

A Cinema Guild Release



# Because I Was a Painter

A film by Christophe Cognet

104 minutes / Scope 2.38:1 / DCP / Dolby Digital 5.1 / 2013  
In French, German, English and Hebrew  
with English subtitles.

Contact:  
Graham Swindoll  
[gswindoll@cinemaguild.com](mailto:gswindoll@cinemaguild.com)

The Cinema Guild, Inc.  
115 West 30<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 800  
New York, NY 10001-4061  
Tel: (212) 685-6242, Fax: (212) 685-4717  
[www.cinemaguild.com](http://www.cinemaguild.com)

## **Synopsis**

*Because I Was a Painter* is unprecedented investigation into secretly created artworks inside Nazi concentration camps. Including interviews with a handful of artists who survived the camps, this fascinating documentary confronts notions of beauty and delivers a forceful message on the power of art.

### **Director's Statement**

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi worried about “the gap that exists and grows wider every year between things as they were ‘down there’ and things as they are represented by the current imagination fed by approximative books, films, and myths.”

What images are available to us after such a disaster? There are the sites of former camps, the stories and personal accounts of survivors, the photos taken by the SS and the films taken during the Allied liberation. But what do these images represent? What do they truly show?

That is the heart of the question of the images of the camps, the image of catastrophe – of any catastrophe. All illustration is false, deceptive, grotesque, to say the least. It’s not a question of illustrating but of showing and rendering present even something as simple as an emptiness or impossibility. This is the function of art.

With this film, I am trying to experience the tragic beauty of these artworks created in hell.

- Christophe Cognet

## **An Interview with director Christophe Cognet**

**Could you explain how drawing or painting in the concentration camps represents an act of resistance for you? What compelled artists to practice their craft in such conditions?**

I think that aesthetic exultation is an intrinsic part of humanity. It is something that endures within us and is ever present. Drawing or painting in concentration camps is also a form of political combat that involves affirming a certain art form in opposition to Nazi political culture. Striving to represent and symbolize is waging a combat, after all, an active resistance because it means representing places that aren't supposed to exist, that are conceived not to exist. Therein lies a point of contact between them and us, because we aren't representable either. There is a void, something we don't understand, that we'll never see. When you're placed as an individual in this mass of mud, screams and perpetual survival where you risk death at any moment anywhere, having a general understanding of what is happening, even visual, is extremely difficult. That is the artists' work: understanding, sometimes through fragments, sometimes in a more general way, what is happening around them. All of the artists I met told me that: being an artist, drawing a line means beginning to create divisions; so it's dissecting, illustrating, and is thereby an effort of thought. Drawing allows for this, and most of the pieces created in the camps are drawings. This was obviously often for material reasons, because some would have liked to do watercolor or painting.

The film strives to test something during both the making of and also in the editing, in the relationship I'm trying to create between the experience, the knowledge, the sites and the pieces, and a moving body – my own, but also the people we see in the film. There is a corporal experience, and I'd also like this film to create physical sensations.

**The dimension of the personal experience is also felt in the way the materiality of the investigation is developed. This materiality covers many aspects, such as the presentation of the pieces. They're constantly being presented as objects to be handled with care. What was your position on this?**

It was to tell myself that I wasn't considering these objects, these pieces, as a kind of proof of what the camps were. And if they provide testimony, I wanted to problematize that informative aspect of the pieces to the extreme. In historical films, they often use works of art as illustrations, figurative art – and their physicality isn't really taken into account: where they came from, who made them, etc. I wanted to avoid that at all costs. My hypothesis is that a work of art is physical matter, first and foremost; a dimension, a grain, a texture, a sound... For example, I was very moved when I discovered Leon Delarbre's pieces, which, for me, are some of the most beautiful from the camps. Delarbre was in five different camps. At Dora, he tore sheaths from the asbestos pipes in the factory, which he would use for drawing, a kind of tracing paper with a particular sound. Over the course of my investigation, I always tried to hear the sound these objects made, precisely because my hypothesis is that if they bear witness to anything, it is perhaps first as a physical fragment, more so than what they represent. And what they represent perhaps doesn't testify so much to the camp, but to something else: the painter's perspective, an act of resistance, an imaginary world. So it was absolutely necessary to put these works back into their materiality, and their extension.

So the materiality was first a link with these artists, but also with the people who had preserved their work, and it was very important to show that: that we were in the concrete, in the most simple, trivial form of real. That it was necessary to conserve these works, handle them, which is something that has to be done in a particular way. And that, in the way Kochi Lévy treats them in the Ghetto fighter's house, with movements of great elegance, we can see that they're taken care of, that they are fragile, and that they have value. This position in the materiality is also to tell the audience: we are really going to discover these things as they

are, there where they are, and we're not going to redo a bit of black with computer graphics because a line looks poorly drawn, we're not going to do 3D, color, etc.

**The film concerns what these works of art represent as much as it does the experience of which they are the remainder, or the footprint. Or let's say it concerns the relationship between the two.**

It concerns both. The first drawings we see are those of Zoran Music, and we really delve into the image, then it's the pile of bodies drawn by José Fosty. We're in their fiction, in what they represent. What matters to me is to have an aesthetic perspective on these works. Obviously not in the sense of a kind of vague hedonism, it's actually exactly the contrary: an aesthete's perspective also concerns the content, but it concerns the way in which the shape works with the content. When we're inside the pieces, the camera is attentive to the erring of the lines, scrutinizing the imperfections. Incidentally, the camera often hesitates and goes out of focus. I talked extensively about this with Nara Keo Kosal, my operator, and his assistant, Sylvain, who often offered to reshoot these sequences. But we didn't, because these unfocused sequences are an active part of this initially hesitant research. I didn't want to have a confident perspective, ever. It's a perspective that searches for lines, that barely dares to follow them... Figures appear and disappear, that's how we wanted to film them. We're therefore asking what they represent: a face, a body, a hovel... This hesitation, these imperfections form the aesthetic relationship, a relationship that leads us to question if it's beautiful, if the lines create something possessing harmony, in short, all questions relative to beauty. And since we see the materiality of the works either before, after or at the same time, it creates a relationship that shows things in their double identity: as objects and as figurative art. Boris Taslitzky said that no normally established painter does a random drawing one day and a work of art the next. No, everything we do is part of an ongoing quest. If they are painters, artists, all of the drawings they do, absolutely all of them, are artistic drawings. They never say to themselves, "Now I'm going to stop being an artist and become a journalist"... After, there are varying degrees of quality in the work - some are amateur artists. But my objective wasn't to generate a collection of masterpieces. For example, someone like Krystina Zaorska, a fourteen year-old kid who had an incredible pen stroke, didn't go on to become an artist at all. Her drawings are extremely moving in their content, because they tell. And just after, I show the drawings of Maria Hispanska Neumann, which are among the most beautiful: drawings of women holding children that are extraordinary.

**Your approach is effectively that of an essayist, your film is closer to an essay than a classic documentary: it takes on a fragmentary dimension of research entirely opposite to demonstration.**

I don't have to confirm my point of view. Take the sequence with Walter Spitzer in his workshop, for instance, with the large painting done in 1961 representing the inside of a gas chamber that he proudly describes to us. I don't really like that painting; I find it difficult to defend, morally. That's precisely the reason that it's in the film. Because I want to question the issue of beauty to the very maximum, the representation of an impossible moment, a moment of blindness that almost no one saw apart from a few SS officers who watched through a peephole in some gas chambers but not in all of them. So this painting, in the least awful sense, is the executioner's perspective, and in the worst is an absolutely impossible perspective for obvious, ethical reasons. I try to go around that with Walter Spitzer, but I can't see myself - because of where I am on the issue at this point in my life but also because I don't believe it's the role of a filmmaker - saying to him "you don't have the right to do that". If I did, I could have turned my film into a courtroom.

**What are you trying to show by filming the camps using a very ample style, as though they were vast landscapes?**

Firstly, I'm trying to give a precise sensation of the space, of its dimensions. It's imperative for looking at the drawings; the two are interlinked. Because the drawings come from these places, and because the perception of the dimensions underscores the fragility of the drawings compared to the immensity of the camps. But also because the dimension facilitates the understanding of

what the drawings represent. And conversely, the drawings help us to imagine for ourselves what it was to be an individual in the middle of this space. That was very important for me. And if it's possible to have a point of contact with the people who experienced that, it's also there in fragments: we can gather little bits of what it was to look at one thing or another, to be there. Not the suffering, the hunger, nor the cold, of course, but the perspective. I think that the film allows for that in moments, most of all in the second part.

**So you had to construct your own body of knowledge based on your own criteria?**

Yes, and the materiality also relates how I put these images to the test, how I make the trip. So it's fragmentary because the body of knowledge is fragmentary on the filmmaker's scale. You have to go and see. And in fine, what made me decide to focus on this or that drawing was emotion, the feeling, which isn't merely a plastic sensation and which supports what is related.

**The way you build a sequence determines the relationship between feeling and emotion. You can begin by presenting the work, demonstrating its beauty, then providing the context and knowledge, to then return to the piece. You can re-establish the experience that we have of the piece, between feeling and thought. This relationship of beauty with knowledge is at the very heart of the film, yet not in a theoretical or didactic manner: you ask us to test this relationship to lead us to question it.**

It's fundamental. It's a question of how to approach each piece. It comes up while filming, then during editing. For example, for the Gottliebova sequence, the question was decisive, and with Catherine Zins, the editor, we tried both editing approaches. We chose to edit the commentary first, and then show the pieces, which are filmed in a way that favors meditation. Conversely, in the Dora crematorium, I say nothing and let it come through on its own. We know where we are just from the space alone, without saying anything, and we understand that these drawings were done in a crematorium. But we don't know anything more. I don't say anything because we don't know anything. Someone said to me, "but we'd like to know more about it." So would I, but we don't! The only information we have is the ten words given during the film. Like the guy who did the sketchbook at Auschwitz, we don't know in what conditions he was drawing. We remain with our interrogations. Sometimes it's difficult to see a feeling through to the end because we lack information, and I think that the film tries to meditate on this. That includes aesthetic pleasure, these pieces of information are important for understanding what it is you are dealing with. The film did that for me: I realized that, despite all of these trips, the abyss was still there, but that, through fragments, we still manage to perceive things, however minuscule they are. In spite of it all. Through the image. There is intimate knowledge in the image and the journey was worth it. But there is also the irreconcilable, the un-representable. It isn't just dogma. I didn't know that before making this film.

**Your interlocutors often have trouble talking from an aesthetic point of view. How did you work with that? The film doesn't judge them, but it seeks to provide what's missing a bit, to communicate the idea that it's possible to talk about beauty without becoming obscene.**

We had to leave the speeches with their historical precision – such as “yes, there were really shower heads in the gas chambers that were like this, so the piece has a reality from the document point of view” – and trust the editing, in filming the pieces and in the film's silent interrogation of beauty, with the aesthetic relationship. As such, I left the interrogation to the spectator. It's for them to answer. I'm not here to say “that's beautiful and that isn't”. “That's correct”, I end up saying a little. But “it's beautiful”, that is a problem for each person, their sensitivity, their story. I have no lesson to teach anyone about beauty. I know that can put off people who ask where the filmmaker is and what is his position. It is precisely to give these elements, these materials, to organize them and reorganize them, to treat them in a different way in the next sequence so that you yourself have access to the materials and develop your own relationship to these questions using your own trusted sensations, which I try to unfold to the maximum. That is the filmmaker's job, not to give out points.

**The film's first shot is impressive. It's a complex, very sensual movement that goes from the sky, passing by the wind in the trees before dropping down to the stones. The wind in the trees, that's film itself; its origin, its beauty and its own sensitivity, as Griffith saw it. It's also the very strong feeling of the present as a passage, of the wind that was blowing that morning. Your shot affirms that. And it dives to the stones, to the past locked within those stones. It's a beautiful cinematic gesture.**

It's difficult for me to comment on that, but I can tell you how we did it. We got up at four thirty in the morning and went to Treblinka. It was in the summer, and since we were in the East, the sun rose very early. I roamed the camp again that morning and saw a light; suddenly, an intuition with the tree and that stone forest came. I was always looking for the material and the un-representable. But for me, those stones, out of all the places I visited – it's the best monument. Because it shows the number, the innumerable, and at the same time un-representable because they aren't exactly tombs, they're more stones in suffering, pointed. I also wanted to start from white, a white sky, to go past the tree that weeps and drops down to the stones. It seemed simple enough to me. It took two hours of setting up during which we did other static shots, and then we came back and practiced it twelve times. It was windy so they were very risky shots. I had one good take and all the others were complete failures. Then, when I saw it on the big screen, I immediately understood that it was an important shot, but I didn't know where it should go. Upon thinking, I told myself that it was so important that it could perhaps carry the whole film and be the symbol of my research. But most of all, it situates the location of the film. It says: we're going to look in here, in these stones that tell nothing, that show nothing, we go from there. It situates an investigation, a spiral movement that is searching. The white page, the landscape, the detail. And we search.

**Then come the first words, after the shot: "I don't dare say it. I shouldn't say it. Even for a painter, it was incredibly beautiful." As if there were a sense of modesty and something forbidden at the same time. Your film dares to tackle the question of beauty, but without neglecting this modesty or despising the forbidden. These first words are those of Zoran Music, it's you who reads them in another painter's workshop. Music says: "It's because I was a painter. It isn't that I wanted to show proof." Then, a few lines further on: "It was an absolute necessity to reproduce, to preserve for what came next". On one hand it isn't about showing proof, on the other it's necessary to reproduce, preserve. From the opening of the film, a tension is created between the work of art and the document, between the aesthetic relationship and the value of testimony. It's laid out by a painter, by his words.**

Yes, but I think that when he says that he has to keep/ preserve, he means for himself as a painter. Showing proof is for the others. Reproducing, preserving, it's for oneself, driven by a painter's necessity, "because I was a painter." At any rate, that's the hypothesis I finally formulated. It's like Jazwiecki's 114 portraits. Agnieszka tells me that he paints them to show proof, but I think he does them for himself first and foremost, like an artist working his material, his piece, his own questions, his own collections.

## The Artists

### Yehuda Bacon

Lives in Jerusalem. Born in 1929 in Czechoslovakia into a practicing Jewish family. His entire family was deported to Terezin, where he learnt to draw with artists such as Léo Haas, Otto Hungar, Karl Fleischmann. In 1943 he was deported to Birkenau. He secretly drew there – mainly gas chambers – drawings that he had to destroy. He was then evacuated in a « death march », and arrived in Mathausen, where he was freed by the American army. The only family member to survive, he settled in Prague and redrew from memory replicas of his clandestine drawings – some of which were shown at the Eichmann trial, where he acted as a witness. He then became an internationally renowned artist.

### José Fosty

Lives in Visé, near Liège. Born in 1919 in Belgium. He studied at the Fine Arts School in Liège, was deported for being part of the resistance to the Buchenwald camp where he was held between March 1943 and the liberation of the camp in April 1945. During this period he created 500 clandestine drawings and met with other artists such as the Belgian René Salme, and the French artists Paul Goyard and Boris Taslitzky. He managed to bring back 150 of his drawings. After the war, he continued his artistic activity at a sustained amateur level.

### Walter Spitzer

Lives in Paris. Born in Poland, in Cieszyn, in 1927. After being imprisoned in a ghetto, he was deported to Blechhammer (during his time there, the camp came under the command of Auschwitz), then to Gross Rosen and Buchenwald, where, thanks to his artistic talents, he managed to be placed under the protection of the internal resistance. Evacuated in a « death march », he was rescued by the American army. He became friends with GIs and for them he drew what he lived through – later on he recreated these drawings in etching. After the war, he joined the Fine Arts School in Paris and has led an artistic career since then.

### Samuel Willenberg

Lives in Tel Aviv. Born in 1923 in Poland into a Jewish family, as the son of a painter. He chose to join the Polish army after his country was invaded. He was placed in the Czestochowa ghetto with a part of his family, then deported to Treblinka. He escaped from the gas chamber by being the only one “removed” from his transport to join the « kommando » in charge of victims’ clothes. He took part in the revolt of 2nd August, 1943. He was one of 63 survivors of this extermination camp. After the war, in Israel, he made black and white drawings and sculptures of Treblinka.

### Krystyna Zaorska

Lives in Gdynia, in Poland. Born in 1930 in Poland. After the Warsaw insurrection, she was deported with her mother to Ravensbrück. Very weak and exhausted by the forced labor, she had a narrow escape when a well-meaning guard sent her to work in the infirmary. Talented, she made drawings to illustrate stories she told to convicted children as they were hiding in the blocks. Before the arrival of the Soviets, she was evacuated with her mother to other camps in Westphalia. Her mother was to die there.



### **The Artwork**

*Because I was a Painter* deals with the works of art created in the camps under Nazi command (« concentration camps » and « extermination camps »), where it was strictly forbidden to draw. There is no estimate of the number of these works.

In a survey carried out at the end of the 70's, the English historians Janet Blatter and Sybil Milton estimated at 100 000 the number of artworks created between 1933 and 1948 in Europe, in all the ghettos, internment camps, transit camps and Nazi camps. They estimated that 30 000 of them survived. This figure should be handled with care. Each institution, each memorial, each museum, has a different approach to cataloguing their collections – and it does not take account of private collections, which are not easy to quantify. With the help of these estimates and on the basis of the collections I have had the chance to view, we can assume that several thousand artworks were created secretly in the Nazi camps. This figure should be considered in the context of the millions of people who were murdered, deported and imprisoned in those places – how many of them were artists?

### **Artwork held in the following collections:**

National Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau

Beith Lohamei Haghetot Yad Vashem Buchenwald Memorial

Mittelbau-Dora Memorial

Foundation of the Brandebourg Memorials

(Sachsenhausen, Oranienbürg, Ranvensbrück Memorials)

Liège Museum of Fine Arts - Cabinet des Estampes

Royal Library of Belgium

Musée National de la Résistance de Champigny-sur-Marne Musée de la Résistance et de la

Déportation de Besançon Kunstmuseum Basel, Kupferstichkabinett

Private Collection Evelyne Taslitzky

Private Collection Walter Spitzer

Private Collection Samuel Willenberg

### **About the Filmmaker**

Christophe Cognet studied cinema at La Sorbonne Nouvelle, before becoming a writer and director, mainly of documentaries but also of essay, intermediate and short films.

Always attentive to the act of remembrance and sensitive to the traces left behind, his films ask questions about Cinema, forms of power and surveillance, the act of creation and the power of images.

Since 1993 he has undertaken a cinematographic study of Art at the limit of human experience – a reflection accompanied by articles, written works and conferences on this subject.

He also is a scriptwriter, a writing consultant and author of articles on Cinema and Art (mainly for the magazine *Vertigo*). He is currently writing the script for his next film, a free adaptation of the book *Le ParK* by Bruce Bégout.

### **Selected Filmography**

Because I Was a Painter	2013
The Snake's Colls	2008
When our eyes are closed	2006
Boris's Studio	2004
The Lost Planet	2002
The Dominici Affair by Orson Welles	2000
La mer en colimacon	1998
Gongonbili, the other side of the hill	1997

**Production**

France : La Huit - Stéphane Jourdain

Allemagne : Augenschein Filmproduktion - Jonas Katzenstein and Maximilian Leo

**With the participation of**

Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image animée,  
Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Filmförderungsanstalt,  
kulturelle Filmförderung Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Eurimages,  
Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, Procirep and MEDIA  
Programme.

**Director**

Christophe Cognet

**With**

Yehuda Bacon, José Fosty, Walter Spitzer, Samuel Willenberg, Kristina Zaorska

**Cinematography**

Nara Kéo Kosal

**Editing**

Catherine Zins

**Sound**

Graciela Barrault

**Sound Editing**

Didier Cattin

**Mix**

Jean-Marc Schick

**Historic advisor**

Annette Wievorka

**Worldwide distribution**

Jour2fête

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