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## **Necessary Monsters Monstrous Narratives Haunted Images of Our Time**

**Abstract:** Considering posthumanism in its impossibility to tell its own story and in its quest for a language that would make it possible, our paper investigates the possibility of bearing witness to the unrepresentable. We will revisit the polemic around the images of the Shoah as we will delve into how one can deal with the language that bears witness to the events of a past that is out of reach. We will reconsider the dispute between Georges Didi-Huberman and Claude Lanzmann around the four photographs rescued from Auschwitz as we analyze László Nemes' film *Son of Saul* – which Didi-Huberman calls a *necessary monster* – and other documentary films exploring the possibility of speaking about the catastrophe.

**Keywords:** Shoah; Apophysis; Testimony; Unrepresentable; Haunted Memory.

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**“La voix blanche”**

“Free of memory and of hope,  
limitless, abstract, almost future,  
the dead man is not a dead man:  
he is death.

Like the God of the mystics,  
of Whom anything that could be said  
must be denied,  
the dead one, alien everywhere,  
is but the ruin and absence  
of the world.”

(Jorge Luis Borges, *Remorse for Any Death*)

**H**ow does the narrative of the catastrophe integrate the unrepresentable? Can we speak of the catastrophe? And in our speech can we name it, or rather, do we have to refrain ourselves from trying to find the means to express and contain it in a narrative? Throughout the history of art and philosophy, the question of the unrepresentable was linked to the (re)presentation of the invisible, and hence of divinity. The history of art is also a close indicator to how certain regimes of the present surpass certain historical tunings to the



various registers of (re)presentation. When connected to the representation of the invisible, the unrepresentable spoke thus of a reality that is beyond that which is apparent, or perceptible. But more recently, the preoccupation for the unrepresentable has broadened its scope as it moved past that which is not accessible to the senses to that which is not accessible to a narrative. This broadened sense confronts both modern art, and the history of evil with a discourse and a narrative that constantly negotiates the aesthetic and ethical limits that border on the abjection. The heated debates triggered around the problem of representation in connection to the events of the catastrophe coagulate around one key question: should we and could we ban any attempt of representation of certain realities and events? According to Jacques Rancière, the interdiction of representation could reintroduce a theological approach there where we should consider things from a political and historical point of view. On the other hand, when they position in a political and historical discourse, representations should remain aware of their own means and constantly reconsider these means so that they don't eventually deny the real they attempt to represent.<sup>1</sup>

To Georges Didi-Huberman, posing the problem of the unrepresentable simplifies things as it allows for a more philosophically prone, therefore a more general approach. Invoking the unrepresentable means in fact thinking in terms of the representation and, as the art historian observes, representation is at the same time a faculty and an object, which implies inherently a certain degree of generality. Instead, Didi-Huberman suggests that such discussions should always take place

*en situation*, and therefore, he thinks the discussion should not revolve around the idea of representation, but around the idea of image (which is an object, not a faculty) and of imagination (which is a faculty, not an object). Operating such a necessary distinction will also place the philosophical approach *en situation*, in a specific context.<sup>2</sup> It is not by chance that he, as an art historian, has been concerned with studying images which are not artistic and do not belong to the field of art. The four images rescued from Auschwitz which he analyses in his book *Images in Spite of All*<sup>3</sup> are a unique, exceptional series that call into question whether it is ethical to refuse the images of the catastrophe, on account of the fact that they cannot deliver the entire horror, or to retouch them and manipulate images of the archive with the purpose of emphasizing the horror, of guiding the eye of the viewer to read these images in a certain way. We will return to these photographs and to the polemics stirred around them and around the possibility of bearing witness. It is enough for now to keep in mind that “the image is *not all* [*pas toute*], the image in *not the same* everywhere”<sup>4</sup> and while seeing does not equal knowing, our task is to find the *points of contact*, rather than concentrate on the points of antagonism: “Beyond the question of *seeing* and *knowing* is the parallel question of *image* and *truth*. My analysis of the four photographs of Auschwitz, indeed assumed a certain relationship – a lacunary relationship, ‘in rags,’ as precious as it is fragile, as clear as it is difficult to analyze – of the image to truth. I looked at these images as *image facts*.”<sup>5</sup> What are these *images* the *facts* of? Firstly they are a testimonial attempt to visually represent the experience and



the infernal world to which these members of the *Sonderkommando* were condemned, and at the same time they are a political gesture, an act meant to defy the terror of the camps by secretly taking these photos speaking of the extermination taking place in these camps and making them available to the world outside these sites of death with the help of the Polish resistance.<sup>6</sup>

Since all testimony dwells, according to Jacques Derrida,<sup>7</sup> on an *impossible limit*, bearing witness to the monstrous and the catastrophe is thus haunted (and at the same time triggered by) two apparently opposed, yet interrelated, unstable functions. As it is continuously undone by the impossibility to tell its story, to find a language that can speak of the catastrophe in a comprehensive way, the testimony is also a constant search for this possibility of a language that could confess to that which is impossible to grasp entirely. So what does it mean then to talk about the events of the Shoah according to the voiceless voice? As Didi-Huberman sets the tone in the opening of *Images in Spite of All*, it is not a matter of choice, it is a matter of responsibility, “in order to know, we must imagine for ourselves.”<sup>8</sup> But can one image help us better know our history? Can one image help us imagine the unimaginable? And in trying to find a language for the catastrophe, don't we run the risk of manipulating and replacing the gaze on history and on the real?

The opening scene of Alain Resnais' movie, *Hiroshima mon amour*, based on a script written by Marguerite Duras, plays on the impossibility of language to speak of the catastrophe, but also on the impossibility of memory and of imagination to contain the catastrophe: “J'ai vu la

patience, l'innocence, la douceur apparente avec lesquelles les survivants provisoires de Hiroshima s'accommodaient d'un sort tellement injuste que l'imagination d'habitude pourtant si féconde, devant eux, se ferme. Écoute... Je sais... Je sais tout. Ça a continué.”<sup>9</sup> And all these attempts to put into words the catastrophe are intercut by their negation, by the same recurring phrase which is also a way of playing on this impossible limit of the testimony: “Tu n'as rien vu à Hiroshima, rien.” A way of witnessing by that which is missing, which cannot be in the language, like witnessing about death in the Nazi camps by the way of the negative, an apophasis by which the (hi)story *divides within itself*, saying one thing and its contrary, witnessing to the death and denying the very act of witnessing by the impossibility to recall the real of the death in the extermination camps in a comprehensive language. That which is without being able to be imagined and that which is beyond any imagination. And yet, the last thing we should do, according to Didi-Huberman, should be to invoke the unimaginable, which is in fact a way of protecting ourselves by invoking our impossibility to imagine by any means and to the very end. We must imagine, says Didi-Huberman, “we *are obliged* to that oppressive imaginable. It is a response that we must offer, as a debt to the words and images that certain prisoners snatched, for us, from the harrowing Real of their experience.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore we must provide an expected response to these images of the past, to the real they speak of, otherwise the gesture, and the risks that the authors of these images took for these glimpses of reality to reach us would have been useless. In order to talk we need more than one voice, we



need several voices, explains Derrida in his essay, *On the Name*,<sup>11</sup> based on a series of talks on the topic of negative theology and published in a book in the form of a fictive dialogue. These images too, in order to tell something about the horror they were snatched from require a dialogue, require us to be willing to look at them and (by that gesture) to allow them to speak: “So let us not invoke the unimaginable. How much harder was it for the prisoners to rip from the camps those few shreds of which now we are trustees, charged with sustaining them by simply looking at them. Those shreds are at the same time more precious and less comforting than all possible works of art, snatched as they were from a world bent on their impossibility.”<sup>12</sup> All the more as these are the testimonies that the SS wanted to prevent at any cost, the testimony of the special squads who were first hand witnesses as they operated the extermination process with their bare hands, the testimonies that would refute any subsequent denials as to the extermination process enacted by the Final decision. So where should one draw the line? Which are the acceptable forms of testimony and which are not? And what renders them unacceptable? Claude Lanzmann, the director of the documentary film *Shoah* (1985), reacted very aggressively to Steven Spielberg’s fictional film *Schindler’s List* (1993) claiming an indisputable ethical imperative, which should ban any cinematographic representation of the Holocaust as trivializing and therefore abject: “Je suis incapable d’une certaine manière de fonder mon dire. On comprend ou on ne comprend pas. C’est un peu comme le cogito cartésien: à la fin, on bute, c’est le nœud final, et on ne peut pas aller au-delà.

L’Holocauste est d’abord unique en ceci qu’il édifie autour de lui, en un cercle de flamme, la limite à ne pas franchir parce qu’un certain absolu d’horreur est intransmissible: prétendre le faire, c’est se rendre coupable de la transgression la plus grave. La fiction est une transgression, je pense profondément qu’il y a un interdit de la représentation. En voyant *La Liste de Schindler*, j’ai retrouvé ce que j’avais éprouvé en voyant le feuilleton *Holocauste*. Transgresser ou trivialisier, ici c’est pareil: le feuilleton ou le film hollywoodien transgressent parce qu’ils ‘trivialisent,’ abolissant ainsi le caractère unique de l’Holocauste. [...] Et si j’avais trouvé un film existant – un film secret parce que c’était strictement interdit – tourné par un SS et montrant comment trois mille juifs, hommes, femmes, enfants, mouraient ensemble, asphyxiés dans une chambre à gaz du crématoire 2 d’Auschwitz, si j’avais trouvé cela, non seulement je ne l’aurais pas montré, mais je l’aurais détruit. Je ne suis pas capable de dire pourquoi. Ça va de soi.”<sup>13</sup> And we will come back later on to the debate triggered around the interdiction of representation. For now, we will just hint at the inherent limits of any testimony, and how the same dangers Lanzmann points out when claiming the necessary interdiction of any representation of fiction are in fact inherent in the very structure of the testimony itself. As the testimony is produced, it always remains on an *undecidable limit*, what Derrida explains in terms of “a chance and a threat, a resource both of testimony and of literary fiction, law and non-law, truth and non-truth, veracity and lie, faithfulness and perjury.”<sup>14</sup> As, he further explains, if by law a testimonial cannot be reduced to a fictional status, yet no testimony does not



“structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury – that is to say, the possibility of literature, of the innocent or perverse literature that innocently plays at perverting all these distinctions. If this possibility that it seems to prohibit were effectively excluded, if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the *possibility*, at least, of literature.”<sup>15</sup> To Derrida, testimony is also *passion*, because it is submitted to a permanent position of having to “*suffer* both having, undecidably, a connection to fiction, perjury, or lie and never being able or obligated – without ceasing to testify – to become a proof.”<sup>16</sup>

**“Nous sommes faits de la substance même du passé”**

During the campaign of terror carried by the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, a former school became the place where seventeen thousand alleged enemies of the Party were tortured and executed. The code name used for this site was S21. Out of the seventeen thousand prisoners only three survived. Cambodian-French filmmaker Rithy Panh, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge camps, set out to document the genocide by interviewing the remaining survivors. His documentary film *S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine* (2003) follows two survivors who return to S21, where they had been imprisoned, and confront their former guards who are still unable to admit guilt or show remorse,

as they maintain they were only acting according to bureaucratic orders and indications they were given. In one of the scenes we are shown around the former school (where the classrooms had been emptied and turned into sites for torture) by a former guardian who explains and acts out in front of the camera his daily routine with the prisoners. It is a most chilling performance as we see this guardian so at ease and still so connected to his former routine. He enters and then leaves the room, carrying spectral prisoners to and from their interrogatory and torture, he gives indications, kicks them if they dare to move, beats them if they ask for water, and he reenacts his daily activities with so much detail and zeal that no images could manage to better grasp or convey the atrocity of the scene. What makes this scene so important is not the graphic reconstruction of the scenario and details that provide such a precise depiction of how a systematic imprisonment and torture of the prisoners was carried out, but the director’s choice to film this guardian’s “performance” of almost five minutes that all of a sudden fills a place that presents itself void to our eyes, with countless specters of the past. The camera films everything from the outside, never leaving the corridor. As the guardian displays a busy to-and-fro in and out of the room, imparting blows, menaces and carrying out various imaginary tasks, the camera never follows him inside the room where the imprisoned used to be kept. It is an ethical choice, the only one acceptable, to see things by taking position, but not the position of the torturer, an idea to which we will return. Such a position requires a certain neutrality in the sense in which, according to Derrida, Blanchot defines the



neuter and the neutrality of the “narrative voice,” as a “voice without person, without the narrative voice from which the ‘I’ posits and identifies itself.”<sup>17</sup> Had he followed the guardian moving around, the filmmaker would have identified with the “I” who was narrating the scenes, with the point of view of the abuser and not of the victim. It is a matter of choice to partake to a certain language, to a certain discourse. To Blanchot, language completely changes the situation as, he explains, whereas language describes a limit, the limit ceases to be limit, and whereas language describes or announces the unimaginable, that which cannot be uttered, the limit, the impossibility shifts, it is brought within language and thus ceases to be a limit. So whereas language describes the impossibility to imagine the unimaginable, this impossibility ceases to be a limit. In these terms the discussion on the unrepresentable should no longer separate (and employ a functional distinction between) images and language as an equally acceptable form of testimony. The discussion should rather shift as to what are the acceptable, i.e. ethical, and what are the unacceptable forms of recalling the catastrophe and the haunting specters of the past.

In the trailer to his 2014 documentary film, *The Missing Picture*, Rithy Panh presents both a meditation and an insight into the quest and narrative mechanisms that guided his movie: “There are so many images in the world that you think you have seen everything, thought everything. For many years I have been looking for a missing picture, a photograph taken between 1975 and 1979 by the Khmer Rouge when they ruled over Cambodia.” On its own, of course, a picture cannot testify to a mass

murder, but it can prompt a meditation, it can offer a lead into thinking the monstrosity of facts. It is a means of recording history. He admits to having searched in vain for it in archives, old documents, forsaken and remote places in his country only to come to the understanding that it is essential that the very image he has been missing must actually remain missing. What he was looking for, he understands now in hindsight, was not that image, but the narrative, the history that made that image possible. Would this one image not be obscene and insignificant, he wonders while he admits that instead of trying to retrieve it, he created it: “What I give you today is neither the picture, nor the search for a unique picture, but the picture of a quest, a quest that cinema allows.” So he produces an animated historical documentary recreating atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. To the purists of the idea of the unrepresentable, Rithy Panh’s undertaking to recreate the persecution of Pahn’s family in an animated account using handmade clay figurines and propaganda footage should be utterly unacceptable. Yet, as Jacques Rancière explains, there is no such thing as the unrepresentable which pertains inherently to an event; we can only speak in terms of choice of an aesthetic regime, or of a certain regime of representation. Rithy Panh’s stylized memoir stemming from his childhood, when the Khmer Rouge came to power, is an exploration of a traumatic past whose horrors remain largely undocumented.

Jacques Derrida theorizes the relation between fiction and autobiographical truth (a relation we would like to extend to the context of the connection between narrative and testimony) by associating





literature and death.<sup>18</sup> According to Derrida, speaking and writing about death *work on life*, and since they pertain to that which we would call autobiography, since they come from a subjective narrative on the dead and death which remains nevertheless in abeyance, exterior to us, it takes place between these two instances that the philosopher retrieves from Goethe, namely *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. To Derrida, *truth* (*Wahrheit*) becomes synonym to testimony, as *Dichtung* remains huddled like an *amas de serpents*<sup>19</sup> in the troubled and ever shifting “grammar of so many sentences,” a narrative that is neither fiction nor poetry, “a distinction between fiction and autobiography that not only remains undecidable but, far more serious, in whose undecidability [...] it is impossible to *stand*, to maintain oneself in a stable or stationary way. One thus finds oneself in a fatal and double impossibility: the impossibility of deciding, but the impossibility of *remaining* [demeurer] in the undecidable.”<sup>20</sup> As the philosopher emphasizes, in testimony it will always be a question “of the biographical or autobiographical truthfulness of a witness who speaks of himself and claims to be recounting not only his life but his death [...] at the limits of literature.”<sup>21</sup> And to that we might add, a witness who speaks of the other and of the death in the extermination camps while talking about the only thing that he knows, his own life on the threshold of death, a way of appropriating a foreign, unaccountable death by transposing it into one’s own death in abeyance. As any testimony is always bent on its own impossibility, how can we operate with binary oppositions or simple, distinct categories of thought anymore? When we use such terms as unimaginable,

unrepresentable, unspeakable, we are faced with false problems, explains Georges Didi-Huberman, because these terms never define what we actually understand by image, representation or figure. Why is it a false problem? Because, he explains, if we consider that representation is the renewed entire presentation of the thing itself, then we can only speak of unrepresentable. On the other hand, if we consider the traditional meaning of the word figure (which means to find by detour), then we can only speak of the figurable. We therefore must make the distinction between the critique of representation and the problem of the unrepresentable. The critique of representation does not mean a lobby for the problem of the unrepresentable.<sup>22</sup>

### “Regardons dans l’image là où ça fait mal”

The debate on the representation of the catastrophe tends to concentrate more on the question of images than on the problem of language. Yet, testimony is possible, as we have already seen, on the *undecidable* limit between fiction and truth. There is a montage at work in every discourse, a choice of framing the real and conveying a certain narrative and coherence to the real. German filmmaker Harun Farocki, who is not only a filmmaker, but also a theorist, a philosopher, a thinker of the image, resorts to language in an almost suffocating manner in order to push the limits but also the limitations of language. In his films *Wie man sieht* (1986) and *Bilder der Welt und Einschrift des Krieges* (1989), the language he uses is employed in tune with the coherence and functionality of images: “The structure is created by words and not



by images. In narrative films, the narration creates a structure, we know how to read a film, the matrix of narration pre-exists. With documentaries, it is the logic of the discourse that dominates in the majority of cases, and this is not sufficient, because commentary is a major problem. How can we avoid the reign of words? In certain cases [...] I used a lot of language, but a language where the texts function a little like images. With regards to words, I am trying to make use of the same cinematic methods of repetition employed for images. Perhaps this is a solution for the continued existence of commentary.<sup>23</sup> To Farocki, an image is primarily a means of and a medium for meditation. The way he conceives and assembles the cinematic image is – in a line of thought opened by Godard – always on the edge, opening up to a constellation of possible associations and assemblages. The type of montage he employs is always at risk, as it never seeks for a resolution, it does not solve the (hi)story, the interpretation and the decoupage of the real into a visual and narrative harmony, but insists on the fragmentary nature of the real, emphasizing the false coherence that we create by leaving out the fractures and that which does not coagulate, which does not integrate in a homogenous whole. His overlapping images and words perform a temporal pluristratification of images through the sedimentation of time, memory and history. Analysing Godard's method of montage and the novelty of thought it stems from, Gilles Deleuze observes that what sets it apart is that it shifts the concern for the association or attraction between images to the interest for what happens between images, what happens in this *interstice*, in the spacing between two images, “a spacing

which means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it”.<sup>24</sup> A method which is not an end in itself, as it asks cinema to rethink itself constantly, “making it a method which cinema must ponder at the same time as it uses it.”<sup>25</sup> This marks an essential aspect in how we should approach the narratives of the past, since there will always be an insurmountable lag between different temporalities, the scission between different times and the lag in their connection which makes it impossible to bring them together in a totalizing synthesis. These temporalities coexist in stratification, they cannot overlap, so, as Godard knew it, we can only speak about the real in a language that interrogates this interstice, in a language that is atonal as it no longer aims to resolve harmonically the real in a comprehensive narrative: “For, in Godard's method, it is not a question of association. Given one image, another image has to be chosen which will induce an interstice *between* the two. This is not an operation of association, but of differentiation, as mathematicians say, or of disappearance, as physicists say: given one potential, another one has to be chosen, not any whatever, but in such a way that a difference of potential is established between the two, which will be productive of a third or of something new.”<sup>26</sup> The interstice Godard is interested in is yet another undecidable limit, where the possibility and impossibility of language and of images dialectically does and undoes any testimony. Any image is an unresolved dialectics which speaks only through differentiation just as any testimony is always a gesture of subjectivization, a gaze that only coagulates retroactively. Thus any narrative, (hi)story, testimony is possible in this non-totalizing dialectics which





will never result in a renewed entire presentation of the thing itself. History is (and is only possible in) such an interstice, a spacing that makes any testimony possible not through association, but through differentiation and disappearance. When we understand that, we also understand that we cannot talk in general terms about *the image*, that we can only talk about images, which are not stable, fixed items which deliver an immovable (hi)story. Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, a dynamic montage on panels of clusters of images (photographic reproductions of works of art, postcards, photographs, and other printed materials), explores the possibility of historical knowledge not only through association (or, closer to Warburg's idea, through attraction) of images, but most importantly, through dissociation, as the panels he conceived were meant to undergo constant reconfiguration, exploring not only the images, but most importantly, the spacing created between them, which would actually render images visible in sudden glimpses or flashes, in what Walter Benjamin refers to as *dialectics at a standstill*: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language."<sup>27</sup>

To Aby Warburg, historical lisibility and knowability is possible only if we don't

back up when faced with the effort of reconstituting the natural connection, the coalescence between word and image, explains Didi-Huberman. This means that historical knowledge does not involve going towards the past in order to better seize it and describe it as it was. According to Benjamin, historical knowledge is only possible from the point of present, from the now amid the archive of texts, images or testimonies of the past which ushers "a moment of memory and of lisibility which emerges [...] as a *critical point*, a symptom, a disruption within the tradition which, up until then, had presented the past with its more or less recognizable picture."<sup>28</sup> Of his movie *Shoah*, Lanzmann said that all he did was to represent Shoah in nine hours and a half of cinema and in the only possible way, inventing a new form which was adequate to that. As he saw it, his film had to take up the ultimate challenge, to take the place of the non-existent images of death in the gas chambers. The discussions on whether it is ethical or not to show the images that are connected to the Shoah reject from the outset any fictional or aesthetic approach. Claude Lanzmann refused to use any archive images in his documentary film, *Shoah*, as he considered that nothing else than the interviewed witnesses could (and should) speak about the death in the gas chambers. The debates on the representations of the Shoah reached their climax with the publication of a catalogue which included a text by Georges Didi-Huberman on the four photographs rescued from Auschwitz that were part of the exhibition.<sup>29</sup> Subsequently the text was reprised in his book, *Images in Spite of All*, in which he also includes a response to the polemic in the press around these four



images taken clandestinely by members of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz-Birkenau in August 1944 outside Crematorium V. These images are hurried and blurred; the first two might have been taken from the gas chamber, as there is a shadow of a doorway framing the sight of a heap of dead bodies scattered on the ground awaiting incineration, while smoke rises from the incineration trenches and members of the Sonderkommando handle the bodies. The third photo, which is even more blurred and hurried and has no orthogonality shows a group of naked women against the background of trees, while the fourth photo, taken at a similar angle, is almost abstract, a quasi unintelligible photo of trees. When these images were published at the time, they were retouched, reframed and cropped so that they would communicate more than they actually did, but in fact they ended up by communicating less than what they were actually supposed to. What Didi-Huberman insists on is how we can fail to pay attention to these images and to what they actually show. On the one hand, we misread them by requiring them to show us everything, by wanting to see everything in them, to make them *icons of horror*. To that avail the original photos had to be made more presentable, and therefore they were transformed without hesitation, “the lower right-hand corner was enlarged and then made orthogonal, in such a way as to restore the normal conditions of a photo shot that did not in fact benefit from those conditions; then it was reframed, cropped (the rest of the image discarded). Worse, the bodies and the faces of the two women in the foreground were touched up; a face was created, and the breasts were even lifted”<sup>30</sup>

which “reveals an urgent desire *to give a face* to what in the image itself is no more than movement, blur, and event.”<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, we misread an image by reducing it to the status of a simple *document of horror*. So, by recropping the four photographs, the intention was to isolate “what there is to see, by purifying the imaging substance of its nondocumentary weight.”<sup>32</sup> Yet, the manipulation of these four photographs is not only formal as Didi-Huberman emphasizes, it eliminates documentary information which makes it also a historic manipulation and an ethical manipulation. The black frame that was eliminated as the photo was cropped, “the *mass of black* [...] where nothing is *visible* gives in reality a *visual mark* that is just as valuable as all the rest of the exposed surface. That mass where nothing is visible is the space of the gas chamber. [...] That mass of black gives us the situation itself, the space of possibility, the conditions of existence of the photographs themselves. [...] The cropping of these pictures was no doubt believed to preserve the *document* (the visible result, the distinct information). But instead, their phenomenology was removed, everything that made them an event (a process, a job, physical contact).”<sup>33</sup> Processing such a photograph would eliminate the danger faced by the photographer, as we can no longer read the urgency that renders these images *out of breath*, turns them into “pure utterance, pure gesture, pure photographic act without aim (therefore without orientation, with no top or bottom).”<sup>34</sup> Each image in itself is a montage of sequences, of gestures, of states that we must read, or imagine as “an image without imagination is quite simply an image that one didn’t spend the time to work on.”<sup>35</sup> And more



importantly, these four images should be read and considered together, in a sequence, as they are a series of photographs connected by a montage that “gives us access to the condition of urgency in which four shreds were snatched from the hell of Auschwitz. Indeed, this urgency too is part of history.”<sup>36</sup> Lanzmann rejects Didi-Huberman’s thesis that these four photographs were taken from the gas chambers, accusing such an idea of creating confusion and distorting the truth in people’s minds so much as they could be lead to imagine that there are photographs of death in the gas chambers, while Lanzmann was denying any possibility of such images at all. The position and interpretation of Didi-Huberman was attacked by Gerard Wajcman and Elisabeth Pagnoux in the pages of *Les temps modernes*, a debate that unfolded throughout March-May 2001, in response to which Didi-Huberman published *Images malgré tout*. To the accusations that archive images offer a limited and partially legible depiction of the extermination process and that therefore they could reduce the scope and the scale of the horror, Didi-Huberman responds that such a view sets such a high bar that any admissible evidence becomes impossible: “The four photographs from August 1994, of course, don’t tell ‘all of the truth’ (it would be very naïve to expect this from anything at all – things, words, or images): they are tiny extractions from such a complex reality, brief instants in a continuum that lasted five years, no less. But they are for us – for our eyes today – truth itself, meaning its vestige, its meager shreds.”<sup>37</sup> Following *Shoah* (1985), Claude Lanzmann became an authority figure on the issue of the limits of representation of the Holocaust. He

rejected any use of archival images and favored eyewitness testimony only and footage filmed as he was revisiting the places of the crimes throughout the 1970s-1980s while he was filming. Lanzmann’s formal choice in filming *Shoah* became a dogmatic choice for the group that coagulated around these ideas of rejecting archive images. Pagnoux accuses the preoccupation for such images as fetishistic, while Wajcman asks *the all image* and he rejects any image which is anything less, that is not an integral representation of the Shoah, refusing thus to consider any actual images of the Final solution, since there is no single image that can speak of the entire process of extermination. Didi-Huberman insists on the ethical and historical responsibility we have for these images that suddenly appeared on the verge of their own impossibility. “They are infinitely precious to us today. They are demanding too, for they require archeological work. We must dig again in their ever so fragile temporality.”<sup>38</sup> Even as they reached us bent on two impossibilities (on the one hand the deadly danger, as the witness was exposing himself to *imminent obliteration*, on the other hand the *certain unrepresentability of the testimony*, these images speak primarily of the need to *snatch some photographs from the real*), they remind us that a photograph requires at least two persons in order to communicate – they are made to be looked at, to snatch something *imaginable* even as they speak from a place (and of a place) that no one had ever conceived as possible: “To imagine in spite of all, which calls for a difficult ethics of the image: neither the invisible par excellence (the laziness of the aesthete), nor the icon of horror (the laziness of the believer), nor the mere



document (the laziness of the learned). A simple image: inadequate but necessary, inexact but true. True of a paradoxical truth, of course. I would say that here the image is the *eye of history*: its tenacious function of making history visible. But also that it is *in the eye of history*: in a very local zone, in a moment of visual suspense, as the ‘eye’ of a hurricane”<sup>39</sup>

### “La mémoire est une force de gravité”

“Ceux qui ont une mémoire peuvent vivre dans le fragile temps présent.

Ceux qui n'en ont pas ne vivent nulle part.”

(Patricio Guzmán, *Nostalgia for the Light*, 2010)

To resume Walter Benjamin’s thesis, historical knowledge is possible only in flashes, in the *eye of the history* which is not anchored, but fleeting and unstable. It is all the more important to emphasize our ethical responsibility in allowing the possibility of such flashes to reach visibility: “What distinguishes images from the ‘essences’ of phenomenology is their historical index. [...] For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time. [...] Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is changed to the bursting point with time. [...] The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.”<sup>40</sup> In this line of thought, the question that László

Nemes’ film *Son of Saul* (2015) gives rise to is whether something has changed in the way in which we represent or we accept the possibility of representation of the Shoah. Taking into consideration the long-lasting debate on the idea of the (im)possibility of representation of the genocide, and Claude Lanzmann’s position as to the impossibility of all fiction which claims an interdiction of the representation of the figural so far as the extermination camps are concerned, it doesn’t come short of a surprise that the film was received so positively not only by Didi-Huberman, but also by Lanzmann and Annette Wieviorka. This quasi unanimous positive response has been disrupted only by *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Libération*, who question the immersive technique employed by the director to give the fictional account of two days in the life of a member of the *Sonderkommando*, who is trying to bury a boy whose body he retrieves from the gas chamber.

Jacques Rancière points out several arguments that exist around the idea of the unrepresentable, and these positions are not always coherent among themselves:<sup>41</sup> there are those who say that the Shoah is unrepresentable and reject any images that would seek to visually reconstitute it (they do not accept that a film could show the bodies of the victims and the perpetrators); then there is the argument that the Shoah is unrepresentable, and therefore it reclaims an art of the unrepresentable. In *L’Objet du siècle*,<sup>42</sup> Gérard Wajcman correlates the problem of the representation with the emergence of modern art, as if modern art had already created the premises for the crisis of representation that marked the 20th century; and there are also others who claim that Shoah should not



be banned from the possibility of fictional representation. French journalist Samuel Blumenfeld argues that fiction allows for the insertion of a human element and of humanity in a place of absolute inhumanity.<sup>43</sup> The question that we should be actually concerned with is what is (rendered) intolerable in an image, when does an image become abject since, as Rancière points out, there is no inherent unrepresentable. What makes it unrepresentable (i.e. intolerable) pertains to a matter of formal choice: “Qu’est ce qu’un irreprésentable? Une exigence morale de l’ordre de l’interdit, ou bien esthétique au sens d’une jouissance prise à l’horreur, ou bien un problème de bienséance, de choix, ou encore un impossible, l’impossibilité d’atteindre le cœur du génocide.”<sup>44</sup>

Gillo Pontecorvo’s film on the Holocaust, *Kapo* (1960), nominated for the Academy Award as Best Foreign Film was hailed by many, including Visconti and Fellini as a great film. Yet, the director’s choice to film the ending triggered a violent reaction from Jacques Rivette, who accused him of using the *tracking shot* in an abject manner as he had failed to ask himself certain preliminary questions in what was being filmed when taking on the subject of the concentration camps: “Look however in *Kapo*, the shot where Riva commits suicide by throwing herself on electric barbwire: the man who decides at this moment to make a forward tracking shot to reframe the dead body – carefully positioning the raised hand in the corner of the final framing – this man is worthy of the most profound contempt.”<sup>45</sup> Serge Daney observed later, invoking Godard’s sentence that a tracking shot is a matter of *moral issue*, how abjection articulated itself

from a simple camera movement which was *the one movement not to make*:

These were my thoughts a few days ago while watching on television images of very famous singers and very starving African children. The rich singers (“*We are the world, we are the children!*”) were mixing their image with the image of the skinny children. Actually they were taking their place; they were replacing and erasing them. Mixing stars and skeletons in a typical fast editing where two images try to become one, the video elegantly carried out this electronic communication between North and South. Here I am, I thought, the present face of abjection and the improved version of my tracking shot in *Kapo*. These are the images I would like at least *one* teenager to be disgusted by and *ashamed* of. Not merely ashamed to be fed and affluent, but ashamed to be seen as someone who *has to be aesthetically seduced* where it is only a matter of conscience – good or bad – of being a human and nothing more. I realised that all my history is there. In 1961 a movement of a camera aestheticised a dead body and 30 years later a dissolve makes the wealthy and the starving ones dance together. Nothing has changed, neither me, forever incapable of seeing in all this a carnivalesque dance of death, medieval and ultra-modern, nor the predominant conceptions of consensual beauty. The form has changed a bit though. In *Kapo*, it was still possible to be upset at Pontecorvo for inconsiderately abolishing a distance he should have “kept.” The tracking shot



was immoral for the simple reason that it was putting us – him filmmaker and me spectator – in a place where we did not belong, where I anyway could not and did not want to be, because he “deported” me from my real situation as a spectator-witness forcing me to be part of the picture. What was the meaning of Godard’s formula if not that *one should never put himself where one isn’t nor should he speak for others?*<sup>46</sup>

Abjection stems from showing too much, from dissolving or blurring the (necessary critical) distance or delineation and plunging on the subject, as the abject recalls a certain form of voyeurism, a participation (under the pretense of indignation and condemnation) in that which is at work in the mechanisms of the monstrous. Films like Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) and Roberto Benigni’s *La vita è bella* (1997) still remain a subject of scrutiny and debate as to their intentions. As Jacques Rancière observes, in *La vita è bella* what bothers us is not the comical aspects or the way Benigni ridicules the Nazis, but the way in which the narrative naturalizes the horror,<sup>47</sup> the way it is actually taming the horror of the Holocaust by encapsulating it in a manageable scenario (in order to protect his son from the horror of the camp, the father creates a “virtual” or parallel reality in which everything becomes – to the eyes of the child – a child’s play).

### “Hanté par les fantômes du permanent”

In Nanni Moretti’s *Mia Madre* (2015), there is a scene where a filmmaker is about to shoot a scene of a riot. When the

cameraman chooses to follow the policeman beating one of the rioters in a close-up, the filmmaker explains why such a position of the camera is wrong, as it assumes the position of the repressive force, of the policeman, and not of the victim. Why is that? Because we have no context, we are not detached, we don’t see the police/repressing force, we see the repressed, we see through the eyes of the police which acts only as a pawn, doing what they are instructed to do, without thinking decision-wise. Or, in this case, the camera can and must assume a decision to consider the context, and not act blindly. Ethically, an option to film like that is wrong just as, in the case of the four photographs snatched from Auschwitz, retouching them before being featured in the media was equally wrong as by doing that, by eliminating the noise, by recropping them and adjusting the position and orientation of the frame, what we eliminate is precisely what is relevant in these photos, the context they speak of and which is entirely wiped off. In 1963, in an issue from August of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Jean-Luc Godard imagined how “the only true film about the concentration camps” could be made: It would be a fictional film that would concentrate on the technical and factual problems of the Final solution, a fiction so intolerable that it could actually never be made: “How to get a two-meter body into a fifty-centimeter coffin? How to dispose of ten tons of arms and legs in a three-ton truck? How to burn a hundred women with only gasoline enough for ten? One would also have to show the typists typing out lists of everything. What would be unbearable would not be the horror aroused by such scenes, but, on the contrary, their perfectly normal





and human aspect.<sup>748</sup> To Godard the film that needed to be made about the Holocaust was not a film about the victims, but a film about the guards, so not a film that shows us the oppressed (and maybe in doing that risking to show us the perspective, the gaze of the persecutor), but a film that shows us the oppressor (and maybe, by that, retrieving something of the gaze of those who were stripped not only of their voice and identity, but of their death also).

So how does a film that chooses to place its character not only inside the extermination camp, but also in the gas chamber, avoid (if case be) the problems of representation that coagulate around the moral issue on the one hand, and the aesthetic issue on the other? While it cannot be accused of seeking voyeurism at all cost, one might question the viscerally immersive effect (as if we were there) of the handheld shots following the main character around the camp in hyperreal close-ups. The formal choice that László Nemes makes to reflect the fragmentary experience of the prisoners displaces the action rather off screen in a blurred, at times out of focus background: "The human experience within the camp was based on limitation and lack of information. No one could know or see that much. So how do you convey that?"<sup>749</sup> While the entire film is a reflection on the point of view of the main character, the movie does not try to manipulate the viewer. It does not seek either to employ an objective approach (which should require a certain distance), a point of view from the outside, a remote and equal perspective which should not be involved to the point where such an involvement verges dangerously on being manipulative and biased. To Nemes, classical storytelling does

not make sense in a camp as it fabricates and projects emotions (that we can only speculate about) on a story in an artificial way, so his approach (albeit fictional) reclaims the mindset of a documentary. Yet how come we can see such close-ups without talking about manipulation? Because the background is always a blur. We are not given the perspective of the SS, of the executioner, we are not presented with an objective perspective of the victim, what we are shown is a personal, subjective interiority which the filmmaker does not objectify, or generalize. His option is always at risk, just as Lanzmann's choice to film the interviewed witnesses with extreme close-ups is always at risk. Is Nemes' film also a (form) testimony? Can fiction also bear witness to the catastrophe and to the unimaginable? As Derrida pointed out, all testimony is also fiction as in order to remain testimony it can never become proof, certainty, archive. Although based on extensive research, *Son of Saul* is less a film on the Shoah, but rather a film on the human dimension, as it inserts a (spectral) human element in a place of utter inhumanity: "The special squad was isolated from the rest of the camp: they were better fed and clothed, but had the certainty of liquidation at the end, because they knew everything about the extermination process. The notes they made, transmitted to us, gave me the sense of being there, the here and now, that I never experienced anywhere else. I thought, these people are like shadows between the living and the dead, caught between the victims and the perpetrators, but were also victims themselves. Their deaths were stretched over a period of several months."<sup>750</sup> The gesture of the protagonist Saul Ausländer to try to bury



the young boy, to allow the boy to die in a place where death no longer exists is a very powerful one: “There are no survivors in my film; I have only the dead. I didn’t want it to tell the story of survival. All these older films establish a safe road for the viewer, and at the end, some kind of liberation. But that’s not the story of the Holocaust. That’s the story of how we want the Holocaust to be. It’s not the story I wanted to tell. [...] There is a hope there, I think: not the hope of survival, but the hope of the inner voice that might still exist, when everything, including God and religion and sanity, is gone.”<sup>51</sup> As Primo Levi put it, the camps made death impossible, death itself was murdered here, as people were denied their individual death in the highly effective serial production of dead bodies.<sup>52</sup>

### “Il faut écouter les images”

- Go on, Abe. You must go on. You have to.  
 – It’s too horrible...  
 – We have to do it. You know it.  
 – I won’t be able to do it.”

There is a scene in *Shoah*, where Abraham Bomba, a former professional barber and member of the *Sonderkommando* in Treblinka, is interviewed by Lanzmann in a rented hair salon in Tel Aviv as he is working on a man’s haircut. As Bomba talks about the technical details of his job in the camp, Lanzmann keeps coming back to the same question. He wants to know what Bomba felt when he first saw all those people that were about to be sent to death, what he felt when he met people he knew, what he felt when those people asked him what was going

to happen to them. He is reluctant, yet eventually answers: “I tell you something. To have a feeling about that... It was very hard to feel anything, because working there day and night between dead people, between bodies, your feeling disappeared, you were dead. You had no feeling at all. As a matter of fact, I want to tell you something that happened. At the gas chamber, when I was chosen to work there as a barber, some of the women that came in on a transport from my town of Czeszochowa, I knew a lot of them.”<sup>53</sup> But Lanzmann insists, he wants Abe to tell him how he felt about what he saw. “I knew them; I lived with them in my town. I lived with them in my street, and some of them were my close friends. And when they saw me, they started asking me [...] ‘What’s going to happen to us?’ What could you tell them? What could you tell? A friend of mine worked as a barber – he was a good barber in my hometown – when his wife and sister came into the gas chamber...”<sup>54</sup> It is impossible for Abe to go on, it is here that he stops. He had been talking for all this time (more than ten minutes) almost with objective precision, giving details, relating everything in a composed, distant voice, and now he breaks, he cannot continue, he refuses to go on. Yet Lanzmann insists that he continues although we can imagine the rest, although Abe has already told us everything, he insists that he must go on, that he must talk about it no matter how monstrous and difficult that might be. It must be one of the most affecting scenes in the movie, a sore point that Lanzmann unhesitatingly keeps pushing until all the confidence and strength the man had amassed to protect himself (throughout those four decades that had passed) from the memory



of the horror crumbles under our own very eyes. Two long minutes pass and we can only hear the sounds of the scissors in the barber shop until Abe is able to continue. But what continues to resonate is this painful silence, Abe fighting against these memories and Lanzmann insisting that he goes on talking.

Images are not only depositories of the catastrophe, they are also the remnants of destruction. As any archive (or narrative) only contains the rest, the lacuna, we must be able not only to see, but also to listen to images as testimony, as discourse and language and not as the visual rendering of a discourse. No discourse could contain those two long minutes of silence where only the sound of the scissors accompanied the haunting expression of Abraham Bomba's impossibility to speak, to pluck from the darkness those harrowing images of his fellow barber spending a minute longer than usual to cut the hair of his sister and of his wife, the only expression of affection and farewell he could have afforded.

In *Nostalgia for the Light*, his 2010 documentary exploring the impacts of Pinochet's regime in Chile, Patricio Guzmán overlaps two layers of meditation and interrogation of the past: on the one hand he revisits the golden age of the astronomical research in Chile in the vast Atacama desert whose climate makes it the perfect place in the whole world to carry on such research, on the other hand he revisits the political and historical upheavals that shook the country during the 1970s. What connects these two layers is the very Atacama desert which also became a depository for the human remains of the political opponents sent here to concentration camps and executed by Pinochet's dictatorship. A

huge mass grave is explored daily by the wives and sisters of the victims who continue to search for the disappeared, just as the astronomers and archaeologists continue researching into the past of humanity. As a filmmaker preoccupied with exploring memory, his previous films were almost entirely made up of archive images. In *Nostalgia for the Light*, Guzmán chooses to film a desert landscape, so vast and empty, while paradoxically filled with history, in a quest to bring into visibility something more than an image, as if he was searching for hidden correspondences, a possible montage between visible elements that would open up the memory of the past: "L'image d'archives, par nature ne fait que témoigner d'un moment donné enregistré, donc passé, révolu et qui ne concerne la mémoire que de manière rétroactive. Or, c'est une mémoire consubstantielle et concomitante qui est à l'œuvre dans *Nostalgie de la lumière*. Et pour cela Guzmán a recours au langage de la métaphore."<sup>55</sup> When we decide to show more and to talk less there is more room for music and for silence, explains Guzmán in an interview.<sup>56</sup> That is why there are so many moments of silence (for interrogation and research) in his film:

C'est un film qui se pose beaucoup de questions mais qui ne répond à aucune, qui fait croiser des lignes qui ont l'habitude d'être parallèles. C'est une réflexion sur la vie, la mort, le passé, la mémoire, sur notre relation avec le cosmos, sur la matière de notre corps et la matière du cosmos qui est le même [...] je crois effectivement qu'on peut arriver à un type de raisonnement métaphorique montrant que



s'il n'y avait pas de mémoire collective de la part de l'humanité, de la terre, de la planète et du système solaire, il n'y aurait pas de futur. Je voulais prouver dans le film que la mémoire est un élément clé dans le développement du cosmos et de la vie [...] Quand j'ai superposé des os humains sur un livre d'images du système solaire, les os et les astéroïdes avaient la même forme. On peut donc dire que ce sont des morceaux de corps qui flottent dans l'espace. C'est la clé du film [...] J'avais besoin que l'archéologue me dise que le désert est une porte ouverte sur le passé et qu'il me donne raison quand

je lui demandais pourquoi on étudiait les momies et le cosmos, mais pas les vingt-cinq dernières années de l'histoire du Chili.<sup>57</sup>

On the threshold of memory (and therefore of history) we must also listen to what images have to say. In the closing lines of his book, *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno was wondering what art would be, as the depository (as the writing) of history, if it *shook off the memory of accumulated suffering*.<sup>58</sup> The answer art and cinema give us is that art must (continue to) speak the unspeakable and the unbearable not in order to show us the truth, but to provoke the truth.

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## NOTES

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