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# Two Emperors and a Queen



Two Emperors and a Queen

from Vesna Lukic

1:06:04



**Author:** Vesna Lukic

**Format:** Film

**Duration:** 65'

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## Research Statement

The film *Two Emperors and a Queen* has been produced as central element of my practice-as-research PhD project 'The River Danube as a Holocaust Landscape: Journey of the Kladovo Transport', set between the departments of Film & TV and History at the University of Bristol. I am especially interested in utilising cinematic media as a way of probing ideas around movement and temporality and would like to invite viewers to consider the interplay of these in the film. The work is virtually in its entirety presented in split-screen in order to highlight the layering of different temporalities relating to the narrative (see Methods section below). It is best viewed on a large screen in a single sitting.

## Research Questions

*Two Emperors and a Queen* (re)traces the journey of the Kladovo transport – a group of Jewish refugees from central Europe – through the camera lens. Their entire journey was marked by striking relations to time, starting from its overall duration of more than two years (from 1939 to 1941-42) dominated by stasis rather than movement. The group derived its name from the Serbian town of Kladovo where their trip came to a prolonged halt. After nine months there the group was moved to Šabac, another Serbian town, where, nearly another year later, their persecutors caught up with them (during the summer of 1941). Virtually all the men from the Kladovo transport were executed in Zasavica near Šabac in October 1941, while the women and children were transported to a concentration camp in Belgrade in January 1942 and killed in a gas van, during the following spring. The sole

survivors were some 200 young people who obtained legal certificates to leave Yugoslavia for Palestine shortly before the outbreak of war in April 1941 and a small number of others who left the group autonomously.

In approaching this historical narrative, I use film (as time-based media) because of its situatedness within time (Bazin 2005), in order to explore the journey of the Kladovo transport as a multi-temporal event. Focusing on the refugees' movements and their experience of the long duration spent in liminal spaces marked by the Danube waters, I wish to understand and unpack the relationship between the riverscape and the trauma they experienced. I seek to map out their journey and the layers of time that provide a tangible link between the 'now' – when my research takes place – and 'then' – the historical moment of the journey of the Kladovo transport between 1939 and 1942. Drawing also on Deleuze's notion of 'cinematic idea' and using chunks of 'movement–duration' as cinematic building blocks (Deleuze 1998) in thinking how to tell the history of the Kladovo transport, my project aims to explore different temporal registers inherent in this narrative. Specifically, I am interested in the collision between the sound (voice-over) that communicates archival texts and the images of the locations in their contemporary appearance. I seek out ways in which this collision provides opportunities for experiential engagement with the past.

To address these concerns my study is organised around the following research questions:

1. How does the cinematic experience, based on this historical narrative, contribute to gaining new knowledge on the subject in the context of contemporary modes of academic practice and research?
2. How does the camera inscribe the physicality of the journey of the Kladovo transport as an historical map of the Holocaust?

3. How do artistic media create a tangible thread between different temporalities that both link and separate the then, the now and the meanwhile; implying the period between the moment when my research takes place and the past that the project aims to investigate?

4. In what ways does the sharing of the same places between different actors, times and temporalities, offer a shared platform for a more immersive engagement with the past?

### **Context**

My film borrows its title from the first publication on the Kladovo transport, Naftali Bata Gedalja's text 'Dva cara i jedna kraljica' ('Two Emperors and a Queen'), published in the *Jewish Almanac* 1957-58. The title refers to the names of the three vessels, 'Emperor Dušan', 'Tsar Nikolai II' and 'Queen Maria', on which the refugees travelled down the Danube and lived, moored in Kladovo for about six months in 1939/40.

Previous research has approached the Kladovo transport as a Holocaust narrative and mainly discussed it from a socio-political perspective (Anderl & Manoschek 2001; Jovanović 1979; Lebl 1997; Mihajlović & Mitrović 2006). In contrast to this, my project suggests another perspective framed through artistic media and, more specifically, documentary film. Although several artists have tackled this historical narrative in their art works (Alisa Douer in art installation, Mirjana Dragić Lehner in painting, Nikola Radić Lucati in photography), my work brings forth the narrative in a novel way, especially considering the time, depth of analyses and the unique academic-artistic research frame that the practice-based PhD has provided.

My research expands on previous work on the Kladovo transport by including an interdisciplinary body of knowledge. My particular contribution can be viewed within the context of creative/artistic modes of academic knowledge (Jones et al 2009; Nelson 2009, 2013) and within the growing field of Holocaust geographies (Cole 2016; Gigliotti 2009; Knowles et al 2014). Offering alternative, more experiential and

visceral engagement with the history of the Kladovo transport, than is generally the case in Holocaust research, my work adds an artistic dimension to scholarly engagements with places and spaces of the past. It therefore responds to Holocaust scholar Andrew Charlesworth's recommendation to follow the cinematic gaze in creative approaches to the spatiality of the past (Charlesworth 2004).

Within the context of academic practice-as-research (PaR) I explore my subject matter, raise and discuss my research questions through artistic practice. By doing so, I am joining the growing community of practitioners in the academy that challenge or contribute to the diversity of ways to engage with knowledge. Particularly important sources of inspiration throughout the process of my doctoral studies were: Jill Daniels' *Not Reconciled* (2009) and Cahal McLaughlin's work on the Maze and Long Kesh Prison (2004 – ). They are both based on mediating traumatic experience related to conflict, drawn from historical subject matters and raise research questions through practice in a similar way to my project. Furthermore, in both these examples, locations, places and landscapes take a predominant role. The relationship between the camera and the physicality of these places, as well as the way in which the presence of the camera indicates the presence of the subject, i.e. the author/researcher, is of great significance.

Daniels's work breaks the silence of the ruins of Belchite (a town left in ruins after the Spanish civil war) with the voice over that is whispered by two spectres, two 'surrogate witnesses' (Daniels 2014, 5) who, by the virtue of their elusive presence in the film, speak for the absence in the historical world. Although I approach my subject matter differently, in the sense that I am not creating fictional characters in my film, I drew from Daniels's work in thinking about the tension between the sound and the image in responding to the silence of the places where trauma had been experienced. While Belchite was left in ruins deliberately, the locations encountered by the Kladovo transport along their journey slipped into oblivion, unmarked, possibly as a result of neglect in a different socio-political context to that of Spain. Nonetheless, both in Belchite and locations in Kladovo, Šabac and Belgrade, the

primarily ruinous places seem to evoke another time that they have witnessed and are now tacitly signalling through their physical properties. This is why it was instructive to refer to 'Not reconciled' in deciding how to record the locations in my film.

## **Methods**

In the filmmaking process I specifically identified the following three research methods:

### 1. Doing/un-doing history

The script for *Two Emperors and a Queen* is composed of excerpts from letters, memoirs and documents written by the members of the Kladovo transport, or immediate witnesses to their journey, with the exception of the cineaste, Stanoje Backo Aleksić. Some of the material I collected myself from a number of archives, while other parts are taken from Anderl and Manoscheck's (2001) *Gescheiterte Flucht*, Reich's (2014) *Zwei Tage Zeit* and Babović (2010) *Letopis Šapca 1933-1944*. The script is less concerned with historians' interpretations and more with direct witness accounts of the events surrounding the Kladovo transport. I was looking for raw material that could not only provide information about the events, but would also be able to evoke some of the atmosphere of the times and the experiences of the protagonists in my film. Excluding the authoritative voice of the official historical interpretations, I started feeling that I was in a sense undoing the history and the manner in which the story of the Kladovo transport has been told before, in order to tell it in my own way.

After decontextualizing the direct sources from the way they were presented in the literature and the archives, I started assembling them together without commentary or narration in-between. In leaving the raw material to seemingly 'speak for itself' I am asserting my wish to enable direct insight into the experiences of the past. The script is however carefully constructed to communicate the history of the Kladovo transport, in the way I understand it and chose to tell it.

## 2. Filming as embodied research

The camera dwells on the locations, and records the actual (current) state of the places where the Jewish refugees spent their time more than 75 years ago. I am recording the 'authentic' locations marked by the presence of the Kladovo transport. Despite significant changes in the landscape over the intervening years, I hope to evoke through the camera lens the 'bones of the land' (Tilley 1994) grasping the specificity of the places once inhabited or glanced at by the Jewish refugees. This videographic record is evidence of 'having been there', but as Godard (in Ranciere 2006) points out – only 'after the deed' (see also Bazin 2005). However, while the long duration of shots and the visual record of the places refer to the attempt to incite a sort of 'existential authenticity' (Rickly-Boyd 2013) through film, I am aware that my attempt to truly 'walk in the footsteps of the past' is futile and necessarily leads to failure to represent the journey of the Kladovo transport.

Nonetheless, through my own gaze and physical presence in the landscapes once inhabited by the members of the Kladovo transport, as manifested through film, I intervene in and transform 'the past'. I argue – alongside philosophers of film such as Astruc (1992) and Deleuze (1989, 1997) – that the potential of audio-visual media lies in their ability to essay movement, duration, place, space and materiality. In other words, more than seeking to describe the landscape in which the journey took place, I seek to explore how the physicality of that landscape was interwoven into the travellers' experience of the journey. This personalized scope of the environment implies embodied experience, not only of the members of the Kladovo transport, but also my own experience, as a researcher visiting and filming the same locations. These two very different positions in time – the one of the refugees at the time and my own in the present – share (albeit very different) visceral engagements with the places and spaces of interest. While I can only make very limited claims of knowing what the (sensorial) experiences of the refugees were, my 'memory practice' (Cole 2013) recorded through the camera lens is a mapping exercise that positions our shared experience of the landscape.

### 3. Editing/working in time.

I started editing the material for *Two Emperors and a Queen* very early on in the project.

As the process of editing felt like working with externalised time (Doane 2002) and reflecting on the process of doing feels very relevant in a PaR context (Nelson 2013), I considered ways in which I could make time visible in my film. Therefore, I started wondering how to tell the story of the Kladovo transport, while at the same time, allowing the audience to engage with my way of thinking about time. This is, for example, how I decided to edit the entire film in split screen, or to use jump cuts.

The image appears as a long strip across the single screen. The only exception is at the beginning of the film, when photographs appear as three separate images on the screen. Otherwise, the three, at first and later two, screens are joined together in a single frame. This is inspired by my thinking about time and the river, where the image appears as a flow across the screen. In this way, the boundaries between the screens are sometimes lost or barely recognisable. At other times, however, the distinction between the images is very clear and they are perceived as separate screens. Sometimes the same footage is repeated in each of the screens, frequently with a time lapse between them. These variations help to put forward different ideas concerning time, which may appear as a single flow or as a number of fragments.

#### **Outcomes**

The film makes the case for interdisciplinary alternative modes of knowing and the value of the creative alongside the critical humanities (Kador and Lukic 2017). To the best of my knowledge, this is the first PaR film project entirely based on a Holocaust narrative, and as such its contribution is important to both fields, that of PaR and that of Holocaust studies.



## **Dissemination**

The film is produced as central part of my doctoral project, and partially funded through a DEAS scholarship awarded by the University of Bristol Department of History. To date, it had several public screenings including at the Wiener Library (London), the Jewish Historical Museum (Belgrade, Serbia), Moesgaard Museum (Aarhus, Denmark), the Serbian embassy London, the University of East London, and the University of Bristol. Throughout the PhD I have showcased my project, including segments from the film, at several UK and international conferences.

Among others, I have presented at: NECS conference 'Archives of/for the Future' (Lodz, Poland, 2015), 'World Cinema and the Essay Film' (Reading, UK, 2015), TAG (Theoretical Archaeology Group) (Cardiff, UK, 2017) and at *Media Practice and Education* and *MeCCSA Practice Network Annual Symposium 2018* 'CONTEXTS OF FILM PRACTICE' (Lincoln, UK, 2018) and Visible Evidence XXVI (Los Angeles, USA).

## **Impact**

Beyond its impact in academic circles (see above) the film has great potential to engage with wider audiences and has already done so. For example its recent screening at the Wiener Library was attended by descendants of Holocaust survivors, including relatives of members of the Kladovo transport.

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## Peer Reviews

*All reviews refer to original research statements which have been edited in response to what follows.*

### **Review 1: Accept work subject to minor revisions of statement (these should be outlined in detail in the review)**

Sitting on the well-populated margins of documentary practice, Vesna Lukic's *Two Emperors and a Queen* is a highly original, if occasionally impenetrable, intervention into image-based representations of the Holocaust (or perhaps visual commemoration works better here). The work is a rich contemplation of the possibilities and limitations of film practice-as-research and its potential contribution to the investigation, production and dissemination of knowledge – especially that related to historical events.

The film engages with the story of the transport of a group of central European Jews during the Second World War, known as the Kladovo transport. The journey was marked by its long duration (more than two years), hardship and, as the author puts it, the fact that it was 'dominated by stasis rather than movement'. Like many similar journeys across Europe at the time, it culminated in the genocidal extermination of the vast majority of the "travellers".

Lukic revisits some of the places associated with the journey and films them as they are “now”. The images are accompanied by words pieced together from many sources (documents, memoirs, letters, witness accounts), compiled and edited by Lukic, and read out by actors and other participants in the project. Lukic declares that she seeks ‘to map out their [Jewish refugees’] journey and the layers of time that provide a tangible link between the “now” – when my research takes place – and “then” – the historical moment of the journey of the Kladovo transport between 1939 and 1942.’

Beyond its focus on the interaction of words (from the past) and images (from now, bar the archival images that appear at the beginning of the film), the most striking visual aspect of the film is that the screen throughout is split into two (except for at the very beginning, when it is split into three). The two frames don’t fill in the screen but are positioned in its horizontal middle – surrounded by black and accompanied by the English translation of the voiceover at the bottom. On occasions, the two frames show distinct images, but most of the time they show the same images (or with slight differences in framing, or of the same thing but shot at a different time of day). If the footage is the same, there is often a time lapse between the two screens-within-the-screen. Lukic writes that the decision to present her work like this ‘help[s] to put forward different ideas concerning time, which may appear as a single flow or as a number of fragments.’

There are many beautiful and disturbing moments in this visual essay. The oppressively static framing and the long duration of some of the shots occasionally has a visceral effect on the viewer – an impressive thing to achieve. But the pay-off is not immediate and requires patience. What could be read as nudging towards formal self-referentiality and fetishism, becomes a lucid and poignant device in the section of the film (quite late on) in a fairground that was used as a concentration camp during the war. Lukic’s camera becomes mobile (albeit not on its own, but through the windscreen of a moving car). Only then do we realise the relief that comes with movement; only then are we forced to acknowledge the oppressive

stasis of the immobile majority of the previous frames. With this movement, however, comes a sense of danger and indeed finality. This is the closest the film gets to the idea of 'film as embodied research' and it is worth waiting for. It's an extremely powerful and successful sequence.

There is no doubt that *Two Emperors and a Queen* is a very well thought-through piece of visual research, with moments of real brilliance. Two features of the work I would have liked to have seen developed more extensively are the interaction between text and image, and the literalness of some of the visual comments about temporality and duration.

A conversation between the words and the images definitely occurs in the film. But at the moment it's not entirely clear what this conversation is – and the mesmerizing visuals tend to dominate, abstracting the work considerably. Lukic argues 'that artistic, time-based media are particularly well suited to provide insights into the different temporalities inherent in the history of the Kladovo transport.' This might well be the case but the obvious interventions (especially the time-lapses and jump-cuts) are heavily marked by their intentionality in an otherwise beautifully subtle piece, and signal towards something that feels external to, and imposed upon, this rich material.

## **Review 2: Invite resubmission with re-edit of work and/or statement.**

Vesna Lukic's *Two Emperors and a Queen* is a revealing multi-layered mediation of place and time. Lukic has deployed contemporary techniques of video-production with split screen to create a thought-provoking essay film. The film unfolds through multiple voice-overs that read testimony in original language, archival photographs, and footage gathered on location. The effect is an expressive montage that guides the audience through a historically relevant journey, until the demise of the people involved. While the film gives some information on the identities of the people talking to us, and at times on the locations we observe, it sets the Kladovo Transport within the classic narrative of the Holocaust ecology. The reference to an

established narrative tradition opens a route into the intertextuality of this film's poetic contemplation of the journey portrayed, and the fate of Jewish refugees from central Europe (1939-1941/2) who tried to find freedom following the Danube route.

The film flows in the manner of the river, in that the images blend one into the other while continuing to recall the dependency of the convoy on the flow of the water. Thus, the Danube becomes a vessel able to take the people to freedom one minute, and a strong barrier the next. Especially poignant is the moment when a witness recalls how the convoy saw the passing by of another boat, which transported the parents and relatives of many people who were stopped from travelling by the local authorities. A montage of footage filmed on location suggests the exploration of the buildings that served as lodgings when the group was rendered captive, the concentration camp on the Sava river where they were transported, and the killing of the people. There is ambiguity around the locations, which are not specifically indicated in their significance to the story. This contributes to anchoring the images to the sentences of the testimonies we listen to, which are in the original language, and guide the narration. The English translation in subtitles enables the Anglophone audience to understand the meaning of each testimony but allows for a level of ambiguity in the exact identity of the perpetrators. This ambiguity is not present in the original voices, and it would be useful to have an explanation of the reasons behind the author's decisions while translating, as an indication of the level of collusion of the local authority with the Nazi invaders would offer a stronger contextualisation of the event and the meaning of the film. Towards the end of the film, as Lukic's exploration of the Danube as a Holocaust landscape draws to a close, the frames are filled with unidentified footage filmed on location, which adds to the overall effect of the film, and complete this evocative exploration of historical distance and sense of space.

The statement is illustrative and offers a good sense of the intention behind the construction of the film. However, the statement tends to be descriptive rather than analytical, and less than precise in indicating the novel way in which this film

performs, and manifests a sense of time, and an original perspective in comparison to other essay films exploring lesser known historical events and locations. The contextual references are well chosen, but the statement needs some analysis of their specific relevance and how they fit into the filmmaker's research. The reference to various artists' work is very general and does not allow for a sense of depth in the understanding of how this film relates to them but offers something original to the debate on the use of film to explore space and time. Within the context of academic practice-as-research, the sources cited are relevant. However, it would be useful to learn how and why these scholars' creative practice influenced the creation of *Two Emperors and a Queen*, and how the author's response to these sources resonated both with the author's situatedness and the historical period/location she manifests within this film. A more precise debate, and additional work on the above would make this piece stronger. Please proofread the statement, as there are minor typos.

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