Encountering Absence: to be written to be erased to be written

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Introduction

It's birth and death that resist analysis: always the origin and end of the world.
Jacques Derrida, "Artifactualities"

Since Freud, trauma has been considered as a somewhat paradoxical state that manifests itself belatedly, emerging in the form of the traces that it leaves behind.[1] Ulrich Baer, for example, defines trauma as "the failed translation of an unremembered experience,"[2] marked by "the perplexing condition of a missing original."[3] Experienced in its aftermath, trauma cannot be confronted directly and is mediated through the procedures of repetition, deferral, and erasure.[4] As a result, it is distinguished by both pastness and futurity, as traumatic traces reappear violently in the time that is yet to come.

Jacques Derrida describes the peculiar temporality of a traumatic event as directing itself both towards a past and a future, which can never be and never could have been experienced in the form of presence.[5] For him, trauma "takes place when one is wounded by a wound that has not yet taken place, in an effective fashion, in a way other than by the sign of its announcement. Its temporalization proceeds from the to-come."[6] The "missing original" of trauma delineates a place of a profound *absence* that can be neither remembered nor represented, and yet it permeates lived experience. It persists as an un-memory that, in Maurice Blanchot's words, "cannot be forgotten because it has always already fallen outside memory."[7] As such, it also cannot be reintegrated into the teleological order of history, revealing the radical out-of-jointness of chronological, linear time.

Since trauma pervades human experience, Derrida argues for philosophical discourse itself advancing "from traumatism to traumatism,"[8] as long as it necessitates an encounter with the other whose identity cannot be determined in advance; an encounter with absolute non-sameness, forcing one to go out of tune with oneself.[9] This encounter, or event, is inherently perilous and fraught with danger, not only because it implies a dislocation from within, but also because it is

[1] Michaelsen, "Tracing a Traumatic Temporality," 45.
[2] In that, Baer paraphrases the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche. Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 73.
[3] *Ibid*.
[4] Freud uses the following terms to describe the traumatic condition: "belatedness" or "afterwardness" (*Nachträglichkeit*), "delaying," "deferral," or "retardation" (*Verspätung*) (*Ibid*).
[5] Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 38–39.
[6] Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, 104–105.
[7] Blanchot, quoted in Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 39.
[8] Derrida, *Points: Interviews, 1974–1994*, 381.
[9] Derrida, "Artifactualities," 10.

marked by the possibility of a recall of the past, imbuing the present with its traumatic temporality. Thus, trauma (and the experience of palpable absence it brings) can never be put to rest and must be endlessly re-negotiated, even though its very nature indicates "the [human] mind's inability to edit and place an event within a coherent mental, textual, or historical context in ways that would allow it to become part of lived experience and subsequent memory."[10]

This paper examines the problem of the apparent unrepresentability of the traumatic event of such enormous proportions that it will never cease challenging "both the individual and the collective capacity for memory."[11] The event that, according to Giorgio Agamben, indicates "the very aporia of historical knowledge"[12] and has for its "missing original" six million dead.[13] Commonly referred to as "the Holocaust," the genocide of European Jewry during the Second World War can hardly be "contained" in a word, since an attempt to describe that which evades definition is in itself controversial. Being aware of the disputed nature of the term, I will nevertheless use the unfortunate but widely accepted "Holocaust"[14] and only ask the reader to continuously question whether any representation at all can be *just*, when a name is called upon to designate one's encounter with absence left in the place of an ungraspable trauma. For it is this very question that lies at the heart of the current research.

Assuming the position that a representation of the Holocaust must bear witness to the impossibility of its ever being able to represent it, in this paper I investigate how the visual media of film and photography can convey the sense of historical events as ruins (or "cinders") by refraining from signifying that which cannot be signified and indicating the presence of the referent as constituted by its palpable absence, thus prompting the spectator to bear witness to something

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[10] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 10.
[11] *Id*., 67.
[12] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 12.
[13] Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 17.
[14] In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben refuses to use the term "holocaust" unconditionally. He states that not only it arises from one's "unconscious demand … to give meaning back to what seemed incomprehensible" (*Id*., 28), but, what is worse, in its historical usage, the word is anti-Semitic from its inception (*Id*., 31). He indicates that "holocaust" is the scholarly transcription of the Latin *holocaustum* which, in turn, is a translation of the Greek term *holocaustos* (meaning "completely burnt"). The Church Fathers used the term in a twofold sense: 1) literally, to condemn bloody sacrifices performed by the Jews; 2) metaphorically, to equate the torture of Christian martyrs with sacrifice, ultimately defining Christ's sacrifice on the cross as a holocaust (*Id*., 29). However, the term also has a history of being used in violently anti-Semitic polemics against the Jews with a reference to their massacre (*Id*., 30). But even if one were to ignore the derogatory instances of its usage, for Agamben, the equation between "crematoria and altars" is simply unacceptable (*Id*., 31), because establishing a connection "between Auschwitz and the Biblical *olah* and between death in the gas chamber and the 'complete devotion to sacred and superior motives' cannot but sound like a jest" (*Ibid*). Agamben elects "Auschwitz" in a metaphorically extended sense instead. Another common alternative to "the Holocaust" is the Hebrew word "Shoah" (meaning "catastrophe").

that is impossible to bear witness to. Here, I propose to discuss trauma not in the context of psychoanalytic and neurological theories, but rather explore how film and photography can create a certain "phenomenology of hell" by "speaking" from within the effects of traumatic repetition, deferral, and erasure, while making the spectator access the place of alterity within and subsequently vanish beyond language and meaning. Taking deconstruction as my guiding principle, I am inspired by the thoughts of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Giorgio Agamben to conceptualise trauma as a pre-signifying event, in which one enters the state of porosity between the inside and the outside, and from which the need for writing emerges, through the act of witnessing. As such, I investigate the origin of writing (in a Derridean sense) as a decidable action that transforms a "missing original," or one's missing testimony, into a definitive relationship by giving the experienced absence a form. I further aspire to bring to light the rarely acknowledged ethical impetus of deconstructive thinking, stemming from the consideration of the underlying supplementarity between *the I* and *the other*, always bound to reveal themselves in relation to one another.

This paper takes as its corpus three works of representational media that interrogate the essential lacuna of trauma from the point of view of the witness making absences "speak:" the aftermath photograph *Sobibór* (Dirk Reinartz, 1995), the monumental documentary film *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), and the recent historical drama *Son of Saul* (László Nemes, 2015). It analyses the mechanics of still and moving images that thus create not a record but a consciousness of the devastating history that refuses to be "known" and can only be continuously discovered in an act of imaginative construction, going beyond the purely indexical processes. Each discussed work is a burning, a moment of suspension, and horror apprehended on the skin. Each work is an encounter with a spectral arrivant, rising from a holocaust. By examining the affective techniques employed by the artists to first seize the spectator's gaze and then make them stare into a blind spot, it will be shown how an encounter with absence uncovers the spectator's own spectrality, allowing them to "speak" justly on behalf of the beyond. However, to gain access to that treacherous beyond, we must candidly state, together with Agamben, that we *"'are not ashamed of staring into the unsayable' — even at the risk of discovering that what evil knows of itself, we can also easily find in ourselves."*[15]

[15] *Id*., 33 (my italics).

I. Absence: Suspendable Time

Of course, you will never discover a trace, but the only thing that matters is the *attempt*, let's put it that way. What matters is to find a form for this attempt: the forming of the attempt, forming of the impotence.
Armando, *Uit Berlijn*

An attempt to touch the elusive experience of death is a theme prevalent in art dealing with the ruinous heritage of the Holocaust. Lily Brett's autobiographical novel *Too Many Men* (1999) provides a glimpse into such an encounter, as the protagonist Ruth visits Auschwitz with her elderly father Edek. While Edek is a survivor of the death camp, Ruth — through whom the author communicates her own experiences — comes to confront the harrowing past as a secondary witness.[16] Upon entering the site, haunted by memory that is not her own, she is stricken by the sheer nothingness it contains: "Ruth was disturbed by the absence. The absence of dirt, filth, stench, stink. The absence of cruelty. The absence of suffering. She'd expected to see the suffering in the air, on the ground, in the walls and on every fence."[17] However, the landscape she encounters is, in James Young's words, "blood-soaked but otherwise mute."[18]

It is its muteness that overcomes her, its lack of evidence, and its lack of memory. Furthermore, having arrived in the aftermath, her own presence seems banal. To overcome this banality, she must transpose herself out of the bereft present and transform into a ghost of the past: "She felt annoyed to have been bitten by a fly, in Auschwitz. Still, to come out of Auschwitz with only a bite was something other inmates would have prayed for. She stopped herself. It was not other inmates. It was just inmates. She was not an inmate. Others, clearly distinct from her, were there. She was not there."[19] Ruth walks the grounds of Auschwitz performing a balancing act of sorts: with her one foot in the now, pervaded by emptiness, she constantly slips into the abyss of unknowable time, enveloping her in the clout of inexplicable trauma. She is there, but obviously she could not have been there. She is here, but she cannot bear being here.

[16] In Holocaust literature, the primary witness is someone who directly experienced the events of the genocide. The children of Holocaust survivors are collectively known as "the second generation," while their grandchildren are referred to as "the third generation." The phrase "secondary witnessing" describes the experience of non-survivors who did not live through the Holocaust but acquaint themselves with its history through primary sources, such as primary witnesses' oral or written testimonies, the Holocaust physical sites, art objects, etc. See Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 17, 21.
[17] Brett, *Too Many Men*, 531.
[18] Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 119.
[19] Brett, *Too Many Men*, 576.

Baer aptly notes that "trauma is a disorder of memory and time."[20] He further suggests that traumatic memory is often associated with a particular place, as survivors and secondary witnesses encapsulate their tumultuous, fragmentary, and phantom recollections in an actual physical location.[21] Fitting an abysmal memory into a site seems to allow one to acquire some point of reference and, perhaps, a sense of moral bearings.[22] For if trauma is, indeed, "the failed translation of an unremembered experience,"[23] then place appears to be the only *terra-firma* where the "missing original" potentially can be found. However, as time decomposes the traces of all things, no amount of digging can unearth what had been buried. One may only look at the ground wondering: This had been, but what exactly had been?

In this chapter, I argue that trauma originates at the scene of rupture of all spatio-temporal coordinates, as place fails to provide any solid ground but rather serves as an entry point into suspendable time. To explore this traumatic experience, I examine the aftermath art photograph *Sobibór* (see figure 1), capturing the site of the Nazi extermination camp at Sobibór in Poland.[24] What distinguishes this image is its focal point: instead of portraying the physical evidence of the genocide — ruins, memorials, "the rubble of its destruction"[25] — it positions the spectator in relation to an eerie absence that radically unsettles the notion of a stable and originary place and further deconstructs the very idea of presence. By analysing how *Sobibór* turns the viewer into a witness of what Baer calls "an unexperienced experience of a death,"[26] I thus attempt to re-conceptualise trauma not as an "originary" event, or the signified, but as a pre-signifying event inscribed into the movement of *différance* that itself results from an encounter with the void.

Place often figures as a central motif in artistic reflections on and historical accounts of the Holocaust. As the dire events of the genocide disappear from living memory with the passing of the last remaining survivors, the vacated geographical sites of the extermination stand to bear the indexical link between places and their histories. Entwined with the memory of the past, they emerge as the haunted grounds that are disturbingly silent, as Ruth's recollection suggests, and laden with death. Since places do not speak for themselves, what renders a particular site

[20] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 9.
[21] *Id*., 79.
[22] *Id*., 83.
[23] *Id*., 73.
[24] *Sobibór* is featured in Dirk Reinartz's photography book *Deathly Still: Pictures of Concentration Camps* (1995).
[25] Young, "Jewish Memory in Poland," 215.
[26] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 17.

significant is historical knowledge.[27] Places acquire their meaning within a specific cultural framework, and taken out of context, a site would just be a site.

It is precisely with our perception of place that Reinartz's photograph engages. At first glance, it portrays a rather unremarkable view: a clearing in the woods, indistinguishable from a myriad of other such landscapes. With no identifiable markers in sight, one may only surmise that the opening must have been cleared for a reason. Somebody must have been there and done something, but the image itself gives no further indication as to the nature of that activity. It is only through the caption *Sobibór* that the depicted site acquires its specific meaning — Sobibór — a dreadful name for anyone even minimally familiar with the events of the Holocaust. A word conjuring up a landscape like no other.

John Wylie observes that a "landscape is … not just the land itself, but the land as seen from a particular point of view or perspective. Landscape is both the phenomenon itself and our perception of it."[28] According to Lucy Lippard, in its earliest recorded usage, the German fifteenth-century *Landschaft* was defined in spatial terms and denoted "shaped land, a cluster of temporary dwellings … the antithesis of the wilderness surrounding it."[29] In the seventeenth century, the Dutch *landschap* embraced the additional sense of ideational representation, as the word acquired the meaning of a "painting of such a place, perceived as a scope, or expanse."[30] Contemporary language, in turn, delineates a much broader scope of the concept. As Ali Shobeiri suggests, "landscape" can designate any of the following: "nature, habitat, artefact, system, problem, wealth, ideology, history, aesthetic and, finally, … place, depending on what attributes and qualities individuals elicit from and assign to it."[31] Landscape, therefore, encompasses not only spatial properties but also describes one's relationship to a place, or a nexus of relationships formed within a place. Ultimately, Shobeiri concludes "landscape is not something to project, but to encounter as a conglomerate of things in the phenomenal world."[32]

Thus, Esther Jilovsky underscores the duality of its function: landscape is both the literal place that one encounters and the mode of perception of this particular locale, "dependent on

[27] Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 4.
[28] Wylie, *Landscape*, 7.
[29] Lippard, quoted in Shobeiri, *Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography*, 113.
[30] *Ibid*.
[31] *Id*., 114.
[32] *Id*., 29.

specific cultural and temporal parameters."[33] A visitor to a place brings meaning with them, while at the same time the place confronts them with its physicality.[34] So, when one thinks of Sobibór, one would most likely conjure up a mental image of mass slaughter as the most immediate connotation — a death factory swarming with people, hidden in the woods — for Sobibór is associated with the Holocaust, which has come to mean mechanised physical annihilation. However, Reinartz's photograph only captures the clearing. The trees are frozen in stillness, all colour sucked out of them. The air is thick, suggesting no possibility of movement through it. The pines on each side of the image and the woods in the background frame an emptiness, showing the traces of what looks like scorched grass in the middle. There is no slaughter, no swarming masses, no sense of dread. But, likewise, one could hardly imagine a buzzing fly upsetting the dormancy of the scene.

There is a stark discrepancy between the caption and the image in Reinartz's photograph: while the text alludes to history, the depicted landscape stands still, dull, and paralysed by the uncertainty of its reference. There is a dissonance, a discord, and a counterpoint between what the photograph shows (i.e., what the spectator sees) and what it tells (i.e., what the spectator is made perceive). Does the image lie, or does the text mislead us? And if both tell the truth, what are we to make of it?

Sobibór belongs to the genre of aftermath (or late) photography documenting vacant sites associated with past tragic events and strategically situating the spectator in relation to what is not presented within the photographic frame. Not limited to landscape images alone, it can capture both: natural scenes — such as dense forests still littered with unseen landmines long after the war ended — and urban scenes, showing, for example, the wreckage of buildings after a massive explosion. What distinguishes the aftermath photograph is its focus on place, elected on the basis of "the historicity that is attached to it."[35] In other words, the pictured place is located within a historical context and therefore always gestures beyond its present moment. By portraying the current state of sites that *had been*, the aftermath photograph shows a time past within the frame of the image's illusory "now," catching the spectator in a net of concomitant temporalities. Thus,

[33] Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 4.
[34] Jilovsky observes that the varying interpretations of place, resulting from visitors' encounters with the site, can be demonstrated by the diversity of texts written by different generations: while "survivor memoirs testify to the unmuteness of sites, second-generation texts … seek traces of the Holocaust at these sites and third-generation texts … create sites anew" (*Id*., 121).
[35] Shobeiri, *Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography*, 112.

unlike traditional photojournalism, aftermath photographs assume a stance closer to forensic photography.[36] They feature no people, often aestheticize the scenes they capture, and most importantly, thoroughly depend on captions for their interpretation.[37] The textual reference identifies the depicted site as not just any other site, helping the spectator to locate the image within a particular cultural framework.

Photography's reliance on text in general is a well-known fact. Roland Barthes, who attempted to develop a structuralist method of visual analysis of the photograph, postulated that, since our civilization is still one of the text and not of the image, the photograph is always permeated with words surrounding it (caption, article, title, etc.).[38] He identified the linguistic message (along with the connotational and denotational messages)[39] as one of the three levels of meaning conveyed by the photograph. Its function is twofold: while an anchorage "[fixes] the floating chain of signifieds"[40] to one possible denoted meaning to focus the interpretation of the viewer, relay positions the text and the image in a complementary relationship, wherewith meaning emerges from their symbiosis. Most photographs rely on the text as an anchorage to unambiguously convey to the spectator the implied significance of the image. However, in the aftermath photograph, the caption also serves the function of relay, communicating the past-presentness of the pictured scene and inviting the viewer to search for meaning in between what is shown and what is told. The reference of the photograph becomes obscured, as it points at a place of an eloquent absence: whereas the image might show a still vista of the azure sea against the backdrop of the blue sky, the caption will counterpose — *Zeebrugge (Belgium): On March 6th 1987 the Herald of Free Enterprise capsizes just outside the harbor of Zeebrugge killing 192 people*.[41] The sea, as it turns out, conceals the secret of a shipwreck.

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[36] Campany, "Safety in Numbness," 124.
[37] Shobeiri, *Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography*, 112.
[38] Barthes suggests that in order to find an image not accompanied by words, one would need to go back to partially illiterate societies ("The Rhetoric of the Image," 38).
[39] During his structuralist period, Barthes states that at the level of denotation the photograph transmits the literal reality of the scene, denoting it and doubling it as its "perfect analogon." Therefore, he calls the photographic image "*a message without a code*," which has a direct, physical relationship with its subject. At the level of connotation, however, the photograph is an object that has been constructed, treated, read, inscribed into a system of cultural codes, thus inevitably connoting certain aesthetic and ideological values of a society that receives it. Barthes calls the event of "the connoted message [developing] on the basis of a message *without the code*" the photographic paradox and argues that it is precisely its claim to denotation that separates photography from other representational arts. See Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 17, 19.
[40] Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," 39.
[41] This photograph, taken by Gert Jan Kocken in 1999, was exhibited as a part of the gallery entitled *Disaster Areas* (1999) and is featured in Shobeiri, *Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography*, 122.

The aftermath photograph depicts a site of historical significance, and yet, as Baer notes, it "neither confirm[s] nor add[s] to our knowledge of history."[42] How and why did the 192 people die? What exactly happened at Sobibór? Reinartz's photograph, perhaps unintentionally, serves as a symbolic self-referential reflection on the elusive nature of the genre: in its portrayal of the trees, planted by the Nazis between 1943 and 1945 to conceal their ghastly crimes,[43] the image betrays its interest in a death that had been hidden, while at the same time itself shrouding the site in a veil of mystery. The photograph's large panorama format, normally used for capturing scenic scapes,[44] combined with the imposing low framing that crops off the sky, positions the spectator in an uncomfortably confined space, permeated with a stifling air of heaviness. It draws one into the middle of the clearing, for it is impossible to exit the image on the right or on the left, but one is hardly at ease to make the first tentative steps. For a format associated with scapes, this photograph offers no escape. It encases the spectator inside the frame and forces them to look straight ahead, only subtly alluding to why the grey ground might be traversed with those infertile patches.

Baer suggests that *Sobibór* is conceived within the Romantic conventions of landscape art[45] that, according to Shobeiri, "has a strong affinity with the temporal dimension of seeing."[46] On the one hand, the image portrays the place of the catastrophe in the documentary mode, which establishes the "realness" of the connection between the event of Sobibór and the site. On the other hand, it draws on the conventions of the landscape genre that makes the spectator feel addressed back by the image. Thus, Shobeiri argues, the aftermath photograph "elongate[s] the act of looking,"[47] as the spectator is pulled into the photographic void that is meant to signify history: they know that something definitely happened there, but it is all so quiet. Baer further elaborates that the Romantic era created the prototype of the modern spectatorial subject, who looks at the landscape not "for its own sake but as a pointer back to [their] own position."[48] The aftermath photograph lures the spectator to see, arresting their gaze, while, at the same time, it suspends their judgement by directing its obscure referential gesture at a place of absence. While landscape is a

[42] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 79.
[43] *Id.*, 78.
[44] *Id*., 62.
[45] *Id*., 17.
[46] Shobeiri, *Place: Towards a Geophilosophy of Photography*, 123.
[47] *Id*., 113.
[48] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 68.

looking glass, aftermath photography picturing landscape is a murky mirror. The spectator is made question: Is it a nothing that I see? But nothing can come out of nothing.

Reinartz's photograph puts the spectator in the middle of the landscape that encloses them on all sides and addresses them back as Sobibór. But instead of encountering a place that is pervasively horrific, they see the vacant site, arrested in a moment of dull impasse, absurdly out of place and out of time. Jilovsky defines the witness as "somebody who sees or experiences an event."[49] The spectator of *Sobibór*, or any other photograph for that matter, cannot experience the Holocaust. However, they can experience the event of the photograph, which, in this case, brings the movement of time to a halt and annihilates any further possibility of development. The photographed place, "evacuated of human presence but affected by human action,"[50] is a lacuna of memory delineated by the obscure traces of the blinding catastrophe that, in Donna West Brett's words, was itself "an assault on seeing."[51] The viewer is made gaze into a blind spot, encountering as visual artefacts "the *trace*[*s*] *of* the trace[s] of an event"[52] that, although vanished, holds the witnessing subject in an arresting grip. Consequently, *Sobibór* is a reflection on the experience of trauma that emerges as a "fundamental enigma"[53] and resists the incorporation of the originary event into any form of comprehension. The photograph situates the spectator in a setting that "seems inhospitable and strangely placeless,"[54] refusing to denote its absent referent or to serve as a sign signifying "a pre-existing reality."[55] Instead, it pulls the viewer into an uncertain time between the "now" of the image and the "then" of the caption and asks them to encounter their own murky reflection in the place of the harrowing void.

While Baer calls the Holocaust "a crisis of witnessing itself,"[56] he references Jean-François Lyotard's observation that every representation of this cataclysmic trauma, which can be neither stored as a memory nor forgotten, must bear witness to the impossibility of ever finding an adequate means of representing it.[57] Just as the primary witnesses of the events cannot fully appropriate their memories of what Blanchot calls "the impossible real,"[58] so the visual

[49] Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 9.
[50] Brett, *Photography and Place*, 5.
[51] *Id*., 2.
[52] Campany, "Safety in Numbness," 124.
[53] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 10.
[54] *Id*., 69.
[55] Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," 45.
[56] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 19.
[57] See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
[58] Blanchot, quoted in Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 40.

representations of the Holocaust should obstruct gaining access to an understanding: for trauma refers to absence and thus "withholds a sense of knowing."[59] Consequently, instead of serving "as a depository or a mechanically archived slice of the past that is encrypted according to the codes of 'realism,'"[60] Baer advises that historical photographs should be *witnessed*, as they position the spectator in relation to "something that remains off the map of historicist readings."[61]

The term "witness," however, is seen as problematic by some in Holocaust scholarship. For example, Gary Weissman draws a strict distinction between primary witnesses and non-witnesses, as no amount of knowledge about the Holocaust can compare to "the experience of victimization."[62] For him, the inclusion of all groups of non-survivors into the witness category blurs the "meaningful distinctions"[63] between the Holocaust and one's current historical moment. Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, goes even further by stating that "we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses … we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom … They are the rule, we are the exception."[64] Levi's claim accentuates that even the survivors of the concentration camps did not fully experience the operation of the death machinery. Having said that, Jilovsky observes that many researchers adopt the term to describe the experience of non-survivors — from Geoffrey H. Hartman's "witnesses by adoption" to Jackie Feldman's "witnesses of the witnesses" to S. Lillian Kremer's "witness through the imagination" — even though the amount of expressions in use for the phenomenon of secondary witnessing does testify to a lack of coherence in existing literature.[65] Bearing in mind the contested nature of the term, I would now like to explore further how a photograph like *Sobibór* allows its spectator to witness and to what extent their experience might be called witnessing.

The spectator of *Sobibór* finds themselves in a precarious position. On the one hand, the photograph confirms that the catastrophe has ended, reassuring them of the safety of their viewing perspective: the image does not distress them with unspeakable cruelty, does not victimise its human subjects, does not raise the moral question of whether it is permissible to look at the suffering of others without endangering oneself.[66] And, yet, somehow *Sobibór* feels like a trespass

[59] Brett, *Photography and Place*, 6.
[60] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 67.
[61] *Ibid*.
[62] Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing*, 20.
[63] *Ibid*.
[64] Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 83–4.
[65] Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 12.
[66] See Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

and a transgression, as if its address back to the spectator is: What are you doing here? The counterpoint exists not only between the image and the caption, but also between the viewing subject and the photograph itself that, unlike Romantic art, prohibits an easy identification. As Baer notes, it projects the sense that "we don't belong here — that we are excluded, that we have arrived *après coup*, too late and perhaps in vain."[67] By picturing a site that erased human experience in the past, Reinartz does not allow the photographic frame to be fully filled with the spectator's interpretation,[68] for they simply cannot know what happened *there* and have to accept their "irretrievable otherness … in the present."[69] Disregarding their personal background, they come as an outsider, confirming Levi's statement that the experience of death always remains hidden from view.

The aftermath photograph seems to purposefully subvert the view of the early theorists of photography that "it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction."[70] As if challenging Barthes' claim that, through denotation, photography establishes a new space-time category — its having-been-there[71] — *Sobibór* demonstrates the impossibility of its ever being there. *Sobibór* is not Sobibór, just like René Magritte's pipe is not a pipe. The image does not coincide with its "model," insofar as the moment the photograph captures does not coincide with itself. Thus, if we are to suppose that Reinartz's photograph attempts to signify the "being" of Sobibór, then we must look for it somewhere in between the abyss of time into which it has sunk and the spectator's perception of the depicted absence that threatens to engulf them.

Barthes himself was acutely aware of the problematic nature of denotation, stating that the mere assumption that the referent of the scene "really" existed is already a connotation.[72] He elaborates that "a pure denotation, a *this-side of language*,"[73] perhaps, can only be possible "at the level of absolutely traumatic images … [for] trauma is a suspension of language, the blocking of meaning."[74] Hence, an image cannot be absolutely traumatic if it depicts an identifiable presence, since it would not bring the process of signification to a halt. A photograph portraying a heap of

[67] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 63.
[68] *Id*., 65.
[69] Sekula, "Reading an Archive," 448.
[70] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 14.
[71] Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," 44.
[72] Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 30.
[73] *Ibid*.
[74] *Ibid*.

corpses in Dachau, terrible as it is, can serve as an icon of the genocide and be inscribed into the episteme of the Holocaust, but it would fail to denote the being of the murdered people at the moment of their utmost suffering, at the moment when absolute trauma consumed all meaning. The "having-been-there" of such an image would be epistemological rather than ontological and reach no further than establishing a subject-object relationship between the spectator and the depicted scene. To be absolutely traumatic, however, the Holocaust and all the lives it erased may only appear as a non-presence, as "an absence of meaning full of all the meanings."[75] To exist as a signified, Barthes' statement suggests, is not to be signified, not to belong to a teleological framework, not to be thought of as meaning. The "real" Dachau or Sobibór, by this logic, belong in a place outside of all signification.

But where could such a place be found? Hardly in a Platonic world of ideal forms. In response to the inherent difficulties in defining the "real," Derrida questions the divide between being (the signified) and representation (the signifier). He proposes that no signified escapes the play of signifiers, since the signified is not a presence locked onto itself but is always already a trace, and, as such, it finds itself "*in the position of the signifier*."[76] For example, a photograph taken at Dachau, signifying the Holocaust, is a remnant of the event that is itself constituted by memories, written and photographic records, ruins overgrown by forest: words, images, engravings fading over the horizon of history. The "signified" — the Holocaust and the lives it did erase — is but a trace of one's ruptured remembrance. For Derrida, the Holocaust can neither be constituted as a singular unique event, nor can it be denoted. The Holocaust is a myriad of holocausts,[77] each burning with its own writing.

Derrida uses the word "writing" in a broad sense, referring not only to pictographic, ideographic, and phonetic forms of record, but to the whole continuity of phenomena that make it possible.[78] Writing precedes and encompasses any form of -graphy, which captures not the sign of

[75] Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," 42.
[76] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 73.
[77] The word "holocaust" appears frequently in Derrida's writings, and often it is not capitalised. He defines its meaning as the "the burning of everything" in Greek and "sacrifice" (for burning) in Hebrew, stating that he designates by "holocaust" various instances of burning-to-ashes and erasure, such as the burning of books in the beginning of Hitlerism, or even the burning of postcards and love letters. For him, no word is suited par excellence to refer to the Shoah, as "any event is unique, any crime is unique, any death is unique," hence together they can hardly constitute the singular uniqueness of the Holocaust. See Derrida, "Interview with Professor Jacques Derrida."
[78] Thus, language is only one species of writing, along with cinematography, choreography, music, painting, sculpture, photography, etc. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 9.

a thing but the sign of a sign,[79] and stands in the place of the underlying principle of differentiation — or *différance* — describing the continuous deferral of presence and meaning. Derrida, who shapes his philosophy under the influence of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology investigating inner consciousness of time, postulates that present-beingness is always already split, removed from us by a concatenation of traces. Defining the trace as a momentary retention of experience, once experience splits the fabric of space and time,[80] he suggests that each trace emerges not in its being, but in its becoming and is thus incomplete. The trace appears at the moment of its disappearance, never reaching any fixed form. It coincides not with itself in the future or in the past, but with its neighbouring traces that are synchronously concurrent at the moment of their emergence and effacement. The trace, therefore, captures the dynamism of the sign, for before it is a form, it is a play — a process of "supplementarity" — as each instance of incompleteness seeks completion, or in other words, as absence of presentness aspires to acquire presentness but can never succeed. As such, presence dissolves in the multitude of traces and cannot be centred, collected, logocentric. For Derrida, presence is an emptiness, an abyss, which engenders a play of all possible meanings within a given structure. The desire for presence emerges in the abyss of reflections, in the abyss of mirrors, in the abyss of representations of representations.[81]

I earlier described the absence depicted in *Sobibór* as "eloquent," as if it could persuasively express itself. What it expresses, however, is not a resolute statement of death *post-mortem*, but an appeal to the spectator to plunge into an abyss delineated by their own writing of Sobibór. Not to be excluded from the site, one has to abandon one's sense of belonging and take a step forward to be consumed. Reinartz's photograph is a holocaust and a burning. It is a collapse of spatio-temporal bearings, the loss "of meaning full of all the meanings,"[82] a moment of suspension. Within its frame, presence and absence de-constitute each other without acquiring any quintessential form. The absence is not the referent, as Baer suggests,[83] but a self-referential *reference*, engendering the movement of shifting traces in the spectator's mind and inscribing their "I" into a play of *différance* — to be written by the image and then erased again. To encounter a

[79] Derrida mentions that according to Chinese tradition, writing emerges from the contemplation of traces in nature, such as cuts and marks on a turtle's shell or constellations in the night sky (*Id*., 123). As such, the possibility of writing predates discerning patterns in nature.
[80] *Id*., 62.
[81] *Id*., 163.
[82] Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," 42.
[83] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 76.

memory of death that eludes them, they must be bereft of their ability to explain it and rather be swallowed up by the void. Thus, *Sobibór* has no illusive having-been-there perceived as a marker of presence, no signified. It is a space beyond the "event-horizon" of knowledge; an image "bound with an uncertainty and anxiety"[84] that does not intend "to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs."[85] Baer concludes that, as a place "without proper frame or closure,"[86] it "situat[es] us *vis-à-vis* the intangible presence of an absence, which Jacques Derrida has called the 'hell in our memory.'"[87] What one is made witness is *one's own vanishing*, even though temporarily, *beyond language and beyond meaning*.

To reflect on the traumatic past, the photograph must be perceived as trauma. As such, it may offer no comforting belief, no sense of closure, no ontological certainty. It must open before the spectator an abyss, wherein trauma may not transform into a sign but remain in a "gray zone"[88] as a gripping nothing. An immediate shock to comprehension, trauma itself is not experienced belatedly. What is experienced in its aftermath is *writing*: broken pieces of vague recollection that the mind attempts to assign meaning to.

Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo coined the terms *mémoire ordinaire* and *mémoire profonde*, which Lawrence Langer translates as "common memory" and "deep memory," to describe the difference between the expression of the self that has learnt to speak about trauma and the self that is affected by trauma. Langer formulates the theory of "chronological time" and "durational time," building on these two forms of memory. While chronological time forms the strategy to overcome the affect of trauma by assembling the fragments of meaning into a narrative, "in the realm of durational time, no one recovers because nothing is recovered, only uncovered and then re-covered, buried again beneath the fruitless struggle to expose 'the way it was.'"[89] Trauma persists into what I would like to call *suspendable time* — a timeless time, a placeless place beyond reason.

I borrow the word "suspendable" from Derrida, who used it to describe the photographic referent itself as "absent, suspendable, vanished …"[90] The presence of the referent is constituted

[84] Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," 39.
[85] *Ibid*.
[86] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 75.
[87] *Id*., 70.
[88] Primo Levi used the phrase "gray zone" to describe the nullification of conventional moral norms in the concentration camps. See Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*.
[89] Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 15.
[90] Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," 53.

by its noticeable absence — it is misplaced, spectral, belated, and yet persists into the present, jolting it out of joint. While Langer describes traumatic temporality by the adjective "durational" to highlight its lasting power, I believe that "suspendable" better captures the vacuous state of trauma that not only endures but capsizes. Trauma exists outside of time, outside of language. It is a shock and a collision, when meaning cannot be furnished. As such, trauma precedes signification and is a trace of its own becoming. It endures, capsizes, and suspends, because it continuously emerges, never reaching any fixed form, never finding an appropriate writing to contain it. Language, photography, film — whatever type of -graphy is used to determine its form and to hold it is by definition an impotent attempt to collect oneself in the face of trauma. For as long as trauma persists, it will endanger its subject. Writing, thus, is an act of resistance. Just like reason is a defiant act.

Sobibór brings the spectator to the threshold of suspendable time, but it does not aim to reconstruct or appropriate the visceral experience of being in the death camps.[91] For neither a visual representation of the place nor the physical location itself can impart to the unscathed spectator the deep disruptive memory of paralysing fear, cold, or burning flesh. What a photograph like *Sobibór* can demonstrate, however, is that an effort to assemble a historical narrative out of the debris brings one right back to a heap of cinders. Trauma overpowers an attempt at writing, while *Sobibór* is an invitation to sense the affect of the former and the futility of the latter. In that, Reinartz's photograph produces an effect similar to Armando's paintings, also dealing with the subject of the aftermath of the Second World War (see figure 2).

As Armando gets in touch with a traumatic experience that cannot be expressed cohesively, he portrays dramatic, textured shapes in monochrome colours — not distinguishable figures — that serve as indexical traces of human consciousness finding itself *in relation* to the "incomparable experiences of death and destruction."[92] Thus, Ernst van Alphen suggests, the artist reflects on the sensations of overwhelming phenomena and becomes a witness of "aggressive

[91] No writing can impart one with the phenomenal knowledge of experience, unless one has their own memories of the event. Recounting a conversation with her son upon her return to the site of extermination in *Kitty – Return to Auschwitz* (Peter Morley, 1979), Auschwitz survivor Kitty Hart-Moxon suggests that the gulf between the past and the present simply cannot be perceived by a non-survivor: "You see grass. But I don't see any grass. I see mud, just a sea of mud. And you think it's cold? … Well, imagine people here or out beyond that fence working when it snowed, when it rained, when it was hot or cold, with one layer of clothing" (Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 27). While her son sees a well-maintained green lawn and hears silence, she sees smoking chimneys and hears agonising screams.
[92] Van Alphen, "A Master of Amazement: Armando's Self-Chosen Exile," 493.

power"[93] and violence that can only be captured in writing as fragments.[94] What matters is not the resulting representational form, the definitive identity of place and of time, but the very attempt of *being with* the unknowable past that "will never be surrendered or understood."[95] As such, what is being witnessed is one's failure of understanding upon looking into the blind spot and one's futile desire for the discovery of meaning at the site that fails to provide meaning. One stands in relation to alterity that cannot be experienced in the form of an identifiable presence. Consequently, it cannot be captured, only "touched."[96]

Like Armando, Reinartz acknowledges his inability to depict that which "[has] vanished into the unique past time of its event,"[97] for it leaves an absence in its place that cannot be surrendered. He invites the spectator to step into the engulfing void, not to speak about the unknowable and make it known, but to be with it: in Derrida's words, to "bear witness to what we *are* in so far as we *inherit*, and that — here is the circle, here is the chance, or the finitude — we inherit the very thing that allows us to bear witness to it."[98] As such, we bear witness to our own vanishing beyond the horizon of knowledge and our own disappearance into the resounding silence of Holocaust memory that we cannot bear witness to. Thus, the "chance" that Reinartz's photograph gives to its spectator is to hear the silence of death that itself was nothing like silence. The pain of the photograph resides in the realisation that the screams cannot be heard, even though they never cease screaming.

Sobibór captures the event that has vanished but not departed. The present does not allow the past to depart, for one bears witness to one's own inheritance of the abhorrent death that becomes "all the more legible [when] it remains unmarked."[99] The "phenomenological fascination"[100] of the photograph is precisely in its ability to position the spectator in relation to Time itself[101] that resists to be encapsulated in a fixed chronology and reveals its spectral nature. Once the spectator steps into this time, they bear witness to their own transformation into a spectre that cannot materialise into a form of presence or noetic consciousness. Rather, they inhabit the

[93] *Id*., 492.
[94] *Id*., 493–494.
[95] *Id*., 506.
[96] *Id*., 501.
[97] Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," 53.
[98] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 54.
[99] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 129.
[100] Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," 45.
[101] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

space of rupture, where pain abounds, meaning collapses, but nothing can be perceived. What gives rise to the *punctum* of the image — defined by Barthes as a phenomenological state of arrest and intensity felt by the spectator — is not the "nothing" that they see but the experience of being consumed by the void of history, where "nothing is recovered."[102] *Sobibór* itself, as a photographic instance of writing, is an act of resistance against being consumed. And yet, being fully aware of the limitations of its -graphy, it demonstrates the futility of its attempt, only recovering the experience of non-recovery of those who had been un-written in the gas chambers — and in that is its utter horror, suspending the spectator into a traumatic temporality.

Photographing history, thus, in Eduardo Cadava's words, is "never a matter of presence."[103] He suggests that a faithful historical photograph would signal its *not*-having-been-there and only conjure up a "ghostly emergence,"[104] for it would recognise that the otherness of the past simply cannot be contained.[105] Therefore, "the photograph most faithful to the event of the photograph is the least faithful one, the least mimetic one … It dislocates — it *is* the dislocation, from within, of the possibility of reflection."[106] It reveals itself as a trace that defers meaning, emerging out of the play of *différance* and pointing not at an origin, but a self-effacing, differentiated instant in time that, once captured, is already a ruin of memory. Taken from within the site designed to eliminate "the very possibility of experience,"[107] *Sobibór* hauntingly testifies to the fact that experience, indeed, had been erased; while what emanates from the place of erasure is writing pervaded by amnesia — such as a photograph uncertain of its reference, or a fragment of barbed wire stuck on a tree.[108]

[102] Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust*, 15.
[103] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 73.
[104] *Id*., 15.
[105] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70.
[106] Cadava, *Words of Light*, 15.
[107] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 83.
[108] Jilovsky counterposes the heavily developed former concentration camp sites of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Sachsenhausen to Sobibór that, at the time of her visit, consisted of a clearing in the woods and displayed only very minimal reference to its former function, such as a fragment of barbed wire stuck on a tree. According to her, the memorialisation of Sobibór "captures the essence of what non-survivors can know about the Holocaust" (*Remembering the Holocaust*, 148).

II. Encounter: In the Face of Effacement

The world of It is set in the context of space and time.
The world of Thou is not set in the context of either of these.
Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

> And … I … saw … Paradise! The sun was bright and vivid. There was cleanliness all over. It was a station somewhere in Germany. There were three or four people there. One woman had a child, nicely dressed up; the child was crying. People were people, not animals. And I thought: "Paradise must look like this!"
>
> Edith P., quoted in Lawrence Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*

In his final work *Camera Lucida*, Barthes observes that instead of depicting the essential identity of phenomena the photograph typically captures their indexical traces: like that of a creature who had walked in the sand and has since disappeared or been fossilised. The photograph tells one that "this has been,"[109] but unless it arrests the deictic language of the viewer, it has a strictly archival value. For the photograph to be endowed with agency and possess the slightest measure of what Marcel Proust referred to as "the dignity which it ordinarily lacks,"[110] its subject must emerge within the consciousness of the spectator as affect[111] and cease being an imprint that can be examined. What makes a photograph extraordinary is its power to pierce, or *punctum*, that does not reside in the cultural perception of the image — which Barthes terms as *studium*[112] — but belongs to "a kind of subtle *beyond* — as if the image launch[es] desire beyond what it permits us to see."[113] He thus suggests that the phenomenological potential of photography does not amount to its denotational claims but, on the contrary, is revealed in the spectral nature of the medium, so that, in Derrida's later account, "[one] could speak of these photographs as of a thinking, as a pensiveness without a voice, whose only voice remains suspended."[114]

Whereas the *studium* is a centripetal force that directs the spectator to seek meaning, the *punctum* is a centrifugal force that bursts the circle of understanding, leaving the spectator staring into "a blind field,"[115] wounded, and in a state of shock. Famously, to demonstrate the operation

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[109] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 79.
[110] Proust, quoted in Cadava, *Words of Light*.
[111] The term "affect" comes from the Latin *affectus*, meaning passion or emotion. Van Ernst, "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," 23.
[112] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.
[113] *Id*., 59.
[114] Derrida, quoted in Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, ix.
[115] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 57.

of the *punctum*, exposing a certain nakedness against which the spectator finds themselves unguarded, Barthes describes his own labyrinthian search for his late mother through photography; a search fuelled by the torment of loss that inspired his book in the first place. He realises that, for him, the photograph capturing "the truth of the face [he] had loved"[116] is the least one like the woman he knew: a blurry image of her as a five-year-old child accompanied by her brother in a Winter Garden. And yet, somehow, that photograph portrays exactly the woman he loved most and allows him to *rediscover* her, encountering her anew in the image that he calls "just" — an image that is "both justice and accuracy."[117] However, conscious of the fact that the "Winter Garden Photograph" will not result for his reader in the same poignant encounter with love, suffering, and time, he never shows it to us. Its absence is the looming lacuna at the heart of his book: for to feel a fraction of his pain, we must sense his mother as irretrievably lost.

The question of whether photographic representation can be "just" at all is especially relevant in relation to the cinematic treatment of such morally challenging subjects as war or genocide. Claude Lanzmann, who directed one of the most remarkable films about the Holocaust — the 1985 documentary *Shoah* — appears to agree with Barthes' observation that the photograph's claim to mimetic representation is at best deceitful. For him, the problem of using archival photographic material is not only strategic but ethical. How can one signify the calamity of the six million people who were gassed and then thrown into mass graves or burnt? Through language? But trauma is "a suspension of language, the blocking of meaning."[118] Through photography? But the most photography can do is to enliven a ghost,[119] the least it can do is to point at the world, like a child with his finger.[120]

Lanzmann offers a striking solution and rules against using any archival photographic evidence, instead making "the impossibility of telling this story … [his] point of departure"[121] and

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[116] *Id*., 67.
[117] *Id*., 70.
[118] Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 30.
[119] *Id*., 18.
[120] Referring to the Buddhist name for reality *śūnyatā*, "the void," Barthes describes the photographic utterance by the Sanskrit word, *tat*, meaning "that!," and compares its effect to the action of a child indicating the presence of something (or someone) with a brash pointing gesture (*Camera Lucida*, 5).
[121] Lanzmann admits: "When I started the film, I had to deal with, on the one hand, the disappearance of the traces: there was nothing at all, sheer nothingness, and I had to make a film on the basis of this nothingness. And, on the other hand, with the impossibility of telling this story even by the survivors themselves; the impossibility of speaking, the difficulty — which can be seen throughout the film — of giving birth to and the impossibility of naming it: its unnameable character." Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows*, 117; Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 204.

creating what Daniel Morgan calls "negative aesthetics."[122] Acknowledging the limitations of the medium to be able to represent the Holocaust with justice and accuracy, he chooses to rely on eye-witness testimony as the guiding principle for his work, which spanned eleven years and was conducted in fourteen different countries.[123] The resulting 350 hours of footage were condensed into a nine-and-a-half-hour-long film, portraying the harrowing memory of the past relived in the present. However, in his depiction of the "machinery of death"[124] through oral narration, Lanzmann diverges greatly from the traditional discourse of testimony and breaks all the established rules.[125] Not trying to remove himself from the frame, not attempting to remain objective in his interviews with the survivors, by-standers, and perpetrators, and fully exploiting the potential of all cinematic devices available to him (such as visual composition, editing, camera work, setting, diegetic music, etc.), Lanzmann ends up creating a highly charged, interactive documentary that, according to Marcel Ophuls,[126] paves "the way into the gas chambers."[127]

In this chapter, I continue exploring how a work of representational media can be used to "speak" about the unspeakable through engaging with the "negative space," or traumatic absences, and transcending its role as an object of spectatorship by acquiring an affective power that seizes the spectator. But now I shift the focus from photography to film in order to investigate how trauma can be inhabited by the viewing subject via the close-up — one of the defining cinematic techniques that contributes to the specificity of the medium, described by Derrida as "solitude in the face of the ghost."[128] Here, I will consider the close-up as the locus of the interrelationality between the spectator and the projected image and theorise it as an event, or the "experience of the other,"[129] thus suggesting, after Derrida and Deleuze, that this encounter reveals the acute

[122] Morgan, *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema*, 180.
[123] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 203.
[124] *Id*., 206.
[125] In general, Holocaust survivors' testimonies were collected for historical record by such organisations as the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, founded at Yale University in 1982, and the Shoah Foundation (not affiliated with *Shoah*), to name a few. Aiming at objectivity and defining the video testimony as "raw archival footage, the content of which is considered valuable material to scholars, researchers, academicians, etc.," these organisations established a strict code for conducting interviews. For example, the Shoah Foundation guide instructs its videographers to follow the following steps: "Once the interview has begun you should very slowly zoom in to a comfortable close shot. Be sure to avoid extreme close-ups. Once the close shot has been established, do not zoom in or out. Such camera moves would add editorial comment to the testimony, thereby compromising its historical validity" (*Id*., 197).
[126] Marcel Ophuls directed the seminal documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969) in the aftermath of the Second World War, challenging the myth of French resistance under the Vichy government.
[127] Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows*, 238.
[128] See Derrida, "Le Cinéma et ses fantômes," 75–85.
[129] Derrida, "Artifactualities," 11.

experience of the effacement of one's presence in the face of the other. I will further claim that the close-up is essentially spectral, and, as such, it mediates the spectator's coming in contact with their own spectrality. Therefore, by analysing the mode of signification that Lanzmann employs to convey the paralysing horror of the Holocaust, which itself profoundly challenged the camera's ability to convey the "real,"[130] I will argue that in *Shoah* cinema takes a phenomenological turn and creates, through its mediation of the lived experience of time and place, not a record of events but a consciousness of the catastrophic history that, perhaps, can be called *just*, for it allows one *not* to know but to discover.

Shoah opens with a shot of Simon Skrebnik, singing a melodic Prussian military song, as he slowly moves along the calm Narew River on a rowing boat. Simon is introduced by the text preceding the visuals as one of the only two survivors of the four hundred thousand men, women, and children gassed by carbon monoxide in Chelmno. At thirteen, he worked in the death camp and frequently travelled by river between villages, with chains around his ankles. The guards, who accompanied Simon, taught him the Prussian songs. Still remembered by the Polish villagers for his pleasant voice, he is brought back by Lanzmann to encounter the former site of the camp and to reanimate the deadly landscape with his narration.

Lanzmann sets up the stage for the forty-seven-year-old Skrebnik to enter the past through his singing, to bring back the visceral memory of the place that is nothing like the one he is physically present in. Openly acknowledging his role in constructing the film, Lanzmann recognises that for it to be trusted as a document signifying reality, first it must disclose its own artifice. He does not only expose his work's seeming "imperfections" — uncut pauses disrupting one's speech, grainy picture in some parts of the movie, the jerky motion of the hand-held camera, the translator's selective translation missing out parts of the interviewees' responses, etc. — but positions himself as a social actor within the frame, thus becoming an "embodied filmmaker"[131] who actively interrogates his subjects and is prepared to retrieve information at all cost.[132] The

[130] The importance of the horrifying events of 1939–1945 for the development of cinema has been frequently noted. In response to the problem of the unrepresentability of the war and the Holocaust, Jean-Luc Godard takes a critical look at cinematic history in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988), while Gilles Deleuze divides his meditations on cinema *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* into two parts: the movement-image before the war and the time-image after the war.
[131] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 179.
[132] Lanzmann privileged getting information even over his personal safety. On one occasion, he was severely beaten after family members of a German war criminal discovered his hidden microphone and camera. In his interview with the former SS guard Suchomel, Lanzmann lies to his interviewee, falsely promising him that his identity will not be revealed, and also conceals the fact that he himself is Jewish. He shows Suchomel false papers and later reports no remorse whatsoever at disguising his intentions (*Id*., 206).

director here is not a humble conduit but an inflamed nerve, through whom all interactions pass. So when Lanzmann interviews the other survivor of Chelmno, Mordechaï Podchlebnik — who admits that all of him had died in the camp, but he needed to live and prayed to God that he would forget everything and never remember — we learn that the only reason why Mordechaï is talking about it now is "because [Lanzmann is] insisting on it."[133] In such a way, the film alerts the viewer that they are privy to this man's innermost pain, as he relives his traumatic memory for the sake of their spectatorial experience.[134]

To tell a truthful account of the Holocaust, Lanzmann does not only challenge others to remember, but he himself, as a non-survivor, has the "urgency … to retrace its steps."[135] He admits: "In Sobibór, when I ask where the boundary of the camp was, I go across the imaginary line; it becomes real. The zoom in to the sign 'Treblinka' is a violent act. And for the tracking shot into Auschwitz, I push the dolly myself."[136] According to him, the history of the Holocaust is an embodied history. And as such, it is rooted in place: walking through the woods, "hiding the secret of a death camp,"[137] Lanzmann imparts to the audience the anguish of memory. Consequently, we see Simon Skrebnik walk the perimeter of Chelmno as one solitary figure in a vast green field: talking about the mass graves dug for the victims, he touches the black soil and lets it fall through his fingers.[138] Skrebnik is the first and the last person to appear in the first segment of the film, framing its fragmentary narrative, bringing it back to the human realm. The audience encounters the landscape of extermination through his perspective, while his song, resounding hollowly through the air, sounds like a contrapuntal coda to the grimmest of funerals.

Lanzmann's strategy is not to relay "facts" but to reveal the living memory of the past through gestures, tears, uncomfortable pauses, and inappropriate laughter. He chooses the testimonial mode of narration precisely because it is raw and uninhibited, catching his subjects defenceless in the face of their traumas. Indeed, Langer confirms the affective power of the testimony, observing its difference from a linear, structured narrative. He recounts the testimony

[133] *Shoah: First Era*, 00:13:03-00:15:55.
[134] Referencing Lanzmann's *Shoah*, the Holocaust survivor Ruth Klüger notes that the Holocaust sites are now only needed by non-survivors and clearly differentiates her perspective from theirs: "You need the places, I tell his image; I need only the names of the places. Yet what is the difference? We are entangled in the same web, only in different meshes." Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 48.
[135] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 206.
[136] *Ibid*.
[137] *Shoah: First Era*, 00:22:28.
[138] *Shoah: First Era*, 04:23:00.

of Barbara T., detailing her arrival at Auschwitz. First, she describes the events in incoherent speech: it was night, they had no water, some people "had died of thirst, of hunger, of madness,"[139] "inmates whipped us out of the cattle cars"[140] and ordered to stand in marching rows of five. Then, she suddenly stops, struggling to continue at a loss for words and, after a pause, asks if she could read from her written memoir instead. The text narrates: "We are dragged out of cattle cars, vomited into an impenetrable black night … torches keep licking the sky like rainbows, flaming rainbows, and I quickly close my eyes."[141] Langer compares the refined idiom "vomited into an impenetrable black night" with Barbara T.'s spoken testimony, noting that the literary here obscures the real. The homogenous form of the narrative and its figurative language conceal the author, failing to capture "Barbara T. vanishing from contact with us even as she speaks, momentarily returning to the world she is trying to evoke."[142] While her literary prose is sequential, the testimony conveys the coalescence of the past and the present that creates its own complex chronology, pointing to a disrupted, suspendable time.

Langer concludes that the knowledge of the Holocaust, even when it is direct, is inherently fragmentary and can hardly be contained in a single narrative, encapsulated into a "recognizable monument to the past."[143] The rhetorical strategies commonly used to tell a cohesive story would necessarily end up misrepresenting lived experience. This is exactly why, for Lanzmann, such fictional representations as *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) or *Holocaust* (Marvin Chomsky, 1978) are reprehensible,[144] for they assume that the Holocaust can be knowable and encased within the three-act structure. But the catastrophic event itself has no satisfying third act, no resolution, and must prohibit what Lanzmann calls "reassuring identification."[145] There can be no closure, simply because almost all "characters" are dead. Their memory might only be woven out of the surviving voices that try to "speak from within erasure."[146]

Hence, Lanzmann resolves to find the broken traces of the Holocaust in the phenomenal world, bringing one back to the vacant sites of the death camps. He founds the architecture of his film upon the basis of thematic rather than chronological coherence, with the three pillars holding

[139] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 17.
[140] *Id*., 18.
[141] *Ibid*.
[142] *Id*., 20.
[143] *Id*., 161.
[144] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 203.
[145] *Ibid*.
[146] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 80.

this structure together: *places*, *voices*, and *faces*. In her review of *Shoah*, Simone De Beauvoir states that the achievement of the film lies in "making places speak, in reviving them through voices and, over and above words, conveying the unspeakable through people's expressions."[147] *Shoah* refrains from capturing deceptive continuities and instead focuses on disorderly eye-witness accounts that have an "un-story"[148] to tell[149] and point to the past that permeates the present but yet is vanished. No wonder that one of the recurrent images in the film is a landscape, marking the location of a former concentration camp: still and sorrowful, it stands haunted by the impossible memory.

Similarly to Derrida and Agamben, Lanzmann resists the idea of denoting the Holocaust even by name. Without knowing Hebrew, he chooses "Shoah" as the title,[150] because for him "[it] was a signifier without a signified, a brief, opaque utterance, an impenetrable word."[151] In *Shoah*, Lanzmann sets out to delineate the dreadful absence of possibility of ever gaining access to the catastrophe and, at the same time, to rescue it from complete anonymity. Thus, he portrays the Holocaust neither as a story nor as a mythology, but as a world that can be mentally *inhabited* — not known — by means of relating to the individuals who speak and witnessing the places that become enlivened through their voices. A person, whom Lanzmann converses with, functions as the index of the lived experience of time, while the solitary landscape, evoking the haunting presence of the past, serves as the index of the lived experience of place. In such a way, one of the techniques that the film recurrently relies on to establish its space-time continuum is a cutaway from the speaker to a particular locale: for example, as Franz Suchomel, a former SS Unterstürmfuhrer at Treblinka,[152] details the daily operations of the death machinery and describes

[147] De Beauvoir, "Shoah," vii.
[148] Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, 39.
[149] Langer notes that part of the difficulty of sharing survivors' testimonies is that they demand from the listener to suspend their belief and to "abandon traditional assumptions about moral conduct and the 'privileged' distinctions between right and wrong that usually inspire such assumptions. The events they endured rudely dispel as misconception the idea that choice is purely an internal matter, immune to circumstance and chance" (*Id*., xii). He further observes that the struggle of narrating is one of the recurrent and most powerful themes on the tapes, for the survivors themselves tell their stories "from the context of normality now, the nature of the abnormality then, an abnormality that still surges into the present to remind us of its potent influence" (*Id*., 22).
[150] "Shoah" is the Hebrew word meaning "catastrophe." Andrea Liss defines it as "a term that already existed to refer to historical precedents of destruction of the Jewish people. Although the term Shoah tends more toward implications of metaphysical doubt than toward punishment, it still resonates with the concept of divine retribution." Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows*, 4.
[151] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 4.
[152] Suchomel's chilling appearance comes amid the survivors' testimonies, further accentuating the dramatically charged architecture of the film.

the horrifying "funnel," through which the prisoners, stark naked, had to pass before entering the gas chamber, the camera pans slowly across the deadly landscape, allowing the spectator enough time to dwell on the captured emptiness.[153]

Reminiscent of aftermath photography, *Shoah* focuses on landscapes to signify the historical void and to situate the audience in relation to what is not presented within the frame. However, the film does not need to depend on the caption for its meaning and uses survivors, by-standers, and perpetrators' testimonies instead, overlaying them on top of the image and inhabiting the places of absence with the voices of the living to "evoke the specter of the victims."[154] So, when Simon Skrebnik walks the lush green field at Chelmno (see figure 3), which is nothing like the one he would have recalled,[155] on the one hand, he validates the historicity of the locale, while on the other, he indicates to the spectator that in order to follow him into the "real" Chelmno, they would have to envision it.

Thus, Lanzmann's cinematic image goes beyond pure *mimesis*, illustrating Gunning's statement that "a host of psychological and perceptual processes … cannot be reduced to the indexical process."[156] Just like the aftermath photograph, *Shoah* recognises that the otherness of the past cannot be experienced in the form of a presence[157] and acknowledges the belatedness of its arrival, inviting the audience to transform into a witness of the vanished time, as they perceive it in their consciousness, partaking in a play of *différance*. The image, in Elena del Río's words, becomes "translated into a bodily response … body and image no longer function as discrete units, but as surfaces in contact, engaged in a constant activity of reciprocal re-alignment and inflection."[158] The film demands of the viewer to envision the scene in an act of imaginative construction and, hence, furnishes them with a world that is *felt* before it can be processed intellectually. In such a way, Lanzmann shows that before the Holocaust is a word signifying a definitive concept, it is horror apprehended on the skin.[159]

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[153] *Shoah: Second Era*, 00:08:20-00:09:02.
[154] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 208.
[155] Grass in itself is symbolic of the ongoing debate on the memorialisation of the Holocaust, because the death camps at the time of their existence were covered in mud, not in grassland and meadows. Auschwitz survivor Kitty Hart-Moxon highlights that the present sites simply cannot authentically reflect the past: "Now, you see grass, but I don't see grass … Do you know what would have happened if there had been one blade of grass? You would have eaten it" (quoted in Jilovsky, *Remembering the Holocaust*, 51).
[156] Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," 41.
[157] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 70.
[158] Del Río, "The Body as Foundation of the Screen," 101.
[159] Brian Massumi suggests that affect is an embodied, purely autonomic reaction that is first manifested in the skin and is registered as a *felt* state, "for the skin is faster than the word" ("The Autonomy of Affect," 27–28).

This further explains why Lanzmann insists on interviewing people, inhabiting the phenomenal world in the present, rather than using archival photographic material from the past. Aware of the problematics of the "truth claim" of photography, i.e., the notion of indexicality itself,[160] he clearly understands that a documentary film relying on photography's "evidential" properties would necessarily reduce the image to a sign, signifying "a pre-existing reality,"[161] and assign it a function within the context of its discourse to substantiate its particular argument. Thus, it would obstruct the spectator's sensual coming in touch with the impenetrable world and explicate it instead. But Lanzmann's argument is precisely that no argument about the Holocaust can be made.[162] Its disturbing "truth" cannot be denoted. The Holocaust cannot be signified, it can only be inhabited within one's consciousness. And it is to the consciousness of the speaker that the spectator must relate in order to enter the abyss lying outside of any identifiable discourse.

To create a *sense* of the harrowing past rather than knowledge, Lanzmann employs one of the most affective cinematic techniques — the close-up shot — as he zooms the camera penetratingly into the faces of his interview subjects, recounting the workings of the machinery of death. Defined by Walter Benjamin as an entry point into the optical unconscious — which affords the audience an intensity of vision much greater than they would habitually enjoy by identifying with the camera's point of view[163] — the close-up is a "lurking danger"[164] that Mary Ann Doane describes in her paraphrasing of Jean Epstein as "a potential semiotic threat to the unity and coherency of the filmic discourse."[165] Somehow it seems to disengage the objects from the rest of the *mise-en-scène*, "phantasmatising" them and endowing them with a power, unfettered by the laws of time and matter. As such, the close-up resists the logic of continuity editing that strives for "wholeness"[166] and disrupts the flow of the film by arresting the spectator's thought and calling for an embodied autonomic reaction, as they encounter the entity presented on screen.[167] Taking into account Lanzmann's refusal to tell the story of the Holocaust, as if it could be told, it is not

[160] Gunning defines indexicality as "a physical relation between the object photographed and the image finally created" ("What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," 40).
[161] *Id*., 45.
[162] While Godard blames cinema for "public blindness," as it failed to record the genocide from inside the camps (Morgan, *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema*, 179), Lanzmann contradicts him in a public dispute and states that if there were actual footage of the gas chambers, he would destroy it, for he believes it would become a "fetish" object and prohibit any critical reflection on the nature of the Holocaust (Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 203).
[163] See Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
[164] Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," 90.
[165] *Ibid*.
[166] *Id*., 90–91.
[167] Van Alphen, "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," 23.

surprising that *Shoah* abounds in close-ups, showing not only human faces but also things (such as the Treblinka sign or the exhaust pipe of a Volkswagen van). However, there is one scene in particular that exemplifies cinema's ability to "shock" the spectator into the raw sensation of nothingness, positioning them in relation to the face of a man "who had been in the very charnel houses of extermination"[168] as the direct witness of "the death of [his] people."[169]

Lanzmann stages this scene in a busy Tel Aviv barbershop, situating his interview subject, Abraham Bomba, in an environment remotely reminiscent of his workplace at Treblinka. Bomba, a former Sonderkommando worker, was conscripted as a barber to cut hair of women and children right before they were led to the gas chamber. In his testimony, he specifies that he was ordered to cut their hair short, giving off the impression that they would be bathed afterwards. Holding a pair of scissors in his hand and giving a man with short hair a haircut, he continues to tell the story of his friend who was taken from the same Polish town as him and worked by his side. The whole interview, almost twenty minutes long, is presented uncut in a highly unconventional talking-head format.[170] The camera follows Bomba around, as he interacts with the interrogating director and his make-believe "client." However, while the set is fabricated, Abraham's narration conjures up a place in his mind that is persistently real, further accentuating the irreality of the present, as he gradually enters a traumatic temporality and starts speaking from the inside of durational time.

Recounting the memory of unspeakable suffering, Bomba is almost sadistically placed in the environment that his *body* remembers: following the mechanical movements, sinking deeper and deeper into the past, he is confronted with its utter horror and experiences an embodied response to it. The scissors, the hair in his hand, and the cutting, all placed within the context of memory, conjure up that which cannot be represented and for which there may be no words. When Abraham reaches the point in his story at which his friend's wife and sister enter the room, his voice breaks, and he abruptly stops his testimonial narrative. Unable to speak, he tries to continue cutting the man's hair but struggles to collect himself. Overcome by emotion, he refuses to go on, but Lanzmann insists that he must. As Bomba's face winces with emotion, the camera, relinquishing all claims to testimonial objectivity, zooms in to an extreme close-up and stays with him for almost five minutes, capturing him in a gripping encounter with death and revealing before the spectator not the Holocaust but its devastating affect. Finally surrendering to Lanzmann's

[168] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 205.
[169] *Ibid*.
[170] *Shoah: Second Era*, 00:17:18-00:36:15.

unrelenting pleas, Abraham concludes: his friend "tried to do what's best for them — to stay with them a second longer, a minute longer, just to hug them, and just to kiss them, because [he] knew that [he] would never see them again" (see figure 4).[171]

Van Alphen observes that while the experience of affect is intrinsically personal and unique, the phenomenon of affect is relational in nature, because it results from "an *interaction* between a work and its beholder."[172] The energetic "intensity" of the experiential state, which Deleuze ascribes to affects, originates within this relationship and in itself has "no particular content or meaning,"[173] as affect precedes conscious thought. However, the close-up shot can only give rise to affect, if it relies on the process of identification,[174] surrendering the psyche of the spectator to an encounter with the other. Thus, Van Alphen distinguishes between *idiopathic identification* that involves "taking the other into the self on the basis of a (projected) likeness,"[175] enhancing similar features while discarding those features that remain irreconcilably other; and *heteropathic identification* that "takes the risk of — temporarily and partially — 'becoming' (like) the other,"[176] without casting anything aside. It is the latter form of "becoming the other" that is affectively powerful and compels the spectator, to borrow Louise Burchill's phrase, to "undergo a vacillation of her/his own sense of identity."[177] The affective close-up is spectral because through the encounter with the other, the spectator becomes at once "*both and neither*: visible and/nor invisible … , sensible and/nor insensible, living and/nor dead, perceptual and/nor hallucinatory."[178] In other words, one comes into being as *both and neither* oneself and Abraham Bomba to encounter the ghosts inhabiting suspendable time.

The affective close-up is an encounter between the spectator and the other by way of sensation; and, as such, it allows the projected image to cease being an object of spectatorship, arrested by the viewer's thought, and endows cinema with the power to arrest their thought instead, shattering their sense of security. Consequently, this encounter is inherently dangerous, for it entails a temporary renouncement of the I, which, according to Martin Buber, belongs to the realm of things occupying the past, while engendering a surrender of one's being to the treacherous

[171] *Shoah: Second Era*, 00:35:00-00:36:15.
[172] Van Alphen, "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," 25-26 (my italics).
[173] *Id*., 24.
[174] *Id*., 28.
[175] *Ibid*.
[176] *Ibid*.
[177] See Burchill, "Derrida and the (Spectral) Scene of Cinema."
[178] *Ibid*.

present that is constantly in flux and yet "… not fugitive … [but] enduring."[179] Taking a stance *in relation* to the other, one enters a state of sustained being-presentness to the uncanny outside — the "spaceless, timeless present,"[180] from which otherwise one is expelled.[181]

For Derrida, each encounter, to a certain degree, is traumatic, as long as it presupposes "a 'come' that opens and addresses itself to someone, to someone else that I cannot and must not determine in advance, not as subject, self, consciousness, nor even as animal, god, or person, man or woman, living or non-living thing."[182] The event necessitates a meeting with an absolute *arrivant*, whose identity cannot be ascertained in advance.[183] Thus, the event is both originary and marked by the possibility of ghostly recall. On the one hand, it is "an absolute spark"[184] — a new openness; on the other hand, it is a trace of the infinite, inhabited by the phantoms of remembered time, which re-emerge in new constellations. The event is intrinsically unpredictable, even to the point that it may not happen at all. But if it does, the subject of this encounter bears witness to their openness to the other that is yet inappropriable in the present, unrepresentable, spectral. Unlike Buber, who argues that the experience of the other endures in the present,[185] Derrida highlights the impossibility of being present with the other, appearing in its absolute singularity and alterity. The arrivant can neither be evaded nor retained, precisely because it is *the other*, precisely because it is *not* "I." The "now" of the event, thus, is never present, since it relates both to the future (as a becoming) and the past (as a recall), while constituting the present by means of the relational difference, revealed through the encounter.

Within this logic, the event demonstrates the working of *différance* as a thinking that, echoing Buber, "tries to surrender to the imminence of what is coming or going to come … and so

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[179] Buber, *I and Thou*, 10.
[180] *Id*., 11.
[181] In his seminal philosophical-religious poem *I and Thou*, Buber sees one's individual identity, or *I*, as a *becoming*, originating from two kinds of relationships: *I–Thou* and *I–It*. The *I* is intrinsically relational and is bound with the outside world either by the deep phenomenological experience of being in the presence of the other, or by the objectifying experience of using external phenomena as objects and things (*Id*., 3–5). Buber is particularly interested in the first relationship, for it is "through the *Thou* [that] a man becomes *I*" (*Id*., 20). Although one's encounter with the other presupposes one's abandonment of the *I*, as one becomes "seized by the power of exclusiveness" (*Id*., 6), the *I* is continuously formed in the in-between spaces where one's inwardness is propelled outwards. The *Thou*, therefore, is an occurrence of porosity between the inside and the outside, when the inside and the outside can no longer be reduced to a categorisation but entwine in their absolute totality, endangering and at the same time constituting each other.
[182] Derrida, "Artifactualities," 12.
[183] *Ibid.*
[184] *Id*., 20.
[185] Buber, *I and Thou*, 10.

to experience itself."[186] In Derrida's words, the event marks "a relation to what is the other, to what differs in the sense of alterity"[187] and demonstrates what *différance* "is all about:"[188] it is an encounter of one with absolute not-sameness by means of which one "is going out of tune with [oneself] all the time."[189] It is a derangement, a dislocation, and an out-of-joint-ness. Reference and deference are constantly made to the other, while the other returns a gesture of reference and deference. It is a suspendable dance of mutual co-creation and effacement, in which one comes in relation not to a presence but to a spectre that cannot be captured in space and in time. For before it can be named, compressed into the sign, and turned into an "it," the spectre has already vanished.

Noting the spectrality of the close-up, Deleuze observes that it "turns the face into a phantom"[190] and is inseparably linked with the process of effacement. His definition of "the face," however, extends far beyond a human visage, including anything that displays a "reflecting, immobile unity" and "intensive expressive [micro-]movements"[191] — like the exhaust pipe of a van with smoke coming out of it. The face seems to resist spectatorial objectification, it is not passive: "[it] stares at us [*dévisage*], it looks at us … even if it does not resemble a face."[192] Doane observes that the close-up transforms a "faceified" object "into a quasi-tangible thing, producing an intense phenomenological experience of presence."[193] Yet, the close-up abstracts what it captures from space and from time, "rais[ing] it to the state of Entity"[194] and reducing the world "to this face, this object."[195] The world, contained in the affective close-up, seizes the spectator and withstands being seized.

Deleuze postulates that traditionally the human face has been ascribed a triple function: it is individuating (i.e., embodying one's uniqueness), socialising (i.e., manifesting one's social role), and relational (i.e., ensuring one's communication with others and oneself).[196] However, the close-up, according to him, strips the face of all three roles, leaving it in a state of absolute muteness: "The close-up is the face, but the face precisely in so far as it has destroyed its triple function — a

[186] *Id*., 10–11.
[187] Derrida, "Artifactualities," 10.
[188] *Ibid*.
[189] *Ibid*.
[190] Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, 111.
[191] *Id*., 98.
[192] *Ibid*.
[193] Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," 94.
[194] Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, 106.
[195] Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," 91.
[196] Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, 110.

nudity of the face much greater than that of the body, an inhumanity much greater than that of animals."[197] Doane notes that this moment of absolute muteness should be regarded as stasis, for it resists linear narrative, acting as "the vertical gateway to an almost irrecoverable depth behind the image."[198] The affective close-up, therefore, points to an absence: what is phenomenologically experienced as "presence" is in fact the loss of the image's identity, the loss of that which was never really given, or in Derrida's words, which was "always already split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance."[199] The face addresses the spectator as an absence, as the absolute other that cannot be captured or appropriated in advance — it reveals itself as the spectral arrivant.

Thus, when the audience encounters Abraham's face in the close-up, it becomes doubly effaced: first by his personal traumatic arrest that reduces him to the naked sensation of horror, and secondly by the close-up that further transforms him, as a character within the frame, to a palpitating muteness. The spectator, in turn, encounters deadly silence and is seized by the naked sensation of an unexperienced death, mediated through the face that had seen more than it ever should have seen or could have perceived. Consequently, the spectator transforms into the naked perception of total erasure, where there is nothing at all to see. Through this shot, the world becomes reduced to an absolute paralysis and the absolute absence of meaning, as the audience stands in relation to their total negation.

To describe the power of affect, Deleuze uses the expression "shock to thought."[200] For him, it is "the encountered sign" that must be felt before it can be "recognized, or perceived through cognition."[201] First, the affect is shock — an arrest and a seizure — that is sensed as an absence in the face of effacement; and only then it is transformed into thought by means of which the spectator attempts to reclaim their "I." Through affect, the spectator has the phenomenological experience of the other — in this case, Abraham Bomba and the world that lies beyond words and comprehension — as an energetic intensity that seizes them in its absolute muteness, positioning them in relation to total alterity. Through the process of heteropathic identification, the close-up erases not only the identity of the image, abstracting it from all spatio-temporal coordinates, but

[197] *Ibid*.
[198] Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," 97.
[199] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 112.
[200] Deleuze, quoted in Van Alphen, "Affective Operations of Art and Literature," 22.
[201] *Ibid*.

also the identity of the spectatorial I. It blurs the boundaries between sensible and insensible, real and virtual, living and dead, present and absent, and reveals the spectator's own spectral nature, subverting any attempt at determining being as presence, while making an emptiness and a hollowness sensually felt.

For Deleuze, this sensation serves as "a catalyst for critical inquiry,"[202] as affect momentarily suspends the spectator, only to "launch" them into further exploration in search for meaning that can account for the experience of being suspended in the first place. Considering Lanzmann's intention to create a narrative that can remain porous and open to continuous re-evaluation, I would like to suggest that the representational form that he uses to "contain" the Holocaust is essentially affective. By making places speak and embedding people in places, he creates *Shoah* "exclusively in the present tense"[203] and makes the spectator *encounter* the stupefying horror of the genocide, "recollected in tranquillity,"[204] without attempting to comprehend it. Lanzmann's "refusal to understand" [205] is imparted to the audience as "the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude."[206] In order for the image to be *just*, Lanzmann develops a cinematic language that allows him to portray "sheer nothingness"[207] and conjures up the place of an embodied response to the events that evade representation. Disorienting and petrifying, it is nonetheless a place of grief that gives its visitor a chance to lament the six million dead, whose voices can only be heard internally.

[202] *Ibid*.
[203] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 204.
[204] *Ibid*.
[205] Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows*, 117.
[206] *Ibid*.
[207] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 204.

III. Writing: Naming Death

This ought not to have happened. And I don't just mean the number of victims. I mean the method, the fabrication of corpses and so on — I don't need to go into that. This should not have happened. Something happened there to which we cannot reconcile ourselves. None of us ever can.
Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*

A genuine reflection on the genocide would not be possible without addressing the ethical aporia of the death camp, sombrely defined by Giorgio Agamben as "… the site in which it is not decent to remain decent, in which those who believed themselves to preserve their dignity and self-respect experience shame with respect to those who did not."[208] Lanzmann is conscious of the fact that to speak of the Shoah he must point his lens at the "gray zone" and at least try to probe how it turns the oppressor into the oppressed and the victim into the executioner. For the darkest, most twisted atrocity of the camp was not only that innocent people were brutally murdered *en masse*, but that it was no longer possible to claim innocence, as upon entering this site the prisoners were stripped of all definitions of traditional ethics. Good and evil coalesced into moral impasse. Lanzmann admits that to trace this hellish transformation, he sought out not any survivor but a very particular type: "direct witnesses of the death of their people: the people of the 'special squads.'"[209] In other words, those deportees who, like Abraham Bomba, were deemed too usable to be killed immediately and were organised by the SS into groups, managing every stage of the exterminations: from the other deportees' arrivals to the gas chambers to the crematoria.

Unsurprisingly, it is the Sonderkommando that Levi describes as "National Socialism's most demonic crime."[210] They are the epitome of the "gray zone," submitted to the most extreme conditions and forced to perform such work that "one either goes crazy the first day or gets accustomed to it."[211] To reiterate, one either goes crazy or forms a *habit* out of the absurdity *sine causa* that should have pushed one into insanity. This place of decent indecency, the "gray zone" wherein good and evil collapse in on each other, becomes the moral setting of the final film — *Son of Saul* (László Nemes, 2015)[212] — that I will consider in this paper. The choice of this film is predicated upon its extraordinary effort to *witness* from within the abyss not blinding

[208] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 60.
[209] Kerner, *Film and the Holocaust*, 205.
[210] Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 52–53.
[211] *Ibid*.
[212] In 2015, *Son of Saul* won the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film.

nothingness but the origin of *writing* as a result of an encounter. In fact, the origin of just one word — *son* — just one relation. One just relation, perhaps? The final questions that I would like to address are the following: What word(s) can be *just* enough to emerge from the "gray zone," fusing the human and the nonhuman? What word(s) does/do stand on the threshold of life-death? In this last chapter, I will thus examine what meaning may originate from one's erasure by non-meaning; or, what one may say if one manages to survive an encounter with the abyss.

Son of Saul is set in Auschwitz-Birkenau in the early autumn of 1944 and follows Saul Ausländer, a Hungarian Jew whose very name means "foreigner," for a little over than a day. The day, however, happens to be not an ordinary day in the charnel houses of extermination, but the 7th of October 1944 — the date of the Sonderkommandos' historic attempted uprising against their guards. Although Saul's story is completely fictional, the script (written by Nemes and the historian and novelist Clara Royer) draws heavily on what is known as "the scrolls of Auschwitz" — the collected texts of Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando members, who secretly wrote and buried around the concentration camp their first-person, single-perspective accounts of what they had witnessed[213] (in particular, the film relies on the eyewitness record of the Hungarian doctor Miklos Nyiszli, detailing his work in the crematorium's autopsy rooms).[214] Thus, while the protagonist's journey through the camp, as he tries to bury the body of a boy he believes to be his son in a seemingly absurd obsession, takes place on a metaphorical plane, the setting of Auschwitz is a staggeringly realistic reconstruction of the actual historical site. So much that even Lanzmann praised the film for its depiction of Saul as a witness to the realities of the death camp rather than the gas chamber (of which there could be no witnesses).[215]

Nemes' film inherits from the scrolls not just factual precision but, even more importantly, a certain ethos: namely, that Auschwitz was experienced as a lived place by individuals whose own fragmented vision of their environment wholly dictated their perception. The Holocaust is *a* holocaust for each and every person who by a whim of fate was burnt. *Son of Saul*, hence, does not aspire to narrate a grandiose saga on behalf of all the victims, but rather focuses on one panicked and confused perspective of a man who strives to live just one more final day in a claustrophobic world that has no meaning, only absences. To inhabit the consciousness of the

[213] Ratner, "Imagining the Unimaginable," 58. "The scrolls of Auschwitz" are published in French under the title *Des voix sous la cendre* [*Voices from Beneath the Ashes*] (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2005; not available in English).
[214] Liebman, Review of *Son of Saul*, 47.
[215] Lanzmann, "*Shoah* Filmmaker Claude Lanzmann Talks Spielberg, *Son Of Saul*."

protagonist, Nemes makes a strategic stylistic decision: instead of using standard point-of-view shots to suggest what Saul might possibly be thinking, he follows him around with a hand-held camera shooting "over his shoulder," tightly framing him in medium and close-up shots, immersing the spectator in the environment Saul is trapped in. The spectator is made "inhabit" Saul's body, as he navigates the factory of death: we see what he sees (or does not see), we hear what he hears (or does not hear), and, just like Saul, we need a reason to survive this harrowing hell, abounding in disorienting noises — cries, gunshots, shrieks, shouting voices in various languages — for just a while longer. The very first scene is exemplary of Nemes' technique, as it establishes an out-of-focus green field with a spectral figure entering a sharply focused close-up (shot with a 40mm lens curtailing the depth of field)[216] — Saul — who is immediately engaged in his deathly work, taking the new arrivants into the camp. What we are faced with is not his thoughts, but his vision, for he has no resource for thoughts while serving the death machinery as its instrument.

Instantly Saul is drawn into action, silently accompanying, through dirty corridors and halls, the deportees on their way to death. He obediently carries out various tasks, seemingly mentally uninvolved albeit cooperative with the other Sonderkommandos, closing doors, directing the crowd, collecting their belongings, as they are commanded to strip naked; whilst in the background, we hear the atrocious lie these people, flickering as blurry shapes in Saul's field of vision, are told: namely, that they will be bathed and employed for good pay in various workshops shortly afterwards. All to keep them quiet and to spare everyone the embarrassment of the obvious truth. Only one woman suddenly breaks into tears and screams, as she is being forcefully dragged into the gas chamber. What follows then is one of the most agonising scenes in the film: the metal door is shut behind the naked crowd, and Saul, amongst the other workers, patiently waits as shrieks, cries, and howls, rising in volume and intensity, pour from the closed chamber. The living do not flinch, as people are being turned into corpses.

Indeed, as Agamben notes, "in Auschwitz, people did not die; rather, corpses were produced. Corpses without death, non-humans whose decease is debased into a matter of serial production."[217] He goes on to say that it is precisely this chain production of death at Auschwitz that is "the proper name of its horror."[218] As the SS refer to the dead bodies as "it" and "*figuren*,"

[216] Liebman, Review of *Son of Saul*, 47.
[217] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 72.
[218] *Ibid*.

neither death is called death, nor corpses are called corpses.[219] Thus, Agamben suggests, "the dignity offended in the camp is not that of life but rather of death."[220] At Auschwitz, one cannot die, for death that everyone carries within them and that gives each person, in Rilke's words, "special dignity and silent pride"[221] is denied. When the gassing is finished, corpses are mechanically dragged out of the chamber and thrown into a pile, while Saul quickly goes back to scrubbing the floor before the next party of deportees-to-be-turned-*figuren* arrives. No one seems to notice the dead, much less lament them.

Grieving in the death camp is an oxymoron. For funeral rites to take place, the living must acknowledge the dead as an uncertain life-death form that has undergone a mysterious transformation from being woke to being irrevocably lost. Agamben observes that the idea of death having a certain dignity that should be respected originates not from the field of ethics but magic, as originally the honour and care given to the deceased body was intended to protect the world of the living from the potentially threatening presence of the deceased person's "soul."[222] For nothing can come out of nothing — if there were life, there must be a "remainder," haunting the animate world. To appease this uncomfortable and indeterminate presence (of absence), funeral rites were performed to establish cultic relations with the ancestors, who then could be thought of not only as allies, but, more importantly, defined entities. The human-nonhuman was granted the right to become the dead.

Subsequently, the SS use of the word "*figuren*," designating the corpses of the death camps, is more than honest disrespect. In itself, it is also a magical incantation. Having the literal meaning of "puppets," or "dolls," the word *figure*, as Shoshana Felman notes, is "a disembodied verbal substitute which signifies abstractly the linguistic law of infinite exchangeability and substitutability."[223] To name a deceased body a doll is to not see it, or rather, to *un*see it.[224] According to Felman, the whole essence of the Nazi scheme "is to make itself — and to make the Jews — essentially invisible."[225] The dead bodies, turned into smoke and ashes, were not meant to be dead but to vanish entirely. For death to be transformed into nothingness, the "occult"

[219] *Id*., 70.
[220] *Ibid*.
[221] Rilke, quoted in Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 72.
[222] *Id*., 79.
[223] Felman, "In an Era of Testimony," 44.
[224] It is not surprising that the SS were incapable of bearing witness. The voided vocabulary rendered the executioners incapable of seeing and hearing.
[225] Felman, "In an Era of Testimony," 44.

linguistic procedure first rendered the deceased void of substance. So when the deportees (another word that obstructs the sight of an individual) were turned into *figuren* behind the heavy metal door, there was nothing to see. The transformation from life to death, from the human to the nonhuman, never took place: one kind of predefined entity entered the chain production of death and another kind of predefined entity exited it. Nothing remained to be negotiated or determined. The Nazi jargon, invented to numb and to blind anyone who had the ability to feel and to see, silenced the nagging discomfort. Moral paralysis had to be turned into a habit for everything to work according to the scheme. The scheme itself induced moral paralysis.

Saul's habitual pattern of operation, however, gets unexpectedly interrupted, when he hears a voice unlike all the other voices. A kind of guttural hiss, a fading aspirated wheeze, struggling for breath. He follows the voice and sees a teenage boy who miraculously survived the gas chamber, laid on a medical bed and surrounded by doctors, one of whom comments that he only knows about one more such case — a girl. This impossible witness of the gas chamber is not just alive: he makes himself known. His laboured breath is not articulate like speech, but nonetheless it communicates his persistent struggle. It is neither a scream nor dead silence that, in a place like Auschwitz, cannot make anyone heard. Rather, it is an individuating sound of a body that has been damaged but not turned into a *figure*. It is a breathing, struggling body, and, hence, it is a human being — a boy. Saul watches, as the head doctor strangles the child who, to Saul, no longer appears as a disembodied linguistic signifier. The boy was alive, and then he was murdered, while Saul has witnessed the transformation of life into death. Suddenly the overwhelming absurdity ceases to be a habit, and we observe the scene from a rare standard point-of-view shot, inhabiting Saul's thought rather than vision.

In response to the killing, Saul volunteers to bring the child's body to the autopsy room, where he asks the doctor, a fellow Hungarian, "to not open the boy."[226] The doctor, perhaps recognising Saul as one of his own, promises him five minutes with the boy in the evening. What unfurls for the rest of the film is Saul's hopeless quest to find a rabbi and give the dead a proper burial. A quest so absurd, given Saul's circumstances, that it begs the question of what exactly has happened there that momentarily suspends Saul from his emotional paralysis, which allowed him to carry out his usual work, and endows him with the will, focus, and determination that he has lacked up to this point?

[226] *Son of Saul*, 00:12:50.

In Greek, the word for witness is *martis*, martyr. According to Agamben, it has two senses: first, being derived from the verb "to remember," it denotes the survivor's vocation to remember; secondly, referencing Luke 12: 8-9 and Matthew 10: 32-33 that describe the spectacle of Jesus' apparently absurd death, martyrdom can be interpreted as a divine command to find a reason for the irrational.[227] Either way, to witness is to stand in the stead of something that cannot make itself remembered or understood, something irretrievably lost to time and calling on to someone else, who is capable to speak on its behalf, by proxy. Let us recall Levi's definition of the "true" witness, the drowned:

> "I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses … Those … who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute … They are the rule, we are the exception … We who were favored by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate but also that of the others, indeed of the drowned; but this was a discourse on behalf of third parties,' the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally. The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death … We speak in their stead, by proxy."[228]

What survivors testify to, therefore, is a missing testimony.[229] They speak on behalf of the children of death who have been forever silenced or are mute. But before one may lend the drowned one's voice, one must first hear theirs.

Saul finds himself standing in relation to a voice that emanates from the lacuna of death, from which people do not return. He hears not language, not a story told, but an aspirated wheeze that says nothing, except for that it cannot bear witness to its own lacuna, even though it has not been deadened (yet). The boy is what Agamben would call "the complete witness,"[230] who by definition cannot bear witness, because the possibility of language and decidable action collapse inside the abyss. The compulsion to first hear the boy and then to "speak" on his behalf thus transforms Saul into a witness who lets his own language "give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness."[231] To bear witness on the boy's behalf, to testify to his existence, Saul must translate the sound coming from the abyss into *a* language, if the boy is to bear witness through Saul's words, for nothing else remains of him.[232] But, as Agamben notes, the

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[227] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 26–27.
[228] Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 83–4.
[229] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 32.
[230] *Id*., 39.
[231] *Ibid*.
[232] Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 192.

pre-existence of language as the main instrument of communication does not oblige one neither to communicate nor to use language for communication.[233] Saul obliges himself to bear witness not because language is readily available to him, but precisely because it is not: for "only if language bears witness to something to which it is impossible to bear witness, can a speaking being experience something like a necessity to speak."[234]

That "something like a necessity to speak" is key here. To bear witness by proxy, one must not necessarily perform a speech act but *something like* speech — some kind of decidable action that compensates for the undecidability of the complete witness' being that makes itself known to the survivor only in its death. Paraphrasing Agamben, the boy may only give Saul a non-language to which Saul's language responds.[235] However, Saul's act of witnessing may not give birth to language necessarily but, rather, to writing in a broad sense — the underlying act of -graphy, a compulsion to do something in response to something else that differentiates itself as an entity from the void and "utters" a sound, because it itself has the compulsion to be *made* known. To bear witness, thus, is to perform a decidable action that transforms the indeterminate presence of one's missing testimony into a definitive relationship. It obliges one to take responsibility for the absence and to give it a name. And in this, the act of bearing witness undoes the "gray zone" by eradicating the ethical aporia of non-action. Once Saul witnesses the boy's transformation from being woke to being irrevocably lost, he acquires something like a necessity to speak — the need to bury him, to "write" him into the ground and the words of the prayer, so the boy can be released into death, of which he himself had testified.

Consequently, Saul's act of writing is born as testimony: the boy imparts to him his being of death and, by extension, his being of life. Saul must place his language in the position of the boy's lost ability to speak: "to establish oneself in a living language if it were dead, or in a dead language if it were living…"[236] The child becomes the active-passive, human-nonhuman, life-death entity to whose most intimate non-language Saul responds with the awakened being of his own life-death. In such a way, Saul and the boy become bound in a relationship that brings Saul back to an ethical plain where an encounter with the other is possible, but only as a human-nonhuman who must speak the boy's last "word" of mortality. As a result of encountering the child

[233] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 65.
[234] *Ibid*.
[235] *Id*., 38.
[236] *Id*., 161.

as an indeterminate presence, Saul must give up his own "determinacy," as he obliges to bring forth not the boy's life but death, thus "fathering" the child's being and "birthing" him into his innate dignity.

In the death camp, however, Saul himself cannot function as a liminal being: he cannot be *both and neither*. If he is to survive another day, he must be emptied of all the categories of life-death: he must not see, hear, or smell it. For if one lets oneself be affected into an *encounter* with the dead, one goes crazy. Whether Saul loses his mind or goes unbearably sane can be debated, however the point of the matter is that from the moment he holds the boy in his hands to the moment he eventually loses his body at the end of the film, Saul is overcome by a kind of "moral mania"[237] and, consequently, can no longer function as a cog in the death machinery. What is more: he can no longer cooperate with his comrades who, in turn, are preparing an uprising after learning that the SS are planning to exterminate their group. Thus, Saul's "impossible-to-realize-obsession"[238] with death is juxtaposed to his fellow men's desperate and heroic fight for their lives, while he himself is repeatedly blamed for "having forsaken the living for the dead."[239] His actions not only hinder the others' progress[240] but put them in immediate danger, as he hides the corpse in their cell. Having witnessed the boy's death, Saul surrenders to the realisation that they are all already dead[241] and simply voices the boy's testimony, determined to carry out one last ritual in spite of the obliteration — the burial, which neither him nor his comrades will have. In a paradoxical way, Saul is dedicated to making the boy present in his death, so that his "son" can *die* in their stead, because all the others are absent walking corpses, whose destiny is to be turned into *figuren*.

To his fellow men, however, Saul's actions indicate not a sense of moral sanctity, but that he, indeed, has become one of the "drowned." Saul's deterioration into utter indifference to the outside world and his complete dedication to the corpse, which seems to be the only reason that keeps him alive, mark his symbolic transformation into a human who has "'touched bottom' in the

[237] Liebman, Review of *Son of Saul*, 48.
[238] *Ibid*.
[239] *Son of Saul*, 01:27:27.
[240] For example, Saul fails to obtain gunpowder, losing it in the hellish scene of the mass burning of the deportees, while compulsively looking for a rabbi.
[241] *Son of Saul*, 01:25:00.

camp and has become a nonhuman"[242] — the *Muselmann*.[243] In him, the human testifies to the nonhuman, and the human being survives only by surviving the human being,[244] letting death consume life. Agamben observes that it is only at the point of the *Muselmann* that ethics in the death camp may begin, for the latter is the "complete witness" in whom "man and non-man"[245] are forever indistinguishable. The dead body of a boy becomes "son," a source of life, and the reason to risk oneself to the point of total erasure. The word "son," however, is just a signifier to justify Saul's relational position to death to both the others and himself. To make the boy *seen*. The first time he voices this relation is not until the middle of the second act, when he addresses the man he believes to be a rabbi: "You gonna help me bury my son."[246] The second time he repeats the word to his comrade Abraham, who reminds him that Saul has no son. By assuming "the charge of bearing witness … [he bears] witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness"[247] and looks into the eyes of the Gorgon, in whose place stands the "son."

The word "son" seems to cover something Saul has no word for — a certain inexplicable nakedness, at once both innocence and guilt, before the fact "that each man is his brother's Cain."[248] For if the boy dies in the stead of the living, then the living survive in the stead of the dead. The boy's most intimate wheezing and hissing for life reveals to Saul his own intimacy he cannot break away from. His own *shame*, grounded in "the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide oneself from oneself."[249] Agamben describes this intolerable obviousness of one's Being to itself thus:

> "It is as if our consciousness collapsed and, seeking to flee in all directions, were simultaneously summoned by an irrefutable order to be present at its own defacement, at the expropriation of what is most its own. In shame, the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject."[250]

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[242] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 54.
[243] The term *Muselmann* (German plural *Muselmänner*) is the camp jargon that was used to denote those prisoners who no longer feared death, for they had given up on life completely and simply existed as "mummy-men," clouted in their overflowing apathy for the struggle of the living. See Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*.
[244] *Id*., 82.
[245] *Id*., 54.
[246] *Son of Saul*, 01:13:20.
[247] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 34.
[248] Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved,* 81–82.
[249] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 105.
[250] *Id*., 106.

In shame, Saul becomes the witness of his own witnessing and discovers his own acti-passivity: he is both subjected and sovereign, experiencing self-loss and self-possession, and he "must respond to what deprives [him] of speech."[251] What he thus confronts inwardly is the "non-place of language,"[252] wherein one knows but cannot speak of one's knowing, because one's consciousness reveals its own erasure, "bringing to light the disjunction on which it is erected: the constitutive desubjectification in every subjectification."[253] What crumbles is the idea of language, and speech in particular, to serve as the condition of pure and wholly present cognition of oneself. One cannot speak of the self-presence of consciousness but rather of its infinite deferral, divulged in a word that arrives too late and, perhaps, in vain.

When Saul names the boy his "son" he, thus, performs an act of concealment, betraying the violence[254] of naming, as it condenses an essence into a thing that can be named. What he discloses to the others is not the boy's "proper" name or Saul's "proper" relationship to the boy, but that which functions as a signifier and establishes the boy's belonging to a social group,[255] so that he can be recognised by the others as worthy of Saul's "fatherly" obsession. Whereas the "proper" relationship is the unnameable space of oscillation between life and death, humanity and inhumanity, the I and the other, the given, uttered name serves to inscribe that which is unique and indeterminate in nature into a system of familiar relations: "I shall bury him, *because* he is my son." As such, it is an act of arche-writing, the loss of self-presence, the loss of that which was "incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance."[256] The "son" conceals the *Muselmann*. Somewhere between the "son" and the *Muselmann*, Saul discovers the intolerable shame of his being that, in Kimura Bin's words, "touches the world of death in the form of an excess, an excess that is both an overflowing and a source of life,"[257] ultimately realising its own having been and its own vanishing.

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[251] *Id*., 107.
[252] *Id*., 123.
[253] *Ibid*.
[254] Rousseau and Saussure (whose work Derrida analyses) link writing to violence, because for them a representation always skews reality and thus alters it. The signified becomes a shadow of the signifier: reflections constantly deflect meanings that can no longer find their origins, becoming split in themselves and not only in their image. Derrida, however, shows that speech undergoes the very same "violent" procedure and does not have a "better" claim to the signified. See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.
[255] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 125. The transition from speech to writing (in the narrow sense) happens within arche-writing itself. Thus, writing foregoes speech and not the other way around, as Rousseau and Saussure would have it.
[256] *Id*., 112.
[257] Bin, quoted in Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 127.

The act of speaking necessarily implies both subjectification and desubjectification: one speaks language only to realise that one is being spoken through by it. The possibility of speaking testifies to the impossibility of speaking,[258] to the profound silence that pervades each word, for in the beginning was a free-floating signifier that describes not the essence of the thing but the uncertainty of the I-other relationship. If the voice of death that called Saul came from a girl, he would have called her his "daughter." In any case, what lies between Saul and his "son/daughter" is the abysmal death announcing its own arrival. And to its voice Saul responds with his being that concerns not the meaning of the word "I" but the very act of responding. His "I" is a *verb* implying pure existence: I hear, I see, I sense, I will, I am. It is not surprising then that the first word Saul utters in the film is *Ich will*,[259] volunteering to bring the child's body to the autopsy room. *Me*, *I will*, *Do*. Saul's first utterance is an enunciation that shutters the boundary between the inside and the outside, to which he is no longer numb. His speech does not define a thing, does not give anyone or anything a name but states his readiness to act and be responsible for the other. The other cried of his coming death but could not bring himself to it. So Saul will bury him. The other's will to die preceded Saul who now must *act* on its behalf: to "speak" on behalf of its impossibility of "speaking," to complete its incompleteness as a relational being. He must bury the child not because he is his "son," but because "*I will (to) die*" has been spoken through him.

Saul is a witness in so far as he completes the imperfect act of death. But to act in the world he must first state his "I," which itself never coincides with itself. He is a "split" consciousness, acting on behalf of the other's incompleteness, at the moment of the split "now." In the event of speech, the lived experience of his being is forever divided and pushed into "a limitless past."[260] The living being cannot "speak" and the speaking being cannot "live," while "the human being exists in the fracture between [the two]."[261] The articulation between the lived and the spoken, the human and the nonhuman, may only take place in the "verb," in an *act* of seeking one's completeness through the incompleteness of the other and vice versa. That is why we hardly see Saul speak, with the rare exceptions of when he must state to someone else what he must do in order to bury his son: to find a rabbi, to get outside, to hide the body, etc. Speech cannot overtake his lived experience, his pure action. If he is to bear witness, he must continuously remain

[258] *Id*., 116.
[259] *Son of Saul*, 00:11:29.
[260] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 122.
[261] *Id*., 134.

suspended in the disjunction between the I and the other and inhabit "the intimacy that betrays [his] non-coincidence with [himself, which] is the place of testimony."[262] To bear witness, he must stand in the place of the boy's extinguished voice and perform *a kind of* writing — the burial.

Agamben concludes that to truly bare witness means that:

> "Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject …"[263]

The human becomes the agent of the nonhuman and witnesses its own desubjectification, thus realising that it always stands beyond its own humanity.[264] Life can be called life only if it bears witness to death, while a human being is human only if they bear witness to the nonhuman,[265] inhabiting a liminal space between the living being and the speaking being, experiencing their own non-coincidence with themselves and seeking for completeness in the act of acting on behalf of the incompleteness of the other. The place of testimony is the place of the loss of the "I" for the "I will (do)," expressed in a *gesture* towards the other. To bear witness is to substitute *I* for *me*, as it is being affected beyond its own humanity.

To return to my initial questions raised in the beginning of this chapter: What word(s) can be *just* enough to emerge from the "gray zone," fusing the human and the inhuman? What word(s) does/do stand on the threshold of life-death? Is it "son"? Is it "me"? Is it "I will (do)"? "Son" justifies "I will (bury)" because "the other stands in relation to me." However, what lies underneath all of these words is the decidable action to *be with* the other, beyond one's own humanity. To act justly and to speak justly, one must draw words — which are actionable verbs in essence, assuming one's own responsibility — from the traces of that beyond.

Saul carries out his mission as far as getting the child's body out of the camp during the uprising and almost crossing the river, in which the body finally drowns. Saul is rescued by the very rabbi who first refused to help him bury his "son" in the camp, and the two, together with the other escapees, hide in an abandoned building. But for Saul all hope has been lost. The voice that has spoken through him has drowned, and he has finally drowned with it. For Saul, beyond the

[262] *Id*., 129–130.
[263] *Id*., 120.
[264] *Id*., 135.
[265] *Id*., 121.

river there is only obliteration. On a symbolic plain, the dignity, innocence, and intimacy that Saul afforded himself while caring for the child's body are incompatible with survival in the death camp. His ethics cannot let him live another day. So when he sees a Polish peasant boy in wet clothes appear in the door opening, looking at the escapees in silent shame and terror, all Saul does is — he *smiles*, failing to discern his own "Cain" (see figure 5). The boy, who leads the Germans to the hiding place, rises in Saul's eyes as "Lazarus,"[266] and Saul dies *happy* from the gunshot that must have felt like bliss, while the boy runs away, disappearing in the fields, having re-established the "gray zone" of the death camp.

Conclusion

The three works of visual media discussed in this paper take the idea of occluded vision as their point of departure and focus on absences, triggering the spectator's affective response and asking them to interrogate the essential lacuna between a traumatic un-memory and its representation. As such, they reflect on historical trauma as the "destruction of experience, place, context, … belonging"[267] and do not attempt to offer closure. Instead, they put the viewer in relation to an inexplicable abyss, drawing them into an encounter with the tangible absence of the other's presence that can never find completeness in itself. Thus, the spectatorial subject is invited to undergo a process of desubjectification and inhabit in their mind the place of oscillation between the inside and the outside, life and death, human and nonhuman, the I and the other, and ultimately to come in touch with the spectrality of their own identity, allowing them to bear witness to "an unexperienced experience of a death"[268] in the first place.

I have investigated three loci of absence — place (in *Sobibór*), memory (in *Shoah*), and death (in *Son of Saul*) — to show that trauma originates at the scene of rupture of spatio-temporal coordinates and has for its "missing original" not a signified but, rather, the perpetual play of supplementary, or *différance*, that eventuates in writing (in a Derridean sense), as one bears witness to the other within oneself and responds to the other by acting on behalf of their incompleteness. As such, it has been suggested that witnessing is conceived in the desire to act as a conduit for that

[266] Or, rather, the boy rises in Saul's *thought* as "Lazarus," as here Nemes employs another standard point-of-view shot.
[267] Baer, *Spectral Evidence*, 73.
[268] *Id*., 17.

which cannot act in and out of itself. Thus, it always implies one's own reaching out beyond oneself to be written to be erased to be written in the constant exchange between the self and the other, as they call upon each other and are being called upon. In that, I perceive a very important and often overlooked ethical application of deconstruction: namely, that what one retrieves from the abyss is not nihilistic paralysis but, on the contrary, a gesture extended toward the other that in itself is justice — an actionable "verb" *I will …*, assuming one's responsibility for … *stand in relation to the other*.

A representation may be called just, when it draws the spectator into its play of self-deflecting reflections and reveals to them that it is nothing more and nothing less than an encounter with absolute alterity, absolute absence, absolute unknowability that nonetheless wants to be known. And it is to that absolute beyond that the spectator may choose to respond. What *Sobibór*, *Shoah*, and *Son of Saul* demonstrate is that Holocaust commemoration must involve acts of secondary witnessing that prompt the spectator to encounter the abyss of its horror and ultimately address their sense of individual responsibility as a historical actor. By assuming a representational form that is essentially affective, they appeal to the viewer's judgement and compel us to mentally inhabit the catastrophes of the past as our own, so that we can ask ourselves, after Hannah Arendt: If somebody pointed a gun at you and said, "Kill your friend or I will kill you," would you refuse to murder because you are unwilling to live together with a murderer — yourself?[269]

[269] Arendt, "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship," 18, 44.

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Appendix

Figure 1: *Sobibór* (Dirk Reinartz, 1995)

Figure 2: *Kopf* (Armando, 1989)

Figure 3: *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985)

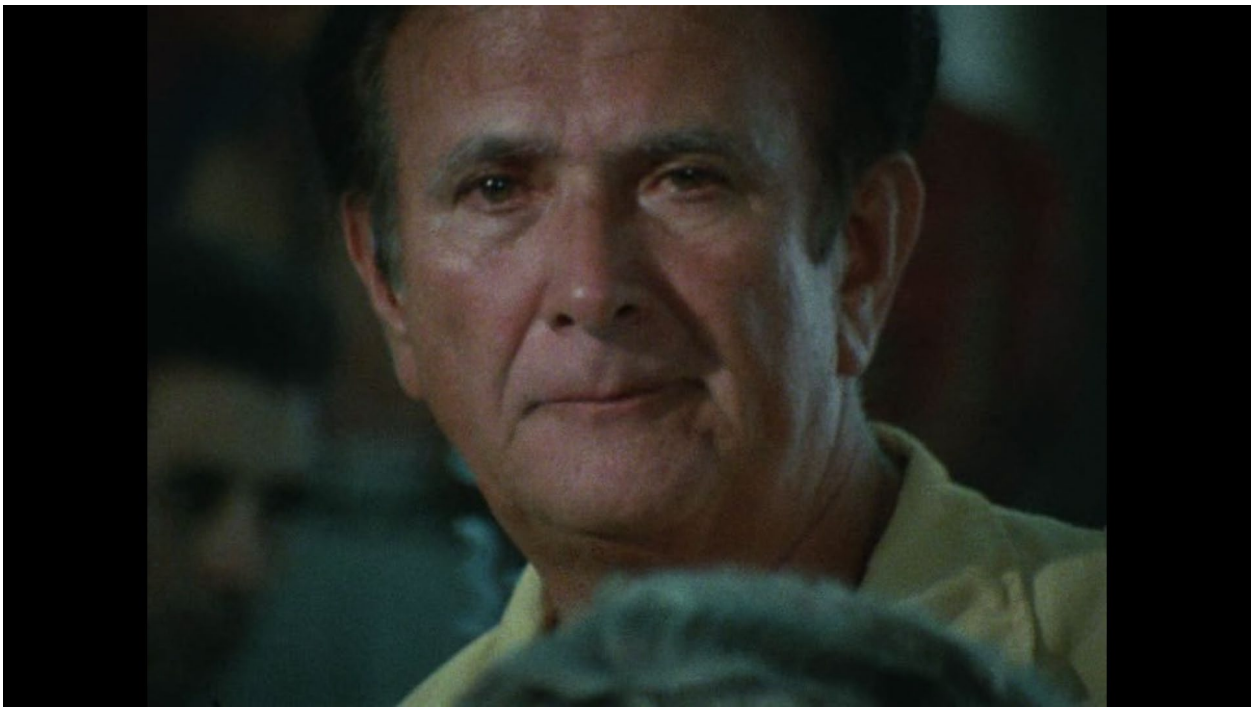

Figure 4: *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985)

Figure 5: *Son of Saul* (László Nemes, 2015)