

Exhibition inspired by The Silent Village

More than 60 years ago, a filmmaker visited South Wales to create a tribute to the massacred inhabitants of a Czech village. Matt Thomas meets the curator of a new exhibition inspired by The Silent Village

When the Nazis massacred 340 inhabitants of a Czech mining village in the 1940s, they also set in motion a chain of events that would have far-reaching effects, prompting a swift response from sympathetic Welsh miners.

The Silent Village, a tribute to the devastated community of Lidice, stages a bold re-enactment of the Czech events set in Cwmgiedd, near Swansea.

Poet and filmmaker Humphrey Jennings first discussed the project in nearby Ystradgynlais just two months after the killings, gaining the co-operation of local pitmen who would play the villagers and their families in his moving recreation of the atrocity.

Now an exhibition being staged at Penarth's Ffotogallery is taking a new look at Jennings' work.

Artists Paolo Ventura and Peter Finnemore, writer Rachel Trezise and film historian David Berry, offer their response to a film that is both a reconstruction of the Lidice atrocity and a film about Welsh life in the 1940s.

"Really, it's an extraordinary work and something that made a real impact on the British documentary culture," says curator Russell Roberts.

"It looks at history in a different way, as something that is changeable and open to interpretation.

"It's a fictional documentary if you like, with the miners and their families playing roles in order to bring new perspectives to the tale."

This unique aspect of the film also presented the exhibition contributors with a set of unique problems.

"It's not the Holocaust, but it's a holocaust," says Roberts. "This is one of the factors that makes it such a difficult subject to respond to, to work with.

"Primo Levi, and I'm paraphrasing here, wrote about a similar problem that he encountered whilst working with ways of looking at the Holocaust in The Jaguar.

"He says that the problem you run into is, that if you begin to humanise the perpetrators of an act like that, you start to understand them and that's not really a position you want to find yourself in."

Rather than revisit the village itself in order to try and tease out new angles from the existing material, Roberts says the contributors decided to explore the Welshness of the film.

"Some people might ask the question, why didn't you re-engage with the people of Lidice?" he says.

"What we wanted to do was to look at a slightly different aspect of the film and to put it into a wider context of what was happening in Europe at the time.

"Other artists have already gone over to the village



and worked with people there, what we wanted to do was look at the aspects of life which are drawn out in the film which perhaps haven't been quite so thoroughly explored.

"The idea of community and family, for example, which is very much central to the film.

"That's something Rachel Trezise has picked up on in her short story, which deals with a young girl being transplanted to South Wales after escaping the massacre and her fostering by a Welsh family.

"And Peter Finnemore has taken inspiration from a trip we made to the village to create his contribution to the exhibition which is a macabre photo collection, essentially recreating the sense of the village using his own home as the setting."

It's an engaging exhibition, but Roberts warns potential attendees might need to do a bit of research before turning up.

"I would say that a knowledge of the film is probably required to get the most out of the exhibition," he says.

"Especially with Peter's work which is quite allusive rather than being a particularly straightforward narrative work. But I think that the emphasis on the ordinary, everyday details of these people's lives you find in the film really underlines the universality of what's being said.

"Aside from anything else it's a warning that any village, anywhere, at any time could be destroyed in a similar way."

Silent Village will be at Ffotogallery until February 27. Call 029 2034 1667.

--Matt Thomas