1. The Lanzmannian ‘documentary real’ and its opposite

‘Documentary real’. Is it not the most adequate term to summarize the shape of almost any Holocaust memorial is in? The memory of the Shoah deals with events and facts so ‘real’ that no document can give a satisfactory account of the unbearable atrocities they try to report. They are literally beyond imagination. No image can do justice to the ‘real’ dimension of that horror. This is, however, precisely why ‘documentary’ is needed here, ‘documentary’ in the sense of a (partly) fictitious report. If ‘documentary real’ stands for the attempt to catch reality by means of its fictitiously dramatized account, then, the Shoah is the first in line to need such dramatized fiction. Without the support of imagination, one can never have the slightest idea of the cruel ‘real’ that had occurred in the Nazi extermination camps. And yet, because of that very imagination, one runs the risk of missing out on the ‘real’ of the Shoah. For the mere idea one can imagine the unimaginable comes down to a denial of the Shoah’s most basic character which is precisely its unimaginability. Imagination to easily make us suppose to ‘understand’ and to ‘feel’ the inhuman suffering of the Holocaust’s victims. A real understanding of their suffering cannot but coincide with admitting one’s incapacity of ever fully understanding or feeling it.

This is why, in the case of the Shoah, the ‘documentary real’ can imply both a ban on imagination and its promotion. For Claude Lanzmann, the ‘documentary real’ is the result of avoiding images, i.e. of evoking the bygone facts only by verbal testimonies. Contrary to Alain Renais Nuits et brouillard (1955), which offers a kind of ‘anthology’ of the images collected in the Holocaust archives, Lanzmann’s nine hour movie Shoah (1985) does not show one of these images. As no other, his movie celebrates the Holocaust’s unimaginable
character. On the opposite of that line are movies such as Schindler’s list (Steven Spielberg, 1993) or La vita è bella (Roberto Benigni, 1997), in which images and imagination are given free rein. Here, the ‘documentary real’ is similar to the one present in any ordinary movie: identifying himself with the main characters, the spectator gradually evolves toward an emphatic understanding of the movie’s message.

The fact that, in the documentaries on the Holocaust, there are no examples of documentary real in the ‘ordinary’ sense, i.e. in the one of ‘a documentary mixed up with fictitious settings’, indicates that, indeed, the problematic relation between images and the real is more delicate here. In the realm of theatre, however, there is at least one exception: Kamp (Camp), a theater performance by the Dutch group Hotel Modern (première in Rotterdam, 2006).2 Eight thousand puppets, each eight centimeter high, fill the stage turned into a miniature of the concentration and extermination camp ‘Auschwitz’. The puppets are moved by the ‘actors’ who, as evil giants, dominate and orchestrate the entire life of the inferno. One of the actors handles camera’s whose images are simultaneously projected on the back wall of the stage. The ‘plot’ is well known: the arrival of the trains, the selection by the ‘Mengele’ of the day, the labor of building barracks or dragging stones, the hanging or torturing of sentenced inmates, the undressing before the entrance of the gas chamber, the inserting of the Zyckon B, the emptying and cleaning of the gas chamber, the burning of the dead, et cetera.

*Kamp* is a documentary, reporting both the *real* done by ordinary people (German citizens) and the *real* done to ordinary people (European Jews). *Kamp* shows the ‘*real*’, documented in the shape of a docudrama, mixing up the reality it reports with fiction. In sum, in *Kamp*, we deal with a ‘documentary real’, reporting one of mankind’s cruelest genocides.

Claude Lanzmann was afraid of reducing the Shoah to such a ‘documentary real’. Reducing it to a theater play would nourish the spectator’s pretention to really comprehend the incomprehensible. This is why Lanzmann’s ‘theater’ is not really a theater, it does not play on the level of images but of words – words that endlessly ask for new words in order to finally leave the ‘thing’ unsaid. Even after the movie’s nine hour, the spectator is not able to really identify with the victim he nonetheless feels solidarity for. The real of the Shoah resist identification.

Identification, however, is the sine qua non for theater. And *Kamp* is theater. From the very first moment, the spectator is ‘in’ the camp, not in order to find there something he still did not know or to discover new, unseen insights, but to be emotionally submerged by the

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‘atmosphere’ of this sadistic universe. Kamp addresses itself to the affect of the viewer. It aims at an emotional reaction with the audience, inviting them to ‘empathize’ with the victims, to imaginarily feel the cruel shape they are in. From a Lanzmannian perspective, this is mere blasphemy, since it denies the unimaginable character of the ‘real’ atrocities the deportees had to suffer. The ‘real’ at stake in that documentary is beyond empathy, beyond imagination or any other kind of appropriation.

Yet, is the ‘real’ only on the side of the object? Is it not on the side of the subject as well? Does the subject, too, not have an unimaginable side? And does identification, in its very heart, not encounter a kind of obstacle resisting any kind of appropriation? If this is the case, is a peculiar way of identification still not indispensable in any kind of memory of the Shoah?

To understand what is at stake in these suggestive questions, it could be helpful to consider the provocative way in which, in the nineties, an interesting tendency in visual art has dealt with the Shoah. The success of Kamp in 2006 is partly due to the impact of that tendency. A few illustrating examples suffice here.³

2. Playing Holocaust

David Levinthal’s work, for instance, is typical for the use of puppets in evoking historical scenes, of which some refer directly to Shoah issues. One of his early ‘series’, Hitler Moves East (1975-1977) shows miniature installations evoking typically Nazi events, such as parades with the swastika flags, concentration camps, torture scenes, et cetera. The same goes for his ‘series’ Mein Kampf” (1994-1996). The danger of immediate – i.e. all too easy – identification with the victim is minimal here, since the alienating effect is difficult to avoid. The uncanny combination of toy puppets and the Nazi terror is too brutal to allow an affective sympathy or identification. And this is by purpose. Here, too, the artist’s intention is to illustrate the unimaginable character of the Holocaust, precisely by suggesting that none of its representations transcends the infantile level of a puppet scene. The all too easy show, so to say, indicates that is all too easy to suppose the Shoah to be grasped in a representation.

In that perspective, the work of Ram Katzir, Your Coloring Book (1996) is even more accurate. That visual art work is an installation in which coloring books lie on school desks or

³ For an elaborated comment on these examples in a different direction as explained here, see the third chapter in: Ernst van Alphen (2004), Schaduw en spel. Herbeleving, historisering en verbeelding van de Holocaust, Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers, p. 79-120.
tables, containing drawings that copy photographs from the Nazi period. The spectators are invited to take place on one of the school desks and to color the drawings. Here, the subject is more actively involved. And, what is more, he is invited to identification, be it with a person he spontaneously would not identify with at all. The artist’s intention here is to deconstruct identification, to bring it to an uncanny, impossible point. Instead of identifying with the victims, the spectator/participant is forced to do so with the perpetrator in his shape of ordinary German father or mother assisting his or her little son or daughter with coloring the drawings books of the time. Here too, the Nazi atrocity is exposed as being easily representable, and precisely this is the uncanny thing subverting the usual representations of the Shoah. In Katzir’s installation, the Lanzmannian criticism with regard to images is performed by ‘easy’ images, ‘easy’ in the sense that they all too easily – and, therefore, uncannily – invite people to approve them by coloring them.

A third example is Zbigniew Libera, Correcting Device: Lego Concentration Camp (1996). Sponsored by the well-known LEGO Corporation of Danmark (who, by the way, was unaware of the precise intention of the art work), the Polish artist realized a seven-box limited edition of three LEGO sets of a concentration camp. Stephen Feinstein describes the three sets as follows:

Inside were the bricks and other pieces to construct the concentration camp shown on the cover. The outer box looks like a normal LEGO box except in the upper left corner—instead of the "system number" is the inscription: "This work of Zbigniew Libera has been sponsored by LEGO." Each unit of the seven-box set contained a different aspect of a concentration camp. The larger boxes showed the entire concentration camp, with buildings, gallows (one showing an inmate being hanged), and inmates behind barbed wire or marching in line in and out of the camp. An entry gate similar to the stylized "Arbeit Macht Frei" entry point at Oswiecim is included, although without the German inscription. The guards, in black shiny uniforms, came from the regular LEGO police sets. The inmates came from LEGO medical or hospital sets. A second box showed a crematoria belching smoke from three chimneys, with Sonderkammando or other inmates carrying a corpse from the gassing room. The smaller boxes depict a guard bludgeoning an inmate, medical experiments, another hanging, and a commandant […]. The last box is one full of possessions, the type of debris painted by other artists and inspired by the vast array of loots collected by the S.S. in the Kanada warehouses at Birkenau.

What is at stake in these three examples of conceptual art about the Shoah? Do they pour ridicule on the Holocaust, reducing it to a play for children? Do they minimize its gravity?

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understand what is going on in these conceptual artworks, one should situate them, precisely, in the tradition of conceptual art and of modern art in general. Here, two general characteristics of modern art are to be taken into account: first its inherent self-reflection and, secondly, its subject-oriented (instead of object-oriented) nature.

3. Art’s modernity and the Shoah

The first characteristic typifying art’s modernity is its self-reflexive nature. Art has changed into art about art, into representation of representations. Art has become modern by facing its possible uselessness (its ‘death’, as Hegel said)\(^5\), i.e. when it realized that the visual culture accompanying society’s reality was made elsewhere than in art.\(^6\) The representations in which the society recognizes itself and constitutes its identity have emancipated from art, and now form an independent, proper industry. Marginalized, art is given no option than to reduce itself to a reflection upon that emancipated visual culture and to stick to representing what is going on in the autonomous realm of society’s representations. In a countless variety of ways, it shows that the representation constituting our visual culture are but representations not to be taken for what they claim to be, namely direct accesses to reality.

So, when a modern work of art – in this case, conceptual art – deals with things related to the Shoah, it is not simply a matter of representing them, but of representing its representations. In the pictures of the Shoah it presents, art at the same time shows that the Shoah has become itself a representation, and, even, one of the most weighty ones constituting our world. In order to show the representational dimension as such, one has to intervene in its logic which is one of denial. A representation, to be taken for true, by definition has to deny the mere fact that it represents. To be taken for real, it immediately has to hide its representational nature. So, to show the latter, one has to break that logic of denial and to deprive an image from the sense it is supposed to have.

Here, we face the inherent ‘iconoclastic’ nature of modern art’s intervention into visual culture. To show the representation as such, one has to break it and to subvert its logic. To show the Shoah as being itself a representation, one has to intervene in the way it is


\(^6\) For visual art, this moment is crystallized in the figure of Gustave Courbet and his ‘realisme’. He realized that the art of his days was locking itself up in its realm of beauty (i.e. of ‘les beaux arts’), and had lost connection with the ‘real’ reality of current time. Hence his claim, expresses in both his art and his pamphlets, that art must whether become realistic or disappear. That requirement to be realistic (i.e. to guide visually the real tendencies of the progressing times), although fulfilled by no artistic ‘-ism’, hallmarks art’s modernity until now.
anchored in the set of representations constituting our visual culture. Hence the ‘uncanny’ and alienating character of modern artistic representations – including the ones referring to the Holocaust. They always have to deconstruct the existing way in which it is represented.

Even Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah illustrates this. Being appropriated by visual culture (for instance by the popular television series, entitled ‘Holocaust’, 1978), Lanzmann tried to deconstruct the common and settled idea of the Nazi genocide on the European Jews, by presenting, not the cruel images the audience of the time already got used to, but verbal testimonies showing their incapability to tell exhaustively what they have to tell. This was Lanzmann’s iconoclastic way to make clear that the core of what Auschwitz means, remained beyond what one was able to show or to tell, beyond the realm of graspable ideas reducing the Holocaust to a ordinary movie scenario.

The visual culture of the nineties, in which the art of David Levinthal, Ram Katzir and Zbigniew Libera operate, is a different one than the one Claude Lanzmann worked in. The Lanzmannian representation of the Shoah has now become generally accepted. So this accepted image, too, is to be broken by modern art’s iconoclastic imperative. By turning Hitler’s Mein Kampf or his war against the Soviets into a puppet play for children, Levinthal indicates the genuine place the Nazi terror, including the Holocaust, now occupies: a neutralized, everyday life place. So does Katzir’s gesture turning Nazi pictures into coloring plates offered to the spectators pictorial inventiveness. Similarly, in an uncanny way, Libera’s Lego boxes show how deeply the image of the Shoah is integrated into our everyday life sphere.

If the work of these three artist has given rise to criticism and protest (which was often the case), it is precisely because they have been ‘correctly’ understood: people suddenly realized they did no longer stand the ‘ordinary’ place the Shoah occupied in their mind. By condemning these conceptual artworks as blasphemous, people blamed their own everyday life perception of the Shoah. So, these works of art were successful to the extent that they enlightened the way Auschwitz had become a neutral, indifferent element in people’s common cultural baggage. In a formally negative way, they did what Lanzmann’s Shoah had done a decade before: they criticized the ruling idea about Auschwitz.

This brings us to the second characteristic of modern art helpful to found out what is going on in these ‘blasphemous’ representations. For they make clear that the truth of art is

7 Directed by Marvin J. Chomski and starring (among others) Meryl Streep and Fritz Weaver. The series won several prices, but was also immediately criticized – by Elie Wiesel for instance – for ‘trivializing’ the Holocaust and economically exploiting it.
not simply to be located in what it shows, in its object, but at the same time in the effect it produces on the spectator. Art’s truth depends on its effect on the side of the subject.

Not in the sense that one can recognize himself in that truth, but precisely in the way one cannot. The truth the subject experiences is one of extreme exteriority, radical alterity. And it’s in this very quality that the subject’s experience of truth coincides with an ultimate self-experience. Not in the sense that, beyond representation, the subject finally finds its real, substantial self. What, in this moment of truth, the subject realizes, is rather its incapacity to exist without – and outside – these representation. This is the consequence of the primacy of visual culture, which is our current modern condition. In absence of a real, substantial self, we constantly need images in which we supposes our ‘self’ mirrored. This is the reason why mass media have become so indispensable and why, night and day, we need screens deluding us with images we can identify with – images offering us an ‘identity’. And where do we find the truth of the identity we identify with? Neither in the image nor in its beyond, but in the mere fact we do not coincide with these imaginary identity. In our incapacity to appropriate even our own identity, our own mirror image.

The representation of the Holocaust touches us in a true way, not only as what is beyond representation, but also as what makes us realise we are ourselves beyond the representation we identify with. Not only as the object, but also as the subject beyond representation. Yet, the important thing to grasp here is that the subject, being beyond representation, cannot exist without them. Being the beyond of visual culture, the subject is nothing more than its supposition, i.e. than that image imagining itself to be located outside the realm of images, denying at the same time its imaginary status. That imagined beyond, is nothing substantial, but is exist as a leading image, be it unappropriable by the autonomously functioning realm of images/representations.

Libera’s LEGO boxes represent the Holocaust in an way similar to the one in which the Holocaust is appropriated by common sense. It is the artist’s way to suggests Auschwitz being beyond representation. But the experience of that truth coincides with a kind of de-centring or deconstruction of the subject. This truth makes the subject stop considering himself as the owner of his representations. Experiencing the representation as alienating, he

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8 The background of this definition of the subject is the Lacanian structuralistic theory of the subject, according to which the human world is constituted out of a semiotic system, of a autonomously functioning network of signifiers. The subject is a supposition, produced by the interaction between the libidinal being and those signifiers. ‘Supposition’ is literally the definition of the subject: it is what is put under (sub) the signifiers, i.e. what is supposed to be the bearer of the signifier. To put it “technically”, as Lacan does in the beginning of his seminar on identification (in the lesson of 6 December 1962, unpublished), in a passage defining the signifier (while, in reality he is defining the subject): ‘the signifier is what represents for another signifier’. 
realises his own alienation, his own being at the mercy of images without ever coinciding with them. The experience of not being able to appropriate the Holocaust goes hand in hand with the experience of not being able to appropriate oneself, to coincide with the image one identifies with.

This is what any ‘documentary real’ is after. This is the structure of the ‘real’ a documentary – whatever fictitious it is – is aiming at. It, first, has nothing to do with the representation of something real, of the real atrocities of the Holocaust for instance. These can only be suggested as the ‘beyond’ of such representations. And, secondly, it needs a decentring or deconstruction of the subject: the subject must acknowledge itself as being ‘beyond’ what it supposes it is.

This is why the television series “Holocaust” (1978) certainly possesses something as a documentary real. But to keep this, to introduce this ‘real’ into a tradition, one needs an iconoclastic repetition of it. For instance in Lanzmann’s Shoah. And it is no surprise that, to support this tradition, one needs, again and again, new iconoclastic gestures such as Libera’s, Levinthal’s or Katzir’s.

Yet, not all gestures are equally successful with respect to their deconstructive effect on the subject. One can say that the gesture of the artists from the nineties mentioned above do not have that impact as once had Lanzmann’s movie in the eighties. Compared to Lanzmann’s movie, is their work too momentaneous, too fragile, and too much dependant on the issues of the day. Yet, their work is certainly of greater impact than the theatre play mentioned in the beginning of this essay, Camp, performed by the group Hotel Modern from Rotterdam. Although perfectly in line with the conceptual art of Libera, Levinthal and Katzir, this work of art misses the deconstructing effect on the subject, i.e. the audience. In a first moment, the effect is similar, but since in the play, there is no real evolution in the spectator’s position facing the well-known aspects of the life in an extermination camp, that position loses more and more its alienating character. At the end of the day, the play risks enabling a re-appropriation of the Holocaust. It is far from being improbable that people go home thinking they now have really understood the atrocity of the Nazi determination camps. In reality, they only have neutralized it, classifying it within the realm of representations that constitute their world and that supports the idea they are this realm’s self-assured owner, its substantial subject.

4. Coda: Persona
In Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), an actress of great fame, Elisabeth Vogler (Liv Ullman) is checked into a psychiatric hospital since, for months already, she refuses to utter the slightest word. One might interpret this character as illustrating the modern subject no longer able to stand atrocities such as the Vietnam war of the Holocaust. In the movie, Elisabeth explicitly deals with these. On television she sees a Vietnamese monk burning himself alive as a sign of protest against the war in his country, and in another shot, she stares at the image of a Jewish child threatened by Nazi guns. The movie seems to suggest that, being an actress, she realises we live in a fake universe, unable as we are to have access to the real side of life. In the world we live in we all are but a ‘persona’ in the original sense of the (Ancient Greek) word: a mask we use to play our role on the stage.

Elisabeth’s cure is given in the hand of a young nurse, Alma (Bibi Andersson). Unlike her patient, who during the entire movie remains paralysed by the ‘real’, Alma undergoes an strong evolution. In a first moment she identifies herself with her famous patient, but, felt betrayed, her love for Elisabeth turns into hatred. It is then Alma discovers the ‘real’ her patient is suffering from: the actress has a young son whom she never had wished to have and whose nonetheless affectionate love she is not able to respond. Yet, precisely in that hate, Alma discovers how identical she is with respect to Elisabeth. She recognizes that the fake world she hates in Elisabeth does not differ that much from the authentic world she herself is in.

Not unlike the representations of the Shoah, the real in Ingmar Berman’s *Persona* is shown to be beyond representation, as is made clear by Elisabeth’s syndrome. But the effect of that truth is not to be located in Elisabeth who expresses this insight by remaining mute before the ‘real’. That effect is with Alma whose very subject-position gets ‘moved’ – read: decentred or deconstructed – by that truth. This kind of decentring movement within the identification process of the spectator/audience is essential in modern visual art. If there is such a tings as a ‘documentary real’ – a ‘real’ speaking even through the most fictitious documentary – it is to be calibrated in reference to such decentration.

It is here that a theatre play like *Camp* missed the mark. Its alienating representation of the Shoah (‘alienating’ because it illustrated the ‘infantile’ imaginary of our common sense consciousness of Auchwitz) turns too easily into an appropriating gesture. The identification

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procedure, inevitable in theatre or in visual culture in general, is not fashioned in a way it deprives the spectator of his position mastering the scene.

In this performance, the Shoah turned into a kind of “Hotel Holocaust”. And, as anyone knows, the Holocaust is anything but a hotel.