is being said. A direct translation would have been much more helpful.

However, "Shoah" is still on my shelf, and from time to time I have another look.