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**TRUTH BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION: BOLTANSKI, LANZMANN,  
RICHTER, AND THE SHOAH**

*Abstract:*

The article tackles the question of truth in the visual field and in the visual arts, referencing the work of Claude Lanzmann, Christian Boltanski and Gerhard Richter, that is the way they dealt with the trauma of the holocaust, thereby rethinking the status of images and approach to making images and/or art after WWII. The focus is the definition of truth, which can no longer be seen as being merely on the commonsensical level of facts or evidence, but also, within the frame of all arts, as closely connected to the structure of fiction. In fact, it is only by way of fiction that another level of truth beyond mere factuality can reach us. This entails a discussion on the mechanism of the signifier (as interplay of presence and absence) and the hallucinatory aspect of a heightened sense of reality (the experiences of something unreal or fictitious in reality). Furthermore, the topic of the holocaust in the visual arts leads to a broader question of the impossibility to capture death/dying and consequently to the question of an atheistic image.

*Key words:*

Christian Boltanski, Claude Lanzmann, Gerhard Richter, truth, fact, fiction, holocaust

*“Indeed, there is no such thing as a documentary image, and if, by some extraordinary chance, there were a document on the great gas chambers of Birkenau, and if we were to see men fighting, in order to breathe again, the appalling battle that Filip Müller, in Shoah precisely, calls the battle of death, not only would I not have included it in my film, I would have destroyed it.”*

Claude Lanzmann<sup>1</sup>

## **There Is No Image of the Shoah**

The present article will try to outline a concept of truth—not only within the visual domain—with which fiction will establish itself as a necessary aspect of truth “as such” or almost as a *conditio sine qua non* for the otherwise, yet not simply empirically, but structurally impossible total articulation of truth, thus going well beyond the usual, commonsensical level of truth as mere archival or documentary facts, namely, evidence. Here, we shall follow the Lacanian line of “truth structured as a fiction,” that is of a level of (unconscious) truth, which can only reach us by way of fiction: that is in both its more *general* meaning, for instance in the very real experience of the illusory, delusional, hallucinatory, unreal, hyperreal or de-realized, *das Unheimliche*, even of the veiled or masked, and its *specific* meaning, namely, as the praxis of staging, that is fiction in the literary, narrative and the visual arts. The illusory, delusional, hallucinatory, unreal, or de-realized, the veiled or masked will here not simply be an antithesis of reality, or loss of reality, but the very “articulation” of reality—of a heightened and simultaneously blurred sense of reality, of coming too close to reality or to something that not only magnifies and distorts it, makes it mostly unbearable, but paradoxically opposes it. Our sense of reality thus actually relies on something that opposes it. As we shall see, what opposes it, so to speak, and paradoxically, is the very presence of the mechanism of signifiers.

In psychoanalytical praxis, this fact, which concerns all speaking beings, reveals itself especially in psychotic hallucinations, which are first and foremost verbal hallucinations. Simply put, what is hallucinated is language itself or signifiers. There is something hallucinatory about the advent of language or more precisely the signifier. The pathological thus reveals a truth that concerns us all as speaking beings. On the other hand, and on the other side of psychosis, which is, in a way and in its substitute reality, a flattening out of the (psychotically non-operative) unconscious, the whole question of truth between fact and fiction, yet now within the frame of an operative unconscious, simply implies that the unconscious too does not care about any “sane” delineation between fact and fiction, yet its consequences are very much real. In other words, the non-existence of something, the non-real, or the unreal have very real, actual effects. It is no coincidence then that the stories we tell ourselves

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1 Bognoux 2001, 271. On a personal note, I would like to dedicate this article to the extraordinary work of Đorđe Lebović.

about ourselves, say the fiction of our own image (of what we supposedly are), are the cause of many very real or consequentially real pathologies or pathological acts. Thoughts and delusions have physical consequences, so to speak.

Therefore, and especially in terms of the question of facts, it seems that our choice to pursue this issue of two different levels truth, as either fact or fiction, within the harrowing historical context of the Holocaust or, more precisely, the Shoah<sup>2</sup>, seems even more challenging, slippery, and downright dangerous, not to say unnecessarily provocative. All in all, and especially at first glance, the very word ‘fiction’ seems to feed both the growing ignorance of the Holocaust, including its historical, socio-political, and economic background, and its ludicrous deniers, who are very much akin to paranoid conspiracy “theorists”. From this point of view, it is not difficult to imagine the scandal that Lanzmann’s words (from the quote above) caused in the public sphere. How could anyone, and especially someone as important as Lanzmann, whose film *Shoah* (1985) was, together with Raul Hilberg’s monumental *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961)<sup>3</sup>, the very pillar of the so-called Holocaust studies, say that they would destroy any newly discovered material evidence and especially photographic evidence of the Shoah? How can one wrap one’s head around such a bold statement? Is it “only” because such footage or photographic evidence of what was going on around and especially in the gas chambers would be disrespectful, demeaning to the victims—another blow to them, once again depriving them of dignity?

Here, we must point out two things. On the level of mere facts, that there is no image of the Shoah, as Lanzmann said, simply means what it states: there is no photographic, documentary, archival image of what went on in the gas chambers. This also entails the brutal and not enough underlined fact that the goal of the Nazi machinery, of its industrial production of death, was “oblivion of oblivion”, the “death of death” or “no trace of a trace”.<sup>4</sup> The Shoah never happened and there will be no evidence that it ever happened—not only in the future Nazi *Lebensraum*, but for all. The oblivion of oblivion thus aimed not only at the eradication of the European Jews, but also at the eradication of their eradication, so clearly evoked in Jochen Gerz’s brilliant and mostly participative public WWII monuments or

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2 The term “holocaust”, as is well known, is too tied to the religious connotation of sacrifice—a logic that is to be avoided in this historical context.

3 Raul Hilberg was the only historian that Lanzmann included in his *Shoah*.

4 No wonder then that the Jews themselves, especially those that rebelled or revolted, as seen in the last part of Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, were haunted by the question of being the last Jew—the last trace (of not only the Jews, but also of humanity). The same question also drove the Nazis. From the standpoint of survivor’s guilt (Why did I survive and not the others?), one must mention the redoubled pressure of this question when it came to the so-called *Sonderkommando*, the Jews that were forced to collaborate in the extermination process. Their guilt stemmed from this: “I survived because there was no shortage of others.” When the *Sonderkommando* started to feel the shortage of the human material that came on the trains, they knew that they would be next, as the last trace to be eradicated. This was the cause of the Jewish revolt in Treblinka.

memorials.<sup>5</sup> Even the Nazi perpetrators themselves will forget how their future *Lebensraum* came to be.

This is the key to Lanzmann's eerie shots of the seemingly peaceful, neutral looking woods in Treblinka, where one of the six extermination camps was built. Nothing is there, but the tall trees, as if nothing happened there, unless one remembers that those trees were planted by the Nazis themselves to cover up the now almost inexistent ruins of the camp. Their destroying of all material evidence, of what could be destroyed, including camp sites, is a crucial point<sup>6</sup>—since this was the Nazis' preemptive strike at the future. One can now see that the Holocaust deniers hold on to and perpetuate exactly what the Third Reich tried to achieve until the very end of WWII: *no evidence*. Pure fiction. The same goes for the absence of any document with Hitler's clear orders. Gitta Sereny was therefore completely right: *Do we need any such document as evidence?*<sup>7</sup> We do not. Of course, there is plenty of (today even forensic) evidence, but that is not the point. Something else, something "psychological" seems to be at play behind this (voyeuristic) striving for *photographic* evidence or documentary *imagery* from the inside of the actual gas chambers. Whence this need for an image, not to say the Image with a capital 'I'? The Image of all images? As if we were once again dealing with the whole problematic of iconoclasm and the image of God...

One can begin to sense here that this question is also linked to pseudo-historical "practices" of *Einfühlung*, of "in-feeling" or "feeling into", which can be summed up by empathic or re-enactment questions such as: How was that? How must that have felt? Here, one can immediately recall the criticism of the Holocaust memorial in Berlin that in the eyes of some strived too much to convey the horrid anxiety of those that experienced utter loss overnight or were about to die. One could even say that Lanzmann's *Shoah* does something similar, especially when the camera movements follow, as in a reconstruction, Filip Müller's voiceover testimony of how it was to work in Auschwitz's crematoria. However, Lanzmann does not stage this as, say, Steven Spielberg's *The Schindler's List* (1993), which was rightfully criticized not only by Stanley Kubrick, who said that "the holocaust is not a success story."<sup>8</sup> Far from it. In fact, the simplicity of Lanzmann's approach, which is not documentary (since there are no documents), but an establishing of a document, so to speak, follows a certain absence, which is also the absence of direct

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5 See Wajcman's brilliant analysis of his work in *L'Objet du siècle* (Wajcman 1998).

6 Besides the destruction of all evidence for the murder to be perfect, one must remember the fate of the Hungarian Jews, the last to be exterminated, and the unbelievable frenzy of the Nazis to kill them as quickly as possible even if they knew that they would lose the war.

7 See her interview on Charlie Rose: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UT6wu\\_JKLRw&t=1301s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UT6wu_JKLRw&t=1301s) (Still available on August 15, 2023). One must mention her interviews with Franz Stangl and Albert Speer, another milestone in the Holocaust studies.

8 This is a viral story about Kubrick. Still, if this was said by him or not, the statement is true. Many other filmmakers, for instance Michael Haneke, criticized Spielberg for staging exactly the inside of the gas chamber.

fictional staging. Lanzmann therefore breaks any deep emotional form or possibility of our “in-feeling” or “feeling into”. Nothing happens or, should we say, *the nothing as impossibility of “feeling into”* happens. The nothing that is also echoed in “no trace of a trace”. Filip Müller’s voiceover testimony of facts, of how it was to pile up the bodies and burn them in the crematoria, thus begets a dimension of fiction, of something unreal because it is all too real. The whole definition of fiction thus changes. It is no longer something merely opposed to reality.

In other words, Lanzmann does something much more effective: his very minimalist, formalist approach produces a *separation from commonsensical, supposedly shared, common reality and from us, from any form of psychological depth*, which is echoed in disbelief—the exact disbelief that this was possible, that this happened. Was this not exactly the disbelief that many survivors talked about: “Is this really going on? Where am I? What is happening?” All depth and psychology are cancelled out here, just as much as common, self-evident reality—we are totally separated from ourselves, from our innermost identity of what we think we are or were. However, if reality is suddenly put into parenthesis, dissolving, it is only because it is heightened and therefore as if hallucinatory. The illusory, hallucinatory aspect of it all, when the delineation between fact and fiction becomes blurry, is for us the locus of (a traumatic) truth, not so much or only in terms of content, but in a more formal, structural aspect. We can “illustrate” this with another film by Claude Lanzmann: *The Karski Report* (2010). When the Polish resistance fighter Jan Karski managed to report to the Allied forces, and quite early, the horrors that were happening to the Jewry in Poland, the Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter told him in Washington the following: “I am not saying that you are lying, I am saying that I do not believe you.” The split here is key, and it is structural, linked to the mechanism of the signifier. We take this sentence not only in terms of a lack of historical precedence and therefore of the previously already imaginable and therefore possible, but in terms of the very structure of truth. This is, namely, why we can speak of “true lies” or “lying by telling the truth”. A person can state all the facts, yet still lie or avoid the issue by exactly stating mere facts. From the opposite perspective, someone can inadvertently tell the truth by lying or embellishing. Frankfurter’s sentence of something not being a lie, yet still beyond belief, is thus the perfect encapsulation of our whole problematic.

László Nemes’ outstanding film *Son of Saul* (2015), about the impossibility of a burial, proves this point of truth in fiction *per negationem*. The film is a fictional staging of Auschwitz, obviously inspired by Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, especially the Filip Müller testimony, yet in such a way that any form of identification by way of “in-feeling” or “feeling into”—of somehow, even intuitively knowing what the Shoah felt like—is rendered strictly impossible. What becomes felt is this very impossibility. In fact, and to boot, those within the camps were also deprived of any form of “in-feeling” or “feeling into”, constantly thrown out of themselves and their surroundings. The Nazis were much aware of this, especially upon the

prisoners' arrival to the camps. One should remember their cynicism in how to avoid their panic, at least one of its examples: the train station in Treblinka was intentionally designed to give them the impression of the most pleasant, bucolic local station with pretty flower beds, etc. The people on those trains, which were also called "merchandise" by the Nazis, predominantly did not know what they were a part of.

We should therefore repeat and thus conclude that the level of truth that we are aiming at is the very distance toward and within any form of "feeling into". In other words, or in another articulation of the truth as an inner split, we are here split away from any possible psychological wealth of our own supposedly transparent ego identity. The truth in question here touches upon our non-coinciding with ourselves. Again, what is one of the articulations of the truth-as-split? Non-recognition—when we become strangers to ourselves, and the same goes for reality. None of us totally overlaps with him— or herself. However, this is not only the point of madness or of reality suddenly turning into a nightmare. This same point of non-identity within identity is also the very possibility of being in touch with reality. The structure of truth here is thus akin to the Möbius band or the Klein bottle.

If our first point was the level of mere facts, we have now articulated the second one by rearticulating the question of *Einfühlung*, of "in-feeling" or "feeling into". This will namely be, as we shall see, *the* theme of Christian Boltanski's work, yet exactly from the point of that split away from ego-psychology depth. One should thus be bold and simply say that the question "How must that have felt?" means "What do death or dying feel like?"—and can one capture death *visually*? Can one photograph it? Is there an image of death? Can one verbally fully articulate it? Again, this impossibility is not only empirical. The impossibility is or appears empirical because it is structural. The outer border is the inner limit. That something remains unsayable, like a silent scream, attests not to the richness of the empirical, but to a structural problem of language as such, its inner inconsistency, which overlaps with the impossibility of any metalanguage. That is why more than one articulation is possible, thus not only due to a myriad of individuals. The whole issue thus revolves around a certain gap of the unspeakable as unsayable, a certain non-coinciding of the thing with itself, which overlaps with total destitution, total loss, even of the loss of loss. We could also say that death is this gap, just a pause or a comma, not simply physical death, but first and foremost a symbolic one: the sheer possibility of total loss, of both the outermost and the innermost while still alive. Utter destitution of what we were, are or think we were and are.

We should now stop at our first out of three short case studies of Boltanski's work. How does Boltanski tackle the question of *Einfühlung*, of "in-feeling" or "feeling into"? What is his answer to the empathic question "How must that have felt?" or "What do death or dying feel like?" Dare we walk in the shoes of the dead?



## Feeling the Used Clothes: There Is No Image of Death

The piles of used clothes, so typical of Boltanski's work (*fig. 1*), are for the most part an echo of the clothes that the prisoners had to undress and give over at their arrival into concentration and extermination camps, sometimes right before they were asphyxiated in the gas chambers. A part of Auschwitz, for instance, where they accumulated, inspected and sorted all of the clothes and other personal belongings of the imprisoned, was named Kanada (Canada). This was typical of any camp (*fig. 2*). The name 'Kanada', however, (cynically) signified, the same as the name 'America' in the history of migrations, the land of plenty. During WWII, the predominant part of these piles of seized clothes and personal belongings nourished the European markets, at least those of second-hand clothes, and contributed to the flourishing of flea markets after the war. People all over Europe were wearing clothes and using belongings of those perished in the camps.



1. Christian Boltanski, *A view of Boltanski's show at The Armory, New York*, 2010, [CC](#) C-Monster (Flickr); 2. Sidney Blau, "Dachau Atrocity Camp: Tattered clothes from prisoners who were forced to strip before they were killed, lay in huge piles in the infamous Dachau concentration camp which was liberated by the 7<sup>th</sup> U.S. Army troops. Clothing was reused because of material shortages.", 30 April 1945, [CC](#) United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Stuart McKeever

In the case of Boltanski's larger clothes installations, the public could be surprised or even shocked by the artwork's turn into its actual use or participatory aspect. Let us imagine trying on the clothes of the deceased: "When I do a large piece with used clothes, some people talk about it in relation to the Holocaust and say how sad the piece is. But children find it fun, it makes them happy, because they can try on all the clothes. I never speak directly about the Holocaust in my work, but of course my work comes after the Holocaust. You know, at the end of the nineteenth century people believed that science was going to save us. Now we can see that things have gotten worse: not only the Holocaust, but Bosnia, Rwanda, the

atom bomb, and then AIDS, pollution, mad cows...So we know that science isn't going to save us, our big hope has been destroyed. The Holocaust taught me that we are no better now than we were in the past. All the hopes of human improvement and progress have been destroyed.” (Boltanski 2017, 6)

However, as the recently deceased Boltanski, truly still one of the biggest names in contemporary art, also said, the connection between the clothes and individually lit photographs, say of children, is not only the Holocaust or more precisely the Shoah, but also, more generally, death and intimacy (*fig. 3*). Both are present in the *used* aspect of the clothes: “Every time I work on pieces like these, there are always people who tell me that they can sympathize somehow with the use of these materials, because when their own mother or grandmother died, they never knew what to do with their clothes and things. And especially with shoes, which have a particular link to the person who wore them. What is beautiful about working with used clothes is that these have really come from somebody. Someone has actually chosen them, loved them, but the life in them is now dead. Exhibiting them in a show is like giving the clothes a new life—like resurrecting them. Especially when you think that clothes can belong to such different people: it's like a kind of resurrection.” (*ibid.*, 5)



Christian Boltanski, *Monument*, 1989, installation,  C-Monster (Flickr)

When it comes to death and the presence of a past, departed intimacy of a certain person, Boltanski's thoughts make us see and feel the double dimension of these *used* clothing items or objects that once belonged to this or that person, perhaps a loved-one, a mother, or a grandmother as Boltanski says above. We feel this already when we are faced with what to do with these objects after the death of their owner. Should one keep, give, or throw them away? Here, we can allude to the most sensual aspect of the clothes of a departed person, namely, the smell, which somehow preserves this person, her physical presence, keeping that person “virtually” alive. The double, conflicting dimension of these objects is therefore located on the thin or Möbius-like borderline between the phobic and the fetishistic: on the one hand, the objects that once belonged to the

departed person evoke the loss, and consequently provoke sadness, yet also, on the other hand, our psychological clinging and thus denial or disavowal of that sad loss. These objects are *simultaneously* the carrier of a certain emptiness that is loss and the defensive barrier against that same loss, which threatens us with the possibility of destitution, yet which in a way already happened.





Christian Boltanski, *Candles*, 1996, installation, [CC](#) Ed Jansen (Flickr)

It is exactly because of this that mixed emotions, between the phobic and the fetishistic, were especially provoked by shoes, which visually most echoed the feeling of a past presence or of a life that was once, as such, in those shoes, walking on this earth or Earth. This is also why anonymity of the photographed people plays an important role in Boltanski's work, since the question of loss also aims at what the Nazis tried to achieve by destroying all documents and all traces of what they were doing. They wanted to ensure that this or that life never was, that it never happened and that it will leave a trace. In other words, the goal of industrially produced deaths was that lives could not even be counted, let alone named. As if the once living never walked on this earth or Earth, as if they never were. No one will be able to remember them, not even the future generations of Nazis. There is no image of their death because their death never happened. Of course, in art history there are numerous images of death and dying, but the sheer vastness of these images attests to the simple fact that there is no capital image of death as such. There are images, but no (defining) Image. However, when we talk of "no trace of a trace", all these works point to a certain return, to something that could be called a revenant—what returns is a virtual trace in the absence of a positive trace.

This is also why Boltanski's work revolves around the following eternal question: resurrecting the nameless dead. One can immediately sense the role of the nameless people on those photographs. As if being nameless, or an image without a name, already evokes the touch of death. No wonder then that a special "resurrection" line within his work was dedicated to the history of shadow theater (*fig. 4*). Even if Boltanski's playful shadow theaters stemmed from something much more

personal, they still adhere to the same line of death and resurrection, both within a wholly fictional, even “virtual” context of reminiscences or revenant images—very close to the return of the repressed. The personal here reveals something much more general, universal, and therefore structural. Ultimately, what this context of playing with absences and presences (that is presences of absences) actually implies is the so-called primary signification process that was first—from the standpoint of the human psyche—properly described by Freud in his observation of his nephew’s *Fort-Da* game with which the little child tried to make sense of his mother’s comings and goings, basically her absence(s), which are nothing more but the opacity of her (or the other’s and one’s own) desire (Soler 2002, 118). The emergence of the signifier thus overlaps with the emergence of an absence or the absence of a known cause. The signifying or structural dimension springs up together the question “What does this mean?” (or “What does she want?”). The primary signifier thus emerges with the primary lack of sense/meaning or the primary enigma of *presumed* sense and meaning.

Again, what we are underlining here is the fact that from a strictly psychoanalytical point of view, trauma is trauma proper when something much more “primordial” attaches itself to an external event, which faces us with the possibility of utter loss. What Boltanski touches upon by delicately referencing different socio-political traumas is the echo of something “primordially intimate” that will attach itself to any external threats of total destitution or total loss of sense. The outside becomes the inside, the socio-political becomes intimate—and in more ways than one.

After experimenting with large-format photographs, also under the influence of Georg Baselitz’s monumental figures, Boltanski decided, in 1984, to move away from that, opting for a more modest way of creating, i. e., playing in a childlike manner with different used or found objects. It is no coincidence that this happened in 1984, after his father’s death and to whom he will pay homage in 1986 with an exceptional installation at the hospital chapel of La Salpêtrière, where he delicately lit small shadow figures that will then, through time, slowly become bigger and begin to move with the help of ventilators. It goes without saying that in coping with the absence of the deceased loved ones, these shadow figures become playful signifiers of absences, thus echoing the entire history of *in effigie*, of making the present distant, as if touched by a future absence, namely, death, or making the absent present.<sup>9</sup> The signifying mechanism in this seemingly simple childlike game of presences and absences thus most certainly, yet not only,

9 In painting, especially with the Renaissance advent of the *quadro*, but later also photography, this aspect of making the absent present and the present as if touched by future absence will be the very presence of framing something. The frame thus already is the presence of a signifier and its twofold ways: the frame both gives identity and dis-identifies something, makes it slightly alien. See Wajcman’s brilliant analysis of the history of the frame in painting in his *Fenêtre* (Wajcman 2004).

also grasps the logic in portraiture, photography, and especially film, going all the way back to *lanterna magica*—everything that we could, if we repeat ourselves, label *in effigie*.<sup>10</sup> To reiterate: when we speak of fiction as the necessary condition of truth that is not mere facts, we cannot bypass the logic of the order of the signifier, which *de facto* presupposes a loss.

From the point of view of the same *structural* or signifying mechanism, we should thus align “No image of the Shoah”, “No Image of Death”, “absence and presence”, “burying and resurrecting”, and *Fort-Da*. In trying to further grasp this primary or fundamental signifying logic for all of us speaking beings, we will now propose, especially in terms of burying and resurrecting, even as covering up and (re)discovering, a seeming U-turn into the work of another artist.

### Underneath Gerhard Richter’s Abstract Paintings

On the folded leaflet that accompanied Gerhard Richter’s recent exhibition in Berlin (*Gerhard Richter: 100 Works for Berlin*, Neue Nationalgalerie, 2023), we come across his statement: »Abstract images are fictional models because they illustrate a reality that we can neither see nor describe, but whose existence we can infer.« However, and after seeing this particular exhibition, what will interest us here is the simple fact that many of Richter’s abstract »images« are sedimentary, i. e., that there are (realistic) images behind the abstract »images« — and those can also include photographs taken in concentration camps. As with Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz, and many others, Germany’s past never let go of him. It is well known that Richter is an avid collector of images. Most of these collected images are a part of his *Atlas* book, which is basically a compendium of photographs, snippets, newspaper cuttings and sketches that the artist has been assembling since the mid-1960s.

However, and more precisely, what we have in mind now is a group of four images that were also the base for Richter’s *Birkenau* series (2014), consisting of four canvases (*fig. 5*). These photographic images are literally underneath the abstract. Richter transferred onto canvas four photographs taken by an inmate of this camp, showing the burning of corpses of murdered Jews in a wooded area, as well as naked women on their way to the gas chamber (*fig. 6*). He gradually painted over the figurative images with brushes and further worked on them with a squeegee. These works are all on display at the Neue Nationalgalerie on permanent loan. In addition, Richter added two full-size photographs out of the actual four. Of

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10 Here, Boltanski often mentions the influence of the day of the dead in Mexico, Japanese *yōkai*, Marcel Marceau, Robert Wilson, Bergman’s film *Fanny and Alexander* (1982) or Charles Laughton’s *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). Much here falls nicely under what Freud called *das Unheimliche* (Blistène 2019).


course, these four photographs are already well-known from much before. However, and much to our present interest, more than two decades ago they caused a huge scandal in France that nicely renders the whole issue of “there is no image of the Shoah” and its consequences for the visual field.

The scandalous exhibition in question was titled *Mémoire des camps* (*Memory of the Camps*), on view in Paris in 2001 at the Hôtel de Sully. The exhibition was curated by the art historian and photography specialist Clément Chéroux, accompanied by a catalogue with a text by the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman. The exhibition displayed the aforementioned four photographs from Auschwitz, which were taken by a *Sonderkommando*, a man about whom little is known. His name was supposedly Alex or Alex the Greek Jew. What was the problem then? What was so scandalous about exhibiting these four photographs? Again, they were very well known, ever since immediate postwar times. They were reproduced, reported about, described, available online, disseminated everywhere, etc. From this point of view, exhibiting them could hardly be the real cause of any proper scandal. Also, one could hardly ascribe any cheap intent to shock or disturb the audiences to both Chéroux and Huberman. Again, what was the whole public conflict around the exhibition about? It seems, and quite convincingly, that pretty much all the public attacks that the organizers of the exhibition faced after the opening focused on the question of the status of the image in contemporary times, especially after WWII.

Consequently, the most problematic aspect of the exhibition was actually Huberman’s text in the accompanying publication, which clearly “legitimized” the show under what will become the title of his future book *Images malgré tout* or *Images in Spite of All* (Huberman 2004). This book, which followed the catalogue, already contains Huberman’s reply to his critics, especially Claude Lanzmann, Gérard Wajcman (Wajcman 2001) and Elisabeth Pagnoux (Pagnoux 2001). The question or problem thus seems to be the reassertion of the power of images and of the passion for images. Is this the old quarrel between iconoclasm and iconodulism? The titles of Wajcman’s and Pagnoux’s scathing critiques already say it all: *De la croyance photographique* or *On photographic belief* and *Reporter photographe à Auschwitz* or *Photo reporter in Auschwitz*. All in all, is the image again a fetish, capable of conveying it all, as some sort of ultimate truth? If one does not see it, one cannot believe it? And how can we align this question to the Nazi’s quest to destroy all evidence of what they were doing? Of course, Alex the Greek was no photo reporter. However, it would be wrong to say that Huberman’s critics, Lanzmann included, treat the Shoah as some sort of Ultimate or Absolute Crime of which one cannot speak, but only remain silent.

The critics’ argument is much simpler and therefore also much harder: that there is no image of the Shoah simply means that there is no big, unfathomable secret behind the Shoah, and that images, as belonging to the visual domain, are ultimately “just” images. There is nothing behind the image, nothing but a nothing. This is why there will never be an adequate image and why there will never be



Left to right, above: *Image 280* and *Image 281*; below: *Image 282* and *Image 283*. August 1944. Alex, Aleko or Alekos, a member of the *Sonderkommando* from Greece, often named as Albert, Alex or Alberto Errera, a Greek army or naval officer who died in Auschwitz in 1944.  Public domain.

enough images. In other words, the power and simultaneously the weakness of an image as such is that it both shows and conceals, gives the impression of supposedly touching the mysterious beyond of the ultimate cause of all things. This is why the critics' argument of the expression "images in spite of all" is finally *atheist*. All presuppositions, which are as such already in themselves bound to religious logic,

to a beyond of an image, of an image as a veil of a supposedly divine Beyond (if we remember the paradigmatic story of the painting contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius) are thus strictly cancelled. Nothing lies behind and that is the true revelation. No divine Cause, but only socio-political, economic and other ideological causes. “Images in spite of all” thus unfortunately comes too close to reasserting the power of and the passion for images within a strictly religious domain, which is the domain of both iconoclasm and iconodulism. The Shoah, however, is not some sort of divine mystery. Here, Huberman’s critics were simply right, leaving the religious domain of iconoclasm and iconodulia behind. It is as if we now, especially post-WWII, need a different way to talk and think about images, beyond any form of religious logic that always presupposes a Beyond. However, we could also say that the very *insistence* of this religious logic in the visual field, in imagery, is ultimately very human and that it concerns our unconscious, which does not distinguish between real and false or fictitious.

We can now also see how ingenious Richter’s approach is within this whole interplay of what we see and what may lie beyond the image in front of us. It is as if he adds another twist to Parrhasius’ painting of a curtain that fooled Zeuxis into thinking that something might be behind it. If Zeuxis could fool the birds by painting the grapes as if they were real, Parrhasius could fool mankind by painting a curtain as if something was behind it. To reiterate, it is absolutely no coincidence that Richter chose this dispositive in dealing with the four photographs from Auschwitz and Germany’s past. Behind the veil of the abstract is the horror of the absence of the Cause—no divine Beyond. Yet this by no means entails an anchoring in reality, but a total loss of reality and identity. And a totally different approach to what an image is or can be. An image that is in itself already marked by an inherent impossibility without any link to a Beyond.

As we can see, the question of the image here seems to be tightly connected to the question of the representation or the representability of death, one of the oldest of questions. Can art capture it, fully convey it? Death of course belongs to the domain of faith and religion. To see death, to finally grasp it and not only represent it, but simply present it would mean finally seeing it all. This would be the fundamental presupposition: the possibility to see it all in some sort of total transparency of the Absolute Eye. In order to conclude, it would perhaps be best to quote a longer, brilliant passage from Slavoj Žižek’s book *Less Than Nothing*, which is close to his arguments as to why Krzysztof Kieślowski abandoned documentary films, opting for feature films or fiction instead, which was ultimately even more problematic for him since fiction revealed itself to be closer to the intimacy of others, much more than documentaries (Žižek 2001). The following quote will also bring us back to Lanzmann’s quote at the beginning of this article: “The famous last proposition of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*—‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’—involves an obvious paradox: it contains a superfluous prohibition, since it prohibits something which is already in itself impossible. This paradox faithfully reproduces the predominant attitude towards the aesthetic representation



of the Holocaust: it shouldn't be done, because it can't be done. Jorge Semprún's Spanish-Catholic origins play a crucial role in his reversal of this prohibition: for Semprún, it is not poetic fiction but prosaic documentary which is impossible after Auschwitz. For Elie Wiesel, by contrast, there can be no novel about the Holocaust: any text claiming to be such is either not about the Holocaust or is not a novel. Rejecting this claim that literature and the Holocaust are incommensurable, Semprún argues that the Holocaust can only be represented by the arts: it is not the aestheticization of the Holocaust which is false, but its reduction to being the object of a documentary report. Every attempt to 'reproduce the facts' in a documentary way neutralizes the traumatic impact of the events described—or as Lacan, another atheist Catholic, put it: truth has the structure of a fiction. Almost no one is able to endure, still less to enjoy, a snuff film showing real torture and killing, but we can enjoy it as a fiction: when truth is too traumatic to be confronted directly, it can only be accepted in the guise of a fiction. Claude Lanzmann was right to say that if by chance he were to stumble upon some documentary footage showing the actual murder of inmates in Auschwitz, he would destroy it immediately. Such a documentary would be obscene, disrespectful towards the victims even. When considered in this way, the pleasure of aesthetic fiction is not a simple form of escapism, but a mode of coping with traumatic memory—a survival mechanism. But how are we to avoid the danger that the aesthetic pleasure generated by fiction will obliterate the proper trauma of the Holocaust? Only a minimal aesthetic sensitivity is needed to recognize that there would be something false about an epic novel on the Holocaust, written in the grand style of nineteenth-century psychological realism: the universe of such novels, the perspective from which they are written, belongs to the historical epoch that preceded the Holocaust." (Žižek 2013, 23–24)

However, this stays only within, or mostly within the field of literature, so we need to ask ourselves about the domain of visual arts: What kind of visual art, in all media, can "grasp" the trauma of the Shoah? It is no coincidence that Lanzmann never spoke of his film *Shoah* as a documentary, but only a film. A film-monument one could say. He rarely praised any form of fiction until the aforementioned film *Son of Saul*. We dare say that all of the examples here, from Boltanski to Richter, show that what is needed is imagery that takes into account the very impossibility of total grasping and of *Einfühlung*, first and foremost by rejecting the Beyond. In other words, such an image would fail as much as words fail, especially the words of the survivors, of those who gave testimony of what happened. We should thus remember their testimonies, namely, all the instances where their narration stumbles, becomes incoherent, punctuated by silences and what could only be described as a bone in one's throat. No wonder then than Zoran Mušič's paintings of what he saw in Dachau, from his *We Are Not the Last...* series, seem to be images that stand on the borderline between appearing and disappearing—as if never fully that, never fully or totally an image. This self-effacing character is akin to that bone in the throat. The truth ultimately is that bone in the throat. It is the very incidence of the unspeakable or the unsayable.

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**ISTINA IZMEĐU ČINJENICA I FIKCIJE:  
BOLTANSKI, LANCMAN, RIHTER I ŠOA**

*Apstrakt:*

Članak se bavi pitanjem istine u vizuelnom polju i u vizuelnim umetnostima pozivajući se na radove Kloda Lancmana, Kristijana Boltanskog i Gerharda Rihtera, odnosno na način na koji su se nosili s traumom Holokausta, promišljajući time status slike i pristup stvaranju slika i/ili umetnosti nakon Drugog svetskog rata. Fokus je na definiciji istine, koja se više ne može posmatrati samo na zdravorazumskom nivou činjenica ili dokaza, već i unutar okvira svih umetnosti kao usko povezana sa strukturom fikcije. Zapravo, jedino putem fikcije može doći do druge ravni istine izvan puke činjeničnosti. To uključuje raspravu o mehanizmu označitelja (kao međugri prisutnosti i odsutnosti) i halucinatornom aspektu pojačanog osećaja stvarnosti (iskustva nečeg nestvarnog ili fiktivnog u stvarnosti). Nadalje, tema holokausta u vizuelnim umetnostima dovodi do šireg pitanja nemogućnosti snimanja smrti/umiranja, a posledično i do pitanja ateističke slike.

*Ključne reči:*

Kristijan Boltanski, Klod Lancman, Gerhard Rihter, istina, činjenica, fikcija, Holokaust