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# **Lives Unremembered: The Holocaust and Strategies of its Representation**

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## Exergesis abstract

The Holocaust is a subject that seems to defy artistic representation by way of its sheer scale of tragedy and subsequent trauma. As I will demonstrate in this paper, it is hard to restore visibility – pictorial links between past and present realities – to crimes that have been deliberately submerged by its perpetrators. I will examine some of the common strategies used in representation of the victims of the Holocaust since the end of the Second World War, in the mediums of film and photography.

As my main method of enquiry, I will examine three films from different eras, and of very different approaches in terms of their processing of the proposed original evidence, as examples to illustrate my arguments. In the second chapter Alain Resnais's documentary film *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*) is analyzed as a birthplace of the so-called iconography of the Holocaust. Chapter three examines workings of memory through the aesthetic form that was soon to follow; the role and testimony of the survivors is considered through Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. In the fourth chapter a new player is introduced: the second generation witness of postmemory, works of transmitted but unexperienced realities. In this chapter I will closer examine the workings of art in the game of reprocessing the evidence of the Holocaust, and through Dariusz Jablonski's film *Fotoamator* I aim to critique how the previously discussed approaches serve to further lock the Holocaust in an inaccessible canon.

Moreover, the generalization implied – a drive toward universalization of the Holocaust as an idiom or even a metaphor for the dark sides of human history/character – derives from problems of representation; mainly that of anonymity in face of the proposed beauty of the spectacle, of tragedy and suffering in mass-media. A key problem is that any historical document, however we define one, is considered transparent and unmediated, whereas art is clearly something where a degree of mediation is necessarily recognized. In the face of this dichotomy it seems that all the collected "proof" of the Holocaust – witness accounts, photographs, films, material remains – achieves, is to strengthen the prevailing version of history.

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## I. Introduction: A crisis of words, images and remembering

*"I want to talk about a certain time not measured in months and years. For so long I have wanted to talk about this time, and not in the way I will talk about it now, not just about this one scrap of time. I wanted to, but I couldn't, I didn't know how. I was afraid, too, that this second time, which is measured in months and years, had buried the other time under a layer of years, that this second time had crushed the first one and destroyed it within me."*<sup>1</sup>

The Holocaust is a subject that on the surface seems to defy artistic representation by way of its sheer scale of tragedy and subsequent trauma – how could anything ever justly represent all of the suffering proposed in the literature, photographs, films and monuments created after the Second World War? This notion of the unrepresentable Holocaust perhaps has its roots in Adolf Hitler's own failure in art. The fact that he favoured a romantically realistic style of painting, and his exclusion from the academic art world, led him to subsequently declare new, imaginative and conceptual art (the modern and abstract Dadaists for example) as simply degenerate. It has often been argued that this attack of a totalitarian nation on imagination "was a prelude to what mutated into genocide on a massive scale."<sup>2</sup> As an extension of the expansive and severe control the Nazi state imposed on the aesthetic that followed, it is logical to think that the Nazi administration understood how significant it was that their proposed project of annihilation would not translate well to the visual domain, that it should seem like the victims simply disappeared without a trace. As I will demonstrate in this paper, it is evidently hard to restore visibility – pictorial links between past and present realities – to crimes that have been deliberately submerged.

In this paper I intend to examine some of the common strategies used in representation of the victims of the Holocaust since the end of the Second World War, in the mediums of film and photography. While these mediums are classically seen as essentially different in that photography is the more spatial, and film the more temporal one, I still intend to mostly discuss them as a single representative medium based on their technical ability to depict scenes and instances in more detail than meets the eye, and the common notion of their "realness" that follows.

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<sup>1</sup> Fink, I. (1987, p. 3)

<sup>2</sup> Feinstein, S. (1999)

As my main method of enquiry, I will examine three films from different eras, and of very different approaches in terms of their processing of the proposed original evidence, as examples to illustrate my arguments. In the second chapter Alain Resnais's documentary film *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*) is analyzed as a birthplace of the so-called iconography of the Holocaust. Chapter three examines workings of memory through the aesthetic form that was soon to follow; the role and testimony of the survivors is considered through Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. In the fourth chapter a new player is introduced: the second generation witness of postmemory, works of transmitted but unexperienced realities. In this chapter I will closer examine the workings of art in the game of reprocessing the evidence of the Holocaust, and through Dariusz Jablonski's film *Fotoamator* I aim to critique how the previously discussed approaches serve to further lock the Holocaust in an inaccessible canon.

As is perhaps most obvious in Resnais's film, documentary rhetoric originates in the conscious doctrine of the socio-political.<sup>3</sup> These works embody the 19th century concept of the "objective" – the creator (for example the cameraman) as an observer and mediator of uninterpreted information instead of an author in a subjective sense. The classic conventions of documentary literature, films and photographs call for "natural material (as opposed to artificial studio sets) presented in an imaginative and dramatic form."<sup>4</sup> Although contemporary documentary makers like Dariusz Jablonski acknowledge the defining status and the inescapable presence of the creator of the work, a premise of a justly representable reality (a kind of a truth mechanism) still exist within the documentarian practice. These workings around the generalizing notion of the true reality of things are central to representations of the Holocaust; as I will argue in this paper, all employed modes of representation refer back to those of the documentary.

In contrast to the makers of these documentaries, it is interesting how many of the artists working within other disciplines (like painting, sculpture, architecture etc) have often assimilated an approach that is seemingly opposite to that of the uninterpreted discussed above. For example, Murray Zimiles, a painter who has done works that sit under the definition Holocaust art<sup>5</sup> by painting, among other things, burning Polish synagogues has said of his approach to the subject, that "the artist must confront the viewer in an unambiguous way. He must show the horror, the pain and the loss. The image must be a vehicle that propels the

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<sup>3</sup> This rhetoric of a socio-political doctrine was pioneered by Emile Zola in his naturalistic document-novels, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, depicting social struggle during the French Second Empire.

<sup>4</sup> Newhall, B. (1938, p. 3)

<sup>5</sup> Any works of art that are about, or in response to, the Holocaust are widely considered Holocaust art, but the term chiefly points to postwar art, and not, for example, to works created at the Nazi camps.



viewer into a world of undeniable recognition of what happened fifty years ago."<sup>6</sup> But as I will argue in this paper, this display of horror, the quest for unambiguousness, is exactly why a lot of Holocaust art of this kind falls short of opening new points of entry to the subject. And maybe more importantly, what did happen sixty years ago that Zimiles feels must undeniably be recognized? Apart from the inaccessible statistics (that around 6 million Jewish, and a total of an estimated 9 to 11 million civilian people lost their lives in the German camps during the period of 1942-45) and historical propositions constructed afterwards, can anyone really understand, not to mention somehow mediate, or transmit, what happened?

Even the traditionally trusted conveyors of historical fact, words, fail us: to define the program of genocide undertaken by the Nazis by its common denominator, the Holocaust, implies to a rite, a religious act. Etymologically the word originally derives from Greek word *holokauston*, meaning *completely (holos) burnt (kaustos)*, its original connotation refers to a sacrificial offering to a god / gods.<sup>7</sup> Holocaust's roots in referring to large catastrophes and massacres date back to mid-19th century, when it was common to call the mass killings carried out by the medieval French monarchs holocausts. Not until the late 1970s it became the norm to refer to the Nazi crimes as the Holocaust (the capital letter apparently emphasizing that this is the ultimate incarnation, the largest catastrophe of its kind). In reaction to the theological connotations of the word holocaust, the biblical word *shoah* is another term used to describe the event; it is Hebrew, and literally means *calamity*. In relation to the word holocaust, the fact that shoah is of Jewish origin adds a different kind of religious tone to the description of the event – that of martyrdom, and the sacred untouchability this notion of self-sacrifice implies.

It is interesting that this terminology is so tied to a religious canonization; very few secular terms exist that seemingly avoid this, the Hebrew expression *Churban Europa* being one, meaning simply European destruction, as well as *Porajmos* used by the Roma people to describe the attempts, rather than the outcome, of the Nazis to exterminate the Roma of Europe.<sup>8</sup> This struggle to name the event to a degree also stems from the cunning Nazi strategy of euphemisms at the time; the action of large-scale genocide of its subsequent victims was referred to as the *Final Solution of the Jewish Question*. And this is precisely one of the problems of the representation of the event; the exclusivity of Jewish suffering, inequality of victimhood that unavoidably leads to inequality (and to some degree, an unreality) of

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<sup>6</sup> Baigell, M. (1999)

<sup>7</sup> In Greek and later Roman pagan rites these gods received offerings of animals, a ceremony often performed at night around a pyre.

<sup>8</sup> Petrie, J. (2006)

representation. How this is also a form of victimization and continuation of the genocide, is further discussed in chapter three.

The German name for the Polish town of Oswiecim, Auschwitz, where the largest concentration and extermination camp (Auschwitz-Birkenau) was located, has also largely become a metonym for all the camps (there were six Nazi death camps, and thousands of concentration camps, depending on source), and thus for the whole of the genocide. Since victims from all ethnic groups were killed there, this synonym for the genocide does not have as strong religious connotations as for example holocaust, or shoah, both have. Moreover, the generalization implied – a drive toward universalization of the Holocaust as an idiom or even a metaphor for the dark sides of human history/character – derives from problems of representation; mainly that of anonymity in face of the proposed beauty of the spectacle, of tragedy and suffering in mass-media. It is a single indescriptive name that facelessly bears notions of both the aggressive Nazi program of geographical expansion, and the full scale of the following project of extermination – it embodies both the perpetrators and the victims, and through turning the camp sites there to monuments and museums, the past in the present.

The problem is that any historical document, however we define one, is considered transparent and unmediated, whereas art is clearly something where a degree of mediation is necessarily recognized. In the face of this dichotomy it seems that all the collected "proof" of the Holocaust – witness accounts, photographs, films, material remains – achieves is to further raise questions on which accounts, which photographs and films, and which of the objects that remain should be trusted (and indeed, which ones not) to convey what each of them imply for posterity. In other words, which ones are elevated to these proposed objects of historically accurate realities?

It is in their nature that any memorial, and particularly those monuments allegedly commemorating massacres and other crimes of vast scale, in addition perform a dubious function of framing the dead to justify more deaths in the victims' names (in other words, to strengthen the prevailing version of history, and its claim to judge alternative versions). This is due to the political and rhetoric urgency to judge, condemn, resolve; to arguably forget rather than to commemorate. Thus what follows a tragic event is more important to its representation than the event itself. For example, it is more interesting to examine issues and events around 9/12 and beyond, rather than 9/11, if one is to think about possible ways of creating a memorial to the victims of that particular attack, instead of one whose key

implication is that of condemnation toward the perpetrators – the terrorists.<sup>9</sup> Because of the chosen aesthetic forms, but indeed because of a solidarity of all the victims is seldom present, the memorial as a concept can be seen as a tool for making the gap of us (the viewers) and them (the suffering other) wider. The fear of forgetting, of the Holocaust passing into history as an event like many others, is a defining aspect of the victimhood thereof.

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<sup>9</sup> Simpson, D. (2006)

## II. The establishing shot/scene: First images of what is not there

*"The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying."*<sup>1</sup>

Towards the end of the Second World War Allied armies were advancing in continental Europe towards Berlin with a quickening pace. Attached to these armies to capture images of the impending victory over Nazi rule were hundreds of men with a variety of cameras as their weapons – the official news photographers and film crews.<sup>2</sup> Although the notion of the war photographer hardly was a new one – recreated scenes of battle from the American Civil War had already set the tone and conventions some 80 years earlier – it can be argued that with the golden age and mass circulation of papers like London's *Picture Post*, and the slow coming of age of television transmissions, the Second World War presented these image-dependent medias with a perfect venue of inexhaustible visuality for a receptive audience.

### A campaign of controlled representation

The subsequent discovery of an extensive system of concentration and extermination camps within the occupied continent did wonders to further authorize Allied propaganda's claim of the Germans as an evil nation, led by the devil himself, thus making it easy to find at least one way of explaining the performed annihilation through simple conclusions and stereotyping. Even now, some 60 years on, it seems somewhat impossible and, to some, insulting to suggest that Adolf Hitler was, among many other things of course, a human being with feelings, insecurities and affections.<sup>3</sup> It is easy to see how the demonization of a nation, mainly through the imagery (later, the iconography) of the liberated camps, and the need to portray anything German from the 1930s and the 1940s as simply evil, are the results of a campaign of controlled representation. This victory of the rhetoric of Allied propaganda imagery in mind, the role of the cameramen on the front is a central one in shaping our perception of the imagery of the Holocaust – fundamentally, an imagery and a version of history constructed solely by (and apparently for the purposes of) the victorious party of the conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Sontag, S. (2003, p. 70)

<sup>2</sup> That is to say one's whose access and output was controlled by the appropriate authorities.

<sup>3</sup> Take for example the 2004 film *Der Untergang* by Oliver Hirschbiegel, based on the diaries of Hitler's secretary, about Hitler's last days in his Berlin bunker, and how most of its criticism was based on the film's depiction of some of the aspects of his personality mentioned above.

But this victory is not that clear-cut and simple, as is easy to see by asking a simple question: what actually is represented here, in these photographs and films of liberated camps, of corpses? What are we to read from the images brought back by the photojournalists first to arrive at the horrible camp sites? All the photographs and films of the camps are essentially misleading since they show the camps at the moment the Allied troops marched in. It is always the piles of putrifying corpses, the suffering of the anonymous skeletal survivors, the vast open spaces of partly or completely destroyed camp sites, which, when the camps were functioning was indeed not typical as the Germans had perfected the process of mass killings towards an industrial precision. These are images that say "look, it must have been horrible, but it is already gone". Although this problem of the photograph, of a struggle between the original then and there against the viewer's here and now, concerns all technically reproduced mechanical images, it becomes a somewhat pointed attribute in the case of the discussed Holocaust imagery. Ulrich Baer writes that,

*"Even in our postphotographic era, when sensory perception is being reformatted according to new technological paradigms, we continue to view photographs as snippets of an unreachable and yet real past. This sight is here, immovably preserved and printed, but you are elsewhere. Before yielding information, all photographs (and not only Holocaust images) signal that we have arrived after the picture has been taken, and thus too late."*<sup>4</sup>

This concept of something that is fundamental to our understanding of the subject (the perished, the annihilated) but essentially missing – the void if you like – is a defining quality of the so-called iconography of the Holocaust. This imagery does not commemorate the victims, by necessity it references their passing, and the fact that through meticulous work by the Nazis, it is impossible to access them, or their lives through what has become the de facto representation of all the victims of the Holocaust. There is an alarming closeness to the Nazi project and ideology in this so-called revictimizing of the victims.

### Traces of the "Other"

The position of the photojournalist is always a fundamentally problematic one: traditions and conventions of documentary photography label the person in apparent control of the critical and distant eye of the camera the supertourist. He or she is the star witness to our relation to

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<sup>4</sup> Baer, U. (2002, p. 76)

the suffering of the "Other", the one who brings back images of catastrophe from afar – which is still the quintessential modern experience.<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the resulting awareness of the suffering that happens elsewhere is a construct, and more importantly that of limited scope. Contemporary discussion on photography and the suffering of the "Other" inevitably brings about some serious ethical questions. Firstly, how this "Other" is represented, and perhaps more interestingly, who is this "Other" represented by and to what ends? It seems that no moral charge or baggage is attached to these representations of cruelties. The photographs and films seem only to provocatively announce: things like this happen. Through the mediums of photography and perhaps nowadays more significantly film in the form of news "flashes", these events are gone from the media's subjects of interest (and by extension, as is presupposed, the public's) as quickly as they appeared, fading from view to the accumulated mass of faceless horrors.<sup>6</sup> This is the moral imperative of the produced documentary; to cause a stir within us, not greater contemplation of the suffering.

When confronted by images of horrors, we take satisfaction in looking without flinching – the ability to keep a distant stance of indifference – but at the same time derive pleasure in flinching when something has "pricked us" and pierced the thick protective armour one needs to go through the morning paper.<sup>7</sup> But, it is still the suffering of the "Other" we distantly engage in, an activity bordering on entertainment. Powerful, beautiful images drain attention from the subject, and compromises the picture's status as a document of the realities of the "Others" in favour of the framed spectacle unfolding within the reproduced image. Nevertheless, be they black and white photographs from years ago or contemporary Holocaust art, these pictures that grab us seem to be the very building blocks of our common perception and understanding of (or at least the attempt on an understanding of) history, and thus also, in a very real sense, traces of the Holocaust. As Dorota Glowacka puts it,

*"The artists who incorporate Holocaust themes – writers, painters, filmmakers – carry out a preponderant task of producing testimony to the unique individual suffering of the Other. In speech and image, they wish to bear witness to the*

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<sup>5</sup> Primarily that of the wealthy western cultures.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag writes, "Awareness of the suffering that accumulates in a select number of wars happening elsewhere is something constructed. Principally in the form that is registered by cameras, it flares up, is shared by many people, and fades from view." Sontag, S. (2003, p. 20)

<sup>7</sup> Sontag argues that, "No moral charge attaches to the representation of these cruelties. Just the provocation: can you look at this? There is the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching. There is the pleasure of flinching." Sontag, S. (2003, p. 41)

*victims' broken or extinguished lives in such a way that their traces will reverberate for both present and future generations of witnesses."*<sup>8</sup>

So a trace of the "Other" present in the above discussed Holocaust art most importantly signifies the presence of that "Other" who has never otherwise appeared in the present. It is precisely the ways in which these traces are treated – by the primarily documentarian films and photographs, and the traditionally more fictitious aesthetic forms, as the so-called Holocaust art perhaps is – that are of great interest to me.

### **Night and fog: The specific and the iconographic**

In contrast to the more informative and objective newsreels often screened before feature films at the time, the first clearly authored film about the full scale of the Holocaust is Alain Resnais's 1955 movie *Nuit et Brouillard* (*Night and Fog*) – named after the 7 December 1941 decree of the Fuehrer (*Nacht-und-Nebel Erlass*<sup>9</sup>) whereby people considered hostile towards the German state could be arrested and deported, and even if not spelled out in the text of the decree, ultimately killed. This controversial French film about the deportations and the mass murder in Europe during the Second World War was compiled and directed by Resnais from a vast catalog of black and white newsreel footage (films shot by the Allied armies liberating the camps), various still photographs of the same nature, and smooth colour panning of the (now) more famous camp sites in their postwar state, before their inevitable museumification (Fig. 1). The film was commissioned by the French Committee of the History of the Second World War<sup>10</sup>, and thus cannot escape its significance as also a national attempt to process and examine the guilt felt by the French for their co-operation with the occupying Germans some 10 years earlier – after all, there were several so-called collection camps on French soil, operated by the French. For many, this film was their first encounter with explicit visual "proof" of the atrocities.

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<sup>8</sup> Glowacka, D. (2002, p. 102)

<sup>9</sup> Translated at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/imt/nightfog.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Comité d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale



Fig. 1

The less than 30 minute film is made of two levels. The grainy black and white footage shot right after the liberation of the camps, and a few still photographs taken during their operation by the "photoamateurs" within the SS, form a very traditional documentary backbone complete with sparse spoken (male) narration. The apparent authority and originality of this evidential footage is further emphasized by colour footage shot by Resnais at the (by then) deserted, and mostly destroyed camps, inserted carefully throughout the film. The black and white quality represented a period of history most were keen to put behind them – whereas perhaps the professionally executed colour tracking shots conveyed a sense of a modern way of life, carrying a sense of hope for a better future (without wars and suffering) and a hope of closure and resolution in regards to the dark years of wartime.

In addition, although clearly a strategy to heighten the impact and the proposed "realness" of the original black and white footage, this interweaving of two very different visual styles, along with the sheer brutality of the original footage, acts as a powerful distancing tool. This interweaving creates a disruptive space between the two temporally different depictions of realities by placing these depictions next to each other, to be reevaluated from afar. Together with the narration employed (the storyteller, in place of the deceased, and the survivor) the



film becomes a defensive act, or self-protection. Resnais's *Night and Fog* may be a defense against the yet unimaginable (images of) suffering and death, and is thus a product of the fear thereof. The fact that it has no talking heads (personal testimony, as in for example Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* has), seems to further emphasize the argument. The missing of these witnesses, and perhaps the humane (replaced by the machinery and the logistics of destruction), soon takes on a very defining role in viewing the film: it is employed to accordingly distance the viewer through generalization. This locking of meaning into a universal history creates, as Slavoj Žižek argues, a deadlock of a false resolution:

*"The images of utter catastrophe, far from giving access to the real, can function as a protective screen against the real. In sex, as well as in politics, we take refuge in catastrophic scenarios in order to avoid the actual deadlock (of the impossibility of the sexual relationship, or social antagonism)."*<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the deadlock in relation to the Holocaust points to the struggle to find closure; a resolution, and becoming history, of an event which arguably cannot have a valid, universal resolution, and thus will continue to be suspended without this closure no matter how many memorials and monuments (both in terms of public sites of remembrance, and individual artworks) are erected.

So, the defining problem with Resnais's film seems to be how to justly portray (to give fair and equal emphasis) the proposed unrepresentable; how to attempt to universally touch on almost unlimited individual tragedy? I would argue that the director's decision to evoke a testimonial aura through the use of horrific scenes of piles of bodies bulldozed to a pit towards the end of the film (Fig. 2) actually does the opposite of convincing the viewer of any sort of authenticity. Although clearly a work of art (by an author) with its manipulations of preferring one clip over another, pacing the edits, overlaying narration, Resnais hesitates just when it matters: as the author of the film he stands halfway between the binaries of iconographic-specific, and subjective-objective. And thus, *Night and Fog* becomes more of a historical document, and a failing memorial/monument itself, testifying first and foremost to the difficulties of representing the Holocaust than a point of access to the actual Holocaust.

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<sup>11</sup> Žižek, S. (2000, p. 34)



Fig. 2

### III. Documentation continues: Attempting access through testimonies of witnesses

*"The thing about pictures of dead people is that they are always taken when the subjects are alive, all tanned, muscular, and smiling. The photo replaces the memory. When someone dies, after a while you can't visualize them anymore, you only remember them through their pictures"<sup>1</sup>*

It is said that without memories we would not know who we are, how we once were, and who we would like to be in the memorable future.<sup>2</sup> This is to suggest that memories play a defining role in the present: we are the sum of our memories, they provide a continuous private sense of one's self. But memories as such are inexpressible. They are not made of words, images, sounds or other sensory, packageable and deliverable ingredients, but an undefinable combination of scattered fragments thereof. The camera allows the active (and retroactive) editing of the scenes and appearances that we would like to "keep" or "cherish" – the memories – and thus it is clear that the photographic practices arguably hold a special place in the processes of encoding (registration, processing and combining of received information), storage (creation of a record of the encoded information) and perhaps most obviously, retrieval (activation of the record, recalling in response to some cue in the present, to be used in the present) of what we define as memories.

For a moment, think of how you were when you were young. Most likely the most instant recollections are closely based on photographs taken years ago – an image easy to summon at will. Then, according to this trajectory of thought, clearly photographs inform us in some fundamental, and indexical / associative way who we now think we once were. But in line with their easily editable nature, photographs, as referring to a specific subject or a given moment that's already lost, are objects of nostalgia, and thus during our lives continue to repeatedly lead us to gradually redefine our internal and external perception of the past: "[...] by establishing a link between a "self-in-present" and an image of a "self-in-past", nostalgic memory plays a significant role in the reconstruction and continuity of individual and collective identity."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Boltanski, C. in Camhi, L. (2007, p. 56)

<sup>2</sup> Ackerman, D. (2004, p. 76)

<sup>3</sup> Spitzer, L. in Bal, M., Crewe, J.V. and Spitzer, L. (1991, p. 92)

The photograph's mechanically reproduced (limited) view of an instant works as proof (if somewhat unreliable as is the common postphotographic argument) of something that was: a photograph is not supposed to evoke, but to show – though not always what they're said to show. Coming back to the quote by Christian Boltanski at the beginning of this chapter, photographs of people who are no longer with us are a phenomenon of transmitted, borrowed or secondary, second-generation, memory (we are denied the possibility of firsthand experience) – a phenomenon named postmemory by Marianne Hirsch. A photograph does not exist, as it is often proposed, if it does not have a viewer. The picture thus becomes a vehicle of postmemory, for the second-generation witness: the viewer of the photograph. As Eduardo Cadava notes (reflecting on Benjamin, Barthes and others),

*"[the photograph] begins, even during his [the subject's] life, to circulate without him, figuring and anticipating his death each time it is looked at. The photograph is a farewell. It belongs to the afterlife of the photographed. It is permanently inflamed by the instantaneous flash of death."*<sup>4</sup>

Essentially the moment it is created, a photograph (or a film) then becomes a site of an inaccessible past; an index of association and connotation, which themselves reside outside of the picture, and are evoked by the filmic image's routes of reference.

### **Photographs and trauma**

Seeing has a traditionally privileged status: it is a somewhat dated, but evidently still valid precondition and guarantee of knowledge and understanding (seeing is believing). But I would argue, that this link between seeing and comprehension has been radically disrupted in the experiences of Holocaust victims – the fact that they saw what they did does not lead to comprehension, let alone deeper understanding of the events. In psychological terms a trauma is defined as a disorder of memory and time: a puzzlingly accurate (indeed, like a photograph) imprinting on the mind of an overwhelming reality.<sup>5</sup> This imprint, of an occurrence, has not been encoded into (conscious) memory; its incomprehensibility blocks its passing to the conscious flow of remembering and thus makes it a traumatic memory, inaccessible but nevertheless troublingly there. In other words, it is a past yet to be remembered. Just as a

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<sup>4</sup> Cadava, E. (1997, p. 13)

<sup>5</sup> Psychological trauma in the context of psychoanalysis was examined and redefined by Sigmund Freud throughout his career. In his words trauma is "An event in the subject's life, defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization." Laplanche, J. and Pontalis, J-B. (1988, p. 465)

traumatic event is only rarely (re)integrated into memory, the photographic (re)presentation of an event never quite achieves the status of full presence: it only presents "a trace of the referent in its disappearance."<sup>6</sup> In this sense it is clear that the visual imprints the survivors (and perhaps the perpetrators) of the Holocaust have in their minds are interestingly similar to the imprints carried by photographs of the Holocaust; raw material, unmodified returns of what happened, there to be processed towards understanding (a reading). The photograph is thus like a reenactment of an event, still inside the event, present at it – like the sufferer of a traumatic event, it has no distance to the event (like the viewer, as a third party, necessarily has).

*"The original traumatic event has not yet been transformed into a mediated, distanced account. It reimposes itself in its visual and sensory directness."*<sup>7</sup>

Thus, to draw a conclusion, photographic evidence of the Holocaust is frustratingly inadequate and lacking if attempting to form a reading, a move towards comprehension, of the event: these pictures do not open for us, the images are there, but they refuse to budge. So perhaps naturally the next domain to turn to is that of the accounts of the witnesses – something that (we think) is already mediated, and transmissible.

### **The inquisitive camera of *Shoah***

Claude Lanzmann's 1985 film *Shoah* has long been hailed as the oral history of the Holocaust; it is over nine hours long (no mercy for the viewer), has no actors and thus limits itself to interviews with victims of the Holocaust (Fig. 3), its perpetrators, and eyewitnesses. It also shows original German documents and reports. Somewhere between specific historical facts and memories of the facts, enactments of personal recollections – a process of retrieval of (in)voluntary memory, accompanied by denial or selective forgetfulness on the part of the witnesses – take place.

One of the more powerful accounts is a segment of the interviews done with Treblinka survivor Abraham Bomba, a barber by profession, in a Tel Aviv barbershop (Fig. 4). In this long scene Bomba is performing a haircut on an older gentleman. It is a busy shop, but everyone is silently listening as Bomba answers Lanzmann's probing questions. Soon Bomba starts to get

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<sup>6</sup> Baer, U. (2002, p. 53)

<sup>7</sup> Alphen, E. van in Glowacka, D. and Boos, S. (2002, p. 103)

frustrated with the director's continuous pleas to describe things precisely; a callous air develops toward the inquisitive camera. After telling that he had to cut the hair of some of his closest friends from back home (this happened in the gas chamber, before the gassing), and how his friends would ask him what would happen to them, Bomba goes silent and teary-eyed.

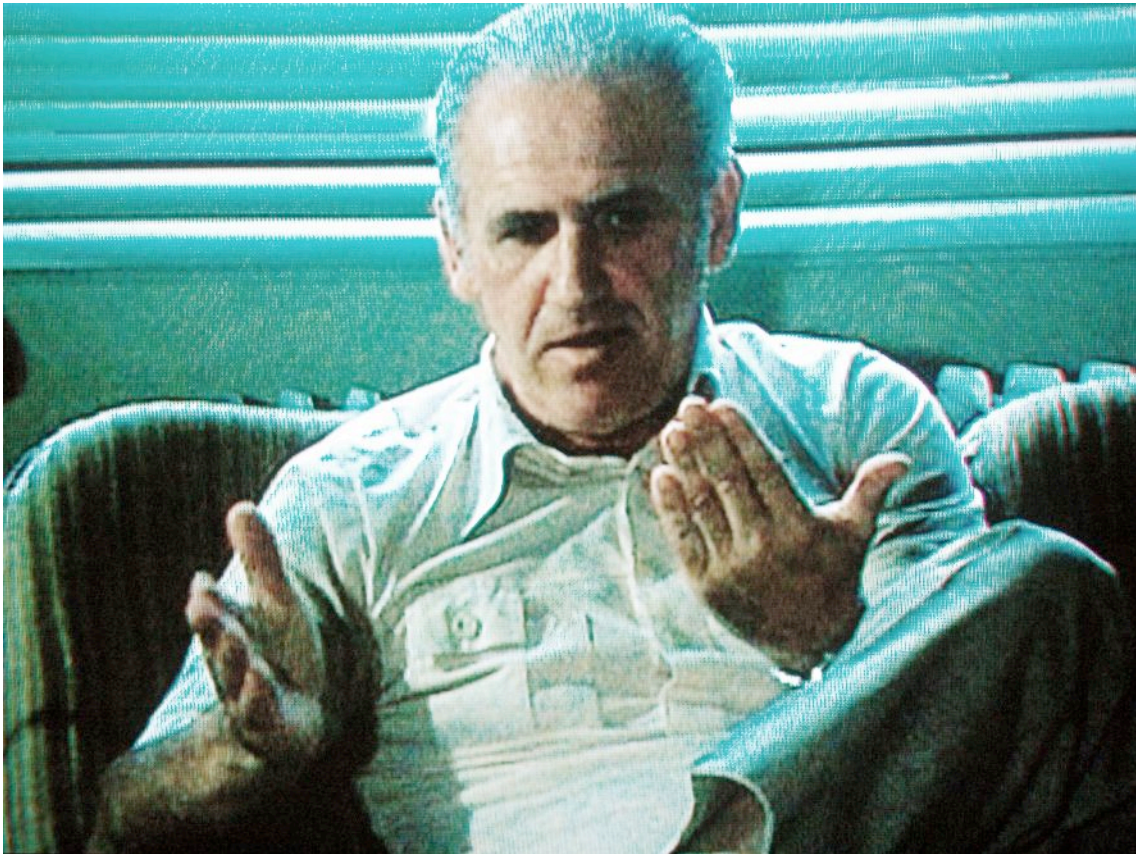


Fig. 3. Filip Müller in the DVD chapter *He learns that the Jews in the family camp will all be gassed within 48 hours.*

The following discussion takes place:

*Lanzmann "Go on then, you must, you have to"*

*Bomba "It's too horrible"*

*Lanzmann "Please, we have to do it, you know it"*

*Bomba "I wouldn't be able to do it"*

*Lanzmann "You have to do it, I know it's hard"*

*Bomba "Don't keep me long in that, please"<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Lanzmann, C. (1985, 2nd era, 1st part, DVD 3, chapter 2)





Fig. 4. Abraham Bomba talking in the DVD chapter *Cutting the women's hair inside the gas chamber*.

After this, Bomba wipes his eyes and tries to compose himself, and starts to talk so silently that it is very hard to hear what he is saying. Lanzmann's insistence on answers and painfully descriptive accounts is consistent through the film; his strategy of interrogating his interviewees perhaps reflects his frustration with the subject of the Holocaust. Interviews with the Germans who used to operate the camps are filmed in secret, and clearly without the consent of the interviewees (Fig. 5).

In addition, almost exclusively the camps, crematoria, neighbouring villages and towns are shown as they appear during the filming in the late 70s - early 80s. During the twelve years of its making, the director and his camera crew travelled in Poland, (the then) Czechoslovakia, Greece, Holland, Israel, Switzerland, Romania, and as well the United States, in pursuit of grave first-hand testimonies and seemingly lighter anecdotes (recollections of bystanders) of and around the Holocaust. Thus *Shoah* is closer to the tradition of the need to speak personally than to a contemporary premise of documentarism: the rejection of the idea that an image can objectively refer to anything.



Fig. 5. Franz Suchomel in the DVD chapter *The song of Treblinka. The station. The ramp. The role of the different command groups. The walk along the "funnel" to the gas chambers. The cold at Christmas.*

In *Shoah*, the visual depicts the present while the voice evokes the past, and the tension of this juxtapositioning, creates and guides the fertile space for the viewer to imagine the realities narrated by the witnesses. Although this leads the informed viewer back to the usual suspects – visuals like those of the Resnais's film – at least Lanzmann recognizes, and skillfully plays with the limitations of his chosen media. This is a powerful strategy, of a somewhat allusive realism, as Florence Jacobowitz writes,

*"They [contemporary documentaries] reinforce the postmodern notion that truth is relative, a construction contingent upon the limitations of subjective perspective and prevailing ideologies. Cinema is considered yet another reflection in the simulacrum, mistaken for reality."*<sup>9</sup>

Lanzmann's subject is (and is unashamedly limited to) the torment, deportation and eventual extermination of Jews, as something unique and incomparable. This bias in representation, a singling out of (in his opinion) the most important demographic of Nazi victimization (as

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<sup>9</sup> Jacobowitz, F. in Glowacka, D. and Boos, S. (2002, p. 10)



opposed to a solidarity of that victimhood), is also one of the most valid points his film has been criticized for. As a defining attribute of a people, this universal postwar victimhood has turned into a position of power; the Jew historically seen as the iconic sufferer of persecution. To compare any other suffering during the Second World War to that of the Jews, is to evoke a dichotomy of careful construction. As Robin Wood relates in his provocative essay on the representation of sexual minorities and the Holocaust, "The best scapegoats are minority groups, and the more unpopular the better. Join the powerful and you automatically become empowered, but to express that power you require a victim."<sup>10</sup>

But to Lanzmann's credit, the fact that we as spectators are made to confront these witnesses who speak to the (inquisitive, and somewhat intrusive) director (and by extension, the camera) face to face, makes us understand our relation and distance, but also perhaps more profoundly, our answerability and responsibility to the "Other", as discussed in chapter two. Also, to a very different degree if compared for example to *Night and Fog*, Lanzmann's film is built of the "annals of the participants, mainly the victims"<sup>11</sup> instead of those of the state, or the victorious party of the conflict.

The aesthetic form employed in *Shoah* – of talking heads and "authentic" locations, of the director personified as the main vehicle of enquiry – is constructed to emphasize the burden of bearing witness, and thus the filmic medium's inevitable forcing of memory into coherent whole (the frame), or a narrative (of a linear timeline). This fundamental property of the chosen aesthetic form, in the sense that to bear witness is the need to transmit and convey the burdensome memories, as Jean Baudrillard has examined it, necessarily reduces its value and variety:

*"In fact this obsession with reliving and reviving everything, this obsessional neurosis, this forcing of memory is equivalent to a vanishing of memory – a vanishing of actual history, a vanishing of the event in the information space. This amounts to making the past itself into a clone, an artificial double, and freezing it in a sham exactitude that will never actually do it justice. But it is because we have nothing else, now, but objects in which not to believe, nothing*

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<sup>10</sup> Wood, R. in Glowacka, D. and Boos, S. (2002, p. 122)

<sup>11</sup> Furman, N. (2006, p. 183)

*but fossilized hopes, that we are forced to go down this road: to elevate everything to the status of a museum piece, an item of heritage."*<sup>12</sup>

### **Memorials and monuments: Limiting aesthetic forms of sites of remembrance**

So, in relation to imposing an aesthetic form on the filmed accounts of the witnesses, it can be said that these testimonies are not so much revelations, but repressions. But if these testimonies, traces of the past, are eagerly turned into museum pieces and other representations of "fixed" meaning (ie. limited points of access), they must also play a central role in the formation of a proposed cultural / collective memory. Of this category, perhaps the more potent ones are public memorials; monuments to the dead, sites of remembrance through highly aestheticized forms of the monumental. While the ethical questions of to whom (and by whom) these memorials are erected are important, by default, the act of remembrance of one thing leads to the exclusion of others. As Lucy Lippard notes, "Public memorials and visited sites are the battleground in a life-and-death struggle between memory, denial and repression."<sup>13</sup> It seems that we encourage monuments to do the "memory-work", the encoding, for us: the initial impulse to memorialize events like the Holocaust (to visit these sites, to look at films and photographs of the Holocaust) may actually spring from an opposite and equal desire to forget them – to reach a conclusion, a resolution, via an easy access point to the subject through these public artworks, that are traditionally created with a collective experience, rather than an intimate one, in mind. The above mentioned struggle is thus partly due to how the act of commemorating has turned into an industry of travel / tourism: "Holocaust Disneyland".<sup>14</sup> As many people now visit the various Holocaust memorials around the world every year as died in the Holocaust itself. In addition to an interest to experience tangible traces of the event, surely this testifies to a profound insufficiency or an inadequacy – what our collective reading of the "official" history of the Holocaust fails to address – the irrational, and perhaps unreachable but important, whys and the hows in the core of attempts to access, understand and explain the apparently unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust. As Susan Sontag puts it, "to reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited."<sup>15</sup> This general public interest in the Holocaust in my opinion is understandable in the light of the impossibility to find a solution to its ultimate definement; perhaps to make peace is, equally, to forget.

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<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, J. (2000, p. 40)

<sup>13</sup> Lippard, L. (1999, p. 119)

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 128

<sup>15</sup> Sontag, S. (2003, p. 115)

#### IV. Reprocessing of evidence/traces: To witness the witnessing

*"The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (ie., of those who established it) to define what is real. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality. Art is committed to that perception of the world which alienates individuals from their functional existence and performance in society – it is committed to an emancipation of sensibility, imagination, and reason in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity. The aesthetic transformation becomes a vehicle of recognition and indictment."*<sup>1</sup>

The time of the Holocaust's first-hand witnesses, of yet untold accounts of experienced events, is almost at an end; heartfelt concerns about the importance of remembering are voiced to a world seemingly desensitized to (and by) such horrors. These concerns are largely based on the false idea that the survivors, the victims of terror, have an understanding – somehow a privileged point of view, and more importantly to this paper, the better means to convey and explain, when in fact often the opposite is true. The subject of the Holocaust seems to impose a rigorous set of rules on art: it is expected to perform as a history lesson, and at the same time, provide a site for mourning. The idea to tell a story of the Holocaust – the ultimate breakdown of humanity, and to create a work of violent contrasts of good and evil, of wealth and deprivation – often reveals a well-meaning naiveté and a tendency to an oversimplistic didacticism that is all too common among artists intent on making a solemn general statement about the Holocaust. But the need to understand (a common motivation of all Holocaust art) persists. In the 1970s and 1980s a new generation of artists emerged who, with a sensitivity towards the subject, attempted to find points of access to a subject by then reserved only for the worthy: the survivors of the atrocities.

##### **Strategies of the second generation of witnessing**

A significant amount of the second generation so-called Holocaust art is self-referential: it is based on a suspicion of power of medium, be it a film, book or a photograph that is meant to transmit, to exist in place of the witness. This art emphasizes the impossibility of understanding the primary generation's experience through the available means; it seeks to be the witness to witnessing, thus gaining a necessary distance from the event in order to better evaluate the

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<sup>1</sup> Marcuse, H. (1978, p. 9)

workings of, for example, photography on encoded memory/history. It is a project to undo erasure, and forgetting. But works by second generation artists like Claude Lanzmann, and particularly Dariusz Jablonski as discussed below, also aim to reopen past wounds that have not healed by confronting them with a new set of tools of intervention. For example, photographer Mikael Levin has taken photographs that trace the photographs of his father's (that is, rephotographed the photographs he brought home after the war), on route with the American troops in the recently liberated Europe. He writes about his approach to reprocessing his father's experiences and history,

*"If taken in the same spot, my photo is always at least slightly dislocated. So these are not mirror-images. In showing Eric's [his father] photos next to mine, it was not so much a comparison of then and now, but rather a desire to make the point that I knew my experience was totally different from theirs, that what I was seeing was so totally different that I couldn't possibly claim to be having some sort of parallel experience, and that I knew I could not possibly comprehend what they had actually experienced."*<sup>2</sup>

This secondary witnessing is thus not so much an act of restoration (of trying to mend and add to the "original") but of mourning – like a stone marking a visit to a gravesite. To the second generation it is perhaps easier to make art about this postmemory, art that is finally more specific, rather than iconic (what the art based on representation of first generation suffering necessarily has become). This aesthetic transformation reveals the two-dimensionality and flatness of pictorial evidence and testimony, that "continue to signal their remove from both past and present – their effective unreality. Even as they seem to open doors to the past, they bar access to it, signaling both the lure and the frustration of visual remembrance."<sup>3</sup>

Another body of work that is interesting in relation to my own work is that of Shimon Attie, who is of European Jewish heritage (in contrast to Mikael Levin who has a somewhat different approach, not that of a direct identification to a victimized past). In 1994 Attie projected found black and white images – fragments of torn photographs and the like – of Jewish shop fronts, and general 1920s and 1930s street scenes depicting the everyday of the era, on the walls of buildings in Berlin's pre-war Jewish quarter.<sup>4</sup> His work is entitled provocatively "The Writing on

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication in September 2001 between Mikael Levin, and Hirsch, M. and L. Spitzer, reproduced in Glowacka, D. and Boos, S. (2002, p. 139)

<sup>3</sup> Hirsch, M. and L. Spitzer in Glowacka, D. and Boos, S. (2002, p. 149)

<sup>4</sup> *Scheunenviertel*, today *Spandauer Vorstadt*.

the Wall" (Fig. 6 and 7). Where possible, his projections were done on the original buildings in the found photographs, to emphasize what is the most powerful aspect of his work: the depiction of the void – the missing signs of life that previously inhabited the streets – and thus how the past resides in the present. But as Attie himself has said, not all the slides from the Holocaust past that he projected onto buildings in the present were superimposed on their original sites; also, that not all the photographs were from the Jewish quarter, or even Berlin. In other words, he acknowledges the lure and frustration of the historical images as objects that are expected to carry and refer to historical facts. In an introduction to a book on this work he argued that this historical conflation increases the work's effectiveness: where he had to choose between being a good historian and being a good artist, he writes, he "always chose the latter."<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

The fact that Attie's installations only took place a few days at a time on different locations meant that this work now resides in the photographs Attie took of the projections to document "The Writing on the Wall" (the hostility of a part of the Berlin audience towards his work ensured no permanent projections were to remain). In other words, in line with Mikael Levin's work shortly discussed above, Attie's project is now photographs of photographs; another study of the relations between form and content, specific and iconic, of the representation of the Holocaust.

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<sup>5</sup> Attie, S. (1994, p. 11)

### A release by countermemories

Polish director Dariusz Jablonski's 1998 film *Fotoamator*<sup>6</sup> is based on some 400 colour photographs (slides) taken during the war in the Lodz ghetto by chief Nazi accountant of the ghetto Walter Genewein. In contrast to *Shoah*, Jablonski has instead decided to use black and white footage to portray present-day scenes, nicely twisting the notions time and authenticity in his film (Fig. 8). Also, to further emphasize this disruption of convention, the soundtrack of the film is very quiet during the black and white filmed sequences – lively and dramatic when the camera examines the still colour slides, through extreme close-ups and trackings. Inserted throughout the film is also an interview (black and white) with Arnold Mostowicz who was the former doctor of the ghetto. Again, in contrast to *Shoah*, in Jablonski's film the interviewer is never heard or seen; this clearly lends more potency to the visuals.



Fig. 8

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<sup>6</sup> *Photographer* is the title of the English release, although a direct translation of the original title is closer to "photo amateur", in reference to the Nazi hobby photographer who took the pictures used in the film.



Genewein's colourful snappings depict the everyday life (pointedly excluding suffering and death) of the ghetto (Fig. 9) in the center of (modern day) Poland. A voice narrates Genewein's official correspondence (for example, he complains to the Agfa factory about reddish-brown colour casts on some of his developed films) over scenes of outdoor areas – buildings, infrastructures, market scenes, streets crowded with pedestrians – various workshops, garment factories, munitions factories, and even of exhibit rooms showcasing the goods manufactured in the ghetto. Thus, they are also very clearly a document of the photographer's status within that system – although Genewein's position surely afforded him the incontestable right to enter and photograph any area of the Lodz ghetto – everything, and everyone, in the ghetto was not only governed, but owned by his employer, the Nazi state – his choices and framings, in view of what he excludes, conform to the Nazi initiative to leave no traces of the subsequent destruction, and also, his exclusions anticipate the forthcoming reckoning, and thus, exhibit a premonition of guilt and trials on acts against humanity.



Fig. 9

One of the main things that make this set of pictures interesting is their public double life; before Jablonski made his film of them, they were published in an exhibition catalogue<sup>7</sup> of an exhibition that was a cooperation of German research institutes, along with an essay that declares, "This collection of slides offers us an account of the ruination of the culture of European Jewry. At the same time, however, it is a document of the mental and existential attitude of those who administered the mass murder of European Jews from a cool distance."<sup>8</sup> So, according to this description, the slides record nothing but the Jewish population's "ruination" in front of the camera (governed by the Nazi gaze), but still manage to depict an overall, and whole, attitude of the perpetrators (one of whom is behind the camera). This simplification of interpretation is characteristic of the common reading of Holocaust imagery (indeed, the iconography of the Holocaust) be they taken by the Nazis or by the victorious Allied troops and photographers; it is an interpretation that fails to acknowledge the Jews (or other victims) who are not, at the moment the shutter is released, completely governed by this gaze. The reality present in these pictures is first and foremost a construct of the corresponding authority: the victims in this interpretation are robbed of any interior life and self-directed means of expression (and by extension, of representation), all the while the party behind the camera is endowed with motives, feelings, and most importantly a rationale for his/her actions.

Coming back to the Jablonski film, instead of presenting a click-through slide show of Genewein's images, he primarily uses technical effects (fades, colour-drains, sharp cuts) to undermine the viewer's faith in the medium, in its reality effect. His is a project of breaking the above mentioned incontestable control and domination of the author. By way of making the figures "entrapped" in still slides somehow temporarily "come back to life" by the means of the medium of film, he creates an illusion that the Jews captured by Genewein's gaze have been (for at least a moment) released. This release allows the viewer to examine the "discrepancies and congruencies between historical events, individual and archival memory thereof, and photographic images."<sup>9</sup> The fact that the original footage is in colour, instead of the commonly encountered grainy black and white shots of the era, also plays a part in bringing the depicted scenes and people closer to a contemporary image world; away from entombment in the archives and in canonized history. Moreover, it is significant that this self-referentiality (a critique and an examination of the workings of the medium) does not translate to a reduction of the subject's representation; these counter-memories (questioning the memorialized, the

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<sup>7</sup> *Unser einziger Weg ist Arbeit: Das Ghetto in Lodz, 1942-1944* edited by Hanno Loewy and Gerhard Schoenberger (1990)

<sup>8</sup> Baer, U. (2002, p. 136)

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 151



historicized) actually serve to invest that representation with more meaning by trying to strip away some of the discussed layers of convention that, although often unseen and allusive, block access. By using Genewein's photographs that blatantly refer to a known future (the destruction of the people depicted), *Fotoamator* deconstructs this reference, to a past from our point of view, as something less certain – and thus forces viewers to reflect on our role as secondary witnesses to the emergence of this particular unhealed and unresolved past.

What is similar, apart from the obvious thematic connection, in the works of Levin, Attie and Jablonski is their interest in postmemory; the distrust of testimonies of witnesses, and material remains – traces – in the form of pictures and objects. Instead, they are confident and distant enough (in difference to the generation of firsthand experience) to fully question and investigate the formation of the (previously) used aesthetic forms; the results of transforming a given content to a self-contained whole, where, paraphrasing Herbert Marcuse, the content taken out of its reality, assumes a reality of its own. It is this aesthetic reality that in the works of the artists mentioned above (as well as many other, obviously) enables them to reach beyond the locked meanings of "official" histories, and other constructs of the like. Marcuse observes that,

*"Aesthetic form, autonomy, and truth are interrelated. Each is a socio-historical phenomenon, and each transcends the socio-historical arena. While the latter limits the autonomy of art it does so without invalidating the transhistorical truths expressed in the work."*<sup>10</sup>

While Marcuse's idea of truth might be a little vague, his observation that the aesthetic form transcends the realm of histories is poignantly depicted in Jeff Wall's 1992 photograph *Dead Troops Talk* (*A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986*) (Fig. 10). It is seemingly an anti-war picture that plays with the conventions of war imagery to create an elaborate and somewhat grotesque fictive image in which a group of soldiers who have just been killed on the battlefield are re-animated, and engaging with each other, in relaxed and fraternal dialogue. Shot in a studio with the help of make-up professionals and set makers, every character in the picture is turned toward another, none face the viewer. The implication is clear; it is us (the witnesses) who are made distant and outside – we who have never experienced "anything like what they went through – don't understand. We don't

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<sup>10</sup> Marcuse, H. (1978, p. 9)

get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like."<sup>11</sup> Similar to a lot of Holocaust art, Wall's photograph is a work of art that is necessarily concerned with the balance of the dangerous and luring binary pairs of "ethical judgement in relation to aesthetic appreciation, the status of the particular (or historical) event in relation to its universal or abstract implication."<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 10

What in my opinion makes Wall's photograph powerful is the idea that instead of directing us to struggle to memorialize them as the heroic deceased, the victims (to concentrate on their absence from our present), these troops declare that they are back to who they once were – the individual characters rather than the faceless dead. Through their air of indifference toward us, they have been released from that common representation.

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<sup>11</sup> Sontag, S. (2003, p. 125)

<sup>12</sup> Lang, B. in Glowacka, D. and Boos, S. (2002, p. 27)

## V. Conclusion: Against the universality of representation

*"[...] the emphatic, identificatory perspective favoured by some critics remains tied to the seductive myth of a viewer's self-aware, unified, and all-encompassing nonalienated gaze. The notion of such a gaze is itself part of the legacy of the Nazi worldview."<sup>1</sup>*

It is a common claim that the reason for the difficulties in depicting the Holocaust in art is because the event itself is so unimaginable (unsayable, invisible, intangible and so on) that it is impossible to access. As I have argued, the opposite is more plausible; precisely because so little exists, in terms of evidence (testimony, photographs, film – traces) we feel confident to invest our trust in, we are forced to primarily use our imagination to grasp what we think actually happened. Thus unimaginable horrors actually mean horrors which reside in our imagination, in contrast to imaginable horrors that we have knowledge of, and can summon a mental perception of. And this leads to the described crisis of words, images and remembering – the mediated realities that all Holocaust art is in (at least some) relation to – chiefly because it is these traditionally powerful forms of remembrance, of words, images and memories, that we cannot begin to (quite justifiably) trust.

In looking at the traces that remain of the Holocaust, it is not possible to find things that would evoke the mentioned "self-aware, unified, and all-encompassing nonalienated gaze" in the viewer – a comforting familiarity, universal truth, nor a simple explanation that would enable one to somehow position oneself firmly in relation to the Holocaust. It is in this sense, that the "traditional forms of remembrance that seek to disclose the events in all their horrible detail, may seem to contradict representations that are sensitive to the danger of revictimizing the victims."<sup>2</sup> This clearly implies the continuation of the Nazi project that meant to leave no trace, and the anonymity of the victim that it requires.

Although genocides have been carried out before and after the Holocaust, the novelty of filmic evidence after the war elevated the German genocide of Jews and others to an iconic idiom to represent all genocidal events. But as I have argued, the Holocaust is closely linked with the idea of Jewish suffering, and thus, the Jews as a people are also within what might be called an

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<sup>1</sup> Baer, U. (2002, p. 177)

<sup>2</sup> Liss, A. in Glowacka, D. and Boos, S. (2002, p. 31)

"abject".<sup>3</sup> As much as Auschwitz is also a metonym for the Holocaust, as well as more loosely words like "camp", "deportation", "gas", "survivor", and sometimes even "Germany", "1940s", "fascism" and so on. While it is understandable that a connotation toward the Holocaust resides in these words, it is also very typical of how the need to finally fix the Holocaust into history – to come to a resolution of its meanings – creates more and more general and universal definitions around it. For an artist, the positioning of oneself in a relation to this dauntingly monstrous concept of the Holocaust is perhaps not an easy one, as Inga Clendinnen writes,

*"Normally we expect the magic of art to intensify, transfigure and elevate actuality. Touch the Holocaust and the flow is reversed. That matter is so potent in itself that when art seeks to command it, it is art which is rendered vacuous and drained of authority."*<sup>4</sup>

So much has already been said and transmitted through every imaginable medium that by necessity, I would argue, the only morally feasible way to participate in the field of Holocaust art is by working to undo the above mentioned fixed meanings that have resulted in such a tragic universality. To reverse a famous Jewish saying, to commemorate one victim of the Nazi crimes is to commemorate the millions.

As I have argued, the most important task of an artist who produces art that touches the Holocaust is to stand up to the above mentioned control over the representation of the victims by reevaluating the meanings of those indexical traces that were preserved for posterity by previous generations. As part of this ongoing research, in my own work I have tried to interrogate the processes of remembering through photographs and films, the tradition of decodable pictures and the conventions this tradition implies, by ways of role-play, and reflecting on the search for an entry point: what are the actual material remains of an event like the Holocaust, and how are they evaluated? Whose testimonies (memories, material evidence) are seen as valid and/or significant, and why? Why is there an insistence of positioning oneself in relation to the event? By this I do not mean to sanctify the artist as a morally or ethically higher (than the previous generations, for example) individual whose task is to give answers, but an autonomous player within our culture to ask the right (relevant)

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<sup>3</sup> An ambiguous term referring to the uncontrollably repulsive, an act of expulsion that can point towards the disintegration of identity in death. The "abject" is also related to religious purity and impurity. Kristeva, J. (1982)

<sup>4</sup> Clendinnen, I. (1998, p. 185)

questions by subjecting art to the same kind of scrutiny Holocaust art itself has imposed on the photographs, films and the rest of the discussed remains.

This possibility that the content may exceed and command any possible given aesthetic form is indeed controversial in a culture where arguably art's main function, by contemporary standards, is to comment and interrogate reality. This reversal of the roles, as observed by Clendinnen, dismantles the general structures that work internally within constructs of representation; when the link between seeing and comprehension has been radically disrupted in the first instance (that of the surviving victims of the Holocaust), it is not possible to repair that link by mechanizations of the second degree – namely the second generation Holocaust art. It is that this art must inevitably direct its deconstructing gaze back onto itself.

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