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Three Minutes: A Lengthening

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Three Minutes: A Lengthening

Abstract

This is a film review of *Three Minutes: A Lengthening* (2021), directed by Bianca Stigter.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



Three Minutes: A Lengthening (2021), dir. Bianca Stigter

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zU6SgmPlixg&t=1s>

There is something liturgical about Bianca Stigter's haunting *Three Minutes — A Lengthening*. A meditation on an astonishing home movie shot in Poland in 1938, it repetitively passes over faces, closing in on them and then widening to reveal the scene again, darkening backgrounds in order to foreground a face or an object, and then repeating the cycle again. The rhythm, accompanied by Helena Bonham Carter's gentle voiceover narration, allows us to feel like we have entered into a temple and a museum at the same time, a reverie in which lost human beings can be found and returned into the light.

In 2009, American musician Glenn Kurtz happened upon a roll of footage that had been shot by his father, David Kurtz, while travelling in Europe in August of 1938. The film shows an

average street in a small town as dozens of people congregate around the cameraman, who is clearly at home among them. They are drawn to his familiar and friendly face and his rare (for the era) color home movie camera. The place is Nasielsk, about thirty miles north of Warsaw and the people being photographed are Jewish. They are enjoying a sunny day and an exciting diversion, stepping out of buildings to shield their eyes against the sun and gaze at the photographer, or moving quickly to stay in the camera's view. They are children and parents and grandparents, shopkeepers and rabbis. And in about a year and a half nearly all of them would be gone.

Glenn Kurtz embarked on an extraordinary journey to restore the footage and to try to identify the people in it, culminating in a book published in 2014.¹ Dutch filmmaker and cultural critic Bianca Stigter picks up where Kurtz has left off in her first solo directorial project.² The result is a film that is both documentary and experimental, flowing from a critical and brilliant decision never to show anything else on camera except the footage. There are no interviews, no visits to survivors, no tour of the place as it is today. There is only the footage, shown to us in its raw and damaged and also restored conditions, fragile and on the edge of disintegration at the time it was found, like the fragments of scrolls found in caves at Qumran that would later reveal a treasure. Kurtz sometimes joins Carter in narrating the discoveries of his research which unfold like the unspooling of a detective novel: the shop sign that was deciphered, the buildings identified, the survivors that emerged out of time and space to help name a few of the faces.

Behind every moment and frame of the original footage, however, and also of Stigter's documentary, is the inevitable horror that awaited each one of them. Testimony and official record recite in terrifying detail how the community was rounded up and held for more than a day in the synagogue without food or water, then marched through an impenetrable bog and ultimately put on trains. The sacred is profaned at every turn: whips hanging on the walls of the synagogue are

used mercilessly on the people before they are driven out. One of the stories of survival comes from a man who had been away and returned to find the round-up had taken place. Anxious to rescue his fiancée from the synagogue, he is able to negotiate with a soldier he has encountered before. Under pretense of arrest, the young woman is brought out to safety. Such stories offer brief flashes of light in a nightmare of darkness.

Light is sacramental in every aspect of this testament. From time to time, bleaching sunlight floods the frame, and also disappears in dim interiors, making the shadows of the moving figures seem like flickers in a cave. A three-minute strip of film is the hallowed centre of this documentary, and film itself is made by how light defines space. The endurance of Kurtz's film is an unexpected light in a devastating story and Stigter's documentary holds it up on a cinematic altar. The human beings who perished in December, 1939, will now never be forgotten.

¹ See Glenn Kurtz, *Three Minutes in Poland: Discovering a Lost World in a 1938 Family Film*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

² Stigter had previously worked as an Associate Producer on *Widows* (2018) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013), both directed by her husband Steve McQueen, who also acts as a co-producer on *Three Minutes: A Lengthening*.