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PART I. IMAGES IN SPITE OF ALL [1]

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To know, we must imagine for ourselves. Auschwitz, August 1944: four images *in spite of all*, in spite of the risks, in spite of our inability to know how to look at them today. The *Sonderkommando* at work. Survival and impulse to resist: emitting signals to the outside. The photographic image appears from the fold between the imminent obliteration of the witness and the unrepresentability of the testimony: to snatch an image from that real. Organization of the clandestine photo-taking. First sequence: from the gas chamber of crematorium V, images of the incineration pits. Second sequence: in the open air, in the trees at Birkenau, image of a "convoy" of undressed women. The roll of film, hidden in a tube of toothpaste, makes it into the hands of the Polish Resistance, in order to be "sent further."

Against All Unimaginable [19]

The photographs from August 1944 address the unimaginable and refute it. First period of the unimaginable: the "Final Solution" as a generalized "disimagination" machine. To obliterate the victims' psyche, their language, their being, their remains, the tools of their obliteration, and even the archives, the memory of this obliteration. "Reason in history" always refuted by singular exceptions: the archives of the Shoah are made of these exceptions. Photography's particular ability to be reproduced and to transmit *in spite of all*: the absolute prohibition of photographing the camps coexists with the activity of two photography laboratories at Auschwitz. Second period of the unimaginable: if Auschwitz is unthinkable, then we must rethink the bases of our anthropology (Hannah Arendt). If Auschwitz is unsayable,

then we must rethink the bases of testimony (Primo Levi). If Auschwitz is unimaginable, we must give the same attention to an image as we do to what witnesses say. The *aesthetic* space of the unimaginable ignores history in its concrete singularities. How Robert Antelme, Maurice Blanchot, and Georges Bataille did not conform: the fellow human and the human species.

In the Very Eye of History [30]

To remember, one must imagine. Image and testimony in Filip Müller: immediacy of the monad and complexity of the montage. The urgency of the “photographic” present and the construction of images in the *Scrolls of Auschwitz*. The image as an “instant of truth” (Arendt) and “monad” appearing where thought fails (Benjamin). Dual system of the image: truth (the four photos in the eye of the cyclone) and obscurity (the smoke, the blur, the lacunary value of the document). The *historic* space of the unimaginable ignores this dual system of the image, asks too much or too little of it, between pure exactness and pure simulacrum. The photographs from August 1944 rendered “presentable” as icons of horror (touched up) or “informative” as simple documents (cropped), without attention to their phenomenology. Elements of this phenomenology: the “mass of black” and the overexposure where nothing is *visible* constitute the *visual* marks of the condition of their existence and of their very gestures. The images do not say the truth but are a fragment of it, its lacunary remains. The threshold of the *in spite of all*, between the impossible and the actual necessity. “It was impossible. Yes. One must imagine.”

Similar, Dissimilar, Survivor [41]

For a visual critique of the images of history: to tighten the viewpoint (formally) and to open it (anthropologically). The photographs from August 1944 as a drama of the human image: the “inseparable” (Bataille) and the similar. When the executioner dooms the human to the dissimilar (“mannequins,” “columns of basalt”), the victim resists by maintaining the *in spite of all* image of the world, the image of oneself, of the dream, and of the human in general (Levi: “to stand straight”). To maintain even the images of art: inexactness but truth of Dante’s figure of Hell (*Lasciate ogni speranza . . .*). Recourse to the image as a lacunary necessity: lack of information and visibility, necessity of the gesture and of the apparition. The photographs from August 1944 as *surviving things*: the witness did not survive the images that he extracted from Auschwitz. Time of the flash and time of the earth, instant and sedimentation: need for a visual archeology. Walter Benjamin in the face of the “authentic image of the past.”

PART II. IN SPITE OF THE ALL IMAGE [49]

Fact-Image or Fetish-Image [51]

Critique of the unimaginable and its polemic return. The thought of the image as a political terrain. The photographs of August 1944, historical and theoretical symptom. "There are no images of the Shoah." To render *all of the real* absolute in order to contrast it with the *all image*, or to historicize the real in order to observe its lacunary images? A controversy on the relations between singular facts and universal theses, images to think about and an already thought image. The unimaginable as an experience is not the unimaginable as dogma. That the image is *not all*. Images of the camps: ill seen, ill said. "There are too many images of the Shoah." That to repudiate images is not to critique them. Thesis of the fetish-image, experience of the fact-image. The photographic "print" between image and real. The fetish: the all, the standstill, the screen. A philosophical debate on the powers of the image: veil or tear? The dual system of the image. That the imaginary cannot be reduced to the specular. Between the primacy of veil-images and the necessity of tear-images. Susan Sontag and the "negative epiphany," Ka-Tzetnik and the photographic "rapture," Jorge Semprun and the ethical moment of the gaze. "To abruptly attend our own absence."

Archive-Image or Appearance-Image [89]

The historical "readability" of images does not go without a critical moment. From the fetish-image to the evidence-image and to the archive-image. Claude Lanzmann and the rejection of the archive: "images without imagination." The filmmaker and "peremptory" judgment. The fabricated archive confused with the verified archive. The hypothesis of the "secret film" and the polemic between Lanzmann and Semprun. Hyperbolic certainty and unthought of the image. To rethink the archive: the breach in conceived history, the grain of the event. Against radical skepticism in history. To rethink the evidence [*preuve*] with the ordeal [*épreuve*]. To rethink the testimony: neither *différend*, nor pure silence, nor absolute speech. To tell *in spite of all* what it is impossible to tell *entirely*. Testimony of the members of the *Sonderkommando* beyond the survival of the witnesses. The *Scrolls of Auschwitz*, the multiplication of the testimony, and the photographic "scroll" of August 1944. To rethink imagination beyond the opposition between appearance and truth. What is an "image without imagination"? Jean-Paul Sartre, or the image as act. Quasi observation. Door or window? The "margin of the image" and the order of the two sequences: inverting the views.

Montage-Image or Lie-Image [120]

Four images, two sequences, one montage. Imagination and knowledge by montage: access to the singularities of time. The image is neither *nothing*, nor *one*, nor *all*. Claude Lanzmann and Jean-Luc Godard: centripetal montage and centrifugal montage. "No single image" actually *tells* the Shoah, yet "all the images" *speak* only of it. From polarity to polemic: the two meanings of the adjective mosaic. A single all image, or a profusion of part images? Founding moments: memory and the present in the work of Alain Resnais, archive and testimony in the work of Marcel Ophuls. "What we cannot see, we must show." Lanzmann's montage-narrative and Godard's montage-symptom. When making a montage is not to falsify but to create a "form that thinks" and to make the image dialectic. *Table critique*: cinema *shows* history by reviewing it as through a sequential montage. Dachau placed in a montage with Goya, Elizabeth Taylor, and Giotto. Angel of resurrection according to Saint Paul, or angel of history according to Walter Benjamin? A dialectic without outcome.

Similar Image or Semblance-Image [151]

Two viewpoints confronted with the gaze of a third. To make a montage does not mean to assimilate, but rather to fuse together *resemblances* by making *assimilations* impossible. Similar is neither semblance nor identical. Doubles and contrasts: the Jew and the dictator in Charlie Chaplin. The speculative hyperboles of the unrepresentable and of the unimaginable. "To know, one must imagine for oneself." The image at the heart of the ethical question. Hannah Arendt and the imagination as a political faculty. In what way can an image "save the honor" of a history? Redemption is not resurrection. The *Endlösung* and the *Erlösung*: from Kafka and Rozensweig to Scholem and Benjamin. The "true image of the past passes by in a flash." The model of cinema: fleeting images, pregnant nonetheless. Filmic redemption, according to Siegfried Kracauer. Critical realism: the image dismantles and assembles sequentially the spatial and temporal continua. Perseus in the face of the Medusa: the trick of the shield, the courage to know and to confront *in spite of all*. The image in the period of the torn imagination: the crisis of culture. To open, by an image of the past, the present of time.

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FOUR PIECES OF FILM SNATCHED FROM HELL

In order to know, we must *imagine* for ourselves. We must attempt to imagine the hell that Auschwitz was in the summer of 1944. Let us not invoke the unimaginable. Let us not shelter ourselves by saying that we cannot, that we could not by any means, imagine it to the very end. *We are obliged* to that oppressive imaginable. It is a

response that we must offer, as a debt to the words and images that certain prisoners snatched, for us, from the harrowing Real of their experience. So let us not invoke the unimaginable. How much harder was it for the prisoners to rip from the camps those few shreds of which now we are trustees, charged with sustaining them simply by looking at them. Those shreds are at the same time more precious and less comforting than all possible works of art, snatched as they were from a world bent on their impossibility. Thus, images *in spite of all*: in spite of the hell of Auschwitz, in spite of the risks taken. In return, we must contemplate them, take them on, and try to comprehend them. Images *in spite of all*: in spite of our own inability to look at them as they deserve; in spite of our own world, full, almost choked, with imaginary commodities.

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Of all the prisoners in Auschwitz, those whose possible testimony the SS wanted to eradicate at any cost were, of course, the members of the *Sonderkommando*. This was the "special squad" of prisoners who operated the mass extermination with their bare hands. The SS knew in advance that a single word from a surviving

member of the *Sonderkommando* would quash any denials, any subsequent cavils with respect to the massacre of the European Jews.¹ “Conceiving and organizing the squads was National Socialism’s most demonic crime,” writes Primo Levi. “One is stunned by this paroxysm of perfidy and of hate: it must be the Jews who put the Jews in the ovens; it must be shown that the Jews [. . .] bow to any humiliation, even to destroying themselves.”²

The first *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz was created on July 4, 1942, during the “selection” of a convoy of Slovakian Jews for the gas chamber. Twelve squads succeeded each other from that date; each was eliminated at the end of a few months, and “as its initiation, the next squad burnt the corpses of its predecessors.”³ Part of the horror for these men was that their entire existence, including the ineluctable gassing of the squad, was to be kept in absolute secrecy. The members of the *Sonderkommando* could therefore have no contact whatsoever with the other prisoners, and even less with whatever “outside world” there was, not even with the “noninitiated” SS, those who were ignorant of the exact functioning of the gas chambers and the crematoria.⁴ When sick, these prisoners, kept in solitary confinement, were denied admission to the camp hospital. They were held in total subservience and mindlessness—they were not denied alcohol—in their work at the crematoria.

What exactly was their work? It must be repeated: to handle the death of their fellows by the thousands. To witness all the last moments. To be forced to lie to the very end. (A member of the *Sonderkommando* who had attempted to warn the victims of their fate was thrown alive into the crematorium fire, and his fellows were forced to attend the execution).⁵ To recognize one’s own and to say nothing. To watch men, women, and children enter the gas chamber. To listen to the cries, the banging, the death throes. To wait. Then, to receive all at once the “indescribable human heap”—a “column of basalt” made of human flesh, of their flesh, our own flesh—that collapsed when the doors were opened. To drag the bodies one by one, to undress them (until the Nazis thought of the changing room). To hose away all of the accumulated blood, body fluids, and pus. To extract gold teeth for the spoils of the *Reich*. To put the bodies in the furnaces of the cre-

matoria. To maintain this inhuman routine. To feed coal to the fires. To extract the human ashes from that “formless, incandescent and whitish matter which flowed in rivulets [and] took on a grayish tint when it cooled.” To grind the bones, the final resistance of the wretched bodies to their industrial destruction. To pile it all up, to throw it into a neighboring river or use it as fill for the road being constructed near the camp. To walk on 150 square meters of human hair, which fifteen prisoners are busy carding on large tables. To occasionally repaint the changing room; to erect hedges—for camouflage; to dig supplementary incineration pits for exceptional gassings. To clean, to repair the giant ovens of the crematoria. To start over each day, constantly threatened by the SS. To survive in this manner for an indeterminate time, drunk, working day and night, “running like the possessed in order to finish more quickly.”⁶

“They had no human figure. They were ravaged, mad faces,” said the prisoners who were able to see them.⁷ They survived, however, for the time left to them, in the ignominy of the job. To a prisoner who asked him how he could stand work of that kind, a member of the squad replied: “Of course, I could throw myself onto the electrical wires, like so many of my friends, but I want to live [. . .]. In our work, if you don’t go mad the first day, you get used to it.”⁸ In a manner of speaking. Yet some who thought themselves “used to it” simply threw themselves into the fire.

If this kind of survival surpasses any moral judgment (as Primo Levi wrote)⁹ or any tragic conflict (as Giorgio Agamben commented),¹⁰ then what could the verb *to resist* mean in such constraints? To revolt? That was a dignified way of committing suicide, of anticipating a promised elimination. At the end of 1942, a first projected rebellion failed. Then, in the great mutiny of October 1944—when, at least, crematorium IV was set ablaze and destroyed—not one of the 450 members implicated survived, of whom “only” 300 were due to be gassed soon in any case.¹¹

At the core of this fundamental despair, the “impulse to resist” probably abandoned them, condemned as they were to die, leaving them to concentrate rather on *signals to be emitted* beyond the borders of the camp: “We, the prisoners of the *Sonderkommando*,

kept thinking about how we might make known to the world the details of the gruesome crimes which were perpetuated here.”¹² So in April 1944, Filip Müller patiently gathered some documents—a plan of crematoria IV and V, a note on their operation, a list of the Nazis on duty as well as a Zyklon B label—and passed them along to two prisoners who were attempting escape.¹³ Such an attempt, as all of the *Sonderkommando* knew, was hopeless. This is why they sometimes confided their testimonies to the earth. Digs undertaken around the borders of the Auschwitz crematoria have since brought to light—often long after the Liberation—the devastating, barely legible writings of these slaves of death.¹⁴ *Bottles cast into the earth*, as it were, except that the writers did not always have bottles in which to preserve their message. At best, a tin bowl.¹⁵

These writings are haunted by two complementary constraints. First, there is the ineluctable obliteration of the witness himself: “The SS often tell us that they won’t let a single witness survive.” But then there was the fear that the testimony itself would be obliterated, even if it were transmitted to the outside; for did it not risk being incomprehensible, being considered senseless, unimaginable? “What exactly happened,” as Zalmen Lewental confided to the scrap of paper that he was preparing to bury in the ground, “no other human being can imagine.”¹⁶

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It is in the fold between these two impossibilities—the imminent obliteration of the witness, the certain unrepresentability of the testimony—that the photographic image suddenly appeared. One summer day in 1944, the members of the *Sonderkommando* felt the perilous need to snatch some photographs from their infernal work that would bear witness to the specific horror and extent of the massacre. The need to snatch some photographs from the *real*. Moreover, since an image is made to be looked at by others, to snatch from human thought in general, thought from “outside,” something *imaginable* that no one until then had even conceived as possible—and this is already saying a lot, since the whole thing was planned before being put into practice.

It is troubling that a desire to *snatch an image* should materialize at the most indescribable moment, as it is often characterized, of the massacre of the Jews: the moment when those who assisted, stupefied, had room left for neither thought nor imagination. Time, space, gaze, thought, pathos—everything was obfuscated by the machinelike enormity of the violence produced. In the summer of 1944 came the “tidal wave” of Hungarian Jews: 435,000 of them were deported to Auschwitz between May 15 and July 8.¹⁷ Jean-Claude Pressac (whose scientific scrupulousness generally avoids any adjectives or any empathetic phrases) wrote that this was the “most demented episode of Birkenau,” carried out essentially in crematoria II, III, and V.¹⁸ In a single day, 24,000 Hungarian Jews were exterminated. Toward the end of the summer, there was a shortage of Zyklon B. So “the unfit from the convoys [i.e., the victims selected for immediate death] were cast directly into the burning pits of crematorium V and of bunker 2,”¹⁹ in other words, burned alive. As for the gypsies, they began to be gassed en masse from August 1.

As usual, the members of the *Sonderkommando* posted at the crematoria had to prepare the entire infrastructure of this nightmare. Filip Müller remembers how they proceeded to “overhaul the crematoria”:

Cracks in the brickwork of the ovens were filled with a special fireproof clay paste; the cast-iron doors were painted black and the door hinges oiled [. . .]. New grates were fitted in the generators, while the six chimneys underwent a thorough inspection and repair, as did the electric fans. The walls of the four changing rooms and the eight gas chambers were given a fresh coat of paint. Quite obviously all these efforts were intended to put the places of extermination into peak condition to guarantee smooth and continuous operation.”²⁰

Above all, on the orders of *Hauptscharführer* Otto Moll—a particularly feared and hated SS officer who had taken personal charge of the liquidation of the *Sonderkommando* from 1942 on²¹—five incineration pits were to be dug in the open air, behind crematorium V. Filip Müller has described in detail the technical experi-

mentation and the management of the site led by Moll: from the conception of gutters to collect the fat, to the concrete slab on which the “workers” would have to pulverize the bones mixed with the human ashes;²² to the elevated hedgerows forming a screen to make all of this invisible from the exterior (fig. 1). It is significant that, apart from far-off aerial views, *not one single view* exists of crematorium V—situated in a copse of birch trees, from which Birkenau gets its name—that is not obscured by some plant barrier²³ (fig. 2).

To snatch an image from that hell? It seemed doubly impossible. It was impossible by default, since the detail of the installations was concealed, sometimes underground. But also, outside of their work under the strict control of the SS, members of the *Sonderkommando* were carefully confined in a “subterranean and isolated cell.”²⁴ It was impossible by excess, since the vision of this monstrous, complex chain seemed to exceed any attempt to document it. Filip Müller wrote that “in comparison with what [Otto Moll] had imagined and what he had begun to undertake, Dante’s Hell was only child’s play.”²⁵

As it began to grow light, the fire was lit in two of the pits in which about 2,500 dead bodies lay piled one on top of the other. Two hours later all that could be discerned in the white-hot flames were countless charred and scorched shapes [. . .]. While in the crematorium ovens, once the corpses were thoroughly alight, it was possible to maintain a lasting red heat with the help of fans, in the pits the fire would burn as long as the air could circulate freely in between the bodies. As the heap of bodies settled, no air was able to get in from outside. This meant that we stokers had constantly to pour oil or wood alcohol on the burning corpses, in addition to human fat, large quantities of which had collected and was boiling in the two collecting pans on either side of the pit. The sizzling fat was scooped out with buckets on a long curved rod and poured all over the pit causing flames to leap up amid much crackling and hissing. Dense smoke and fumes rose incessantly. The air reeked of oil, fat, benzole and burnt flesh.

During the day-shift there were, on average, 140 prisoners working in and round crematoria IV and V. Some twenty-five bearers were employed in clearing the gas chamber and removing the corpses to the pits [. . .].

The SS guards on their watch-towers beyond the barbed wire which encircled the area around the pits [. . .] were badly upset by the ghoulish spectacle [. . .]. Under the ever-increasing heat a few of the dead began to stir, writhing as though with some unbearable pain, arms and legs straining in slow motion, and even their bodies straightening up a little [. . .]. Eventually the fire became so fierce that the corpses were enveloped by flames. Blisters which had formed on their skin burst one by one. Almost every corpse was covered with black scorch marks and glistened as if it had been greased. The searing heat had burst open their bellies: there was the violent hissing and sputtering of frying in great heat [. . .]. The process of incineration took five to six hours. What was left barely filled a third of the pit. The shiny whitish-gray surface was strewn with countless skulls [. . .]. As soon as the ashes had cooled down a little, wooden metal-covered boards were thrown into the pit. Prisoners of the ash team climbed down and began to shovel out the still hot ashes. Although their mittens and berets gave them some make-shift protection, hot ashes kept blowing down on them, especially when it was windy, causing severe facial burns and eye injuries, sometimes even blindness, so that after a short time they were issued with protective goggles.

Once the pits had been emptied and the ashes taken to the ash depot, they were piled up in man-high heaps.²⁶

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To snatch an image from that, in spite of that? Yes. Whatever the cost, form had to be given to this unimaginable reality. The possibilities for escape or of revolt were so limited at Auschwitz that the mere *sending of an image* or of information — a plan, numbers, names — was of the utmost urgency, one of the last gestures of hu-

manity. Some prisoners had managed to listen to the BBC in the offices they were cleaning. Others managed to send calls for help. “The isolation of the outside world was part of the psychological pressure exercised on the prisoners,” wrote Hermann Langbein. “Among the efforts to defend oneself from the psychic terrorism, there were obviously those that sought to break the isolation. For the morale of the prisoners, this last factor increased in importance year by year as the military situation unfolded.”²⁷ On their side, the leaders of the Polish Resistance were in 1944 demanding photographs. According to a witness’s account collected by Langbein, a civilian worker managed to smuggle in a camera and



Figure 1. Anonymous (German). Hedge for camouflage at crematorium V of Auschwitz, 1943–1944. Oswiecim, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (negative no. 860).

get it into the hands of the members of the *Sonderkommando*.²⁸ The camera probably contained only a small piece of blank film.

For the shooting, a collective lookout had to be organized. The roof of crematorium V was deliberately damaged so that certain squad members were sent by the SS to repair it. From up there, David Szmulewski could be on watch: he observed those—notably the guards in nearby observation posts—who were charged with overseeing the work of the *Sonderkommando*. Hidden at the bottom of a bucket, the camera got into the hands of a Greek Jew called Alex, still unidentified today, for we do not know his family name. He was positioned on the lower level, in front of the incineration pits, where he was supposed to work with the other members of the squad.

The terrible paradox of this *darkroom* was that in order to remove the camera from the bucket, adjust the viewfinder, bring it close to his face, and take a first sequence of images (figs. 3–4),



Figure 2. Anonymous (German). Crematorium V of Auschwitz, 1943–1944. Oswiecim, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (negative no. 20995/508).

the photographer had to hide in the gas chamber, itself barely emptied—perhaps incompletely—of victims. He steps back into the dark space. The slant and the darkness in which he stands protect him. Emboldened, he changes direction and advances:



Figures 3–4. Anonymous (member of the *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz). Cremation of gassed bodies in the open-air incineration pits in front of the

the second view is a little more frontal and slightly closer. So it is more hazardous. But also, paradoxically, it is more posed: it is sharper. It is as though fear had disappeared for an instant in the face of necessity, the business of snatching an image. And we see



gas chamber of crematorium V of Auschwitz, August 1944. Oswiecim, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (negative nos. 277–278).

Of one and a half million surviving photographs related to Nazi concentration camps, only four depict the actual process of mass killing perpetrated in the gas chambers. In *Images in Spite of All*, Georges Didi-Huberman posits that these rare photos of Auschwitz, taken clandestinely by one of the Jewish prisoners forced to help carry out the atrocities there, were made as a potent act of resistance.

Available today because they were smuggled out of the camp and into the hands of Polish resistance fighters, the photographs show a group of naked women being herded into the gas chambers and the cremation of corpses that have just been pulled out. Didi-Huberman's relentless consideration of these harrowing scenes demonstrates how Holocaust testimony can shift from texts and imaginations to irrefutable images that attempt to speak the unspeakable. Including a powerful response to those who have criticized his interest in these images as voyeuristic, Didi-Huberman's eloquent reflections constitute an invaluable contribution to debates over the representability of the Holocaust and the status of archival photographs in an image-saturated world.

"Images in Spite of All provides the carefully extended anguished engagement, both epitaph and caption, that the subject demands."

WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN, *BOOKFORUM*

"The choice to translate Georges Didi-Huberman is timely. . . . The larger problematic of the (limits of) representation of the Holocaust remains a fraught subject for Western scholars, and Didi-Huberman's polemic takes the discussion in a new and productive direction."

SUSAN A. CRANE, *POSTMODERN CULTURE*

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