

Photography as an (im)possible way of depicting historical truth

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ABSTRACT

Within the matter of contemporary and historical trauma, this paper deals with questioning the possibilities of the representations' visual structure, that is, the possibility of witnessing through photography. First of all, it starts with key photography theoreticians who analysed the relations between a photograph and reality, history and historical truth, then it continues to review representative photographs of the Holocaust and finally analyses the most explicit visual material from Auschwitz, that is, four photographs of the Sonderkommando members.

Keywords: photography, the Holocaust, Sonderkommando

Introduction

A photograph is supposed not to evoke but to show. That is why photographs, unlike handmade images, can count as evidence. But evidence of what?

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)

Through all the periods in history, based upon the available relevant documentation, we can trace a continuity of crime, motives for its execution and different ways of its manifestation. Religious, invasive and civil wars, inquisitions, reformations and counterreformations, genocide and other forms of crime have been built in the foundations of many countries. Different groups, i.e. national, ethnic, racial and religious ones, have experienced as such an attempt to partially or completely exterminate, so the 20th century can unfortunately be called the century of genocide.

The Holocaust may belong to a rare historical experience where we are faced with a lack and an impossibility of establishing rational awareness and strength. Through a ruthless abolition of all humanistic principles, it has marked a complete breakdown of hope and reason. Much has been written about the tragedy of the European people, but, despite all of it, we stand in front of a series of unfathomable and insoluble questions. This only proves that the event itself is unspeakable and

inconceivable in its dimensions of representation and trauma. On the other hand, there is a need to speak about the Holocaust as a paradigmatic instance of the expression through which we strive to arrive at the omnipresence of evil in humanity; the events of the Holocaust seem more immanent because, by merely determining our collective history, it is possible to intervene in the present.

That is why, for the last couple of years, we have witnessed different discursive reconstructions of the incurable trauma from the history - memoirs, historical studies and theoretical reviews, films and photographs, as well as an institutionalisation of the memory on the mass destruction of the European Jews. New technologies have mostly revolutionised the ways of preserving and awakening memory "At the end of the 19th and in the 20th century, photography and then sound films, radio and TV, have made a more complex dynamic of the history's intervention (...). The new time machine has enabled us to observe the past from different perspectives..." (Kuljić, 2006) Within the matter of contemporary and historical trauma, this paper will pay attention to the visual structure of representations, that is, the possibility of witnessing through photography. A photograph is a narrative that reveals and masks at the same time. Its indicative nature should be understood as a mimetic nature of

an image that constructs instead of memories and reflects the reality of the Holocaust. A photograph utters "this happened", its referent "has indeed existed" (Barthes, 2003), and that is why it functions as an index symbol.

However, the credibility of a photograph does not so much depend upon photographic technique but upon a series of discursive, social and culturally conditioned practices. Understanding a photograph is related to the way we interpret visual perceptions, that is, symbols. A semiotic approach does not only question the established categories of perception and photograph analysis but it also focuses on producing a meaning, which indicates that observing is not enough, one should also read. Observed from the viewpoint of the semiotics pertaining to reading a photograph of the Holocaust, it can be concluded that the image represents a meaning polysemy and that it would be wrong to contemplate about unequivocal visual perceptions and forms. Thus, a photograph is much more than passive observation.

Photography and reality

Contemporary life gives us multiple opportunities to observe the suffering of others owing to the phenomenon that is photography. A photograph of the Holocaust revives the dark world and provides an opportunity to semiotically read the visual text and meaning of the details shown in the picture. It is the language and utterance in the absence of the victims' memories - ".....All photographs are memento mori (a reminder of death). To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." (Sontag, 2009)

A photograph enables the memory to become communicative, just like history marked by blood - as a trace, document, witness, memory, biography and autobiography, political fact, presence and absence of the past. It represents the culture of memory by developing a visual history of reality. Theories of photography are based upon examinations of photographic, artistic, aesthetic, semiotic, historical and cultural aspects. In theories and studies of photography after the Second World War there are two most frequent directions according to M.Šuvaković: "1. The starting point is the attitude that the primary trait of photography is the technical ability of a faithful reproduction of the world and 2. Photography is interpreted as a technical medium

that allows expressions of subjective views and accomplishments of experimental demands" (Šuvaković, 2005, p. 234.)

The relationship between reality and photography is primarily the result of technical production. It is known as a product of chemical and physical processes, that is recording scenes from reality on a layer of a light-sensitive material (film or a photographic plate). The exposure itself is devoid of "a human's creative intervention" that "is present in the procedure through his or her choice of the photographed object and a purpose they have in mind", but it does not have a role in the actual production process. (Bazin, 1967) The way in which the production process of a photograph is automated proves and secures a lack of human interference, "...a photograph affects us as a natural phenomenon", and gives its objective nature. At the same time, it ensures the existence of the depicted object because it is a necessary precondition for photo-chemical processes. The objects or persons depicted in such a way are shown as "the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (Barthes, 2003, p.20).

According to Barthes "every photograph is a certificate of presence", which means that it brings forth a frozen part of time always related to the past. It freezes the moment and records a moment in time that is already a part of the past thereafter connecting reality with the past. This trait makes photography extremely convenient for history, both for private usage in reminiscing about memories from the past and as a historical document of former situations, historical depictions of cities etc. However, despite a certain relationship between a photograph and the past, many theoreticians who analyse photography doubt in the value it gives history or even discard the idea. Even though it can confirm the presence of the past, it is often not possible to discern the situation at hand and, for the observer to do so, the photograph would have to be placed in a context in the form of narration or description, that is, a title (W.Benjamin). In his book *Camera Lucida* Barthes (Roland Barthes) analysed photography from a poststructuralist point of view as a representation. On the one hand there is denotation that is elaborated on different levels of a photographic production (the choice, technical processing, cropping, etc.) and on the other hand an accompanying text that limits the polysemic meaning of the image, that is a floating chain of signifiers. Contrary to Benjamin, Barthes does not see titles as signs that will help the reader experience them

as “evidence of the historical phenomenon” but as a way of selection and its fundamental meaning. When it comes to the relationship between writing and an image, both authors focus on the potential of photography. Nevertheless they differ because according to Barthes a photograph contains multifaceted information and meaning, while for Benjamin a photograph shows too little reality.

In her book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag also supposes that a photograph has multiple meanings. She observes it as a surreal medium that is made out of pathos as a message from time past. She has a historical reason for doubting the appropriateness of photographs due to their time structure “...most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos” (Sontag, p. 23.) continuing with “all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.” (ibid) and in such a way they are “both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence.” She talks about the fact that the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses and concludes that the knowledge gained through photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism “... It will be a knowledge at bargain prices—a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom...” (ibid, p. 30)

All three theoreticians aimed at drawing a conclusion about the relationship between a photograph and history, that is, social reality. Barthes mentions a related position of reality and the past. By explaining the essence of photography he wants to name its importance, that is, its noeme. Photography does not talk about that which is gone but only and certainly about that has been. (Barthes)

If we follow Barthes’ phenomenological ideas, photography does indeed provide us with historical truth. However, this of course hypothesises that images can be deciphered or read solely in the context of a historical narration, which implies the necessity of acquiring knowledge on the object of photography. Previous knowledge can be acquired from personal experience (memories – as in the case of Barthes’ knowledge about his mother and the circumstances in which the photograph was taken), or historical knowledge (as in the case of the Holocaust photographs). In this way, the knowledge a viewer possesses about the photograph is necessary for depicting the truth. As a target, a photograph is not the event itself; it does not contain a clear narrative but represents a trace, a two-dimensional print that can only provoke assumptions, creation and construction of the potential narrative placed in the

context by the observer. In other words, a photograph always portrays, indicates, presents, represents and the road towards construction is always open.

Pulling a trigger on the camera or a gun¹

In art, portraits of suffering have always been represented through an image or a sculpture – the portraits of fights ordered by the rulers functioning as witnesses of victories in war. It is a genre with a long tradition in the history of art. Nevertheless, the overlapping relationship between photography and modern warfare has deeper foundations. When it comes to photography, we basically evoke a section of the time past.

The Holocaust provides a challenge in visualising historical truth from the photographic representation. It is possible to visualise such structures and organisational procedures using graphs, but they are photographically indescribable because even when descriptions that give the photograph intelligibility are provided, the information will be limited.

Extermination and the range of extinction are elements that further complicate the photographic representation. The number of people who were killed exceeds human imagination and cannot be visually represented; they are only implied in the form of metonymy (piles of shoes, clothes or dead bodies). It is impossible to visualise the extermination of Jewish people in Europe because it demands visibility of the object.

What is visible in a photograph of the Holocaust is solely that which was not completely destroyed, i.e. it is not final (yet). Thus, piles of dead bodies, prisoners and concentration camps shown in the photograph only represent traces of the systematic extermination. Despite the problem of depicting the systematic destruction of the European Jews in the photograph, there are numerous ones that depict the Holocaust. Marianne Hirsch point out that “... the Holocaust is one of the visually best documented events in the history of an era marked by a

¹ In this context I am paraphrasing the words of S. Sontag who refers to this metaphor: “...a camera is sold as a predatory weapon (...) Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time. Eventually, people might learn to act out more of their aggressions with cameras and fewer with guns...” *On Photography*, p. 23

plenitude of visual documentation." (Hirsch, 2001)
All photographs, whether taken by the perpetrator or images of souvenirs or concentration camps after liberation only show a fragment that cannot be visualised easily. However, human imagination can, through a photograph, envisage people's experiences in extermination camps.

The majority of photographs witnessing the Holocaust have been captured by the perpetrator and taken from concentration camps and ghettos. Not all of them were meant to be published; they were ordered for official purposes such as documenting the construction of the Auschwitz concentration camp, for the purpose of medical experiments or as illustrated reports from concentration camps and the like.

The reports from concentration camps have been necessary to refute the rumours on the prisoners' grave conditions and photographs of prisoners working or spending their spare time have been taken for that purpose. The Nazis were, in this case, using the truth in photography (Barthes, p. 140) as the means to stop the spread of falsity. After the war, the deed brought upon the destruction of photography as a visual value of evidence.

Jürgen Stroop's final report on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, contains more than fifty titled photographs. They document the activities of the German Nazi army during April and May of the same year representing burnt houses, forceful evacuation of people from their hiding places, prisoners, arrests and deportations. One of the most famous Holocaust photographs that originated from this report is A boy with his hands raised, titled in the report as "Mit Gewalt aus Bunkern hervorgeholt" (Forcibly pulled out of bunkers).

The image shows imprisoned Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto in front of which a boy stands with raised hands. The photograph symbolises the innocence of the National Socialism's victims and the boy is a precisely perfect representative of all the victims (just like Anne Frank).

At the same time, an innocent face of a child - beyond any historical responsibility, awakens empathy and the awareness of guilt. One of the rare photographic collections and evidence on what had been happening is the Auschwitz Album, whose original goal was never resolved and it contains 193 photographs showing the arrival of the deported Hungarian Jews.

It can be considered as the only surviving visual evidence of the process leading to the mass murder at Auschwitz. The Album was found after the war and the photographs show the selection process undertaken before sending people to the gas chambers.

Apart from the official photographs, there are numerous amateur ones depicting certain aspects of the Holocaust - for example, pictures taken among German soldiers and visits to the Warsaw Ghetto. Their photographs show typical street scenery: A Warsaw streetcar, the Star of David, barricades and check points emphasising captivity, street beggars, exhausted people, from which we can interpret a clear segregation in all the spheres of life. There is also a series of photographs where soldiers stand proudly behind a number of bodies lying on the ground, as well as a series of photographs documenting murder.

Some of the amateur photographs gained larger publicity in the last couple of years. These photographs are often more convincing than the photographs taken by professional photographers. The result of their strength is in the manner of presenting, i.e. they depict a situation by showing the inhumane treatment of prisoners.

In Barthes' words: "Usually the amateur is defined as an immature state of the artist: someone who cannot - or will not - achieve the mastery of a profession. But in the field of photographic practice, it is the amateur, on the contrary, who is the assumption of the professional: for it is he who stands closer to the noeme of Photography." (Barthes, p. 122)

Apart from the more significant photographs, that I briefly mentioned, there are around two million photographs of diverse quality and content in public archives.

The fact is that the Holocaust is the most visually documented event in history. Even though photographs can never provide the proper knowledge on the Holocaust, that is, prove the actual existence of a given situation, they are but an index that subsequently grows into a symbolic picture with a multitude of possibilities for interpretation on the connotative and semiotic levels. We can conclude that reality is placed behind the photograph as a trace, the visual puts reality in the field of the unfathomable, the untold, but forever present in symbolic representations.

The Sonderkommando photographs - Four pieces of film snatched from hell

Even though the success of certain photographs can explain the symbolic content, aesthetics, multiple interpretation and visual representation integrated into specific memory and remembrance practices, the matter of other less prominent Holocaust photographs remains. Such photographs, that have recently been placed at the centre of attention, are four highly unusual images taken by a smuggled camera in 1944, on part of a Sonderkommando member (special commandos) in Auschwitz.

The photographs are the only visual evidence of killing with gas at the time of its application: "Testimony produced by the prisoners themselves, meant to be transmitted, like the famous Sonderkommando manuscripts, beyond the closed world - the implacable sealing of space and implacable inevitability of time - that was Birkenau." (Huberman, 2012, p. 36)

The photographs have poor quality and they are partially blurred; two of them show a heap of dead bodies, the third is an unidentified view of a tree, with a naked woman in a corner, and the fourth photograph is shaded with a treetop being the only visible thing. Four pieces of film snatched from hell were hidden in a tube of toothpaste, buried in newspapers and dug up only after the Liberation.

The importance of these photographs is that they were taken by a prisoner at Birkenau, as opposed to the previously discussed famous SS photographs, that is the Auschwitz Album or the Warsaw Ghetto photographs. The photographs were taken by one or two members of the Sonderkommando, units composed out of Jewish inmates and Russian prisoners-of-war who were forced to work in the gas chambers and Auschwitz crematoria in the Summer of 1944. For the members of Sonderkommando, the gas chamber was a daily "workplace", an inferno where the witnesses (photographers) worked.

"The gesture of the clandestine photographer was, altogether, as ordinary as it was heroic: entering the gas chamber, the same one in which the SS officers forced him to unload the bodies of the recent victims, he transformed, in the couple of rare seconds of stolen attention from the guards, the captive labour,

his slave labour in hell, in a true action of resistance." The four photographs were first shown to the public in 2000 as a part of the exhibition *Mémoire des Camps*, and later published in the book *Images malgré tout* (Images in Spite of All).

A text written by Georges Didi-Huberman was placed in the exhibition catalogue. In it, he described the photographs as an act of the prisoner's resistance who tried to defy the absolute extermination and inconceivable events. By examining these photographs and writing about them, Huberman tries to see them up close, outlining the phenomenology, situating its historical content and understanding the disturbing value in our opinion.

Through his work, he faces the difficulties present in such images, as well as with external difficulties tied to the controversy of giving them such meaning, i.e. the possibility, legitimacy and ethics of publishing explicit visual materials. He points out that the difficulties are not his alone: "...I think that they follow every cultural decision linked to the transmission and museification of a historical event whose stakes - memorial, social, philosophical and political - are significant." (Huberman, 2012, p. 43)

Huberman believes that if it is true that photographs can be transformed into symbolic images, we then witness such a process in this moment. He not only claims that photographs are closer to reading, but also forms a theory about the image where he focuses on the photographs' historical truth on the one hand, and determines the relevance of their reception on the other. The following argument of Hannah Arendt shows the four photographs as "moments of truth". It is needless to say, he states, "that the four photographs from August 1944 do not tell all of the truth. It would be very naive to expect this from anything at all - things, words or images: they are tiny extractions from such a complex reality, brief instants in a continuum that lasted five years no less. But they are for us - for our eyes today - truth itself, meaning its vestige, its meagre shreds: what remains, visually, of Auschwitz." (Huberman, p. 38)

In his text, Didi-Huberman further analysed these photographs, describing in detail each visual level, that is, starting from the formal aspects of a photograph in the first part. He pays particular attention to the big black frames of the photographs; their presence points at a place from which the photograph was taken, i.e. hiding in the moment when the shutter release was pressed. Formal traits become the basis of determining what

happened, that is, morphological analysis enables us to see the effectiveness of these photographs, it does not directly relate to its readability and the evidence of the depicted, but to the significance of the material, visual layer.

The thing that Huberman notices, and criticises in the analysis, is that the photographs were reframed so as to make the reality to which they testify more legible, and states: "...The image of the women running toward the gas chamber here is merely a close-up taken from the real photograph of which the birch wood itself occupied a far greater part. The two images showing the cremation of the bodies in the open air have been corrected so as to suppress precisely what had made them possible: namely, the slanting angle and the substantial darkness - that of the gas chamber itself - thanks to which the covert photographer was able to take out his camera and frame his shot. Indeed, he had to hide in order to see, and curiously this is what memorial pedagogy would have us forget here. (ibid)

Likewise, in today's Auschwitz Museum, only three photographs are exhibited, the fourth is missing; for the organiser of the place of memory this photograph is useless, because it has no referent, i.e. there are no people in it. As an answer to the question whether visible reality is necessary for the testimony to happen, Huberman states: "For us who accept to look at it, this failed, abstract or disoriented photograph testifies to something that remains essential: It testifies to danger itself, the vital danger of seeing what was happening at Birkenau. It testifies to the situation of urgency, and to the near impossibility of testifying at that precise moment in history." (ibid)

The proof of a photograph as a testimony is also shown in the choice of the viewpoint, that is, recording as taking a moral stance. In 1961, the director Jacques Rivette wrote a short text for *Cahiers du cinéma*, in which he precisely emphasises how the recording point is significant to the matter of reality and, at the same time, morality.

He points out that: "What matters is the point of view of a man, the auteur, and the attitude that this man takes in relation to that which he films, and therefore in relation to the world and to everything: that which can be expressed by a choice in situations, in the construction of the storyline, in the dialogue, in the play of actors, or in the pure and simple technique, "indifferently but as much"...There are things that should not be addressed except in the throes of fear and trembling. Death is one of them, without a

doubt; and how, at the moment of filming something so mysterious, could one not feel like an imposter?" (Rivette, 1961)

What Huberman further points out and what definitely comes from a formalistic approach is history, that is, narration based on photographs. He describes the Sonderkommando members' circumstances. He reconstructs the event by using visual matter and a series of other documents and memoirs that help him describe the organisation of the concentration camps, as well as a strict ban on photography.

The reconstruction and interpretation of these events would be impossible without Huberman's reliance on background documents. Huberman's text also deals with the conditions that enable the construction of a historical discourse in the context of the inconceivable and the untold that dominate the Holocaust discourse. He treats the four photographs as visual phenomena, enabling deliberation through a dialectical relationship between that which is inconceivable and the process of the conceivable. In the context of the conceivable matter in relation to history we can discern two realisations - on the one hand, there is the inconceivable that shows different forms of the ban on photography, and on the other hand there is the conceivable, a potentially limitless ability of producing, assimilating, observing and absorbing the photographs.

Talking about the Holocaust is based upon the inconceivable. Despite everything, the photographs advocate research in the possibility of creating knowledge based upon fragmented visual materials and the analysis of historical knowledge with their foundations being set in specific images and formal traits.

Didi-Huberman claims that only these photographs can give us an opportunity to experience that which happened in Auschwitz: "the four photographs, of course, don't tell all of the truth (it would be very naive to expect this from anything at all - things, words or images: they are tiny extractions from such a complex reality, brief instants in a continuum that lasted five years no less. But they are for us - for our eyes today - truth itself..." Huberman's position and arguments can serve as a justification for all the theoretical models of deliberation on the Holocaust experience. In accordance with this alternative way of thinking, the formal dimension of a photograph has to be taken as the basis for analysis in which the ethical aspect and the photograph's epistemic values

are considered inseparable. In other words, in order to transfer the Holocaust experience, one should take into account the structure of the photograph. Huberman poses the question: "Are they useless images, then?"

Of course, they are far from it, they are infinitely precious to us, we should know how to perceive, despite everything, despite the destruction and eradication, i.e. perceive as an archaeologist. That is how things start to spring up from times past. Memory does not demand that we offer only meticulous mementos. The most important witnesses, like the clandestine photographer from Auschwitz, have given us so many clear depictions and irrefutable facts.

That is why we are touched even by the photographer's urgent choice to enable visual coexistence "...where the unrecognisable rivals the recognisable, just like the shadow rivals light, to give form to its despairing testimony." (ibid, p. 40.) That is, by returning time that was lost, those are "images that - torn from all earlier context - stand as valuables in the sober chambers of our perception..."

Therefore, memory cannot be reduced to the clearly visible, archaeology does not only explore the past, but also a collection of data with the goal of understanding the present "...a true memory must, at the same time, provide an image of the person who remembers (...) and show the layers through which it had to pass in order to reach them."

Here I am pointing out the status of these photographs as historical documents, their usage as evidence and the way theory can help in approaching the observer's visual representation. Special attention has to be paid to the contradiction between the immediate response of those who give the photograph the status of evidence, and, on the opposite side, those who consider it as a depiction and those offering a certain proximity, as well as an emphasised distance. In the end, in Barthes' words "...The photograph must be silent: this is not a question of discretion, but of music. Absolute subjectivity is achieved only in a state, an effort, of silence (shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence). The photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah: "Technique," "Reality," "Reportage," "Art," etc.: to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness. (Barthes, p. 70)

Conclusion

The Holocaust left behind permanent consequences representing an event that, in the history of the Western civilisation, brought that which no other genocide before it did - heinous crimes of mass destruction of human lives. Remembering the Holocaust has a historical value for all humanity, since the memory cannot be left to the past and oblivion. Above the entrance to the Dachau Museum there is an inscription in the words of an American-Hispanic poet George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

The main hypothesis in this work is related to the analysis of the relationship between photography and reality by observing the theoreticians' analysis of different concepts and evidence on the possibility of depicting the truth. What is the ability of photography as a way of depicting historical truth or as a testimony? In relation to the theoreticians, we can conclude that it reflects and shows reality at the same time but also transforms, that is, depends upon the interpretation of the viewpoint and opinion in different contexts.

Meaning occurs in historical and social situations, in specific circumstances and cultural conditions. In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag points out that Wittgenstein equalised meaning with use, and that photographs of the deceased can, when necessary, glorify death in service of the country, but also stimulate hatred towards the enemy, which implies that meaning is established through emotional reactions; thus comprehensive deliberation is required.

The question of reality can be observed in different ways, and it certainly has to include the point of view/ recording as the possibility of testimony, which, by analysing the Sonderkommando photographs, points at an absolute reality of the Holocaust. Therefore, the fact is that in photographs there is a long way to go from observing to understanding.

Considering the medium of photography as cognition, it can be concluded that, even though we live in a period of an absolute flood of images, the scenes from the Holocaust invite us to pay attention, learn and think about the possibility of connecting with the historical truth and reconstruction of memory and knowledge.

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Fotografija kao (ne)mogućnost prikazivanja povijesne istine

SAŽETAK

U sklopu problematike savremenih i povijesnih trauma, rad se bavi pitanjima mogućnosti vizualne strukture reprezentacije, odnosno mogućnosti svjedočenja pomoću fotografije. Najprije polazi od ključnih teoretičara fotografije koji su analizirali odnose fotografije i stvarnosti, povijesti i povijesne istine, potom pregledom reprezentativnih fotografija holokausta, te konačno analizom najeksplicitnijeg vizualnog materijala iz Aušvica, odnosno četiri fotografije pripadnika Sonderkommando.

Ključne riječi: Fotografija, holokaust, Sonderkommando.

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