

Dan Stone

Thinking Europe's Catastrophe

Essays on Fascism and the Holocaust

Volume 2

The Best of Scholars and Scholarship in the Humanities

Edited by:

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Dan Stone

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CATASTROPHE**

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The *Sonderkommando* Photographs¹

Recent debates concerning the possibility of representing the Holocaust focus on postwar attempts to do so, often by people who did not experience the events directly.² The much-discussed works of survivors were of course produced after the liberation of the camps. Much of the existing literature on the representation of the Holocaust, dealing with retrospective reconstructions or responses, tends to concentrate

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- 1 I would like to thank Lawrence Langer for reading an earlier version of this piece, and Ute Wrocklage for discussions.
 - 2 The starting point in any discussion of representing the Holocaust is Saul Friedlander (ed.), *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1992). See also Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Dan Diner (ed.), *Zivilisationsbruch: Denken nach Auschwitz* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988); idem., *Beyond the Conceivable: Studies on Germany, Nazism, and the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Omer Bartov, *Murder in our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); idem., *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Lawrence L. Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Berel Lang, 'Is it Possible to Misrepresent the Holocaust?', *History and Theory*, 34:1 (1995), 84-89; Nicolas Berg, Jess Jochimsen, and Bernd Stiegler (eds.), *Shoah: Formen der Erinnerung. Geschichte-Philosophie-Literatur-Kunst* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996); Dan Stone (ed.), *Theoretical Interpretations of the Holocaust* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi 2001). On photography, see Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Andrea Liss, *Trespassing Through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), and Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004). On Holocaust photographs in West German collective memory, see Habbo Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild: Fotografien des Holocaust in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001).

on literature, poetry, film or historiography. The special problems of photography—especially photography from the period—as a medium of representation are therefore overlooked.

The *Sonderkommando* photographs, however, are so important precisely because they are not recollections. There is an urgency, an immediacy about these photographs that appears to render the whole discussion of representation problematic. In the face of full-frontal atrocity, the impulse to theorise seems almost offensive. Can one say more about these photographs than confirm Ernst Jünger's claim from 1931 that 'Already today there is hardly an event of human significance toward which the artificial eye of civilisation, the photographic lens, is not directed. The result is often pictures of demoniacal precision through which humanity's new relation to danger becomes visible in an exceptional fashion'?³

In what follows I argue that the *Sonderkommando* photographs, far from revealing the inadequacy of theoretical thought, actually demand an awareness of it, for these photographs go far beyond what Jünger had in mind in 1931. The photographs themselves are of such manifest importance that I must state at the outset that this article is only an attempt to broaden an awareness of the existence of these photographs with the aid of a theoretical vocabulary. If the language of representation is of use, then a discussion in its terms should be a promising way to approach these photographs.⁴

3 Ernst Jünger, 'On Danger', *New German Critique*, 59 (1993), 31.

4 I refer to the photographs individually according to the negative numbers which they have at the Auschwitz museum photography laboratory, 280-283. The reproductions here show which numbers correspond to which photographs. The original films and prints have been lost, and all reproductions are today made from prints dating from the 1950s which are held at the Auschwitz Museum.

One thing that makes these photographs so important is that, unlike the well-known SS photographs in the so-called 'Lili-Jacob album' (*Auschwitz Album*) or the photographs of the Warsaw ghetto clearance,⁵ these photographs were taken by inmates of Birkenau. Specifically, they were taken by one or two members of the *Sonderkommando*, the special squads made up of mainly Jewish inmates, but also Soviet prisoners-of-war, forced to work in and around the gas-chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz, in the summer of 1944.⁶

Furthermore, despite some knowledge of the circumstances in which the photographs were taken, we do not

5 For the Lili-Jacob Album see *Gesichter der Juden in Auschwitz: Lili Meiers Album*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Hahn (Berlin: Verlag Das Arsenal, 1995); for the Strop report of the Warsaw Ghetto clearance see *The Strop Report: The Jewish Quarter of Warsaw is No More!*, trans. and ed. Sybil Milton (London: Secker & Warburg, 1980). On the nature of photographs taken by perpetrators see Dieter Reifarth and Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 'Die Kamera der Täter', in *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944*, eds. Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995), 475-503; Judith Levin and Daniel Uziel, 'Ordinary Men, Extraordinary Photos', *Yad Vashem Studies*, 26 (1998), 265-293; Cornelia Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung: Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998).

6 See Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), 34-43. See also Eric Friedler, Barbara Siebert and Andreas Kilian, *Zeugen aus der Todeszone: Das jüdische Sonderkommando in Auschwitz* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005); Gideon Greif, *Wir weinten tränenlos: Augenzeugenberichte der jüdischen "Sonderkommandos" in Auschwitz* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1995), and the references in these two books; Miklos Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eye-witness Account*, trans. Tibere Kremer and Richard Seaver (St. Albans: Mayflower Books, 1973); Filip Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999); Rebecca Camhi Fromer, *The Holocaust Odyssey of Daniel Borna, Sonderkommando* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993); Gideon Greif, 'Die moralische Problematik der "Sonderkommando"-Häftlinge', in *Die nationalsozialistische Konzentrationslager*, eds. Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth and Christoph Dieckmann (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), vol. 2, 1023-1045.

know for sure who took them. In her contribution to the official publication of the Auschwitz museum, Barbara Jarosz says that the photographs were taken 'by members of the Sonderkommando of crematorium V: Alex from Greece (his name is unknown), Shlomo Dragon and his brother Josel, Alter Szmul Fajnzylberg (known in the camp as Stanislaw Jankowski) and David Szmulewski.'⁷ On the information board placed by the museum on the grounds of crematorium V in 1995, the photographs are ascribed to the Greek Jew Alex. Sadly, in Gideon Greif's book of interviews with surviving *Sonderkommando* members, we learn nothing new about the photographs, even in the interview with the Dragon brothers. A more recent book claims that the photographs were taken at the end of August 1944 by Alberto Errera, a Greek Jew who was sent to join the *Sonderkommando* just before the murder of the Hungarian Jews, using a camera that was probably found among the possessions of one of the deportees.⁸ All we can be sure of is that—along with the hidden *Sonderkommando* writings⁹—these photographs are among the most astonishing of the various artefacts to have emerged from Auschwitz. In terms of the visual record, they are unquestionably the most important documents that we have. Photographs taken by members of the SS are today no less horrific to our eyes for the fact of their authorship; but the *Sonderkommando* photographs are especially harrowing, not only because of their content, but because of the extreme difficulties involved in taking them, smuggling the film out of

7 Barbara Jarosz, 'Les organisations de la résistance et leur activité à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur du camp', in *Auschwitz: camp de concentration et d'extermination*, eds. Franciszek Piper and Teresa Świebocka (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, 1994), 248.

8 Friedler, Siebert and Kilian, *Zeugen aus der Todeszone*, 214.

9 Ber Mark, *Scrolls of Auschwitz* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1973).

the camp and into the hands of the Cracow Aid Committee for the inmates, and having them developed in Cracow.

What I want to discuss here is precisely the status of these photographs as historical documents, their use as evidence, and the way in which the theory of representation can help the observer approach them. I want specifically to address the contradiction between one's immediate response to the photographs—granting them their status as irrefutable evidence—and the unease which is felt before them when they are considered as representations. The photographs both offer a certain closeness to events, and emphasise distance. This discourse of representation asserts that the medium of photography, contrary to one's instinctive (because socially-constructed) response, is not transparent: the 'signifier' does not refer in an uncomplicated way to the 'signified'. To claim otherwise is to succumb to an 'edenic notion of the visual' in which the transformation necessary in producing 'analogical and indexical signs' is obfuscated.¹⁰ Indeed, one critic claims that seeing the photograph 'as the representation of nature itself, as an unmediated copy of the real world' and therefore as 'true' constitutes a 'bourgeois folklore' which has been complicit in the history of photography as a tool in reinforcing uneven relations of power.¹¹

10 John X. Berger and Olivier Richon, 'Introduction', in *Other than Itself: Writing Photography*, eds. Berger and Richon (Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications, 1989), no pagination.

11 Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982), 86. Rita Bischof, *Soweränität und Subversion: Georges Batailles Theorie der Moderne* (München: Matthes & Seitz Verlag, 1984), 91, writes: 'The social dimension of photography, which threatens to confiscate its aesthetic dimension, lies in its inherent possibility of performing a social control, and concealing the moment of control, leaving it anonymous, so that this control can appear as self-control.' Michel Tournier's novel, *The Ogre*, trans. Barbara Bray (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 103-107, rather disquietingly discusses this aspect of photography.

The feeling of unease before technological reproduction is longstanding, as old as the history of the mirror. As Jean Baudrillard suggests, 'Reproduction is diabolical in its very essence; it makes something fundamental vacillate. ... [S]imulation ... is still and always the place of a gigantic enterprise of manipulation, of control and of death, just like the imitative object (primitive statuette, image of photo) always had as objective an operation of black magic.'¹² On the one hand, this seems to be a promising approach; after all, we do not want to fall into the trap of seeing in the photographs privileged moments of time rescued from oblivion, making them stand metonymically for the genocide as a whole, as 'Auschwitz' already does. This would give to the signifier a meaning which the signified (the very moment that is arrested) did not have.¹³ But, apparently, it is exactly the indexical correspondence between the signifier and the signified which gives these photographs their tremendous significance. In Barthes's terms, the denotative function is equivalent with the connotative function, that is to say, it is precisely *what* the photographs depict that gives them their meaning for us.¹⁴ The *analogon* is indivisible from the way in which the social meaning is generated. Or so we would like to think.

In fact, as already suggested, this is the sort of claim dismissed by some theorists of photography. The *analogon* is nothing without the social and cultural conventions which

12 Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 182 n. 1. See also Yves Michaud, 'Philosophy and Photography', in *A New History of Photography*, ed. Michel Frizot (Cologne: Könemann, 1998), 734-735.

13 Cf. Detlef Hoffmann, 'Ein Foto aus dem Getto Lodz', in *Holocaust: Die Grenzen des Verstehens. Eine Debatte über die Besetzung der Geschichte*, ed. Hanno Loewy (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992), 242-243.

14 See Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message', in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 15-31.

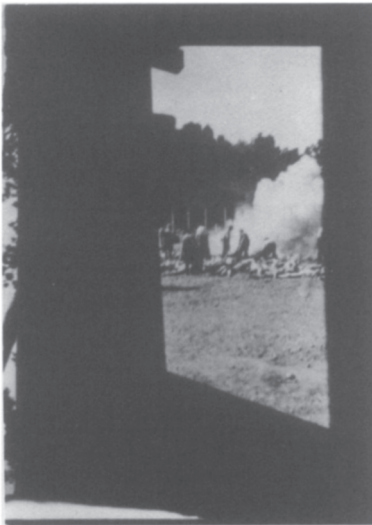
permit interpretations of it. According to John Tagg, the 'indexical nature of the photograph—the causative link between the pre-photographic referent and the sign—is therefore highly complex, irreversible, and can guarantee nothing at the level of meaning.'¹⁵ This seems logical enough, especially in the light of the introduction to this article—only with some historical information surrounding the production of the photographs, combined with an awareness of our cultural response to mass-murder, in particular to the privileged place which Auschwitz has in our tableau of western nadirs, can we formulate a serious response to the *Sonderkommando* photographs. Even to call them the '*Sonderkommando* photographs' as I do here gives them a meaning which is not contained in the images themselves. Were we to come to them cold, so Tagg's argument goes, we could not know what they mean. Or rather, our attempts at finding meaning would be vague and unfocused, being some sort of generalised response to horrific (280/281) or disorienting (282/283) images. Photographs without context carry no moral message.¹⁶

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- 15 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 3. This is a riposte to Barthes, who argues that 'photography's Referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation' because in photography 'I can never deny that *the thing has been there*.' Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993), 76. See also Joanne Lukitsh, 'Practicing Theories: An Interview with John Tagg', in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squiers (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 232.
- 16 Bernd Hüppauf, 'Der entleerte Blick hinter der Kamera', in *Vernichtungskrieg*, eds. Heer and Naumann, 511-513.

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[Fig. 1: #280, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum]



[Fig. 2: #281, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum]



[Fig.3: #282, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum]



[Fig.4: #283, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum]

But suppose we did come to the photographs cold. What could be said about them? Firstly, their startling nature emphasises a paradox common to all photographs: the contradiction between the static signifier (the unchanging photograph which one can hold in one's hand) and the active signified. Here this paradox is emphasised because the signified, the moment in the infinite sequence of time which has

been arrested and ossified, is so clearly characterised by activity.¹⁷ And not just ordinary activity: there is an attack on the senses of which we are aware but which we cannot experience, an atmosphere of violence, to put it mildly. Naked bodies lying on the ground, and behind them the smoke from (presumably) other burning bodies. Even without knowing that these are innocent Jewish victims of genocide or that the 'workers' in the photograph are destined for the same fate, the contrast between the comfortable medium of the photographs and their subject matter is unusually disquieting.

As well as the paradoxical clash of signifier and signified, the *Sonderkommando* photographs highlight another attribute of photography. According to Tagg, the unconscious signified of all photographs is the presence of death.¹⁸ This attribute is especially clear in contrast to film. Christian Metz writes that film, colluding with the wishful thinking of the viewer, gives back to the dead a 'fragile semblance' of life; 'Photography, on the contrary, by virtue of the objective suggestions of its signifier (stillness, again) maintains the memory of the dead as *being dead*.'¹⁹ In photographs 280 and 281 death is not merely the unconscious signified; it is the explicit signified. But the distance of the photographer from the corpses, suggests that these are no sensational, authorized news photographs such as became common during Vietnam or the Gulf War. It is the very fact of the dead *being*

17 As John Berger puts it, 'The image seized by the camera is doubly violent and both violences reinforce the same contrast: the contrast between the photographed moment and all others.' 'Photographs of Agony', in Berger, *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1980), 39.

18 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 1. See also Ulrike Schneider, 'Der Tod als Metapher für das fotografische Verfahren', *Fotogeschichte*, 16, no. 59 (1996), 5-13.

19 Metz, 'Photography and Fetishism', in *The Critical Image*, ed. Squiers, 158.

dead, of a more urgent witnessing to murder, which is here the point of the photograph.

This lack of aestheticisation—their ‘messiness’ or ‘failings’ as photographs—means that it is hard here to concur with Susan Sontag, when she writes that ‘Even those photographs which speak so laceratingly of a specific historical moment give us vicarious possession of their subject under the aspect of a kind of eternity: the beautiful.’²⁰ The all-too-evident elicit nature of photographs 280 and 281, framed as they are by a black doorway, creates a classical device for fixing the viewer’s gaze; but Sontag’s sense of the beautiful is not appropriate here, for the subjects of the photograph are not available to our vicarious possession as is, say, the boy in the famous Warsaw ghetto round-up photograph to which she refers in this context. That these two photographs are most often reproduced, most notably in the huge reproductions in the Auschwitz museum display, with the doorway/frame removed, is usually interpreted as emphasising the ‘heroic’ nature of the photographer, as if taking the photographs from a hiding-place were not already dangerous enough.²¹ But it is also indicative of a desire to get closer to the ‘thing itself’, possess it, render it amenable to the senses and cognisable in a way that the photograph will not allow.

However, it is not this unease before photographs 280 and 281 which leads curators and publishers to remove essential parts of them; it is compounded by the other two pho-

20 Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 109.

21 See also the Auschwitz museum publications *KL Auschwitz seen by the SS: Rudolf Höss, Pery Broad, Paul Kremer*, eds. Kazimierz Smoleń et al (Warsaw: Interpress, 1991), photography section between 128 and 129; and *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs*, eds. Teresa Swiebocka, Jonathan Webber, and Connie Wilsack (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum 1993), 174-175, for examples of photographs 280 and 281 printed without the doorway-frame.

tographs. In contrast to 280 and 281, 282 and 283 are apparently accessible as 'art' photographs, that is to say, photographs about which the viewer asks, 'How did it come to be like this or has it always been the same?' In other words, the aspect of duration which characterises photographs 280 and 281 is one of obvious change, a frozen moment in an ongoing event, whereas 282 and 283 seemingly display a fit between the static signifier and the unchanging state signified.²² In contrast to the obvious sense of duration in 280 and 281, 282 and 283 are, on first glance, photographs of stillness. It is this 'fit', the fact that there is 'nothing happening', which has meant that 283 has only once been published—in a book distributed to libraries and not on open sale—and has only recently been displayed, and accounts for the fact that most people are aware of the existence of only three *Sonderkommando* photographs.²³

However, when the latter two photographs are examined more closely, it becomes clear that this stasis is more illusory than actual. On a more careful examination, the 'interest' of 282 is to be found in the bottom left-hand corner, which is why the photograph is only rarely seen as a whole, original image. The angle at which the naked Jewish women, some sitting, some walking out of the path of the lens, have been captured as they spend their last moments alive in the forest outside gas chamber and crematorium V, perhaps reveals that this is a genuine snapshot, literally shot from the hip.

22 Peter Wollen, 'Fire and Ice', in *Other than Itself*, eds. Berger and Richon, no pagination.

23 283 was shown for the first time in the exhibition 'Representations of Auschwitz', Cracow, Weimar, and Oldenburg, 1995. It is published in Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers*, trans. Peter Moss (New York: The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989), 423, though not in the German translation of the book, *Die Krematorien von Auschwitz: Die Technik des Massenmordes* (Munich: Piper, 1994).

The ordinary association of the snapshot with casualness, with its suggestions of voyeurism, not only contrasts terrifyingly with the content of the photograph. but also make us question the nature of our own looking. And beside it there is 283, its nothingness made all the more profound by virtue of the other photographs; what lies behind those black depths is both unknown and, thanks to the other three photographs, only too imaginable. Its nothingness, in fact, is the very condition of its importance, the sign of our 'luck' in having the image of the women in 282, for clearly the cameraman had no time to aim. And, ultimately, what 'better' image to come out of the concentration camps than absence, impossibility, black, a space informed not by human consciousness but by the unconscious.²⁴

These photographs, then, do not permit comfortable reflection. For Roland Barthes the photograph is divisible into two aspects, the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is the quality which permits one to be interested in the photograph; it 'doesn't mean, at least not immediately, "study", but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many pho-

24 See Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), 243: 'For it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye: other in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.' On the idea of the look being able to give photographs meanings that the camera cannot, see Kaja Silverman, 'What is a Camera?, or: History in the Field of Vision', *Discourse*, 15:3 (1993), 3-56; and Marianne Hirsch, 'Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory', *Discourse*, 15:2 (1992-93), 7. On absence see the analysis of Dirk Reinartz's photograph of Sobibór in Ulrich Baer, 'Contemporary Holocaust Images: The Landscape of Loss and the Limits of the Photograph', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 96:4 (1997), 741-753; and idem., 'To Give Memory a Place: Holocaust Photography and the Landscape Tradition', *Representations*, 69 (2000), 38-62.

tographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes...' The punctum, by contrast, is that which disturbs the studium. 'This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. ... A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).'²⁵ The functions of the studium, so Barthes says, include 'to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire.' And he says that recognising these functions is the role of studium; but the studium's investment, he expressly states, 'is never my delight or my pain.'²⁶

What is so striking about the *Sonderkommando* photographs is that this dichotomy of studium and punctum cannot be maintained. Indeed, the studium is the punctum. What interests one is what pierces one (although in the case of 282 this is not an immediate occurrence). There is nothing that can be examined in a moment of quiet reflection, for everything is always and all at once bursting out of the photograph, carving a path of terror through one's senses. There is no casual or peaceful response to such photographs.

The disruptive quality of these photographs is evident in the way in which they throw into confusion another well-known platitude about photography. I use the word 'platitude' deliberately, for it is just this platitudinous aspect of the photograph that is here called into question. Writers on photography since Siegfried Kracauer have pointed to the relationship between photography and historicism, the fact that they emerged at the same time being no coincidence. Historicists believe

25 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26-27ff.

26 *Ibid.*, 28.

The *Sonderkommando* Photographs

that they can grasp historical reality by reconstructing the course of events in their temporal succession without any gaps. Photography provides a spatial continuum; historicism seeks to provide the temporal continuum. ... Historicism is concerned with the photography of time. The equivalent of its temporal photography would be a giant film depicting the temporally interconnected events from every vantage point.²⁷

Eduardo Cadava has recently made the same point in explaining how Walter Benjamin thinks the philosophy of history in terms of photography. The ‘Medusa effect’—‘the capacity to arrest or immobilize historical movement, or isolate the detail of an event from the continuum of history’²⁸—is a characteristic shared by photography and historicism. The photograph, then, is a *flat death*, a platitude corresponding to the homogeneous, empty time of historicism.²⁹

The *Sonderkommando* photographs are presumably no exception to this rule. And yet, do they not fit the description of the revolutionary moment that Benjamin believes could arrest the linear time of historicism? Since they were not taken with a view to objectification—in which ‘one can tell that the object photographed was seen by an insensitive and invulnerable eye’³⁰—are they not precisely embodiments of

27 Siegfried Kracauer, ‘On Photography’, in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 49-50. On Kracauer, see also Dagmar Barnouw, *Critical Realism: History, Photography, and the Work of Siegfried Kracauer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

28 Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 59.

29 See Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 92: ‘With the Photograph, we enter into *flat death*. One day, leaving one of my classes, someone said to me with disdain: “You talk about Death very flatly.”—As if the horror of death were not precisely its platitude!’ See also Elissa Marder, ‘Flat Death: Snapshots of History’, *diacritics*, 22:3-4 (1992), 128-144, a discussion of Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire’s *À une passante*, which develops this connection between history, platitude, and photography.

30 Ernst Jünger’s celebration of ‘our characteristically cruel way of seeing’ in ‘Photography and the “Second Consciousness”’, in *Photography in the*

the *Jetztzeit*—'now-time'—a 'messianic cessation of happening'³¹ which invades the present, filling it? They are moments of shock, flashes which—whilst conforming to the law saying that photography ossifies a moment in time—refuse to be fitted into a linear history, but 'blast out of the continuum of history.'³²

In this context of the *Sonderkommando* photographs, theory helps us understand why we can talk of the photographs as imprints of reality at the same time as acknowledging that the photographic process always occults reality, producing something other than the thing it shows. This is in no way to revert to notions popularised by Daguerre and responsible for the success of photography, the claim that the daguerrotype is 'not merely an instrument which serves to draw nature ... [but it] gives her the power to reproduce herself,' or indeed (in Poe's formulation), better than nature itself, 'a more absolute truth, more perfect identity of aspect with the thing represented.'³³ We have already seen such claims dismissed as being bourgeois desires of power. But Tagg too overstates his case when he asserts that 'there cannot be found any ontological or semiological basis for the privileging of photography as a means of representation

Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art / Aperture, 1989), 208-209.

- 31 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 102.
- 32 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), 252-253. See also, on the time of trauma, Cathy Caruth, 'Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History', *Yale French Studies*, 79 (1991), 181-192; Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
- 33 Daguerre cited in Sontag, *On Photography*, 188; Poe cited in Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', 87.

which renders a direct transcription of the real' simply because the photograph is the end-result of a fluke of physics and chemistry.³⁴ He is of course correct to state that photographic authority derives not from the 'alleged intrinsic nature of the photographic process' but from 'the operation of certain privileged apparatuses within the given social formation' (e.g., scientific establishments, government departments, police and law records).³⁵ Nevertheless, the photograph cannot be reduced to the procedure that created it, nor discussed solely in terms of the authority with which it is endowed by privileged agencies. That is indeed an interesting chapter in the history of these particular photographs, as with other famous or influential photographs. Yet one glance at the *Sonderkommando* photographs and one knows that here is something that, *in itself*, makes extremely difficult demands on the viewer.

Photographs, Tagg says, are not magical emanations, but the material products of a material apparatus set to work for specific purposes.³⁶ And yet, one cannot help thinking, if Auschwitz was the realisation of hell,³⁷ are not these photographs epiphanic manifestations (negative ones, to be sure,

34 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 188 and 3. For an early claim that 'the beauty of matter belongs to no one: from now on it is a product of physics and chemistry', see Tristan Tzara, 'Photography Upside Down' (1922), in *Photography in the Modern Era*, ed. Phillips, 6.

35 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 189.

36 *Ibid.*, 3.

37 According to George Steiner, 'The concentration and death camps of the twentieth century, wherever they exist, under whatever regime, are *Hell made immanent*. They are the transference of Hell from below the earth to its surface. ... In the camps the millenary pornography of fear and vengeance cultivated in the Western mind by Christian doctrines of damnation, was realised.' In *Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), 47-48.

as befits hell) of this (un)reality?³⁸ Such a claim is of course inseparable now from our knowledge of what these photographs are—to this extent Tagg is correct—and our insistence on their evidential role. The failure of 283 to play an evidential role proves this point. But even a claim by a Holocaust denier—taking advantage of the fact that the evidential weight a photograph enjoys is socially granted—to the effect that the photographs do not depict a scene of the Holocaust but something (anything) else, would not stand up, because, holding them in one's hands, or seeing them displayed, the visceral impact of these photographs is truly frightening.³⁹ It is this fact which bespeaks the presence—if not of a trace of Nature, an image devoid of any rhetoric⁴⁰—of a moment of light captured from the past, what Andrea Liss calls 'translucent mimesis'.⁴¹

Surely it is going too far to claim, with Tagg, that outside of their history the existential essence of photographs is empty. Does the indexical nature of the photograph *only* exist by virtue of a knowledge of its history? Does Tagg, in confronting Barthes, not conflate 'existential absolutes' with a mere static confirmation that *something happened*? The very angle at which 282 was taken, with the human subjects squashed into the corner of the frame, the very fact that 283 is virtually blank with darkness, these are aspects of the pho-

38 Sontag, *On Photography*, 19: 'One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany.'

39 Although as Detlef Hoffmann notes, given the absence of the original prints and films, it is questionable whether the photographs would actually stand up as trial evidence against Holocaust deniers. Detlef Hoffmann, 'Auschwitz im visuellen Gedächtnis: Das Chaos des Verbrechens und die symbolische Ordnung der Bilder', *Jahrbuch zur Geschichte und Wirkung des Holocaust* (1996), 243.

40 Berger and Richon, 'Introduction', in *Other than Itself*.

41 Liss, *Trespassing Through Shadows*, 124.

tographs which, when seen next to 280 and 281, are unnerving, and not only because of their evidential or connotative functions. This disagreement with Tagg certainly lies in the fact that he scoffingly dismisses the attachments that people can have to depictions which are the end result of a chemical process, as if that fact alone should prevent any emotional attachment with photographs. But perhaps the disagreement is also a result of the fact that Tagg is thinking of individual photographs, whereas what we have before us here is a sequence, a basic narrative of the genocide of the Jews which exists even without textual help. Individually these photographs are far more difficult to read, but together they offer to the viewer a basic form of understanding.

But the fact remains that these photographs cannot be treated as exceptions to the rule of representation just because of the importance of their subject matter or because they form a sequence.⁴² As Edith Wyschogrod notes, 'the photographic image requires narrative orchestration if its meaning is to emerge and narratives differ in the claims they make about their referents.'⁴³ The indexical nature of the photographs is not separable from the 'technical, cultural and historical process[es] ... [which] produce a new reality,'⁴⁴ nor can the punctum be split from the studium. But is not the visceral impact of these photographs precisely their meaning?

42 In this the *Sonderkommando* photographs parallel the wider case of the Holocaust in historiography, where the Holocaust is treated as exceptional, resisting the methods of the historian, particularly the process of historicisation. See especially Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, 'A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism', *New German Critique*, 44 (1988), 85-126. To appreciate the impact of the Holocaust, it should neither be isolated from the normal processes of historiography, nor reduced to them, but shown to call into question western notions of history *per se*.

43 Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 111.

44 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 3.

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At the Auschwitz museum this last question is answered with a definite 'yes' as the photographs are displayed with only one thing in mind: shock. The absence of historical information or any other connotation regarding the photographs in the old permanent display in the Auschwitz I *Stammlager* (due to be changed in the future) is so striking that it has been called the 'pornography of violence'. Apart from the fact that the visitor is seeing them in Auschwitz, there is nothing to indicate why these photographs are important; but anyone who sees them knows, even the most poorly informed. 283 is a problem for this desire to shock, as is 282, which is why the former is not displayed and the latter cut and only the left-hand corner blown up and shown. The removal of the frame from 280 & 281 indicates the same attitude to the role of these images in the exhibition. But again what this shows is that to a large extent meaning is socially constructed—the shudder we experience on viewing them is borne of our knowledge of *what they are*—as well as also being proof of the intrinsic power of the photographs to shock; in other words, of the blurred and overlapping nature of their indexical and constructed meanings.

This shock, revealing that the photographs have a power beyond that which is given to them by the guardians of Holocaust memory, also explains why so little has been said about them. Sontag says that

photographs can and do distress. But the aestheticising tendency of photography is such that the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralising it. ... Photography's realism creates a confusion about the real which is (in the long run) analgesic morally as well as (both in the long and in the short run) sensorially stimulating.⁴⁵

45 Sontag, *On Photography*, 109-110. Sarah Kember, "'The Shadow of the Object': Photography and Realism", *Textual Practice*, 10:1 (1996), 146, writes that 'the current panic over the status of the image, or object of

How long is the long run? Fifty years? In that time, the photographs have certainly become familiar. Have they also deadened us to the violence, dulled our senses in the overexposure to them which we have received? Has the visible, as Cornelia Brink puts it, made us blind?⁴⁶ Or do the photographs themselves, by virtue of the paradox of the medium, mean that this anaesthetic effect (to continue Sontag's medical metaphor) is inevitable, that 'The feeling of being exempt from calamity stimulates interest in looking at painful pictures, and looking at them suggests and strengthens the feeling that one is exempt'⁴⁷ Does the very obsession—so compellingly identified by Benjamin—'to bring things *closer* to us'⁴⁸—end by negating the closeness, preventing us from confronting the horror of what we are seeing?

A note smuggled out of camp by the political prisoners Józef Cyrankiewicz & Stanislaw Klodzinski on 4 September 1944 is instructive in this regard:

Urgent. Send two iron reels of film (2 1/2 x 3 1/2 in.) as soon as possible. It is possible to take pictures. We send you photographs from Birkenau—people who have been gassed. The photograph shows a heap of bodies piled outdoors. Bodies were burned outdoors when the crematorium could not keep pace with the number of bodies to be burned. In the foreground are bodies ready to be thrown on the heap. Another photograph shows one of the places in the forest where people were told to undress, allegedly for a bath, but in fact

photography, is technologically deterministic and masks a more fundamental fear about the status of the self or the subject of photography, and about the way in which the subject uses photography to understand the world and to intervene in it.'

46 Cornelia Brink, 'Secular Icons: Looking at Photographs from Nazi Concentration Camps', *History & Memory*, 12:1 (2000), 144.

47 Sontag, *On Photography*, 168.

48 Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', 250. See also Cadava, *Words of Light*, xxv and *passim*.

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before being driven to the gas chambers. Send a reel as soon as possible. Send the enclosed photographs to Tell.⁴⁹

Reading this, it is possible to sense something of the urgency and desperation of the time it was written. Yet its description forbids as well as beckons us to approach the reality of genocide. It bespeaks the desire to bring the reader closer, at the same time as it makes plain the ultimate inability to do so. But this fact does not necessarily mean that one becomes inured to the horror; indeed, awareness of the contradictory feelings of closeness and distance is itself confirmation of the enduring power of these words and the photographs to which they refer. If the language of representation, challenging as it does our easy dependence on simply-determined notions of mimesis, has a benefit, it is to make us realise that, with the *Sonderkommando* photographs, just when we think we are closest to the actuality of genocide, standing on the edge of a mass grave, we are further away than ever.

49 'Tell' was Teresa Lasocka-Estreicher, a member of the Polish underground in Cracow. Cited in Swiebocka et al, *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs*, 172.