

**Fragments, futures, absence and the past:**

**A new approach to photography**





## Acknowledgements

I thank Adrian Rifkin for all our illuminating conversations. Without his constant inspiration to think off-track, this thesis would not exist in its current form and content.

I thank my partner Anita Janzen for her true-hearted confidence and unconditional backing.

I thank my friends and my family for their manifold support.

*Fragments, futures, absence and the past: A new approach to photography*

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PhD Thesis

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The work presented in this thesis is the candidate's own.

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Silke Helmerdig, Berlin, 2015

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## **Abstract**

### **Fragments, futures, absence and the past: A new approach to photography**

Who am I — or should I rather ask what am I?

As a practising photographer with both German and Jewish origins, my artistic interest has long been in photographic representation in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

Following Kracauer's definition of what may be called "photographic", namely what tends to conform to the realistic as a basic aesthetic principle, my research focuses on the role of photography in the historical recollection of a traumatic event of unimaginable dimensions such as the Holocaust.

Remembrance of the Holocaust in Germany has seemed to focus on the figure of six million. By contrast, I am interested in what absence offers us in terms of future possibilities rather than a void created by the past that leads only to closure. The void comes as a historical consequence, while absence is essential to memory. With regard to the Holocaust, absence can only be found in the invisible that holds a possibility of a German-Jewish coexistence, which was interrupted by the acts committed during the Third Reich.

According to Benjamin, the past that is not recognized by the present threatens to disappear irretrievably. As a consequence, photographs cannot save the moment from oblivion by pure depiction alone, but only by keeping it actual at every present moment.

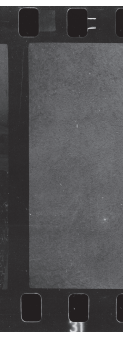
Instead of counting on the documentary quality of photography that speaks in the past tense of "what has been", I suggest a different approach to photography, an extension of a future subjunctive (photographic) tense speaking of "what could be, if", allowing one to think possible futures instead of harking back to the past.

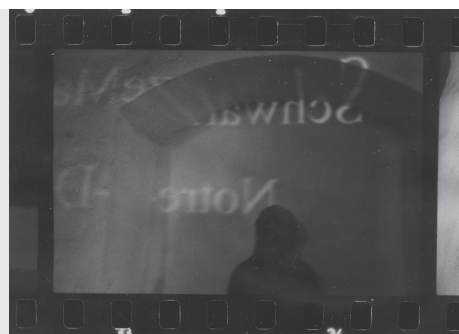


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Fragments of past futures, 2014





## Introduction

### "After Auschwitz" — photography and the principle of hope

From the fragmentary moment of the present one can look backwards to a seemingly determined narrative of the past and forwards to undetermined narratives of possible futures. Germany in the 2010s is shaped by, inter alia, the narrative of the past post-WWII, especially in regard to the legacies of the Third Reich. It is also looking forwards to what it will become in the future. Just as the past must be worked through, so possible futures offer a prospect of change.

Through the temporal distance, the perception of events during World War II changes from events still memorised by survivors to purely historical ones. This can be seen in a changing use of terminology. Whereas for a long time the term "concentration camp" was used for both concentration camps and extermination camps, as the distance to the events grows, a more differentiated debate begins. While the planned and executed extinction of a people on an industrial scale remains unique to the deeds of German National Socialists, the internment and torment in concentration camps is recognized as a wider phenomenon of authoritarian systems.<sup>1</sup> Commonly the terms have been used synonymously as no value judgment was to be made between concentration and extermination camps with respect to the suffering of victims who survived them. The change of perception from an emotional remembrance with regard to survivors — their memories and feelings — to a historical subject of research regardless of individual emotions takes place in the temporal distance of the event.

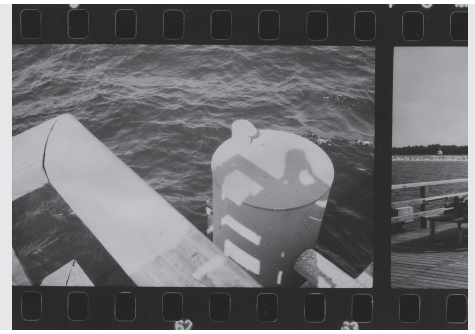
When World War II ended and the remaining prisoners of German concentration and extermination camps were liberated, it seemed plausible that the German-Jewish relationship from periods preceding the so-called final solution was interrupted by the

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<sup>1</sup> see Pollock, Griselda and Max Silverman (eds.): *Concentrationary Cinema*, Oxford/New York, 2014  
Pollock and Silverman discuss concentration camps on a wider systemic level and take them out of their specific context within the Holocaust.







Holocaust. Few Jews returned to their former German hometowns and were prepared to confront the memories of their humiliation during the era of National Socialism. Germany and especially the relationship between Germans and Jews had significantly changed into an "after Auschwitz", in other words all the mutually beneficial times before the Third Reich seemed forgotten.<sup>2</sup> From the end of World War II onwards, life in general would also always be an "after Auschwitz", bearing in mind what humans were capable of doing to each other. While the caesura in human relationships will remain, there is hope for the social caesura between Germans and Jews to be repaired one day, especially for generations born in a temporal distance to the event. Germany is surely a nation that lives consciously in the shadow of this specific part of its history. Historical records assert the knowledge of the event and confirm their impact on the present.

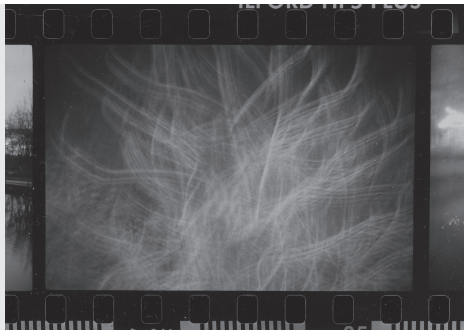
To Germans Jewish life in post-war West Germany has only been visible in the police guards in front of all Jewish institutions. The presence of a police guard tells the observant passer-by of the protected Jewish life going on behind closed gates when walking past a synagogue or a Jewish nursery school. With few exceptions in cities such as Berlin or Frankfurt, Jewish foodstores and Jewish quarters no longer existed. Jews living in Germany could order kosher food through their communities. The representatives of the Central Council of Jews in Germany sometimes appeared in public, thereby attesting to Jewish life in Germany. But Jews were invisible as part of German civic life.

The absence of visible Jewish life in Germany for most of the time after World War II does not speak, as often considered, of the impossibility of a renewal of Jewish life in Germany in general. Instead it speaks of the missing representation and perception of Jews in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Seventy years after concentration and extermination camps all around Europe were liberated, I wonder where the lack of perception of Jews in Germany is founded. As

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<sup>2</sup> When referring to Germans and Jews, I use the term Germans for those who inherited the legacy of the perpetrators, while the term Jews indicates the victims and their descendants.





an artist (working with photography) I question the role photography played with respect to the invisibility of Jewish life in Germany by its visual presentation of the Holocaust period from a post-war perspective. In this thesis I will explore ways in which photography participated in this ignorance of Jewish life in Germany after World War II. I will then reconfigure strategies for photography to create potential futures out of the absent visibility.

As Adorno observed, "suffering conceptualized remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany."<sup>3</sup> "After Auschwitz" not only has an impact on civic life, but also on the arts. As discussed by Adorno, the dilemma to create beauty in the aftermath of horror is found in aesthetic production proceeding in the shadow of the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> Artistic creation is not free from the burden to carry the possibility of Auschwitz in whatever form it takes. Adorno's famous verdict that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric seems exaggerated when taken literally, but carries true significance.<sup>5</sup> Adorno clarified his point quoting Brecht's *To those who follow in our wake*: "What times are these, when / to speak of trees is almost a crime / because it passes in silence over such infamy."<sup>6</sup>

After Auschwitz, the attempted extermination of the European Jews and the crimes against humanity committed in the camps must be made part of everyday life. That applies even more to the production and appreciation of art, which must be executed with responsibility.

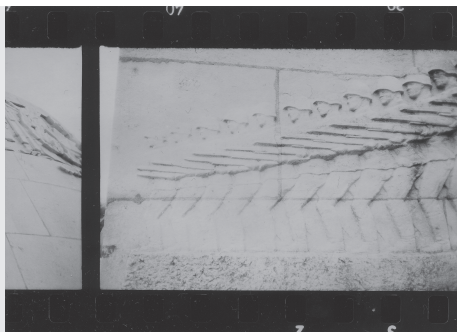
"The reduction that beauty imposes on the terrifying, over and out of which beauty raises itself and which it banishes from itself as from a sacred temple, has — in the face

3 Adorno, Theodor W.: *Aesthetic Theory*, New York/London, 2013, p. 27

4 This thought permeates Adorno's writings after 1945. See especially Adorno, Theodor W.: *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, Stanford, 2003 and Adorno, Theodor W.: *Aesthetic Theory*, New York/London, 2013

5 Originally written in his essay "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" in 1949, Adorno returned to this postulation in later essays to relate it to poetry that seemed to stand against this proposition, such as Celan's, admitting the necessity of expression for the unspeakable crimes committed. Although the situation "after Auschwitz" does not tolerate art as aesthetic objects, it requires artistic expression as a comment all the same. Adorno, Theodor W.: *Ob nach Auschwitz noch sich leben lasse*, Frankfurt a. M., 1997; "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" (p. 205); "Engagement" (p. 299); "Die Kunst und die Künste" (p. 430)

6 see Adorno, Theodor W.: *Aesthetic Theory*, New York/London, 2013, p. 53/54





of the terrifying — something powerless about it."<sup>7</sup> Picking up on Adorno's words, artworks reduce horrors to beauty when produced with ignorance, thereby becoming powerless tools in the face of horrendousness.

We can find a solution by applying Adorno: For artworks to not merely be meaningless aesthetic objects, they must go beyond the visible and suggest a possibility. "By their very existence artworks postulate the existence of what does not exist and thereby come into conflict with the latter's actual nonexistence."<sup>8</sup>

The reality of artworks testifies to the potential of the thinkable. Artworks are desired to form the substantiality of what is not and turn that into remembrance. Adorno argues,

In remembrance what is qua what was combines with the nonexisting because what was no longer is. Ever since Plato's doctrine of anamnesis the not-yet-existing has been dreamed of in remembrance, which alone concretizes utopia without betraying it to existence.<sup>9</sup>

Artworks contain the power to remember what has not yet been, thereby suggesting possibilities of future occurrences. "Art desires what has not yet been, though everything that art is has already been."<sup>10</sup> Thereby art constructs complicated associations of the past and future in the form of the existence of the not-yet-existent.

According to Adorno's opposition to aesthetic fetishism his idea that art contains what has not yet been holds a solution for the production of art "after Auschwitz". The remembrance of a potential can be linked to Ernst Bloch's utopian writings, especially his *Principle of Hope*.<sup>11</sup>

Ernst Bloch, a German philosopher, already wrote his *Spirit of Utopia* in 1918.<sup>12</sup> *The Principle of Hope* was written in American exile between 1938 and 1947 and revised

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7 Adorno, Theodor W.: *Aesthetic Theory*, New York/London, 2013, p. 70

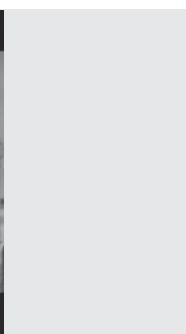
8 Ibid., p. 80

9 Ibid., p. 181

10 Ibid., p. 184

11 Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope* (Volume 1), Cambridge (MA), 1986

12 Bloch, Ernst: *The Spirit of Utopia*, Stanford, 2000



in 1953 and 1959. The revision dates justify the presumption that Bloch noted or modified his ideas with knowledge of the horrors of the Holocaust. He suggests a "Can-Be" as a foundation for all human progress.<sup>13</sup> *The Principle of Hope* is a text in the consciousness of "after Auschwitz". We can very well apply Bloch to the aftermath of the Holocaust. He describes the hopelessness propagated by the bourgeoisie as a result of the abyss into which it has fallen, calling it "the most insupportable thing".<sup>14</sup> His counter-offer to hopelessness is simply hope. Reasoned on the aspirations of human beings, he establishes a timeline in which, "primarily, everybody lives in the future, [...] past things only come later, and as yet genuine present is almost never there at all."<sup>15</sup> For Bloch, anticipation is an advantageous driving force of a society. For him, as for Adorno years later, artworks are a form of utopia that is not truly expected to turn into existence. Bloch describes connections between artworks and the dream as potential. He differentiates the qualities of daydreams and night-dreams. While night-dreams originate in the known and form a working through of events past in the unconscious, daydreams are fantasies of potential. For Bloch artworks find their quality in bringing together what is with the potential of what is not yet.

And the great, i. e. realistic works of art do not become less realistic through the notation of latency, through the space — however blank — of the Absolute, but more realistic; since everything real mingles with the Not-Yet within that space. Significant daydream imaginative creations do not blow soap-bubbles, they open windows, and outside them is the daydream world of possibility which can at any rate be given form. There are enough differences between the two kinds of dream at this end; the mode as well as the content of wish-fulfillment diverge in them insuppressibly. This always means: the night-dream lives in regression, it is indiscriminately drawn into its images, the daydream projects its images into the future, by no means indiscriminately, but controllably even given the most impetuous imagination and mediatable with the objectively Possible.<sup>16</sup>

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13 see Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope* (Volume 1), Cambridge (MA), 1986, p. 235

14 Ibid., p. 4

15 Ibid., p. 4

16 Ibid., p. 98







Artworks can be seen as carrying similar potential for what is not yet, in other words suggestions. They have no need to be connected to the real. They can be expressions of possible futures.

"It is not sufficient to speak of dialectical process and then to treat history as a series of sequential Fixa or even closed 'totalities'. [...A]nticipating elements are a component of reality itself."<sup>17</sup> Returning to my opening question of the consequences of historical awareness of the Holocaust for the German-Jewish relationship in post-war Germany, I wonder about the role art (and my special interest is in photography as an artistic medium) can play in the construction of potential future utopias of a common ground for Germans and Jews.<sup>18</sup>

Not only in a philosophical sense, but also for the civic process, all the working through in the sense of Adorno's "working through the past" and the accumulation of knowledge about the horrors of the Third Reich could not help reestablish the relationship between Germans and Jews that was interrupted so painfully by the Holocaust.<sup>19</sup> Memories become history in the temporal distance of events.

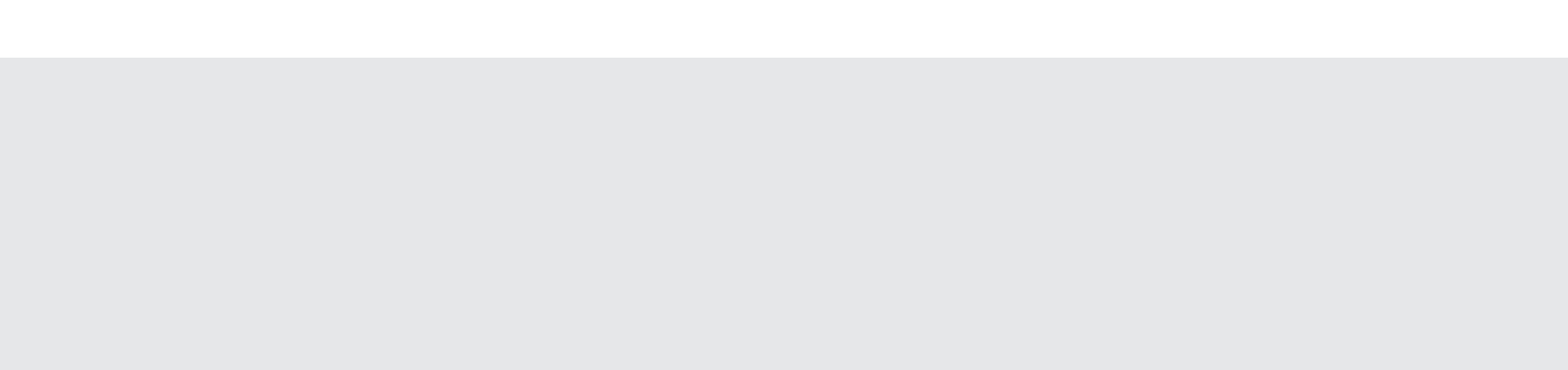
Bloch has observed that, "there are two kinds of things history does not know, namely what is hidden in the past and what is hidden in the future."<sup>20</sup> After collecting data and reassembling the image of the horrific deeds committed in the name of the German people, it is time to turn away from the science of history and to acknowledge not only the hidden, but also the absent as pivotal. The absent represents essentially something that must have been present in a former time and which contains a potential return. German-Jewish relationships that have been brutally interrupted by the Holocaust, re-formed in private with Jews returning to Germany after World War II, unnoticed

<sup>17</sup> Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope* (Volume 1), Cambridge (MA), 1986, p. 197

<sup>18</sup> In the words of Marius de Zayas, "Art is the expression of the conception of an idea. Photography is the plastic verification of a fact." (de Zayas, Marius: *Photography and Photography and Artistic Photography*. in: Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.): *Classic Essays on Photography*. New Haven, 1980) Assuming this distinction, photography as an artistic medium must go beyond the "plastic verification of a fact", as it is supposed to do when applied professionally as a document. As an artistic medium it needs to express the "conception of an idea". In chapters 2 and 3 I will take a closer look at photographic works that pursue different artistic strategies.

<sup>19</sup> see Adorno, Theodor W.: "Working through the Past", in: *Can One live after Auschwitz?*, Stanford, 2003

<sup>20</sup> Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope* (Volume 1), Cambridge (MA), 1986, p. 138





by historical accounts. Relationships between Germans and Jews were thus not non-existent but merely unrecognized. They were hidden from historical transmission and public awareness, holding the potential to again become a commonplace part of everyday German life in the future. Even if it were merely a possibility, the unnoticed has a relationship to the real. Only then is it an absent that contains a potential former and future presence. Ernst Bloch demanded:

The Can-Be would mean almost nothing if it remained without consequences. The Possible only has consequences, however, in that it does not occur merely as formally permissible or even as objectively supposable or even as open in an object-suited way, but in that it is a future-laden definitiveness in the real itself.<sup>21</sup>

As a consequence of the Can-Be, potential must be included in the idea of a non-chronological timeline of events in opposition to a consecutive historical order. The recognition of possibilities offers a chance for a re-development of the German-Jewish relationship in contemporary Germany. Once the past as one knows it is only regarded as one option out of many that might have been, it must be regarded in its subjunctive form. The subjunctive of the past then demands the future to be seen as conditional, a "could be".

Therefore relationships between Germans and Jews after the Holocaust, as inconspicuous but existent as they may have been, form a potential narrative of Germany's past, and also of its present and future. As artworks are not bound to the real, they offer the subjunctive of the past, present and future. Before the Holocaust, art and culture were connecting parts in the German-Jewish relationship. Art with its tendency towards the intangible can offer a starting point for an awareness of the invisible relationship between Germans and Jews, absent or rather unperceived in its presence — despite the melancholy of mere existence "after Auschwitz".

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21 Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope* (Volume 1), Cambridge (MA), 1986, p. 235





Adorno describes the role of art in this respect as follows:

Even while art indicts the concealed essence, which it summons into appearance, as monstrous, this negation at the same time posits as its own measure an essence that is not present, that of possibility; meaning inheres even in the disavowal of meaning. Because meaning, whenever it is manifest in an artwork, remains bound up with semblance, all art is endowed with sadness; art grieves all the more, the more completely its successful unification suggests meaning, and the sadness is heightened by the feeling of 'Oh, were it only so.' Melancholy is the shadow of what in all form is heterogenous, which form strives to banish: mere existence. In happy artworks, melancholy anticipates the negation of meaning in those that are undermined, the reverse image of longing.<sup>22</sup>

How can Bloch's concept of the Can-Be be applied to photography?<sup>23</sup>

In his last book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes observes that "[e]very photograph is a certificate of presence". He sees in the photograph what has existed, what has been there at the time of exposure.<sup>24</sup> Thomas Elsaesser refers in an essay to Barthes's "has been", calling it a photographic tense.<sup>25</sup> Once his interest is triggered by a photograph, he sees not only what has been, but also what will be. This "will-be" in portrait photographs is to Barthes an anticipation of death.<sup>26</sup> In resonance to Barthes's distinct photographic past tense as speaking of "what has been" and his concluding anticipation of a future, I suggest an extension of an indistinct future subjunctive (photographic) tense that speaks of "what could be, if", helping us to think possible futures instead of harking back to the past.

22 Adorno, Theodor W.: *Aesthetic Theory*, New York/London, 2013, p. 145

23 I will limit my observations and analyses to photography following Kracauer's definition of photography's basic aesthetic principle as described in the introduction to *Theory of Film*: "The basic properties [of film; SH] are identical with the properties of photography. Film, in other words, is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality and, hence, gravitates toward it." (Kracauer, Siegfried: *Theory of Film, The redemption of physical reality*, Princeton (NJ), 1997, p. 28) I will not discuss photography 'in general'. As Jan Baetens stated, "we no longer believe that photography is one single medium." (Baetens, Jan: "Conceptual Limitations of Our Reflections on Photography." in: Elkins, James (ed.): *Photography Theory*. New York/Oxon, 2007, p. 54) My interest is in camera-based photography recording a physical reality on a light sensitive emulsion of silver halides, which ultimately produces an image.

24 Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 82, p. 87

25 Elsaesser, Thomas: "Migration and Motif: The (Parapractic) Memories of an Image", in Pollock, Griselda and Silverman, Max (eds.): *Memories*, London/New York, 2014. For Barthes's use of "has been" see Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000

26 Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 96



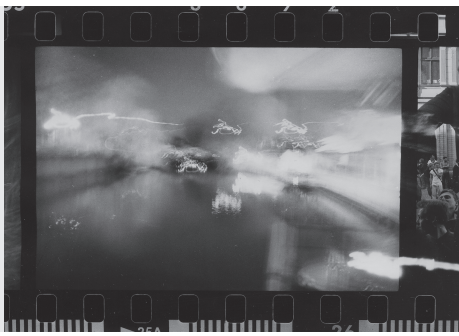


Since the camera-based photographic process is limited to depicting a physical reality present on exposure, it seems the least advantageous medium to express any utopian idea. It shares the propensity to the real with the science of history. Like history it also must be perceived in connection with what is missing, what has been left out. Chapter 1 presents philosophical reflections on history, historiography and commemoration, which also have relevance to photography. The connection between history and photography is explored by focussing on Nietzsche's understanding of history and on Kracauer's consideration of both history and photography. I presuppose that Nietzsche as a philosopher of the late 19th century was aware of the occurring changes of modern industrial society, which include the changes in art and perception through the advance of photography. I adopt his analysis of different approaches to history, which present the usefulness and disadvantages of historical records to photographs. Kracauer, like Benjamin, explored the conditions and effects of photography as the mechanical recording of a physical reality. Both also questioned the use of accumulating facts from the past for the writing of history. Nietzsche, Kracauer and Benjamin located the importance of history for the future in oblivion, in the invisible, the absent or the forgotten. They encourage an understanding of history in which the recorded is important, but the absent must be equally valued to create future relevance. Thereby they offer me a valuable starting point for similar reflections on the unregistered in photography. By assembling threads of thoughts on history, memory and commemoration from philosophy, photography is questioned in its relationship to history. Once photography is considered in respect to the importance of oblivion for history, it loses its character as evidence.

Chapter 2 examines what has been established in Chapter 1 in the specific case of the historical dealings with the Holocaust in post-war Germany, first as a general situation and then in three field study cases to present photography's part in this. The three chosen examples belong to the category of documentary photography. They illustrate the insufficiency of documentary photography to make something absent tangible







through the register of what is present at the time of exposure. Only the present can be seen in the individual photograph alone, even by a viewer who is instructed to look for the absent. Otherwise the photograph must be contextualised by the artist in a way that a viewer can start his journey beyond the surface.

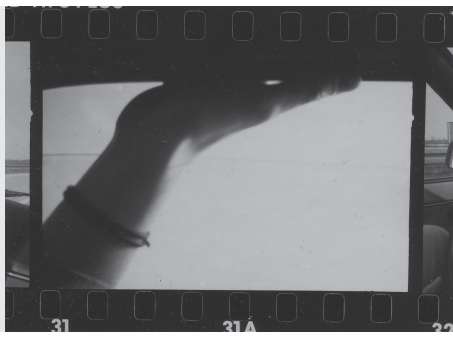
As discussed above, the absence of visible Jewish life in German society after the Holocaust emphasises the need for a recognition of absence as part of German identity. In Chapters 1 and 2 the significance of absence will be demonstrated for history and photography alike. To be useful for a wider historical understanding, it requires alternatives to what in Chapter 2 will be unmasked as a pitfall in the practice of documentary photography.

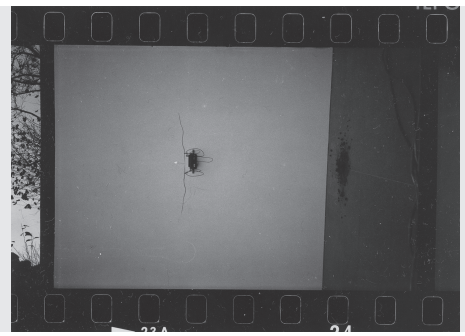
Chapter 3 therefore investigates artworks that adequately offer the absent through the way they are produced. It is not their purpose to represent a physical reality that is expected to speak for itself. They use photographic depiction as a suggestive and metaphorical starting point of artistic expression. They do not offer authentic depictions of something, but are authentic representations in themselves.<sup>27</sup> The disruption of the spatial and the temporal continuum is important for photography (and history) to break with objective tendencies. In Chapter 3, montage is offered as one method to facilitate photography against objectivity. Adorno calls montage "photography's self-correction". For him, "Montage is the inner-aesthetic capitulation of art to what stands heterogeneously opposed to it. The negation of synthesis becomes a principle of form."<sup>28</sup> Montage brings images from different times and places into a new subjective order, thereby offering additional meaning in the spaces between the images. The space between brings to mind the presence of the absent and thus gains historical relevance. This is particularly important for an event like the Holocaust, which is considered to be unrepresentable.

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27 Photographs as authentic depictions are authenticated through their technical presupposition of being mechanical recordings of a physical reality. Once photographs are produced to overcome the mechanical recording to become images, they turn into representations and become authentic of the artist.

28 Adorno, Theodor W.: *Aesthetic Theory*, New York/London, 2013, p. 211





Once the disadvantages of photography's documentary use and the advantages of artistic photographic practices are outlined, I aim at a different understanding of photography. While photography is often related to the past and specific times, places and events due to its depiction of physical reality, it is time to see beyond its realistic qualities (which have often readily been used for propaganda and to prove so called historical truths). The photograph is an image and has as such a representational potential.<sup>29</sup> It is made by the artist with the camera, formed from silver crystals or pigments. As such it can offer as much a view into the past as future possibilities, which are both always fictional and never true to anything other than the artist. Once the spatial (and temporal) continuum of photography is shattered, photography offers a potential for time travel in the viewer's mind, back to the moment of exposure, where the present, past and future meet. Photographic works turn into meaningful artworks beyond documentation when "their being is a process of becoming".<sup>30</sup>

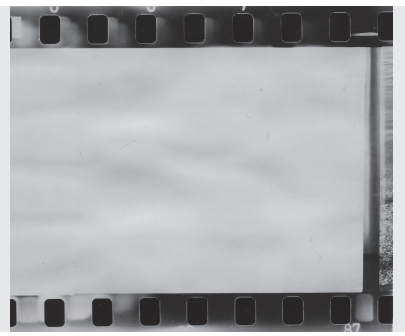
The new approach indicated in the title of this thesis suggests a change of perspective from photography's perception in past tense to a comprehension of its capacity to speak in a future subjunctive. While Chapters 1 and 2 deal with established theories on photography and history, I will move towards an altered notion of photographic communication in Chapter 3. In the Epilogue I will illustrate my proposition for a photographic future subjunctive as developed at the end of Chapter 3 to understand the significance of photographs for Ernst Bloch's "Can-Be", which I regard as desired for the production of art "after Auschwitz".

In consequence, I argue that the viewer's interest must not be directed towards the specific time and place when and where the photograph was taken. Instead it must avert the adherence to any specificity of space and time. Only then can photography

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29 In an article from 1981, Roger Scruton argues that photographs cannot be representations. As a photograph is a photograph of something, what Scruton calls the ideal photograph does not present an intention but a causal process. The artist must present us "with a way of seeing his subject", i.e. with an intention to produce a representation. Scruton concludes, "that an aesthetic interest in the representational properties of a picture must also involve a kind of interest in the picture and not merely in the thing represented." Photographs, which present themselves as images by representing the artist's intention, carry a representational potential. See Scruton, Roger: "Photography and Representation", in: Walden, Scott (ed.): *Photography and philosophy: essays on the pencil of nature*. Chichester, 2010, p. 138-166; *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7 No. 3, 1981, p. 577-603

30 Adorno, Theodor W.: *Aesthetic Theory*, New York/London, 2013, p. 264





be redeemed of its commitment to testifying historical events, which then lose their coercive impact on future occurrences. The past is extricated from any historical determination. Events of the past and the future alike appear as merely potential occurrences, of which some will be recognized and others not. Photographs show fragments of the past, which were starting points into once possible futures.

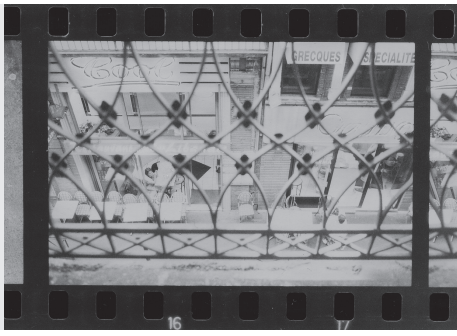
These possible futures are wish-images. We learn from Ernst Bloch the importance of wishing in contrast to wanting to preserve hope. "In wishing there is not yet any element of work or activity, whereas all wanting is wanting to do. [...]Therefore the wish remains even where the will can no longer change anything."<sup>31</sup> Even if we know that we cannot change the past depicted in the photograph, the wish offered by the photograph's not-yet future makes the retrospection valuable.

We must start looking for future possibilities offered by photographs, thereby allowing one to think "what could be, if". This approach liberates both photography and history — and eventually us — from their strict connection to fact.

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<sup>31</sup> Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope* (Volume 1), Cambridge (MA), 1986, p.46/47,





## Chapter 1

### Photography and historiography

Plato has been said to have denounced writing, as he regarded it to be the great enemy of memory.<sup>32</sup> More than two thousand years later, photography plays a similar role as the enemy of history, just like Plato's perspective on writing.

The family photograph serves as a good example. It is supposed to prompt memories of events of family life for future generations. Only what is in the photo album will be remembered.

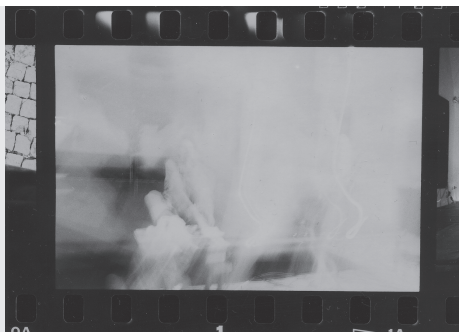
Very early on in my life I discovered the importance of the photo album as a family chronicle. When I was five years old, my father entrusted me with his camera and to record a family get-together. On a Sunday afternoon the family went for a walk and it was then that I was allowed to take my first photograph. The family members grouped themselves on the edge of a field and I took my position vis-à-vis. The way I remember it, the sun stood low behind their backs, projecting their long shadows in front of them. My father set the camera and I framed the group carefully. Then I released the shutter and we returned home for coffee. Months later when the film got developed we wondered about the picture. The photograph we had imagined was not there. Instead we were left with what I would nowadays consider a beautiful image of the hemline of coats and some shadows on the field. On both, the coats and the shadows, each family member was recognizable. Rated as having no value for the family chronicle, the image is lost. When recently the *memory* of this image came back to me, I understood that what I was looking for in photography was not the presence of what has been in front of the lens, but exactly the absence of the same that would make the presence feasible. As photography registers the light reflected from objects in a physical reality according to specific optical and physical premises in a specific moment in time that is gone,

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32 see Clark, Martin: "This Storm Is What We Call Progress", in: *This storm is what we call progress*, Bristol, 2005, p. 18







the moment the image is recorded, the reception of photography is often linked to the question of what we see. To me the more interesting question, which is less often in the foreground, is: What is the meaning of what we see? I am interested in the iconic understanding of a photograph, which is equivalent to Pierre Nora's definition of memory as "a perpetually actual phenomenon", in distinction to his definition of history as "a representation of the past", which I relate to the indexical representation of *a moment past* in the understanding of a photograph.<sup>33</sup> When I take a photograph, I do not release the shutter for preservation, but for metaphorical meaning. In taking a photograph, rather than being interested in the specificity of the place where or the moment when it was recorded, my focus lies on the absence of this specificity and in the greater and more general meaning, in other words in its iconic meaning.<sup>34</sup>

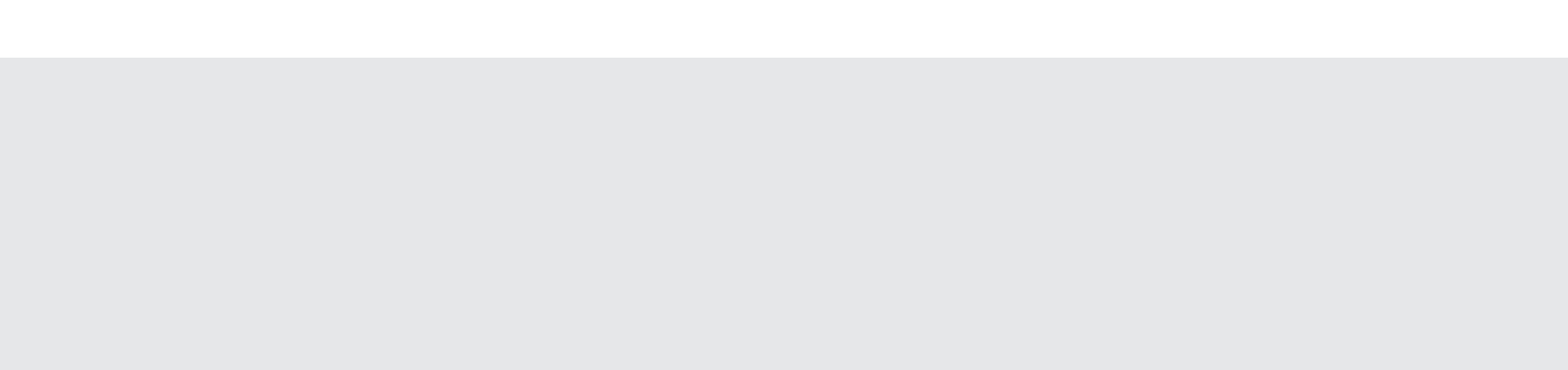
A photograph of soldiers' faces and hands that are modelled in stone and have corroded over time, gives less information on the war-memorial it represents than about the glorification of the warmongering of an era. The German word "Ehre" (honour) above the soldiers' heads places the image within a specific national context. The viewer shares the photographer's perspective on the corroded faces, looking up to them from below. What does the black and white photograph say about the real situation? Does it not rather tell us what is missing than what it depicts? Can it ever be more than a metaphor of the past? Or does it and therefore photography in general rather become a visual metonym of the past?

The corroded faces do not look back at the viewer.<sup>35</sup> Instead the missing faces work as a projection screen. This depiction of reality has no need for a namable time or space.

33 Representation is here rather a re-presentation in its most literal sense, and less in Scruton's sense of representational art. See footnote no. 29. Nora, Pierre: "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", in: *Representations*, No. 26, 1989, p. 8

34 Index and icon both originate in semiotics. Through its indexical relation the photograph points at the depicted referent. Since semiotics have been applied to images as signs, the relation of a photograph to its referent has been called indexical. But as Martin Lefebvre states, this should not be the only way to read photographs. Barthes's idea of the photograph presenting "what-has-been" fixed the photograph with the idea of it being indexical and ignored its iconic value. Once the photograph works as a representational image it gains iconic meaning. See Lefebvre: "The Art of Pointing: On Peirce, Indexicality, and Photographic Image", in: Elkins, James (ed.): *Photography Theory*. New York/Oxon, 2007

35 Benjamin wrote: "The person we look at, or who feels he is looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return." see Benjamin, Walter: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 188





Reality is here without specific conditions that appear to be absolute, but are always fragmentary.

The photographic process involves a ghostly transference of the real (the loss of corporeality) in which objects are dematerialised and transformed into images, so that the connection to the real is not just a transmutation assisted by certain mechanical and chemical processes, it is also alchemical, and, as Barthes would have it, astonishing and metaphysical.<sup>36</sup>

As photography needs a presence to produce an image, how can the depiction of this presence lead to an understanding of an absence? Just as historicism should not "content itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history," the indexical relation to a photograph's referent is only the starting point and the least interesting aspect for the future value of a photograph.<sup>37</sup>

"To articulate the past historically," Benjamin wrote, "does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was' (Ranke)."<sup>38</sup> Thus, if a photograph is only read in its indexical relation to the recording of a moment in the past, photographs become, "dams placed in the way of the stream of history, jamming historical happenings."<sup>39</sup>

When first discovered, photography was most highly praised for its accurate record of physical reality. Its relationship with history was already determined at the first official acknowledgement of the new process. When Arago announced Daguerre's success in recording the light reflected from the world, he lauded its usefulness for history as a science in "the faithful pictorial records" that could be taken on archaeological expeditions. The automatic recording of archaeological sites in Egypt was one of his examples to show the value of the photographic technique.<sup>40</sup>

Over the subsequent decades the discussion on the use and abuse of photography for historical records rather investigated the artistic qualities of the medium. But with

36 Gibbons, Joan: *Contemporary Art and Memory*, London, 2007, p. 37

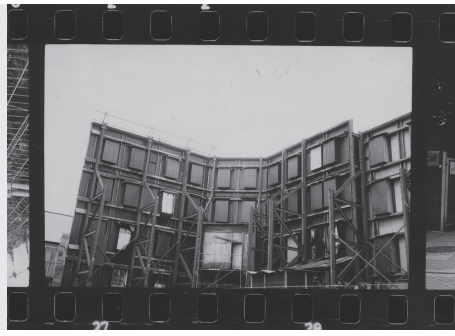
37 Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 263

38 Ibid., p. 255

39 Flusser, Vilém: "Photography and History", in: *Writings*, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 128

40 Arago, Dominique François: "Report", in: Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.): *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven, 1980, p. 17





works like Fenton's record of the Crimean War in the mid nineteenth century or Atget's documentation of Paris at the turn of the century, a clearly historic connotation is established around photography.

### Photography as the ideal medium to record events that then become the past

The idea of keeping a record of events to pass on to future generations is old. Hegel originates historical recording in the sense of a transfer from what has been into the realm of a concept sometime around the Egyptian Empire.<sup>41</sup> Historiography, as the writing of history, follows this idea. Like every human activity, the recording of the past depends on digested extracts. Only what is considered to be of importance will be passed on. Historical transmission depends highly on choice, as much as style. Therefore, when Arago presented the new technique at the French Academy of Science, his praise was on the exactitude of the depiction and on the image being created regardless of the operator's taste or preferences — although, as has been discussed extensively since then, the framing and moment of shutter release obviously always depended on the decision of the photographer<sup>42</sup>; as more options of focal length and materials developed, the influence of the photographer's taste (and mastery) became even more evident on the final image. But the myth of a neutral recording of light reflected from objects in a physical reality still lingers. The necessity of whatever is recorded to be in front of the lens makes the photograph a trustworthy witness.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, the image taken in the present is always already in the past as soon as it comes into existence as an

41 The Persians were the first historical people, but the Persian Empire disappeared and not much remains of it. Hegel regards Egypt as the first empire of which we have historical remnants. See Hegel, G.W.F.: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*. Reclam, 2013, p. 255 and p. 287

42 For the report on the invention by Daguerre and Niépce, see Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.): *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven, p. 17. In his statement Arago writes to promote the new process: "Equip the Egyptian Institute with two or three of Daguerre's apparatus, and before long on several of the large tablets of the celebrated work[...] innumerable hieroglyphics as they are in reality will replace those which now are invented or designed by approximation." The advantage of the new process is an optico-mechanical recording of the light itself without human failure.

43 Roland Barthes points out in *Camera Lucida* that the "photographic referent" has not been a real thing optionally, but necessarily, "without which there would be no photograph". See Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 76/77. On the photograph as witness, see chapter 1, p. 95, the passages on *Blowup*.

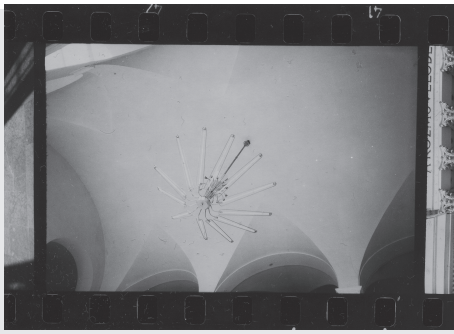




image. The time gap was bigger in times of analogue photography, but it still exists in the digital age. The image never exists simultaneously with the recorded moment. The event and the recorded image of it never occur at the same time.

According to Kracauer, while "[p]hotography presents a spatial continuum; historicism seeks to provide a temporal continuum."<sup>44</sup> Like history, photography is always a record of an event past. Because of their accuracy in depicting what has been in front of the lens, photographic records were thought to be more reliable as a medium to keep a record of the past than written records. Following the dictum "seeing is believing", photographs have been believed to make us see events from the past and therefore make us believe they happened. That is why photography seems to be more ideal as a record of the past in a historical sense than written records could ever have been.

"The camera obscura isolates consciousness, separates it from the real; enclosed, the latter constructs a sort of neo-reality, analogous to that produced by psychotics."<sup>45</sup> But, as Kracauer suggested, "[i]n order for history to present itself the mere surface coherence offered by photography must be destroyed."<sup>46</sup>

In his introduction to "The Last Things before The Last", Siegfried Kracauer finds many parallels between historical reality and camera reality.<sup>47</sup> He believed history must achieve an understanding of the past that would offer guidelines for the present. At the very least, history should enable us to step back and look at our own time from a distance: History resembles photography as a means of alienation.

### Photography's promise to witness the past

The connectedness of the photographic depiction with its subject — which can be found in the direct imprint of reflected light representing the object — has been

<sup>44</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 425

<sup>45</sup> Kofman, Sarah: *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, Ithaca, 1999, p. 17

<sup>46</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 427

<sup>47</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried: *History—The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton (NJ), 1995







regarded as one of the defining conditions for photography from its beginning. Once the photograph is regarded as a sign, this relation is called indexical, following semiotic concepts. "Indexicality [...] is an essential requirement of representation."<sup>48</sup> The photographic depiction is directly caused by the existence of an object, as that leaves an imprint of its light reflection on the photographic emulsion.<sup>49</sup> The necessity of the physical presence of the photographer at the recorded scene makes the photographer, but also the photograph — and maybe even therefore the viewer — an eyewitness. We now believe we can see a moment past for ourselves, since we assume that photography only records the reflected light, regardless of any judgment by the photographer. Everything visible within the frame is recorded, irrespective of the author's perception, but only within the limits of the physical capacity of the material. As a result, photographic images show only what has been in front of the lens, but not necessarily according to human vision.

In the early days of the medium its accuracy in the depiction of still things was highly praised, as by Fox-Talbot who wrote about the great detail which the new process recorded.<sup>50</sup> But everything that moved throughout the process of exposure would not register at all, as for example on an early picture by Daguerre, showing the always busy Boulevard du Temple removed of most signs of life apart from one person having his shoes polished. The architecture lining the boulevard appears in perfect detail, but the image does not show much as a record of its time. Also Fenton, a witness of the Crimean War, could not document the events with his camera and had to restage them afterwards or merely depict the remains after the battle.

48 Lefebvre, Martin: "The Art of Pointing: On Peirce, Indexicality and Photographic Images", in: Elkins, James (ed.): *Photography Theory*. New York/Oxon, 2007, p. 227

49 In the quoted remarks, Martin Lefebvre points out that photographs are no more indexical than other images, unless we distinguish between direct indexical relation and indirect indexical relation. Then the imprint of an object on the photographic emulsion would be a direct indexical relation that is a specific quality of photographs. An indirect indexical relation could for example be accidental light traces resulting from a defect camera. They are indexical to the defect rather than to the depicted object. When using the term indexical in relation to photographs I refer to the direct indexical relation of the imprint of light that seems to have strongly influenced theoretical debates on photography. See Lefebvre, Martin: "The Art of Pointing: On Peirce, Indexicality and Photographic Images", in: Elkins, James (ed.): *Photography Theory*. New York/Oxon, 2007, p. 230ff

50 In *The Pencil of Nature* Fox Talbot wrote accompanying an image of a haystack: "One advantage of the discovery of the Photographic Art will be, that it will enable us to introduce into our pictures a multitude of minute details which add to the truth and reality of the representation, but which no artist would take the trouble to copy faithfully from nature." Fox Talbot, Henry: *The Pencil of Nature*. Budapest: Horgy Editio, 1998





Only with the technical developments, faster exposure times and better lenses, did it become possible to actually depict a real life scene. But as human vision operates in each moment, there are certain aspects of photographic depiction in consequence of recording over time that vary from the way our vision works. As Hubert Damisch observed,

the principles of construction of the photographic camera — and of the camera obscura before it — were tied to a conventional notion of space and of objectivity whose development preceded the invention of photography, and to which the great majority of photographers only conformed.<sup>51</sup>

The closeness to the already existing pictorial representation of space in a two-dimensional image and the requirement of the physical presence of the camera made photography an ideal witness of the past. The witness testifies that the past was the way it is depicted. And as Kracauer already stated in 1960 in the chapter on photography in his acclaimed *Theory of Film*, "present-day realists have learned, or relearned, that reality is as we see it."<sup>52</sup> Reality is none other than a concept, and the same applies to the past.

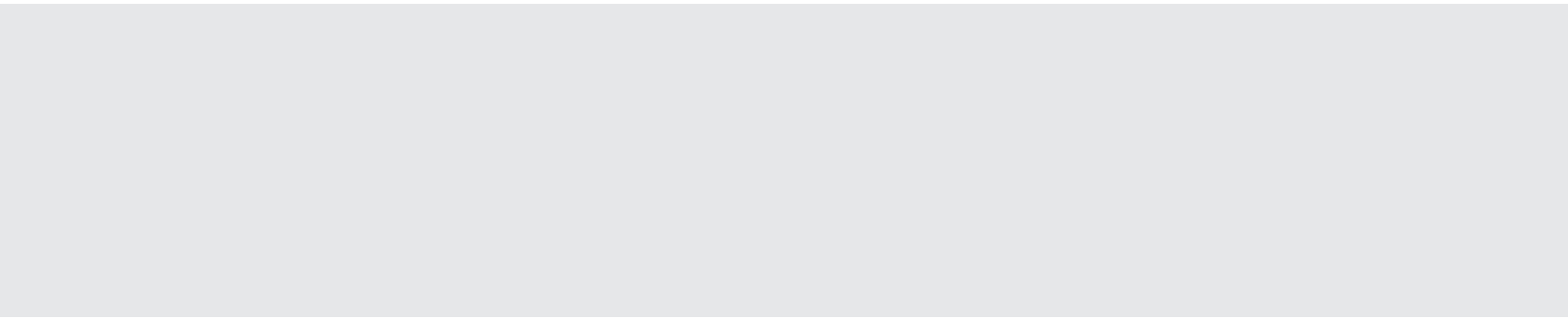
### The difficulty of representing history through photography

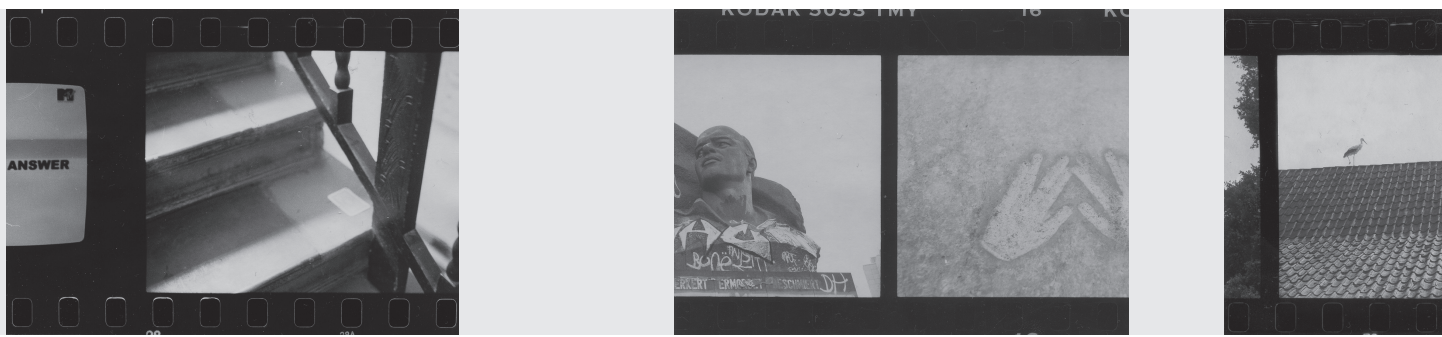
On first reflection, what seems purely advantageous concerning the relationship between history and photography, — namely their ability to give a record — becomes problematic on closer inspection.

As seen in reflections on history by philosophers such as Nietzsche or Kracauer, the use of history for life is as much defined by remembrance as by oblivion. A fixation of

<sup>51</sup> Damisch, Hubert: "Five Notes for a Phenomenology Of the Photographic Image", in: Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.): *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven, 1980 p. 289

<sup>52</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.): *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven, 1980 p. 250





historical transmission, a fixed repertory, occurs with the decision to produce records. Only what is recorded will be passed on, the rest is left to oblivion and ignorance.

Photography functions in a similar way. The photographer decides with her framing and the momentary release of the shutter what to record of the here and now.<sup>53</sup> "All great photographers have felt free to select motif, frame, lens, filter, emulsion, and grain according to their sensibilities."<sup>54</sup> Just as historiography gives no full account of the past, so "does the mere reflection of reality", recorded in the photograph, "reveal anything about reality", as Benjamin quoted Brecht in his "Small History of Photography".<sup>55</sup>

John Berger believes that photographs,

bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation. A photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this particular object has been seen. If everything that existed were continually being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless.<sup>56</sup>

Meaning is not created by recording as such, but by the decision that precedes the recording, the decision on what is important enough to be recorded. This idea is analogous with Augé's description of memory and remembrance. Remembering every image of our life would rapidly lead to saturation. Forgetting is a result of the incapacity to remember every moment in time and is important in shaping what will be remembered. What seems less important gets washed away. "Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are crafted by the sea."<sup>57</sup>

For Benjamin, the photograph contains something other than just the record of physical reality. "For it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye:

53 As the photographer's experience relates to my own, I use the feminine form for the photographer. Any other generalisation concerning groups like historians, viewers and others will be referred to in the masculine.

54 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History—The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton (NJ), 1995, p. 52

55 Benjamin, Walter: "A Small History of Photography", in: *One Way Street*, London, 1985, p. 255

56 Berger, John: "Understanding a Photograph", in: Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.): *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven, 1980, p. 292

57 Augé, Marc: *Oblivion*, Minneapolis, 2004, p. 20







other in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious."<sup>58</sup> The photograph can show things the photographer was not aware of when releasing the shutter. There is always the chance for an element to have slipped the photographer's notice, so that in the enlargement she can find things, "that would not have been suspected in the original print — nor in reality itself, for that matter."<sup>59</sup>

The problem with photography though is that its concept and understanding have been grasped as a truthful record of physical reality throughout most literature on it since its beginning. In this way it is similar to the perception of history. While one can take the selection of events into account, it seems difficult to detect what has been forgotten. Although the viewer knows that the photograph can only show a fragment in space and time, as he will never get to see what was outside the frame, its meaning seems defined only by what is kept. Thus history and photography both create a specific image of the past that is difficult to challenge.

A photograph is already a message about the event it records. The urgency of this message is not entirely dependent on the urgency of the event, but neither can it be entirely independent from it. [...] Photography is the process of rendering observation self-conscious.<sup>60</sup>

What Berger suggests here is that the process of selection through the photographer is not just an intrinsic part of the creation of photographic images, but that photography should be seen as a psychological process rather than merely a depiction of reality.

Freud drew an analogy between the linearity of psychic time and the photographic process.

Freud's use of the model of the photographic apparatus is intended to show that all psychic phenomena necessarily pass first through an unconscious phase, through darkness and

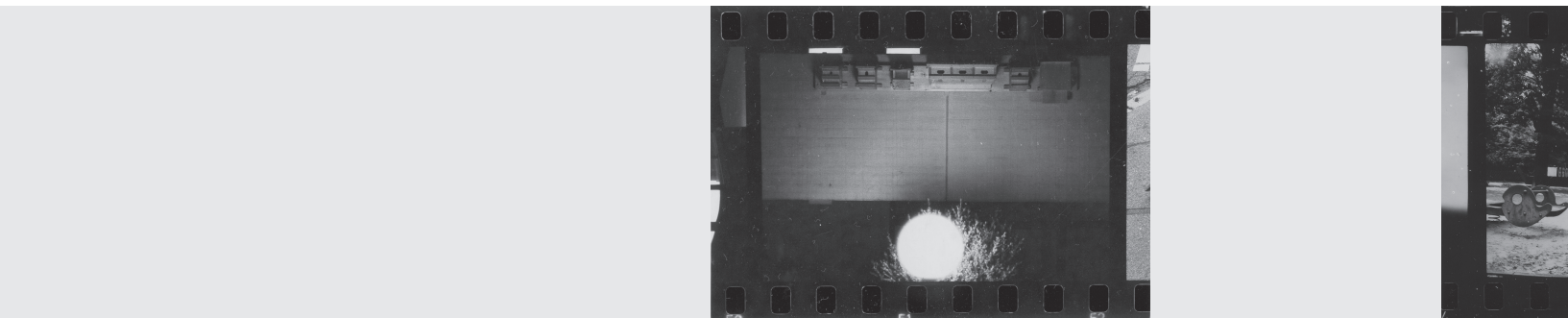
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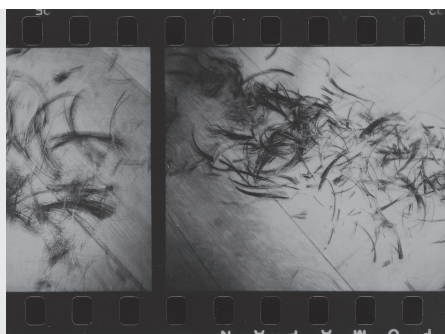
58 Benjamin, Walter: "A Small History of Photography", in: *One Way Street*, London, 1985, p. 243

59 Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.): *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven, 1980 p. 266

60 Berger, John: "Understanding a Photograph", in: Trachtenberg, Alan (ed.): *Classic Essays on Photography*, New Haven, 1980, p. 292







the negative, before acceding to consciousness, before developing within the clarity of the positive.<sup>61</sup>

The first stage of psychic time would be infancy, which equals the stage of light leaving its imprint in the emulsion. The second stage is described as the process of development from the latent image to the negative, "the time of development and growth". The third stage is "marked by the passage from darkness to light, from infancy to adulthood", the time of the positive image.<sup>62</sup>

While history is a more general recall of past events in a wider context — mostly concerning a country or a people — collective memory is the recollection of a past by individuals who share the memory to construct a common identity.<sup>63</sup> The past only comes into existence when we engage with it.<sup>64</sup> In Assmann's reading of Halbwachs, the relationship between memory and history is one of succession. History only begins where the past is no longer remembered as an integral part of life.<sup>65</sup>

If I bring this idea forward to look at photography, then a photograph turns into a historical document as soon as no living person relates directly to the depicted anymore. To illustrate that concept, Kracauer described the image of a grandmother as a young film diva.

The photograph, over sixty years old and already a photograph in the modern sense, depicts her as a young girl of twenty-four. Since photographs are likenesses, this one must have been a likeness as well. It was carefully produced in the studio of a court photographer. But

<sup>61</sup> Kofman, Sarah: *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, Ithaca, 1999, p. 22

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27

<sup>63</sup> Halbwachs's concept of collective memory is based on communication. While one remembers individually, communication within the collective is needed to start the memorizing process. Any transmission of events past, either in writing or in images, helps us to create an idea of the past. The more one can relate to the account of the moment, the easier one can reconstruct it. Looking at a photographic album, we either see images of people we know, have known or know of, which keeps the images alive. Or we do not know any of the depicted faces, then we look at them impassively and just see records of past clothing styles, hair styles, architecture and more. To create an active image of the past a combination of objective facts and subjective involvement is needed. In this Halbwachs's idea can be associated with Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, which will be explained later (see footnote 184). see Halbwachs, Maurice: *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, Frankfurt 1985

<sup>64</sup> see Assmann, Jan: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, Munich, 1992, p. 31

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44





were it not for the oral tradition, the image alone would not have sufficed to reconstruct the grandmother.<sup>66</sup>

The image of the grandmother serves within the frame of the family as a memory of her life. Once this direct bond is disconnected, the image becomes a historical record of the film diva. It will be transferred from memory to history: "[T]he photographed present has been entirely eternalized."<sup>67</sup>

But as the relationship with the photographed moment, lying in the past, is fully detached from the present of the viewer, "Likeness has ceased to be any help."<sup>68</sup> All the viewer relies on is a convention that makes him believe he is witnessing through the photograph a moment in the past, a moment that was at its time relevant enough — at least for the photographer — to be recorded and remembered. The photograph turns the moment into a decisive moment.<sup>69</sup> Ugo Mulas observed that the truly important task of the photographer is not to grasp the particular moment, but to identify a reality as her own. The task of the camera then is to record the photographer's reality in its totality.<sup>70</sup>

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, with which reality has so to speak seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future subsists so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it.<sup>71</sup>

To see in an exposure of the past a sparking of the future, as Benjamin suggested, it is necessary to go beyond the de facto remembrance of events. The preservation

66 Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 423

67 Ibid., p. 433

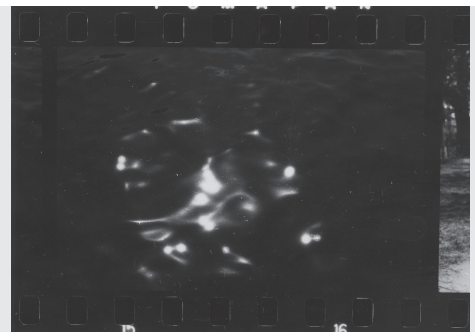
68 Ibid., p. 423

69 The myth of the decisive moment runs through writings on photography. Roland Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, "[T]he Photograph immobilizes a rapid scene in its decisive instant." (see Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 33) But what defines the captured moment as decisive? As the recorded moment is the only one that will be known of in the future, it will automatically become decisive. For Henri Cartier-Bresson the decisive moment photographed was as much defined by the moment as by the organization of forms in the image. (see Cartier-Bresson, Henri: *The Decisive Moment*. New York, 1951)

70 Mulas, Ugo: "Verifikationen", in: Kemp, Wolfgang: *Theorie der Fotografie III (1945-1980)*. Munich, 1983

71 Benjamin, Walter: "A Small History of Photography", in: *One Way Street and Other Writings*, London, 1992, p. 243





of traces of the past — such as ruins, fragments or other remains — can be treated as a securing of evidence or just as keeping visible symbols of remembrance in the psychoanalytically reformulated model of traces of remembrance, in other words as visible agents of the illegible traces that are permanently inscribed in Freud's mystic writing pad.<sup>72</sup> Applied to an understanding of photography, what makes photography a useful tool to look at the past is not the evidence we can find depicted in it, but the traces that might be found in the recording beyond physical reality.

#### Where photography and history meet

"The truth is that the majority of minds are but mediocre recording-cameras of the surrounding world."<sup>73</sup> Like Siegfried Kracauer, Marc Bloch finds many parallels between historical reality and camera reality. History resembles photography as a means of alienation. For all that interested him in history's relationship to the present, Kracauer's focus was also on an antiquarian idea of history, always considered separately, unrelated to present-day issues.<sup>74</sup> Positioning history between science and art, displaying traits of a literary genre, Kracauer's aim is to "establish the intermediary area of history as an area of its own right."<sup>75</sup>

Although in the 19th century history achieved the status of science, movements regarding history from a philosophical perspective rather than purely based on facts already existed. Thus there was still a division between history as science based on factual grounds or laws and history as a philosophical aid to understanding the creation of a society, the analytical in opposition to the narrative.<sup>76</sup> History seeks or constructs, invariant similarities or repeating patterns.

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72 see Weigel, Sigrid: *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit — Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise*, Frankfurt/Main, 1997, p. 36

73 Bloch, Marc: *The Historian's Craft*, New York (A. Knopf Inc.) 1953, p. 101

74 The antiquarian idea of history refers to Nietzsche's essay "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life" that will be discussed later in this chapter.

75 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 16

76 Just as history was classified as science, so were photographs regarded as documents.





"[S]ince the days of Max Weber the boundaries that separate history from sociology have become more fluid."<sup>77</sup> For Marx, nature and the history of Mankind are closely related. He sees Man as a "product and force of nature."<sup>78</sup> Individuals form groups, which form society. The social universe can be regarded as falling under the rule of nature, with certain patterns in human interaction repeating themselves regularly. This idea leads to theories of modern mass societies where dependence on the predictability of individual responses relies on historical studies of past behaviour. As willingly as Kracauer acknowledges such behaviour, he also voices a certain scepticism. "There are actions and emergent situations which so stubbornly resist a breakdown into repeatable elements or a satisfactory explanation from preceding or simultaneous circumstances that they had better be treated as irreducible entities."<sup>79</sup> History offers a great array of possibilities to confirm all sorts of contingencies and repetitions, but also to support new beginnings.

Instead of looking at history analytically as a science, Kracauer demands that historians tell a story. Like Hegel and Nietzsche before him, Kracauer finds the desire for a comprehensible history of humanity to be constituted in Christianity, with its claim of a divine plan. The laws introduced to define history as a science, "rest on the assumption that human history is identical with the history of nature."<sup>80</sup> From this follows the idea that historical time unfolds in measurable chronological time, that the historical process is a linear movement and represents a temporal continuum, for which he finds an equivalent in a spatial continuum presented in photography. Kracauer seems to find all these laws that define history as science to be too limiting, or in his words: "[S]trange mixtures of scientific pretences and theological leftovers".<sup>81</sup>

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77 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 20

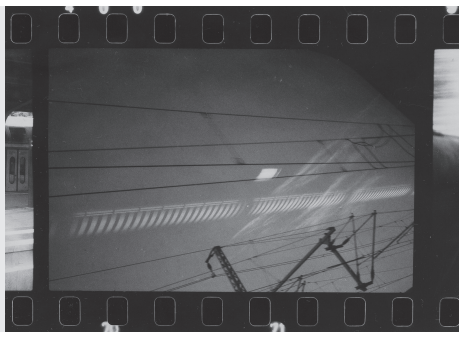
78 Ibid., p. 21

79 Ibid., p. 29

80 Ibid., p. 35

81 Ibid., p. 42







The desire to understand is fundamental to all interest in the history of human affairs. Understanding requires experience and therefore, Kracauer claims, a need for the historian's total involvement, in a sort of epic rather than scientific or factual way.

Only when the epic, in the form of philosophical speculation, and the factual, in the form of laws and regularities, come together, does modern history appear to evolve. "History is indeterminate as to meaning. Its characteristics conform to the materials of which it is woven."<sup>82</sup>

Kracauer writes,

The historian cannot assemble the evidence needed unless he is guided by an idea, however vague, of what he wants to recover of the past and why he wants to recover it; and reversely, the evidence he gathers may in turn oblige him to modify his original hunches.<sup>83</sup>

It is impossible to conduct history as neutral scientific research, since it always requires a specific research interest on the part of the historian. Despite methodological similarities, historical research cannot be seen as disconnected from everyday experience, historical reality being a "mixture of natural events and relatively free decisions".<sup>84</sup> In this, history resembles photography and has been compared to it from the beginning. Photography appears to present this world. History is seen to recall a past world with exactitude and supposed objectivity. "The momentous discovery of the document led historians to believe that documentary authenticity was the repository of the whole truth."<sup>85</sup> Both an awareness of the discussion on history as a science and the invention of photography evolved in the early 19th century. Scientifically-minded realists expected history and photography to show how things had actually been. But this naively realist approach appears to be overcome. Historiography and photography are no longer expected to merely represent what was. Both are seen to be influenced by the individual's experience. To Kracauer, the highest principle of photography and

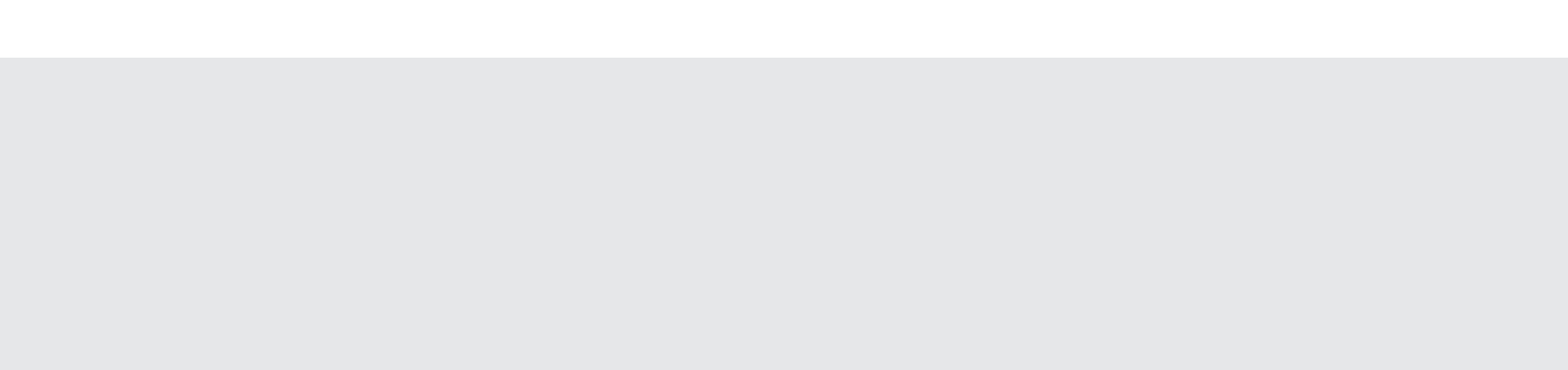
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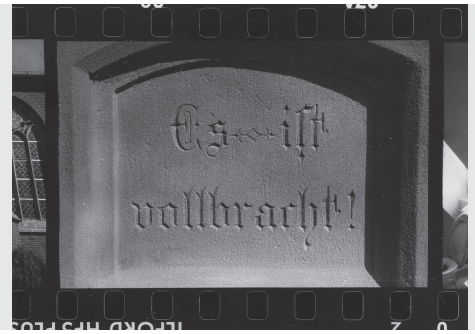
82 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 45

83 Ibid., p. 47

84 Ibid., p. 48

85 Braudel, Fernand: "History and the Social Sciences", in: *On History*, Chicago, 1980, p. 28





historiography is to be true to reality. "The thing that matters in both photography and history is obviously the 'right' balance between the realistic and formative tendencies."<sup>86</sup> Comparing the two pursuits leads to a better understanding of the realistic tendencies and their limits. Not a criticism as such, it serves rather to open up new perspectives from which to study and analyse these two different, and yet in some ways very similar, fields.

As the historian's mind is located in a specific space and time, he, like the photographer, regards things from a certain point of view. The historian looks at the past, while photographs create a past by looking at the photographer's present. But for both, the living present is the starting point of their work.

The past, the predecessor of the present, can only be fully understood by someone who lives really in and with the present, which is presumed to contain all moments preceding it. This involves the risk that problems of the present overshadow the analysis of the past and influence the historian's view. But as the spirit of a period is not at all homogenous, the historian also works from a strong personal position that can, "initiate new situations, new systems of relationships."<sup>87</sup> He must collect evidence and interpret it, much like a detective. But what happens to the facts that fail to touch the historian? "Are they doomed to oblivion?", Kracauer asks.<sup>88</sup> One purpose of history is to discover how we have become what we are; it serves a present interest, or at least takes present interest as its starting point. Both the present interest and scientific impartiality seem of equal importance to historical understanding.

Like Orpheus, the historian must descend into the nether world to bring the dead back to life. [...] They are lost to him when, re-emerging in the sunlight of the present, he turns for fear of losing them. But does he not for the first time take possession of them at this

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86 The 'right' balance between the realistic and formative tendencies, Kracauer mentions, leads to the representational qualities of photography.. Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 56.

87 Ibid., p. 67

88 Ibid., p. 72





very moment — the moment when they forever depart, vanishing in a history of his own making?<sup>89</sup>

While Kracauer compared the historian to a photographer, I wish to compare the historian to a stereotypical tourist visiting sights without really seeing them. Thinking he could understand the impressions better from his photographs, the tourist takes pictures to encounter later. Like the historian who collects documents from the past to gain knowledge about a specific period, the tourist collects photographs of the new and unknown surroundings in passing to view when back home. For both, direct experience is not of interest. History as a retrospective on the past from the present is like the photographs taken by such tourists. The historian gets in his own way. "The historian [...] would have to blot out his self not just for the purpose of dispassionately rendering the course of past events but with a view to becoming a participant observer engrossed in the uniquely significant spectacle that evolves on the stage of the world."<sup>90</sup> This also applies to an exile, who was forced to leave his country as an adult and who thus lost all of his familiar environment. He therefore looks at his new surroundings without any personal history. He looks back at his past as a stranger, but is also a stranger in his new environment, to which he will never fully belong. Such a double estrangement creates a balance between objectivity and subjective involvement, which is useful for historians and photographers alike. One could call the objectivity with which a historian tries to analyse the material "passive", only meeting the minimum requirements of history as a science.

This passive objectivity is where Kracauer sees similarities between historiography and documentary film-making. Directors of documentary films let physical reality speak for itself and refuse to use their creative powers to, "produce the effect of impersonal authenticity."<sup>91</sup> But just as the film director frames the reality in front of the lens in a

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89 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 79

90 Ibid., p. 81

91 Ibid., p. 90





specific way, so the historian must interpret the facts he collected once he has accounted for all the facts of the past.

As Marc Bloch wrote in *The Historian's Craft*, "in the film which [the historian] is examining, only the last picture remains quite clear. In order to reconstruct the faded features of the others, it behooves him first to unwind the spool in the opposite direction from that in which the pictures were taken."<sup>92</sup>

The journey into the past will ultimately change the historian's present and must therefore lead to a change of perspective. This makes the historian a parent of at least two times, his own present time and the time he investigates, namely the past.<sup>93</sup> A historical understanding results from a thorough analysis of the facts collected in correlation with the historian's life experience, "faculties bound up with a reflective disposition and the knack of passive observation."<sup>94</sup> The historical idea emerges from these two aspects. But just like any idea, it will never comprise everything. Ideas are determined by choice. "To the extent, then, that historical ideas are generalisations they cannot be 'right' without being 'wrong' also."<sup>95</sup> They are of an active objectivity driven by the subjective interpretation of the historian instead of a passive objectivity through the plain listing of facts and data.

The larger the scale of recounted history — for instance the history of a people — the further the historian must distance himself from it to get a full overview. While always searching for the general, one should not disregard the particular. The general, in film terms the total shot, and the particular, or the close-up, must exist beside each other in a montage. The close-up enriches the total shot. Kracauer distinguishes between micro and macro histories. Using the above mentioned terms, he calls micro histories "close-ups", as they isolate and focus on some (visual) detail. Historical research on some

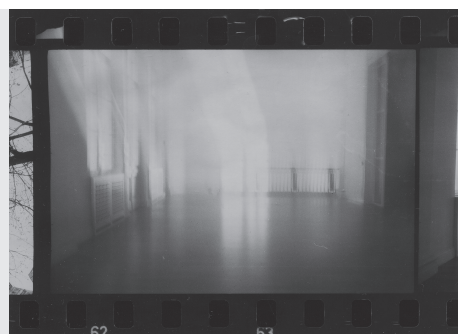
92 Bloch, Marc: *The Historian's Craft*, New York (A. Knopf Inc.), 1953, p. 46

93 Most likely that is also valid for the photographer, inhabiting two times, the one when he took the pictures and the time when he can finally look at them, or show them. There is the present of the picture-taking, becoming immediately the past, and the present of the viewer, which moves on with the image and is always a different present.

94 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 96

95 Ibid., p. 100







specific periods or peoples is classified in the same way. "As a rule they result from their author's desire to supplement, refine, or indeed invalidate notions and explanations which have been unquestioningly accepted by generations of macro historians."<sup>96</sup> The close-up appears to be more accurate than the high-magnitude overview given by macro-history and is therefore seen by Tolstoy and Namier as the starting point of any investigation into historical truth. They believed that macro history builds up from the accumulation of micro historical events. But, as Kracauer objects, not all macro history can be perceived through micro history. Some greater events might not be envisioned through the accumulation of individual smaller incidents. Thus by just concentrating on micro history, the overall image might lose out. But we cannot learn enough from macro history alone. The macro picture is too vast to be understood in its entirety. It holds too much information and overburdens the researcher. "Macro history cannot become history in the ideal sense unless it involves micro history."<sup>97</sup> Thereby history becomes a story and a study; it lives off a permanent movement between the whole and the detail. Micro history is also helpful as the historian views the past from a certain perspective, which might prevent him from seeing the full picture. Here the analysis of smaller fractions can be helpful. The combination of long-range views and minutiae is similar to the narrative structure of many novels and films. "In several cases the movement between different levels has resulted in an 'idea', a new principle of explanation."<sup>98</sup>

What may be called "general history" consists of different parts of special histories, such as the history of art, technology or philosophy, or even of a people or an age. But at the same time general history differs essentially, "from special histories in that it extends over a variety of areas."<sup>99</sup> It needs a perspective from a wider distance than special histories, which are studied as close-ups. Thus the chronological time of general history is at risk of disintegrating, "into the divergent strands of events of which it is

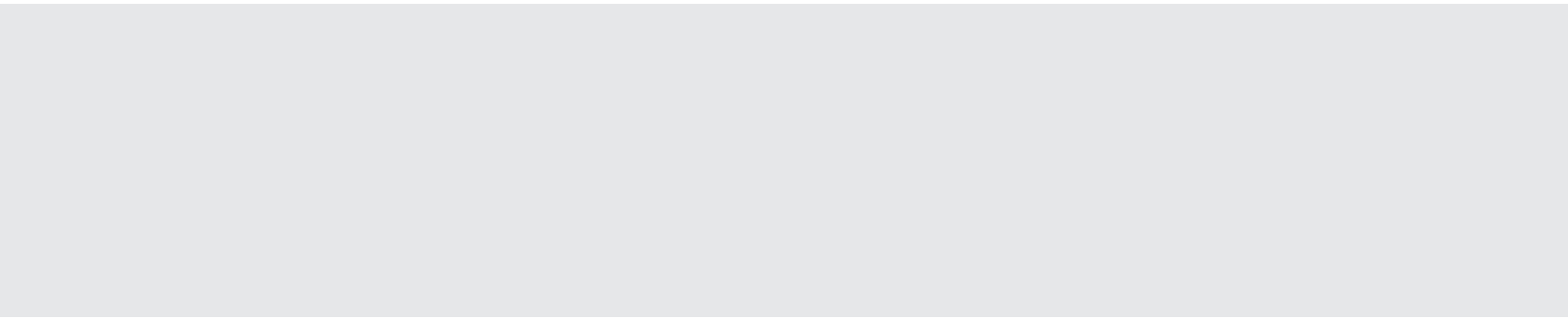
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96 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 106

97 Ibid., p. 120

98 Ibid., p. 129

99 Ibid., p. 164





composed."<sup>100</sup> To let it appear as a unity, the historian fits all cultural or political parts of a period into one image, thus risking the loss of their individual importance. The truth of the detail is often sacrificed for the overall picture. History thus generalises all events and brings them into line.

Kracauer argues in favour of a balance between a longing for universal truth and an awareness of its limits in absoluteness. Thus we receive different outcomes of historical stories based on the different historical materials involved in the creation of the narrative.

History is identified as a continuous record in chronological time, comprising all events imaginable. Being just a list of events bound to their chronological order, these seem to have happened inevitably, there and then along a timeline. Historical occurrences are made to follow a presumed irreversible chronological order. History, "seeks to provide a temporal continuum." Conversely, as already mentioned above, Kracauer saw photography as presenting "a spatial continuum".<sup>101</sup> Lined up like pearls on a string, the logical order of historical events is defined by their chronology. Similarly the accumulation of all individual photographs, which inevitably present only spatial sections, assemble a phantom of a perceived spatial continuum.

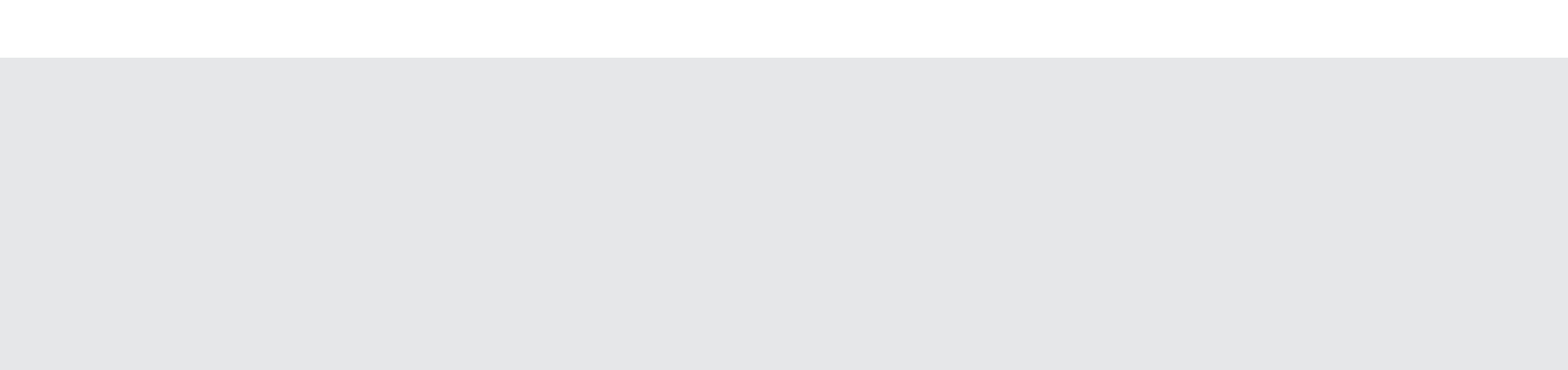
"The photograph," writes Flusser, "has succeeded in carrying the image into history; but in doing so, it has interrupted the stream of history," thereby creating an isolation.<sup>102</sup> Thus the photograph problematises Braudel's notion of history as, "the total of all possible histories — an assemblage of professions and points of view, from yesterday, today, and tomorrow."<sup>103</sup>

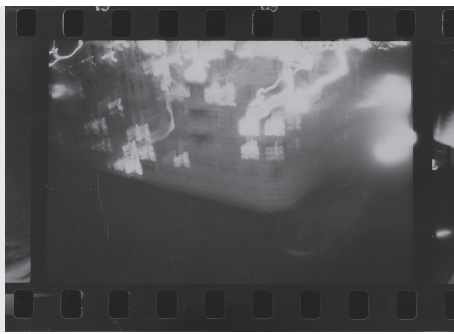
100 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 171

101 Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 425

102 Photographs as technical images are experienced as scenes not as a process. Thereby they do not appear as a total of all possible histories, but as individual separate moments in the past. Flusser holds the technical, numerical origin of photographs responsible for the fact that we "experience our environment no longer as a process, but as a sequence of scenes". Therefore photographs become "dams placed in the way of the stream of history". If "the carrier of historical consciousness is the linear code of the alphabet", in photographs, which are coded in numbers, "an unhistorical, calculating, formal consciousness articulates itself." "Photo apparatuses are based on equations of mechanics, chemistry and optics." Thus the images resulting from these apparatuses follow a numeric order. Flusser, Vilém: "Photography and History", in: *Writings*, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 128

103 Braudel, Fernand: "History and the Social Sciences", in: *On History*, Chicago, 1980, p. 34





"The past is, by definition, a datum which nothing in the future will change. But the knowledge of the past is something progressive which is constantly transforming and perfecting itself."<sup>104</sup> Here Flusser describes photographs as technical images, that are "produced, reproduced and distributed by apparatuses" and therefore are of no help.<sup>105</sup> Historical records are no fixed entities, while photographs appear to be.

As time is not an absolute measure, it cannot be the only relevant basis for history. This idea of history simplifies its own cause. The chronology of events tells us nothing about their relationships and meanings. This is even more so for memory. In opposition to history, memories are stored in a subjective time curve, and are therefore difficult to truly identify within chronological time, which one cannot experience. At the same time we order our lives according to chronological time and are able to locate our time of birth within a specific flow of generations. Life time follows a chronological order.<sup>106</sup> I will come to explore the difference between memories and history further in the last part of this chapter.

Time flows irreversibly. Our concept of it is chronological, but not necessarily our memory. History has neither, "an end nor is it amenable to aesthetic redemption."<sup>107</sup>

There is no place for caesurae instigated by major upheavals during the 20th century. But as the past is made of incoherent events — "[e]ach 'current event' brings together movements of different origins, of a different rhythm: today's time and dates from yesterday, the day before yesterday and all former times" — it is a difficult task to make them into one.<sup>108</sup> That is where history and art meet. The historian fulfills his aim through narrating. This marks the divergence from the true record, as history is perceived, and the epic theme in which the story appears. For history must find a narrative form in order to be passed on. History finds itself being both, a science and an art. "Art [...] fulfills an indispensable function if it is not so much a goal as a

<sup>104</sup> Bloch, Marc: *The Historian's Craft*, New York (A. Knopf Inc.), 1953, p. 58

<sup>105</sup> Flusser, Vilém: "Photography and History", in: *Writings*, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 128

<sup>106</sup> The introduction of facebook's timeline reaffirms this belief.

<sup>107</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 163

<sup>108</sup> Braudel, Fernand: *History and the Social Sciences*, in: *On History*, Chicago, 1980, p. 34





consequence of the historian's pursuit."<sup>109</sup> In other words the historian must decide on the form of his narration on a total exterior continuum. The use of language in a literary sense helps the historian to escape from the "tyranny of the chronological order", although the field is still largely dominated by a nostalgia for large-scale narration.<sup>110</sup>

For Kracauer, both historical reality and photographic reality reside in an anteroom area because of indefinite ways in which they are dealt with. Neither fully factual nor fully fictional, these realities lie in an interspace between science and art.<sup>111</sup> Just as photography has been regarded as either purely artistic image creation or a truthful representation of physical reality, history has been defined either as "a matter of negligible opinions" or as a factual record of events past.<sup>112</sup> As a truthful record of the visible the photographic medium can redeem an outer reality from oblivion. That would also be expected of history. History's ability to look at the past is limited to a realistic tradition that omits all unrealized possibilities. "Ideas and philosophical truths come closest to puncturing the screen that separates us from what we fathom to be Truth."<sup>113</sup>

### On the uses and disadvantages of History

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes specifies two elements of looking at photographs.<sup>114</sup> Firstly, the studium is based on knowledge; knowledge of the photographer, of the subject depicted, and about history or histories behind the image. Secondly, the punctum is based on the viewer's personal and emotional reaction. Although based

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<sup>109</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 177

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 186

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 191

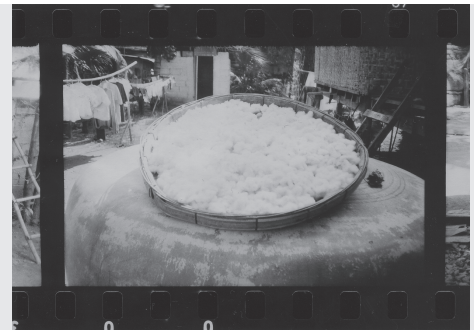
<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 192

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 202

<sup>114</sup> Barthes, Roland, *Camera lucida*, London, 2000







on factual account, a photograph offers both readings.<sup>115</sup> The more truthful to reality the photograph seems, the more it implies the studium and produces a belief in authenticity.<sup>116</sup>

In Martin Jay's reading of Walter Benjamin, the appreciation of authenticity is closely linked to reproduction. "Authenticity becomes 'authentic' only against the background of reproducibility. [...] [I]ts origin lies not in itself, but rather in its opposite, reproduction."<sup>117</sup>

While Barthes clung to the idea of the representation of a presence in a photograph, Benjamin enthused about the emptiness. According to Douglas Crimp, "the notion of presence as a kind of increment to being there, a ghostly aspect of presence that is its excess, its supplement," was what fascinated Benjamin in Atget's photographs of Paris.<sup>118</sup> Benjamin and Barthes are two main protagonists in a canon of photographic theory that emerged in the 20th century.

Reproducing what "has been" functions as proof of a "decisive moment", a singular moment in time worth being remembered.<sup>119</sup>

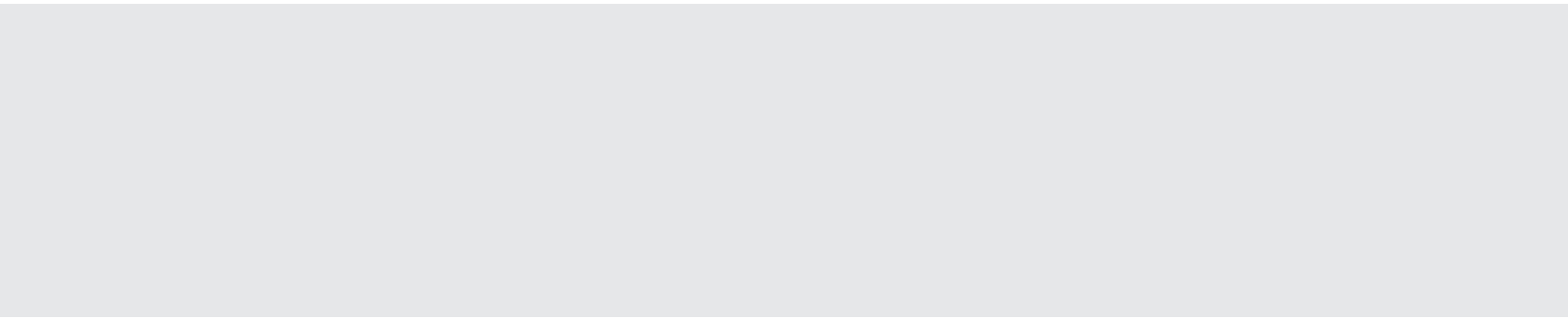
115 The studium offers a reading of the photograph as "has-been", while the punctum offers a "this-will-be". With the punctum Barthes provides a photographic reading beyond a past-tense. In the present of the photograph, the past and future meet. But Barthes's future always anticipates a termination in death. In contrast, following Ernst Bloch's concept of a "not-yet" as possibilities with no regard to an ending, I am searching for photographic future possibilities that are not directed towards an ending. See Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 96

116 The word 'authenticity' derives from the Greek words *autos*, meaning 'self' and *hentes*, meaning 'prepared'. 'Authenticity' denotes that something is of undisputed origin and can therefore be recognised as itself, for example a Being's existence is asserted through its being in actual fact. Authenticity in relation to artworks certifies a genuine origin of the artwork, either for the artist or, as is quite common in photography, for the depicted or recorded. In the artwork essay, Benjamin uses the German word "Echtheit" (genuineness), which is translated as authenticity. (Benjamin, Walter: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977) Since camera-based photography is understood as the mechanical recording of a referent's reflection, it is regarded to authenticate the referent's existence. Barthes writes: "Photography never lies; or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, [...] never as to its existence." (Barthes, Roland, *Camera lucida*, London, 2000, p. 87). I use the term in this sense. The term is also associated with Heidegger who used it rather than in reference to things essentially in reference to Being. In his *Sein und Zeit* he used the German words "Eigentlichkeit" and "Uneigentlichkeit" — translated as 'authenticity' and 'inauthenticity' — to differentiate between two basic modes of being in the world. In short, authenticity describes the Being of its own right, while inauthenticity defines the Being through its being connected to the world (see Heidegger, Martin: *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen, 2006, p. 42/43). Heidegger's use of authenticity and its political implication is not in my interest here.

117 see "Taking On the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno's Critique of Genuineness", Author(s): Martin Jay, Reviewed work(s); Source: *New German Critique*, No. 97, Adorno and Ethics (Winter, 2006), p. 15-30, p.19

118 see Benjamin, Walter: "A Small History of Photography", in: *One Way Street and other Writings*, London/New York, 1992, p. 250

119 see footnote no. 69





The human ability to remember was highly praised by Nietzsche, who pitied and also envied animals for not having any recollection of the past.<sup>120</sup> But, as he postulated in his essay "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life", historical recollection is not always a blessing but can also become a curse.<sup>121</sup> In her reading of Nietzsche, Sarah Kofman finds references to the camera obscura. She writes, "The dark chamber is set in relation to a system of forces which are themselves intended to establish a certain hierarchy among forces. It is, therefore, the metaphor for forgetting, for a forgetting necessary for life."<sup>122</sup> Sometimes overwhelmed by memories Man looks enviously at the herds grazing with nothing on their minds but the present moment. Then he realizes that only remembering also enables him to forget. As the example of animals shows, it is possible to live happily without memory. But to Nietzsche, forgetting is essential to action of any kind, because it presents us with a choice. Many years later Marc Augé argued in a similar fashion in favour of oblivion.<sup>123</sup> What is forgotten forms remembrance.

Nietzsche explains in ten meditations how the remembrance of things past can shape a sense of different times, of the past, the present and the future. Reflection on the past has a bearing on future behaviour. That is how man progresses. Only by having an understanding of his past actions can he create concepts for a future, partly in the hope of making it better. To learn how to make things better is the purpose of history for life. But once history has offered an awareness of the past and become an autonomous science, it is believed to offer useful conclusions for life. On the other hand, history practised with excess will lead to a degeneration of life in the present, which then ultimately leads to a degeneration of history itself.

In his second meditation, Nietzsche distinguishes between three different types of history: monumental, antiquarian and critical.

<sup>120</sup> Nietzsche agrees with Kant with respect to historical awareness being the key difference between animals and humans.

<sup>121</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich: "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life", in: *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, 2008,

<sup>122</sup> Kofman, Sarah: *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, Ithaca, 1999, p. 29/30

<sup>123</sup> Augé, Marc: *Oblivion*, Minneapolis, 2004, see above, p. 47





Monumental history specifically counteracts resignation to ultimately save Mankind. The monumental mode of history consists of an appreciation of the epic achievements of all ages. What one "learns from it" is, "that the greatness that once existed was in any way possible and may thus be possible again."<sup>124</sup> The monumental mode can stir an anticipation of possible futures to come. Only, in contrast to Ernst Bloch's idea of an undetermined "Can-Be", which offers both known and unknown possibilities, Nietzsche's monumental approach foreshadows an iteration of the once possible and known.<sup>125</sup> The monumental approach meets Barthes's reading of a photograph being "the living image of a dead thing", telling the viewer what "has-been" and also what "will-be", ultimately for Barthes always death. But unlike other forms of remembrance, according to Barthes the photograph cannot be placed in a ritual (only if one avoided looking at it). The photograph, as "Time's immobilization", is the "stasis of an *arrest*", which only blocks memory. It never activates memory, but instead becomes a "counter-memory". If, so Barthes, "the dialectic is that thought which masters the corruptible and converts the negation of death into the powers to work, then the photograph is undialectical [...]."<sup>126</sup> If I now adopt Benjamin's claim for an image to be dialectical "when flashing up in the now of its recognizability", then a photograph, as transparent record of a past physical reality, works according to Nietzsche's monumental approach.<sup>127</sup> It would need an additional momentum to make it recognized as a representation to overcome its plain relation to the past and become a carrier of hope in the sense of Bloch's "Can-Be".

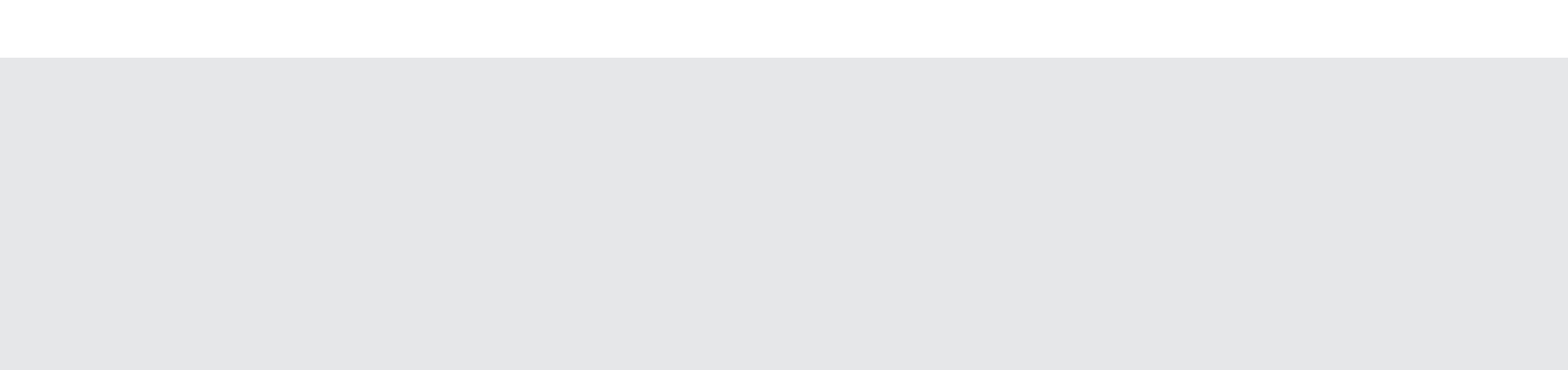
As the term 'monumental approach' already suggests, the construction and celebration of monuments is related to the monumental mode. But not only do monuments remind us of grand achievements in the past (like documentary photographs), they

124 Nietzsche, Friedrich: "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life", in: *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, 2008, p.69

125 see Introduction and Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope* (Volume 1), Cambridge (MA), 1986

126 Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 79, 90, 91, 96; Italics in the original

127 The photograph as a documentary record presents the object photographed rather than itself as an image of the object. Thereby the object is seen through the transparency of the image, which becomes invisible as such. Benjamin, Walter: *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge (MA)/ London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 473, see also footnote no. 185.





visually and historically stand in the way and block the view, making any action resulting from the memory they are supposed to keep impossible. We all know the war memorials commemorating great deeds and victories, which have become such a familiar sight since the two World Wars. In the second half of the 20th century monuments became reminders of wars, but also of crimes against humanity such as the Holocaust memorials in post-WWII Germany.

The monumental approach to history predetermines the culmination of the future as a closure, like Barthes's reading of photographs ("death in the future").<sup>128</sup> Historical events, described as worthy of imitation, run the risk of becoming narratives of free poetic invention. The monumental approach gives rise to the disadvantage of history — when seen as a science — by blocking the dialectical relationship of past and present and thereby the progress into the future through permanently looking backwards. Nietzsche suspected that by upholding the greatness of the past, there is no space for greatness to come.

This can be exemplified looking at a photographic work: In the 1980s, the German photographer Dirk Reinartz set out on a mission to document the historical sites of concentration camps, of which many had been already turned into memorial sites. The memorials that were reminders of the past were meant to be brought forward by the photographs to Reinartz's present time to stay active for the future. As Reinartz's photographic approach is documentary, his photographs are transparent and become just carriers of the visible appearance of the memorials. The images were published in a book entitled *Deathly Still*.<sup>129</sup> Reinartz, a documentary photographer, wanted to save the historical locations from disappearance and oblivion and give them a broader visibility that was disconnected from their geographical location.

In his account of the memorial sites of former concentration camps, recurring themes are watch towers, barbed wire, vast empty landscapes, rail tracks, chimneys and views obstructed by window frames in the foreground. The depicted sites meander between

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128 Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 96

129 Reinartz, Dirk: *Deathly Still*, New York, 1995







what Alois Riegl called a value of age (Alterswert) and a cultural value (Kulturwert).<sup>130</sup> Showing signs of the time that passed since these sites had been in use, especially the first years after the war when they were still ignored and left to decay, the locations were partly restored as memorial sites, once awareness of the Holocaust increased.

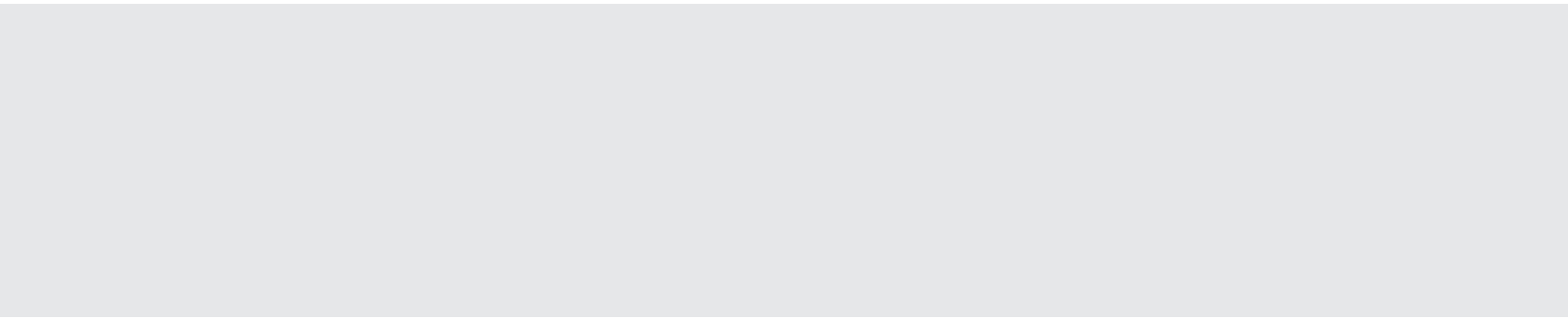
Monuments always contain a certain historical momentum. In his analysis of the importance of monuments, Alois Riegl discerns different values of monuments that can often be exclusive to one another. The value of age is based on visible marks that time leaves on the monument. For the cultural value the monument must be preserved close to its original state. As a third category Riegl names a value of intentional remembrance (gewollter Erinnerungswert). While the value of age is based purely on the perishability the cultural value must impede — at least from that day forward — the value of intentional remembrance claims imperishability, eternal presence and a state of ceaseless becoming. In addition to the differentiation of these three values of a monument, Riegl distinguishes between intentional and purely unintentional monuments. Intentional monuments are those that are built with a monumental approach in mind. By contrast, everything left behind by history can be called unintentional monuments. The former appear in much smaller numbers than the latter.<sup>131</sup> While intentional monuments serve the idea of the monumental approach, often on the basis of their cultural value, unintentional monuments carry the value of age and can be useful for Nietzsche's antiquarian approach. The antiquarian approach to history purely concerns remembrance. The monumental approach serves an ambition with regard to a repetition of great achievements. But can history ever be repeated?

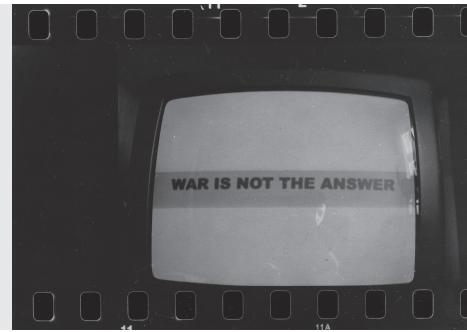
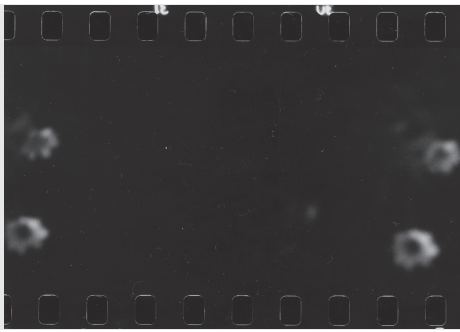
And what of the horrific events? They must be excluded from the,

sub-Nietzschean philosophy whose paean of praise to the redemptive power of sufferings marks, however, the limit case of an older, Christocentric world *before* Auschwitz. [...] *After*

<sup>130</sup> Alois Riegl, K.K. . *Zentral-Kommision für Kunst- und historische Denkmale: Der moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung*, 1903

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 39.





Auschwitz there can be no redemptive discovery of meaning in the pathos of beautiful suffering or dream of redemptive resurrections offered by legends of Orpheus and Christ. To find any meaning at all in atrocities and trauma is itself an obscenity and a violation of any kind of memory.<sup>132</sup>

Christian Graf von Krockow's text in Reinartz's book *Deathly Still* finds an analogy in the recurring emblematic structures to the mechanisation of the inhuman industrialised killing.<sup>133</sup> Reinartz's photographs confirm our expectations of the appearance of a concentration camp. In that respect they do not surprise us. A viewer with a specific knowledge of the depicted subject finds the historical facts confirmed through images that can only refer to the past on a symbolic level. The limited interpretation of photographs as indexical representations of historical sites merely gives a factual account of the past that does not touch on the viewer's experience. As Flusser has argued, by attributing photographs to history, they block the stream of history.<sup>134</sup>

In between the predictable images of camp sites, one finds images of landscapes, some taken with a panorama camera.<sup>135</sup> While the viewer finds remains of the former camp structures in the images of the camps, some of the landscape images bear no signs of the atrocities that took place there during the Second World War. While many of the camp sites have been turned into memorial sites and can be classified under Riegl's "intentional monuments conserving a cultural value", the landscapes can be classified as "unintentional monuments with an age value".<sup>136</sup>

The images of the landscapes show the total absence of any remains. The site is only defined through the caption and the viewer's knowledge. The photographs only represent what "has been" in front of the camera at the time of exposure.

<sup>132</sup> Pollock, Griselda: *Allo-Thanatography or Allo-Auto-Biography: A Few Thoughts on One Painting in Charlotte Salomon's Leben? oder Theater?*, 1941-42, Ostfildern, 2011, p. 13

<sup>133</sup> see Reinartz, Dirk: *Deathly Still*, New York, 1995, cover text

<sup>134</sup> Flusser, Vilém: "Photography and History," in: *Writings*, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 128, see footnote no. 100

<sup>135</sup> Baer, Ulrich: *Spectral Evidence*, Cambridge (MA), 2002, p. 66. Ulrich Baer suggests that these landscape images should be grasped as a refusal to represent the obvious sites that carry the testimony.

<sup>136</sup> see Alois Riegl, K.K. : *Zentral-Kommission für Kunst- und historische Denkmale: Der moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung*, 1903





In conjunction with the captions that accompany the images and the knowledge the viewer has about the sites, Reinartz's images provoke an afterlife (Nachleben) of images of the Holocaust. The viewer understands the images from a perspective according to Barthes's notion of the studium. They can be read in Nietzsche's sense of the antiquarian mode.<sup>137</sup> The photographic depiction is thus purely a retrospection and unconnected to the present.

If monumental history is seen as located fully in the past, making it almost a refusal to acknowledge the present, then the antiquarian approach upholds the past from a perspective of the now. History relates to the present, but in an idealizing retrospection. It is an important means for artists to embrace their own traditions and create new ways on that ground. While the antiquarian awareness of one's own history may seem self-centred, for Nietzsche it is a, "salutary ignorance [...] to further the interests of the community."<sup>138</sup> It stands in strong opposition to "the cosmopolitan hunting after new and ever newer things", which has become increasingly accelerated over the centuries.<sup>139</sup> In this regard historical awareness is valuable, but should never become more important than life.

Nietzsche's monumental approach cherishes the past through visual references in form of monuments. Foucault observed that, "in our time history is that which transforms documents into monuments."<sup>140</sup> Hence, regarded as historical records, Reinartz's photographs documenting the memorials of the camps back away from the monument just to transform themselves into monuments.

I will return to take a closer look at Reinartz's work in chapter 2.

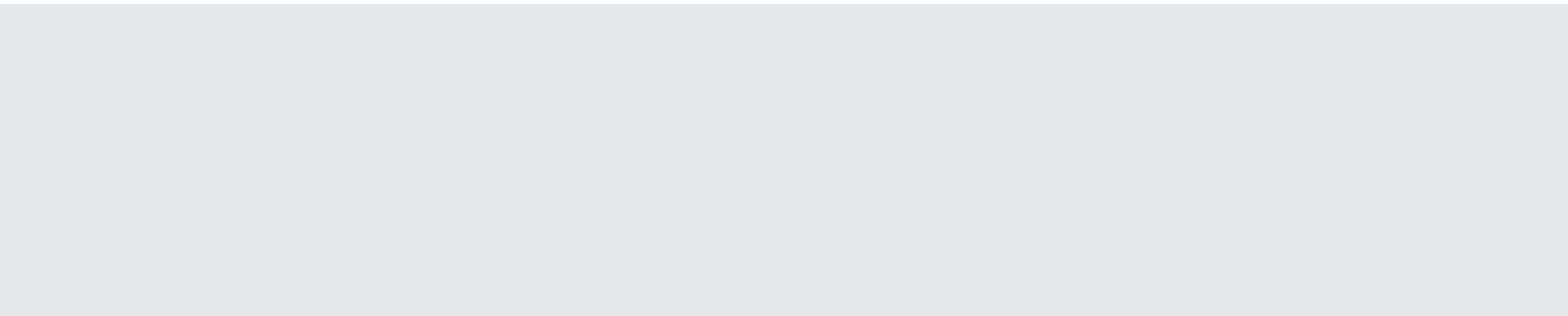
While the monument as an object is a paean to the greatness of the historical event, the photograph, regarded with Barthes's "having been" in mind, pretends to represent the actual site and holds on to it. While the monument makes death (or its remembrance)

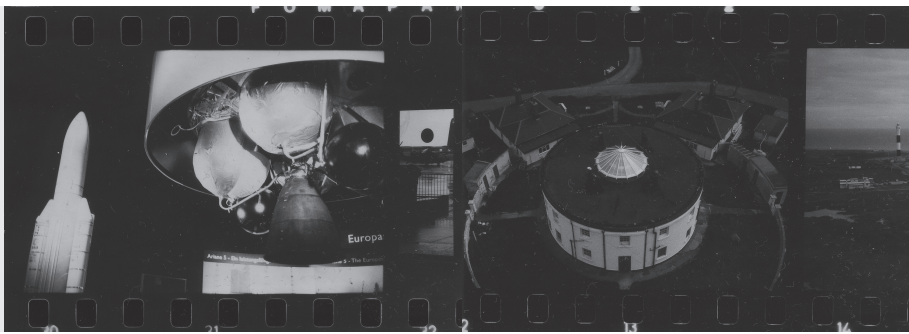
<sup>137</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich: "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life", in *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, 2008

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 73/ 74

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 74

<sup>140</sup> Foucault, Michel: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London, 2002, p. 6





immortal, "the Photograph is a certain but fugitive testimony". Since the photograph ages — "it fades, weakens, vanishes" — it is not as longlasting a memory as monuments were intended to be. Earlier societies managed to make memory immortal by building monuments, but modern society "has renounced the Monument" due to the vulnerability of its new memorizing medium.<sup>141</sup>

The antiquarian approach is rather regressive as it offers only a limited vision resulting in an overestimation of the past and a low regard for the present. Since only certain moments of the past find their way into historical remembrance through photographic remembrance, others become invisible. The past has to be revisited to keep it actual. "Antiquarian history itself degenerates from the moment it is no longer animated and inspired by the fresh life of the present."<sup>142</sup> Photographs should not so much work as records of moments past, but can rather be understood as transmitters of past moments.

If the monumental approach can be connected to a visual description of the past through the monument, I regard the antiquarian approach as identical to photography, which is administered so that the recorded does not only speak of its reference, but as an image in its own right.

In addition to the monumental and the antiquarian mode of history, which on closer inspection both offer a complex of problems for their use for life, Nietzsche defines a third, namely critical mode. The critical mode offers a possibility not only to revere the past, but also to be able to condemn it, "[f]or since we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes."<sup>143</sup> So the use of the critical mode for life is not to solidify in reverence of the past, but to learn from the experiences of the past, good and bad, in order not to repeat the same mistakes. We can find Riegl's value of intentional remembrance in the critical mode. It is not helpful for the identity of a people or

<sup>141</sup> Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 93,

<sup>142</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich: "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life", in *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, 2008, p.75

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p. 76







the creation of culture to merely accumulate historical knowledge. Knowledge must be understood and digested. Otherwise the accumulation of unrelated knowledge will hinder the development of a culture or a character. Focussing on Germany after World War II, I will discuss in chapter 2 how the German people tried to digest the events of the Third Reich by accumulating facts and numbers.

Nietzsche for his part illustrates his thought by looking at the Germany of his time. He criticizes the lack of a proper national character and blames this on a misunderstood idea of culture that ends in conventional copies of other nations with an apparently inherent culture. This false belief in the acquisition of culture through the imitation of historically recorded accomplishments of others can only lead to frustration. As a result, "modern man suffers from a weakened personality."<sup>144</sup> While strong personalities benefit from historical consciousness, weak ones can only be utterly extinguished by it, as they only end up playing roles, and playing them badly.<sup>145</sup> Plain knowledge is not helpful. If one is only after a "canon of truth", one would only "adapt the past to contemporary triviality".<sup>146</sup>

While the monumental mode of history is directed backwards, the antiquarian mode keeps man within a familiar structure. At last critical history is helpful in creating a present as it judges, condemns and leads to a learning from the past. History offers different approaches for different cultures.

It is a myth that historical facts would help to reproduce the empirical nature of things themselves, that a historical moment engraves itself by its own action on a purely passive medium, as on a photograph. "Objectivity and justice have nothing to do with one another."<sup>147</sup> While objectively referring to recorded historical events, the choice one has to make will be subjective, and therefore not empirically true. Any generalisation opposes the work of the historian, who must weave events together subjectively. Thus

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<sup>144</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich: "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life", in *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 83

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p. 86

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 90

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 91





Nietzsche calls the historian a creative mind in the way that he can relate objective facts to each other and assemble them to a narrative. The past can only be evaluated from its future, the historian's present.

Nietzsche's ideal historian who values the past with regard to the present is applicable to a photographer who avoids turning any moment into history by the simple depiction of one decisive moment after another, a photographer who works intentionally with the different times evoked by a photograph: It is taken in the photographer's present, which immediately becomes the viewer's past. In that case the photographer's present is regarded as a more distant past. Photographs often refer to a historical past that is only known to the artist by second-hand knowledge. Like a historian, the photographer needs to be aware of her powers to create an image of the past. In order to be valuable to the present, the photograph must present an awareness of the choices made by the photographer, condemning everything outside the spatial and temporal frame to oblivion. In the words of Marc Augé, "what remains is the product of an erosion caused by oblivion."<sup>148</sup> Oblivion is created by both the photographer and the historian, by deciding which past moments are decisive enough to be recorded, and which are not. What remains of the past is a record of more or less arbitrary individual decisions, while what is not recorded is left to be forgotten.

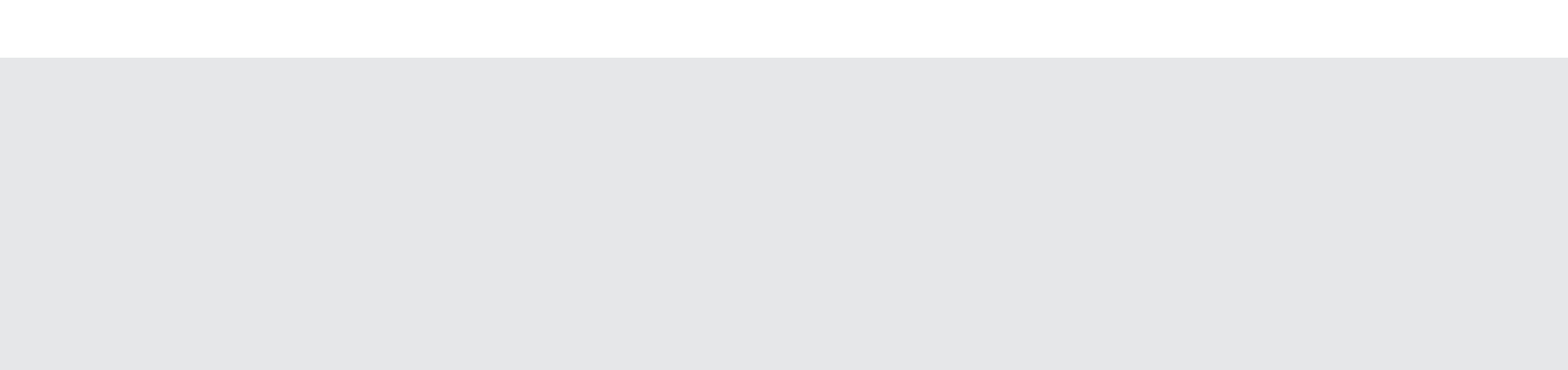
The formation of history was itself inseparable from the development and institutionalisation of a regime of evidence, a technology of truth, and an apparatus of documentation, with its case studies, records, files, and archives. Historical practice, too, [...] only secures the meaning and import of its documents, its notion of the event-hood of the event, and its protocols of evidence within a specific discursive regime and disciplinary machinery.<sup>149</sup>

Thus photography became the "technology of truth", supporting history by keeping records for the archives.

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<sup>148</sup> Augé, Marc: *Oblivion*, Minneapolis, 2004, p. 20

<sup>149</sup> Tagg, John: "Introduction", in: Tagg, John: *The Disciplinary Frame*; Minneapolis, 2009, p. XXXIV





The photographs, taken with an imprint of historical records in the mind of the photographer, appear to allow us to visit sites of the past, thereby confirming and reestablishing historical knowledge and forming a further projection screen for historical testimonies.

As Marc Bloch stated,

We can speak of earlier ages only through the accounts of eye-witnesses. According to this view, we are in the predicament of a police magistrate who strives to reconstruct a crime he has not seen; of a physicist who, confined to his bed with grippe, hears the results of his experiments only through the reports of his laboratory technician. In short, in contrast to the knowledge of the present, that of the past is necessarily 'indirect'.<sup>150</sup>

Accordingly, one of these eye-witnesses could be the photographer who needs to be present for the image to be created. Or, as in Antonioni's *Blowup*, where the photographer realizes that he might have photographed a murder he did not see, the photograph could even function as an eye-witness, as it can show what the photographer has not necessarily seen when releasing the shutter. Unlike the site itself and any memory of it, the photographic recording cannot change over the course of time. The photograph is a testimony of its subject and the site becomes a silent witness through its representation. In Rancière's interpretation of Michelet, the truth is "engraved in the texture of things". Rancière's statement that, "the only one who speaks, is the one who is silent," could equally apply to remembrance of the Holocaust.<sup>151</sup> I will expand on this idea in chapter 2.

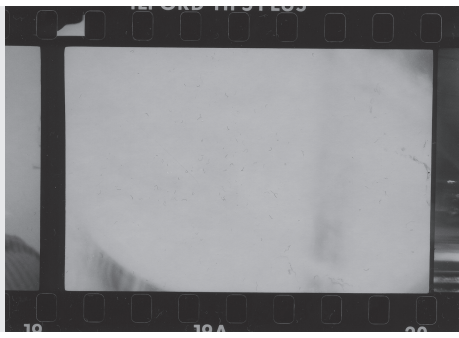
Since a photograph can be read according to Barthes's idea of the "have been", it might as well present Crimp's idea of the "have-seen", the presence of a *déjà vu*, of "nature as representation".<sup>152</sup> Robert Smithson described the "have-seen" in an essay in 1967.<sup>153</sup>

150 Bloch, Marc: *The Historian's Craft*, New York (A. Knopf Inc.), 1953, p. 48

151 Rancière, Jacques: *The Names of History*, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 57

152 see Crimp, Douglas: The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism, *October*, Vol. 15 (Winter 1980), p. 91 - 101

153 Smithson, Robert: "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic", New Jersey, *Artforum*, December 1967





Visiting a bridge over the Passaic River, it felt as if he were looking at a photograph. Photographing the scene felt like photographing a photograph.

The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of 'stills' through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.<sup>154</sup>

After photography, we seem to experience the world only as its own representation.

The historical drive must be fuelled by a drive to construct; otherwise history becomes the antithesis of art as a mode of production. "[O]nly if history can endure to be transformed into a work of art will it perhaps be able to preserve instincts or even evoke them."<sup>155</sup> History must lead to something else. If history is held in greater esteem than life, life itself is far less valuable than when following one's instincts. A historical perspective mistakenly looks back at all ages past with a mind close to that of the Christian idea of the Last Judgement, with a belief that one's own age is the ultimate one, "empowered to exercise over all the past".<sup>156</sup>

In Nietzsche's analysis of his own people, the Germans of his time thrive on being successors of historical times, of classical antiquity. That can only lead to frustration and is "paralysing and depressing".<sup>157</sup> By merely identifying oneself as an epigone, one is condemned to bring nothing of one's own into being.

Now through a mutation that is not of very recent origin, but which has still not come to an end, history has altered its position in relation to the document: it has taken as its primary task, not the interpretation of the document, nor the attempt to decide whether it is telling the truth or what is its expressive value, but to work on it from within and to develop it: history now organises the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges its

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<sup>154</sup> Smithson, Robert: "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic", New Jersey, in: Robert Smithson: *Collected Writings*, Berkeley, 1996, p. 70

<sup>155</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich: "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life", in *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 95

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 101

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 104







levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations.<sup>158</sup>

History, like photography, is no longer seen to merely give an account of the past, it works instead on the representation of the past.

Nietzsche concludes that "man should above all learn to live and should employ history only in the service of the life he has learned to live."<sup>159</sup> As I understand Nietzsche, history that is thought to study the past objectively cannot be useful. The review of the past needs passionate positioning; it needs loving and hating and positioning towards the "factual" register of events, against the "blind power of the actual".<sup>160</sup>

If historical awareness is thought to be the foundation of culture and cultivation, then culture must spring from life.

Walter Benjamin also regarded experience to be the driving force behind history's usefulness for life. If one only focuses on history, culture cannot fully blossom. In Nietzsche's analysis, the Germans believe themselves to be a cultivated people, but mistake knowledge for experience and are therefore less cultivated than they think. Historical knowledge is only helpful to culture as an active part of life.

If we see life as the dominating force leading to knowledge, then what Nietzsche called the unhistorical and the supra-historical are, "the natural antidotes to the stifling of life by the historical, by the malady of history."<sup>161</sup> What Nietzsche calls the "malady of history" can only be cured through reflection and an awareness of one's own experience, "up to the point at which [one] will be sufficiently healthy again to [...] employ the past in its three senses, namely monumental, or antiquarian or critical."<sup>162</sup> Once the obsessive preoccupation with history grows out of proportion, the retrospection into the past dominates and loses any use for life. In chapter 2 I will proceed from this

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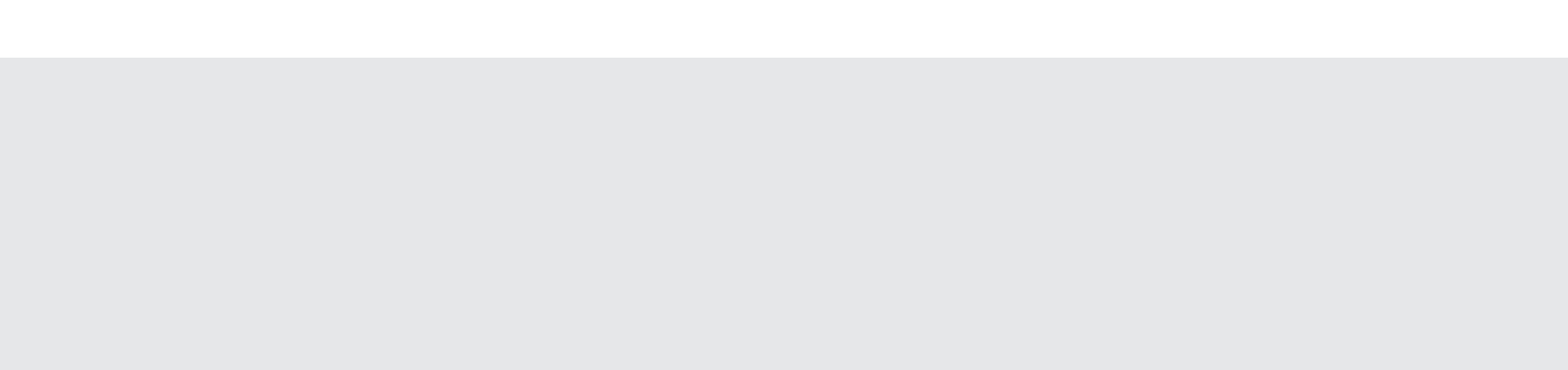
<sup>158</sup> Foucault, Michel: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London, 2002, p. 6

<sup>159</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich: "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life", in *Untimely Meditations*, Cambridge, 2008, p. 116

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., p. 106

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 121

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 122





proposition more specifically to the different stages of Germany's working through the past with respect to the Holocaust.

For Nietzsche, the cure for an unhealthy obsession with history lies in the unhistorical and the supra-historical: forgetting the past or focussing more on the eternal, as in art and religion.<sup>163</sup> Art springs from experience and can deliver a form of experience. Artists work on finding a form for their experience. From a traditional viewpoint, while all handcrafted artworks obviously stem from the artist's mind, the camera image is accredited to its mechanical production. But although "a photograph contains non-motivated details, coincidences, inserted in the image by the sheer release of the shutter", for the final appearance of the image many formative decisions by the artist about size, material, surface are necessary beyond the recording.<sup>164</sup> Still, photographs are to a great degree perceived according to what they depict.<sup>165</sup> As long as the value of a photograph is measured in the indexical relation to the reflection of a visual reality that is supposed to have inscribed itself into the light-sensitive emulsion, photographic images do not seem to speak about experience. Due to the knowledge about the direct relation of the photograph with the depicted object that was to be found in front of the lens on exposure, the photograph is mistaken for the object. The indexical interpretation of photographs falls short. The interpretation of photographs also requires an iconic momentum.<sup>166</sup> While a "painting demonstrates that an icon need not be a record", a photograph can be read as iconic despite its indexical relation to the referent.<sup>167</sup> The focus on the reception of photographic images has strongly been on an indexical interpretation, but an iconic reading makes photographs more useful as a review of the past for life. The image and its meaning for historical tradition

163 Like Hegel, Walter Benjamin considered art and religion to be closely related, since Fine Art developed in the church. See Hegel, G.W.F.: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*. Reclam, 2013; also footnote no. 8 of Benjamin, Walter: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in: Benjamin, Walter: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 245

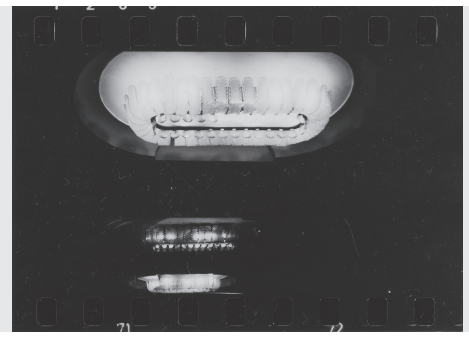
164 Van Gelder, H. and Westgeest, H.: *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective*, Chichester, 2011, p. 36

165 For this reason Roger Scruton denies the photograph a representational function. But Scruton acknowledges a difference between what he calls 'ideal' photographs, which are non-representational and photographs made with an aesthetic interest, which can very well be representational. See footnote no. 29

166 see footnotes no. 36, 42, 49

167 Van Gelder, H. and Westgeest, H.: *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective*, Chichester, 2011, p. 37





is important. The depictive representation of the photograph is understood by the intellect, what Barthes calls the "studium". The possibility of an iconic reading pricks the viewer with a "punctum" and transmogrifies the image into experience.

In correspondence to Barthes's "studium" and "punctum" with regard to photography, similar dichotomies can be found in texts by different authors on history. Reinhart Koselleck counterposes,

two historical procedures. They can be stylised as synchrony and diachrony. Each procedure has complementary advantages and disadvantages. Ordinarily a historian would use both approaches, favouring synchrony when he describes, and diachrony when he narrates.<sup>168</sup>

Marc Bloch also used a dichotomy, defining two different schools of historians.

The first believed it really possible and tried their best to establish a science of human evolution which would conform to a sort of pan-scientific ideal. They were willing to abandon, as outside a true science of man, a great many eminently human realities which appeared to them stubbornly insusceptible to rational comprehension. This residue they scornfully called mere events or happenstance. It was also a good part of the most intimate and individual side of life. [...] The other school of inquirers took a quite different point of view. Unsuccessful in cramming the stuff of history into the legalistic framework of physical science, and particularly disturbed, because of their early training, by the difficulties, doubts, and many fresh beginnings required by documentary criticism, they drew from their inquiries the moral lesson of a disillusioned humility. In the final reckoning, they felt that they were devoting their talents to a discipline which promised neither very positive conclusions in the present, nor the hope of progress in the future. They tended to view history less as truly scientific knowledge than as a sort of aesthetic play, a hygienic exercise to favourable health of mind.<sup>169</sup>

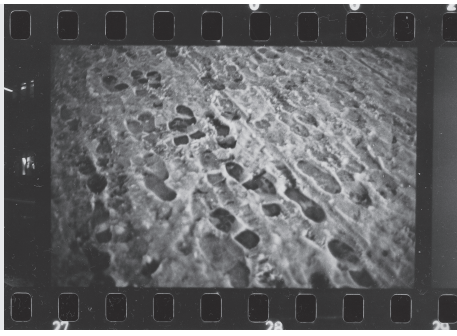
And here I return to Barthes's concepts of "studium" and "punctum". Because the studium is equivalent to the unhistorical or the supra-historical, it is a plain intellectual

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<sup>168</sup> Koselleck, Reinhart: *Futures past — on the semantics of historical time*, New York, 2004, p. 217

<sup>169</sup> Bloch, Marc: *The Historian's Craft*, New York (A. Knopf Inc.), 1953, p. 14/15





understanding of an image that leaves the viewer untouched. By contrast, the punctum pricks the viewer on an individual level. In history as in photography the viewer must be emotionally touched in order to benefit from remembrance. If all these approaches — Nietzsche's monumental or antiquarian mode of history, Koselleck's synchrony and Bloch's school of historians that believed in a scientific account of human evolution — produce only dead matter with no impact on the present, history would only gain an added value through a relation to the now, which is equivalent to the "punctum". Our expectations of photography, not just as a record but also as a transmitter of the past, resemble our expectations of history and its use for life.

#### From collective memory to oblivion and on to photography

In his treatise on cultural memory, Jan Assmann points to the differentiation between cultural memory and history, following ideas of Maurice Halbwachs.<sup>170</sup> Let us now further explore the difference between history and memory in their respective definitions. In widespread misreadings of photographs, they are often regarded as a historical record or as memory aids. I believe that both concepts are too short-sighted and merely follow the requirements defined for history and memory. As Kracauer knew very well, "photographs true to type may range from neutral renderings of physical reality to highly subjective statements."<sup>171</sup>

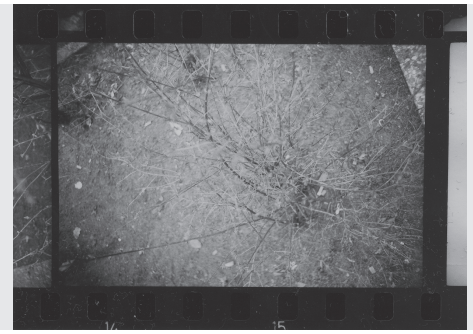
History begins where the past is no longer inhabited, as soon as its content is no longer a part of the collective memory of living groups. Historical time is an artificial time that has not been experienced at first hand as a period by a group of people and thus cannot be remembered actively. Therefore history would only come into being once the groups living in a specific time no longer exist and their memory has disappeared. Then history preserves the image and chronology of facts alone. According to

170 see Assmann, Jan: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, Munich, 1997

171 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 52







Halbwachs, history works in opposition to cultural memory. While the latter only investigates continuity and similarities, the former is only interested in differences and discontinuities. Whereas cultural memory is an internal view of the more immediate past, history is defined by the more factual external view, looking broadly at the past. Handed on from one generation to the next, once the past is fading, its tradition changes from a fluid and agile state to being consolidated in fixed stories. This is why Hegel regarded true historical records to have emerged with scripture and written records.<sup>172</sup>

All memory only comes into existence through communication. As Halbwachs argued, the construction of any memory of the past needs communication. The ability to remember exists only in exchange with others.<sup>173</sup> Memory is an act of semiotization. Only what is relevant will be remembered, but what will be remembered also gains relevance. Whereas the function of history as a science is just a register of events in their chronological order, social memory forms ideas of the past and gives an interpretation of the events past. Without standing in opposition to the truthfulness of events, social memory shows the importance of the past to construct a future.

The past does not become consciously recognized on its own. Its recognition is the result of a cultural construction and representation. As Nietzsche pointed out, awareness of the past distinguishes the human species from animals. According to Halbwachs the past is always formed by the referential framework of a present.<sup>174</sup> Recognition of the past — and with it concepts of history or memory — is activated by present thought. Hegel stated that the ancient cultures of China did not know history. The past had no meaning for them. Their self-awareness was fully related to the present. Hegel only saw the beginning of cultures that identified themselves in relation to their past in later Middle Eastern cultures, namely the Egyptians, Babylonians, Israelites and Persians.<sup>175</sup> Jan Assmann concludes that identity is related to memory and remembrance. Like an

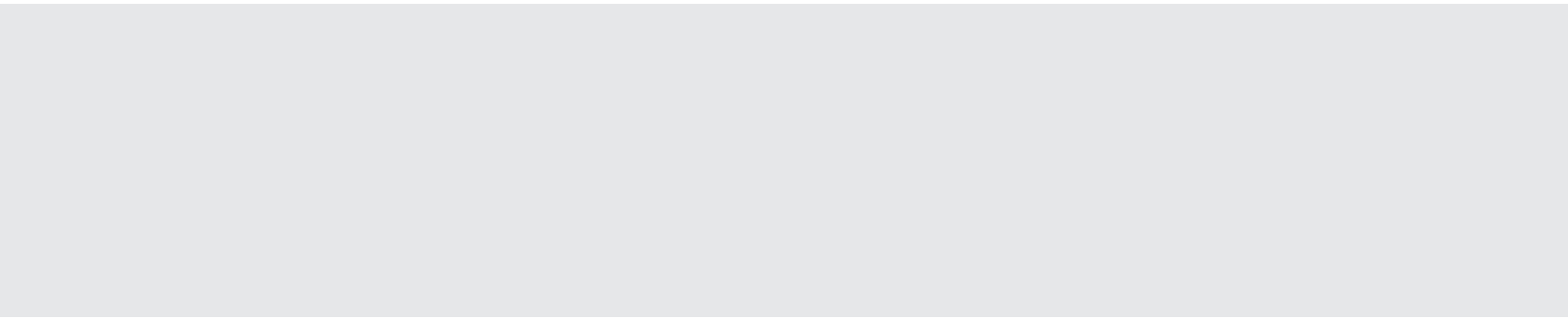
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172 see Hegel, G.W.F.: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*. Reclam, 2013

173 Halbwachs, Maurice: *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, Frankfurt 1985, see p. 102

174 Ibid., p. 55

175 see Hegel, G.W.F.: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*. Reclam, 2013





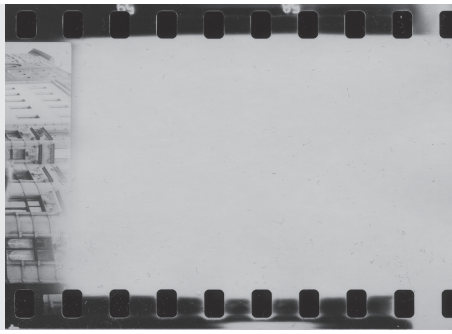
individual, who constructs his identity based on memories of his own past and that of his family, a group can only obtain an identity through memory. The concept of the past is necessary for the social construction of groups, be it tribes, nations or religious communities. For a moment to become historical, or memorable, it must become a "thing outside himself", as Hannah Arendt called it.<sup>176</sup> The experienced moment is transformed into memory through communication; it becomes a communicative memory and is only valuable through its transmission. Words and language imply not only an individual, but also a group of people that see a sequence of acts of understanding behind an articulated sequence of words.<sup>177</sup> Through this system we call language, events of the past are turned into memories. Early societies used rites to transmit their knowledge from generation to generation through repetitive ceremonies until this function was taken over by writing. As the past became fixed in writing, remembrance became vulnerable to changes and interpretation. The need to repeat the ceremony in an exact manner to preserve it most truthfully could be ignored once the textual coherence began. It freed the tradition of the past from the constraint of repetition. However, as the volume of texts grew, cultural memory became split increasingly between background and foreground. This volume of texts exceeds what a society can remember or inhabit in any given age. The more the texts take a back seat in uninhabited archives, the more they turn into a form of oblivion.<sup>178</sup> Once written down, the text can be stored away and archived. Its content need not be actively remembered as it had been in times of oral tradition. While the written record can be seen as a starting point of historical awareness, it also led to accounts of the past being stored in archives and mostly abandoned and ignored.

As already seen in Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, forgetting is essential to memory as we cannot remember everything and therefore must make choices. Oblivion becomes a condition of remembrance, or as Marc Augé puts it: "One must know how to forget in order to taste the full flavour of the present, [...] one must forget the recent past

176 Arendt, Hannah: *The Concept of History*, in: *Between Past and Future*, London, 2006, p. 45

177 see Halbwachs, Maurice: *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, Frankfurt 1985, p. 365

178 see Assmann, Jan: *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, Munich, 1997, p. 96





in order to find the ancient past again."<sup>179</sup> For the past to become historical, or even just remembered, it requires two things: One is communication, the other is choice. We must decide on what to communicate, what to pass on from the past. Decisions on what can be neglected and what is important to keep alive are key in forming the identity of a society. Here Benjamin's claim that articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it the way it actually was, gains relevance.<sup>180</sup> To list all events without any distinction of their importance merely supports the belief that nothing that once happened in the past can be lost to history. But the true image of the past is always fleeting. An irretrievable image, it is always in danger of disappearing with each present. Historical knowledge does not only need factual memorisation, but also an understanding of the past. Photographs taken to retain irretrievable moments are of no use. To articulate things past means to usurp a memory as it flashes up in the moment of danger. The past always holds a promise of redemption.<sup>181</sup> Only the historian who takes this into account — and only the photographer who keeps that in mind — can kindle the spark of hope that can be found in the past. Benjamin's analysis of the use of history is politically motivated to the core. He sees traditional historicism as a possible tool in the interest of the ruling classes. The historian is well advised to empathise with his subject. Unfortunately the traditional historian usually seems to empathise with the victorious, which benefits only the ruling classes.<sup>182</sup> But the tradition of the oppressed reveals that the circumstances of class struggle are not new. In Benjamin's view, fascism can only be fought successfully if the definition of history acknowledges that. As Sigrid Weigel pointed out, Benjamin illustrates historical articulation with concepts of memory and thus brings history and memory together as structurally analogous operations. Pictures of the past become pictures of memory.<sup>183</sup>

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179 Augé, Marc: *Oblivion*, Minneapolis, 2004, p. 3

180 see Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, Thesis no.6

181 see *Ibid.*, Thesis no.2

182 The traditional historian as opposed to the materialist historian. See Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, Thesis no.7

183 Weigel, Sigrid: *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit—Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise*, Frankfurt/Main, 1997, p. 27







Benjamin illustrates his idea of history with a description of Klee's picture entitled *Angelus Novus*, in which Benjamin sees a creature, facing the past, apparently looking upon a great disaster, while the rest of us only see a succession of events. As Benjamin writes in his Thesis Number Nine, much as the angel of history would like to stay and reassemble the piles of rubble in front of him, he is inexorably pushed towards the future by a storm coming from paradise, while the pile of rubble in front of him grows incessantly. Benjamin calls this storm progress.<sup>184</sup> In different texts he refers to an image, any image, in which what has been is connected to the now in one constellation. This image is dialectical, as the relationship of what has been to the now is also dialectical and one defined by experience, while the relationship of the past to the present is just temporal.<sup>185</sup> What has been relates to the now by leaps and bounds and is never continuous.

One can draw an analogy to photography in Benjamin's comparison of the Klee picture with the historian.<sup>186</sup> The angel of history, facing the past and seeing wreckage piling upon wreckage, is like documentary photography, always looking backwards and merely collecting visual recollection upon visual recollection, turning all traces into evidence, testifying to all events past without distinction. That is all that documentary photography can do, before being blown into the future by the storm called progress.

Kracauer makes a similar point that, "from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage."<sup>187</sup> He highlighted the similarities

<sup>184</sup> see Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, Thesis no.9; the image's temporal relationship to the past can be connected to the afore mentioned idea of photography's temporal and spatial continuum as discussed by Kracauer.

<sup>185</sup> In convolute N of his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin describes the dialectical images as "flashing up in the now of its recognizability". The image can only become dialectical in the moment when it is recognized. To be recognized the image needs an active involvement. This is also what Halbwachs argued for to produce memory (see footnote 56, p. 47). As Max Pensky points out in an essay on Benjamin's idea of the dialectical image, "The tension between subjectivity and objectivity of the image is the repeat of the dialectics of subject and object that constitutes the possibility of the image in the first place." (Pensky, Max: *Method and Time: Benjamin's dialectical images*, in: Ferris, David S. (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge, 2004, p. 194) Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image questions historical time as a continuous flow and the camera-based photographic process as a mechanical recording of a visible reality. It challenges beliefs in the objective accounts of photography and history. Benjamin, Walter: *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge (MA)/ London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 473

<sup>186</sup> Benjamin himself in none of his writings formulated an explicit comparison between historiography and photography.

<sup>187</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 426







between photography and history, as I have discussed above. Like the photographer who decides on the lens, frame, exposure or material, the historian decides on what to preserve of the past. What the historian does not consider as important falls prey to oblivion, just as everything that lies outside the photographic frame or beyond the moment of exposure. But then, "oblivion is the life force of memory and remembrance is its product."<sup>188</sup> Marc Augé refers to Pontalis, suggesting that, "what is inscribed 'is not the remembrance but the traces, the signs of absence'."<sup>189</sup> Thus, the absent — or the invisible in the photograph — gains relevance.<sup>190</sup> But we have already seen that memory and history have different relationships to the past. Memory, collective or individual, seems to need oblivion as a driving force, whereas history consists merely of recorded data that can be forgotten once recorded.

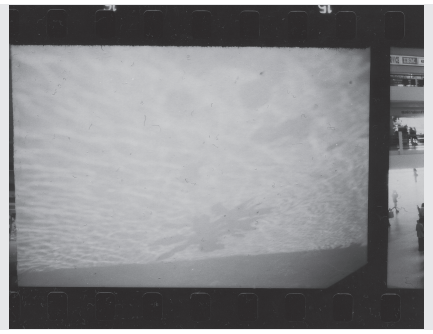
If, as Hegel proposes, history only started with scripture and the written record, photography can be located in the extension of this thought. A truthful picture of physical reality and always located in the past, (documentary) photography records fractions of events past, carrying them forward, unchanged into eternity. In the same way as the written record has defined history as a science, photography has intervened with the formation of our image of the past since its invention.

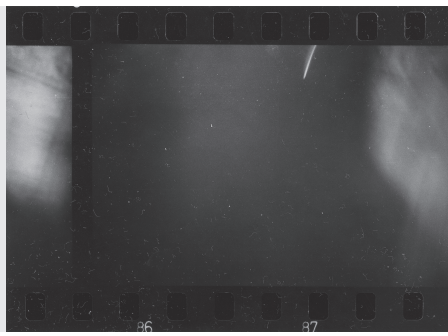
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<sup>188</sup> Augé, Marc: *Oblivion*, Minneapolis, 2004, p. 21

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 23

<sup>190</sup> That is why the representational photograph acts as a dialectical image and stirs the future drive, while non-representational photographs just look back like the angel of history.





## Chapter 2

### Post-War Germany and its remembrance of the Holocaust

The twentieth century with its unimaginable crimes against humanity has changed the world and history forever. The Second World War, in which industrialized mass killings became so easy (and here I especially refer exemplarily to the examples of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, which are used as synecdoches of the attempted extinction of the European Jews and the dropping of the atomic bomb), has brought forward a strong need to remember, while at the same time eradicating all traces of what was there to be remembered. While feeding a specific culture of commemoration, based on a need to better understand the committed atrocities, the Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bomb left a void in their aftermath, a void that disconnects them from all previous periods.

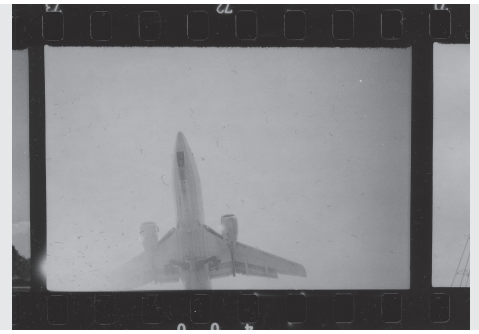
The changes to humanity resulting from the industrialized mass murder of the Holocaust required a recognized verbalisation to prevent them from becoming forgotten. The system by which the human individual was made redundant as a perpetrator and a victim, what Hannah Arendt calls the banality of evil, required a language that must inevitably appear barbaric in the recognition of this banality.<sup>191</sup> With his postulation that after Auschwitz to write poetry could only be barbaric, Adorno demanded a radical change in the use of language after the event of the Holocaust.<sup>192</sup> Photographs share this fate. They can only produce the intended shock-effect — to serve as deterrent and warning — in relation to a prior verbalisation. The representation as such only trivialises the event; or as Roland Barthes writes in his essay "Shock Photos", literal photography scandalises horror, but does not transmit horror itself.<sup>193</sup> The limits of

<sup>191</sup> Arendt, Hannah: *Eichmann in Jerusalem — The banality of evil*, London, 2006; Hannah Arendt's understanding of the banality of evil was received with outrage. The banality and ease with which the most atrocious deeds were committed do not correspond to the extent of terror. That is why photography must break loose from its banality of the plain representation of a physical reality.

<sup>192</sup> Adorno, Theodor W.: "Administered World", in: *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, Stanford, 2003, p. 162

<sup>193</sup> see Barthes, Roland: "Shock photos", in: *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, Berkeley, 1997





documentary photography are revealed in its inability to visualise the unrepresentable. For photographic images to comment on the magnitude of occurrences without drifting into banality, a radically new understanding of photography is required.

Photography and history, as discussed in chapter 1, can be seen either as records or as transmitters of data to remember the past. The aftermath of events such as the Holocaust or the dropping of the atomic bomb are defined by the absence of collectable data. Whatever data can be collected does not tell us much about the nature of the occurrences. The significance of these incidents is particularly defined by what is lost, not their traces.

"And it's as good as if it never happened," Adorno quotes Goethe to indicate Germany's post-war attitude to excuse or diminish what happened.<sup>194</sup> To believe that "it's as good as if it never happened" just by living on — by establishing a democratic nation, by building memorials — equals the pact with the devil in Goethe's *Faust*. Adorno stated that after Auschwitz life can never be the same, it will never be as if nothing had happened.

More than 60 years have passed since the end of the war and since those atrocities, committed in the name of the German people during the Third Reich, changed the world into one before and after Auschwitz. My personal observation is that in Germany, Germans and Jews have still not generally readopted relations among one another, whatever a relationship might look like in the aftermath of the attempted extermination of one of the parties involved. This may in part be due to the fact that most Germans living now have never experienced a German-Jewish relationship of any kind, as they were born in times when Jewish life in Germany was publicly absent, relatively invisible and definitely anything but normal.

Auschwitz, a synecdoche of the industrialised and bureaucratically executed mass murder of people who were a part of society one moment and considered to be subhumans the next, has eradicated normality on a global scale, and this especially

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194 Adorno, Theodor: "Working through the Past", in: *Can One live after Auschwitz?*, Stanford, 2003



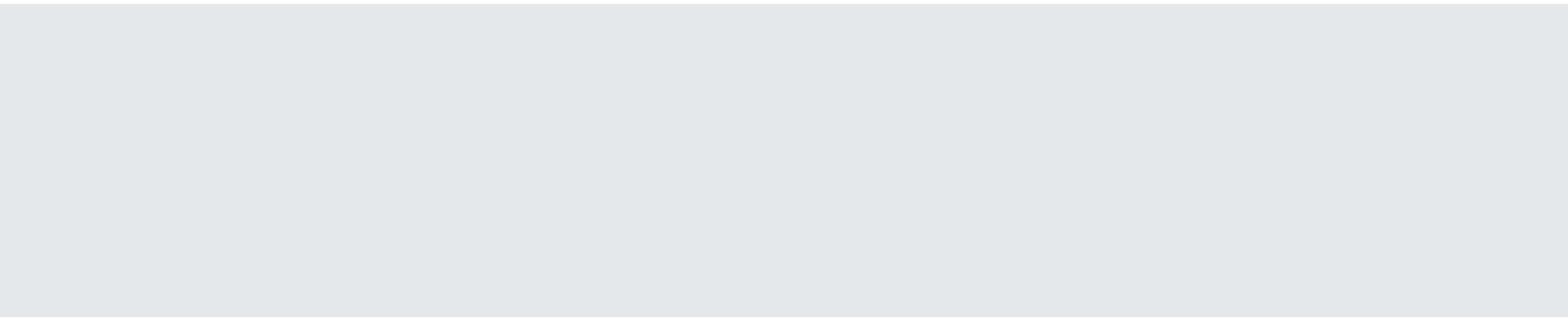


applies to the country that perpetrated these deeds. Although seemingly a normally functioning democracy today, Germany still carries the burden of the legacy of the Third Reich, of a regime in which the public not only failed to object to horrific acts, but also, to the amazement of subsequent generations, was ready and willing to look on and participate. The terror of something like this being possible in a country that had previously been considered a civilised and cultivated nation, had to change the world forever, opening the boundaries of imaginable human behaviour, making clear that something similar could happen anywhere, anytime. To this day the question of how it was possible to proceed with the extermination of defined groups and actively involve the public or at least make it remain silent, engages theoretical debates in different fields.

In consequence, one of the dilemmas is that Germans commemorate a loss for which they have no definition and of which they have no first-hand experience. The generations born after the Holocaust have never experienced what has been lost, the so called German-Jewish symbiosis, in other words Jewish life as an active and visible part of German culture.<sup>195</sup> Since the Jewish population was a tiny minority in Germany after the war (and was only visible by the police guards in front of all Jewish establishments), awareness of Jews living in Germany was non-existent for a long time. It only grew as Jews immigrated in large numbers from former Soviet states, resulting in growing Jewish communities. Thus many Germans associate little more with Jews than a murdered mass to be commemorated, or at most a constant reminder of guilt, but not a living part of society. The murdered Jews are recognized in post-war German society through memorials, books and films. The presence of Jews in contemporary Germany is not acknowledged. They are still regarded as absent. The notion of "Jews" is an abstract reminder and a warning of the possibility of "Auschwitz" as synecdoche of genocide and complicity. The abstraction from a person to a historical symbolic figure defines one of the problems to find a new form of German-Jewish co-existence

<sup>195</sup> The symbiosis of Germans and Jews, when Jews were still an active part of German society, a minority but not outsiders, is described by Enzo Traverso in his book: Traverso, Enzo: *The Jews and Germany: From the 'Judeo-German Symbiosis' to the Memory of Auschwitz*, Lincoln, 1995







in the present and is only possible in consequence of a perceived absence of Jews in post-war Germany altogether.

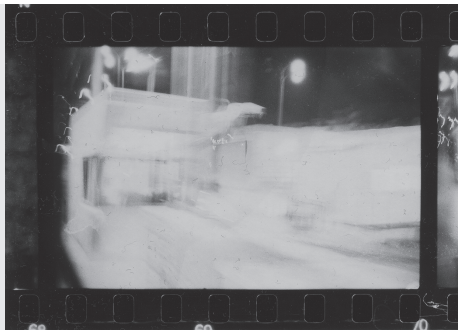
Karyn Ball observed that, "[i]n contemporary Germany, recent debates about memorials reflect competing desires to commemorate the magnitude of genocide and to mark a distance from the Third Reich's crimes as a sign of moral progress in the present."<sup>196</sup> Memorials installed since the end of the war in West Germany by and large from the 1970s onwards can be seen as gestures of compensation. Many Germans understood "working through the past" more in the sense of working away the past than coming to terms with and embracing it as part of the present.<sup>197</sup> At the same time the Holocaust has always been a vivid part of West German political awareness. The two separate German states after the war dealt differently with the dilemma between remembering what one would rather forget — or what one would love undone — and the demand to never forget. The differing systems led to different approaches to the past and different ways of "working through the past". As a West German, my views, which are shaped by my experience, focus on how remembrance of the Holocaust was handled in West Germany until reunification and thereafter. The distinction between East and West is necessary because, although sharing the same atrocious past, the way the legacy was handled has been very different in both parts of Germany. Therefore no general statements can be valid for both countries. My considerations will mostly focus on West Germany, based on my personal experience.

History is often remembered by symbols, which are often passed on by images. The historical occurrences of the Holocaust were passed on to following generations by images of the camps. Memorials use images that become symbols, such as freight train carriages in which the victims were transported, or barbed wire fences. Therefore the original grounds seemed the ideal sites to install memorials. In East Germany the camps were transformed into memorial sites much earlier than in the West, with the purpose of symbolising triumph over National Socialist oppression and reevaluating

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<sup>196</sup> Ball, Karyn: *Disciplining the Holocaust*, Albany, 2008, p. 90

<sup>197</sup> Adorno, Theodor: "Working through the Past", in: *Can One live after Auschwitz?*, Stanford, 2003





it as a heroic liberation by the Soviet army. Therefore the remembrance in the East was not as guilt-laden as in the West. The first camp to be turned into a memorial site was Buchenwald. Others followed later in the East and West: Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Neuengamme, Sachsenhausen. At the beginning of this transformation, the original features were often removed to make space for the (intentional) memorial. Thereby the monument to the time erases the existing monument left over from the time until the latter becomes fully integrated into the former.<sup>198</sup> The remains on the memorial sites are only meaningful in terms of the stories and images that are passed on, placing them in context with the occurrences. Reducing remains to symbolic agents was meant to produce historic meaningfulness. Symbols like barbed wire fences, rail tracks and the (in-)famous entrance gates served as projection screens, as reminders of the past without too much emotional proximity.

Enzo Traverso describes the different stages of how atrocious events like genocides are memorised or not.<sup>199</sup> Firstly after an incident, often a trauma, people avoid the subject and try to forget. This is followed by a return of what is suppressed, which leads to an obsession with the memory of the event. This is a similar process to what Freud describes in his essay "Remembering, Repeating, Working Through".<sup>200</sup> Remembering is a process of recalling incidents that one has not forgotten — if forgotten, it would be impossible to recall them — but one did not think of anymore. Through repetitive mentioning of such incidents one becomes aware of them and recognizes them again. In the final stage, namely being able to accept such incidents, one must again work through the previously ignored time. The same happens to historical incidents to make them part of the present — or even a possible future.

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198 Knigge, Volkhard: "Vom Reden und Schweigen der Steine", in: Weigel, Sigrid/Erdle Birgit R. (eds.): *Fünfzig Jahre danach*, Zurich, 1996, p. 207

199 Traverso, Enzo: *Gebrauchsanleitungen für die Vergangenheit*, Münster, 2007, p. 38  
Traverso is referring to a concept used by French historian Henry Rousso.

200 Freud, Sigmund: "Remembering, Repeating, Working Through", in: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, London, 2003





## Representation of the Holocaust

Although often referred to as an unspeakable or unrepresentable event, the Holocaust needed a label or a name in order to be talked about, to avoid being forgotten.

If the committed atrocities were unspeakable, no word would be adequate to name it. Giving a name to the incident means articulating it. The dilemma, as shown by Agamben, is that by treating it as unspeakable it becomes divine and thus glorified.<sup>201</sup> If the mass murder on the European Jews remained unspeakable the victims would risk being lost in oblivion. Therefore it had to be outspoken. A name had to be found.<sup>202</sup> But no name given to it seemed suitable. As a consequence of the attempted extermination of European Jews, the United Nations introduced the term Genocide to have a name for future occurrences. The term "Holocaust" was established in English in the 1960s. For a long time in Germany the common term was "the extermination of the Jews" (Judenvernichtung). The term "Holocaust" only found its way into the German vocabulary after the American TV drama of the same name was broadcast there. "Shoah" was first used in Israel and likewise found its way into a more general vocabulary after Claude Lanzmann's film.

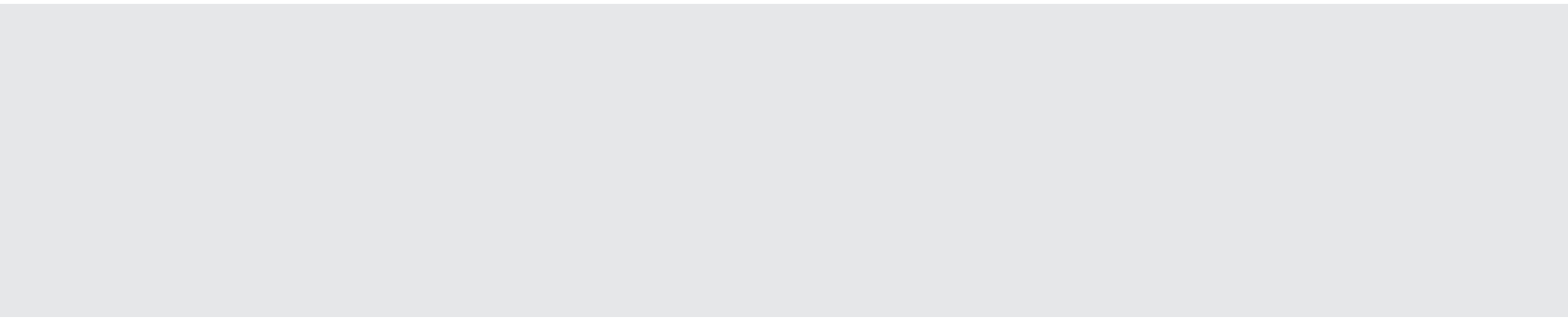
As Henri Meschonnic has demonstrated in an article published in *Le Monde* in February 2005, "Holocaust" and "Shoah" seem rather inadequate terms.<sup>203</sup> Holocaust is derived from Greek, and means an animal sacrifice in which the whole animal is burnt. It constitutes a sacrifice and thus turns the victims into martyrs, denying the fact that the victims had no choice and were rather slaughtered than sacrificed. Shoah on the other hand, coming from Hebrew, means calamity or catastrophe, but as Meschonnic underlines, it is used in the Bible for natural disaster. Under the name "Shoah", the Jewish genocide becomes something like an unavoidable cataclysm and thus takes the responsibility off the perpetrators.

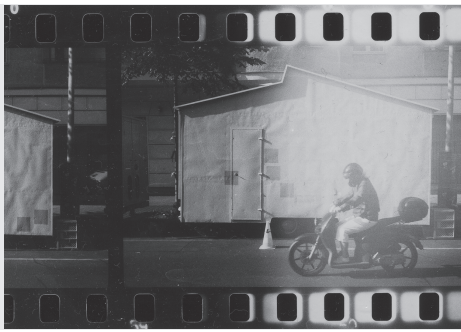
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201 Agamben, Giorgio: *Remnants of Auschwitz*, New York, 1999, p.32

202 Adorno, Theodor: *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, Stanford, 2003, p. 60

203 Meschonnic, Henri: *POUR EN FINIR AVEC LE MOT SHOAH*, <http://meschonnic.blogspot.com/2010/01/pour-en-finir-avec-le-mot-shoah.html>, 16.1.2011





"Holocaust" and "Shoah" are both abstract labels for an event that is unimaginable in numbers and its perfidity. The abstraction seems to make it easier to speak of it, if at all possible. It is no surprise that an obsessive occupation with the events began in Germany once the American TV drama provided an abstract name. "[A]bout what is incommensurable with experience as such one can only speak in euphemisms[...]," Adorno wrote.<sup>204</sup> Although one knows what the term stands for, the meaning is not inherent in the term as such.

Guenther Anders appreciated what the TV drama *Holocaust* offered. With it the victims obtained names, faces and lives.<sup>205</sup> They were individualised, disburdened from being a number too abstract to grasp. The Holocaust was no longer a purely industrial machinery, of which only architectural traces and technical devices remained, but now received a face. Victims and perpetrators were perceived as human beings with emotions, pasts and discontinuous futures. The abstraction of a system held responsible for the slaughter of a vast number of human beings, who merely served as a projection screen for hatred, began to crumble. The realisation that the existence of individual human beings on both sides made ignorance or denial harder generated debate.

"Genocide" seems an appropriate term, but has the disadvantage of denying the uniqueness of the bureaucratically organised, systematic and industrialised mass murder of the European Jews by the National Socialists, therefore placing it together with all other historical mass killings of minorities. To find a name that does not classify it in the same way as other genocides seems important as an appeal to keep an awareness of responsibility and future prevention.

The regime's terms, namely "extermination of the Jews" or "final solution" seem inappropriate as the extermination was fortunately unsuccessful. That leaves us with several inappropriate options to name the unspeakable, but a need to vocalise its remembrance.

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204 Adorno, Theodor: "Trying to Understand 'Endgame'", in: *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, Stanford, 2003, p. 263/264

205 Anders, Guenther: *Besuch im Hades*, Munich, 1985, p. 179







The German name of the Polish village Auschwitz has become the synecdoche for mass murder and the gas chambers.

All names culminate in the purpose of representing the death of millions of people. What they do not include is all the suffering and therefore the survivors who escaped the murder. They most certainly do exclude the post war lives of the survivors.

Agamben does not even consider the survivors to be witnesses. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* he speaks of a lacuna of testimony to the Shoah.<sup>206</sup> He talks about an incident without witnesses.<sup>207</sup> By doing so he makes a value judgement. Those who survived can testify, but not to the ultimate Auschwitz experience, the gas chamber. Nobody who has gone through that experience can testify. The ultimate victim is the one who ended in the incinerators, thus the survivor can bear witness of the agony in the camps, but not of what is ultimately understood under the term "Shoah" or "Holocaust". Agamben refers to the "Muselman", as Primo Levi has described him, someone between life and death beyond caring.<sup>208</sup> Some survivors remarked that somehow the dead were envied by the living, as death was not the worst experience in the camps, since it ended the suffering sooner. Also, all the terms discussed above exclude all other persecuted groups.

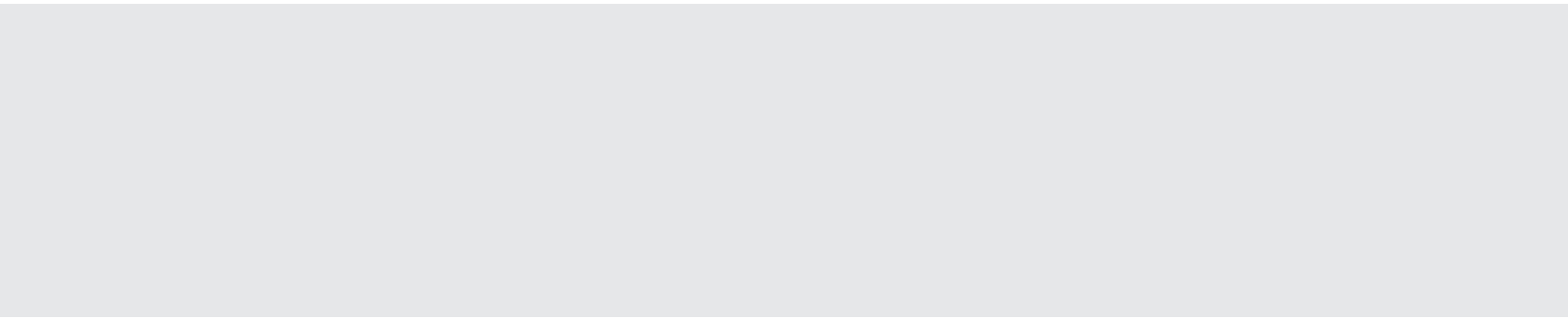
It seems inappropriate to open up a hierarchy of the experience of suffering. At the same time to do so reduces the definition of the persecution of European Jews to their extermination. But much of the perfidious machinery was also to tantalise the victims to an ultimate extent. By denying the survivors as witnesses, one limits what is called "Holocaust" to unimaginable numbers of deaths and thus turns it into a terminated event. Only by allowing the survivors to testify to the atrocities of the camps, on all levels — humiliation, starvation, medical experiments, exhaustion — can one see the significance of German fascism in a wider historical and sociological sense, with

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206 Agamben, Giorgio: *Remnants of Auschwitz*, New York, 1999

207 Ibid., p. 33

208 Muselman was a term used by inmates of concentration camps for those who were as a consequence of their maltreatment near death due to exhaustion, starvation or hopelessness. Primo Levi mentions the Muselman in his autobiographical account of his time of incarceration in Auschwitz entitled *If this is a man*.





consequences that reach forward to the present day. The Holocaust cannot be seen separately from the subsequent political system.

According to Enzo Traverso, history is reduced to a linguistic construct when linked to the testimony.<sup>209</sup> Instead of the survivors, Agamben transfers the right to testify to the "Muselman" for whom the survivors speak. The lacuna seems to lie rather between the absence of the testimony of the "Muselman" and the presence of survivors whose testimony can be heard. This lacuna keeps Auschwitz in the distance of the past.<sup>210</sup>

But perhaps one can find a name for the unnamable that includes the survivors and pays tribute to their suffering, their agony, their fear and uncertainty, and also includes other groups of victims.

Meschonnic suggests the Hebrew word "hurban", "hurbn" in its yiddish form, meaning destruction or ruin as most appropriate. According to Meschonnic only three writers have used this term, Manès Sperber, Elias Canetti and Daniel Lindenberg.

What good is an adequate name if nobody connects it with what it stands for? In spite of the inadequacy of the terms "Holocaust" or "Shoah", there seems no way around them. They are familiar to a wide readership without any need for additional explanation. They seem to have become synonymous with the event despite their deficiencies.<sup>211</sup>

### Photography's role in the communication of the Holocaust

Since the liberation at the end of the war, photography used as evidence has been an important tool to prove and commemorate the atrocities of the Holocaust. Where citizens could not be forced to go through the camps to see (and smell) for themselves what the camps had been like — as in Buchenwald, where the citizens of Weimar were ordered to visit the camp — photographs, mostly taken during the liberation, were

209 see Traverso, Enzo: *Gebrauchsanleitungen für die Vergangenheit*, Münster, 2007,

210 Agamben, Giorgio: *Remnants of Auschwitz*, New York, 1999, p. 41ff

211 Due to the established familiarity of the terms Holocaust and Shoah I will use these terms in the further process of this text.



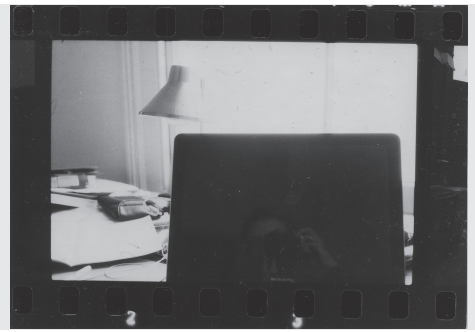


used to educate the German people on the camps. Also, these photographs made it difficult — if not impossible — to disregard the existence of the camps and the atrocities committed in them in the name of the German people. Photographs and films form the visual basis of our knowledge of the camps. Furthermore the collective memory of the Shoah is deeply rooted in photographs. The entrance gates of Auschwitz, the piles of objects and bodies, and the gas chambers disguised as shower rooms are all well known. The stories told by survivors are illustrated by the photographs that have been repeatedly taken over the years.

Whereas photography constitutes the images of collective memories, it cannot properly shed light on the absence that has been created by the Holocaust, including the hiatus in the relationship between Germans and Jews, the absence in German culture and the void in German and Jewish identities. It is inherent by camera-based photography that it can only register what is visible to the photographic material, but not the absent that is invisible (to the photographic material). The inability of language to find an appropriate term for the Holocaust can also be found in discussions on the visual representation of the Holocaust. As Hannah Arendt has pointed out, most photographs that were meant to visualise the atrocities of the camps have been either taken during liberation or after the camps had been evacuated and closed.<sup>212</sup> But what can these images show? The history created by these images is that of the "After". What we see in the images is not the camps in operation, of which only very few images remain, but their liberated state. The terrible agony experienced in the camps exists mostly in the testimonies of the survivors. Thus it remains unimaginable for those who have not experienced it. The normal course of life of the prisoners of Auschwitz and other extermination and concentration camps is beyond imagination. Very few photographic records exist of the camps in operation, of which even fewer pictures found their way into publication. A small number of albums show the daily life of the German officers on guard at the camps. Few documents exist of the arrival of the trains. Only some images — like the four images from Auschwitz Didi-Huberman discusses in *Images*

212 Arendt, Hannah: "The History of the Great Crime", in: *The Jewish Writings*, New York, 2007, p. 455





*in Spite of All* — have been taken while the camps were in operation.<sup>213</sup> As Erwin Leiser stated, the extermination of the European Jews was planned as an event with no testimony, no witnesses, no images. The perpetrators were convinced, that even if some of the prisoners survived, nobody would ever believe what they had to tell. The deeds in the camps were too vast to imagine.<sup>214</sup> This impossibility of representation produces another loss. Images might function as illustrations or as proof of the testimonies given by survivors, but the feelings and memories will be irreproducible.

When the Allies freed Germany from the National Socialists in 1945, and in this instance especially the camps, they were accompanied by photographers documenting their progress. These photographers took pictures of the camps and their prisoners as they found them after the Germans had retreated. These images were the first to be widely circulated as evidence of the atrocities that had happened in the concentration and extermination camps.

One of these photographers was Margaret Bourke-White, whose book *Dear Fatherland, Rest Quietly* shows images of the liberation of Germany by the US Army.<sup>215</sup> Published in 1946 it showed both sides of Germany at the end of the war, the defeated Germans and the liberated victims.

The images taken during the liberation are the images best known to testify to the occurrences in the camps. All photographs taken later, especially in the 1980s when the Shoah became a popular subject, can only present after-images, testifying of the vacated locations and not so much their past.

Photographic memory of the Shoah is very much limited to images of the liberation and aftermath. The photographs do not tell their viewers anything about what it must have been like in the camps. But because the images of the liberation have been circulated as proof of the atrocities that happened in the camps, they were seen as

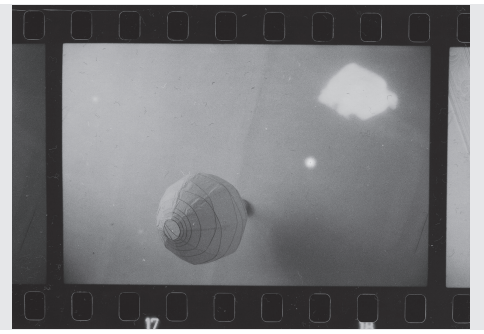
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213 Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/ London, 2012

214 see Leiser, Erwin: "Holocaust und Film", in: Weigel, Sigrid/ Erdle Birgit R. (eds.): *Fünfzig Jahre danach*, Zurich, 1996, p. 105/106

215 Bourke-White, Margaret: *Deutschland, April 1945*, Munich, 1979; (*Dear Fatherland Rest Quietly*, 1945); first German edition 1946





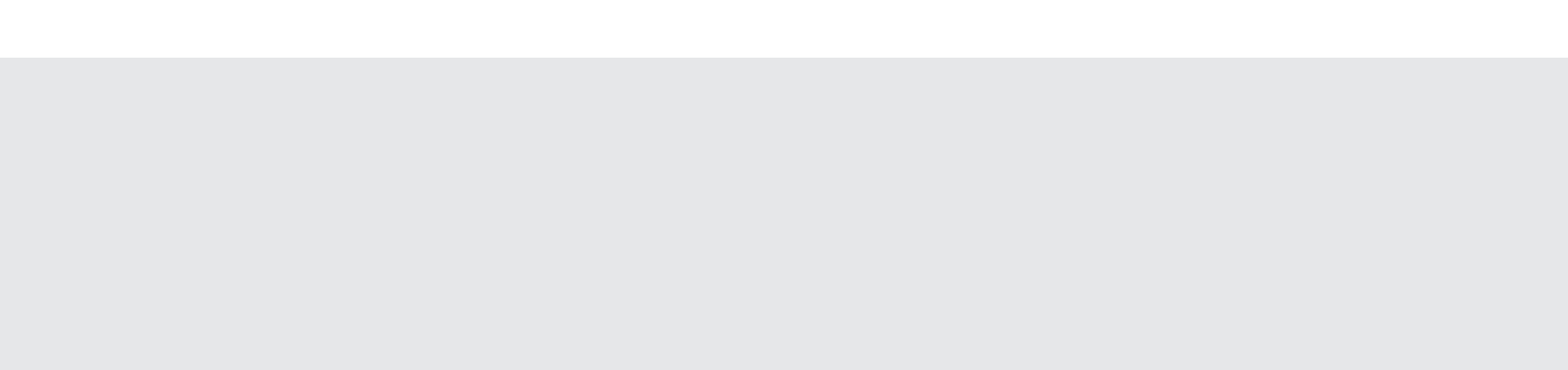


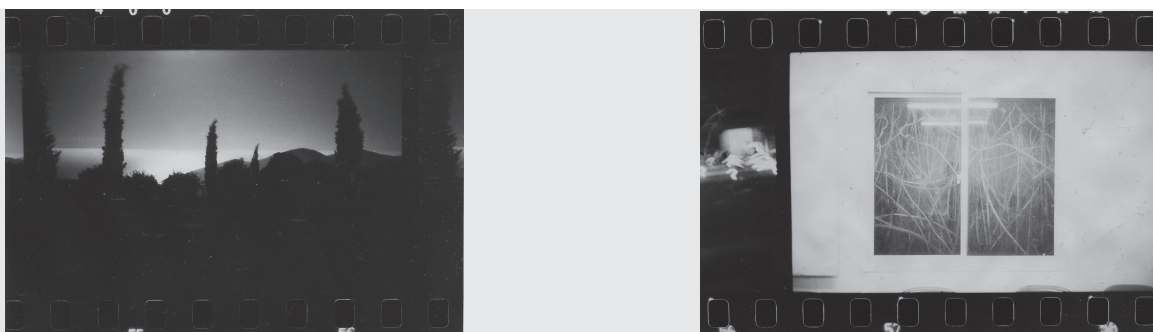
authentic testimony of the concentration and extermination camps. They are very much the only visual record of the camps, and one that enters into our imagination much more easily than all written records.

At the same time these records turn into artistically constructed objects through photography. The photographs overlay the testimony on an aesthetic level. They pretend to give a truthful testimony — the situation visible in the photograph must have been as depicted when taken — but experience an aesthetic transformation. This aesthetic transformation gets in the way of the testimony. The belief in the truthfulness of photography favours the images as testimonies, although they are not testimony of the historical event but only of the existence of the location. Photographs can support the reports that are written or told by survivors. But they do not tell us anything about the events they try to evoke. The images appearing before the reader's eye when reading records of the time in the camps by authors such as Primo Levi, Imre Kertesz or Ruth Klüger have their origin in the photographic imagery taken since the liberation, be they documentary or fictitious. Neither the name that labelled the unspeakable, nor the images required to capture the unrepresentable did justice to the occurrences, but seemed utterly necessary to realize the magnitude of terror. The aesthetic representation of the camps aestheticises the horrors that only truly exist in the survivors' memory. For an outsider there is no representation of the terror that could possibly transmit the true dimension of the events.

First taken to document the progress of the liberation of Germany, these images became visual memories of the atrocities of the Third Reich.

For a long time, Germans did not want to be reminded of the occurrences. They tried to ignore or suppress them, to start anew with no records of the past.<sup>216</sup> But then they were forced to acknowledge the camps by the photographs taken during the liberation. To show a population that pretended not to have known what had occurred in the





camps, the photographs were meant to prove beyond doubt what had been done to the prisoners.

By contrast, German photographers after the war were busy photographing destroyed German cities like Dresden (Richard Peters *Dresden-Eine Kamera klagt an*) or Cologne (Herrmann Claasen *Gesang im Feuerofen*), or the home-comers returning from POW camps (Hilmar Pabel: *Jahre unseres Lebens*). Hilmar Pabel even used a similar visual language to that which was predominantly used to represent the suffering of the victims of the Third Reich.<sup>217</sup> In his book I find images of suffering children and women cramped in a freight carriage. The German reality was that of a defeated people.

Although Primo Levi's first book about his time in Auschwitz was already published in Italian in 1947, "Is this a Man?" was only translated into German in 1961.<sup>218</sup> Just to demonstrate how different East and West Germany dealt with the subject of the Shoah, Nelly Sachs's writings were already recognized in East-Germany in the late 1940s and only in the late 1950s in West Germany. Apart from Paul Celan's rather abstract description of the Shoah in *Der Sand aus den Urnen* (1948) and other works by him published in the 1950s, the Shoah was hardly an issue in West Germany in the years following the war in literature, photography or art.

Alain Resnais, a French filmmaker, was among the first to tackle the issue visually with his *Night and Fog* in 1955. Filmed in the original camps and using archival photographs and footage, *Night and Fog* is both a document and an elegy. The text — the French original was written by Jean Cayrol, the German version by Paul Celan — is a dry description of the images, while the music adds an emotional component. The film led to controversial discussions between Germany and France. Germany was not ready to be confronted with the visual frankness of the material. The film brought up memories most Germans tried to suppress. The images, very explicit and clearly documentary, made denial or ignorance impossible.

217 Pabel, Hilmar: *Jahre unseres Lebens*, Stuttgart, 1954

218 Levi, Primo: *Ist das ein Mensch*, Frankfurt a. M., 1961





In some of his writings, Adorno has pointed out how much the fascist ideology was still a part of West Germany after the war.<sup>219</sup> As long as the occurrences of the Third Reich were suppressed, West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s was still very much infected by the former ideology.<sup>220</sup> This was the stage of evasion as described by Enzo Traverso.<sup>221</sup>

An awareness gained with the Auschwitz trial in 1963 started the process Traverso calls the stage of repeating. In 1965, Peter Weiss' play *The Investigation: Oratorio in Eleven Cantos* was one of the first artistic pieces that raised awareness of the Holocaust in Germany. The Holocaust, still not talked about in German families as part of their own collective memory, was discussed in a historical way as part of the country's past. A slow return to a confession of the past began in the mid-1960s.

Like Resnais, most visual artists dealing (photographically) with the German nightmare of the Shoah until the 1970s were not German. For almost thirty years, German photographers avoided working on this subject.

### Three positions of German post-war photography looking back at the Holocaust

I have chosen three exemplary works by German artists and photographers from different times of the post-war era. These works, different as they are in their approaches, show the ongoing process of working through the past, but fail to show the absence inflicted by the Shoah, while Resnais's film *Night and Fog* for example speaks strongly about the gap between the post-war reality of the camps and their past purpose. I argue that part of this failure is an inadequate understanding of camera-based photography as depicting physical reality, while its representational quality

219 Adorno, Theodor W.: "Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit", in: *Ob nach Auschwitz noch sich leben lasse*, Frankfurt a. M., 1997

220 On a visit to Germany, Kracauer called Germans "raw material for human beings"; as they were lacking a history as a society to be human beings (in *Marbacher Magazin* no. 47/1988, p.116, (from a letter to Löwenthal dated 27.10.1958)

221 Traverso, Enzo: *Gebrauchsanleitungen für die Vergangenheit*, Münster, 2007, p. 38, see above, p. 127



beyond the documentary is often ignored. It shows what has been in the moment of exposure, but does not raise awareness for what it does not depict.

In the early 1970s, Jochen Gerz began dealing with the German legacy in his works. An anecdote from Jochen Gerz's childhood is repeatedly mentioned in catalogues on his works. Born in Berlin in 1940, he experienced war as a young child. In 1944, his family home was bombed and burned down in front of his eyes. Shocked by this experience, so the story goes, he did not speak for a year. The experience is said to have been formative for his later artistic work.

In 1962, he left Germany to live and study first in Basel, then in London and Paris. When he left in 1962, Germans were only just beginning to become aware of the atrocities of the Third Reich. Gerz would follow from abroad the developing debates in the country, "whose culture he absorbed while growing up."<sup>222</sup>

Gerz's works are political, analytical and always multifaceted. They often consist of photographs and texts, although he also works with sculpture, performance or video. He questions political situations as much as media consumption and production. His works are grounded in memory and experience alike. From seeing the family home bombed, it would have been easy to conclude the victimization of one's own past. Gerz had the experience of a victim of war, but also understood the complicity of his compatriots. All his works derive from his personal experience in relation to politics.

For his photographic works he generally uses black and white, since as Stephen Snoddy remarked, it lacks the "real colour of life".<sup>223</sup> Although Gerz made clear that his photographs are only a reproduction of reality, the no man's land between the real and its reproduction is where he positioned his works.<sup>224</sup> His interest has never been reality

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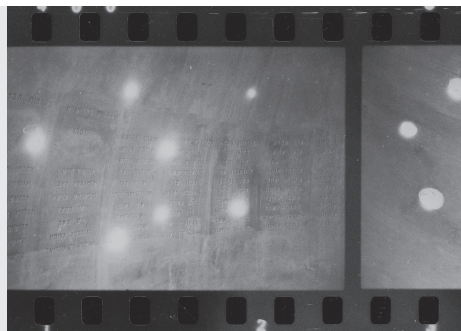
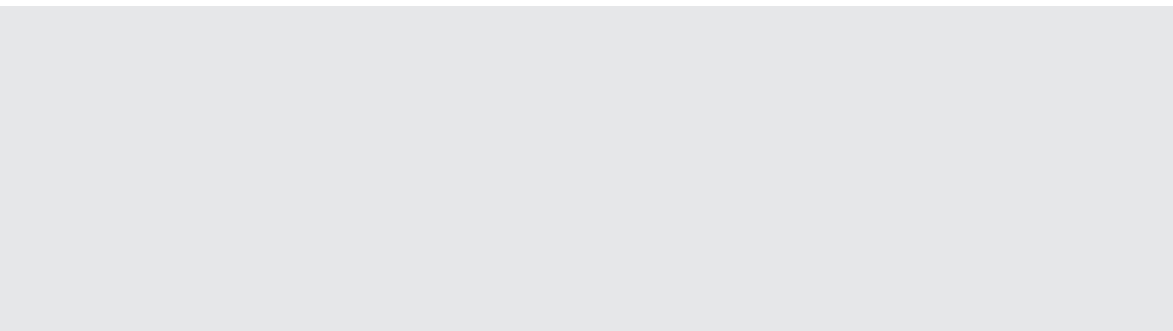
222 Vowinkel, Andreas: "The Absence of the Presence; Concerning the Idea of Production in the Work of Jochen Gerz ", in: Gerz, Jochen: *Life after Humanism*, Ostfildern, 1992

223 Snoddy, Stephen: "25 May 1991 ...", in: Gerz, Jochen: *Life after Humanism*, Ostfildern, 1992

224 "Between the real and its reproduction there is a *no man's land*." This no man's land Gerz speaks about equals the no man's land between what happenend and the consequences. Cited in Snoddy, Stephen: "25 May 1991 ...", in: Gerz, Jochen: *Life after Humanism*, Ostfildern, 1992. Italics in original.

For the difference between the original and its reproduction, see Gerz, Jochen: "Wir wissen, daß das Verdrängte uns immer verfolgt", in: Hemken, Kai-Uwe (ed.): *Gedächtnisbilder*, Leipzig, 1996, p. 255







itself, but the artistic, or even artificial adaptation of reality. I read *Exit - The Dachau Project* in that sense.<sup>225</sup>

On a visit to Munich in 1972, Gerz passed street signs to Dachau. He recounts how he followed the signs on his bicycle and got to the museum on the former site of the concentration camp.<sup>226</sup> In 1972, the former camp of Dachau had finally been converted into a museum after years of quarrel. Here he took 50 photographs, but not of the cause of the museum, but of the signage of instructions and prohibitions, the guiding system for users of the museum. The black and white photographs show the presence of the former camp in its absence. Most of them deny the viewers the superficial horror of the staged remains of crematoria and chimneys.

But although aimed at the photographic depiction of the museum in reference to the linguistic system of the camps, Gerz's final selection for publication still includes typical imagery of the camps. Barbed wire fences, watch towers and the fields where the barracks used to stand mingle with the museum instructions. In fact the series presented in the book begins with a view into the camp, a barbed wire fence and a pole focused in the foreground with buildings and the museum sign out of focus in the background. The second image shows the memorial site rules in front of a similar pole with barbed wire. From here on Gerz concentrates on the organisation of the museum, entrance and exit, warning and information signs, safety installations, sanitary facilities, guest book, seats and coat hangers. At the end one finds the sign indicating the museum together with a watch tower in the background, a leaflet on the floor and as a final image a number marking the field of a former barrack site in the foreground with the watch tower in the background. Although Gerz compared the linguistic or structural similarities of the memorial site and the camp, he still seems to need the more explicit and obvious image references to the camp, probably to connect the two systems.

225 Gerz, Jochen: *EXIT: Das Dachau Projekt*, Frankfurt a. M., 1978

226 Wilson, Sarah: "A German artist in Coventry: Jochen Gerz, The Future Monument, The Public Bench", Vivian Lovell (ed.), *The Phoenix Project* London, Black Dog Publishing, 2004, p. 84-99. <http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/people/wilson-sarah/JOCHEN%20GERZ.pdf>, 14.3.2011



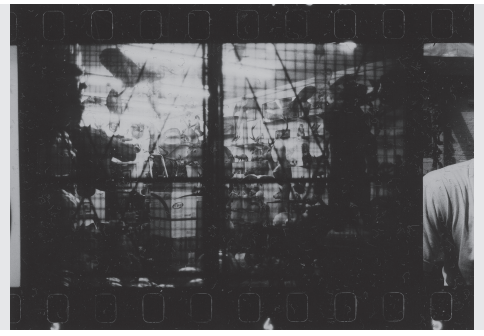


All images are taken in an amateurish manner. The framing is rather imprecise. The depicted is more important than the quality and artistry of the depiction as such. Only the images referring to the former camp hint at the artist's photographic skills. They work with typical photographic representations of space such as depth of field. The paperback book published on the project contains a text by Francis Lévy and the images, all printed on ordinary paper with no regard to the quality of the reproduced images, as well as comments in the visitor book and press reactions.

*Exit* was produced at a time when awareness of the German population's involvement in the Holocaust was just emerging. It draws a connection between institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Third Reich, making it difficult to pretend that things had fully changed, that it would be possible to leave the past behind. The linguistic proximity of the signs in the museum commemorating the atrocities of the camp to the signs displaying the language of the camp is highly apparent and made viewers at the time uncomfortable. It uncovers the pretence that Germany and its citizens had changed and that National Socialism with all its consequences is a thing of the past. As James Young pointed out, a critique of the museum as an institutionalised space for remembrance as such is implicit in Gerz's *Exit*. He, "was the first artist to critique the Holocaust memorial museum as a formal, if ironic extension of the authoritarian regime it would commemorate."<sup>227</sup> Just at the beginning of a willingness to accept the legacy of the past, instead of trying to deny it, Gerz uncovered the hypocrisy of his fellow Germans and held a mirror up to them. By not showing the images related to the past, which was perceived as fully passed, and merely referring to them through images of the present, Gerz refuses to allow the viewer to disconnect himself from the past. Whereas most photographic works comply with Barthes's claim of the "have been", Gerz's *Exit* concurs with the Benjaminian demand that images of the past are recognized in the present. Although working in black and white, "absolutes and opposites", Gerz's works differentiate between victim and perpetrator, leading to the awareness that one can be both in different situations and that does not relieve

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227 Young, James E.: "Memory against itself in Germany today", in: *At Memory's Edge*, New Haven, 2007, p. 124





one of one's responsibility.<sup>228</sup> Gerz seems perfectly aware of Adorno's statement of the impossibility that a "wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen).<sup>229</sup> The possibility of Auschwitz changed all ideas of human existence. The museum cannot be disconnected from the camp that it displays. On the contrary: its good intention must be questioned again and again, and that is what Jochen Gerz does in *Exit*.

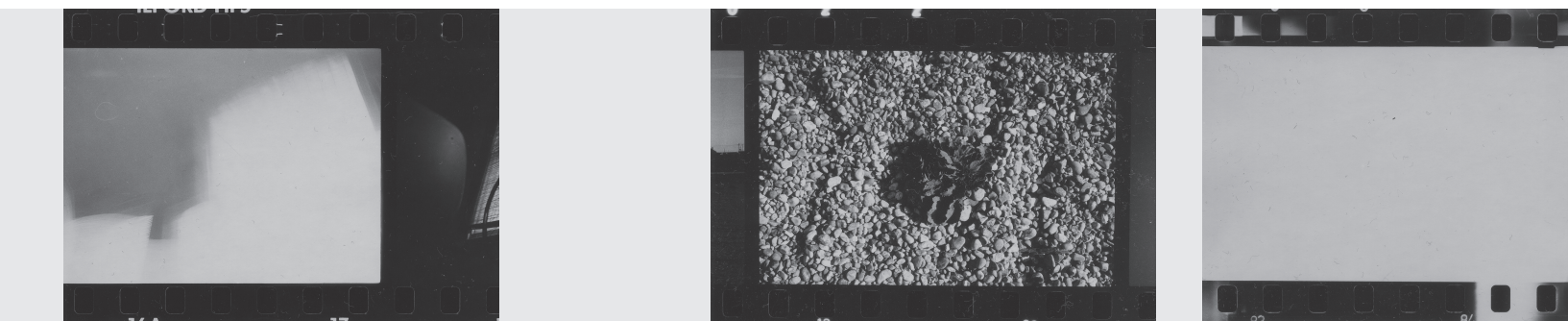
The work was presented in the form of an installation in Berlin in 1974. The installation consisted of crude wooden chairs and tables with the photographic documentation of the museum on them. A lightbulb hung above each table. The visual presentation alone recalled images of the barracks. In addition to the visual presentation, visitors heard the tapping sound of typewriters and the heavy breathing of a running person, conceivably in flight. Gerz mostly avoided the manipulative reference to the camps in his photographs, but went too far with the rather theatrical staging of the installation. While the photographic references to the camp subtly require the viewers' knowledge and involvement, the installation openly evokes the camp and thus arouses dismay. Gerz strongly believes that things that have been repressed continue to haunt us.<sup>230</sup> Now he haunts his audience by playing with the repressed. When presented for the first time in Berlin in 1974, the installation created a scandal.<sup>231</sup> The audience was not ready for these obvious links between a well intended institution of the Federal Republic of Germany (offering public recognition of the deeds) and the camps of the Third Reich. Comparing the linguistic system of the well intended museum, well intended in terms of acknowledging a memory of the atrocities of the Holocaust, with that of the camp devalued all efforts of historical acknowledgment. The past was seen as disconnected from the present. In the 1970s there was still no great awareness in Germany that humanity had changed after Auschwitz, that there was no way back to

228 Snoddy, Stephen: "25 May 1991 ...", in: Gerz, Jochen: *Life after Humanism*, Ostfildern, 1992

229 Adorno, Theodor W.: "Refuge for the homeless", in: *Minima Moralia*, New York/ London, 2005, p.39

230 Young, James E.: "Memory against itself in Germany today", in: *At Memory's Edge*, New Haven, 2007

231 see Wilson, Sarah: "A German artist in Coventry: Jochen Gerz, The Future Monument, The Public Bench", Vivian Lovell (ed.), *The Phoenix Project* London, Black Dog Publishing, 2004, p.84-99. <http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/people/wilson-sarah/JOCHEN%20GERZ.pdf>, 14.5.2015, p.8 of PDF







normality.<sup>232</sup> The possibility of Auschwitz had changed every poem, every art work, but also life as such.

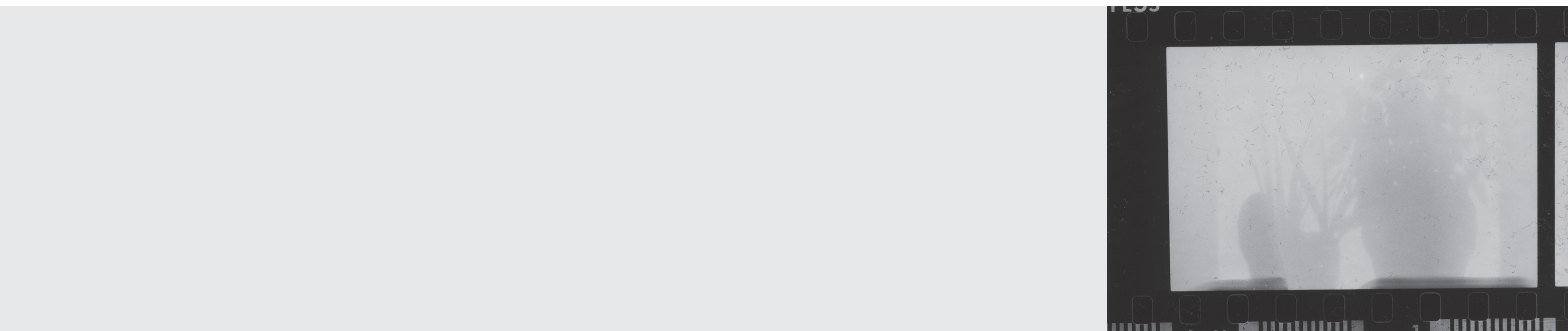
In *Exit* Gerz makes the viewer see the camp, which is absent in the images. Although seeing the photographic reproduction of the museum the informed viewer who knows about the history of the place perceives the images as referential to the former use of the site. It is a presence in the absence that makes the recollection of history even stronger.

In the process of accounting for the past, it took until the 1980s to build an awareness with which history could be worked through. When the American TV drama *Holocaust* was broadcast in 1979, the stage of obsessive engagement with the persecution of the Jews began. In most debates it was treated as a concluded event in the past, so the few critics, like Adorno, stating the actuality of the occurrences were in the minority and rather unpopular. But during this stage an obsessive interest in this specific part of German history began. Through this, the past, which had previously been dealt with in a retrospective manner so far, became part of the collective memory. In doing so it became belatedly reconnected to life in contemporary Germany.

In 1987, during the so called repeating stage, about 15 years after Jochen Gerz's *Exit*, the German photographer Dirk Reinartz began to document the remains of the major concentration camps around Europe. Reinartz, born in 1947, was a renowned documentary photographer. Many of his projects dealt with post-war Germany and showed bleak images of a wounded nation. He worked on *Deathly Still* for six years. In 1995, a book was published containing 270 black and white images from 24 camps around Europe. Most of the camps have been transformed into memorial sites. The photographs are carefully framed and show Reinartz's professionalism as a photographer. Each camp is represented with several images, overviews and details of the remains. The shades of grey tone of the monochrome images make the camps

<sup>232</sup> see Ball, Karyn: *Disciplining the Holocaust*, Albany, 2008, p. 49ff. Karyn Ball refers here to Adorno's criticism of Germans wanting to leave the past behind in texts like "Education after Auschwitz" (1966) or "The Meaning of Working Through the Past" (1959).







look grim even if photographed in bright sunshine. The images (exposed on 35 mm film, including a selection of panoramas) appear to give objective evidence of the structure of the camps. Themes like watch towers, barbed wire, vast empty landscapes, rail tracks, chimneys and views obstructed by window frames in the foreground recur throughout the series. Reinartz limited himself to depicting only the original relics. He thereby presents the true remains of the camps, which according to James E. Young work in the same way as photographs do, namely as a pseudo-reality from the past.<sup>233</sup> The reality of the places acts like the reality of the photograph. In many of the memorial sites, the original relics have disappeared and been replaced by symbolic structures. But Reinartz does not look for the symbolic structures of the aftermath. He photographs the deathly still authenticity of the real. Without any title information, the photographs are as meaningless as the places would be.<sup>234</sup> Even in Bergen-Belsen, which was razed to the ground by the British Army shortly after liberation, Reinartz apparently finds telling details that claim to be witnesses of the past.

These predictable images of the camps are mingled with images of undefined landscapes, often taken with a panorama camera. Ulrich Baer regards these landscape images as a refusal to represent the obvious sites that carry the testimony.<sup>235</sup>

Unlike Baer I regard the images to be unbiased. The kind of photography used does not raise the viewers' attention to the absence of signs. The images are integrated in the rest of the photographs depicting the ruins of the camps.

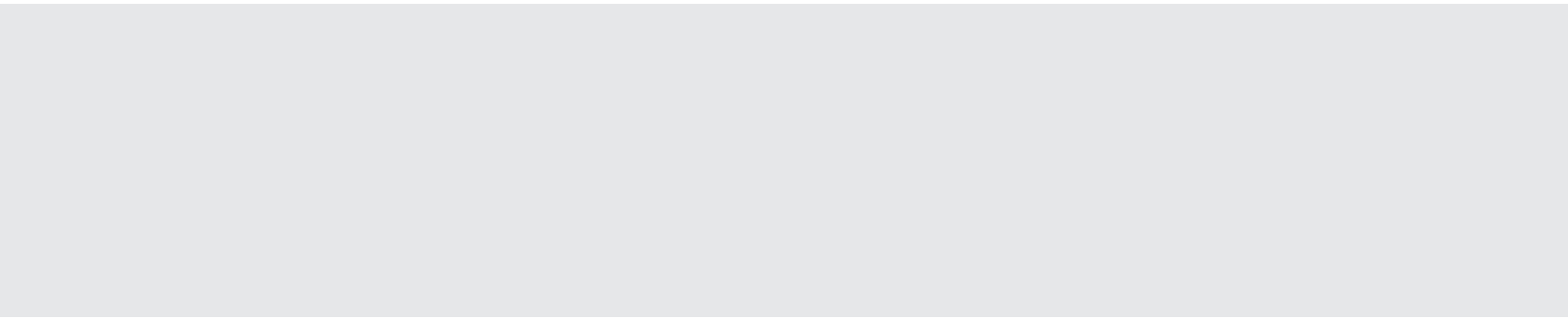
Awareness of the atrocities of the Holocaust and the existence of the camps increased in Germany from the mid-1960s onwards, so that when Reinartz set out to document the remains of German concentration camps around Europe, as the cover text reads, "to preserve the reality of the Holocaust", imagery of the camps was already known and available.<sup>236</sup> Reinartz's images seem to show the state of remembrance at a certain

233 see Young, James E.: *Beschreibung des Holocaust*, Frankfurt, 1997, p. 270

234 *Ibid.*, p. 270.

235 Baer, Ulrich: *Spectral Evidence*, Cambridge (MA), 2002, p. 66

236 see Reinartz, Dirk: *Deathly Still*, New York, 1995, inside cover text





time, rather than the reality of the Holocaust. From some places he brought back the well known images of entrance-gate inscriptions, barbed wire, furnaces and chimneys, as if he needed to prove their existence for himself. From other places he returned with landscape images that showed no visible trace of the Holocaust, like the image of a clearing at Sobibor, as discussed extensively by Ulrich Baer in his book *Spectral Evidence*. Reinartz must have known the images taken by Allied war photographers such as Meyer Levin or Margaret Bourke-White, and also the imagery from both documentary and fictional films like *Night and Fog*, *Shoah* or the TV series *Holocaust*. Photographic depiction cannot show reality once time has moved on. The photograph can only show what is visible in the moment of its coming into being. For post-Holocaust images this means that after the liberation only the memorial sites could be documented. Reinartz's photographs show the camps as deathly still as they have never been or are in reality. While in use they were overloaded with prisoners; nowadays hoards of tourists go through them in search of historical affirmation. The expectation of them being deathly still is a projection onto the space that springs from the horror of committing the most atrocious mass murder. So the bleak monochrome images depicting the well-known sites are a plane onto which the viewer projects images that are known from films and other photographs. Many of Reinartz's images seem familiar from Resnais's 1955 film *Night and Fog*: the architectural structures of watch towers, the surrounding landscapes, innocent as they may seem, and the remaining signs of the camps, barracks, gas chambers, piles of shoes and spoons. One might call them "afterimages" of Resnais's film images in a Bergsonian sense.<sup>237</sup> Only Resnais shows the reality of the remains in true — meaning film — colour and in broad sunlight. The sites look rather innocent, almost friendly in *Night and Fog* since they are all filmed on a pleasant day. The narrator says: "No image, no description can capture the true dimension of constant fear." Resnais does not even try to imitate the horrors through

<sup>237</sup> see Bergson, Henry: *Matter and Memory*, New York, 2005, p. 102/103 "If, after having gazed at any object, we turn our eyes abruptly away, we obtain an 'afterimage' of it: must we not suppose that this image existed already while we were looking? [...] It is true that we are dealing here with images photographed upon the object itself, and with memories following immediately upon the perception of which they are but the echo."



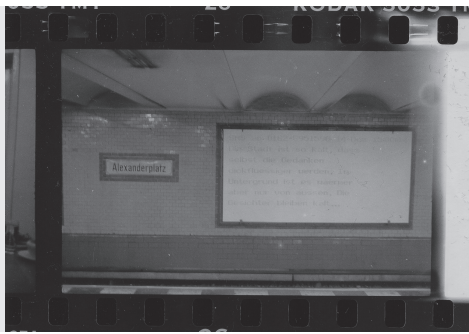


his images. "A crematorium may look as pretty as a picture postcard," the narrator says; and that is exactly what the filmed image does. To fully understand the situation in the camps one would have to have known it. Resnais puts the remains of the camps into context by connecting them to original footage in black and white, thereby already visibly dealing with two different time levels and acknowledging the difference between his time and the past. Resnais makes it more difficult to distance oneself from the images, to see them in an abstract way.

The theme of *Deathly Still* can already be found in Resnais's film, as the narrator says in the first minutes: "The camera the only visitor ... no step is heard but ours." While Reinartz relies on the expression of the images alone, the narrator in Resnais's film poses the ultimate question: Who is responsible? *Night and Fog* is not just a documentary account of the remains of the Shoah, dealing only with the remains that are expected to speak for themselves; it is an accusation of the murder and atrocities committed, demanding subsequent generations to assume the responsibility of never forgetting.

At the same time as Reinartz produced his series, other photographers and film makers, not only of German origin, produced similar imagery.<sup>238</sup> It seems that in the 1980s there was a need to capture such places, perhaps to retain their memory in case they might disappear one day, like the witnesses themselves. These can only function as examples. In his series entitled *The Invisible Camps* Reinhard Matz questions the capability of museums erected on the sites of former camps to keep memory and awareness alive. In this respect, his approach resembles Gerz's in *Exit*. But Matz's images show the site where the symbols of the camp mix with the signs of the museum. They show the commodification of the Holocaust in the 1980s. The experimental filmmaker Wilhelm Hein made a film about the camps. *To those who found no graves* is shot on Super 8 colour material, but presents a similar set of imagery: the barbed wire fences, the

<sup>238</sup> see Milton, Sybil and Ira Nowinski: *In Fitting Memory*, Detroit, 1991. This is not an exclusive problem concerning only German photographers. Ira Nowinski, an American photographer, took very similar images from 1987 to 1989 to document the architectural quality of the memorials, needless to say in black and white. The light is bleak, the contrast is flat and all images have a similar air of tristesse as in Reinartz's images.





watch towers, the Auschwitz entrance gates. This imagery seems deeply engraved in a collective consciousness.

The artistry of Reinartz's photos stands in opposition to Adorno's dictum "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric",<sup>239</sup> meaning aestheticisation after the Holocaust entails the problem Imre Kertesz described as an audience gloating over works of art without comprehending the implemented suffering.<sup>240</sup> This is even more applicable to artworks explicitly addressing the Holocaust or trying to keep the memory alive. While Adorno acknowledged Celan's use of language or Schönberg's use of music as culturally important answers to Auschwitz, since both found ways to integrate the occurrences formally, Reinartz's style follows traditional ways of documentary photography throughout all his works.<sup>241</sup> His images never show recognition of the different historical implications, be they petit bourgeois post-war Germany, or Bismarck memorials, or the remains of the Holocaust. His photography treats all subjects alike. As suspected by Kracauer, the historical events thereby become generalised and just form a line of a temporal continuity. Thus if one could find a specific visual language to differentiate events and their historical implication, this would acknowledge the incoherence of historical narratives and provide for caesurae as discussed in chapter 1. The places, voided of their former function, can only be suggestive of the atrocities that were committed in them to an informed viewer. If all that remains are just fixtures and fittings that have lost their significance, photography can only depict machinery that is now emptied of its meaning. What differentiates these places from places with similar equipment, is their history, which is present in its absence, but therefore invisible. Here is a dilemma for camera-based photography, which can merely record what is visible. The photographic image of a historical site that only records the visual appearance

<sup>239</sup> Adorno, Theodor W.: "Administered World", in: *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, Stanford, 2003, p. 162; Adorno comments on that dictum in *Kunst, Gedächtnis des Leidens* by saying, that the situation — meaning after Auschwitz — does not allow art, but needs art at the same time (see *Ob nach Auschwitz sich noch leben lasse*, p. 430).

<sup>240</sup> see Kertesz, Imre: *Galeerentagebuch*, Hamburg, 1997, p. 11

<sup>241</sup> see Traverso, Enzo: *Auschwitz denken*, Hamburg, 2000, p. 181/182. Traverso describes why Adorno respected Celan's poetry and Schönberg's "Ein Überlebender in Warschau" as exceptions to his dictum that after Auschwitz, to write poetry would be barbaric.







of the site can only be suggestive, relying on the knowledge of the viewer, as it can only capture what is left behind and not what has been there historically. Jochen Gerz avoided this trap when he took his pictures for *Exit* by only aiming for the recent state of the Dachau camp. Reinartz took another route. He could also only document the sites as memorials and museums, but he also documented the disappearance of evidence as time passes.

What do images of missing remains tell the viewer? In co-existence with the caption that names the presented concentration camp, these images seem to prove first and foremost the existence of these sites. We know of the occurrences from hearsay. The depiction of the facilities seems to prove that what we know from hearsay was at least possible and the camps were equipped for the described atrocities. In the end the images do not prove or weaken the testimonies of survivors or liberators. If "absence becomes the referent,"<sup>242</sup> as Ulrich Baer reads these images, then the nothing that is left behind is merely depicted as nothing, not as "the absence of something we could know".<sup>243</sup> That raises the question whether photography can represent the presence of something absent and therefore beyond the visible at all?

With the collapse of East Germany in 1989, remembrance of the Third Reich faded into the background. Although still forming part of German identity, the Holocaust shifted back to a historical position with less and less connection to the present.<sup>244</sup> For decades guilt for the committed atrocities and the shame of having been defeated formed strong parts of German identity. When the Wall came down, the majority of Germans were glad to connect history prior to the Third Reich with the "post-history" and lived according to Mephisto's verdict in Goethe's *Faust*, which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: "It's as good as if it never happened". The suffering of Germans who had been expelled from their homes in Central Europe became highlighted, thereby repressing the suffering of victims of Hitler's politics of persecution and

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242 Baer, Ulrich: *Spectral Evidence*, Cambridge (MA), 2002, p. 76

243 Ibid., p. 75

244 see Assmann, Aleida: *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, Munich, 2006, p. 183





extermination.<sup>245</sup> The shameful past was considered to be worked through and had to make room for the more non-malignant post-history to the Holocaust. The climax of the process of working through was the implementation of the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe right in the centre of Berlin, releasing Germany from its past like a healed patient. In the terminology of reparation, repayment of the debts (in German: Schulden) is used to relieve the guilt (in German: Schuld).<sup>246</sup> In this use of vocabulary one can already find a longing to turn the Holocaust into an event that is fully in the past. Once the debts are paid off, Germany can leave its past behind and move on, not carrying the burden of guilt with it for the rest of time.

About a decade after Dirk Reinartz started out on his assignment to document the scenes of the Holocaust, Bettina Lockemann and Elisabeth Neudörfl addressed the theme of the Third Reich anew. Born in 1968 and 1971, they represent the next generation after Gerz and Reinartz. As the text on their work *Plan* explains, their interest was stirred by the discussion on the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe.<sup>247</sup> They wanted to confront themselves with the historical traces of the Third Reich in an everyday context. This included the full range of Jewish persecution, from marginalization to the extermination as is evident in authentic places in the cityscape of Berlin. Focusing mainly on sites representing the perpetrators' part — which they regarded as their own background — they set out to take photographs of places that played a role in the machinery of the Third Reich. They decided to photograph these places in what they call an "artistic documentary" fashion.

The images are published in a hardcover book in landscape format with a grey cloth lining.<sup>248</sup> The spine shows the title and the authors' names printed in black in an embossed rectangle. The back is plain, the front shows another embossed rectangle with four letters elevated near the bottom right-hand corner on the inside of the outline of the rectangle. In German the word "PLAN" means both map and plan. Inside there

245 see on this subject Assmann, Aleida: *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, Munich, 2006.

246 see Weigel, Sigrid: "Shylocks Wiederkehr", in: Weigel, Sigrid/ Erdle Birgit R. (eds.): *Fünfzig Jahre danach*, Zurich, 1996

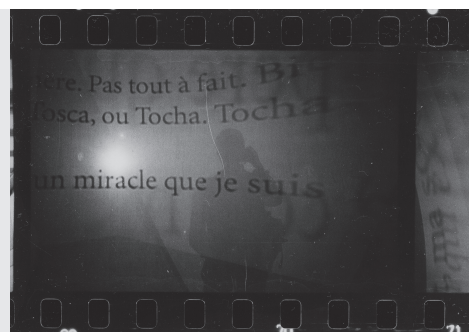
247 <http://www.bildangelegenheiten.de/plan/plan.html>, 27.8.2014

248 Lockemann, Bettina and Neudörfl, Elisabeth: *Plan*, Leipzig, 1999





is slightly yellowish paper with a rough surface. The first page shows the outline of the rectangle with the title *Plan* in the same position as on the cover. Then the book immediately begins with a photograph. It is situated on the right hand page, filling it completely. It is a monochrome photograph of a landscape in an urban environment. In the foreground there is a paved path running in the lower third from the left to the bottom edge, followed by ground and then trees without leaves, indicating that the image has been taken in the autumn or winter. Behind the trees a tower appears in the mist. A viewer with knowledge of Berlin might recognize the Tiergarten and the bell tower near the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. The following two images show winter vegetation, shrubbery with bare branches and leaves on the ground. Whereas in the first two images the light is even and flat, the third image has more contrast. The fourth image shows shrubbery and trees in the foreground, a path on the right-hand side of the picture and buildings in the background. The foreground is out of focus. Between the trees and the buildings one can see a fence. The next image shows an elevated view through the winter trees onto low buildings surrounded by blocks of flats. By turning the page over, one's gaze is fixed on the lower part of a stone façade of a building from the early twentieth century. The image provides a view of the corner of the building with some windows on the ground and first floors, and the entrance towards the right side of the picture. The next image presents a different part of the same building, as one can conclude from the stones of the façade. This time a corner of the building is shown, of which we can now see three floors, but still not its full height. At the right side of the image there is a winter tree in front of the building. The following picture is taken from a distance to the building, with it now in the background, cropped by the top edge of the image. In the front there is a stretch of grass and some trees. The light is even and the trees are still wintry without leaves. The ground is covered, probably with snow. The foreground occupies approximately the lower half of the image and thereby gains importance over the building, which becomes secondary by its placement in the background and the cropping.





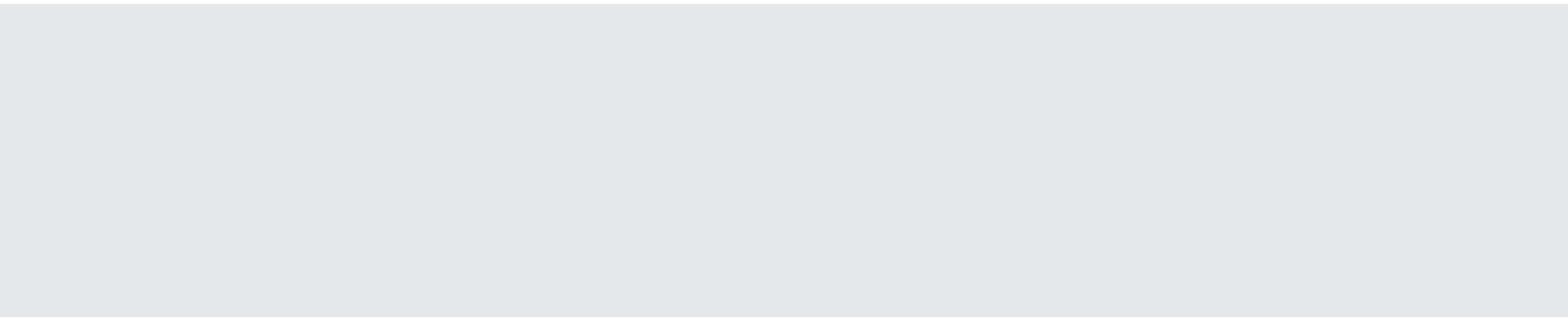
The following seventy eight pages run on in a similar fashion, close-up views of façades, buildings behind trees and fences, stretches of green, wintery urban landscapes. Many views are taken from a distance, sometimes obstructed by bushes, shrubbery or fences. All images are monochrome and all are taken in the winter. The light is sometimes more even, sometimes more defined, even sunny with shadows, while the contrast changes accordingly from low to high. But the differing light situations do not disturb the flow of the images. They all appear on the right hand pages, filling them fully. The left hand pages are left blank. The images are not disturbed by additional information. They just stand on their own, one by one. After leafing through the eighty-six images only with the title at hand, the viewer comes across a page with a list of names and locations of buildings as well as short annotations on their utilisation. The name of the site is underlined. Some of the places have additional information, regarding their use, and then the street name and house number is stated. There is no specification of the city, of the time in which the building was used or the period to which the address refers. The list of places carries references to the Third Reich, including concentration camps, deportation stations, Gestapo headquarters and the Jewish Home for the aged, which functioned as a collection point for deportations. The street names given as addresses specify the names of streets in Berlin at the time of exposure. The viewer is asked to draw conclusions about these references to the different periods.<sup>249</sup>

Coming across the list of places, the viewer can now review the images with the newly gained knowledge about what one has just looked at. Knowing Berlin fairly well, I can recognize some of the stated places and identify them. Others remain a mystery. There are several images of some places, while others are merely represented once, although it is difficult to realize that fact due to the lack of page numbers. Some depicted sites are impossible to identify as a specific place. Coming across the list after looking at all

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<sup>249</sup> The historical attribution of the building therefore might, but might not conform with the address stated, as some of the streets have been renamed after the war. Therefore the Kroll Oper was not originally on John Foster Dulles Allee, but on Platz der Republik, which was once Koenigsplatz. John Foster Dulles Allee was only named thus in 1959.







images once, the seemingly innocent pictures retrospectively show sites that played a role in the Third Reich.

The final page after the list just bears the imprint.

The title — the German word "Plan" meaning map or plan, blueprint, scheme or project — offers two interpretations. One is in the sense of a city map, referring to the different addresses given in the list. The other in reference to the Third Reich, to the bureaucratically planned and executed marginalization and deportation of Jews and other minorities according to a plan. The reference to the Third Reich is only revealed by the notation of the places through their historical names and functions, but without giving an indication of their historicity.<sup>250</sup> The artists very carefully refuse to give the viewer any help on how to read and understand the images and the list.

All photographs are taken in a mode as unspecific as possible to be understood as depictions of real scenes. The list of places at the back provides some information, but refuses to help to identify the actual sites or their historical function in the images. The historical references only become obvious on reading the list carefully.

Lockemann/Neudörfl photograph the sites as unintentional memorials (Riegl) in relation to the Holocaust.<sup>251</sup> As already mentioned in chapter 1, memorials and memorialising photographs both block retrospection and become themselves memorable rather than the historical moments to which they refer. Memorials serve as symbolic representations.<sup>252</sup> This symbolic representation is an easy way to deal with the past. For an event like the Holocaust, which is always said to be unrepresentable, the symbolic is an utterly inadequate way of representation as it makes it easy to distance

<sup>250</sup> The only exception is the "Haus der Wannseekonferenz", which only received this name after the event and is therefore inconsistent with the concept

<sup>251</sup> For the elucidation of Riegl's concept of intentional and unintentional memorials, see chapter 1

<sup>252</sup> In the essay accompanying Ira Nowinski's book with photographs from Holocaust memorial sites with no visible remains, Sybil Milton accredits a special role to sculptors and landscape architects in relation to "the symbolic representation of mass murder". Symbolic representation refers to the many memorials using stereotyped iconography that have been placed in German cities in commemoration of the Shoah. See Milton, Sybil and Ira Nowinski: *In fitting memory*, Detroit, 1991, p. 8, p. 15





oneself from past to present and serves the purpose of relieving the burden of guilt (Schuld) without paying the debts (Schulden).

There is no indication of the different time references, apart from the original names that bear the reference to the Third Reich through certain terms. The contextualisation of the images with the Holocaust throws the viewer into a reaction, acquired through years of education, through what Barthes called "the filter of culture".<sup>253</sup> It thereby evokes a prefabricated reaction, according to whatever the viewer's perspective on the Holocaust is before viewing *Plan*.

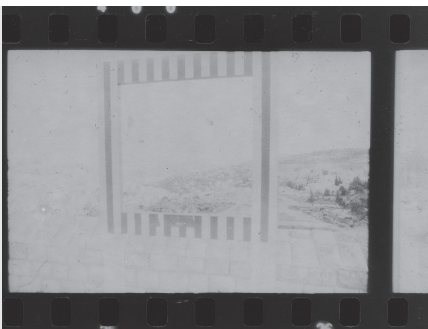
The artists have conducted an individual, personal selection of represented places. They state on their website that the represented places are related to the marginalization and extermination of Jews and other minorities. But on closer inspection what connects all the selected places is the National Socialist system in a wider sense rather than being limited to the persecution of the Jews.<sup>254</sup> Some of the named places, like the Kroll Oper or the Reichsluftfahrtministerium (Ministry of Aviation) have little obvious relevance to the Holocaust, but can be seen more as representative of the authoritarian, oppressive and militarised system of the Third Reich. While the focus in reworking the Third Reich up to the 1990s was clearly on the places where Jews were exterminated, from the 1990s onwards the reworking of the past becomes more multifaceted, now including war-mongering and displacement.

In chapter 20 of his *Camera Lucida*, Barthes ascribes a second sight to the photographer. In accordance with Barthes, the photographer's second sight is not found in what she sees, but in where she is.<sup>255</sup> This idea leads me to the territorial aspect of photography. The photographed site is assumed to speak for itself. This is often expected of Holocaust sites when photographed, although responsibility for the horrors that occurred there cannot be found in the locations, but in people.

253 Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 16

254 <http://www.bildangelegenheiten.de/plan/plan.html>, 11.5.2011

255 Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 47





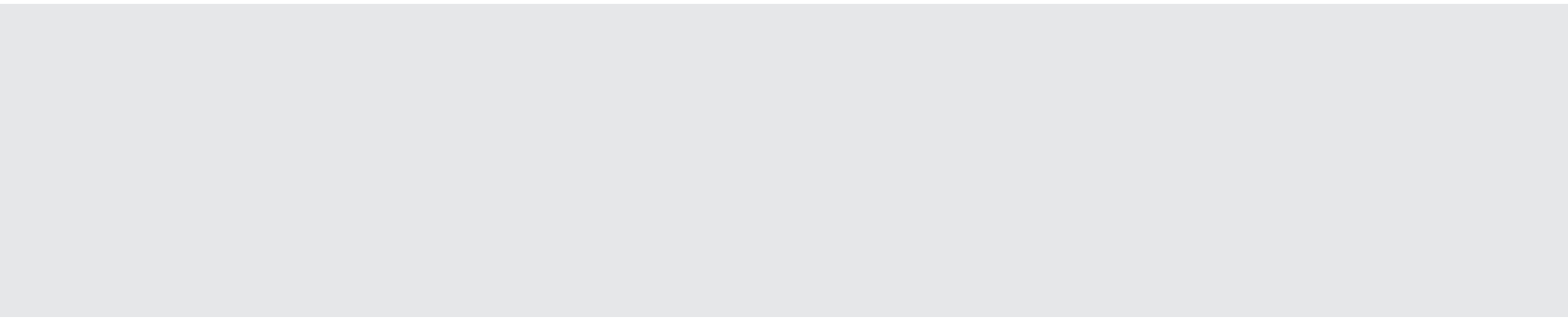
The pictures in *Plan* do not give much spatial information. No people are visible, but bus shelters, cars and bicycles that are occasionally displayed in some images give a sense of the time in which the photographs were taken. The present of the photographs, as indicated by addresses, is the present of the 1990s — which is from the perspective of the viewer just as much a period of the past as the 1940s. While the address and image are located in the same time, their stated function originated in a time past with respect to the moment of exposure.<sup>256</sup> Thus, one finds a time leap between the time of the existence of the places referred to — that is in their Third Reich function — and that of their named location and image. The past is linked to the present. The list emphasises the different time levels with which the viewer is confronted: the historical time, which the function of the place represents only by being mentioned in the list, the time of the exposure of the image and the viewer's own time looking back at two different stages of the past.

In their works the artists are said to often address preferences, habits, conditions and institutional contexts of the general reception of photographs.<sup>257</sup> In *Plan* Lockemann/Neudörfl renounce the use of the well known images from post-memory relating to the Holocaust since, "the specific context of these images has certainly been lost in the incessant reproduction."<sup>258</sup> Hence the viewer can innocently regard the images first, before realising what he actually looked at on meeting the list. Instead repetitively using the same imagery of the same places, Lockemann/Neudörfl investigate the listed locations through the lens of their camera and give the viewer a fresh impression, a report of what they found aside from the clichéd images, in deliberately presenting the unspectacular, the unexpected, the overlooked. They seem to overcome the repetition of the images that are frozen in the collective post-memory and seek new ones. In doing so they question the post-memory images, especially in their relationship to the present. As their images emerge from the same system, namely documentary

<sup>256</sup> see footnote no. 249 and 250

<sup>257</sup> Huber, Hans Dieter: *Orte des Missverständnisses*, opening speech July 1999, <http://www.hgb-leipzig.de/ARTNINE/downloads/lockemann.pdf>, 8.5.2011

<sup>258</sup> Hirsch, Marianne: "Surviving Images", in: Zelizer, Barbie (ed.): *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, New Brunswick, 2001, p. 226





photography that is non-representational in Roger Scruton's sense, they venture to overwrite the existing post-memory images with others and become the new representations of these locations.<sup>259</sup> But as depictions with truth-value representing real sites, the images risk being interpreted in a trivialised way.<sup>260</sup>

The banality of the photographs brings to mind Hannah Arendt's subtitle to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.<sup>261</sup> The "banality of evil" is stirred by *Plan* through the photographs rather than through the represented places. The viewer cannot trust the representation of the place as it is too deliberately chosen to be denied. Here again *Night and Fog* comes to my mind, in which Jean Cayrol poses the ultimate question of who is responsible. Neither *Plan* nor *Deathly Still* pose this question.<sup>262</sup> The way documentary photography obeys standards of representation, directed by reality and without acknowledgement of individual positioning, it corresponds with Arendt's realisation that the denial of the individual's recognition defines the most atrocious deeds as banal, which came out of her observations on Eichmann.<sup>263</sup>

However Lockemann/Neudörfl seem to ask whether one can ever judge from a photograph. Derrida speaks of photography as an invention: on the one hand the invention of the other as a discovery of what is already there, and on the other the production process itself as a form of invention.<sup>264</sup> "Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it."<sup>265</sup> Herein lies the banality of

259 As mentioned in the introduction, Roger Scruton argues that photographs are non-representational as they are often not perceived as images of something. Instead in photographs, especially in documentary photographs (and films) the object is appreciated for itself. I argue in favour of photography's potential to be representational, but agree with Scruton, that this quality is not located in the photographic recording, but in the purposeful transformation from object to image. See: Scruton, Roger: "Photography and Representation", in: Walden, Scott (ed.): *Photography and philosophy: essays on the pencil of nature*. Chichester, 2010, p. 138-166

260 see Huber, Hans Dieter: *Orte des Missverständnisses*, opening speech July 1999, <http://www.hgb-leipzig.de/ARTNINE/downloads/lockemann.pdf>, 8.5.2011

261 Arendt, Hannah: *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil*, London, 2006

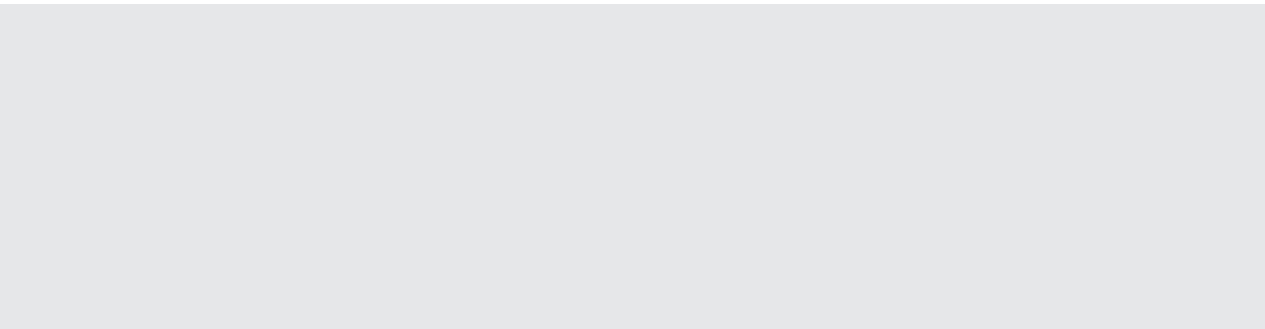
262 The way in which all three works discussed here do without people, without the victims or survivors, without the perpetrators and their successors, resembles Hannah Arendt's idea that the Holocaust made individuals superfluous. The perpetrators were just bureaucrats (like Eichmann), the victims just a mass that was defined, counted and transported to be annihilated by these bureaucrats. The absence of individual deeds made the Holocaust as banal as it was atrocious.

263 Arendt, Hannah: *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil*, London, 2006

264 Derrida, Jacques: *Copy, Archive, Signature*, Stanford, 2010, p. 43

265 Sontag, Susan: "In Plato's Cave", in: *On Photography*, London, 2002, p. 23







photographic depiction. In *Plan* the depiction of Third Reich locations irritates because it does not follow a known paradigm. It questions the trust in photographic depictions of visible reality. "Photographs are valued because they give information. They tell one what there is; they make an inventory."<sup>266</sup> *Plan* sets out to link the inventory of the Third Reich with the overlooked and unexpected more than fifty years later exactly by refusing to give information. By looking at *Plan* one can get the impression that, "history has retreated, leaving behind it an indifferent nebula, traversed by currents, but emptied of references."<sup>267</sup> The photographs show traces of a presence, but not the expected ones.

In Derrida's reading of the concept of the trace that is left on Freud's mystic writing pad the trace, "is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance. An unerasable trace is not a trace, it is a full presence, an immobile and uncorruptible substance."<sup>268</sup> In that respect the images do not present a trace themselves as they manifest the moment in time. Once photographed a trace becomes unerasable and therefore its depiction is no longer a trace. Instead the trace is turned into evidence and photography turns every location into a crime scene. The images taken in 1995 present a trace of a time past, invisible in the image, made clear only in the list by naming the function of the place in the time of the Third Reich. They represent the time in which they were taken and thus show a trace of that time, which when looked at belongs already to the past. As Chris Marker's narrator says in *La Jetée*, "nothing tells memory from ordinary moments. Only afterwards do they claim remembrance on account of their scars."<sup>269</sup> That makes the time of the viewer important to bring the other two time levels together.

In chapter 1 I compared looking at photographs with Benjamin's looking at the angel of history. It always has its face turned towards the past, seeing only,

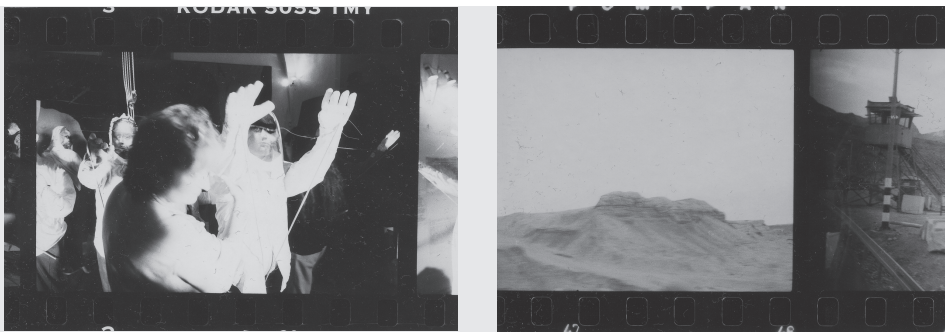
266 Sontag, Susan: "In Plato's Cave", in: *On Photography*, London, 2002, p. 22

267 Baudrillard, Jean: "History: a retro scenario", in: *Simulacra and Simulation*, Michigan, 2010, p. 43

268 Derrida, Jacques: "Freud and the Scene of Writing", in: *Writing and Difference*, Oxon, 2001, p. 289

269 Marker, Chris: *La Jetée*; a film made in 1962 by French filmmaker Chris Marker. I will take a closer look at *La Jetée* in the epilogue.





one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.<sup>270</sup>

Photographs are always looking backwards, but are carried forwards into the future through the viewer. One looks back at the past, but cannot change it. Looking at photographs is always located in the now. "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [Jetztzeit]," as Benjamin stated in his fourteenth thesis on the philosophy of history.<sup>271</sup> This corresponds with Freud's idea of deferred action (Nachträglichkeit).<sup>272</sup> The past is revised when looked back at from the now. When looking at photographs, the presence of the now is always located in the time of viewing, whereas the photograph itself relates to Benjamin's notion of history. In *Plan* this concept is emphasised by the different times indicated by the images, the list of locations and the listing itself. While the images are taken at a time when traces of the past were difficult to find, the list connects these depictions with their own past. Both times are connected to the now, as that is the viewer's time. Only the viewer in his time can give the images their historical meaning. But in *Plan* all three time levels stay separate although connected. They do not overlap or interfere with each other. They are always clearly distinct. They do not reverberate. By depicting just what has been at the moment of exposure, documentary photography is a difficult medium to overcome the notion of the way something really was. When Benjamin says, "[i]t means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger," he asks for a need to be affected by something for the past to echo in the present,<sup>273</sup> just like the madeleine in Proust's *À la recherche du temps*

270 Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 257

271 Ibid., p. 261

272 see Freud, Sigmund: "On Dreams", in Freud, Sigmund: *The Interpretation of Dreams*, The Standard Edition, New York, 1990

273 Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 255





*perdu* involuntarily starts the memories of Marcel's childhood.<sup>274</sup> "The past sensation remains within us, and involuntary memory brings it to light when an experience in the present bears a connection to it. [...] In this way, an association of sensations is established, across time and space: a link, a composition, a reminiscence of desire."<sup>275</sup> Although *Plan* works conceptually with three different time levels, the book does not trigger the viewer's involuntary memory. It is so well planned and conducted that it lacks the taste of the madeleine, the experience in the present that bears a connection to the depicted. Kracauer stated that, "Photography, grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum, [but ...] from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble," in the same way as history as perceived by Benjamin's angel of history.<sup>276</sup> Photography, in accordance with its nature as depictive representation, shows a specific relationship with space and time that always locates it in the past. In comparison to memory as an activity, photography becomes the pile of rubble in front of Benjamin's angel of history, rather than being the angel of history itself. To animate the viewer to take off into the future, to sting him, as Barthes called it, it needs more than just this referential depiction.<sup>277</sup> As already discussed in chapter 1 Kracauer claimed that, "for history to present itself the mere surface coherence offered by photography must be destroyed."<sup>278</sup> The images in *Plan* show a relationship of objects with a specific time at a specific place. Only the additional list opens an additional relationship, but it still does not destroy the mere surface coherence. To specify its meaning the photograph needs the textual contextualisation, in this case the list. The images and list are in a dual relationship in which they confirm each other. The photographed location gains significance through its listing. The existence of the listed places is confirmed by the photographs. Through the list the photographs obtain a narrative based on what one

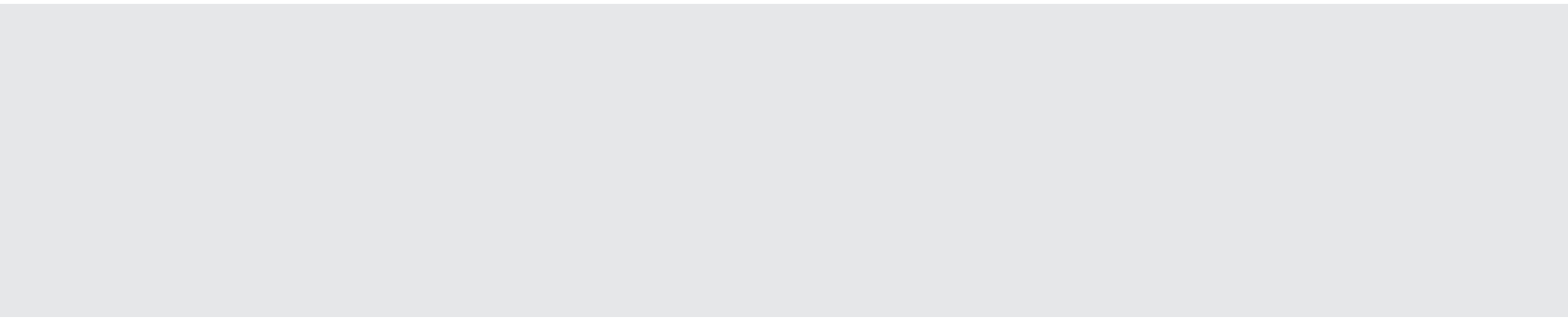
274 see Proust, Marcel: *Swann's Way*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 46f. Proust describes in the first volume of his *À la recherche du temps perdu* how the taste of a madeleine soaked in tea involuntarily takes him as an adult back to childhood memories of summers in Combray — involuntarily as he does not expect this recollection.

275 Kristeva, Julia: *Proust and the sense of time*, New York, 1993, p. 77

276 Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1993, p. 425/426

277 see Barthes, Roland: *Camera lucida*, London, 2000

278 Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1993, p. 427





might call history. "The text comes to sublimate, patheticize or rationalize the image," as Barthes wrote.<sup>279</sup> The images gain meaning from the contextualisation through words, without them functioning as illustrations of the words or vice versa. "[T]he text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination."<sup>280</sup> Images and words have a rhetorical relationship. Only together can they instigate the thought claimed by the artists, of questions both about history and photographic representation.<sup>281</sup> The images are changed and charged through the list. Without it, they are pleasing or not, in the same way as picture postcards.<sup>282</sup> The list gives the images meaning beyond their surface through the contrasting levels of information, the reference to the Third Reich and its horror, as well as the banality of the images.

As inhabitants of the photographic universe we have become accustomed to photographs: They have grown familiar to us. We no longer take any notice of most photographs, concealed as they are by habit; in the same way, we ignore everything familiar in our environment and only notice what has changed.<sup>283</sup>

One might find the change we need in order to see the all too familiar in *Plan* through the photographs that are unfamiliar in their banality and thus direct us to what is otherwise overlooked. "The perpetual readiness of volitional, discursive memory, encouraged by the technique of mechanical reproduction, reduces the scope for the play of imagination."<sup>284</sup> As mentioned before, the depiction of visual reality, which is a simple image of a spatial situation at a given time, does not trigger an involuntary memory.<sup>285</sup> Ultimately, photographs of that sort are incapable of evoking the sensation of an involuntary memory and work in opposition to aura: In his essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction", Benjamin finds another reason for photography, or any kind of technical reproduction, to be non-auratic. The technical

279 Barthes, Roland: "The Photographic Message", in: *Image, Music, Text*, London 1977, p. 25

280 Barthes, Roland: "The Photographic Message", in: *Image, Music, Text*, London 1977, p. 26

281 see the artists' website: <http://www.bildangelegenheiten.de/plan/plantxt.html>, 27.8.2014

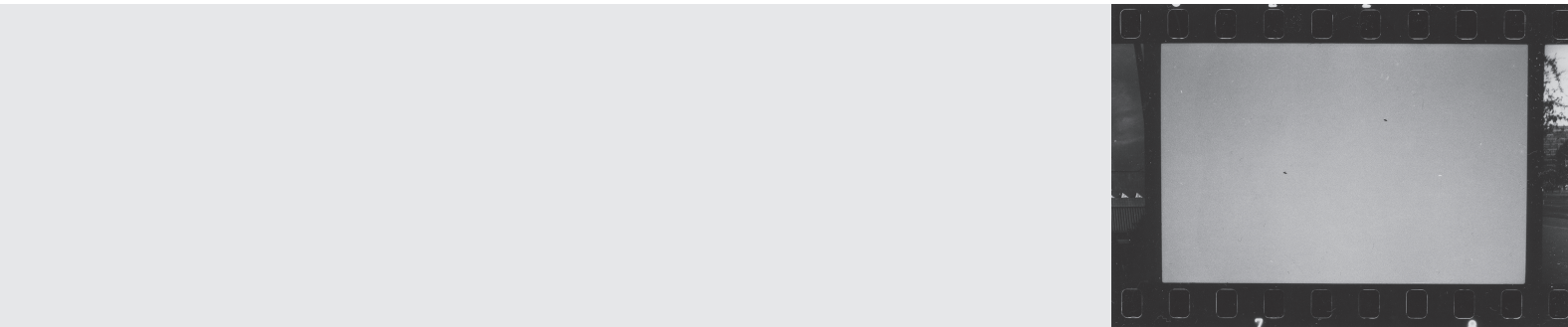
282 see p. 159: Picture postcards in the sense of Jean Cayrol's narrator in *Night and Fog*

283 Flusser, Vilém: "The Photographic Universe", in: *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, London, 2007, p. 65

284 Benjamin, Walter: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 186

285 see footnote no. 275: Julia Kristeva refers to Marcel Proust's use of the term 'involuntary memory'.







reproduction of spaces through photography discharges the place of its uniqueness by producing multiple images and its description of an auratic interpretation.<sup>286</sup> Through the photographs in *Plan* the places that are depicted as nondescriptly as possible lose their uniqueness in time and space and are transported into the space and time of the viewer. The reproduction and distribution of the book, even as an artists' book, in turn removes the uniqueness of each individual photograph as an auratic artwork and delivers the photographs to multiple viewers irrespective of any original. In that sense *Plan* as an artwork is quite deliberately twice deprived of aura, once through the photographic reproduction of the places and again through the reproduction of the images in a book. "If the distinctive feature of the images that rise from the *mémoire involontaire* is seen in their aura, then photography is decisively implicated in the phenomenon of the 'decline of the aura'."<sup>287</sup> The photographic depiction of the chosen locations referring to the Third Reich does not charge them with an aura. It instead makes them rather non-auratic as a plain reproduction of a spatial-temporal order and thereby refuses to have the true image of the past, "which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized."<sup>288</sup> The recognition Benjamin discusses lies in a mental or emotional understanding incorporated in the *mémoire involontaire* and not in an intellectual or visual understanding. To recognize the images of the past and thereby make the past part of the present and retrievable, one must essentially hold on to or create an emotional relationship that exists in the aura. "Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardised by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardised when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object."<sup>289</sup>

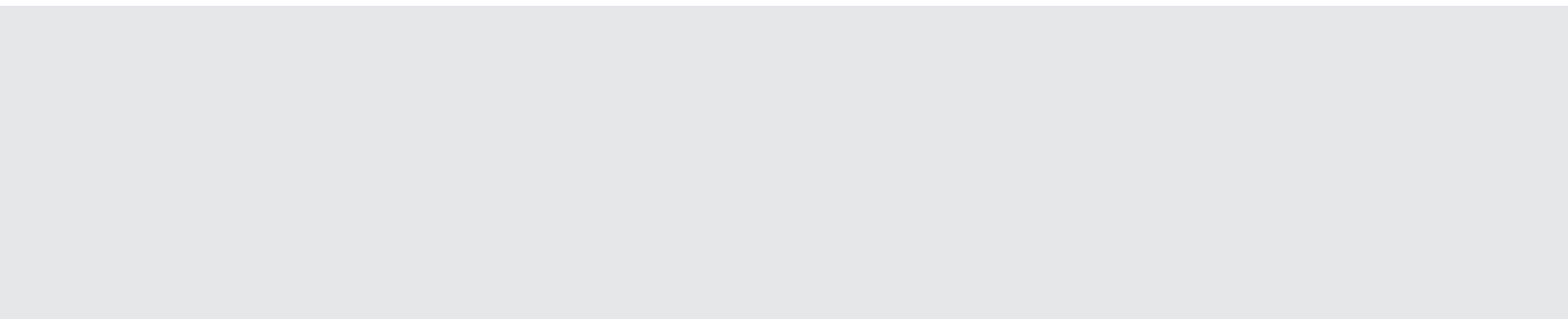
Since the Renaissance the camera obscura, the precursor of modern photographic cameras, was used as a tool for perspective drawing. Understood as being close or

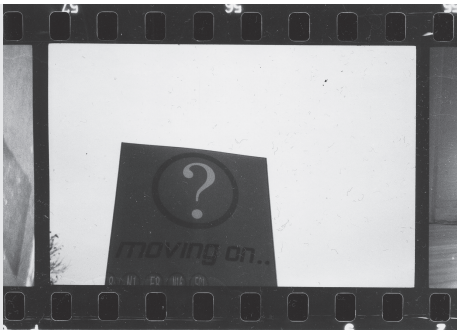
<sup>286</sup> Benjamin, Walter: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007

<sup>287</sup> Benjamin, Walter: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 186

<sup>288</sup> Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 255

<sup>289</sup> Benjamin, Walter: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 221



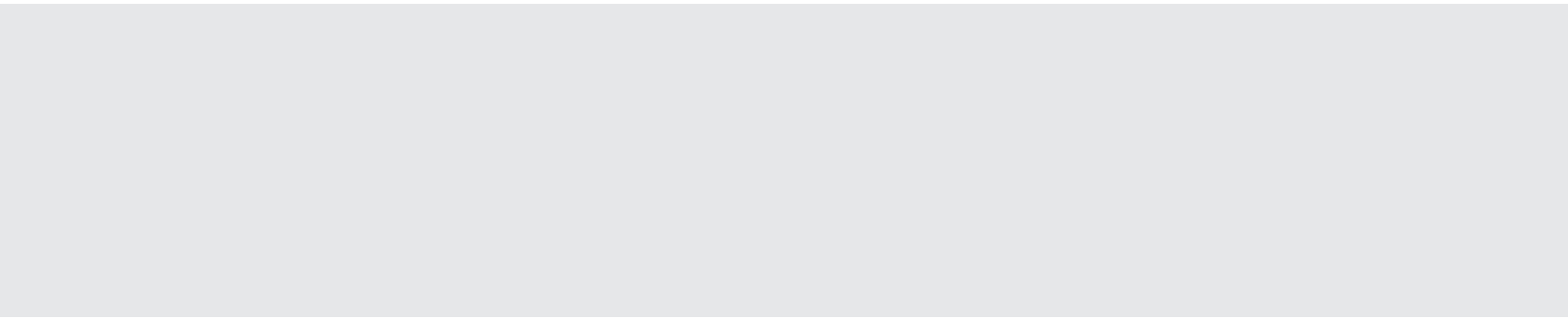


similar to human vision, linear perspective was accepted as a presentation method from reality. In his Berlin lectures, Friedrich Kittler describes how revolutionary the implementation of the linear perspective with the help of a camera obscura was in changing the imagination of the world, from images from a divine perspective to those according to human vision.<sup>290</sup> Our reading of photography is based on a postulation of photographs as images true to reality as seen by Man according to this European tradition of depiction based on linear perspective. Photographs following that scheme are read in accordance to this tradition as records of an existing situation. Hence one reads the images in *Plan* as true to a physical reality. The list with real historical names of places and real addresses adds to the truth factor of *Plan*. But what does *Plan* tell us about the perception of the Third Reich from the perspective of the 1990s? Does *Plan* have any historical impetus? I understand *Plan* as a conceptual artwork using photography, questioning our educated view in reading photographs by using a historical subject. It does not add to a "working through the past" in Adorno's sense.<sup>291</sup> The unemotional approach to the subject and the request to the viewer to understand the work in an analytical way means the question for responsibility that Resnais posed so offensively is missing. If, as Benjamin put it, the past needs to be recognized by the present, *Plan* is not helpful, neither in keeping the past alive, nor in working through it. As the title suggests the implementation is already carefully planned. Thus it works very well on an intellectual level. But through its perfect production, little space is left for an individual or emotional reaction. Bettina Lockemann and Elisabeth Neudörfl approach their nation's past with a similar logic to that used by the system to execute the persecution of the Jews and other minorities, and to wage war. In that respect it works very successfully, as it is deprived of all emotional reaction. But just like monuments, it also blocks the view. If I follow Derrida that, "an unerasable trace is not a trace, it is a full presence, an immobile and uncorruptible substance,"<sup>292</sup> then photography, by

290 Kittler, Friedrich: *Optische Medien*. Berlin, 2002, p. 59f

291 Adorno, Theodor W.: "Was bedeutet Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit", in: *Ob nach Auschwitz noch sich leben lasse*, Frankfurt a.M., 1997

292 Derrida, Jacques: "Freud and the Scene of Writing", in: *Writing and Difference*, Oxon, 2001, p. 289





fixing the trace permanently, can only ever show an "unredeemed reality", as Kracauer called it.<sup>293</sup> Photography cannot redeem the past by pure depiction, but Lockemann/Neudörfl do not seem to seek redemption. Their aim can rather be found in the critical questioning of the photographic medium and its impact on an intellectual discourse, the capability of photography to produce an archive. But it can also be read as a critique of this photographic archive becoming part of a collective memory, freezing images in our minds. Their criticism is directed at the constant use of the same imagery, which they explicitly refuse to replicate.

*Plan* fits perfectly into the rehabilitation process West Germany has experienced since the 1970s. It is a typical example of the presumed last stage of working through the past. The subject is believed to be understood and becomes like any other in the view of German photographers.

All three works discussed in this chapter are photographic in the sense of Kracauer, meaning they are true to a depiction of physical reality. Although they are well framed and technically professional, they purely remain true to the representation of the locations chosen by the photographers to visualise the Holocaust. They thereby refuse any recognition of a responsibility outside of these locations. Images like these keep the events in the distant past and connect them to specific locations. They do not consider the aftermath, but only try to find evidence of the historical events.<sup>294</sup>

The German literary theorist Birgit Erdle argues that history after the Holocaust diverges into two separate incommensurable commemorations, one referring to the perpetrators (and bystanders) and the other to the survivors.<sup>295</sup>

For the Jewish survivors and their descendants the Holocaust became a strong part of their collective memory, while Germans wanted to overcome the shock of defeat and

293 Kracauer, Siegfried: *Theory of Film, The redemption of physical reality*, Princeton (NJ), 1997

294 excursus: The Japanese photographer Shomei Tomatsu made a work on the atomic bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki in 1945. In the book he made in 1961 he combines images of relics with images of locations, portraits and interviews. Thereby he presents a kaleidoscope of the aftermath of the atomic bomb rather than trying to cover the incident retrospectively. Tomatsu, Shomei: *11:02 Nagasaki*

295 Erdle, Birgit: "Das Gedächtnis der Geste", in: *Fünfzig Jahre danach*, Zurich, 1996, p. 251





rebuild their country instead of facing recent history. For the nation of perpetrators there was a strong need to create a distance from the events of the Third Reich.

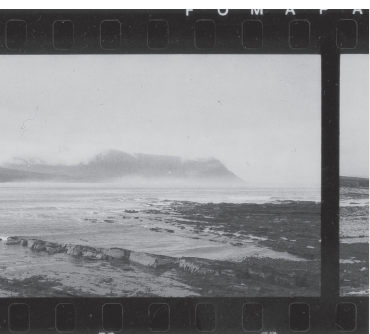
Whereas the descendants of the perpetrators have learnt from the lip service of denazification to keep the subject at an emotional distance while seemingly dealing with it, we can find a different need to keep the memory alive for Jewish descendants. While Jews in Germany (and elsewhere) still mourn their losses, most Germans have not even realised that it was also their loss. So they work through their past intellectually. The depictive representation of photography assists with its trustworthiness to start the process of working through the past by giving a factual account, but with little need for emotional involvement. Consequently the situation in question becomes only part of experience as a peak achievement of the intellect, without "turning the incident into a moment that has been lived," without instigating a shock defence.<sup>296</sup> Thereby the intelligible account of the Third Reich in *Plan* can only result in an unemotional itemisation of places that stands in opposition to Benjamin's call for a recognition of every image of the past by the present. How can photography, although true to its nature as depicting visual reality, instigate the fleeting image to keep its timeliness? The image that only represents what was there when the shutter was released immediately turns into history. But its actuality lies in the image it liberates in the viewer's mind. It does not exist in the image itself. Photographs that do not stir the viewer's imagination are just a recollection of the past. To ask the viewer to work his way through its meaningfulness keeps the moment of the photograph in an irretrievable past. Only images stirred in the viewers mind can help make the image of the past a valuable part of the present. We can find Benjamin's ideas of the angel of history in this demand from photography. The connection between the past and the present that can be created through photographic images must work in the viewer's mind, not only on an intellectual level, but also on an emotional one. It cannot be found in the regarded image, but only in what is evoked by looking at the photograph.

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296 Benjamin, Walter: "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 163







As outlined above, Germans and Jews needed to remember in different ways. While photographers, often of German origin, seem tempted to represent the sites of the Holocaust to remember what they never knew, but also then to be able to suppress and live on, some photographers produce works immersed in the subject because they cannot forget. Their images deal with the past in a more abstract manner, possibly in consequence of a similar belief in working against forgetting by the refusal to inscribe something permanently.

Artists like Lily Markiewicz do not even try to find images of what is beyond understanding, beyond expression. Their images stand for "*the capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak.*"<sup>297</sup>

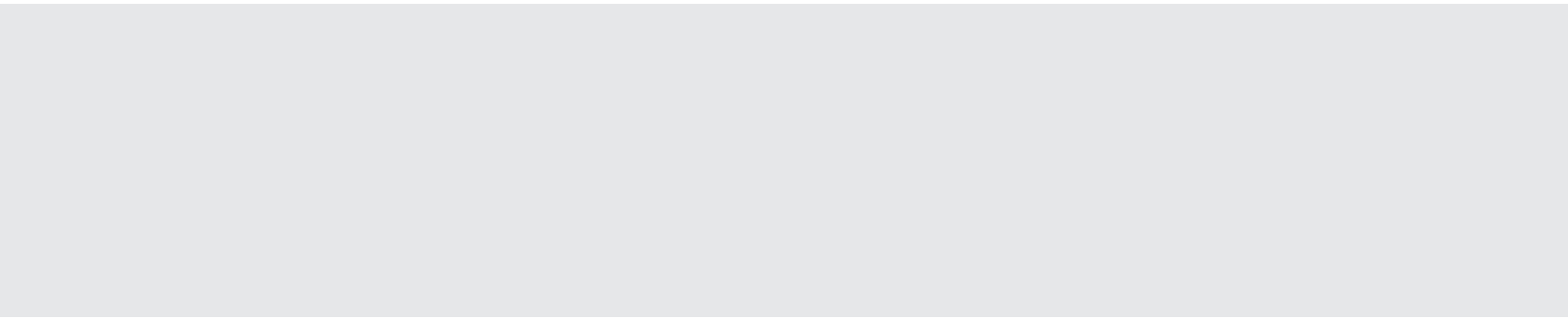
One apparent difference between Markiewicz's use of the photographic medium and the three above discussed works is the non-territoriality of Markiewicz's images, namely the refusal to appropriate a location through photography. By the absence of an obvious representation of territory, Markiewicz's images present the echo of the viewer's imagination and memory, which is even amplified by this absence.

One of Markiewicz's works is entitled THF/LCY and is part of the greater series *Screen Memories*.

Six letters and a slash tell many stories, stories of history, travel and territory. THF used to be the three-letter code for Berlin Tempelhof Airport, built in the 1920s as one of the first passenger airports in Germany. The fact that it was one of the busiest airports in Europe in the 1930s shows the importance of Berlin during that period. From 1939 it was no longer used for civil aviation, but was purely a military base. After the war it served West Berlin for the delivery of goods by the Western Allies, known as the Berlin Airlift. It was West Berlin's sole supply of goods. The airport also subsequently served most West Berliners as a way of leaving the city for visits to their West German families without the difficulties of inner German border controls.

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297 Agamben, Giorgio: *Remnants of Auschwitz*, New York, 1999, p. 158, Italics in the original





After the fall of the Wall, Tempelhof Airport lost its former meaning as a connection to the West and the symbol of resistance against an attempted blockade. For a few years it served as a city airport, mostly for Berliners to commute to unusual destinations like Saarbrücken or Mannheim, but also to Amsterdam, Brussels and for a while even London.

And here we find the other three letters, LCY being the IATA code for London City Airport. In full service since 1988, it is London's inner city airport, mostly serving the financial district since it is located in the heart of the Docklands.

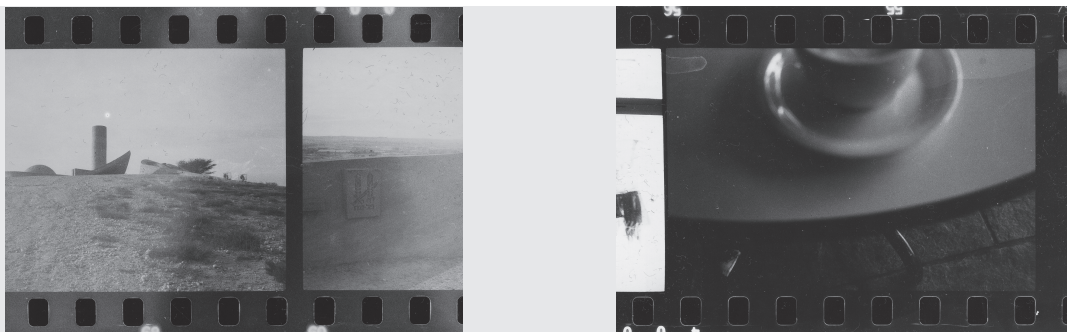
THF/LCY stands for a flight-connection between the city airports of Berlin and London that was only in service for a few years in the 1990s.

In 2008 Tempelhof Airport was finally closed down and is now a recreation area, with cyclists on the runways, barbecue areas and open-air bars. On a sunday afternoon one finds families on their outings, kites flying over this ground that has actively participated in so much history, firstly during the Second World War, then in the post-war era and then in re-united Germany. It has been the site of many personal stories, fates and fortunes. Tempelhof Airport has seen hopes rising and falling.

To a certain extent all airports do. They are places, like stations, from which you take off into the world, leaving home and sometimes your loved ones behind. And they are the places to embrace and welcome you when you return home from your adventures abroad. Airports are places of dreams and longings, of the ancient human dream of flying and the lure of unfamiliar distant places, full of promise and hope.

Here we are now, on route from Berlin to London. Setting off from the old promise of the wild Berlin of the 1920s, from the western part of the divided Berlin or from the reunited promise of a new Berlin that offers the possibility of new beginnings, flying to the working class Docklands of London, to the swinging London of the 60s with its liberties, to that of the anarchic punk period or to the upmarket metropolis where trends are set in arts, music and fashion.





What is the promise of this journey from Berlin Tempelhof Airport to London City Airport?

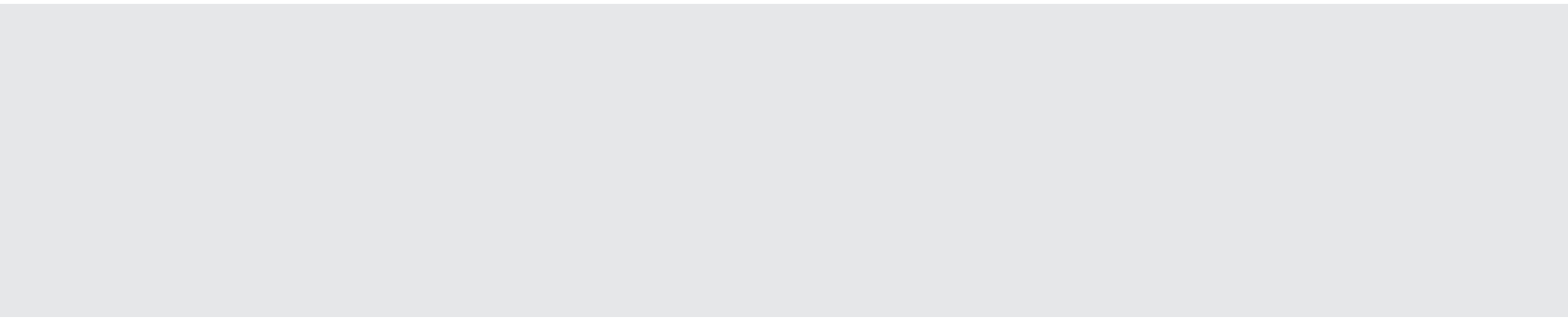
The answer to that question might remain a mystery, but is also suggested in two photographic images that are presented as THF/LCY. The images show a mirror-like reflection and a view through a window, both standing for analogies often referred to in photographic discourse.

Photographs are mirrors reflecting an image of the world, or windows through which we can catch a glimpse of something afar, but from a safe distance.<sup>298</sup> The viewer sees two photographic images, rather large prints face-mounted behind acrylic glass presented side by side separated by a specific distance between them. The images are overlaid with visual noise, as they originate from video files.

On the left, one sees an image of an interior. There is greenery outside two windows, in between white curtains. In front of the windows is a white armchair. The representation of the room seems rather flat. And then we realise that the room does not occupy the whole frame. The room appears in a grey frame surrounded on two sides by white. On the left the white contains a pattern. It is a loudspeaker, while the reflecting surface is a TV screen. Thus the screen makes us think of what can be seen through it, in television, no matter how distant. But what we actually see is the reflection of the home in which the TV is standing, a living room with two windows and trees outside. Thus the television, used to escape the confines of the living room and thereby one's everyday life, a screen into the distance, reflects those very surroundings.

The second image shows the view through a window onto a waterfront in an unidentifiable cityscape. But not only do we see through the window, but the window reflects the interior from where it has been regarded and photographed. Although we

298 Szarkowski, John: *Mirrors and Windows: American Photography since the 1960s*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1978. In an essay John Szarkowski, the former Curator for Photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, defines the conceptions of what a photograph is as either reflecting a portrait of the artist or a means to help to get to know the world better by looking at - or through - it. He compared photographs to mirrors or windows.





cannot identify the interior space, we can see the reflection of the photographer and the camera.

And in between there is an interstice.

In both images one can find the notion of the mirror and the window, of looking into the distance, but also of the act of looking that is reflected back.

But why have I chosen this work as a counterpart to the above discussed examples to speak about territoriality and its absence?

Seen from a cultural, historical and even military perspective, airports are as territorial as one can get. But the two images that Lily Markiewicz creates to represent the locations of the airports are not at all territorial. They avoid depicting the site of the airport as carrier of their meaning. They were taken by a photographer who rather presents what she sees, than to rely purely on the importance of the location.<sup>299</sup>

Three terms are important to understand this work, namely permeability, reflection and resolution.

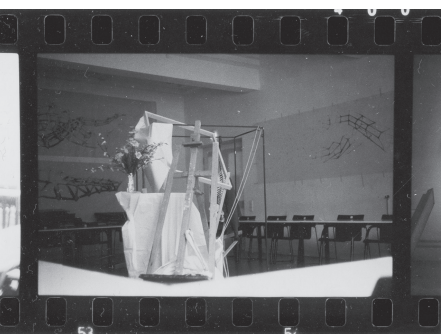
Transparency and reflection, concomitantly visualised by the two visible screens, the television and the window, form the basic content of the images. Resolution is shown in the overlying pixelation that ostensibly dominates both prints. In the first, the look penetrates the transparent screen of the window, while in the latter the look is returned by the solid screen of the reflecting surface. But neither action can happen without the other. The looking through the window includes a reflection in it, the returned look of the TV screen also implies looking through the television screen into a distant world, in the literal sense of the word "tele-vision".

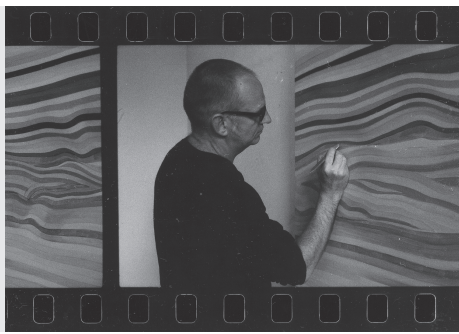
Through the same surface appearance, the reflection of the self and the reflection of the other become one. They are connected by depiction as the same kind of media images. Thus, by looking away from oneself — which is what the viewer of artworks always does — the view is reflected and thereby thrown back at the viewer. The process that

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299 Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p.47







leads to reflection on oneself is made transparent by the obvious use of pixelation as a reference to a mediated image. Resolution as representation of media images becomes a means of reflection.

The theme of the self and the other is also revealed in the title: THF/LCY, the IATA codes of two airports, the origin and the destination of a possible journey. The question arising is which is which? Does Tempelhof or London City represent the self, or rather the other? Tempelhof represents the country — and its manifold histories — in which Lily Markiewicz was born, while London City represents the country she chose to live in many years ago. But how do the images relate to the three-letter codes? Surely the images show neither Tempelhof nor London City. But they can be read in relation to the origin and destination of a life journey, to provenance and exile, to home and abroad. When the photographs are exhibited the viewer is confronted by a reflection into the living room, the view out into the distance (past the reflection of the author and the space surrounding her) and we have a reflecting surface that reflects the viewer and the exhibition space.

While the IATA code only represents the city of origin or destination, of leaving and longing, the images can be seen as visual synecdoches of both cities, as the self or the other in Lily Markiewicz's biography without using plain territorial representation. In these photographs the quality lies in what the photographer saw rather than in where she was.

All of Lily Markiewicz's works have the theme of the aftermath of the Holocaust, of the loss of culture and tradition, of the impossibility of being as if it had never happened. While Lily Markiewicz's works take the changes of the world after Auschwitz into account, Gerz, Reinartz and Lockemann/Neudörfl — like many others — use photography in the traditional way. This strikes me as especially conspicuous when they work on the specific subject their photography seems to undermine: the Holocaust.

The promise that lies in the representation of a specific territory to display its historical meaning is questioned by Jochen Gerz in his later memorial works.





In *Exit* Jochen Gerz still seeks the presence of the Holocaust in the space of the museum and not in the absence in the territory of the former camp. In later works he makes the presence in the absence directly tangible on-site.

This presence in absence is a recurring motif in Gerz's work, although more so in his on-site works than in his photographic pieces. From 1986 to 1993 Jochen Gerz collaborated with Esther Shalev Gerz on a *Monument Against Fascism, War and Violence - and for Peace and Human Rights* in Hamburg-Harburg: a stele 12 meters in height on a plane of 1 x 1 metre made of lead-coated steel. Passers-by were invited to leave inscriptions of any kind on the surface. Every time the surface was covered, the stele was lowered into the ground until it disappeared, fully covered with inscriptions of the present in the memory of the past. People left scribbles and graffiti scrawls beside comments against war and discrimination. Ordinary people left ordinary comments, some related to the idea of the memorial, some not. Thus, "the counter monument reflected back to the people — and thus codified — their own memorial projections and preoccupations."<sup>300</sup> The stele's key aspects were the participation and the process of inscription. It took seven years for the memorial to find its final status, which is invisible on the surface. A plaque informs the visitor today on the site of the memorial. Underneath this plate covering the top on an elevated platform, part of the stele is visible behind glass. In occupying its territory the visible remains of the stele are inconsistent with the idea of the memorial simply existing in the public's mind, or explicitly through its territorial absence.

A third piece referring to the memory of the Holocaust is the *Invisible Memorial - 2146 Stones Against Racism*. For this work, Gerz and students from the Hochschule der bildenden Künste Saar, the art school in Saarbrücken, replaced cobblestones on the square in front of the Saarbrücken Castle with identical ones that had, engraved on the bottom, the names of every Jewish cemetery that had existed before the Third Reich. No viewer can see the inscription. One must believe in the existence of the

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300 Young, James E.: "Memory against itself in Germany today", in: *At Memory's Edge*, New Haven, 2007, p. 139





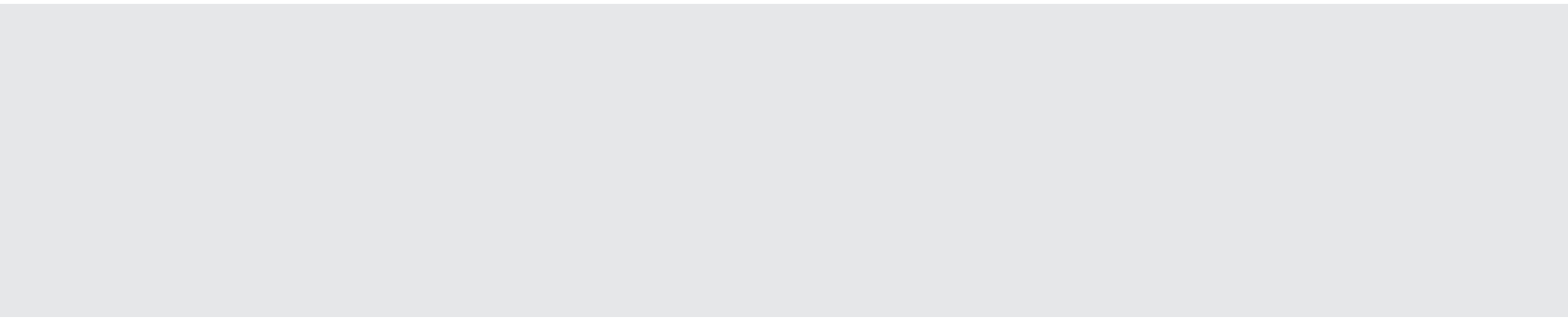
memorial. The public was informed of the memorial's production by the media. Eventually the square was named "Square of the Invisible Memorial" (Platz des unsichtbaren Mahnmals).

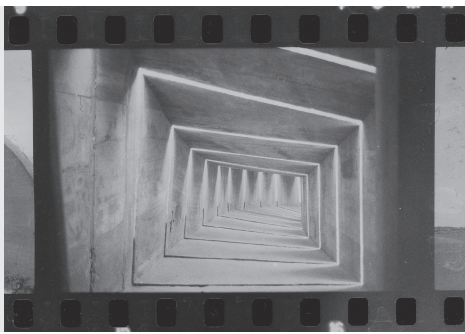
In terms of a presence in absence, this is the most consistent of Gerz's works. While there were still compromises to the idea of memory springing from an engagement with the past and present in *Exit* and in the Harburg memorial, in Saarbrücken Gerz abandoned the need to give evidence of what he wanted to be invisible.

Memory cannot be made visible. Its presence is nourished by absence. In that sense the images in *Exit* that only refer to the museum without disclosing the former camp are more successful in instigating a viewer's memory than the ones showing the actual camp. Here we can refer to Benjamin's analysis of Proust's idea of *mémoire involontaire*: "[W]hat has not been experienced explicitly and consciously [...] to the subject as an experience, can become a component of the *mémoire involontaire*."<sup>301</sup> But where do the images of involuntary memory come from?

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301 Benjamin, Walter: On Some Motifs in Baudelaire, in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 160/161





## Chapter 3

### The representation of absence in photography

As indicated in chapter 1, photography and history are both alleged to be factual, which makes them a means of truth for past narratives. It is in their nature that they only present parts of the truth, of which they necessarily omit the rest; by doing so, they also necessarily point to what has been left out. Photography assists history in recounting a specific story of the past, instead of offering a narrative of the past that could also be retold differently. To take consequences in the present out of historical events, recounting the past must be understood as one possibility of many, which might not have, but could have occurred.

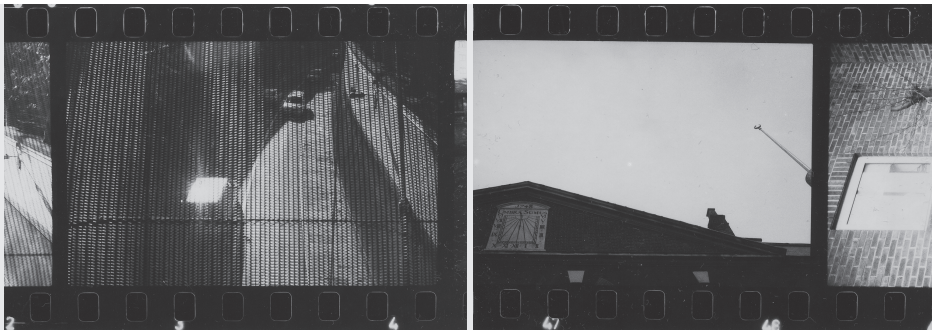
As discussed at the beginning of chapter 2, the legacy of the Third Reich is a difficult issue in terms of appropriate or inappropriate representation. The subject is not and should not be avoided, since remaining conscious of it is an important part of "working through the past".<sup>302</sup> On the other hand, the event was so atrocious that any attempt at straight forward representation must fail. That is especially so for photographic representations in the aftermath that can never do justice to the event, since it keeps the past in the distance by the two separate times a viewer experiences when looking at a photograph: the time when the photograph was taken and the time when it is looked at.

In this chapter, following my observations from chapters 1 and 2, I will reflect on a visual context required for photography to acknowledge the changes "after Auschwitz" and, although photography can by its nature only give an indexical referential depiction of what has been in front of the lens, to present the loss as a presence in absence.<sup>303</sup>

<sup>302</sup> Adorno, Theodor W.: "The Meaning of Working Through the Past", in: *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, Stanford, 2003

<sup>303</sup> The loss is according to Jalal Toufic what remains after a traumatic event and defines what he calls a "surpassing disaster" Jalal Toufic: *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a surpassing Disaster*, 2009, [http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal\\_Toufic\\_The\\_Withdrawal\\_of\\_Tradition\\_Past\\_a\\_Surpassing\\_Disaster.pdf](http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal_Toufic_The_Withdrawal_of_Tradition_Past_a_Surpassing_Disaster.pdf), p.11 (19.2.2013), revised version







Like Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Jean-François Lyotard insisted in *The Differend* that the denial of the Holocaust is made possible through the conflict of being an event without witnesses. Lyotard argued with the paradox that whoever survived the camps could not bear witness to the existence of the gas chambers, as the survivors had ultimately not been harmed by the gas chambers, or else they could not have survived.<sup>304</sup> This denial can be applied to Kristeva's concept of the work of art as a fetish with respect to the Holocaust.

In *Black Sun* Julia Kristeva suggested that,

if loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination and nourish it permanently as much as they threaten it and spoil it, it is also noteworthy that the work of art as fetish emerges when the activating sorrow has been repudiated.<sup>305</sup>

This isolated quote from Kristeva supports my critique of the photographic works discussed in chapter 2, which is based on this fetishization emerging from a denial that is entailed in photographing the empty historical sites.

"Auschwitz and Hiroshima have revealed the 'malady of death'," as Julia Kristeva wrote with reference to Marguerite Duras. From this malady of death, "a crisis of representation has emerged."<sup>306</sup>

Furthermore Kristeva suggests that a,

tremendous, trapped energy would end up in invisibility. [...This was] a pressure that had found its intimate, unavoidable percussion at the heart of psychic grief [was] experienced as an inescapable emergency, without for that matter ceasing to be invisible, nonrepresentable [...].<sup>307</sup>

The nonrepresentability is a consequence of the psychic grief of the malady of death.

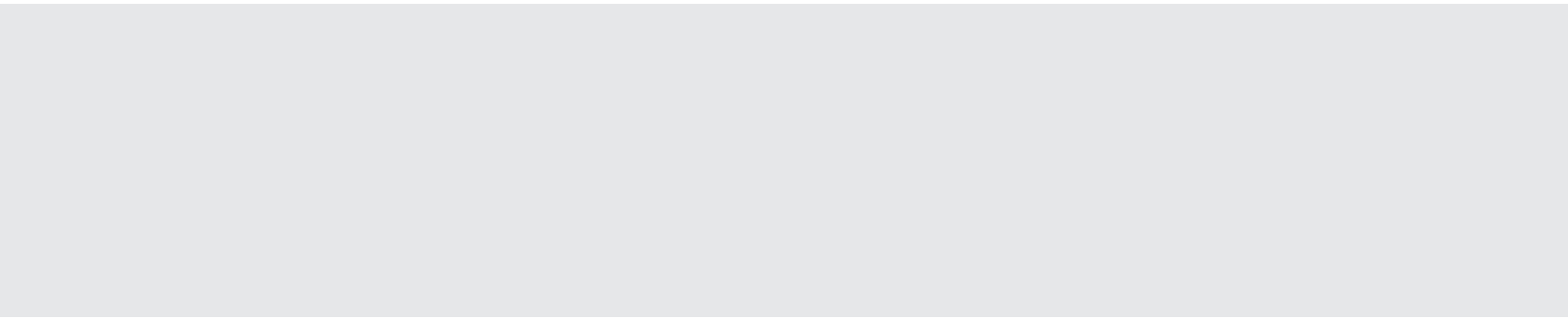
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304 Lyotard, J.F.: *The Differend*, Minneapolis, 1988, p. 3/4

305 Kristeva, Julia: *Black Sun*, New York/Oxford, 1989, p. 9

306 Ibid., p. 221

307 Ibid., p. 222





On the edge of silence the word 'nothing' emerges, a discreet defense in the face of so much disorder, both internal and external, incommensurable. Never has a cataclysm been more apocalyptically outrageous; never has its representation been assumed by so few symbolic means.<sup>308</sup>

In consequence of the malady of death evoked by Auschwitz and Hiroshima, artists must take this unrepresentability into account rather than representing the visible remains.

Kristeva continues: "A new rhetoric of apocalypse [...] seemed necessary for a vision of this nevertheless monstrous nothing to emerge — a monstrosity that blinds and compels one to be silent."<sup>309</sup>

"You saw nothing in Hiroshima" we hear a male voice, responding to a woman, telling the man — and therefore us as viewers — what she saw when visiting Hiroshima.<sup>310</sup> What does he mean when he says "nothing"? Is there nothing left to see in the aftermath of the atomic bomb? Or did she just not see what there was to be seen? Or is what she saw nothing, nothing in the sense of an absence of a presence left behind after the explosion of the atomic bomb and therefore nothing is all one can see?

Just as the woman in Resnais's film *Hiroshima, mon Amour* fails to see what Hiroshima stands for, so are photographs of the empty camps unable to show the suffering during the attempted extermination of the European Jews. The images show only a verification of the incomprehensible that has happened, as conveyed by history.

Thomas, the iconic photographer in Antonioni's film *Blowup*, photographs something he does not see at the time.<sup>311</sup> Only later at a party, he has to admit when telling a woman that he saw someone being killed in a park, that he did not actually see it happening. He only photographed what he later came to believe to have seen. He only finds in his photographs what he believes to have witnessed. Does not every photographer hope

308 Kristeva, Julia: *Black Sun*, New York/Oxford, 1989, p.223

309 Ibid, p.223

310 Resnais, Alain, Duras, Marguerite: *Hiroshima, mon Amour*, New York, 1961

311 *Blowup*, 1966, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni.





to find something revealed by her pictures that she did not see in the scene before her eyes? The witness witnesses through the photograph, the eyes reproducing, "exactly the position and the vision of the lens."<sup>312</sup> The camera appears as a silent witness since its presence is the fundamental condition for the photographic image. Thus the photograph becomes the witness rather than the photographer, who might as well have seen nothing.

The urge to find the unseen between the blown up grain is what makes Thomas iconic, as it follows observations throughout the history of photography.

In 1927 Siegfried Kracauer examines in his essay on photography the quality of photographic representation. He takes a closer look at a photograph of a grandmother and finds that, "If one were to look through a magnifying glass one could make out the grain, the millions of little dots," that constitute the subject of the photograph.<sup>313</sup>

Many years after Kracauer's first essay on photography, the philosopher Vilém Flusser writes:

When we get close to a photograph with a magnifying glass, we see grains. When we get close to the television screen we see points." But for Flusser also the, "wooden table [I am using to write this text] is, on close observation, a swarm of particles and, for the most part, empty space."<sup>314</sup>

The void is inherent in all material in its atomic structure.

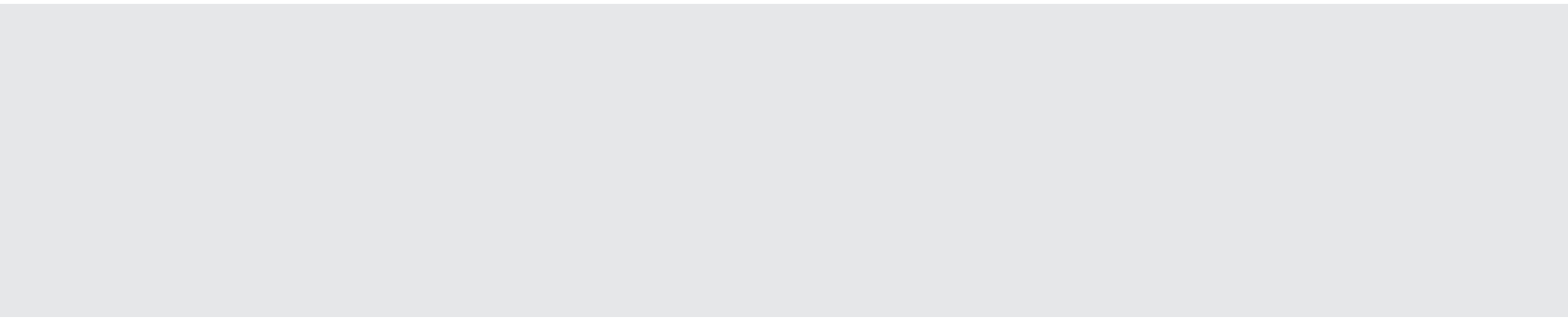
If one sees in the void a lack of material, then a photograph offers this kind of void on the film wherever no light has hit the emulsion. Here we get a lack of silver, a blank on the carrier. Also between the individual grains of silver that form the picture we can find these blank, unexposed parts made visible in the enlargement. To me, a good example of this is in the above mentioned film *Blowup*. To prove his photographic testimony of a murder, the photographer enlarges his negatives further and further.

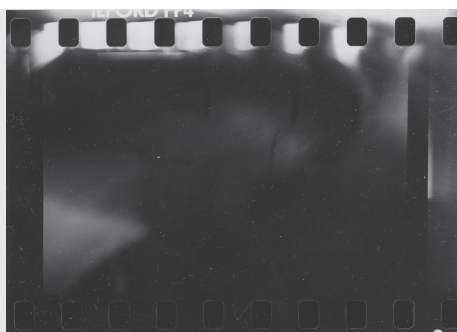
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<sup>312</sup> Cortázar, Julio: "Blow-Up", in: *Blow-up, and other stories*, New York, 1985, p. 127

<sup>313</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 422

<sup>314</sup> Flusser, Vilém: *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Minneapolis, 2011, p. 33





What becomes more visible by doing so is the individual grain and the unexposed spaces in between, thus leaving more space for speculation on what the picture might show than adding clarity to what is actually depicted.

In 2009, Joan Fontcuberta enlarged several images from *Blowup*. Printed from the film stills, the final images are blown up to a size of 360 x 206 cm. What the images in the film still suggested — to recognize a face, a figure or a pistol — becomes structures of grain without a meaning in Fontcuberta's processing.

Joan Fontcuberta's *Blow Up Blow Up* mocks Antonioni's photographer that he could ever have seen something like a face, a pistol or a dead body in the blurs of grain that make up his images.<sup>315</sup> By blowing up the images from duplicates of the 35mm film copy even further than Thomas does in the film, Fontcuberta produces only more and more blur and leaves the viewer to question the appearance of faces and a gun presented in the film. They disintegrate ever more into blurs of grain through Fontcuberta's process, just as Roland Barthes realised in investigating a photo of his mother: By enlarging it one does not get closer to the subject, since one only enlarges the grain.<sup>316</sup>

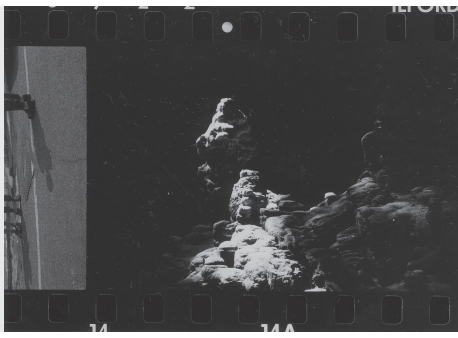
When printed as a positive, the deepest black, the densest materialization in photography, emerges out of the void, which is the unexposed empty space in the negative. The more the photographer enlarges the image, the more she finds a potential in it of what might have happened. This potential offered by the void between the grains can be photography's challenge of connecting the past with the present.

In digital photography this is slightly different. Since the image is not composed of clusters of material, but rather of information concerning defined parts of a grid, namely pixels, the image file contains information for each defined pixel, even if no light has hit the sensor. Therefore we cannot find a lack of material in the files of digital

<sup>315</sup> Fontcuberta, Joan: *Blow Up Blow Up*, Cáceres, 2010

<sup>316</sup> Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 2000, p. 100







photographs. But that does not mean that digital photography does not include the concept of the void.

The digital image file is in a way a void in itself. Whenever the file is closed it dissolves into a state of pure data. This data is merely information and no matter.<sup>317</sup> Some of this data contains the information that defines the file as an image. The rest is ordinary data with no specific information until it gets decoded. Only through the reading of a certain programme does the data become specific and turns into an image. The file itself just offers possibilities for different programs to unscramble it. These possibilities arise from the information in the file being non-specific.

Whether analogue or digital, photography produces the void not in what it shows but precisely in what it cannot show. It offers an unfulfilled possibility in the non-exposed, while showing superficially the physical world that has presented itself to the camera in the exposed. The possibility offered in the unexposed parts of the film are rarely examined or the subject of theoretical discourse.

Every new film, unexposed and ready to capture physical reality, offers within the confines of photographic properties like focal length, depth of field, shutter speed, and light sensitivity of the recording material among others, a possibility to record any moment in time according to the liking of the photographer. For the emerging photographs we have words to describe the visible, to contextualise it, to discuss it aesthetically, its realism and its accomplishment as a record of this world. But what about its missed opportunities, the moments that have not found their way into the photographic consciousness? The film once offered a possibility to capture all, but the photographer is selective with respect to what will become visible and remain.

317 A silver-based photograph presents silver grains following a chemical reaction involving the light coming through the lens. "Most digital data is the result of the conversion of an analog physical signal [...]. Digital data is able to represent most media types, whether text, sound, image, moving image, or new media types such as hypertext or relational databases, in a unified way. In the end, everything is just a bit stream." (Peres, Michael R.: *Focal Encyclopedia of Photography*, Oxford, 2007, p. 359/360) While the analogue process creates an image following a chemical reaction on exposure, in a digital camera on exposure the reading of the sensor is turned into digital data that contains the relevant information for a program to present it as image. "Digital media translate everything into data [...]." (Ritchin, Fred: *After Photography*. New York/London, 2009, p. 17). For an explanation of the two processes see also Helmerdig, Silke and Martin Scholz: *Ein Pixel, Zwei Korn*. Frankfurt a. M., 2006, p. 34-38





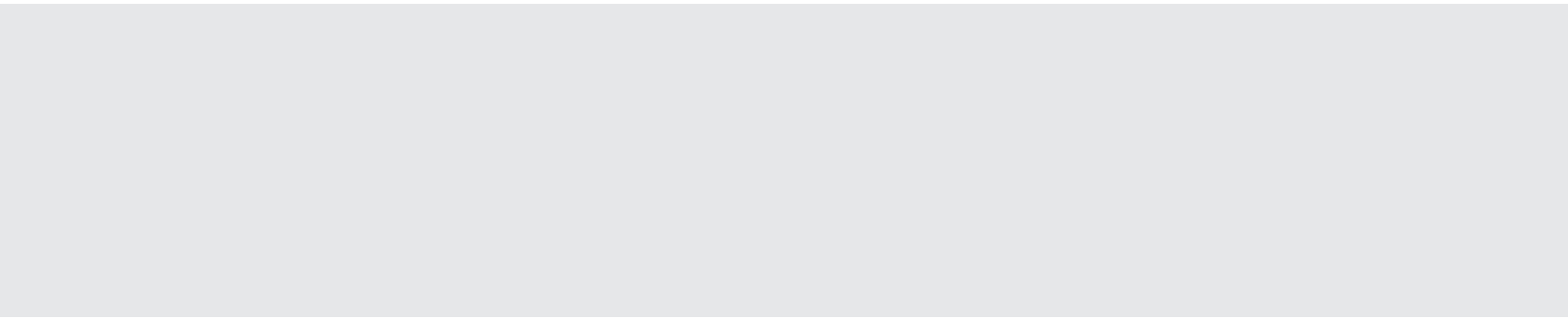
It is the possibility of every image, of a before and an after, of the moment when the photographer decided to take the photograph, that that moment becomes a decisive one, but is still only one possible moment in the entire time continuum. A reminder of this possibility can be found after exposure in the unexposed parts of the film that create a void.

This void can be found on the exposed and processed film in between two negatives. The program of a camera working with rolls of film produces a blank space in between two exposed negatives. This space is defined mechanically. Its programmed use is merely the separation of individual frames. Usually ignored in the printing process, it can come back into focus. The deepest black in the print only informs experts in photography on the wasted potential of the unexposed part. What appears as black in the positive is a blank space in the negative. The unutilized in-between loses its potential as the silver is washed away. It becomes the symbol for the ultimate "this could have been". The space is now open to the viewer's imagination, to fill with images that were once possible, but will never come into being.

As representation of loss, bereavement and absence, the void of the empty space that separates two pictures can trigger the work of the imagination. Since it presents the densest materialization of silver, the black strip contains all pictures imaginable, as in Sugimoto's photos of the cinemas.<sup>318</sup> When Sugimoto took photographs of old movie theatres, lit only by the projection of the film, he exposed his negatives for the duration of the film. The screen blanks out in white from the whole film projected onto it during the time of exposure. Too much information results in the absence of information.

While the exposed photograph gives evidence of a disappearance, the non-exposed parts of the film can offer the possibility of coming into being. The exposure is all about the past; whatever it presents, it represents from a past. Once taken, the exposed moment turns into history. But the unexposed is without a fixed time. It offers a

<sup>318</sup> In 1978, the Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto produced a series of photographs in film theatres, which were only lit by the light of the projector. As Sugimoto exposed his negatives for the duration of a film that was projected, the photograph registered the interior of the theatres, but overexposed the screen. See Sugimoto, Hiroshi: Theaters, 1975-2001, in: Brougher, Kerry and Müller-Tamm, Pia (eds.): *Hiroshi Sugimoto*, Ostfildern, 2007





space for imagination. Anything is possible in that space, even escaping from the mechanical image.

Like the voids in Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin, which are framed by the neighbouring walls, the space between two negatives comes into being only through the neighbouring exposures.<sup>319</sup>

This void, which is necessary to separate the neighbouring negatives on film as much as it gets defined by its boundaries, lies never within and always remains exclusive, a space between one and the other, here and there, then and now. It holds the promise of a presence, any presence in the absent.

In relation to the Holocaust,

The void [...] becomes a space that nurtures memory and reflection for Jews and for Germans. Its very presence points to an absence that can never be overcome, a rupture that cannot be healed, and that certainly cannot be filled with museal stuff. [...] The very notion of the void will have different meanings for Jews than it will for Germans. There is a danger of romanticizing or naturalizing the empty center of Berlin just as Libeskind's building may not ultimately avoid the reproach of architecturally aestheticizing or monumentalizing the void.<sup>320</sup>

It is the space in between that is easily overlooked, but in which memory inhabits photography.

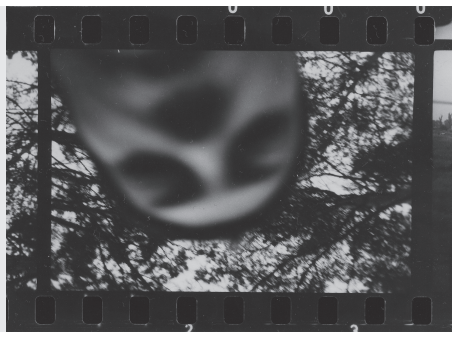
According to Andreas Huyssen, the void has long been an important concept in German history, always as "erasure of memory rather than its imaginative preservation".<sup>321</sup> The

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319 The Jewish Museum Berlin was built after the fall of the Wall, designed by the architect Daniel Libeskind. One of the exceptional features of the building are the voids: apart from one void, which is exterior to the museum structure, the voids are like cuts through the building. They are not used as exhibition space. On the upper levels the crossing of the voids is marked by black walls. They are integral part of the museum but all they exhibit is "that which can never be exhibited when it comes to Jewish Berlin history" (quote by Daniel Libeskind, <http://www.jmberlin.de/main/EN/04-About-The-Museum/01-Architecture/01-libeskind-Building.php>, 10.9.2014).

320 Huyssen, Andreas: "The Voids of Berlin", in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No.1 (August 1997), p. 80 Andreas Huyssen refers to Derrida for whom a void that represents is no longer a proper void.

321 Ibid., p. 62 - 67





void, like the one created by photography, is an absence needing to be filled, filled with history or with memory.

The trace of memory, whose innate quality is fleetingness, becomes fixed in the photograph and turns into the alleged evidence of a "have taken place". More than the pure depiction of the visible world is needed to trigger memories, just as in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* the taste of the madeleine triggers a flashback to Marcel's childhood, going beyond just being a sweet piece of pastry.<sup>322</sup>

If, as for Proust, reality is defined by the specific relationship between the senses and memories, then camera-based photography, producing images as signs that can be equally iconic and indexical, is a process that enables the depiction of this concept of reality, if only skillfully exercised.

Sometimes something pricks us when we look at a photograph. We are struck by something that Barthes called the "punctum". It may be a small detail, embedded in the non-exposed, easy to overlook, that initiates this feeling, perhaps even just for us.

Photography can only save the moment by remaining in every present moment, rather than by pure depiction. According to Benjamin the past that is not recognized by the present is in danger of disappearing irretrievably.<sup>323</sup>

To an external viewer a photograph shows only an "unredeemed reality", as Kracauer called it.<sup>324</sup> Instead of the thing (or person) itself, a photograph takes into account the constellation in space and time that presented itself in a specific moment to the camera and freezes that for future viewing. Photography does not differentiate in its role as a recording medium. To photography it is all the same, picturesque landscapes, sunsets or concentration camps, children, weddings or survivors; to the photograph everything consists just of light reflected from a physical reality. Thus, a photograph

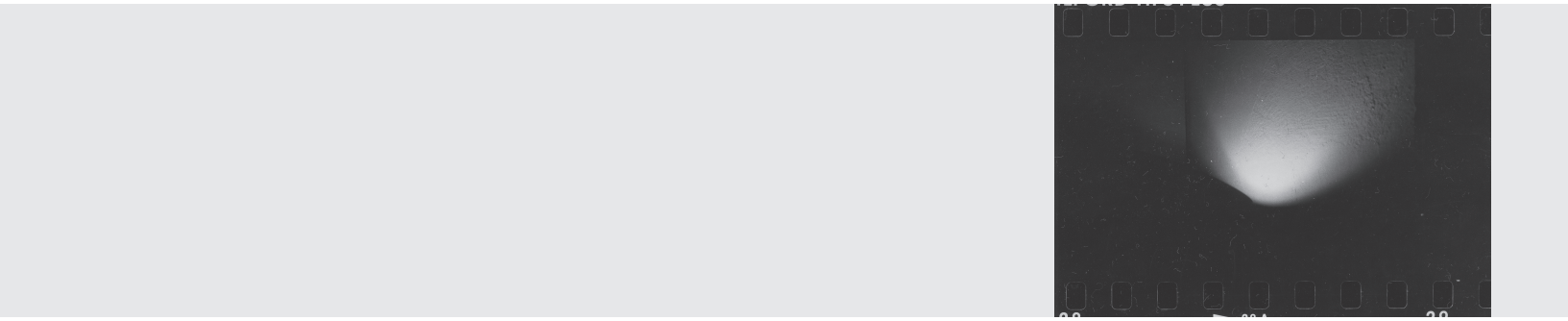
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322 Proust, Marcel: *Swann's Way*. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 46f.

323 Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 255

324 Kracauer, Siegfried: "Die Photographie", in: *Das Ornament der Masse*; Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 32







generally only tells us about the existence of the moment, but not of its quality and certainly nothing about its before or its after.<sup>325</sup>

"You saw nothing in Auschwitz": This might be an appropriate statement to visitors and post-war photographers trying to capture a truth about the Holocaust by visiting and photographing the remains of the camps. In most of these images I find only a repetition of the iconic pictures taken in the first years after the liberation, from Margret Bourke-White to Resnais's *Night and Fog*.<sup>326</sup> Therefore, "The specific context of these images has certainly been lost in the incessant reproduction."<sup>327</sup>

To illustrate my criticism of a photograph keeping a moment in the distance of the past, I will examine Didi-Huberman's book *Images in Spite of All*. While the first part contains an essay of his on four images taken by a prisoner of Auschwitz, the second part of the book, in which Didi-Huberman counters arguments against him by Elisabeth Pagnoux and Gérard Wajcman, entails arguments pro and contra the value of photographic records as testifiers of a historical truth. The reflection on both arguments will be of assistance in untangling my argument against the void, favouring a concept of absence in relation to photography.

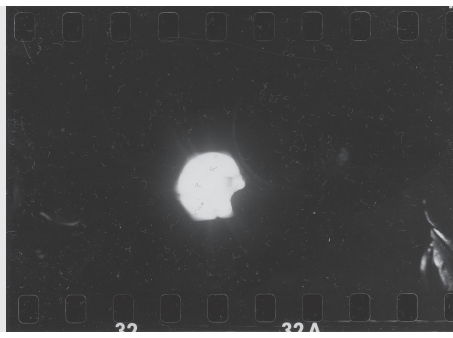
Georges Didi-Huberman starts *Images in Spite of All* with a description of what should have been eradicated, namely the work and duties of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz. Only after sketching the circumstances does he point to the importance of creating remembrance, as one of the members of the Sonderkommando did when taking four "pieces of film snatched from hell". Here Didi-Huberman gives a description of the images and anecdotal accounts of how the images were taken.<sup>328</sup>

<sup>325</sup> This is currently changing in the digital age, with Nikon announcing new cameras that record the moment before and after the release of the shutter. Under the name of "smart photo selector" Nikon advertises that the new 1-series shoots up to 20 high resolution images before and after the shutter release using so called pre-post-capture technology.

<sup>326</sup> The iconic pictures taken when the camps were liberated, which provide the stock for remembrance, can be interpreted as described by Roland Barthes in his essay on shock photos. See Barthes, Roland: "Shock Photos", in: *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, Berkeley, 1997, p. 71 f

<sup>327</sup> Hirsch, Marianne: "Surviving Images", in: Zelizer, Barbie (ed.): *Visual Culture and the Holocaust*, New Brunswick, 2001, p. 226

<sup>328</sup> Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in Spite of All*, Chicago/London, 2012 p. 2





Two of the images described show a similar scene of dead naked bodies spread on the ground. There is smoke and people seem to move the dead bodies towards a fire. In the background there are trees and the scenery is framed in the foreground by a dark structure. The images seem to be taken from a dark interior through a doorway.

Another image shows on the lefthand bottom corner naked women on a clearance in a birch forest. The rest of the image shows trees and sky. The image is blurred from movement of the camera. At the edge of one of the trees, a structure resembling the top of a chimney is visible.

The fourth image is blurred and half of it is dark. The other half shows branches of trees and sky, nothing more.

Didi-Huberman understands the images as evidence of the reports sent from Auschwitz so that the horrors that exceed imagination would not be dismissed as a fantasy of the prisoners, to give a form to this unimaginable reality.<sup>329</sup>

Didi-Huberman uses these images to argue against the discourse of Auschwitz and the Holocaust as unthinkable or unrepresentable.<sup>330</sup> To accept the four photographs from Auschwitz as proof of what exceeds our imagination is to accept the possibility of Auschwitz and its testimonies. Auschwitz thus becomes imaginable to Didi-Huberman.

"To remember, one must imagine," he writes.<sup>331</sup> Didi-Huberman is well aware that the four photographs do not show the whole dimension of the Holocaust. But although these four images have, "a fragmentary and lacunary relation to the truth to which they bear witness, [...] they are nonetheless all that we have available to know and to imagine concentration camp life from inside."<sup>332</sup>

These images are four isolated snatches, inadequate as representations, but indispensable as historical proof. "The image of hell, however *inexact* it may be, is nonetheless part

329 Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in Spite of All*, Chicago/London, 2012, p. 9

330 Ibid., p. 20, p. 23, p. 25

331 Ibid., p. 30

332 Ibid., p. 32





of the truth of Auschwitz."<sup>333</sup> The black space of the door refers to the position of the photographer and, "gives us the situation itself, the space of possibility, the condition of existence of the photographs themselves."<sup>334</sup>

Didi-Huberman reads the poor quality of the images as proof of the necessity of the photographer to record his unimaginable reality. The importance of these images lies more in their poor quality, which refers to the gesture of handling the camera hastily, and therefore to the risk taken by the photographer, than in the depicted itself. After his inescapable extermination, "[t]he images become the survivors" and the witnesses.<sup>335</sup> They, "are not the 'pure reflection' of the real of Auschwitz in general but, rather, its specific, material and intentional trace [...]."<sup>336</sup>

While the poor quality of the images speaks for the photographer's need to produce images in spite of the National Socialists' intention to make the Holocaust an event without witnesses, the cropping, retouching and turning of the images that happened after the war in the archives shows the historians' focus on the images as historical evidence. The archive, and thus the images in it, generates remembrance and works continually on the construction of history. After in the first part establishing the relevance of the four photographs as testimonies against the unspeakability of Auschwitz, Didi-Huberman defends his point of view against counter-arguments in the second part of the book.

In particular, he discusses and defends criticism by Gérard Wajcman and Elisabeth Pagnoux of his approach to the images.

Both Wajcman and Pagnoux have criticized the presentation of the four photographs from Auschwitz in the exhibition *Mémoire des camps* and the argumentation around it in Didi-Huberman's catalogue essay.

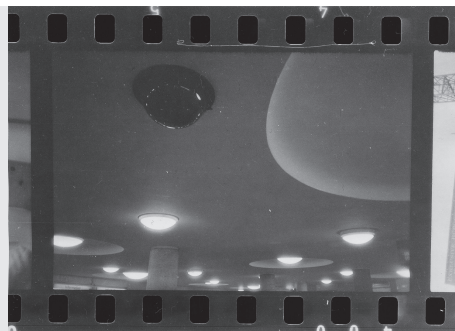
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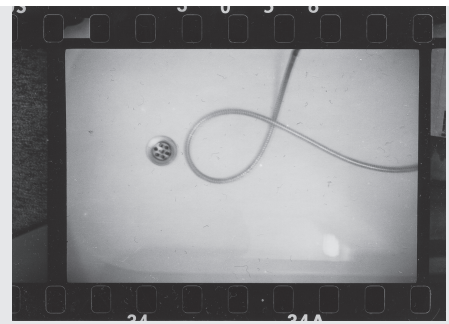
<sup>333</sup> Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in Spite of All*, Chicago/London, 2012, p. 44

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., p. 35/36

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., p. 46

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., p. 100





Elisabeth Pagnoux condemns the images being displayed as a simple voyeuristic thrill, a fetishization of the horrors of the Holocaust and therefore useless to assist the determination of historical truth.

Wajcman's criticism is less moralistic and more complex. He sees the use of the images as an offense against the unrepresentability of Auschwitz. His position is closer to Claude Lanzmann who condemns any representation of images depicting the events of the Holocaust.<sup>337</sup> Didi-Huberman's counter argument is in the existence of the photographs "in spite of all". The exceptional status of these four images from Auschwitz does not lie in what they depict, which is already well known, but in their existence as such. Didi-Huberman confirms that the photographs, which can be regarded as photographs in general, as "images without imagination", cannot represent the totality of the Holocaust, but they present us with images in spite of the machinery of extermination.<sup>338</sup> While for Wajcman the unrepresentability of Auschwitz terminates in a prohibition of representational images, to Didi-Huberman, "the 'unimaginable' of Auschwitz forces us, not to eliminate, but to *rethink the image* when an image of Auschwitz, suddenly, concretely, even if it remains an incomplete image, appears before our eyes."<sup>339</sup> The images become, "a possible point of *contact*, with the aid of the photographic medium, between the *image* and the *real* of Birkenau in August 1944."<sup>340</sup> The images in front of us depict a real situation which the spectator will never experience. The images allow us to participate in our own absence, our absence from the images' reality, our absence from any historical moment. As we are absent from the images' reality, we will have seen nothing of Auschwitz by looking at the images of the *real* of Birkenau in August 1944.

The gesture of resistance, which becomes evident in the viewpoint, the grain of the images, the blurriness, turns the images into acts of representation rather than keeping

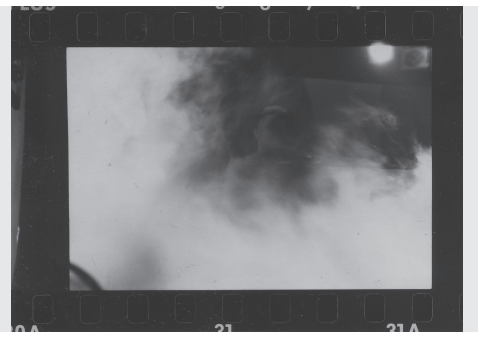
337 see Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/London, 2012, p. 95

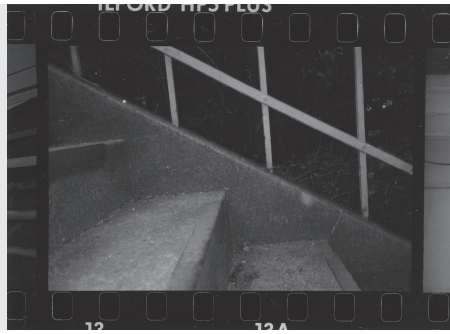
338 Ibid., p. 111

339 Ibid., p. 62

340 Ibid., p. 75







them as things, as non-representational surfaces.<sup>341</sup> Viewpoint, grain and traces of movement, "can all be put to work in articulating the *observation* of the image itself in the *quasi observation* of the events it represents" and will thus lead to interpretation.<sup>342</sup> Seen individually, the four images remain gestures of resistance. Between the four, when presented together, they also tell us about what they do not show. They stir the imagination of the spectator about what happened in between and after.

In order to read the images, Didi-Huberman needs to give a "sort of interpretative montage" based on different background materials like memories, topographical knowledge and contemporary and retrospective testimonies, "which [...] will always have that inherent fragility of the 'critical moment'".<sup>343</sup> While Pagnoux and Wajcman see the witnesses being silenced by the presentation of the photographs from Auschwitz, Didi-Huberman believes they give a posthumous voice to the members of the Sonderkommando in spite of the National Socialists' attempt to silence the memories of the camps by killing the witnesses.

The four photographs from Auschwitz — which I believe contrast with Didi-Huberman's argument, like any other photograph of the suffering — reverberate in postwar photography in the images taken after the Holocaust with the intention to speak about or evoke a memory of the event. The images' accusation lies in the knowledge the spectator needs to read them in the context they need to communicate their intolerable meaning. The images become intolerable through the context in which they are read by a knowing spectator. For their interpretation, the images must be related to other sources, like documents, reports or testimonies. The impact of the intolerable image is discussed by Rancière as follows: "For the image to produce its [political] effect, the spectator must already be convinced that [...] she is herself guilty about being there and doing nothing."<sup>344</sup> While Didi-Huberman accepts the four images from Auschwitz as tolerable, even as necessary, as testimony of the resistance of

341 see footnote no. 259 on representational and non-representational photographs

342 Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/London, 2012, p. 113

343 Ibid., p. 89

344 Rancière, Jacques: The Intolerable Image, in: *The Emancipated Spectator*, London/New York, 2009, p. 85





victims if not as historical proof, Wajcman and Pagnoux oppose the representation of these images. Rancière seems to argue in Didi-Huberman's favour. He denies that the image has its exclusive depicting value.

Representation is not the act of producing a visible form, but the act of offering an equivalent [...]. The image is not the duplicate of a thing. It is a complex set of relations between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid. It is not a mere reproduction of what is out there in front of the photographer or the filmmaker. It is always an alteration that occurs in a chain of images which alter it in turn.<sup>345</sup> This chain of images becomes part of the archive. But Didi-Huberman points out, "the archive is by no means the pure and simple 'reflection' of the event, nor its pure and simple 'evidence'. For it must always be developed by repeated cross-checkings and by *montage* with other archives."<sup>346</sup>

This takes him to discuss the importance of montage. Montage is, "valuable when it opens up our apprehension of history and makes it more complex," Didi-Huberman writes.<sup>347</sup> By presenting "the image's *difference from and link with* that which surrounds it", montage can instigate an understanding beyond the represented.<sup>348</sup> Didi-Huberman agrees with Wajcman that the four images individually do not give a full account of the occurrences in Auschwitz. But between the four images taken and presented in sequence, they hint at what is not shown, at the absent. The invisible, the lacking or the absent can be shown through montage, through the realm of thought. To envisage the invisible requires valuing the visible; ultimately "Auschwitz is only imaginable".<sup>349</sup> The space between two images — no matter if still or moving — brought together by montage, creates the imagination of a third image. The space between takes the focus off the plain narrative of the depicted and creates a more fictional reading.

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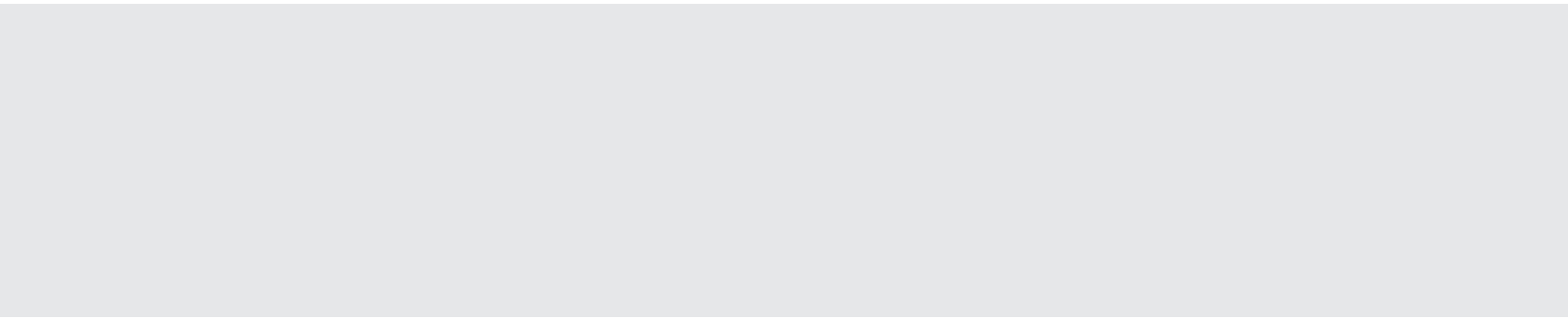
345 Rancière, Jacques: *The Intolerable Image*, in: *The Emancipated Spectator*, London/New York, 2009, p. 93/94

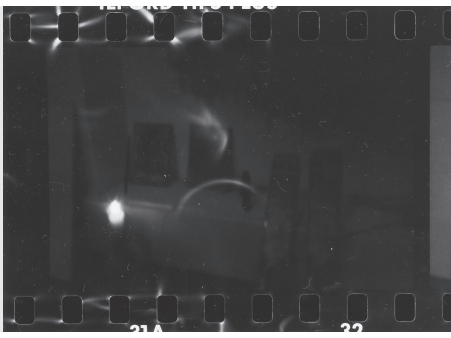
346 Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/London, 2012, p. 99

347 Ibid., p. 121

348 Ibid., p. 142

349 Ibid., p. 45





"An image is not 'the denial of absence' but, rather, its very attestation."<sup>350</sup> By looking at the four images from Auschwitz, we realise that it is highly unlikely that anybody represented in the images is still alive.

Only when we see what the images have survived in the images themselves, or as Georges Didi-Huberman says, of which they are survivors, "history, liberated from the pure past [...] might help us *to open* the present of time," in Walter Benjamin's sense of "Jetztzeit" (now).<sup>351</sup>

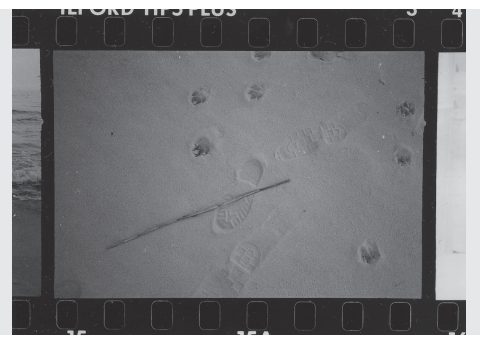
While I agree with Didi-Huberman on the importance of the images, as a gesture of resistance, as shield-images, as a historical record and testimony, I also understand certain aspects of the counter-arguments in favour of the unrepresentable by Wajcman and Pagnoux. But both, Didi-Huberman's arguments and the counter-arguments, are based on knowledge of the historical communication of the depicted.

Didi-Huberman always returns to the depicted moment in time. He even discusses the order in which the images were taken and the way they are printed.<sup>352</sup> He does not refrain from giving anecdotal accounts of how they were taken, although he argues throughout the book against the four images as pure representations of Auschwitz. Not only the fact that the time, place and their coming into existence are highly speculative, they are also particularly redundant in terms of the value of the images. The recourse to the surface of the depicted interferes with the idea of a photograph speaking of absence. If a photograph is viewed for the representation of the photographer's presence, as Didi-Huberman constantly does when he insists on the representation of the depicted events, the indispensable absence of the photographer in the present and of the spectator in the past is concealed. By contrast, the fact that Didi-Huberman locates the importance of the four photographs from Auschwitz in their existence in spite of all, that he understands the images as an attestation of absence and that he points to the importance of montage to read these images, raises interesting aspects

350 Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/London, 2012, p. 163

351 Ibid., p. 182

352 Ibid., p. 116





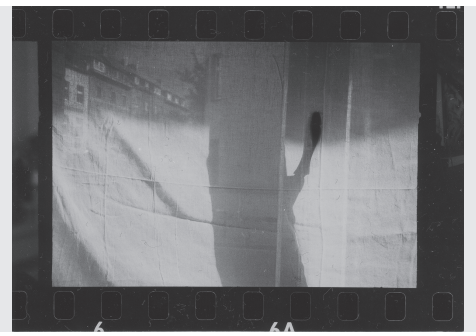
for the discussion of photographic representations as historical records, without any demand to attest to the truth value of their depiction. Although I see the historical value of Wajcman's and Didi-Huberman's arguments alike, they are both reasoned on a retrospective view of photography as representation of a once visible reality.

I wonder if the unimaginable and the unspeakable cannot be found in the area that is beyond imagination and therefore in the absent, as there can be no image, no word for it. Contrary to Didi-Huberman, to me, to consider the Holocaust as unimaginable, as beyond representation, does not devalue its memory, but is exactly what makes the memory valuable. The photographs show on the surface of their emulsion what was in front of the lens. Does what we see in the images not confirm that what happened in the extermination camps is beyond imagination, because the images depict, but cannot carry the vastness of the atrocities?

The discussion of the photographs as fact images or as a fetishization of the Holocaust is enforced by just looking at the surface of the light-sensitive emulsion that registered the images. In opposition to Didi-Huberman's, Wajcman's and Pagnoux's arguments, I am not interested in considering the photographs as historical testimonies. To me, representation lies not only on the surface of the image. Instead it can be found in the reading that needs the thought and the knowledge of the spectator. That is why montage and abstraction play an important role for the impact a photograph leaves on the viewer. The four images from Auschwitz described by Didi-Huberman offer that potential for reading, as they could easily be misread as depicting something other than the original situation and need the engagement of the viewer. I see them as fragments suggesting an absence in the present.

To see a photograph as authentication of the moment or in Barthes's sense as evidence of a "having taken place" — in the case of the four photographs from Auschwitz the naked women's preparation for their way to the gas chambers in the clearing and the burning of the corpses in the incineration pits — seems to make the four photographs from Auschwitz worthy of a historical discussion about the events of the Holocaust.





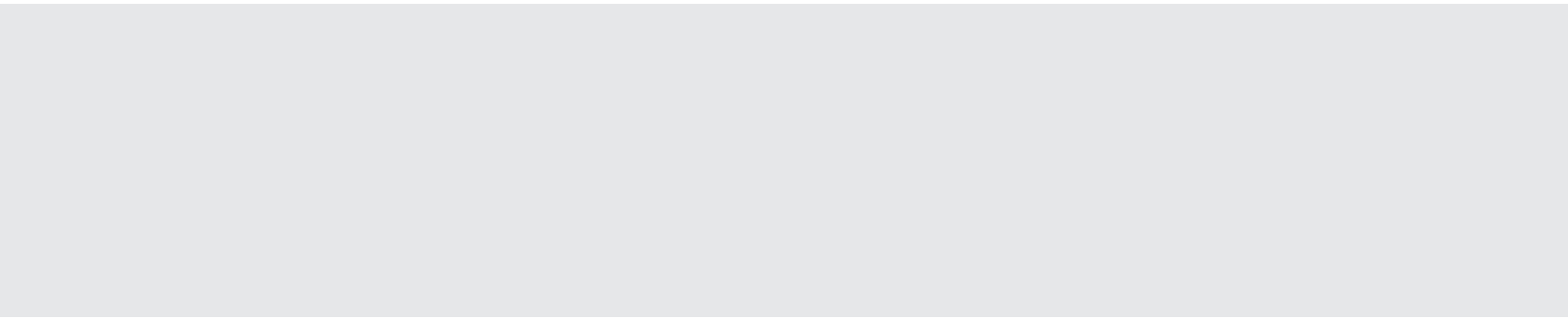
In their fragmentary representation of the horrors and as testimonies of the act of the victims' resistance to leave evidence in support of future testimonies, the images are without doubt highly valuable. That the Holocaust is beyond imagination does not mean that there cannot be images. It only means that no image, no account can ever bring about the full picture of what the victims have gone through. Both Lanzmann's opposition to the images and Didi-Huberman's trust in the images, even if rather as signifiers than as representations, undermine the unimaginability of the Holocaust. The unimaginable and the unrepresentable could gain meaning when instigating future dealings with the absence created by this specific past.

Regarded from the now in the sense of Walter Benjamin's "Jetztzeit", the images seem only to facilitate a worthless retrospection that creates a void since it omits more than it shows.<sup>353</sup> Any insistence to retain them in the past keeps them disconnected from the now and separates them from any reference to the present time. Their fragmentary nature proves that the magnitude of the Holocaust remains ineffable, even unimaginable, even for the survivors, as one can also learn from many testimonies. The visual testimony to the horrors of Auschwitz in their photographic depiction offers a screen for historical debates and for the discussion of the value of representation. This is where the dispute between Didi-Huberman and Wajcman and Pagnoux comes to a cul de sac. They never seem to look beyond the surface of the photographs. This is where I generally see a deficiency in reflections on photography.

A photograph looks back at a moment in time. Photographic representation pretends to be a testimony of a presence in the past, while it just attests a past that is utterly absent when the photograph is viewed. If not only read as a truth-image of the past, but instead communicated in its fragmentary status as part of an entity, a photograph can offer a kind of subjunctive mood for its own future, which still might be the

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353 In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History", Walter Benjamin speaks of "a past charged with the time of the now", a claim to make the past valuable for the present. In the German original the word Benjamin used was "Jetztzeit" to indicate the fleeting nature of that valuable moment. See Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 261





spectator's past, but holds a possibility to come. I will discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

One aspect that was not addressed in the debate concerning the four photographs from Auschwitz is how the relevance of the historical incident for the future lies rather in the recognition of an absence left behind than in the historical recognition of the loss created at the time. As a consequence, greater importance must be attached to the absent, to the invisible for the past to be recognized by the present. The surface of the images that displays the visible reality will remain in the past. The images stand in the way of the historical occurrences, thereby preventing them from casting a shadow to the present and future generations from drawing consequences from history in the now. I agree with Vilém Flusser for whom, "images are not windows; they are history's obstruction."<sup>354</sup> Flusser sees photographs not as transparent to see through, but merely as surfaces for a viewer kept at a distance.<sup>355</sup>

Susan Sontag writes, "A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence. [...]: they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality."<sup>356</sup> Photography's real quality lies hidden in the invisible, in what must be seen and read by the literate viewer. As Benjamin predicted, "the illiteracy of the future will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography."<sup>357</sup> This illiteracy includes the photographer who cannot read her own picture. "Is it not the task of the photographer — descendant of the augurs and haruspices — to reveal guilt and to point out the guilt in his pictures?"<sup>358</sup> As already discussed in chapter 1, here the photographer is not just seen as a keeper of the past, but following Benjamin's concept of entanglement of the past, present and future, also as a foreboder of the future. Photographs only revealing the past fall in my reading of Benjamin under the category of illiteracy, as the photographer does not understand the possibilities the medium offers as a means to transport the echo of

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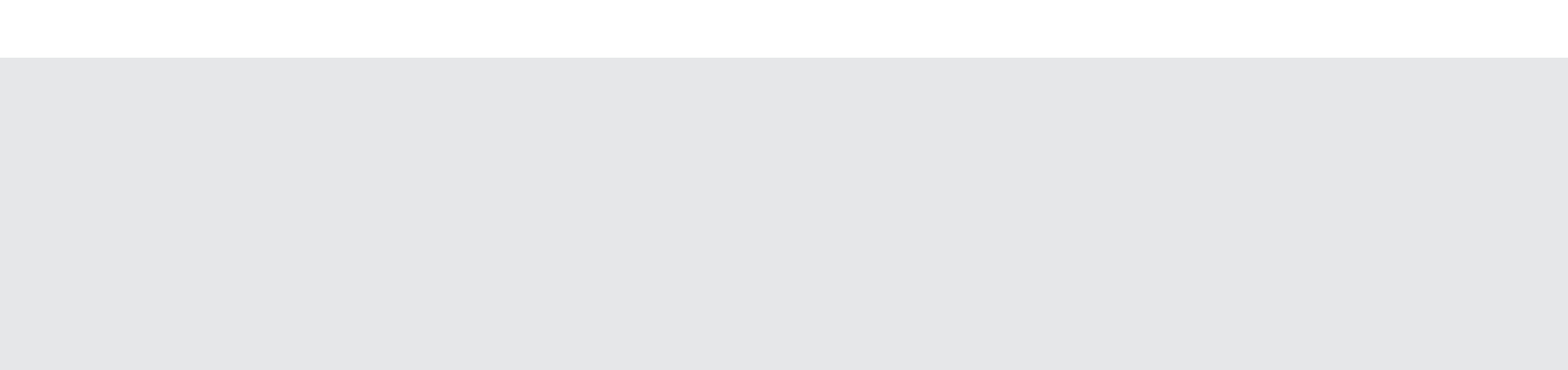
354 Flusser, Vilém: *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Minneapolis, 2011, p. 56

355 Ibid., p. 35

356 Sontag, Susan: "In Plato's Cave", in: *On Photography*, London, 2002, p. 16

357 Benjamin, Walter: "A Small History of Photography", in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, London, 1992, p. 256

358 Ibid., p. 256





the past into the future and thus make it valuable. Now I am seeking photographs that show nothing of Hiroshima, nothing of Auschwitz, and thus instigate their memory by representing the absent and thereby making the past a valuable part of our present, and even the future.

In opposition to the absent the void only serves as a projection screen, as a space that needs to be filled with images, memories and history. As helpful as the void seems as a reference to the past, it is the dead end of a one way street. There is only the recognition of the loss, just like a photograph only records what has been, but cannot offer on its own the prospect of what could be or even what will be. It is unsatisfactory that the concept of the void closes the book of history and keeps history in the distance of the past. While the void comes as a consequence of history, absence is essential to memory.<sup>359</sup>

What seems more important to me is a concept that represents the presence and the future as a follow up of the past showing in the absence.

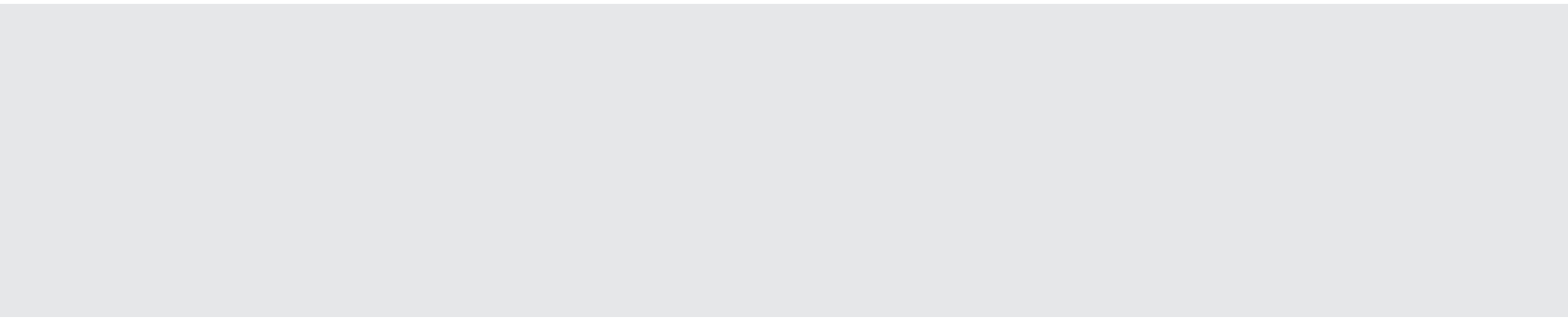
As Sartre observed in *Being and Nothingness*, absence is not equal to death, but describes the possibility of a presence that is no longer.<sup>360</sup> After the Holocaust the mourning seemed to focus on the figure of six million. By contrast, I am interested in what the absence offers us in terms of future possibilities rather than in a void created by the past that leads only to a closure. When we look at a photograph, we see a moment in the past that possesses any number of possible futures. This is akin to the linguistic construct of the future subjunctive, i.e. it bears within it a "what if" quality, reminding us that the future from any point in time is not predetermined. With regard to the Holocaust, the absence I am seeking lies in the other reality that Susan Sontag speaks of in "In Plato's Cave".<sup>361</sup> It can only be found in the invisible, as the invisible holds

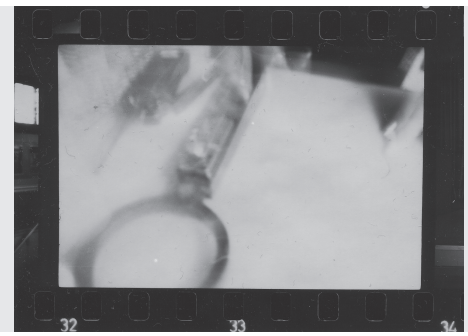
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359 For reflections on history and memory see chapter 1

360 "If we take the expression 'absence' in its empirical and everyday usage, it is clear, that I do not use it to indicate just any kind of ,not-being-there' [...] In short, absence is defined as a mode of being of human-reality in relation to locations and places which it has itself determined by its presence. [...] death is not an absence." Later Sartre continues: "To be absent is to-be-elsewhere-in-my-world." See Sartre, Jean Paul: *Being and Nothingness*, New York, 1992, p.370 f. and p. 449

361 Sontag, Susan: "In Plato's Cave", in: *On Photography*, London, 2002, p.16; see above





a possibility of a German-Jewish interrelationship that has been interrupted by the deeds committed during the Third Reich.<sup>362</sup> The visible presents a pseudo-presence of six million murdered Jews in the form of memorial sites and former camps, while the invisible holds the token of absence, the absence of Jewish life as an active part of German culture.

With *Exit*, which I have discussed extensively in chapter 2, Jochen Gerz has bypassed the problem of representing the past by not even trying to represent the site of the atrocities, instead focussing on its memorial successor. He made this problem even more apparent in monuments he designed in Hamburg-Harburg and in Saarbrücken. By making the memorial invisible, its absence triggers the involuntary memory. While the void only signifies absence, my interest is explicitly in the invisibility even of absence, as in the Saarbrücken memorial by Jochen Gerz.

As described in chapter 2, for the Hamburg-Harburg memorial, Jochen Gerz in collaboration with Esther Shalev-Gerz created a stele, which over time could be inscribed by the public and was slowly lowered until it disappeared into the ground.

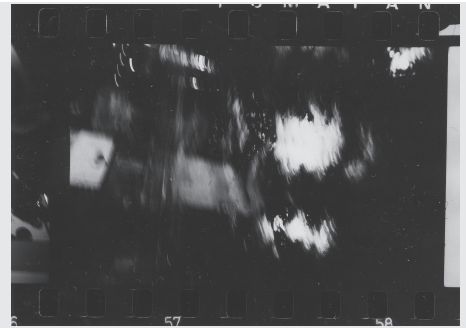
In an interview on both memorials, Jochen Gerz describes how he understood the difference in significance between an original and a reproduction while working on the Hamburg-Harburg memorial: On photographs of the stele, the physical interventions of the passers-by seem rather sublime and beautiful, while the violence becomes more obvious when standing in front of it. The difference lies in the beauty of the palimpsest and the fact that the erasure replaces someone's original signature with a violent mark, thus extinguishing the signature left by the visitors. The absent is replaced by what is visibly left behind.

The next stage of repression is to make the artwork itself invisible as a reference to absence — in Harburg by lowering the stele into the ground. In Saarbrücken the memorial itself was invisible from the beginning. Cobblestones that form the pavement

<sup>362</sup> Enzo Traverso describes how Jews were no pariah-like immigrants, but were embraced as part of German society, even if as minority. Since 1945 they became pariahs, also in their absence. The annihilation and removal has changed any normality, any day-to-day life in Germany. See Traverso, Enzo: *The Jews and Germany: From the 'Judeo-German Symbiosis' to the Memory of Auschwitz*, Lincoln, 1995







on the square in front of the castle were engraved with the names of all Jewish cemeteries in Germany that disappeared under National Socialist rule. Interestingly, the German word for pavement (Pflaster) is identical with the word for a medical plaster. Gerz's intervention in the pavement can thus be read as a healing measure. The repressed past equals the repressed memorial. Memory cannot find a place outside the individual. The Saarbrücken memorial works as a refined repression referring to the absence created by the past.<sup>363</sup>

As a consequence of my analysis in chapter 2 of three works by German photographers dealing with the remains of the Holocaust with respect to the murdered Jews, I find documentary photography highly unsuitable to deal with historical absence. The recognition of the political state of affairs that was established through the power of the system of oppression and extermination under National Socialist rule demands an aesthetic response beyond plain representation, although certain processes of representation, like the documentary, might have been adequate and valid in their own time as a means of getting closer to an understanding.

Also in chapter 2 I began to go beyond the non-representational image: In investigating Lily Markiewicz's work I acknowledged montage as a valuable method to create a third image between two, as suggested by Godard.<sup>364</sup> I will now take this discussion further by looking at artists using photography and who in their works explicitly deal with an absence rather than a void as a result of the historical past. I am seeking the absence that is required, according to Kristeva, to trigger the work of the imagination.<sup>365</sup>

The German artist Thomas Demand uses a strategy of remodelling to assess the validity of photographs as historical records. Reconstructing media images that have become part of a collective memory, he reassesses the original images, transforms them in his studio into three-dimensional models, just to photograph the site again and return to

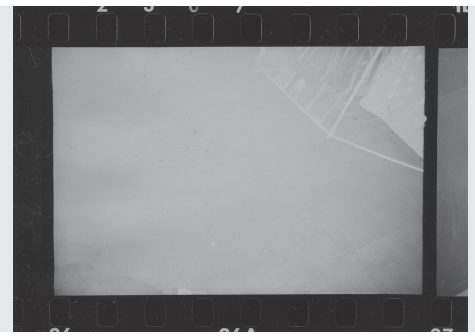
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363 For the interview see Gerz, Jochen: "Wir wissen, daß das Verdrängte uns immer verfolgt", in: Hemken, Kai-Uwe (ed.): *Gedächtnisbilder*, Leipzig, 1996, p. 253-264

364 For Godard on montage see Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/London, 2012, p. 116; I will return to Godard's view on montage below.

365 Kristeva, Julia: *Black Sun*, New York/Oxford, 1989, p.221; see footnote no. 261





a two-dimensional image. Through the process he familiarizes himself with both the image and the depicted space. Much has been written about his work. Ralph Rugoff wrote in an exhibition catalogue that Demand's photographs, "hint at the existence of a blank spot in our experience of the visual field that accomodates a destabilizing intrusion of fantasy and desire."<sup>366</sup> Botho Strauß described Demand in *Nationalgalerie* as a photographer who photographs a scene, preferably from an image that forms part of collective memory, cleansing of everything he does not want to have in it. Since he remodels the scene in cardboard, his replicas are rather rough. Botho Strauß describes the photographer further:

He was also obsessed with the fixed idea that all photos captured 'their Something' at the wrong moment. [...] He finally selected a particular likeness, a photo, and, in order to annihilate it, built a three-dimensional replica of the false quotation from reality that was inscribed in it, but made it incomplete — by deleting excessive accretions of data, rendering them blank, or inventing them anew, thus purging the formative space of a threatening chaos of details.<sup>367</sup>

Demand seems to tidy up these images that are part of a collective memory, often originating from media circulation.

This was a process, as cumbersome as it was creative, of building a figure of pre-figuration. By way of the model, he made each thing the paragon of that thing. This he could now photograph at leisure, lighting as he saw fit — the question of the wrong moment no longer presented itself, it had been eliminated.<sup>368</sup>

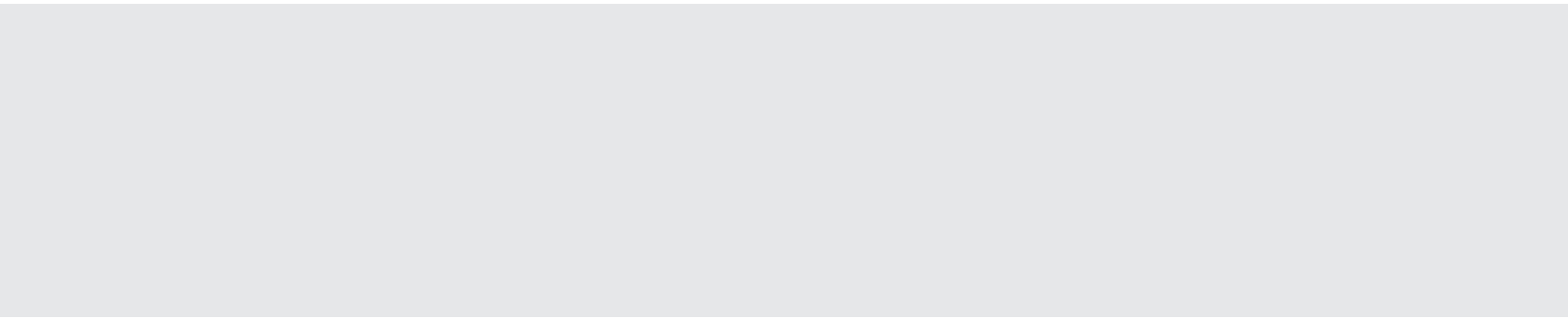
A room in Demand's photographs, "is not the original back room where everything happened, but rather a room that visually describes the back room we've heard about — but falsely. In other words, we are already one step away from the original."<sup>369</sup> Demand

<sup>366</sup> Rugoff, Ralph: "Instructions for Escape", in: Demand, Thomas: *Phototrophy*, Bregenz, 2004, p. 7

<sup>367</sup> Strauß, Botho in: Demand, Thomas: *Nationalgalerie*, Göttingen, 2009, text for Copyshop, 1999

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., text for Staircase, 1995

<sup>369</sup> Demand, Thomas and Obrist, Hans Ulrich: *The conversation series*, Köln, 2007, p. 133





is fully aware that what he reconstructs is already a reconstruction of a constructed reality.

He creates an absence by eliminating what he considers superfluous in the original. Clearly he omits what is most definite about the original. In "Bathtub" Demand removes the politician's corpse that defined the original scene and distinguished it from any other bathtub.<sup>370</sup> He shows an image in which the viewer knows that something is missing, artificially removed by reconstruction. The meaning lies exactly in what Demand decided to leave out, that is in what the viewer does not get to see, rather than in what is shown. What is shown is just a trigger to remember the original and the story behind. Through the knowledge of the viewer, who knows the images from media representations, the absent is still present, yet invisible in the image. Although Demand often works on the absence of a presence in German history, he creates the absence by building a model and not so much through the photographic process. His works can be placed between sculpture and photography. Modelling is equally important for the outcome of his images as the final operation of the camera. In the sense that he photographs his reconstructions straight forwardly, he complies with Kracauer's rule of the depiction of physical reality. However, Demand constructs this reality himself beforehand. He photographs a kind of stage design rather than reality. An absence is also already created in the setting of rules of the game, the purposeful reconstruction after a photographic construction of reality. Photography is just the mediator. The absence is already in the scene. Demand the photographer witnesses the absence that he already built into his models. Demand's images remind us of the amount of images out there that are more or less relevant to us. Viewers will remember the original to some of his images, while some will only echo in one's mind. To some, the original has passed us unnoticed. But most certainly, the absent is not intended in the original image, but only in Demand's reconstruction and in the transfer processes between the original scene, its photographic reproduction and Demand's restaging.

370 Uwe Barschel was a West German politician who was found dead in a bathtub in a hotel in Geneva in 1987. To this day the reasons for his death have not been fully resolved.





Picking up on my analogy between photography and the linguistic construct of a future subjunctive ("what if"), Demand's approach could be described as a form of past conditional: Instead of offering possible futures his images represent a "what would have been". He intervenes with the past, creating the scene anew. The invisible absent becomes palpable through Demand's reconstruction. As a consequence, "The rememberer therefore will no longer be what he always was, a person who stops and stands still in recalling."<sup>371</sup>

My interest in Demand's works is not motivated by his use of photography or sculpture, which is rather conventional, but by the way he challenges photography as a means of historical remembrance. Demand does not create an absence through the possibilities offered by the photographic material, but he plays with the notion of absence through an understanding of the photographic process, through perspective, scale and lighting. He uses what Benjamin Buchloh reads as one of the central arguments of Walter Benjamin's essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, namely reduction in size through reproduction.<sup>372</sup> Thomas Demand plays with this specific quality of the medium when he rebuilds a model from a photograph, which miniaturized the original site, and then photographs the model just to produce a print according to the model's original size. Thus the final image is neither representative of the size of the original site nor of the original photograph, but creates a new reproduction with its own measurements and is thereby fictitious.

Demand's works can be seen as a series of singular depictions in a temporal continuum. But if, as for Foucault, the reality of history is different from the history created by historians in that it does not require any permanence, then the use of photography in temporal succession cannot do justice to a real narrative of the past.<sup>373</sup> A transformation

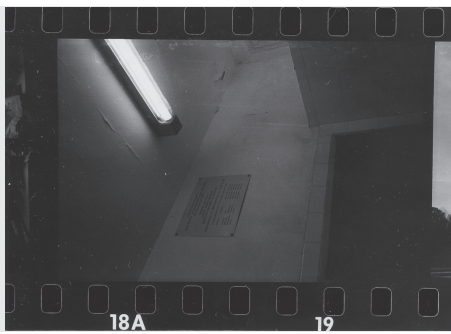
371 Strauß, Botho in: Demand, Thomas *Nationalgalerie*, Göttingen, 2009, text for Office, 1995

372 see Buchloh, Benjamin: "Atlas", in: *Deep Storage*, 1998, Munich/ New York, p. 58; Buchloh refers here to a text by Horst Bredekamp entitled *Der simulierte Benjamin*, published 1992

373 Foucault, Michel: "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire", in Bachelard, Suzanne: *Hommage à Jean Hippolyte*, Paris, 1971, quoted in Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Das Nachleben der Bilder*, Berlin, 2010, p. 193-194







from the repetition of past events to a spatial juxtaposition could offer a solution to this deficiency of historical narratives.

That leads us to the art historian Aby Warburg and his interest in the simultaneity offered by the use of media images — as a transformation from one state of reality to another — that would make a comparison of different source materials possible. As one of a number of media, photography enabled his comparative analysis of different images. In his lectures he was one of the first to use multiple projected images to compare pictures from different periods. His interest was in comparative viewing.<sup>374</sup> In his *Mnemosyne Atlas* he combined photographic reproductions of paintings from different eras and of different sizes in the original with newspaper clippings and photographs from advertisements. Through the use of the photographic medium it all appeared in similar sizes and in a commensurable materiality. The originals were transformed into plain material for the studies. The transformation opened visionary references instead of old fashioned (art) historical retrospection. Marianne Schuller calls the *Mnemosyne Atlas* a manifestation of what was not yet known, which only becomes known for the first time through this appearance. Referring to Georges Didi-Huberman, Marianne Schuller points out that for the *Mnemosyne Atlas* the technically transformed copy was important, not the original. On the panels, not only the presentation in the form of reproductions of similar size and materiality enables the comparability, but also the interspace between the images gains meaning.<sup>375</sup>

The combination opens comparative ways of looking at images and interpreting them. The visionary references between the images form what could be seen as a future conditional of art history, as a proposition for things to be seen as future possibilities, opening the art historical reading up to ever new interpretations. A similar perspective

374 For a good understanding of Warburg's fascination with different media images see Hensel, Thomas: *Wie aus der Kunstgeschichte eine Bildwissenschaft wurde*, Berlin, 2011

375 see Schuller, Marianne: "Darstellung des Ungedachten. Zum konstellativen Verfahren in Aby Warburgs *Mnemosyne Atlas*"; in: *Modern Language Notes (MLN)*, Nr. 126, H. 3 (German issue); Special issue: "Constellations/Konstellationen", John Hopkins University, Baltimore 2011, p. 581-589 Marianne Schuller refers to Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Das Nachleben der Bilder*, Berlin, 2010. As I have mentioned above, Jochen Gerz also had an interest in the transformation from an original — in his case an original site — to its photographic reproduction and the consequences of this shift.





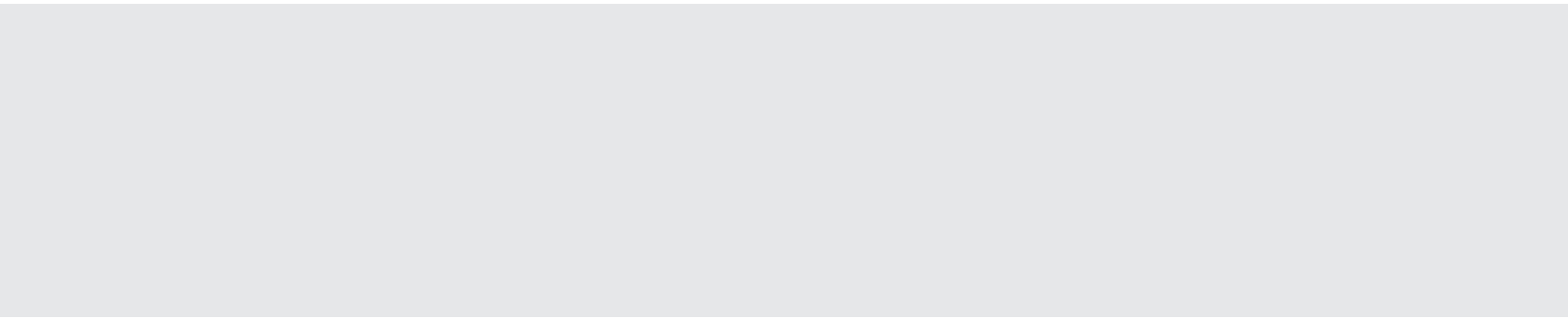
is offered by Georges Didi-Huberman when he refers to Jean-Luc Godard and his idea of montage, creating a third image between two.<sup>376</sup> As Godard proposes, once you have two images, you already have three, and montage leads towards considering the images and away from just looking at them.<sup>377</sup>

In a similar way the German painter Gerhard Richter made use of (often) photographic images in their relation to history to offer new interpretations. Richter, whose biography is closely intertwined with German history, produced several works referring to historical events. He often used photographic images as the starting material for his paintings. In some of them, such as the photorealist "Uncle Rudi" (1965) and the "18 October 1977" cycle (1988), the relationship to a photographic model as a historical reference is more obvious than in others. In the aforementioned works, Richter painted from photographs and the painting initially looks like a blurred photograph. Through the smudged oil paint, Richter adds a material quality to the original picture, a material quality he denies to the photograph as an object. At the same time the image loses its quality as a historical document and becomes a historical interpretation by the painter. There is something in Richter's photorealistic paintings of historical events that informs us on photography. Touched by their realism I attempt to get closer, as if I could approach the truth of the image by physically approaching the painting. But at a close distance the images dissolve into pure paint. All their realism exists only on the surface, and only from a distance. "18 October 1977" is like a memory, blurred and impossible to grasp. Every time I think I can name what I see, it disappears. The absence of the historical referent that Richter creates through his painter's processing of the photographic evidence changes a spectator's reading of the image in terms of its connection only to the past. For Richter, while the photograph triggers horror, a painting of the same scene enables mourning.<sup>378</sup>

376 Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/London, 2012, p. 135

377 Cited in: Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/London, 2012 p. 135 On the idea of montage in Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas see Hensel, Thomas: *Wie aus der Kunstgeschichte eine Bildwissenschaft wurde*, Berlin, 2011, p. 127-141

378 see Richter, Gerhard: *Text, Schriften und Interviews*, Frankfurt a. Main, 1993; p. 179 (conversation with Jan Thorn Prikker 1989)





While his oil paintings work as individual, singular images and therefore still follow the historical narrative of the temporal continuum, he used photography to form a conglomerate of representations from different origins. To Richter, a photograph has hardly any reality on its own, is just a picture, while a painting always has a reality, a material presence of paint, which in the end results in a picture.<sup>379</sup> The advantage of photography is its mechanical production with minimal subjective influence, while painting always shows the influence of the artist through his hand.

In *Atlas*, as Richter calls this collection, photographs from his private archive meet historical photographs, like a collection of concentration camp photographs, images from publications, landscapes and details of paintings, as well as drawings and sketches. *Atlas* assembles all these different images on panels, numbered and arranged in chronological order. Some of the images in Richter's *Atlas* could also be found in a private photo album. But while in an album photographs are assembled to keep hold of memories for conservation, in *Atlas* they offer future perspectives.<sup>380</sup>

Twice a viewer comes across concentration camp images in the book edition of *Atlas* (published in 2006).<sup>381</sup> First, from panel 16 to 20 (1967), concentration camp images appear in the category "Photos from Books", following photos from newspapers and books like fashion, sports or landscape images. On panel 19, some of the images appear blurred, resembling Richter's black and white paintings based on photographs. Panel 20 shows some of the photos that already appeared on the previous panels, hand coloured. On the following panels the viewer comes across "Photos from Magazines", more specifically porn magazines.<sup>382</sup> What follows is an accumulation of landscape photographs, still lifes, portraits, seemingly private photographs and sketches of different sorts, interspersed with some photographs with historical reference. Then the

379 Richter, Gerhard: *Text, Schriften und Interviews*, Frankfurt a. Main, 1993, p. 216 (conversation with Jonas Storsve 1991)

380 Images are compiled chronologically in photo albums and therefore speak in the past tense, while *Atlas* (and atlases in general) organise images differently, in a way that enables possible future interferences between them.

381 Richter, Gerhard: *Atlas*, Cologne, 2006

382 The association of sexual adumbration and Holocaust images seems a popular theme. Jean Luc Godard made a similar montage of images of romance and images from the camps in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. See Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/London, 2012





viewer comes across photographs that served as background material for "18 October 1977", namely the Baader Meinhof photographs. A section entitled "Holocaust" (panels 635 to 646, 1997) follows photographs of details of his paintings and various motifs (1997/98), and sketches for Reichstag (1997) in which the Holocaust images can be found again. The banality of the images surrounding the Holocaust sections, "as a condition of everyday life" as Benjamin Buchloh described it, "appears here in its specifically German modality as the condition of the repression of historical memory, as a sort of psychic anesthesia."<sup>383</sup> In this, Richter's use of ordinary images in relation to the Holocaust images is totally different from the banality of the images by Lockemann and Neudörfl, described in chapter 2, which does not challenge the deficiency of historical awareness.

While the documentary photographs of the Holocaust serve as reminders of the past, the sketches for Reichstag envisage a future in which the past lives on. The seemingly random order in which the images are put together offers new contexts in which to read the images. It also actualizes the images. While the first series of concentration camp images were still connected to other photographic representations, Richter contextualizes the second set of Holocaust images in a more visionary set like collages and sketches, providing an outlook into the future. In *Atlas*, Richter interjects the Holocaust images as a homogeneous part with other subjects of his image reservoir or archive.<sup>384</sup>

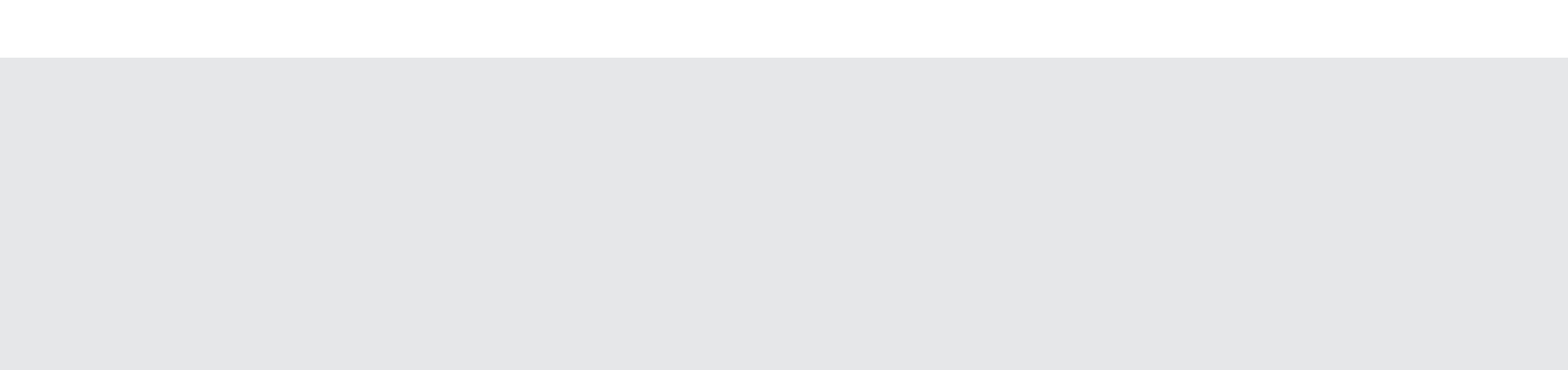
For Richter, all materials in *Atlas* seem to work in a similar manner. The structure in grids, all similar to one another, makes the images of these different backgrounds comparable and connects them. The sheer mass of images and panels makes it impossible to see individual images instead of categories or materials. Like Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Richter's *Atlas* offers a comparative viewing and a spatial juxtaposition — even more in an exhibition context than in the book.<sup>385</sup> *Atlas* does not claim to be complete. It

<sup>383</sup> Buchloh, Benjamin: "Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas': The Anomic Archive", in: *October*, Vol. 88 (Spring 1999), p. 141

<sup>384</sup> This is similar to the observation that photography as a medium does not differentiate between motifs; see footnote no. 282.

<sup>385</sup> see installation views of *Atlas* in: Richter, Gerhard: *Atlas*, Cologne, 2006, p. 854-857







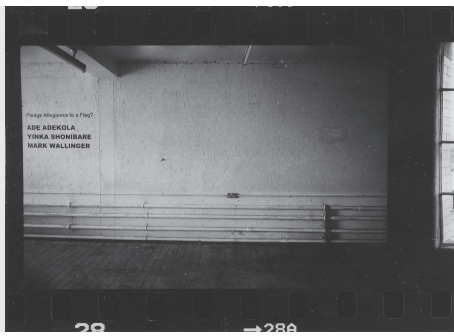
rather presents itself as a personal selection of imagery. The panels offer the possibility of always new combinations and connections. In *Atlas*, Richter's use of photography is not just in the past tense, but also offers readings in a future conditional on the basis of a reality captured through photographs.

While the images in "Holocaust" and in "18 October 1977" remain utterly historical, Richter moves away from the use of a depiction in a series that can also be found in *Atlas*.

In "War cuts" (2004), Richter combined photographic reproductions from details of his abstract paintings with text extracts from newspapers that describe the beginning of the war in Iraq (from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in German and *The New York Times* in the English version). Here in opposition to his photorealistic works, the painting loses its material quality through the photographic process. Richter combines the reality of one of his own paintings — a reality that he experienced himself — with the reality of a war that is only transmitted for most people — and also for Richter — through the media. Richter goes even further in commenting the use of images as illustrations for news events than he did with "18 October 1977", in which he commented on the photographs through his painted modification. If in "18 October 1977" the representation of the event and an original photographic testimony was still essential, Richter no longer needs the literal depiction in "War cuts".

The abstract nature of the imagery Richter used for "War cuts" brings to mind the photographic representation of the war in Afghanistan by two British photographers, who traveled to Afghanistan embedded in the British Army in 2008 for reasons of artistic documentation. Broomberg and Chanarin have worked for a long time in the field of non-representability and questions of photographic validity. Usually they seem to trust the photographic image created with the help of a camera. If they speak about absence they do so by depicting the absent as a void, like images of an empty photo-backdrop with an Israeli flag or an empty plinth stating "native skull found in cave of matabelle witch-doctor, 1897" in *Fig. [sic]*. They go even further in *The Day Nobody*





*Died*. Instead of cameras, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin only used the light-sensitive properties of photographic colour paper to partially expose the roll to the sun for 20 seconds on occasions which a photographer would normally record.<sup>386</sup> The images they produced resemble Richter's abstract details of oil paint.

The images in the series *The Day Nobody Died* have titles that define the incident and the date on which they were exposed, like "The Brother's Suicide, June 7, 2008" or "The Press Conference, June 9, 2008". These titles hint at the indexicality of the photographic image, even if abstract. To me, this is a very appropriate photographic treatment of the traumatic event of war, as the lack of a recognizability of the moment, which is defined through a photograph as decisive, grasps the "surpassing disaster" as unspeakable or unrepresentable.<sup>387</sup> Realistic depiction cannot make the moment more present. Non-representation dehistoricizes the horrors of war. Or to use Chris Marker's words: "History throws its empty bottles out of the window."<sup>388</sup>

Richter's use of montage to bring historical and autobiographical incidents together reminds me of a novel whose author plays with facts, fiction and autobiography in a similar way.

Peter Weiss, a German author who lived in Sweden, fleeing there from the Third Reich, used the technique of montage for his historical novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, consisting of historical and fictional biographies, through different periods and authoritarian regimes, always asking the reader to position himself.<sup>389</sup>

In his autobiographically inspired account of the Third Reich, Peter Weiss recollects his personal view of the time in around a thousand pages and three volumes. Book One describes the time of a young apprentice in Berlin in 1937, when he associated with trade unionists and communists, with whom he went to museums and educated

<sup>386</sup> <http://www.choppedliver.info/the-day-nobody-died/>, 28.7.2013

<sup>387</sup> As mentioned above, according to Jalal Toufic, a "surpassing disaster" is defined by the loss that remains after a traumatic event. Jalal Toufic: "The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a surpassing Disaster," 2009, p. 11

<sup>388</sup> Marker, Chris: *Sans soleil*, 1983, 31:08 min

<sup>389</sup> Weiss, Peter: *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, three-volume edition, Frankfurt a. M., 1983; only Book One has been translated into English.





himself in art history. Thereby Peter Weiss seems not to be interested in this specific time as an isolated part of history, but connects it with times of other authoritarian regimes, reflecting on them by describing in great detail artworks such as the Pergamon Altar in Berlin. With respect to the importance of the artworks for the historical aspects of his novel, Peter Weiss pointed out that often artworks are the only remains that tell us about periods in the long distant past.<sup>390</sup>

As a result of his political awareness of the injustices committed by fascist regimes, he joins the resistance in Spain. This is where the second book is set. The third book takes him into exile in Sweden and resistance against the Third Reich organised from Scandinavia. "The description of resistance leads necessarily to a panoramic presentation of the key period in German history."<sup>391</sup>

The third book finishes with the end of the war and a possible future for Germany. At the end of Book Three of his novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, Peter Weiss looks into the Federal Republic of Germany that is yet to emerge. He uses the subjunctive for his description of the narrator's future that is the writer's, and likewise the reader's past. "The narrating self is projected to a later point in time, from where it obtains clarity through writing and will be able to interpret its experiences."<sup>392</sup>

The mechanism of using the future conditional points out that the past has once been a future offering different possibilities. *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* is not a "book of an 'as if', but one of a 'why not'".<sup>393</sup>

In Peter Weiss's novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, the Third Reich becomes representative of all oppressive systems. In a montage of narratives of historical

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390 see Götze, Karl-Heinz and Klaus R. Scherpe (eds.): *Die 'Ästhetik des Widerstands' lesen*, Berlin, 1981, p. 162

391 "Die Darstellung des Widerstands führt notwendig zu einem Panorama dieser gesamten Schlüsselperiode der deutschen Geschichte."; see Götze, Karl-Heinz: "Abseits als Zentrum", in: Götze, Karl-Heinz and Klaus R. Scherpe (eds.): *Die 'Ästhetik des Widerstands' lesen*, Berlin, 1981, p. 96; (my translation)

392 "Das erzählte Ich projiziert sich auf einen späteren Zeitpunkt, wo es schreibend Klarheit gewinnen und seine Erfahrungen verdeutlichen können." Lindner, Burkhardt: "Ich Konjunktiv Futur I", in: Götze, Karl-Heinz and Klaus R. Scherpe (eds.): *Die 'Ästhetik des Widerstands' lesen*, Berlin, 1981, p. 91; (my translation)

393 "Er [Peter Weiss, Anm.SH] schreibt kein Buch des, als ob', sondern eins des, warum nicht'; Götze, Karl-Heinz: "Abseits als Zentrum", in: Götze, Karl-Heinz and Klaus R. Scherpe (eds.): *Die 'Ästhetik des Widerstands' lesen*, Berlin, 1981, p. 97; (my translation)





facts, fictional encounters and art historical reflections, Peter Weiss throws his readers through time and space, demanding all their attention, as he never highlights the different layers. He mixes stories of fictional characters and historical figures, individual views and historical facts, interpretations and descriptions of artworks with political views of an individualized historical narrative that challenges the authority of traditional history. Weiss's historical narrative is discontinuous, thereby questioning continuous historical narratives that discuss history as a chronological flow of separate occurrences. Through his use of montage to create heterogeneity, Weiss makes the past valuable for the future, as it does not appear as a distant, completed chapter of time. In *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, Benjamin's call for history to be, "the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" seems to find a literary implementation.<sup>394</sup>

The significance of art for a historical remembrance is an aspect that permeates *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*. As Burkhardt Lindner rightly suggested, "in the third book art has been defined as a continuous memory."<sup>395</sup> Throughout all three books the construction of historical memorization alongside artworks from different periods (and different parts of the world: the Pergamon Altar, Géricault's Raft of the Medusa or the temple complex of Angkor Wat) is a literary example of what Richter and Warburg undertook visually with their atlases.

Richter's use of the concentration camp images in *Atlas* presents a form of artistic examination of the remembrance of the unrepresentable. The images show a fragment of the historical event in their "*Jetztzeit*". But as in Warburg's panels of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, the space between the images becomes equally important to connect the images of the past with the present, or even a future. Like the montage used by Peter Weiss in *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* to connect different locations and different times, presenting a kaleidoscopic view of Europe in the time of the Third Reich, the montage

394 Benjamin, Walter: "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in: *Illuminations*, New York, 2007, p. 261

395 "Kunst war im dritten Band als fortwährendes Gedächtnis [...] definiert worden." Lindner, Burkhardt: "Ich Konjunktiv Futur I", in: Götze, Karl-Heinz and Klaus R. Scherpe (eds.): *Die 'Ästhetik des Widerstands' lesen*, Berlin, 1981, p. 91; (my translation)







of the images in Richter's *Atlas* comes across as a construction of a past, offering possibilities for different future developments.

The images as such are related to the trauma resulting from the Third Reich and represent the past in all of its cruelty, disconnected from the present. They present the facts in the same way as the number of six million. But the spaces between the images offer a fictional connection to the present in relation to the other panels.<sup>396</sup> Like Peter Weiss in his historical novel, Richter gives us a kind of subjunctive for a future after Auschwitz, although it is already our past from today's perspective. Thus he suggests a fictive actualization of the past out of de facto photographic images, thereby overcoming the banality of the photographic depiction of horror. Not only do the photographs become fictitious, now also "[m]emory is the work [*oeuvre*] of fiction".<sup>397</sup> [sic] Similarly, what Richter leaves out in his smudged photorealist paintings instills an illusion of something more.

As Kracauer wrote, "compared to photography, memory's records are full of gaps."<sup>398</sup> The gaps in memory's records that are only filled with absence arise from the montage of images, like in the atlases of Warburg and Richter. Montage as a consequence of an accumulation of images collected over time can produce new images and narratives.<sup>399</sup>

And if, as in Svetlana Boym's words, "Collecting becomes a substitute for the loss of collective memory," then the gaps between the collected images fill the void of the loss with the hope for a future presence, enabled by the absence in the space between.<sup>400</sup>

The gaps — that can be more explicit ones like the voids between buildings in Ina Wuttke's work *Gaps of Berlin* or implicit as in Broomberg and Chanarin's photographs in *Fig.* (which present objects as missing), or more symbolically, like the interstices in

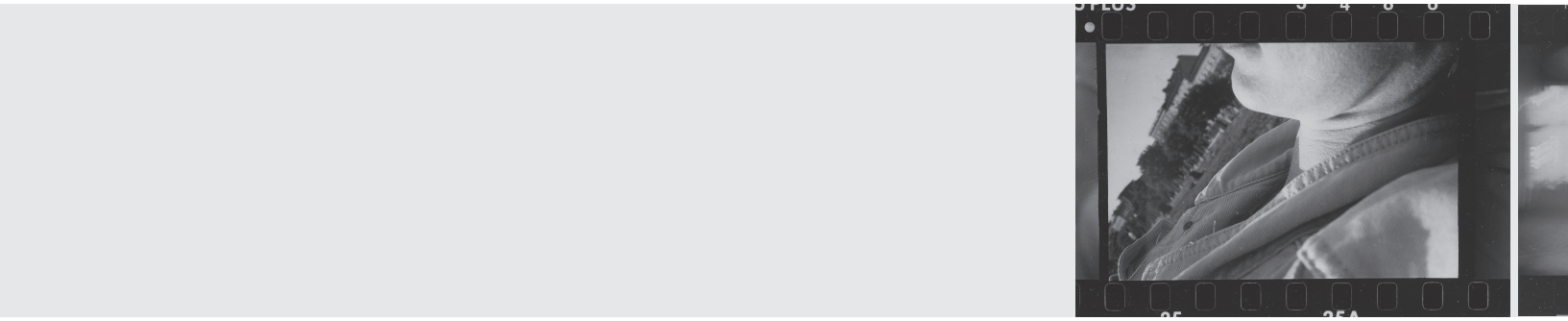
396 see Schuller, Marianne: "Darstellung des Ungedachten. Zum konstellativen Verfahren in Aby Warburgs Mnemosyne Atlas"; in: *Modern Language Notes (MLN)*, Nr. 126, H. 3 (German issue); Special issue: "Constellations/Konstellationen", John Hopkins University, Baltimore 2011, p. 581-589

397 Rancière, Jacques: "Documentary fiction - Marker and the fiction of memory", in: *Film Fables*, Oxford/New York, 2006, p. 158

398 Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography," in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 425

399 see Didi-Huberman's reference to Godard. Didi-Huberman, Georges: *Images in spite of all*, Chicago/London, 2012, p. 135

400 Boym, Svetlana: *The future of nostalgia*, New York, 2001, p. 210





Warburg's and Richter's atlases — represent the "impossible possibility" to speak of the event, the event without witnesses that is defined by its unspeakability.<sup>401</sup>

In that sense Vera Frenkel's *Body missing* is such an impossible possibility, since it speaks of the lost artworks from Hitler's planned Führer-Museum. In a mix of fictionalized stories and historical facts, she allows viewers to follow their curiosity and explore the materials offered by the artist.

The project circulates around a museum that Hitler wanted to build in Linz, Austria for an art collection that he compiled by confiscation and theft. Vera Frenkel follows the traces of the artworks, especially those that went missing after the war. The visual appearance of many of these lost artworks is unknown, but there is a future possibility of them reappearing, as they were not destroyed, but only went missing, waiting to be found anytime. Vera Frenkel worked with the original registration files that list the title, date and artist, but do not present an accompanying image.

The starting point for *Body missing* is an absence, namely the absence of the lost artworks. And although the lost artworks might cast a shadow on the people who are absent as a result of the Third Reich, "the losses are not equivalences".<sup>402</sup>

The work was presented in the form of installations in different exhibitions and virtually as a website. The interaction of navigating through the website works in the same way as a montage and always creates new contexts and references. The lost artworks that are the driving force behind the work remain invisible. Facts and fictions revolve around their absence.

Vera Frenkel, like Peter Weiss and Siegfried Kracauer among many others, speaks from an exile's perspective. Driven to exile by the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, the German-born Peter Weiss fled to Sweden where he remained and found a new

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<sup>401</sup> The impossible possibility to speak of the event refers to a lecture by Jacques Derrida; see Derrida, Jacques: *Eine gewisse unmögliche Möglichkeit, vom Ereignis zu sprechen*, Berlin, 2003; the French original was published as "Une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l'événement", in: Nouss, Alexis (ed.): *Dire l'événement, est-ce possible?* Séminaire autour J. Derrida (avec J. Derrida et G. Soussana), L'Harmattan, coll. "Esthétiques", Paris, 2001, p. 79-112. Derrida describes how the impossibility to speak of the event initially creates the possibility of the event.

<sup>402</sup> Legge, Elizabeth: "Analogues of Loss", in: *Vera Frenkel ...from the Transit Bar/Body Missing*, Stockholm, 1997, p. 72



home after the end of World War II. Vera Frenkel was born in Czechoslovakia and fled from the National Socialists to England, later living in Canada. Both Vera Frenkel and Peter Weiss could have described their life in exile in a similar way to Siegfried Kracauer, who described his situation in American exile as that of someone,

who as an adult person has been forced to leave his country or has left it of his own free will ... and the odds are that he will never fully belong to the community to which he now in a way belongs. [...] His life history is disrupted, his 'natural' self relegated to the background of his mind. [...] The exile's true mode of existence is that of a stranger.<sup>403</sup>

With regard to the stranger, Tom Sandquist refers to Julia Kristeva as follows: "The stranger belongs to no given place, has no time, no love, only a lost origin, an impossible rootedness, a fading memory, a suspended present."<sup>404</sup> This summary of Kristeva's idea of the stranger presents the impossible possibility of a presence in absence as a historical consequence of persecution and expulsion.

Piotr Nathan states on the website for *Body Missing* that the disappearance of the artworks "is a document of war, like a war-memorial".<sup>405</sup> The impossibility in Frenkel's work to present the original offers the possibility to speak about the unspeakable. If, as for Piotr Nathan, "All illustration ( = reproduction) replaces the originals," then we have no necessity for the originals to experience the present and create an awareness of the absent, which is what history means in actual fact according to Ryszard W. Kluszczyński.<sup>406</sup>

In 2013 some of the missing artworks reappeared from the oblivion when they were discovered in a flat in Munich, as if to prove that their absence had never been a total loss that left a void, but that their disappearance had always carried the promise of a presence. The unexpected reappearance of these artworks turns looking into the past as in Vera Frenkel's *Body Missing* into a subjunctive promise for the future.

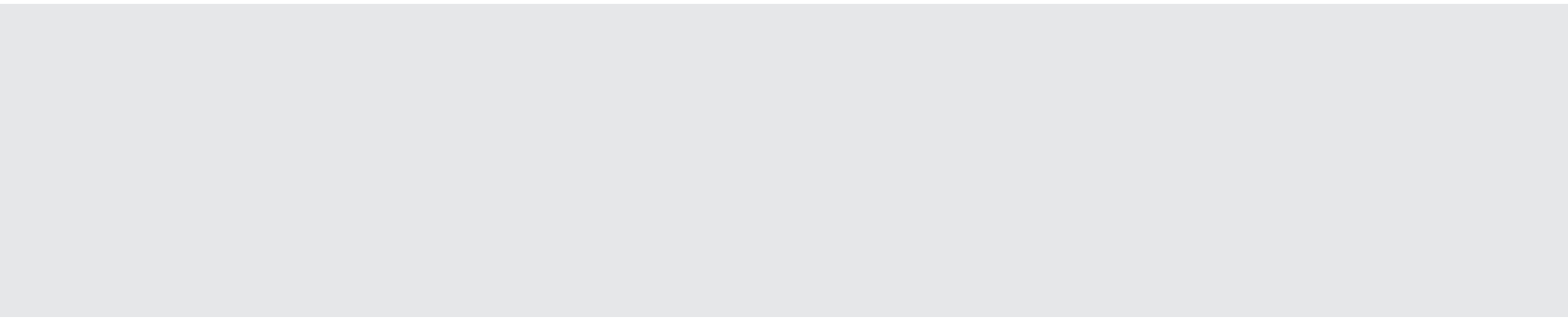
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403 Kracauer, Siegfried: *History - The Last Things Before The Last*, Princeton, 1995, p. 83/84

404 Sandqvist, Tom: "Foreigners in Sweden", in: *Vera Frenkel ...from the Transit Bar/Body Missing*, Stockholm, 1997, p. 80

405 <http://www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing/artists/piotr/hands.html>, 27.8.2013

406 Kluszczyński, Ryszard W.: "Art against Imponderabilia", in: *Vera Frenkel ...from the Transit Bar/Body Missing*, Stockholm, 1997, p. 14





By looking at artworks by Gerhard Richter or Vera Frenkel dealing with Germany's historical past, I realised that the unrepresentability of the historical event without witnesses, as the Holocaust is often described, can only be regarded from the perspective of the absent. As a photographer, my interest is to explore how photography, which only represents a visible present, can be of use to work through the past by replacing the original that might long be gone with an imaginative presence of the absent.

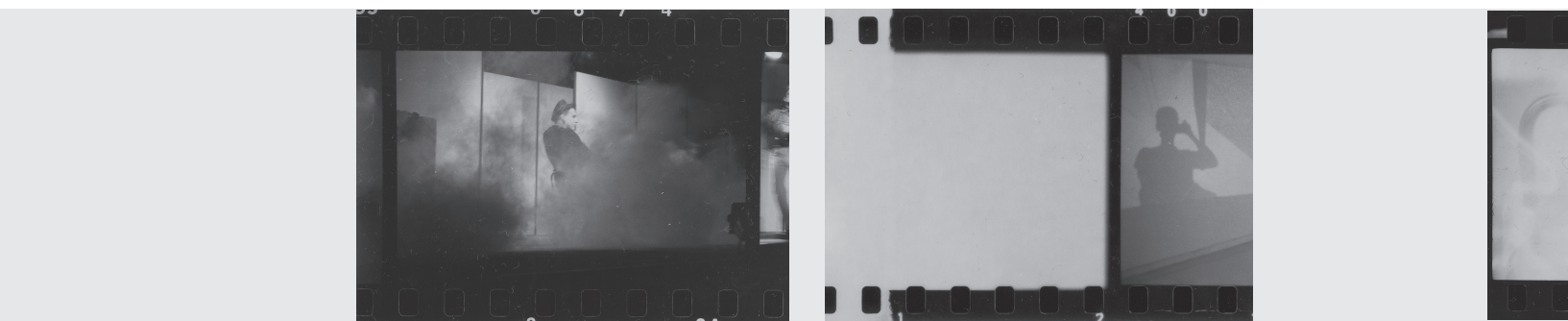
As photographs are always viewed after they are taken, photography has a tendency to be read in the past tense. Gertrud Koch has argued that for film, because its nature is to record what has been in front of the lens, film — producing documentaries and fiction alike — can serve as a document providing information on the past, at least the past in which it was filmed. The recording is done with a present interest in the past.<sup>407</sup> The past has a present, which is the time of its historical recounting. While representing the void left by the past keeps photography in the past tense, looking for ways of representing the absent opens subjunctive possibilities in photography.

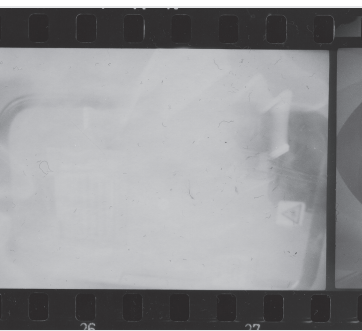
The narration of the Third Reich in Germany led to a perception of the non-existence of Jews in Germany after the war. But the absence of their visibility does not mean their total non-existence. The void that has been perceived, as Libeskind illustrated metaphorically in his building of the Jewish Museum Berlin, is the consequence of a historical narrative that disregarded the invisible presence of Jews in Germany.

When we reach the end of the war in Peter Weiss's novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, it ceases to narrate in the past tense. From that point the narrator projects into a then still possible future, using the future conditional tense. From the reader's perspective, this possible future is known to have taken place. It has actually become German history. Since Weiss wrote the third book in 1981, he contrasts with the narration because the author has a knowledge of how German history developed, while the narrator is still to experience it. This undermines the assumption of the inevitability of history since every moment in time has possible futures. The narrator in Weiss's novel is in the

407 see Koch, Gertrud: "Nachstellungen — Film und historischer Moment", in: Hohenberger, Eva and Judith Keilbach (eds.): *Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit*, Berlin, 2003, p. 216-229







same position as the photographer at the moment when she takes the photograph. The unimaginable past needs to be recognized as an imaginable future conditional. And then Benjamin's angel of history could turn around and fly into a past to come.





## Chapter 4: Epilogue

### Photography: A future subjunctive for the past

In his *Conversations with Kafka*, the Czech writer Gustav Janouch quotes Franz Kafka on photography namely that one photographs things to get them out of one's mind. While Janouch finds the condition of an image in seeing, Kafka saw his envisaging images through writing as a kind of closing of eyes.<sup>408</sup> According to Kafka, his stories emerge behind closed eyes.

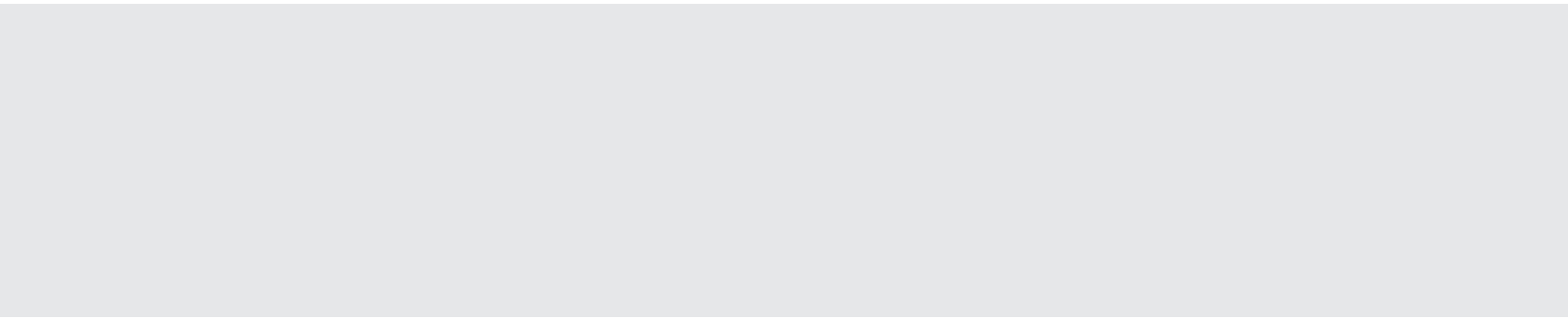
The photograph, despite its reference to a physical reality, kindles the fantasy of memories of a future. In *Camera lucida* Roland Barthes mentions this fragment of the conversation between Kafka and Janouch and indicates that, "in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes."<sup>409</sup>

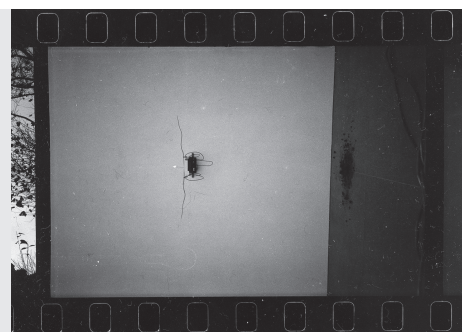
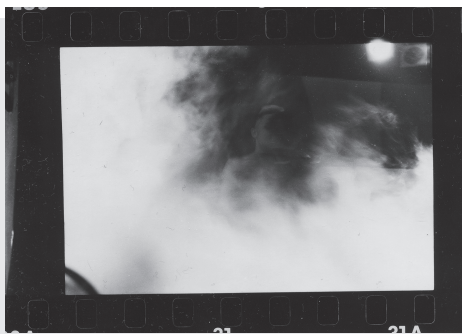
When I was about ten years old, a photograph of a stranger appeared on my mother's wall among images of familiar faces. Amidst the images of my family there was a friendly face of an elderly man in black and white that I had never seen before. The image shows a bald man in a black suit smiling past the camera. It was taken in a studio in Sao Paulo, as I learned later. When I asked her, my mother identified the man as her father. My grandfather was a Hungarian who had lived in Germany since the 1920s, a convinced trade unionist and apparently a communist. He had left Germany in 1933, shortly after the advent of the Third Reich, first for just a few weeks or months, but ultimately never returning to his family. Until the photograph, which was cut out so that it could fit into a small frame, appeared in my parents' house I had never even known about him. From that moment on I had another grandfather, living somewhere in South America who could have come to visit and become part of my life any moment — but never did.

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408 Janouch, Gustav: *Gespräche mit Kafka*, Frankfurt a. M., 1961, p. 28

409 Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 1993, p. 53





Although I have just given a very personal account of the potential future subjunctive in a photograph, every photograph contains this ability to offer a proposal of the future for individual literate spectators to see. The spectator and his view point are crucial for the meaning of a photograph, which can therefore have different implications. Like in *Blowup*, where every new print and detail from the negative gives the story a new twist, every spectator brings his own story into account.<sup>410</sup> The spectator — as an emancipated one — creates the meaning of the image.<sup>411</sup> As the silver halide emulsion contains a possibility for any image at any time, the future subjunctive is already rooted in the material, but still needs to be considered by photographers when releasing the shutter.

While Roland Barthes saw in the portrait a proclamation in anticipation of a person's future death — which could be interpreted in the sense of a future subjunctive — to me the portrait of my grandfather promised a possibility of his living appearance, despite his permanent absence in my life.<sup>412</sup> When I closed my eyes in front of this image, I imagined him already on his way. In contrast to Kracauer's view that the photograph, "annihilates the person by portraying him or her, and were person and portrayal to converge, the person would cease to exist," to me the photograph of my grandfather acted as proof of his existence.<sup>413</sup>

The promise of his possible presence grew even more important when I got to know that he had been not only a trade unionist and communist, but also a Jew, a Jew who had escaped the Shoah by fleeing Europe and thus survived. My identification as a German with Jewish roots was thus not defined by the extermination of family members, but by the promise of an imaginable presence of this still absent family member. Looking at this photograph of an unspecified past, I saw a promise of a future. Accordingly, I regard looking at photographs as a kind of time travel in one's mind.

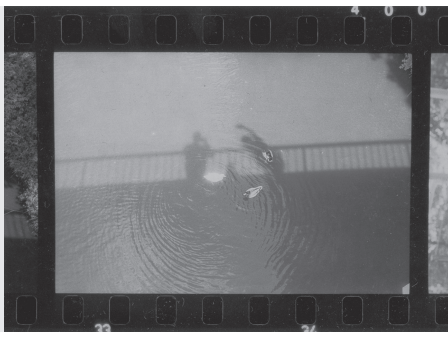
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<sup>410</sup> *Blowup*, 1966, film by Michelangelo Antonioni, discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>411</sup> I refer deliberately to Rancière's concept of the emancipated spectator; see Rancière, Jacques: "The emancipated spectator", in Rancière, Jacques: *The emancipated spectator*, London/New York, 2009

<sup>412</sup> see Barthes, Roland: *Camera Lucida*, London, 1993, p. 96

<sup>413</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried: "Photography", in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 431





The idea of time travel by means of photographs recalls *La Jetée*.<sup>414</sup> Chris Marker's film illustrates this idea of time travel in the mind with the aid of photography, as I see it, twice. The film, consisting mostly of still photographs that work themselves only as projection screens for the representation of the past, present and future in the storyline of the film itself, accomplishes time travel firstly through the way it has been made. Secondly, the story itself constructs a journey through time in the protagonist's mind by the way of photographs. The story winds both through its own past, present and future and through the historical, visual memory of the spectator with the images echoing images of destruction from World War II, concentration camps and from the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. Marker skillfully uses the potential of a photograph to reference a specific time even if the photograph does not represent that specific time. Janet Harbord writes, "In Marker's hands photographs are not time's loyal witnesses but tricksters of temporal consciousness."<sup>415</sup> Images of the past — of Paris destroyed during World War II — become images from the future in the story, showing the destruction of Paris after a future war. Then the story begins from a black screen.

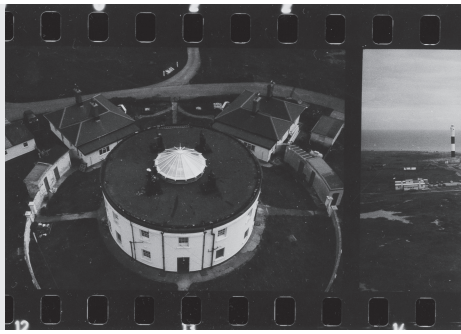
Marker's time traveller in *La Jetée* moves between his own past and future with the help of photographs. Years after the event he realizes from a photo from his childhood that he saw a man dying. When he is sent to the future by scientists, something goes wrong and he ends up in this particular photograph from his past and finds that as a child he had witnessed his own future death. *La Jetée* plays with different realities in different times. The narrator tells us that we are looking at real children, real birds, real cats, real graves while we are presented with still photographs of these objects. Photographed objects become reality. The real bedroom, real children, real birds, real cats and real graves are interspersed by black frames of unexposed material.

To take my explorations in chapter 3 a step further: Not only does the unexposed part of the film allow every moment in the present time of the photographer to leave its mark. But while the unexposed photographic emulsion offers firstly a potential

<sup>414</sup> *La Jetée*, 1962, film by Chris Marker

<sup>415</sup> Harbord, Janet: *Chris Marker La Jetée*, London, 2009, p. 24







for all moments to inscribe themselves, viewing an exposed photograph also offers a possibility for all imaginable future scenarios from that moment in time. The blank strip of unexposed silver halides that separates two negatives speaks of this potential when printed as part of the image.

In 1971 Hollis Frampton made a film recollecting photographs from his past as a photographer.<sup>416</sup> The film starts with black, only with the sound of a soundcheck. The spectator is actively invited to watch the following film. It consists of thirteen similar shots, presenting a photograph for the length of a roll of 16 mm film each.

"Do you see what I see," Hollis Frampton asks at the end of (*nostalgia*). And while I do not know what he sees, I see black. The use of black leader both in (*nostalgia*) and *La Jetée* prompts the spectator to think of the montage of individual frames and the space between, in which the image is absent and which points at "the gaps that such joinings cover over."<sup>417</sup>

Two photographs from different moments in time meet in a montage (made in the camera) and are connected by the separating space in between. The third image that is formed through montage is of a different time than the exposed images, namely of the present time of the spectator.<sup>418</sup> While the two surrounding pictures show moments from the past, the third image located in the possibility between the two speaks in the future subjunctive.

While we are looking at one photograph we hear the description of another, its making, its vision, its time. But the viewed photograph does not resemble the description. Photographs and descriptions run asynchronously. The first image shows a darkroom, but the voice we hear describes a portrait. In that, Hollis Frampton brings different time layers together: the time when the visible photograph was taken, the time when the described photograph was taken, the time of the narrator speaking, the time of the making of the film and finally the time of the film being watched. The past of the

<sup>416</sup> (*nostalgia*), 1971, film by Hollis Frampton

<sup>417</sup> Harbord, Janet: *Chris Marker La Jetée*, London, 2009, p. 41/42

<sup>418</sup> see reference on Godard and montage in chapter 3





photographs — of Hollis Frampton's days as a photographer — meets the past of the making of the film — of Hollis Frampton as a film-maker. Different pasts meet the spectator in his present, every time the film is viewed. The time of the photographs is vigorously turned into a past during each shot, as the viewed photograph slowly catches fire and burns in front of the camera on the rings of a hotplate. Each sequence leaves the spectator watching how the photograph turns to ashes in silence after listening to the story of the following photograph. The silence lasts for different lengths of time, but roughly about a minute. The sequences are separated by one second of black leader, which works like a refresh button. Then a new image, a new story, maybe this time in synch. But time and time again the spectator's hopes are destroyed by the visible appearance of the photograph, the story of which one has just heard and the audible story of a yet unknown image.

While looking at an image the spectator hears the story of another photograph being taken. In his description the film-maker stresses that it was his decision to present us with this one image from a series or from a roll of film, while the others never get described or shown. The process of decision-making is similar for the film as it was for taking the pictures in the first place.

When looking at a photograph with the necessary knowledge to understand what we see, the spectator projects himself back in time to the moment of the exposure. The image can simulate time travel into a past the spectator might never have known. By going back in time, the exposure's future becomes only one possibility of many alternatives that could have become. Therefore the photograph that captures a decisive moment decided by the photographer is less significant than often suggested. Just as photographic representation may appear factual, so the future following it would be fictional. My grandfather, whose photograph was taken in a studio in Sao Paulo in the 1950s, could have returned to his family in Duisburg the next day, the next month, or the next year. But of course we know in the present that he never did.





Do you see what I see in this portrait of an elderly man? Certainly not, as the story it tells for me is personal and individual. Even other members of my family see something different in this image. As the moment of the picture to foretell the future is contained in the photographic emulsion but comes about too incidentally, artists must bring to light (propose) a philosophical or artistic methodology to turn photographs from "dams placed in the way of the stream of history" into windows opening out into the future.<sup>419</sup>

The description of the photographs in Frampton's (*nostalgia*) gives a clear reference to the past as seen from a present that immediately becomes the past. Film in general, but this film in particular, speaks about time passing. The photograph burns and there is no turning back. But what is burned is only a print from a negative that is kept safe. To Hollis Frampton, when photographic images are considered as objects they, "are quite unprepossessing — flat, anonymous sheets of paper, sensually unrewarding aside from the modulation of light — and often completely insubstantial." Consequently, "the projected photograph (which subsumes the whole of the cinema) simply has no physical existence at all."<sup>420</sup> Therefore the burning of some of these flat, anonymous sheets of paper in a film has no consequence for any physical existence. While the copy is destroyed, the original is retained, just like the memory of the moment which is accredited by the description rather than the image as such.

The final image the spectator will not get to see is described as showing a detail that was directly invisible to the photographer and only entered the photograph through a reflection. To make it visible, the photograph needs to be enlarged enough to make the grain of the film visible. The detail is strongly obscured by the grain and the narrator can only guess what he sees in this detail. But what he thinks he sees still fills him with so much fear that he might never want to take another photograph. Knowing that the spectator's answer must be negative, he asks, "Do you see what I see?" Does one ever

<sup>419</sup> Flusser, Vilém: "Photography and History", in: *Writings*, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 128; see also chapter 1

<sup>420</sup> Frampton, Hollis: "Digressions on the Photographic Agency", in: *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters*, Cambridge MA, USA, 2009, p. 20







see what someone else sees? Victor Burgin concludes at the end of his collection of essays *The remembered film* that what we see collectively might be the same, but what we remember, every single spectator remembers individually.<sup>421</sup> The fact that I will never get to see the reflected detail that Hollis Frampton saw in the photograph he does not present merely highlights the fact that I would never see what he sees, even if I could look at the photograph. Frampton goes this step further than Burgin, namely that even by looking at the same thing, ultimately every spectator sees it individually. The absent photograph proves the existence of what Frampton saw.

Many years after the photograph of my grandfather appeared on my mother's wall, I discovered more family members who had survived the Holocaust. My mother shared her childhood memories from her time in exile in Hungary with me and my sister. Just after the November pogrom of 1938, my grandmother had left Duisburg with her three children and found refuge with my grandfather's family in Szeged. There, my mother and her siblings spent their youth with their two cousins. After the war they all went on their own separate ways. My mother and grandmother returned to Duisburg, my uncle and aunt emigrated to South America — to return to Germany much later — and the Hungarian cousins emigrated to Israel. They lost touch one day. All I had ever known of them were the stories my mother had told us and one or two photographs from that time.

When I was about 35 years old, I wrote letters to them, addressed to the Kibbutz we had as the last known address. To my surprise, one day I received a reply. Like my relationship to the photograph of my grandfather, they had kept old photographs and letters as a promise of a possibility of getting back in touch any day. And that possibility came true.

Because Hollis Frampton chose to burn only a copy of the negative, there is always a chance for the image to be reprinted at a later time. Once the photograph is fully turned to ashes in Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*), only the machinery that destroyed

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421 Burgin, Victor: *The remembered film*, London, 2004







it remains visible, just like after the Holocaust only the gas chambers and crematoria remained visible. The print is lost irretrievably. Like a phoenix, the next photograph seems to emerge from the ashes of its predecessor. It is never the same image, but a next one, and it is never the image we hear described, but yet another one. Every flaming death of one image results in the emergence of a new one.

History is formed by the continuity of the emergence of photograph after photograph, story after story. The subjunctive of possible futures must be included in the reception of photographs so that history and its tragedies are remembered and have consequences. As photography deals with questions of representation and therefore — despite its direct relation to its referent — needs the spectator to give the image meaning, photography is an ideal medium to suggest a future subjunctive in the representation of the past. Needless to say, it also needs a literate photographer, or in Benjamin's terms, a descendant of the augurs and haruspices, to use and understand the material accordingly and make the medium explicit.<sup>422</sup>

Photographs offer a prospect, even if just in thinking, for the past to change in retrospect. Could that be why we like to look at historical photographs?

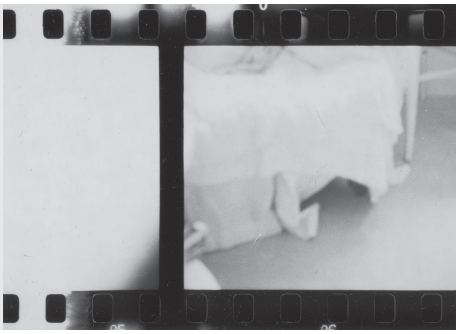
The protagonist in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* has to close his eyes in order to travel first to his past, and then in later experiments to his future, which gets confused with his past. Only with his eyes closed can he travel through time and see real children, real birds, real cats and real graves. The only museum the time traveller visits is the museum of his memory.

While ordinarily the closing of one's eyes in the light of the Holocaust is understood as turning a blind eye to the atrocities committed and their consequences, it also ought to offer visions of a future that needs a visionary spectator to see it behind closed eyes while having the images from the past in front of him.

When my father died I felt the urge to print a photo I had taken years before and put it up. I never felt the need to have photographs of my parents on the wall when they

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422 Benjamin, Walter: "A Small History of Photography", in: *One Way Street and Other Writings*, London, 1992, p. 256



were alive, as I could get in touch with them whenever I wanted to. Now that my father was no more, I travelled back in time to a summer day in the south of France. That day I took a photograph of him in which I can see all my respect and love for him. This individual photograph gives me solace as it takes me back to that day. I can now think of what I would discuss and share with him on the occasion of our next conversation which — of course — I have missed.

Photographs carry me back to the moment when the future was still free to become, before it became the past as it was.



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## Practice





# Fragments, futures, absence and the past



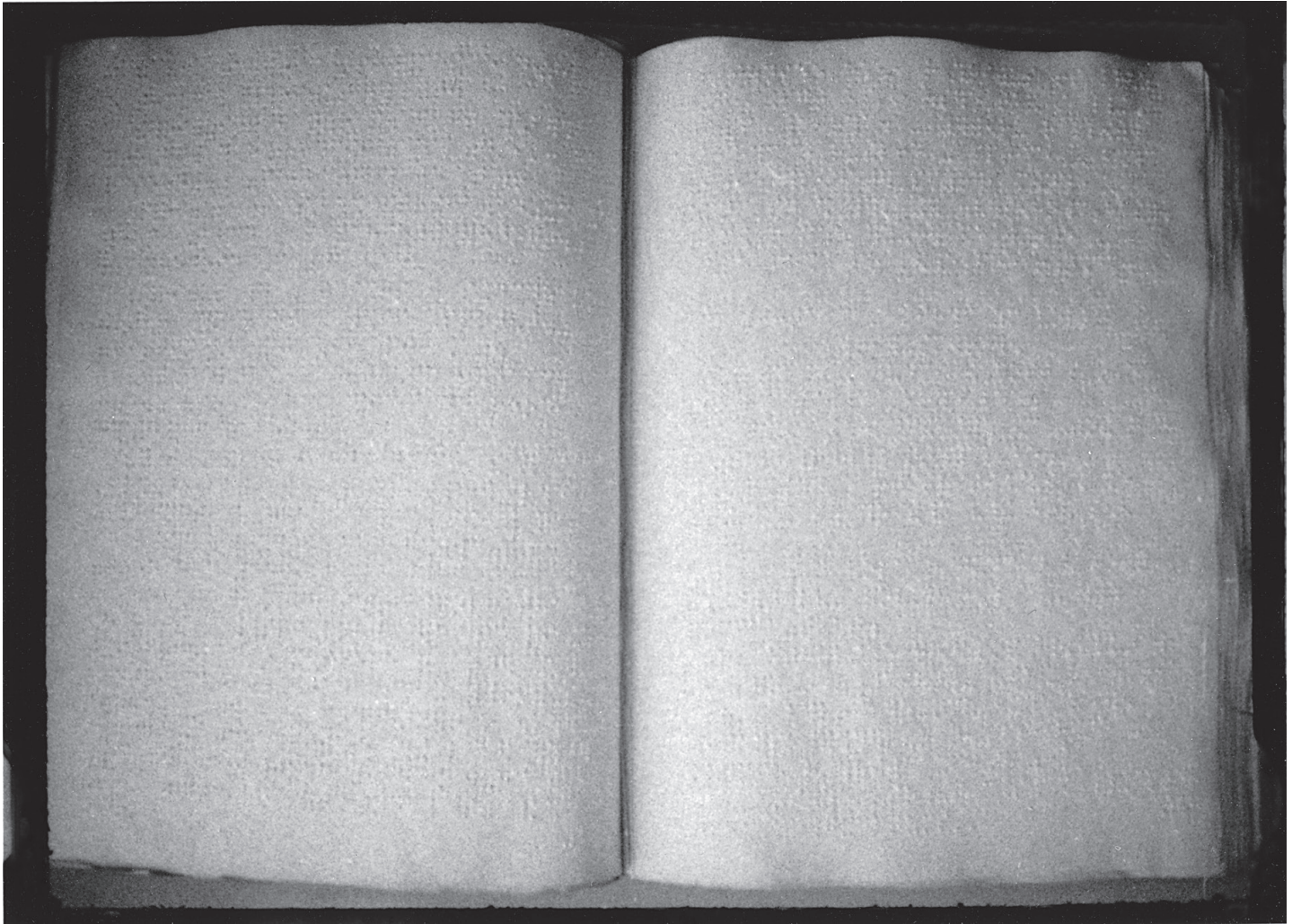
27 - 31 March 2015 - PhD Practice: exhibition at AND event space, London





Seeing is Believing, 2012, double spread from 1937 Stuermer in Braille, silver halide print, 50 x 60 cm







Echoes of light, 2012, pigment prints on Hahnemuehle Potorag, 53 x 80 cm



















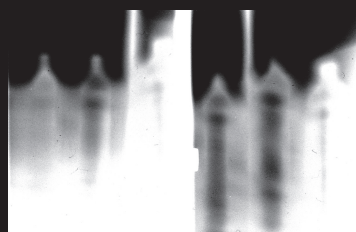






Flashing up, 2011, digital film from negative scans with sound, 4 mins







In Plato's cave, 2013, slide projection with 81 slides from b/w prints





In Plato's cave, 2013, installation view Ludwig Museum Koblenz





The fleetingness of the moment, 2015, 5 x 4 inch transparency on lightbox









Fragments, futures, absence and the past, installation views, AND event space, London, 2015  
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