

The topic of documenting vanished places has occupied me for decades. What is this urge to record disappearance? It can be such a desperate mission. Why do we film absence? We want to document but there is nothing to be seen. In 1984, at age 25, I tried the same—and failed miserably. Together with a Dutch friend called Justus, a super8/video maker from the squatter scene who also happened to live in West Berlin, I produced my first and last film, on the erasure of memory, the creation of non-places, erased by four-lane city highways and parking lots. The punk ‘genial dilettante’ film was called “De Zaak 40/61/84”, named after Harry Mulisch’s [report of the Adolf Eichmann trial](#), which he, like Hannah Arendt, attended in Jerusalem in 1961. The film dealt with the vanished office of Eichmann’s Amt IV B 4 in the Kurfürstenstrasse 115/116, de *Zentralstelle für Jüdische Auswanderung* where the extermination of the European Jewry was planned—including the Dutch. From the back of the squat where I used to live at Potsdamerstrasse 130-A, I looked at the same Kurfürstenstrasse. In his 1961 report, Mulish visits the ruins of the unknown bureaucratic centre of the Holocaust that was bombed in the last months of the war. A few years later the ruins were cleared to make way for the [Hotel Sylter Hof](#) (“rates from 44 euros”). Influenced by the French philosopher of speed Paul Virilio, the video dealt with the erasure of place by roads, cars and concrete modernity, contrasted with interviews with alternative history collectives that gathered traces (Spurensicherung) about everyday fascism of ordinary Berliners, in line with Carlo Ginzburg’s work. The film premiered at the Amsterdam Frankrijk squat—and then disappeared. What’s left is a hazy VHS copy. In 2009 a bus stop (!) next to the hotel was decorated with background information about the historical importance of this [Ort des Schreckens](#).

Based on Bianca Stigter’s [Atlas of an Occupied City](#), Steve McQueen directed a film with the same name, [Occupied City](#), a contemporary cinematographic monument for the 60.000 Amsterdam Holocaust victims and the resistance against Nazi occupation. The film premiered in Amsterdam in November 2023. Right from the first sequence, the viewer is drawn into an experience that reminds one of Lev Manovich’s [database cinema](#) description. Each entry takes 2-4 minutes. The 262-minute opus overcomes the fixed narrative structure and sets out a new terrain that only art can claim: we’ve left the historical documentary format (no historical footage at all was used). While the narrator’s voice reads the historical records of what happened on what day between 1940-45 (inside houses, jails, offices, streets, squares and parks), the viewer is confronted with lively, poetic pictures of that same locality, 80 years later. Ten or so minutes into

the film the viewer gets the idea and settles down. We familiarize ourselves with the audio-visual imbalance, a rhythm sets in and we prepare ourselves for a long, disturbing journey.

An atlas is a systematic record of a mapping exercise. It took Bianca Stigter six years to compile the book. *Occupied City* feeds off this logic, bordering at a cold, bureaucratic level. Not surprisingly, McQueen takes the historic trauma of the city of Amsterdam to another level. The political project here is to embed ‘official’ acts of commemoration into the colourful multicultural present (a policy change that already goes back to the 1980s when survivors and witnesses started to pass away and the question of how to pass on memory to the next generations was put on the table). The vibrant energy of Amsterdam today reminds of Johan van der Keuken’s 1996 approach in his four-hour Amsterdam Global Village documentary—before the gentrification wave.

The database logic of the audio track keeps the narrator out of sight and instead removes attention to the quality of the collection. All we’re presented with are the bare facts of what happened to these Jewish persons, resistance fighters and other enemies of the Aryan supremacy who went into hiding in this house, in that month, were betrayed by this person and arrested on that day, transported via Muiderpoort station to Westerbork transit camp and then onwards to the extermination camps Sobibor or Auschwitz. Let’s keep in mind here that the mythological Atlas figure was Titan who, in the Titans’ revolt against the gods, was forced by Zeus to support the heavens on his shoulders. In this light, we can compare McQueen’s artwork with three other Titanic monuments. Let’s start with [Loe de Jong](#), the official Dutch historian of WWII who made a 21-part series, produced for Dutch television, called The Occupation from 1960-65 (which I saw as a teenager on TV in an updated edition). Here De Jong sits at a desk and explains, supported by sparse documentation footage: traumatized beginnings. The second would no doubt be Claude Lanzmann’s 9 ½ hour documentary Shoah from 1985, which I saw at the time in West Berlin. Third, Steven Spielberg’s [interview archive](#) with 54.399 testimonies of Holocaust survivors that can be searched and watched online.

Despite all the differences, what the four have in common is their disregard for the conventional documentary format. Memory of the unthinkable needs time—and also in the case of McQueen, the film claims time. The topic is such that we accept exceptional approaches. This is not any monument. In

the case of Stigter/McQueen one senses that the atlas and the database cinema approach both struggle with the question of representation and overview. They silently cry out: it is not our task to yet again teach the historic basics, to educate (or moralize) but to inspire, to create genuinely new pathways. Instead of seeing this as an obstacle or shortcoming, the new form invites both maker and viewer/reader with the possibility to create new narratives. Instead of presenting the historical truth (Lou de Jong) or coming up with personal witness accounts of survivors (Lanzmann and Spielberg), the locative database approach instigates new forms of collective memory in the city: it is a future project.

Steve McQueen's magic camera skills and experience as a video artist are mobilized to tackle the fundamental issue that nothing is left. We visit a traumatic place but there's not even a single sign of the tragedy that unfolded there. The façade is silent and pretends nothing ever happened. My generation, including Bianca Stigter, grew into this unbearable denial of local normality through the works of Dutch writer and painter Armando who kept coming back to his notion of the 'guilty landscape' that witnessed the atrocity—but did not intervene. The motive also shows up in the work of Georges Didi-Huberman who interrogates the trees surrounding Auschwitz, in response to the 'testimony trees' motive in the work of Lanzmann. McQueen resolves the problem of the 'limits of representation' in an elegant way by putting lively and remarkable everyday scenes in the foreground of the dead stone. Time and again the heavy last word of the voice-over breaks the spell: "Demolished". The building is no longer there and what we look at is literary a vanished ghost of something that was once there. Has the place deliberately been obfuscated to hide the past violence?

This is the strategy of embedded memory at work. Not abstract values but concrete stories. In this approach, the contemporary is not at odds with the past but instead integrated into the collective mental map. "This was the place where Nazi collaborators took over apartments of deported Jews." However, Steve McQueen's camera no longer looks for traces of the past. Instead, he adds another layer, the turbulent events that happened in Amsterdam in the 2020-22 period when he visited the atlas sites in search of poetic moments that could give the terrible notices a new significance: the lockdown, empty streets, but also the Covid protests, the face mask regime at schools, the vaccine facilities, many of them at significant places of Nazi rule in the city. There is a part about the murder of the journalist Peter R. de Vries in 2021, a speech at slavery abolition day, a climate protest and the

arrival of Ukrainian war refugees in the spring of 2022. Street after street more details, layer upon layer. But also the role of trains and trams, a crucial element of the ‘technological violence’ that McQueens uses as his final shot: infrastructure mobilized for mass deportation and extermination.