

Eight

SHOOTING THE UNIMAGINABLE: ON THE RECEPTION OF FOUR SHOAH PHOTOGRAPHS

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L'image de l'homme est inséparable,
désormais, d'une chambre à gaz . . .¹

Georges Bataille

1. Four Peculiar Pictures

Some art works are so out of the ordinary that, even after centuries of general reception, no one really knows how to deal with them. So are, for instance, the novels written by Marquis de Sade: forbidden *and* edited under almost any regime, being detested *and* read by all generations, yet, no generation was ever able to really come to terms with it. Pier Paolo Pasolini's 'remake' of one of Sade's novels—Salo, based on Sade's *The hundred and twenty days of Sodom*—shares the same condition. As if Pasolini deliberately wanted to make a movie that no one really could stand or accept. Things might even get worse when the reception does not concern art works but photographs picturing reality as it is and doing this for highly moral reasons. Photographs taken explicitly to accuse sadist injustice done to innocent people can have a similar—or even worse—effect as a novel by Sade or Pasolini's unbearable film.

The photographs I have in mind here are the so-called "Polish Resistance photographs," the only few pictures we have that *prisoners* have taken inside the Nazi extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.² Two of the four photographs (*PMO neg. no. 280 and 281*) show an open place in the wood full of dead bodies ready to be thrown into open ditches. The heavy smoke of burning bodies is rising up while on the foreground 'working men' are doing their dirty job. They are 'Sonderkommandos,' Jewish prisoners who were forced to carry out the final phase of the Nazi's extermination program. It was their job to assist the victims before entering the gas chamber, to carry out the dead bodies after the gazing, to collect the victim's

property, to extract their golden teeth and to burn their bodies as quickly as possible. On a third photograph (*PMO neg. no. 282*), taken obviously on another place and from a much more 'difficult' position (considering the picture's bad composition), we see undressed women waiting before they will be led to the gas chamber. The fourth photograph showing only the crown of a few trees is clearly a failure: nothing significantly is to be seen on it (*PMO neg. no. 283*).

We are quite well informed about the conditions in which these photographs have been taken as well as about the probable location in the camp of the pictured events.³ The plan to take photographs of the extermination activities going on in the camp was an initiative of the Polish Resistance, in collaboration with some *Sondercommandos* on site.⁴ One of them was the "former Spanish Freedom fighter and anti-Fascist" Dawid Szmulewski.⁵ As survivor from Auschwitz, he is an important witness with regard to the Polish Resistance act in August 1944. From him we know that prisoners had caused damage on the roof of Crematorium V, so a reparation team was needed. That team, put together with *Sonderkommandos*, succeeded in smuggling in a camera, which (as Szmulewski told) was handled by a certain Alex, a Greek Jew. The pictures are obviously taken on two separate places in the Crematorium V area: one *in front of* the gas chamber where people were ordered to get undressed, one *behind* the gas chamber where the dead bodies were burned in cremation pits. Both camera and photographs were successfully smuggled back outside the camp and delivered to the Polish resistance cell in Cracow. Nowadays, they belong to the archive of the *The State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau*.

So, these photographs were known very soon, even before the end of the war; and for more than half a century, they have been exhibited in diverse places and reproduced in all kinds of shapes. Yet, that some of the negatives soon were lost, already suffice to indicate that they have not been treated with the best care. And so does the fact that they were never shown 'as such'; only enlarged details were used, though mostly entitled as 'original.' What is more, one of the photographs, the one with the undressed women, has even been retouched. Jean-Claude Pressac mentions that the second and last retouch has resulted in the "exhibition photograph" (*PMO neg. no. 252a*) that hung, in the Auschwitz museum, "on the first floor of Block 4 ('Extermination')." This retouch added faces to the three naked women in the foreground ("whereas they were totally indistinguishable on the original") and reshaped their bodies. Old bodies became young: "their breasts, fallen on the original, being lifted and redrawn" in the new version, as Pressac specifies.⁶ Some aberrant interpretations of this photograph, so he adds, might be the effect of these retouches. He mentions a 1980 book by Andrzej Brycht who read it as the story of "three hundred girls . . . from

France” pushed in an impasse in the woods where “well-hidden Germans caught them with flame-throwers and everything was burnt.”⁷

Yet, even when the photographs were shown in their original shape⁸ respecting all their inconveniences and imperfections, they are able to cause highly emotional reactions and straight controversies. For showing the pictures as they were originally taken was the explicit intention of an exhibition in Paris in 2001, entitled *Photographies des camps de concentration et d’extermination Nazi (1933-1999)* (Hôtel de Sully, January—March 2001).⁹ And it gave rise to a huge debate dividing pro and contra concerning the importance, merit, and significance of photographs with regard to the Nazi genocide on the Jews.

An essay by Georges Didi-Huberman concluding the catalogue defended the exhibition’s intention and emphasized the importance of involving photographs—as well as a renewed attention for photographs—in both the Auschwitz studies and the memory of the Shoah in general. His contribution was entitled: “*Images malgré tout*,” “Images, in spite of all.”¹⁰ Of course, images do not say that much and can easily be falsified or misunderstood, but they nonetheless deserve full consideration, so his essay argued. That is why photographs concerning Auschwitz should be respected in their original shape and treated with scientific care. For it is a fact that any one studying the phenomenon of the Shoah has to deal with images, in spite of the inconveniences, shortcomings and the risk of misunderstanding so characteristic to visual documents. In spite of the unimaginable and irre-presentable character of the horror apotheosis in Auschwitz, there *are* images and representations of that horror—“*images malgré tout*”—and they have to be studied carefully and taken seriously in the general memory of the Shoah.

The exhibition “Mémoires des camps” as well as Didi-Huberman’s defence raised vehement reactions, in particular from Gérard Wajcman and Elisabeth Pagnoux, who each wrote without delay a critical essay, appearing right away in *Les temps modernes* of March-April 2001.¹¹ According to them, the organisers of the exhibition together with Didi-Huberman are not enough aware of the pernicious, even blinding influence images can have. They argue that the *Polish Resistance photographs* are treated as if they give access to the very heart of the genocide machine. Are they not taken from the very inside of the gas chamber? And are they not, therefore, the proof par excellence that the existence of the gas chambers—and, thus, of the Nazi genocide—cannot be denied? According to both Wajcman and Pagnoux, that kind of arguing falls in the trap of the “logic of proof.” It is indeed a trap, they argue, for as soon as you try to *proof* Auschwitz, you feed the negationist doubt.¹² Auschwitz is reality, it is a historical fact, but no trace, no sign, no word, no image can/must ever *proof* it. Not even an image acknowledging its own “*malgré tout*”-condition.

Didi-Huberman dangerously overestimates the capacity of an image, his critics claim. An image just cannot show, let alone prove Auschwitz. It is beyond any possibility to be shown at all. It is non-representable, unimaginable. This is why anyone who seriously tries to deal with Auschwitz should suspect images. And this is exactly what the exhibition does not. Elisabeth Pagnoux's verdict is severe: "vanity," "vacuity," and "obscenity." For her, these are the right words to describe the "Mémoires des camps" exhibition.¹³

When, in this essay, I go more into the details of both the pro- and contra-arguments concerning the validity of photograph with regard to the study and the memory of the Shoah, it is because, in this case, both have a similar point of reference. It is indeed noteworthy that both points of view, whether openly or not, refer to the same theory: Lacanian psychoanalysis. With Lacan, Wajcman defends the arguments *contra*, and Didi-Huberman does the same to argue *pro*. Both critics *and* defenders of the value of images and photographs in relation to understand and transfer Auschwitz apparently share the same theoretical tools. My hypothesis is that an elaborated confrontation with this Lacanian reference might help us a step further to overcome the deadlock the discussion seems to have stranded in.

2. Photographs as 'veils'

Although in Wajcman's essay in *Les Temps Modernes*, Lacan's name is not mentioned from the first page, the basic thesis expressed there is undoubtedly sustained by his theory. The essay opens with a "fact"—which is "revisable", as is argued—, but takes its real start from a "thesis," which, as such, is declared to be "not revisable." This thesis cannot be understood without taking into account its full Lacanian background. I quote the very first lines of Wajcman's essay:

There are no images of the Shoah. This is to say that, to the present day, we have neither photograph nor film showing the destruction of the Jews in the gas chamber. There are many images of the camps, of both the concentration and extermination camps, but there is none of the gas chamber in action, of the crime constituting the Shoah. It is a fact within the actual state of our knowledge. This exact fact, thus, is revisable, related to the progress of historical research and possible discoveries. The irrepresentable exist [Il y a de l'irreprésentable]. This is to say: all real is not soluble in the visible. This is not a fact, this is a thesis. It does not point at exactness, but at truth.¹⁴

"There are no images of the Shoah," which for Wajcman means: of the extermination *as such*, of the very moment when the victims were killed in the interior of the closed gas-chamber. It is indeed a "fact" that, so far, we have not such photographs. And of course, that fact is "revisable"; for it is not

impossible they might be found in the future. Even in that case, however, the Shoah would remain irrepresentable, so Wajcman claims. Its irrepresentability, its incompatibility with the image as such, is *not* a fact, it is a *thesis* and, in that capacity, “not revisable.” The horror of dead as such cannot be shown, it is by definition beyond the range of image and imagination. This is Wajcman’s “thesis”: “The irrepresentable exists. This is to say: all real is not soluble in the visible.”

The term ‘real’ in the last sentence must definitely be read in the Lacanian sense of the word. Therefore, Gérard Wajcman is too much a Lacanian psychoanalyst, as is obvious at first sight in all of his writings.¹⁵ According to Lacanian theory, the ‘real’ is not what we normally meet in every day live. What we deal with there is a universe of representations, of images and signs, not referring directly to the real they evoke, but to other images, other signs, other representations. The world we deal with is in fact a relatively autonomous universe of representations, a semiotic surface of ‘signifiers’ (to use the term Lacan borrows from Saussure) referring endlessly to other signifiers. It is a surface of images and signs referring incessantly to other images and signs, a surface constituting a screen that, instead of allowing, rather obstructs any access to the real. In this sense, the real is defined precisely as what is beyond that screen, beyond the ‘superficial’ surface of images, signs or representations. It is in that sense that, for Wajcman, the Shoah is ‘real.’ Within a world made of representations, the Nazi-genocide of the Jews is irreversibly beyond representations. It resists any appropriation, including the appropriating capacity of images and imagination.

One can understand, now, the astonishment Gérard Wajcman must have felt while reading the first lines of Didi-Huberman’s essay in the “*Mémoires des camps*” catalogue, introducing an analysis of the “Quatre bouts de pellicules arrachés de l’enfer” (title of the first section):

To know, one must ‘imagine’ [Pour savoir il faut ‘s’imaginer’]. We must try to imagine what the hell of Auschwitz was in the summer of 1944. Let us not invoke the unimaginable. Let us not protect ourselves saying that anyway—for it is true—we are not, and will never be able to imagine it in its fullness. For we *have to*, we are obliged to this very heavy imaginable [Mais nous le *devons*, ce très lourd imaginable]. As a response to offer, as a debt to the words and images that some deportees have extracted for us from the terrible real of their experience. So, let us not invoke the unimaginable. For the prisoners, it was all the more difficult to subtract from the camps these few fragments of which we are depositaries today, and to support their weight with one single gaze. These fragments are for us more precious and less calming than any possible work of art. So, images despite all [images *malgré tout*, donc]: despite the hell of Auschwitz, despite the

risks. We must in return contemplate them, assume them, and try to take them into account. Images *in spite of all*: in spite of our own incapacity to know how to look at them the way they deserved to be looked at; in spite of our own world which is full and almost suffocated of imaginary merchandise.¹⁶

Wajcman certainly got up on his hind legs while reading those lines. We should “imagine” the Shoah, “imagine what could have been Auschwitz in the summer of 1944”?! How could Didi-Huberman say that? Does he not know that the Shoah is precisely unimaginable? And yes, indeed, he does. “C’est vrai,” “it is true,” he writes, “we are not and will never be able to imagine it in its fullness.” His advice, however, is nonetheless *not* to appeal to the notion of the “unimaginable.” This would be too easy says Didi-Hurman. Precisely because of its unimaginable character, we *must* imagine Auschwitz, “*in spite of all*.” But how can this make any sense? Doesn’t Didi-Huberman know Auschwitz is “real,” terribly real? Does he himself, referring to the prisoners, not talk about the “terrible real of their experience”? But Didi-Huberman says more; he writes that they “have extracted for us images from the terrible real of their experience.” ‘To extract images from the real’: as if the ‘real’ is ever able to be pictured, even by the one who lives in its hell? As if the ‘real’ could ever be caught in an image and, subsequently, transferred to its spectator who, then, by using imagination, gets ‘really’ what this image is about. As if, thanks to this photographs and helped by the power of our own imagination, we finally can have real access to Auschwitz, to the *real* of the Shoah.

Wajcman must have been shocked by both the naïveté and the pretension of what these opening lines of Didi-Huberman’s essay dare to tell. How could one think that an image can give access to the real at all? How can he think the unimaginable to be given in an image? How can one be so naïve with regard to the capacity of images, while at the same time, he acknowledges “our own world is full, almost suffocated, by imaginary merchandise”? It does not prevent him suggesting that the image itself is able to handle its own degeneration to merchandise. As if the image itself is able to even manage its own impossibility, its own finitude. As if it is itself able to overcome its own limits, “*in spite of all*”?

It is his Lacanian background that keeps Wajcman from agreeing with Didi-Huberman’s theory of the image. He is too much persuaded of Lacan’s analysis of the imaginary, i.e. of the function of the image for the libidinal subject. Images and imagination are important for the constitution of the subject, so Lacan explains, but he explains as well that this importance is limited and that the imaginary is not without unavoidable negative effect. The cling to the imaginary can be dangerous. Certainly when used with regard to Auschwitz.

According to Lacan, images are indeed of extreme importance for the constitution of the libidinal subject. The first unity our libidinal economy achieves, the first unconscious formation thanks to which that economy is able to say 'I', is created with the power of the imaginary, of imagination. Only in the mirror-image of the other, with whom it identifies, the libidinal economy finds a first 'self,' a first identity. The power of the image is that of a 'Gestalt', so the young Lacan had learned from the *Gestalt psychology*: to what is basically an incoherent amalgam, it gives the feeling of being a unity, of being 'one'.¹⁷ Initially, the baby is nothing more than an incoherent amalgam of partial drives; at a certain moment, however, looking in the mirror, that amalgam discovers itself as constituting a unity. This unity, this imaginary 'one', immediately gets a central function in the libidinal economy, precisely the function of centring and unifying this incoherent amalgam.

So, it is the talent of the imaginary to create an illusion of totality, of enclosing a dispersed diversity into a unity, of appropriating the Different or Other into the property of the One. A libidinal being's proper identity is the result of appropriating its 'original' diversity or difference, of appropriating an Otherness that is more 'original' than its own supposed origin as being 'one'. According to Lacan, this is the unconscious procedure underlying the consciousness of being ourselves, of being an *ego*. So, the ego's acquired unity is in fact but an imaginary one, based on an illusionary effect. In fact, it is a 'lie', doing *as if* the diversity it is, is the diversity of a unity, of some 'one', while in reality it is the other way round.

So, when an adult gets in trouble with himself—i.e. with that *imagined* 'self' of his—, he will have to face the illusionary character of his ego. Then, however, he will realise that he is not merely the denied image of the other, but that, on a yet more fundamental level, he is the bearer/subject of a desire for another or, even, the desire *of* the other. More basically, his libidinal economy has identified with the desire of the other, with an Other that is desiring—which implies that he is marked by lack and deficiency and that he is a non-totally, contrary to the 'imaginary other'. On the most basic level, the libidinal economy has created a 'self', i.e. a 'point' giving unity to its dispersed diversity, by identifying with what is lacking—and will remain lacking—in the Other. So, the human self is constituted as fundamentally alienated, alienated in the Other, i.e. in a world of language not conceived as an closed imaginary totality, but as an open platform of signifiers operating precisely by means of the signifier's lack, of its incapacity of ever arriving at the signified (*signifié*) it suggests. Never a signifier will stop referring to another signifier, thus postponing for ever the *signifié* it promises.

This is why, according to Lacan, not images, but words and language deliver the paradigm by which the human subject and his unconscious are to be conceived. It is already clear that, from the libidinal perspective, the

human identity is not to be conceived as real. It is thoroughly the result of imagination. It is imagined, first in an *imaginary* way: as a ‘Gestalt’ denying its otherness (i.e. the fact that it originates in a strange, unreal, ‘dead’ image). But subsequently and more basically, it is imagined in a ‘*symbolic*’ way, in a way making full use of the representative power of the *signifier*. On that most basic level, ‘I’ am what the story I (and/or others) tell about myself represents for other similar stories. I (my identity) only exist insofar as a story, a signifier tells about the ‘I’ I suppose I am.¹⁸

It is clearer now why, from a Lacanian perspective, the image and the imaginary do not afford the most adequate way to reveal the truth of what is performed as a ‘self’. It cannot but deny the truth of any self, i.e. of the fact that the ‘self’ originates in radical otherness.¹⁹ Only language—acknowledged in its ‘symbolic’ capacity, i.e. considered from the primacy of the signifier—is able to reveal the *self’s* true condition, i.e. the fact that it resists total revelation. That is why only language, words and discourse are able to acknowledge the even more radically non-revealable side of any self, i.e. its *real* side, the ‘real’ as it is definitely hidden behind the signifier’s screen. A few pages further, Wajcman summarizes his critical disapproval of Didi-Huberman’s attempt to defend “images in spite of all”:

that the Shoah is *imaginable in spite of all* is at the same time wrong with regard to the truth, inexact in the facts, and profoundly religious—or, even, intimately Christian.²⁰

The real truth of Auschwitz—i.e. its truth on the level of the real (in the Lacanian sense of the word)—is not accessible by any imagination. This is why, even if we *did* find photographs showing us the real of Auschwitz, i.e. the actual moment of the dying victims, they would be “inexact.” And, finally, believing in the power of the image “in spite of all”²¹ is basically a “religious,” all too “religious” belief. Does Didi-Huberman not consider the four photographs taken by prisoners in the heart of Auschwitz as “fragments from hell”? Does he not treat them as “relics,” as fragmental “epiphanies” of the hell’s totality? Metaphors and logic are deeply religious, more precisely Christian. This is, according to Wajcman, the conclusion forcing itself upon us

when one looks at the photographs as “remnants of Auschwitz”, as “fragments extracted from hell,” when one tries to persuade us that these images are original, without retouches, without framework, real photographs, [then] these become suddenly infinitely precious and valuable things, as if one faces fragments of the real Shoah [*des morceaux de la vraie shoah*]. One attends a kind of transsubstantiation from an exposition of historical photographs into the pretension of Shoah relics . . .²²

This is a central point in Wajcman's criticism with regard to both Didi-Huberman's essay and the "*Mémoires des camps*" exhibition: they suppose an image to be able to be 'true,' i.e. to be able to extract the real from an event, and to transfer that real truth to the spectators, so those can have access to it and appropriate it. It is basically a Christian scheme, Wajcman argues, where God, although he is performed as Word (as the first lines of John's Gospel state) functions as image. Because God is defined to be the Word *incarnated*, the Word *become flesh*, the reference to radical otherness which is so typical for God in the Jewish bible, has been exchanged for a suggestion of similarity with human sameness. As indeed the Christian myth of Redemption and Salvation tells, the human has again become the 'image of God', as it was the case before the Fall. The Word is again "epiphany"—i.e. image—of totality and/as truth. The image as "epiphany" of the unimaginable 'real': this is, according to Wajcman, the paradigm of Didi-Huberman's view on the four photographs taken in Auschwitz in August 1944. Of course, he does not state they tell the totality of Auschwitz and its 'real', but he considers them to be *relics* and fragmented *epiphanies* of that very 'real'. That is why you can have 'faith' in them. Didi-Huberman's plea for "images in spite of all" is a plea for such faith. Significantly, Wajcman entitled his essay: "*De la croyance photographique*," "On photographic faith."²³

Wajcman himself, on the contrary, has no faith in photographs and images. Too easily, they can be used as a kind of appropriation machine, denying the radical otherness they refer to. Wajcman's faith concerns words, which in fact implies that he has no faith at all. He has no faith in words, for these cannot tell what Auschwitz is either. Auschwitz is ineffable, unspeakable. And neither has Wajcman any faith in the unspeakable as such, as Didi-Huberman thinks he has. This is indeed the latter's reproach to Wajcman and his kind: they lock up Auschwitz in its 'unspeakability'—which, according to Didi-Huberman, is too much a negative theological trick: defining something as unspeakable tells too much; speaking in the name of the unspeakable renders one's position all too sacrosanct, all too absolute, all too comfortably installed beyond any possible criticism.²⁴ This, too, is a way of appropriating Auschwitz, of sublating its radical alterity, so Didi-Huberman argues. And what is more, he adds, it is at the same time an all too perfect trick to hide Auschwitz from view, which fits all too well with the intention the Nazi's had with regard to the 'final solution'.²⁵

However, so Wajcman replies, precisely its ineffable character obliges us to *speak* about Auschwitz, to speak about it *endlessly, interminably*. But *only* to speak about it:

because the very impossibility to speak grounds the necessity of the word and of an ethics of good talking—as shown clearly in the movie

Shoah by Claude Lanzmann, which is thoroughly a movie intended to speak, a work of absolute rationality . . .²⁶

Only words can tell about Auschwitz, if only because—as Wajzman’s Lacanian perspective tells—words (signifiers) keep referring endlessly to other words (signifiers) and, thus, acknowledge the ineffable character of the ‘real’ they talk about. This is why it is ethically recommended to stick to words when treating about Auschwitz. It is what an “ethics of good talking,” “*une éthique du bien dire*,” means—which is another explicit reference to Lacan, this time to *Television*.²⁷

Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* is in perfect conformity with this kind of ethics. During the nine and a half hour of this movie on Auschwitz, not one single archive image is shown. We only see witnesses and hear them speaking. No “fragment of the real” is shown. No image seduces us to imagine ourselves present in this hell. All those long hours, we face words telling about it. None of the heard and ‘seen’ words brings us imaginarily *in* Auschwitz.

The stern restriction to words prevents us from imagining ourselves in the position of an Auschwitz victim, of the ones who became real victims and, so to say, victims of that ‘real’. This supposed similarity must be avoided by all means, Wajzman argues, for it ends up in a doctrine suggesting a similarity between the victim and the executioner, between the Jew and the Nazi. And yet, this “doctrine” was “scrupulously” illustrated in one of the exhibition’s walls: photographs of tortured victims figured next to photographs taken during the liberation of the camps and showing victims taking revenge on the Nazi executioners.²⁸

Moreover, this “doctrine” is Didi-Huberman’s basic thesis: with Georges Bataille, he claims that Auschwitz has changed our very self-image and that now, the image of the Shoah victim belongs to it, as well as the one of his executioner. Quoting Bataille, Didi-Huberman writes:

“[...] like the Pyramids or the Acropolis, Auschwitz is a fact, a sign of mankind. The image of man is henceforth inseparable of a gas chamber [...].”²⁹ To talk about *image of man* here, makes Auschwitz a fundamental problem for anthropology: Auschwitz is inseparable to us, Bataille writes. It is not a matter of confusing victims and perpetrators, of course. This obviousness, however, has to count with the anthropological fact—the fact of the *human* species, as wrote Robert Antelme the same year³⁰—that it is a fellow man [*semblable*] who puts his fellow man to the torture, to disfiguration and death: “[...] we are not only possible victims of the perpetrator: the perpetrators are our fellow men [*semblables*].”³¹ And Bataille—thinker par excellence of the impossible—will have understood very well that we should speak of

camps as of the very possible, the “possibility of Auschwitz,” as he exactly writes.³²

This is where Didi-Huberman’s “doctrine” of the image leads to: that all is possible, even Auschwitz; that there is a similarity between victims and executioners, Jews and Nazis. We are not *entirely* similar, “of course,” but nonetheless, so Wajcman’s suspicion adds:

The whole story of fragments distracted from the horror is simply a means to hold an image as a mirror: each one is the mirror of the other, they are us!, ‘they’ meaning now as well the gassed Jews as the Nazi criminals—but not really, ‘of course’ (‘mais pas vraiment, bien sûr’).³³

Didi-Huberman’s approach of the Shoah along the path of images and photographs is an approach by means of a mirror-strategy by which all, everyone and everything becomes equal, denying the absolute alterity the Shoah horror refers to. That logic is entirely captured within the closure of the imaginary as explained in Lacanian theory. It is a mirror logic in which all differences—and, thus all otherness—finally get sublated (in the Hegelian sense of ‘Aufhebung’). And, which is even worse, the one approaching the world by means of such a speculative mirror ends up to hold himself for the subject of “absolute knowledge” (“*das Absolute Wissen*,” as the last chapter of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes* is entitled). Lacanian theory is conceived precisely as a criticism and an alternative of that dangerous logic of the mirror. How subtle Hegel’s dialectics might seem, it is an *imaginary* logic, in the Lacanian sense of the word. And even when it is unavoidable in the constitution of the libidinal subject, it is as unavoidable to overcome it in the establishment of a ‘symbolic’ logic, a logic based on the paradigm, not of the mirror/image, but of the word/signifier. Thus the main thesis supporting Wajcman’s vehement criticism of Didi-Huberman and the “Mémoires des camps” exhibition.

3. Photographs as “*image-cracks*”

And yet, is an image necessarily imaginary? Does it unavoidably produce the illusion of closure and totality, denying the difference it is build upon or the alterity it refers to? Is an image *as such* doomed to be a veil hiding its veil character and, thus, creating the illusion of revealing true reality? Unlike Gérard Wajcman, Didi-Huberman does not reduce an image to its sole capacity of “image-veil” (“*image-voile*”). From the outset, Didi-Huberman’s general research is focused on a different image procedure conceptualized as “image-crack” (“*image-déchirure*”).³⁴ Yet, this does not imply that, from now on, the image-crack replaces the “image-veil.” Didi-Huberman’s point is that images are under a “double regime.”³⁵ An image is not simply a mimetic apparatus: a mirror hiding its own mirror character in order to perform the illusion of presenting something in its very absence. Next to its

capacity to negate its own negation, an image is also able to “produce effects *with* its negation.” This is to say that an image can function “as language,” as a signifier not denying its negative character (its impossibility to come to a definite *signifié*), but operating *with* it. With regard to the concept of “image-crack” and reacting against Wajcman’s criticism, Didi-Huberman writes:

It is not a matter of coining a new definition of images taken as a whole, but of noticing their dialectic plasticity, what I have named the *double regime* of their functioning: visible and visual, detail et ‘pan,’ resemblance end dissemblance, anthropomorphism and abstraction, form et inform, charm and cruelty . . . *As the signs of language*, images are able in their own way—and there is the whole problem—to produce an effect *with* their negation [produire un effet *avec* sa negation].³⁶

This is to say that an image not only operates in an imaginary way (in the Lacanian sense in which Wajcman uses the word), but also “as the signs of language,” i.e. as signifiers. Not only does an image negate its negation (in order to hide the fact that it does not really render present what it represents), it is at the same time capable of differing that negation, thus suggesting that, while showing something, something remains unshown, unrevealed at the same time. An image as such is not exclusively “affirmative” (as “of course” Wajcman claims, for instance in *L’objet du siècle*³⁷), it might at the same time be dialectical and, in this capacity, confront us with the negativity it usually denies. This is what Maurice Blanchot—one of Didi-Huberman’s sources here—calls the “double version of the imaginary.” Whereas an image normally sublates its own negativity, it is at the same time able to reveal that negativity in a way we can hardly deal with it.³⁸

Earlier in his essay, he has already referred to a passage in the 17th “thesis” of Walter Benjamin’s *On the concept of History (Theses on the Philosophy of History)*. There, Benjamin writes that, unlike “universal historiography” simply summing up an addition of facts, “materialistic historiography” starts from a break in history, a shock that stops the historiographer’s flow of thoughts.³⁹ In the French version of that text (a version written in French by Benjamin), he describes this break or shock as the effect of a *becoming image* of that flow.

The act of thinking has its base not only in the movement of thoughts, but in their blocking as well. Let us suppose the movement of thoughts suddenly to be blocked—then, in a constellation loaded with tensions, a kind of retour is produced: a shock *enabling the image, the constellation to which it occurs, to unpreparedly organise itself*, to constitute itself as monad in its own interior.⁴⁰

In the eyes of Benjamin, the moment of break the materialist historiographer has to focus on, is an “image,” a moment of totalization and closure, indeed,

but not implying the end of history, but precisely its point of restarting—as for instance happens at the instant of revolution. In that moment where time stands still and crystallizes into one imaginary monad, (it is the moment where the messianic “*Jetzt-Zeit*” might be tangible), the flow of words constituting the discourse leading history is interrupted.⁴¹ Then, an irruption—or at least a glimpse—of the ‘real’ is possible. And this irruption passes through an image, through what one can call, with Didi-Huberman, an “*image-crack*.”

On the page where Didi-Huberman refers to Blanchot’s essay on the “two versions of the imaginary,” he refers to Lacanian theory as well. He quotes two passages from in the second seminar where, already in that early stage of his theory, the image is mentioned as being able to reveal the real. One passage mentions the image from a dream Freud had about a frightening confrontation with the ill flesh at the back of the throat of one of his patients, called Irma.⁴² In the other is clearly explained how an image is able to be “the image of dislocation, of the fundamental division of the subject [déchirement essentiel du sujet].”⁴³ The conclusion Didi-Huberman draws from this is:

There, thus, where ‘all words stop and all categories break down’—there where the theses, whether refutable or not, are literally stunned—, there an image can appear. Not the *image-veil* of the fetish, but the *image-crack* enflaming a glimpse of the real.⁴⁴

In fact, this summarizes the core of Didi-Huberman’s Lacanian argument. Against Wajzman’s thesis of the imaginary as inherently totalising and denying its constitutive difference, he objects that, according to Lacan, the image is not by definition totalising,⁴⁵ but might as well open towards the real. Wajzman, so Didi-Huberman claims illustrates

this sterile post-lacanian reading which, bluntly rejecting phenomenology, has more and more purified the ‘symbolic’ from its ‘imaginary’ residues, the *imaginary* as psychic register being more and more—and erroneously—reduced to a simple structure of *specular alienation*.⁴⁶

In his analysis of the four ‘Polish Resistance photographs’, Didi-Huberman does not really elaborate his reference to Lacanian theory. A few quotations must suffice to put his reading of that theory as apposed to Wajzman’s. For the latter, an image totalizes and lies about the real/truth; for Didi-Huberman, an image ‘is not all’ (which is a formula from Lacan)⁴⁷ and might open to the real/truth. The thesis I will defend, here, is that, though Didi-Huberman does not elaborate this reference, he is much more in conformity with Lacanian theory than Wajzman who more explicitly leans on it.

4. The subject of a photograph

What is an image? Even if it might seem to be the central question in the debate between Wajcman and Didi-Huberman, from a Lacanian perspective, the question itself is suspect or, at least, put in the wrong way. You don't solve the problem by finding out what a thing *is*. A thing is never what it is *as such*; what it is or means depends on its position in a web of mutual references, a web that is libidinally invested by human desire. This is to say that, for a libidinal subject, things are first of all *signifiers*. Including images.

Although rarely mentioned by name in the discussion between Wajcman and Didi-Huberman,⁴⁸ it is undoubtedly the crucial point of their opposition. Wajcman considers the image as an imaginary *thing*, which is to be necessarily approached in an imaginary *way*. He erroneously takes the imaginary as the quality of a *thing*, in this case the image, whereas the term 'imaginary' names the *way* in which a libidinal being relates to things. For the human libidinal being, the world—concluding images—is made of signifiers, with regard to which he can relate in an imaginary *or* in a symbolic way. It might seem all too subtle, but this is extremely crucial. In a Lacanian perspective, images—like anything else—are signifiers to which we can *relate* in an imaginary or a symbolic way. Or we consider ourselves to be the '*signifié*' of those signifiers (i.e. we consider ourselves to be origin, cause and owner of those mirror images), which is the imaginary way. Or we consider ourselves as the one whom the signifiers (including images) endlessly are referring to and who therefore never feels to be his proper origin, cause or owner. This is the symbolic way.

Although, at first sight, images are more in line with the imaginary way and words more with the symbolic way, Lacan never treats images as *necessarily* imaginary and words as *necessarily* symbolic. This is why Wajcman's profound distrust in images, contrary to what he claims himself, is not in line with the premises of Lacanian theory. Lacan is not suspicious with regard to images *as such*. All depends on how these images are related to, or, more exactly, what subject-position this relation generates. Looking for the truth for instance implies, according to Lacan, a kind of shift with regard to the subject. Whereas in a first—imaginary—moment we think we can appropriate the searched truth while imagining ourselves to be the full support (subject) of that truth, in a second moment, we realise we are the subject of (only) a desire for that truth, which means we will never appropriate it or make it fully ours. Finally we will find the truth we were looking for in the fact that we are only the subject of a desire for truth, a subject which will be forever split from what it imagines/desires it is. This is what, in a Lacanian perspective, activities gathered under the term 'culture'—including the memory of the Shoah—are about: it is basically a 'cultivation' of that 'shift' and, thus, a constantly retaken confrontation with our condition of being a split subject.

Just after the war, Jorge Semprun, who is a survivor of the Nazi concentration camp Buchenwald, was seeking some distraction in a local cinema of his hometown. "After the summary of a sport manifestation and of some international reunion in New York," he was suddenly confronted with camp images. When he recognized some pictures of his 'own' camp, Buchenwald, a strange experience surprises him. Though recognizing these images, it was as if it was not him who had lived there; as if it was not the man who lived there who was now recognizing them. As if he had lost himself as subject of that very recognition. Didi-Huberman quotes Semprun at length:

Les images avaient été filmées dans différents camps libérés par l'avance alliée, quelque mois plus tôt. A Bergen-Belsen, à Mauthausen, à Dachau. Il y en avait aussi de Buchenwald, que je reconnais. Ou plutôt: dont je savais de façon certaine qu'elles provenaient de Buchenwald, sans être certain de les reconnaître. Ou plutôt: sans avoir la certitude de les avoir vue moi-même. Je les avais vue, pourtant. Ou plutôt, je les avais vécues. C'était la différence entre le vu et le vécu qui était troublante. ... Soudain, dans le silence de cette salle de cinéma ... ces images de mon intimité me devenaient étrangères, en s'objectivant sur l'écran. Elles échappaient ainsi aux procédures de mémorisation et de censure qui m'étaient personnelles. Elles cessaient d'être mon bien et mon tourment: richesses mortifères de ma vie. Elles n'étaient plus, ou n'étaient enfin que la réalité radicale, extériorisée, du Mal: son reflet glacial et néanmoins brûlant.⁴⁹

In Jorge Semprun's case, images enabling a full identification with what they show have an opposite effect. As if they enable Semprun to "be suddenly present with [his] own absence."⁵⁰ Here, images deconstruct or de-centre any possible identification. Images make him see that he is only the subject of what he lived without coinciding with that life. It is the experienced confrontation of the split subject—which, in psychoanalysis, is the effect of a talking cure, of a process of discourse, of words and signifiers. Here, in the case of Semprun's experience, it is clear that images can have the same effect. His own camp images confront even a survivor with his impossibility to appropriate the pictured truth. Yet, it is noteworthy that, here, this impossibility is performed as a quality, not so much of the object (i.e. of the content side of the image) as of the subject. Here, the image confronts the spectator with the split condition, not of his object, of the fact that what he thinks he sees is radically split from the real it suggests to refer to, but of himself as being the 'subject' of those images.

Even if, concerning Auschwitz, it is far from being senseless to invoke notions as 'the ineffable' or 'the unimaginable,' from a Lacanian perspective, it is crucial to locate the ineffable or unimaginable not so much on the

side of the object of speaking or imagining, but on the side of the subject. What is unspeakable is the *point from where* we speak about the atrocity named Auschwitz. What is unbearable is the point where we bear the signifiers constituting the story of that name. It is in that sense that Didi-Huberman agrees with the Bataillon approach of Auschwitz as revealing a kind of “*semblable*.”⁵¹ And this is not simply the opposite of approaching it as “*Autre absolu*,” as Wajzman claims.⁵² The otherness we deal with in confronting Auschwitz is an otherness that, even more than the object of our confrontation, affects ourselves in our quality of subject. It is in that sense that, since Auschwitz, “we are inseparable from Auschwitz,” as says Georges Bataille and endorses Didi-Huberman.

Auschwitz effects whom we are, i.e. how we look to ourselves. From now on irretrievably contaminated by Auschwitz, we are no longer able to be what we think we are. Auschwitz has damaged the point from where we relate, not only to the world, but even to ourselves. This is to say that the point from where *we* look at Auschwitz and the point from where *the prisoner's* in Auschwitz looked at Auschwitz (and, even, the way Auschwitz looked at itself) are similar, “*semblable*” in a way that does not allow to fully assume being the subject of that look. This goes even for the victims. What is unbearable is that they *have* borne it; that, for a limited time, they have been the subject/bearer of the unbearable. This is even clearer with regard to the *Sonderkommandos*, the victims forced to do the executioner's job. Unbearable for that prisoner is the mere fact that he bears it, that he is the subject of the Shoah, not only in the sense that he is subjected to it, but in the sense he is its subject in a *active* manner. The point from where the *Sonderkommando* does bear the Shoah makes him “*semblable*” to the other victims, to the executioners and to us who, in our own impossible way, are the subject of the Shoah—this is to say: are contaminated by it on the level of our very subject position. This subject point cannot and can never fully be assumed. In this point, Auschwitz is unspeakable, unimaginable, and unbearable. So, in this sense, Auschwitz's unspeakable nature is not in contradiction with the fact we have to recognize ourselves as being Auschwitz's bearers, its subject. This is what Didi-Huberman finally, in his way, tries to say in his passionate plea in favour of the exhibition *Mémoires des camps*, including the presentation of “the four Polish Resistance photographs.”

Let us once more turn back on these photographs. Even Wajzman agrees that, in a context as this (i.e. the Nazi genocide), every photograph, every image matters. “*Mais l'image de quoi?*,” “the image of what?,” he asks.⁵³ According to him, it can never be the image of Auschwitz *as such*, though, thanks to the lures of the imaginary, it gives all too easily the impression it does show Auschwitz *as such*, Auschwitz *as non-representable*, *unimaginable*. And what, if ever possible, should a true image of Auschwitz as non-representable show if not the very instant of the genocide, the

moment of death of six million Jews—thus Wajcman. And he immediately—and rightly—adds that such photographs do not exist. Up till now we have no photographs of what happened *in the gas chamber* on the moment the criminal death sentence for an entire people was executed. And, so Wajcman adds, one can even ask if such photographs are possible *at all*. Can we make a picture of death *as such*? We can picture dead bodies, we can picture people just before they are going to die, but can we picture them *in* their very dying? Can we picture death *itself*? For Wajcman, this is impossible, by definition. If life is presentable and re-presentable, death is none of both, certainly not in its criminal, six million times multiplied way as it happened to occur in the Shoah.

We understand now why Wajcman is so furious at a Shoah exhibition exclusively built up with photographs. The emphasis on photographs reinforce the impression as if the spectator is given a real view on Auschwitz, as if he is able to imagine himself present at the locus of the largest genocide in history. When then, in that context, one of the essays accompanying the exhibition is quasi exclusively devoted to four photographs “taken from the gas chamber,” this impression seems to meet its proof and evidence. These photographs—“ces quatre bouts de pellicule arrachés à l’enfer”⁵⁴—makes us feel to be really in the very heart of the Shoah, i.e. in its gas chambers.

In this context, Wajcman refers to Didi-Huberman’s analysis of the large black framework surrounding each of the four photographs. According to him, it is the “*visible attestation*” of the place from where they have been taken.

The dark mass [*masse noire*] surrounding the sight of dead bodies and pits, this mass where *nothing is visible*, gives in fact a visual mark which is as precious as the rest of the photographic surface. That mass where nothing is visible is the space of the gas chamber: the dark room in which one has to withdraw in order to picture the work done by the *Sonderkommandos*, outside, above the cremation pits.⁵⁵

And although Didi-Huberman states that this reading does not tell the final word about Auschwitz and that, thus, it is not that sure that the photographs were taken from the inside of the Crematorium V gas chamber, he nonetheless stimulates the reader’s imagination strongly in this direction. And even if this is true (and Jean-Claude Pressac, among others, agrees with it), it shows only the extreme courage of the *Sonderkommando*; it does not show the Shoah *as such*. The *nothing* we see in the dark frame around the photographs (suggesting the place from where they are taken) does not show the *nothing* to which the victims are reduced, as Wajcman states.⁵⁶

It is here that Wajcman’s analysis reveals its limits. He approaches Auschwitz as the *object* of discourse and image, and he is right when he

states that in this capacity Auschwitz is ineffable, unimaginable. What he oversees, however, is the subject of speaking or photographing. Was it the intention of the 'photographing team' to shoot the unimaginable? Of course, they shot and showed the unimaginable, and wanted this to be communicated to the outside world. It was a cry to the Polish Resistance, to the Polish government in exile and to the entire outside world: 'Please, look at these pictures, they are unbelievable, but please believe that the unbelievable does happen, that these images testify of the unimaginable happening at this very moment.' All this is true, and Wajzman's analysis is based on the complexity of that 'object' that is beyond the speakable but all the more demands to be spoken about.

But, again, what about the subject of these photographs? What about the point from where they were taken? It was an extremely dangerous point: on this, Wajzman and Didi-Huberman at least agree. Is it however, in the case of Auschwitz, not as unspeakable and unimaginable as the object? Is the subject not as non-representable? And, of course, just like the object, an image's subject can be denied by the ruses of the imaginary—which is precisely the reason why images must be *read*. Read as a signifier. 'Proceeding from the primacy of the signifier': this is the only way to reveal its real object and subject. It reveals its object as that which will never be revealed in its truly real character. And it reveals the subject as the point from where the pictures are taken and that, itself, can never be shown or appropriated by those pictures. That point or subject will remain a *supposed* one, 'imagined' as from these pictures. For this is what the subject—in the Lacanian sense—is about: it is a sub-jectum, (literally) a sup-position, a bearer 'posited' 'underneath' (*sub-*) a series of signifiers/images in order to give the libidinal being supported by those signifiers a fictitious point of unity from where its economy can be ruled. Only, this subject is not there from the outset, it is not original; it is a construction, a fictitious fantasy necessitated by the drive and its vicissitudes. It is not a cause but an effect, more precisely an effect of the signifier. It is 'what signifiers represent for other signifiers' (according a Lacanian formula already mentioned above).

It is in this sense that the four Polish Resistance photographs are to be read from the perspective of their 'subject'. These photographs not only shoot an unimaginable object, they establish also a subject, which is necessarily excluded from the picture and, in that sense, unimaginable. Only, in this case, the unimaginable is precisely what gives hope to the *Sonderkommandos* and the other prisoners. The point from where the pictures are taken is formally located *outside* what they picture. Taking these photographs, the *Sonderkommando* situates himself outside the horror. It is in this perspective that the term "*semblable*" makes sense, for it is precisely this kind of 'outside' which makes him "similar" to the outside world. One imaginary moment, the photographer—and with him the photographing team

and the totality of prisoners—has been outside the camp in order to record what is happening inside. It is this ‘outside’ position, how imaginary it may be, that makes him and his photographs receivable precisely for the outside world. The object of the photographs is not transferable at all, as Wajcman rightly observes, but what is transferable—and what *must* be transferred, also in the ethical sense of the word—is their subject, i.e. the position from where they are taken.

More exactly, the subject-position these photographs suppose is itself already transferred from the outside world into the camp. Indeed, the only thing such a photograph does is bringing the gaze from the outside world *within* the fence of the camp. These photographs allow the insider a gaze as if he were outside the camp. And from that gaze—or from its crystallized result, its photographs—the prisoners expect that the outside world finally will see what is going on inside. For the Auschwitz prisoners, photography is not simply an lying machine; on the contrary, it can be a welcome instrument enabling the outside world to look inside the camp and letting the prisoners inside realise—if only for one abstract and imaginary moment—where their true position with regard to the camp is: outside.

Moreover, it is not just a mere coincidence that the photographs were taken by precisely *Sonderkommandos*. For them, it could have been a possible way of dealing with the cruelly ‘special’ position they were in, being the direct assistants of the genocide. Their ‘*sonder*’-position implies that, even more than the other prisoners, they were forced to identify with the gaze of the Nazi executioner, which in a particular way is the gaze of an outsider as well.

It is true this is a psychological torment each camp prisoner undergoes. Each of them is forced to identify with the executioner’s outside gaze. The goal of the camp regime is a point where the injustice done to the victim is recognized as justice by the very victim. Once this goal is attained, the victim’s psychic and moral resistance is irreparably broken. The wrong done to him is no longer experienced as wrong. He then relates to himself exclusively through the executioner’s gaze looking at him from a radical outside. Assuming this outside gaze, the victim is put definitely outside the world. And this was the initial intention of the Nazi executioner: to exclude the Jew who, as ‘racial science’ ‘socio-biologically’ has proven, does not belong to the universe of sane human races.⁵⁷

This torturous logic is even crueller for the *Sonderkommando*, if only because he has to take the standpoint of the executioner *in an active manner*. Together with him, the *Sonderkommando* has to actualize the project of putting the wrong race literally outside the world. He is forced to be the actively collaborating “*semblable*” of the executioner sharing his murderous outside position vis-à-vis to the victims.

Here, we meet the liberating force of photography, allowing the *Sonderkommando* to bring this very outside position *as such* inside the camp—thus turning it against the Nazi executioner. There is a deconstructive power in photography's inherent outside position. It has the capacity to reveal the false pretensions of the Nazi position, claiming that the entire outside world agrees in considering the Jew as the outsider to be destroyed. As if the "four Polish Resistance photographs" say: 'If the outside world states that the Jew is nature's outsider, as the Nazi ideology claims, let then this outside world have a look how the Jew is removed to the outside. Will then the outside world agree with what the executioner says the outside world believes, namely that the Jew is not a human being and that his extermination is not a loss but a benefit for humanity?' It is the *Sonderkommando's* hope (and in the sadistic universe he lives in, nursing hopes is far from self-evident) that the outside world objects the Nazi executioner and says that the Jew simply belongs to the outside world as everyone belongs to that world; that there is no outside to our common outside world, that all humans belong to one single species, to the one single '*espèce humaine*' (to say with Robert Antelme).

Using the outside position inherent to the taking of photographs, the *Sonderkommando* deconstructs the difference inside/outside established by the Nazi regime (inside/outside the camp, inside/outside human races, et cetera). He tells that there is, so to say, *only outside*, and that we are all *in* it. *No one can claim to be outside the outside we are all in.*

No one occupies a position outside the human from where he can oversee its limits and exclude the ones who are judged to be not in conformity with the norm of this limit. And neither can have one the insight in the very inside, the essence, of the human. This is simply the *modern* condition of our knowledge. Since modernity, we know that our knowledge has no access to the 'essence' of things—to '*das Ding an sich*,' as Kant tells us—and we know that, precisely for that reason, our knowledge has no limits, freed as it is from any restriction to such things as 'essences.'

No one can appropriate the truth about the human, no one can define 'man', and, subsequently, exclude those who do not fit with this definition in order to release 'humanity' from them (this tells, in a nutshell, the Nazi project). What makes us human cannot be put in a definition of human 'essence.' What makes us human is that we all *represent* ourselves as human; that we *say* we are. This 'saying' cannot be founded in the solid certainty of a known essence; this representation cannot be linked to an assured 'presence'. Modernity has taken away such certainty and presence. Today's primacy of visual culture illustrates this pointedly. To be someone, one has to be represented on the diverse 'media' of that culture. There, we can be what we are, which is to say that, there, we are what one image represents to another image—to paraphrase once more Lacan's definition of

the signifier which is at the same time a definition of the subject. The representations allowing us an identity and, even, an existence, are not preceded by any presence. Qua real are we absent in the signifiers and images representing us. This is the core insight of the Lacanian subject theory. We—i.e. the identity we imagine we are—only exist as being absent in the discourse that represents us. We only exist as the subject that discourse is about, even if that discourse most of the time erroneously (i.e. imaginarily) tells that the subject we are does exist in itself.

When the *Sonderkommandos* appeal to photography to make the sadistic universe they live in public, they in fact appeal to the typically modern subject position as pointed out in Lacanian theory. They cling to images, and implicitly admit they hang on them as on their last and only hope. Hope guaranteeing no prospect of a place in the real world, but giving them, nonetheless, a ‘human’ place in the hell of the extermination camp, i.e. a place as the subject of a photograph, as bearer of an image—a bearer at the same time borne by that image and forced to cling on it, since he has no real existence on its own.

5. Telecondition

During one imaginary moment, creating a *human* place within the sadistic universe of their camp, a place *similar* (*semblable*) to the one of the outside world: this is what, on that peculiar day of August 1944 in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the *Sonderkommandos* had in mind when they shot those pictures. A place *outside* their world that, precisely for that very reason, is similar to the place from where people outside the camps participate in *their* world. For this is how the free world must be defined: as a place where we suppose ourselves to be outside a world on which we nonetheless depend for hundred percent. The kind of freedom we have in that world is not the one of a monotheistic god, who is able to exist on his own, outside all that is, in order, then, to do with it as he pleases. There, we, mortal humans, are too much dependent on that world; we are too much living *from* that world. Living *really* outside it is no option for us.⁵⁸

And yet, we do *as if* we live outside it, *as if* a position vis-à-vis that world is possible. We do *as if*, and it is really *as if*: the way we act has no real ground; it does not rest in the substance of a ‘*res*’, to put it with a Cartesian term. It is fiction, fantasy, ‘*reine Einbildungskraft*’. But being fiction and imagination, it is full part of reality. What is more, it is what makes it *human*, as already Aristotle suggested, defining ‘φαντασια’ (‘fantasy,’ ‘capacity to representation’) as a substantial part of our capacity to think. He, however, still ascribed imagination an ontological foundation. In modern times, however, imagination can no longer be connected to some essence or ontological base. Modern imagination has lost its anchoring in the real, it is but a matter of ‘wish’ and ‘desire’ (including desire, for instance, to

be anchored in the real). This is modernity's typical condition. Freud's psychoanalysis is nothing else than a consistent conceptualization of that insight, so Lacan rightly has seen. He more exactly has seen that psychoanalysis conceptualizes that modern insight up to the level of the subject: even the subject is the *effect* of mere imagination, of '*reine Einbildungskraft*', of a groundless procedure of wishing and desire. It is not the subject who imagines all kinds of things; that subject is itself the result of an imagination that precedes it (and this goes for the subject of science as well, including the subject of psychoanalytic science). The realm of signifiers enables the *Einbildungskraft* to operate autonomously and to make 'a signifier represent the subject to another signifier'.

This fictitious 'gap' between two signifiers, this 'void' outside/within the realm of signifiers we live *in* and *from*, this merely imaginarily founded 'space' from which we suppose ourselves to speak: this is the 'space' our experience of freedom is based on. This 'space' makes our existence 'human' and makes us all "*semblable*" to one another. Humanity, equality and liberty are to be thought as enabled by this 'space'. The thing that founds our mutual equality is that nobody completely belongs to the world that makes us what we are; that we are all 'outsiders', and that we cannot be reduced to the logic of the world in and by which we live. Human beings participate in social and other reality from an 'outside' which, being fictitious, nonetheless belongs to that reality. They take part in it from a 'tele-condition,' from a structural distance that, though not empirically observable, is no less real.

The thing is now to take this 'outside', this tele-condition, seriously. This is what the *Sonderkommandos* did on that day in August 1944. But they could only do this in 1944, and even then not without a hope still imbued with profound despair. Only a year before, an appeal to the outside world would undoubtedly have failed, because at that time the outside world did not yet consider itself from the 'outside' that makes everyone 'equal'. Then, together with the Nazi ideology, the outside world stated that it could define itself from 'within,' from what man was 'by nature,' from his racial essence. Only the approaching collapse of that ideology and its '*Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*' enabled the *Sonderkommando*'s resistance.

When at the end of Pasolini's *Salò* (which, too, is situated in 1944) the four fascist 'sadian heroes' are torturing their victims one by one to death, one of them occupies the tele-position and, from a room far away, looks to the horror scene through binoculars.⁵⁹ These binoculars tell the core of Pasolini's film. The most enjoying sadist is standing outside the torture scene and only *looks* at what happens, without *hearing* the infernal screaming of executioners and victims. The shouts of the sadist and the cries of his victim is something he only has to *look at*. The spectator, following the latter's gaze, hears beautiful renaissance music, brutally followed by pop songs from

the radio. The spontaneous dance of the guards in charge still enforces the typically sadistic alienating effect.

This scene shows the sadist's true position: *outside*. But it shows at the same time the sadist's denial of that very position. He acts as if he is by no means effected by the outside position he occupies. As if, for him, the world is what lies within his power, a power that keeps everything inside, precisely by excluding every outsider outside—by an act of '*Vernichtung*', as did the *Endlösung* with outsider races.

Notes

1. G. Bataille, *Œuvres complètes XI: Articles I: 1944-1949* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 226.
2. Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers* (New York: The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989), pp. 422-424; on the internet: <http://www.holocaust-history.org/auschwitz/pres-sac/technique-and-operation/pressac0422.shtml>.
3. Jean-Claude Pressac, op.cit., p. 424; <http://www.holocaust-history.org/auschwitz/pressac/technique-and-operation/pressac0424.shtml>. See also: Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust. Interpretations of the evidence* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004); Dan Stone, "The Sonderkommando Photographs," *Jewish Studies* 7 (2001): 131-148; Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the work of Post-memory," in Barbie Zelizer (Ed.), *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (New Jersey: Piscataway, 2001); Clément Chéroux (dir.), *Mémoires des camps: photographies des camps de concentrations et d'extermination Nazi (1933-1999)* (Paris: Mar-val, 2001), pp. 86-91.
4. Five are known: Alex (a Greek Jew whose family name is unknown and who most probably was the photographer), Szlojme Dragon, Josel Dragon (Szlojme's brother), Alter Szmul Fajnzyberg and Dawid Szmulewski (Clément Chéroux, op. cit., p. 86).
5. Judith Lerner Crowley, "Acts of resistance," *SoKoS: Sonderkommando-Studien* (<http://www.sonderkommandostudien.de/artikel.php?c=fotografie/resistane>).
6. Jean-Claude Pressac, op. cit., p. 423.
7. This 'enhanced' photograph has caused considerable emotional havoc, the results of which can be judged from three extracts from '*Excursion: Auschwitz-Birkenau*' by Andrzej BRYCHT (NRF Gallimard, Paris, 1980, p. 37, 54 and 79). They show the extraordinary intellectual confusion of an intelligent man, certainly far more lucid than most visitors to the camp. First of all, he evokes the history of the photograph: 'One day they [the Germans] undressed three hundred girls come from France or I don't know where exactly, they gave them a piece of soap each and one towel for ten girls and chased them between pyres soaked with petrol as high as houses, telling them that that was the way to the showers. But this wooden ravine had no exit and when the naked girls got to the end of the defile, well-hidden Germans caught them with flame-throwers and everything was burnt.' Then, seeing the famous photo [*PMO neg. no. 252a*] on the wall, he described it: 'On the walls of other rooms there were huge enlargements:

- they had thus immortalized these three hundred girls burnt alive at the very moment when the fire was about to devour them. Tall, white girls, three or four in the front rank, gracious, their hair clearly standing out against the grey streaks of the flame-throwers'." (Jean-Claude Pressac, *op. cit.*, p. 423)
8. This is "thanks to the original negatives." Philippe Mesnard, "Représenter l'irreprésentable" (propos recueillis par Daniel Conrod), *Télérama*, n° 2661, janvier 2001, p. 11.
 9. Clément Chéroux, *op. cit.*
 10. Clément Chéroux, *op. cit.*, pp. 219-241. He re-edited this essay, together with a long reply to his critics in: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2003).
 11. Gérard Wajcman, "De la croyance photographique," *Les Temps Modernes*, LVI, 2001, n° 613: 47-83 ; Elisabeth Pagnoux, "Reporter photographe à Auschwitz," *ibid.*, pp. 84-108.
 12. Gérard Wajcman, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
 13. Elisabeth Pagnoux, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
 14. Gérard Wajcman, *op. cit.*, p. 47 (my translation, MdK).
 15. See for instance : Gérard Wajcman, *Le maître et l'hystérique* (Paris : Navarin/Le Seuil, 1982) ; *L'objet du siècle* (Paris: Verdier, 1998) ; *Collections*. Suivi de *L'avarice* (Paris: Nous, 1999) ; *Fenêtre: chroniques du regard et de l'in-time* (Paris: Verdier, 2004).
 16. Georges Didi-Huberman, *op. cit.*, p. 11 (italics by the author, my translation, MdK).
 17. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 93-100.
 18. This is what Lacan definition of the signifier (which is fact is a definition of the subject) is about: "Le signifiant . . . c'est ce qui représente précisément le sujet pour un autre signifiant." Lacan uses this definition for the first time at the end of the 6 December 1961 session of his Seminar on Identification (unedited). See also Jacques Lacan, *op. cit.*, p. 819, 835, 840.
 19. "Imaginer l'Autre, c'est le nier comme Autre" (Gérard Wajcman, *op. cit.*, p. 71).
 20. Gérard Wajcman, *op. cit.*, p. 57 (italics by the author; my translation, MdK).
 21. Gérard Wajcman, *op. cit.*, p. 55: «c'est l'image et non la shoah qui est le vrai sujet et le vrai enjeu de Georges Didi-Hubermann ici [...]».
 22. Gérard Wajcman, *op. cit.*, p. 56 (italics by the author; my translation, MdK).
 23. Or, as Pagnoux says, Didi-Huberman supposes these photographs to make the Sonderkommando—and in a way, thus, also the spectator—a "Reporter photographe à Auschwitz" (which is the title of her essay). At the end of it she summarizes this supposed effect of the photographs as follows: "Regarder la photo et s'y croire" (Elisabeth Pagnoux, *op. cit.*, p. 106).
 24. It is an idea one can find in Antelme as well: "*Inimaginable*, c'est un mot qui ne divise pas, qui ne restreint pas. C'est le mot le plus commode. Se promener avec ce mot en bouclier, le mot du vide, et le pas s'assure, se raffermit, la conscience se reprend." Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957, Collection TEL), p. 302.

25. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 39: « Parler d'Auschwitz dans les termes de l'indicible, ce n'est pas s'approcher d'Auschwitz, non, c'est au contraire éloigner Auschwitz dans une région que Giorgio Agamben a fort bien définie en termes d'adoration mystique, voire de répétition insu de *l'arcanum* Nazi lui-même.» Didi-Huberman refers to Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive. Homo Sacer III*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).
26. Gérard Wajcman, op. cit., p. 57 (my translation, MdK). See also Elisabeth Pagnoux, op. cit., 95.
27. Jacques Lacan, *Télévision* (Paris: Les éditions du Seuil, 1974), p. 36, 39, 65.
28. Gérard Wajcman, op. cit., p. 74. Clément Chéroux, op. cit., p. 109, 132, 133.
29. "Sartre" in: Georges Bataille, op. cit., p. 226.
30. Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).
31. "Réflexions sur le bourreau et la victime" (1947) in: Georges Bataille, op. cit., p. 266.
32. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 42 (italics by the author; my translation, MdK).
33. Gérard Wajcman, op. cit., 2001: p. 74 (my translation, MdK).
34. Didi-Huberman gives two significant passages in his work with regard to this topic: "Le doute [le déchirement] du peintre," in Georges Didi-Huberman, *La peinture incarnée* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), p. 115-132; "L'image comme déchirure," *Devant l'image—Questions posées aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), p. 169-269. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, 103.
35. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 103.
36. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 103 (italics by Didi-Huberman, except "Comme les signe du langage," which I underline; my translation, MdK).
37. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 103; Wajcman, *L'objet du siècle*, 243.
38. Didi-Huberman 2003: 103-104. For the essay by Blanchot: Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), pp. 254-263.
39. "Historicism rightly culminates in universal history. Materialistic historiography differs from it as to method more clearly than any other kind. Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogenous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts but their arrest [Stillstellung] as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic cessation [Stillstellung] or happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the suppressed past." In: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, translated by H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 262-263.

40. “L’acte de pensée ne se fonde pas seulement sur le mouvement des pensées mais aussi sur leur blocage. Supposons soudainement bloqué le mouvement de pensée—il se produira alors dans une constellation surchargée de tensions une sorte de retour: une secousse *qui vaudra à l’image, à la constellation qui la subira, de s’organiser à l’improvisite, de se constituer en monade à son intérieur.*” Walter Benjamin, *Ecrits français*, présentés par J.-M. Monnoyer, Paris : Gallimard, 1991, p 346 (I have put in italics the sentence ‘added’ in the French version); *Gesammelte Schriften. Band I.2. Abhandlungen*, Werkausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980 [1974]), pp. 702-703.
41. Didi-Huberman discussed this already in *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1992), p. 82, 103 ff.
42. See the last pages of Chapter 2 in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (dream of 23/24 July 1895); see also Lacan, *Le séminaire II. Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse (1954-1955)*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller (Paris: Le Seuil, 1978), pp. 196, 209.
43. Jacques Lacan, op. cit., 196; 206; quoted in: Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 104.
44. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 104 (my translation, MdK).
45. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 107.
46. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 105 (my translation, MdK). Didi-Huberman is right to mention an important book rectifying this misapprehend: Guy Le Gaufey, *Le lasso spéculaire. Une étude transversale de l’unité imaginaire* (Paris: EPEL, 1997).
47. “Not all” (“pas tout”) is one of the Lacanian concepts to name the impossibility to enclose the universe we live in (the universe of signifiers) in a closing totality. Lacan develops this concepts for the first time in his seminar “*Logique du fantasme*” (1967-68) (unpublished).
48. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 169. There we read that, unlike Wajcman, who talks about *the* image rather than about *images* (plural), Godard treats the image as a signifier. Like Lacan does, so Didi-Huberman adds, agreeing totally with Godard’s point of view. “L’image ne porte pas, selon lui [Wajcman], cette fécondité que Lacan reconnaissait au signifiant dans ses effets de ‘chaîne’.”
49. Jorge Semprun, *Literature or Life* (London: Penguin, 1998), *L’écriture ou la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 258. Quoted in Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 111.
50. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 113. Actually, Didi-Huberman quotes a passage from: Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu, II. Le côté de Guermantes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 140.
51. Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 42 ff.
52. Gérard Wajcman, op. cit., 73.
53. Gérard Wajcman, op. cit., 79.
54. This is the title of the opening section in “Images malgré tout” (Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 11).
55. Gérard Wajcman, op. cit., 79 (italics by Didi-Huberman; my translation, MdK). Wajcman quotes the version in the catalogue (Clément Chéroux, op. cit., 236), which differs slightly from the version in Georges Didi-Huberman, op. cit., 52 (he has changed «chambre noir» in «chambre obscure»).

56. Gérard Wajcman, op. cit., 80.
57. From the perspective of the racial evolution of human nature, the Jewish race is a mistake, a failure, an anomaly, and thus has to be removed. Ruled by the stimulus/reaction principle, a race is not only the result of an adaptation to the milieu in which it flourishes; at the same time, it adapts the milieu to the race's needs and wishes. Adopting itself to the milieu and adopting the milieu to the organism, each human race created, during its history, its 'milieu,' i.e. its nation and civilization. This is what the stateless Jews have never been able to, so the race-theory the Nazi's referred to stated. The Jewish race is a mistake made by nature and, therefore, is to be removed from racially evolving human nature.
58. The modern, in fact 'bourgeois' idea that man is *in* but not of the world, has its origin in a similar Christian idea ("The world hated them [those who believe in me as the Christ], because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world") John 17:14—translation *World New English Bible*. The only thing modernity adds is the acknowledgement of the fictitious nature of that idea. More precisely is it by fictionalisation that we, as libidinal beings, 'pervert' our experience of the world. This 'polymorphously perverse' condition of our libidinal life is at the same time the condition of our modern freedom.
59. Pasolini's movie locates Sade's *The last 120 days of Sodom* in the spring of 1944 in Saló, a small enclave under fascist rule in the time Italy was no longer a fascist nation.