

BLACKOUT
On Memory & Catastrophe

by

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Table of Contents

	Introduction	1
1.	On Memory Failure	
	1.1 Toward an Ontology of the Blackout	7
	1.2 Media & War: Paradigms of Power	11
	1.3 Technology & Memory	16
	1.4 The Crisis of Sense	21
	1.5 Being & Appearance: Failures of Representation	29
	1.6 Disembodied History	35
	1.7 Paradox, Anxiety & the Question of Ethics	41
2.	Delusion, Dementia & Atrocity	
	2.1 The Nature of Disaster	44
	2.2 Speed & the Aging of History	49
	2.3 The Disaster of Knowledge	58
	2.4 Hypermnesia	60
	2.5 National Memory: Delusions of Immortality	62
	2.6 Historical Secrecy & Dementia	72
3.	The Figure of the Idiot in <i>Shoah</i>	
	3.1 The Incarnation of Memory	75
	3.2 Perpetual Presence	83
	3.3 Madness & Forgiveness	90
	3.4 The Vacuum of Historical Catastrophe	96
	3.5 The Blind Gaze	100
	3.6 Failures of Language	106
	3.7 Beyond Knowability	109
4.	The Art of Absence	
	4.1 The Missing Image	112
	4.2 Praxis: "Accidents of Memory"	121
	4.3 An Ethical World in the Body of the Blackout	125
	Bibliography	129
	Appendix	137

BLACKOUT: On Memory & Catastrophe

Introduction

Our concern with history...is a concern with performed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, somewhere as yet undiscovered.¹ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

Memory in its many permutations -- repressed memory, collective memory, cultural and social memory -- became ubiquitous in the latter years of the 20th century. The mass migration of memory into public discourse has taken root as that which might reconstitute the fractured worlds of history's victims. It is significant that a growing interest in "collective" memory would coincide with the rapid expansion of computer memory and the enormous *collecting* of memory-- Derrida's "archive fever" -- that is taking place through technology. Threatening an ominous departure via Y2K, the sci-fi prophesy of *fin de siècle* computer meltdown, the 20th century's final disaster was slated to be the great crash of memory.

¹ Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 72

Now a mostly forgotten non-event, Y2K nonetheless revealed a symbiosis between our capacity to produce immense disasters of war and immense disasters of information, that is memory, each of which have become dominant, if not essential, structures of technological power. It is indicative of our image-crazed era of hoarded information to be seized by memory and terrified of its loss. The potential disaster of memory that Y2K portended as a failure of technology, or more precisely, as a symptom of technology's increasing capacity to amass and expend power with ever greater consequence, is a disaster that mirrors the colossal force of war that the 20th century demonstrated could wipe us out.

The "blackout" in this work is situated within historical catastrophe, within a traumatic structure, and within structures of technology. As a failure of memory and power the blackout in this context, occurs through the catastrophic deployment of technology, reiterated in media, and manifest in a crisis of sense in which memory, meaning, time, and language are interrupted, suspended, exiled, irreparable. Traumatic amnesia as experienced by victims and witnesses of disaster has been widely studied and placed in the context of historical catastrophe.

Here the “blackout” is seen - if such a word is applicable -- as an historical condition itself, specifically from the 20th century on, as a phenomenon that has been vastly enlarged by technologies of destruction, and further displaced through media and the technologies of prosthetic memory.

And yet the blackout is not something we can “see” or even place. In this work, the blackout is approached from three different angles in an attempt to account for that which evades sense, that is the senselessness we have created through war and its representation. The first chapter, “Memory Failure,” establishes the problem of visibility and invisibility, the rupture between being and appearance, the erosion of sense that is occurring through a virtual world that is replacing an ethical world. Drawing on Paul Virilio’s premise that technologies of war and media, that is the technologies of destruction and observation, have developed concurrently, this chapter proposes that these technologies of light, i.e. firepower, optical power, create the very condition for the inevitable accident, the inevitable blackout.

The second chapter, “Delusion, Dementia & Atrocity,” examines the construction of national memory in the aftermath of disaster, in which

the disaster is reinscribed as progress. Starting with Germany's repressed memory of the Allied firebombings at the end of the Second World War, in which 600,000 civilians were killed, the problem of national memory is situated within a state that cannot mourn its internal disaster in light of its own unspeakable crimes. Through the massive destruction of W.W.II -- extermination, incineration, the atomic bomb -- a tremendously accelerated destruction is followed by an accelerated rebuilding, leaving little evidence of the devastation. The compressed timeframe of war and the compressed timeframe of media have evolved into the War on Terrorism as perpetual war in a perpetual media environment in which past and future have collapsed in a delusion of immortality.

The third chapter, "The Figure of the Idiot in *Shoah*," looks at a thing we cannot see. A village idiot, who appears in Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah*, becomes an allegorical figure whose gaze and silence reflect the stupor, the crisis of understanding, that is produced by the Nazi extermination. The figure of the idiot, who initially appears for only a few frames in an epic film, is impossible to see, to grasp, to comprehend. As an image that disappears as it appears, the idiot is also a figure of

timelessness, the perpetual presence of the disaster that takes place in the present time, in “our time” as Lanzmann says. The film, *Shoah*, as a work of art, a work that can only “incarnate” its subject through the medium of film, transcends its facticity, transcends memory even, transmitting a failure of understanding, an impossibility of meaning that is at the core of the disaster.

“Blackout” is about the *possibility* of memory even more than it is about memory itself. The blackout suspends possibility in an obliterated state that we increasingly fill with media, with the production of memory, eager to shed light despite the truth that may reside in blackness.

Finally, in the last chapter, “The Art of Absence,” the blackout is placed in the context of art that presents the possibility of representing that which escapes representation in the blackout, the accident, the trauma. This section refers to my video art installation, “Accidents of Memory,” which was created as part of this dissertation. To “incarnate” the blackout, the failures of memory, through art is to extend the discourse into a living world, “watchful for a new awakening,” as Levinas says.

Memory, even in the deadened core of the disaster, returns to a living world in which an ethical world may be renewed and reawakened.

The appendix features images from the exhibition of “Accidents of Memory,” which was shown at Zacheta Gallery in Warsaw, Poland, from November 16, 2002, through January 5, 2003.

1. On Memory Failure

1.1 Toward an Ontology of the Blackout

The flash of inspiration, the proverbial light bulb popping into view in an animated cartoon world of bright ideas and thought clouds, arrives like an epistemological strike of lightning, electrates and aglows. Light as knowledge and power has infused philosophy with a sense of truth that still anticipates awakenings even in a post-Enlightenment world in which darkness has irremediably suffused the light. Heidegger's undulating world of revealed and concealed truth envisions a continuity between light and darkness, a co-dependence that functions like day and night. "Strife is not a rift [Riss], as a mere cleft is ripped open; rather, it is the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other."² Heidegger is grounding truth in a unity of knowing and not knowing that tames the darkness as a retreat from light, always certain that the light will return. The opening of truth appears as light, in a movement of becoming that is reconciled with darkness. And while in nature light can arrive as a flash,

² Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," p. 188

darkness creeps or falls, ominous and insidious, a phenomenon that has likely influenced our ontological perspectives on light and darkness.

The blackout, on the other hand, as a sudden or catastrophic interruption, an accident or error that exceeds darkness and evades sense, is another phenomenon. The blackout happens in a blink, the split-second negation of the *blick*, the view nullified, nil (signified by the intrusive “n” in blink). Lights out. Cut. As a suspension of time, of knowing, of presumed meaning or understanding, and even more precisely of memory, that which we may or may not have known, the blackout is a disappearance. It is a transitory phenomenon that is time-based, medial, historical, and neurological. The blackout is ambivalent and confused about time, indefinite, unknowing of itself, likely indispensable, or unavoidable. Suddenly you forget. Maybe you pass out. Or you are knocked out. Time is lost, irrecoverable. Falling short of death, the blackout is not terminal. It enables awakening, but the awakening is fugitive, dislocated and out of sync with the world that re-appears.

The cut-to-black as a transitory absence is an essential device of narrative that distracts just long enough to shift perspective, to disrupt expectation, to disfigure representation and withhold an ending. In Jacques Derrida's reflection on Maurice Blanchot's autobiographical short story, *The Instant of My Death*, in which a man faces execution by the Nazis, only to live always with the moment of his death, the narrative is described as "a memory of what he no longer knows."³ Blanchot suspends the story in its own unknowability, ending it in an ambiguous state of being in which a transformation is sensed, but unlocatable in a war zone in which survival is also a kind of death. For Blanchot the encounter with the moment of death, the imagined death, is an experience that cannot be remembered or forgotten.

As if the death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him. "I am alive. No, you are dead."⁴

Blanchot's brief story is tightly focused on a single moment, a moment of trauma that is impossible to revive or understand. Exposing narrative's failure to restore the moment, Blanchot tells a story that nonetheless fulfills itself, complete despite its black hole. The narrative

³ Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 66

seeks a recovery of knowledge, but it cannot restore the fractured time, imposing a discontinuity that lingers indefinitely, projecting a warped time, a warped knowledge, that Derrida says lacks chronology and chronometry, evicting the logic and measurement of time.

One cannot, even when one has recovered a sense of the real, measure time. And thus the question returns, how many times: how much time? how much time? how much time?⁵

Lapses in memory drop us into dark holes, stumbling blind. The blackout temporarily refuses sense; it shuts down cognitive systems, pulls the plug, and zaps out like a power failure. The association is palpable in an era of technologies that have extended our memories from our heads, hearts, and spleens, onto our desktops and into our laps. Power outages and power surges are a constant threat, the risk and fear of losing everything. Technology itself is subject to power crashes, but its failures mirror other more ontological insecurities, as Timothy Druckrey has noted.

Between the technologies of sovereign encoded power and the blissful information mythology of the cybersphere, crisis continually looms. Despite the often excessive debates about

⁴ Blanchot, *The Moment of My Death*, p. 9

⁵ Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 81

the epistemologies (or lack thereof) of simulated, virtualized, or rendered worlds, it is the presence, pervasiveness, and legitimization of systematically harvested information that destabilizes an increasingly dematerialized public sphere.⁶

Empowered by technology, we face both literal and ontological power failures, dependent on “simulated, virtualized, or rendered worlds” that threaten disappearance. Within the “dematerialized public sphere” that Druckrey describes, our ethical world is less visible, less locatable, verging on the invisible, the dislocated. It is a condition that has developed through technologies of communication and technologies of war.

1.2 Media & War: Paradigms of Power

Power, its failures and demateriality have driven our human existence. “In communication and in battle the power of destiny first becomes free,”⁷ wrote Heidegger, midway into a century that was already a century of media and war. Electricity had come of age and evolved into atomic energy. Airwaves and air raids had redefined the ground-of-being,

⁶ Druckrey, “Strategizing Against Inevitability” (online)

⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 352

lifting it up and into a trans-territorial space. Power in the sense of the power to create light is arguably the human's most human technology, converging in technologies of communication and battle, where power is manifest in a dematerialized form -- as power itself. Optical technologies have shed light on that which we could not have otherwise seen, expanding the horizon of communication, while war with its light of firepower has produced the most blinding of light, that which extinguishes light. In Heidegger's ontology communication is what enables being-in-the-world, being-with others, as the essential fate of Being. Battle enacts the inescapable finitude of Being, empowering the freedom to anticipate death. For Heidegger, both communication and war establish the authentic history, or historicity, of Being.⁸ Paul Virilio, too, traces a convergence of media and war, starting from what he calls the "war of light,"⁹ the Russo-Japanese war that started in 1904 and utilized the first searchlight. "It illuminated a future where observation and destruction would develop at the same pace."¹⁰

⁸ *ibid*, p. 353

⁹ Virilio, "A Traveling Shot Over Eighty Years," p. 95

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 95

Mirroring the divine, as the divine has been envisioned by humans, as one who can throw lightening bolts, the power to electrify and to accelerate matter toward its atomic disintegration has rapidly brought us closer to the imagined limits of power, though the imagination continues to look farther. Testing new limits, World War I is the 20th century's "decisive event," according to Jan Patočka, the beginning of the end of modernity, in which a "factual, objective meaning of the world" is replaced with a fascination and experimentation with force itself. Patočka sees the new paradigm as breaking with all prior categories, despite the ideology that initially drives it. W.W.I transforms a potentiality of force into its actuality, unleashing a sense of power that previously had been contained by the rules of reason.

It was this war that demonstrated that the transformation of the world into a laboratory for releasing reserves of energy accumulated over billions of years can be achieved only by means of wars. Thus it represented a definitive breakthrough of the conception of being that was born in the sixteenth century with the rise of mechanical natural science. Now it swept aside all the "conventions" that inhibited this release of energy -- a transvaluation of all values under the sign of power.¹¹

¹¹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays*, p. 124

The image of accumulated force, the mushroom cloud still hovering as the apparition of our most awesome power, exposes a desire for power, an addiction even, that Patocka identifies as an addiction to war.¹² The mushroom cloud rises like a slow-motion big bang, an image so sublimely mesmerizing that it transforms itself from destruction into a magnanimous illusion of creation. The image itself is so powerful that there is now a public, nearly universal, visual memory of events we never knew. Seduced by the power of the image, we lose track of power itself. For Georges Bataille, the greatest irony is that the fulfillment of power, the intentional disaster, fails as it succeeds. The exertion of force that fulfills its promise, that produces the desired death toll, as in the case of the atom bomb, defines a new limit of power as that which can eliminate the possibility of a future. Exceeding the possible is exactly what Bataille envisions as fulfilling the human project of force. Yet in facing the limits of force as the limits of possibility, we recoil, facing the very powerlessness of the action in its capacity to eliminate itself.

¹² *ibid*, p. 120

Certainly it is better to live up to Hiroshima than to lament it, unable to bear the idea of it. In truth, man is equal to all possibilities, or rather, the impossible is his only measure (would the human being be *fully* what he is prior to the instant when the possible - or the future - disappears in front of him?)¹³

Bataille's diatribe, written in 1947, was aimed at unmasking the cloak of power that had devastated Europe and Asia and was leading into the Cold War unabated. To lament the last disaster even as we arm ourselves for the next one is to lack fortitude in the face of power. In Bataille's extended essay on political economy, *The Accursed Share*, fearing war would break out between the United States and Russia, he describes a compulsive acquisition of power that sacrifices autonomy for control of the future, a future that is envisioned as an amassing of excessive energy that can only lead to an inevitable destruction.

The beings that we are not given once and for all; they appear designed for an increase of their energy resources. They generally make this increase, beyond mere subsistence, their goal and their reason for being.¹⁴

¹³ Bataille, "Concerning the Accounts Given by the Residents of Hiroshima," p.232

¹⁴ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, p. 190

The blind spot of power is the sense that its limits can be determined without exceeding them. Modernity's figure of the nation as "superpower" assumes a metaphysical relation to power as a protective force. "Force has become the modern figure of being,"¹⁵ writes Derrida. Citing Patocka as depicting a "metaphysics of force,"¹⁶ Derrida suggests that force as a persona of being, as a presentation of power, has concealed, maybe forgotten, an immeasurable dimension of being for which force cannot account or reconcile.

Being has allowed itself to be determined as a calculable force, and man, instead of relating to the being that is *hidden under* this figure of force, represents himself as quantifiable power.¹⁷

1.3 Technology & Memory

The representation itself of power has become a force of being, manifest in media that empower the image, revealing our incessant desire to reproduce the image of ourselves as empowered. The imaging of human

¹⁵ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 37

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 37

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 37

power and human failure is not new of course; it is the source of myth and inhabits the world of literature. Yet in the trans-literate, “electrate” culture that Gregory Ulmer describes¹⁸ the electronic image, through the force of its electronic power, holds us captive in a rhetoric of image that is asserting its dominance over communication even as it calls for new forms of invention. The electronic world increasingly mimics our thinking by activating our capacity to consume, create, and transmit image and information. It accelerates transmission so much so, that we are immersed in a plasmatic and ubiquitous electronica, a constant buzz that circulates in our virtual bloodstream. For Wolfgang Schirmacher this phenomenon signifies the evolution of the human as reaching beyond homo sapiens toward “homo generator,” fused with technologies that supplement our finitude with unlimited potentiality, expanding the modes of representation, our image ablaze with kinetic artifice. Media as sustenance for artificial life, the life we have constructed, is also the connective tissue that reverberates among us. “The promise of mediation in media hints at a possible reunion with the world,”¹⁹ says Schirmacher. Torn from our

¹⁸ Ulmer proposes notions of an electronic culture in his book *Heuristics*, which he develops further into the idea of “electricity” in his book, *Internet Inventions*.

¹⁹ Schirmacher, “Homo Generator,” p. 77

natural world, Schirmacher insists we can no longer hide from the fact that human nature is in fact artificial.

If we penetrate all the dissemblance and tear away the last veil of analogy between human and animal, it then becomes irrefutable: we are but artificial beings among all other beings, our bodies are artifacts by nature.²⁰

The electronic prosthetics of speed and memory, closing distance, storing immense, incomprehensible bits of image and information, expand a sense of being even as sense itself disappears. Relying less and less on our own overworked minds, the power of our memory is amplified by its electronic surrogate and increasingly infirm without it. The human is extended through technology well beyond the robotic appendages of a 1950s science fiction story. Technology is penetrating us from the inside out, appropriating memory and imagination, nesting in the psyche, inside the body, not like the nanoprobes and micro-technologies that are increasingly implanted in the body, but as a presence that disembodies us. Technology's over-stimulating simulation of sense resembles a schizophrenic confusion between the visible and the invisible, according to

Avital Ronell. Signals are getting crossed, in private and public domains, producing a cacophony - a *kaka* - of mixed messages that are ingested and excreted in rapid succession. We feel it in our bodies, the electric current of current affairs, and suffer a nervousness that is experienced physically as an invasion of forces. The unhealthy effects of electricity moved Wilhelm Reich to create his legendary Orgone Accumulator, protecting the body from the toxic radiation of inorganic frequencies, which he believed caused cancer and neurological disorders.²¹ A colleague of Freud, Reich was ostracized for his insistence that the body needed to be saved along with the mind. Ever since we inserted the telephone into our ears, figuratively, if not literally, we have opened our bodies to technology, says Ronell, implying an intrusion, if not a violation.

The radicality of the transaction takes place to the extent that technology has broken into the body (every body: this includes the body politic and its internal organs, i.e., the security organs of the state).²²

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 71

²¹ See the works of Wilhelm Reich, including *The Discovery of the Orgone: the Function of the Orgasm*, for further information on Reich's research on the physiological effects of electromagnetic energy.

²² Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, p. 170

The invisible incursion is manifest in the phantom entities that have been procreated by technology. Virtual viruses and worms are hacking our passageways, invisibly competing for control, suggesting other, more ominous forces. No doubt the question of visibility is heightened by technologies that have enhanced what and how we see, let alone the technologies that have blinded us. In Aldous Huxley's peculiar little book, *The Art of Seeing*, which was first published in 1943, we are guided through a series of arcane exercises and theories for improving sight, perception, memory, and imagination (arts that have been transmogrified, if not supplanted, by technology). Huxley's unintentional history of sight reveals an uncanny observation: "Before the war of 1914 it was, I remember, the rarest thing to see anyone wearing dark glasses,"²³ he writes. The blinding power of the war, or its over-amplified afterimage, seems to have provoked a generalized response that required a toning down of seeing, of seeing less and seeing less brightly. Or perhaps it had created a sickness in seeing, a symptom of seeing too much, like eating too much, that regurgitates the image in one sense by expelling it, and at the same time refuses it entry behind a kind of blackened quarantine. Dark

²³ Huxley, *The Art of Seeing*, p. 47

glasses, a primitive but altogether relevant technology, had signified illness to Huxley before the war. The blacking out of eyes, for the one observing the other who wears dark glasses, registers as an impaired or deadened sense of sight.

As a small boy, I would look at the be-goggled man or woman with that mixture of awed sympathy and rather macabre curiosity which children reserve for those afflicted with any kind of unusual or disfiguring physical handicap.²⁴

1.4 The Crisis of Sense

Force has the power to obliterate sense, to surpass or exclude it in a blinding flash that blacks out the experience itself. Such is the nature of trauma that blasts an inarticulate hole in the victim or witness. Cathy Caruth refers to an “inexplicable traumatic void”²⁵ that continues to challenge psychoanalysis and has come to baffle history as well. In the aftermath of the war-ravaged 20th century, it has been argued that a generalized post-traumatic stress disorder is orbiting around the public

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 47

²⁵ Caruth, *Trauma*, p. 7

sphere, a satellite that sends and receives transmissions, cluttering the airwaves with a latent anxiety, in which a deferred history arrives. The void that Caruth locates in trauma has dislocated truth, delaying a sense of what happened. Nietzsche's "eternal return" and Freud's "return of the repressed" both spiral through cycles of memory that eternally try to make sense, that reenact and revisit the site of trauma. Or for Nietzsche, it might be a site of ecstatic release, a catharsis, or epiphany that overpowers itself and is surrendered, left senseless. Sense may return, but it is always already out of time, reminding us that history does not take place in its own time. Caruth's "belated" history suggests something that cannot help suffering the deficiency of arriving too late, in a state of mourning. Deadened to the event itself, history appears in an awakening that is melancholic, a hangover that slowly clears around the blackout.

The attempt to understand trauma brings one repeatedly to this peculiar paradox: that in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness.²⁶

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 6

Media, reuniting us with the world, as Schirmacher suggests, attempts to close the gap of trauma, filling in for the unaccountable time in a nonstop narrative that gives us a running picture of history-in-the-making. The desire to know, to be connected, is enacted in media in a more pervasive and infectious way than ever before. Short wave radios and then the telephone were early signs of a democratization of communications technology, providing the apparatus for active participation. The Internet has spurred a fanatic interaction that spurts and sputters a borderless connectivity. When servers are down, panic sets in. Electronic power failures, internal surges, the glitches that corrupt and destroy memory, mirror our relation with power itself. While our cultural scientists continue to ask how we have been transformed by media and violence, we might be better served by asking what have we created in them, what reflections have we generated, what condition is ours alone. The idea that technology will enable transcendence is a problem that has fueled science and invention, urging us to seek the secrets of a world outside ourselves, according to Hannah Arendt. It is a project that always risks collapsing in on itself, revealing less about the external world than the interiority of the human mind.

The world of the experiment seems always capable of becoming a man-made reality, and this, while it may increase man's power of making and acting, even of creating a world, far beyond what any previous age dared to imagine in dream and phantasy, unfortunately puts man back once more -- and now even more forcefully -- into the prison of his own mind, into the limitations of patterns he himself created.²⁷

Even as we seek to perfect the technologies that produce war, communication, transportation, or even thinking, we are always poised against a disaster of our own making. In concealing its imperfections, technology's failures, as much as its promises, are mythologized as acts of God that reward and punish us. Externalizing the force of technology absolves us of failure and jump-starts the cycle of heroism in which man will hunt down the Frankenstein monster, only discovering an ethical potential in the aftermath of excessive force. Druckrey suggests that technology is sullied by the image of omnipotence it seems to engender, that failure is in its nature, that is, in our nature.

Enveloped by pieties of all sorts (ontological phantasies, epistemological illusions, post-traumatic psychologies, pathologized theatricalities, anecdotal embodiments, over-

²⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 288

dramatized technical reason, excessive allegories of “otherness”), the field of electronic media has been cast as a sphere of managed interactions and programmable subjectivities. Hounded by expectations of flawless computational performance and sustained by extravagant allegories of 'being digital,' the philosophical mystifications and intellectual presumptions of interactivity, virtuality, or cyberspace compel an acknowledgment of imperfection, failure, error.²⁸

The acknowledgment of failure or error or imperfection does not come easily in the worlds of media and war. Failure in itself straddles an abyss and can be read as an omission, a forgetting, an absence, a deficiency. The nonstop world is in the business of rectifying and reconciling absence with presence and presentation that quickly absolves failure. “Reflection is not thrust aside today because it is dangerous or upsetting, but simply because it is a waste of time,”²⁹ writes Jean-François Lyotard, responding to a crisis in language that emerged after the Holocaust when language was inadequate, experience untranslatable. As the architect Rem Koolhaas has observed, the collapse of the World Trade Center has been memorized and memorialized, but the trauma did not produce reflection on what our cities

²⁸ Druckrey, "Missing Links," online
http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/ascii/tim_eng.htm

²⁹ Lyotard, *The Differend*, preface, p. xv

are or what they could be. “The event has been mobilized in a vast, political story.”³⁰ As a result, the city will reproduce itself *in situ* with another towering emblem of invincibility, an assertion and affirmation of power and certainty. Resisting the grand narratives of history is, in itself, traumatic, suspending certainty about the very moment in question. For Lyotard, this is the essential question of thinking, the essential encounter with emptiness.

Reflection requires that you watch out for occurrences, that you don’t already know what’s happening. It leaves open the question: *Is it happening?*³¹

The question *Is it happening?* is the question that haunts trauma, muting the victim and mutating the catastrophe into a recurring hallucination. Trauma forces a breach in the “shield against stimuli”³² that cannot protect against the neuroses of trauma, according to Freud. The trauma returns disguised and disfigured in dreams. The unconscious impulse to rewrite the narrative, to create narrative that will restore meaning to the trauma, could only be achieved through dreams in the world

³⁰ Koolhaas, *The Charlie Rose Show*, 7 May 2003

³¹ Lyotard, *The Differend*, preface, p. xv

³² Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 25

of Freud. The neurosis might seize consciousness in other forms, but the trauma itself, the recurrence of fear that is recognized as fear, is restricted to dreams that visualize and contextualize an event that reconstitutes trauma. The fact that Freud's observations were developed in the midst of the First World War only adds to the intensity of trauma that permeated his studies. Yet the waking world remained remarkably oblivious.

I am not aware, however, that patients suffering from traumatic neurosis are much occupied in their waking lives with memories of their accident.³³

The shattered "shield against stimuli" that fails to protect the sleeping victim from the invasion of disquieting dreams has further corroded in our world of waking dreams, the world that never shuts down. The unconscious urge to narrativize has been desublimated by media that emulate the dreamworld. Manipulating and distorting time, shifting perspective and perception, the electronic break with linear time especially has enhanced the waking dream in ways that Freud may not have anticipated. Replaying trauma as a simulated dream, the high volume of media, the noise of information that penetrates and saturates, seems

³³ *ibid*, p. 7

immune to shielding. Desensitized by the senselessness of trauma and the traumas that recur endlessly through media, we have recreated the fractured memory of trauma through media that fractures and repeats traumas of war, hunger, rape, and murder. The entanglement of television and trauma has been elaborated by Ronell, who points to television's obsession with programming that features police and the legal system, attempting to form an ethical structure to justify the irruptions of shootings, beatings, killings, and crimes that flood the airwaves.

Television is linked crucially to the enigma of survival. It inhabits the contiguous neighborhoods of broken experience and rerouted memory. Refusing in its discourse and values to record, but preferring instead to play out the myths of liveness, living color and being there, television will have produced a counterphobic perspective to an *interrupted history*.³⁴

³⁴ Ronell, "Trauma TV," p. 308

1.5 Being & Appearance: Failures of Representation

With terrorism emerging as the 21st century's leading television drama, the uncanny climate of "reality" television has set the stage for productions of reality and coverage of war as programming that is remarkably compatible. Aestheticizing television as surveillance, an apparatus of the State, we have come to enjoy the spectacle of "real" people suffering danger, fear, frustration, and vengeance with cameras watching them from all angles at all times. With news reporters who now refer to the military troops with whom they are embedded as "we" and "us," journalists appear as players on *Survivor*, surrounded by danger and cameras, loyal to the team rules, and savvy to the tempo of television. The televised, stylized pathos of war blurs with Reality Television's pathos of personal defeat, humiliation, and deceit, games that are played for money, glory, sex, and even love. Media has revealed its capacity to generalize the experience of anxiety as entertainment, and moreover, to give anxiety an appearance, through the projection of images to which we have become glued. Anxiety itself is replacing the structure of drama, confirming Jean-Luc Nancy's observation that "the cycle of dramatic

representations is closed,”³⁵ having exhausted fable and myth, even “the fable at the end of fables (Samuel Beckett).”³⁶

There is some irony in this proliferation of images, the making visible of that which is invisible, giving anxiety appearance in the midst of technologies and science that grapple less with the visible world, and instead are consumed by the invisible world -- the subatomic world, the genetic world -- that has displaced seeing as the pretext for believing. Aristotle established the primacy of sight in the opening lines of *Metaphysics*, a conceit that we are still reluctant to relinquish. “We prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know.”³⁷ And yet, we know that sight has been corrupted, that what we see is not always what we get. Arendt traces this upset to Descartes and the invention of the telescope, transposing the illusion of the sun revolving around the earth, and installing a new philosophy of doubt, one that has become hyperbolic in our current era of images.

³⁵ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 23

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 23

³⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, p. 689

If Being and Appearance part company forever, and this -- as Marx once remarked -- is indeed the basic assumption of all modern science, then there is nothing left to be taken upon faith; everything must be doubted.³⁸

Media's virtual representation of the world is a world that is compulsively creating image for a world that increasingly is no longer represented by that which is visible. The rupture between Being and Appearance is significant in a world subsumed by image. On one level we are, for the time being at least, still clinging to visible evidence as evidence of truth. On the other hand, with Reality TV overtaking television as feigned reality, we have developed a proclivity for truths of our own making, anxiously suspended like distorted mirrors in a house of fun. Reality TV has produced the most compelling version of virtual reality yet. In this context, the staging of simulated terrorist attacks by the United States Department of Home Security has an uncanny familiarity with government-hired actors playing victims of terrorism, sets of burning and exploded buildings that have the cardboard appearance of a 1940s western, and the outfitting of first response emergency workers with protective costumes. News reports on these simulations as events suggest

³⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 275

that we are seeing something very close to reality, a proximate reality that relives the trauma of terrorism for us in a State-sponsored dream in which the United States government demonstrates resolute command. Ronell describes television's paralyzing impact, its surface always refusing interiority, deflecting truth as it entrances us with a "neutral gleam" through which trauma is essentially inassimilable.

What fascinates us robs us of our power to give sense; drawing back from the world at the moment of contact, it draws us along, fascinated, blinded, exploded.³⁹

The photographic image, both moving and still, substitutes for responsibility, according to Susan Sontag. "Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention,"⁴⁰ she writes, suggesting that the creation of the image suspends ethical engagement. But it is the consumption of the image as well that evades ethical obligation. Doubling for an inaccessible reality, the photographic image offers refuge from an indomitable history that the image has already replaced. Sontag suggests that the image offers a belonging, albeit a surrogate one, that the real denies. "A photograph is

³⁹ Ronell, "Trauma TV," p. 317

⁴⁰ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 11

both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence.”⁴¹ Standing in for the lost, forgotten, irreplaceable moment, the image signifies an impossible recovery that is nonetheless restored in an illusion of recovery, in the accessory of images.

Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote. One can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images.⁴²

The obligation to respond to an image is thwarted by the image itself, which usurps the real and colonizes it. The call to conscience, the ethical call, appears suspicious in the form of media. Lyotard said that the call is an obligation, that even when it only resembles a call, it demands an acknowledgment. And yet ethical obligation dissolves when it is confused with that which is not real. According to Lyotard, the addressee must recognize that an obligation exists. “One can resist it or answer it, but it will first have to be received as a call, rather than, for instance, as a fantasy.”⁴³ Media cannot make this guarantee. Sontag's study of

⁴¹ *ibid*, p. 16

⁴² *ibid*, p. 163

⁴³ Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 107

photography reveals that from its inception images were faked. “Not surprisingly, many of the canonical images of early war photography turn out to have been staged, or to have had their subjects tampered with.”⁴⁴

The photographic image presents itself as a double, an impostor of reality that cannot help but confuse sense, even replace sense with an imitation that may not be recognized as such, something that art theorist Rosalind Krauss notes.

The photograph brought with it the simulacral notion of the mirage, of a reality that had been engulfed within its own technology of imitation, a fall into a hall of mirrors, a disappearance into a labyrinth in which original and copy are indistinguishable.⁴⁵

The image is always suspect, so that even within the prevailing illusion is the disillusionment, the doubt that infuses the image, that suspends sense. Lyotard recognizes that the crisis of disillusionment, the negating of sense, is a crisis that does not free us of sense, but only replaces it with deadened sense that is felt nonetheless, yet fails to connect with the world.

⁴⁴ Sontag, “Looking at War,” p. 91

⁴⁵ Krauss, “X Marks the Spot,” p. 217

Worse than sorrow -- which is a negative feeling but one that can reach the level of the sublime and attest to the heterogeneity between Ideas and realities -- is the disillusioned feeling.⁴⁶

1.6 Disembodied History

For Nancy, the crisis of sense, its “deportment,” is an abandonment that perhaps is a truth in itself, noting that our history has abandoned its lapses. Nancy suggests that “the eclipse, fainting, syncopation, or collapse of sense,”⁴⁷ produce interruptions that we have altered and concealed through representation, through the poses of power, “whether proud or humble, bold or timid.”⁴⁸ The repressive history we have lived by, the one that insists on and imposes destiny, has overpowered a sense of being that might be better suited for a scattering of histories with irregular rhythms, stopping and starting. It is also possible that we failed so miserably to fulfill a redemptive history that all we have left are the scattered pieces of a fractured history. Nancy imagines another

⁴⁶ Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 180

⁴⁷ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 148

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p. 148

reading of our impaled history that resists resolution, another history that is interrupted and diverted, inherently indecisive.

If ever things were really different: for of course a different history is at stake and one that will make us reread our entire history. No longer the directional and signifying history of a sense that unfolds and redeems itself, but an intermittent history, conjectural and reticulated, traversed by pulsations rather than by flux.⁴⁹

A different history is perhaps emerging, a history for the future that Nancy appears to perceive among the emergent technologies. The world that pulsates with ones and zeros echoes an accelerated heartbeat, a rapid-fire central nervous system. It is a world that meanders through trans-spatial dimensions, that envelops us in a web of divergent paradigms, and suggests a fractal potentiality without destiny. A different history may appear in the cracks and ruptures of the history we still have. It may be a parallel history. Dangling between the histories of the past and the histories of the future, our memories are frayed.

History no longer exists apart from the media that records, replays, and reedits it. The alterity of media both redoubles and denies our

memories and histories, enacting a trauma of displacement in which we perceive our own disappearance. As Virilio writes, “The philosophical question no longer being exactly: Who am I really but, Where am I actually?”⁵⁰ We inhabit an “optical body” that allows us to move, see, touch, “without really being there.” An otherness inhabits the body itself, “stranger to himself, renegade from his own body, exiled forever.”⁵¹ Media’s exteriorization of the body, of sense, is a more vivid reenactment of trauma than the dreamworld, literally placing the viewer outside of the experience looking in. It is a phenomenon that Krauss recognizes as impossible to represent in language, that calls to Bataille’s concept of *informe*, a formlessness that unmask certainty, that calls to art.

If we read the trauma, then, as a form of being witness to one’s own absence, we see that it gives rise to one of those impossible sentences that cannot be said, and meant, by a living subject.⁵²

Media’s generalized aesthetic of banality is nonetheless an aestheticization, one that projects certainty in the face of uncertainty as an

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 25

⁵⁰ Virilio, “Polar Inertia,” p. 131

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 130

⁵² Krauss, “Pulse,” p. 164

eternal flicker that frantically substitutes for the eternal flame we once assigned to God. It substitutes for the vacancy of our finitude, which has been revealed to us in catastrophic dimensions during the last century with a force of destruction that has coincided with a force of image that we are only just beginning to recognize. The cinematic image is just over a hundred years old. The disasters of war and genocide that preceded the production of photographic images, that is, that preceded the mechanical reproduction of an ersatz reality, were not witnessed by those who were not there. The trauma was contained. Now it is public. Derrida proposes that the structure of our psyches may be changing through the “archival technoscience” that is presenting and preserving our history, that the changes are far greater than the power to move and manipulate information and image. The image itself, in its projection of crisis, is a factor in the transformation of our thinking, of our sensibilities.

If the upheavals in progress affected the very structures of the psychic apparatus, for example in their spatial architectures and in their economy of speed, in their processing of spacing and of temporalization, it would be a question no longer of simple continuous progress in representation, in the

representative value of the model, but rather of an entirely different logic.⁵³

Derrida recognizes that the archive, the mass accumulation of image and data, risks exceeding the finitude of being, the forgetfulness or lapses that are intrinsic to the finite, and threatens to both create and destroy history itself. “The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the so-called news media,”⁵⁴ he writes. The transgression of the finite, the power to produce an infinite accumulation, is something Derrida equates with the death drive, “the destruction drive,” amassing a force of information in which the archive metamorphoses from a record of the past into a force for the present, that is the future, always exposed to the threat of destruction. The “*mal d’archive*,” the “archive fever,” the sickness of archiving, is the fear of losing the past, or even the moment. The electronic apparatus of the archive repositions the idea of the archive as more than conservation or preservation, because it is always already in the process of archiving information as it is created. Derrida argues that e-mail, for instance, is

⁵³ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 15

⁵⁴ *ibid*, p. 17

indicative of a collapse of boundaries between public and private records, transforming how we produce, print, conserve, and delete history.

This threat is *in-finite*, it sweeps away the logic of finitude and the simple factual limits, the transcendental aesthetics, one might say, the spatio-temporal conditions of conservation. Let us rather say that it abuses them. Such an abuse opens the ethico-political dimension of the problem. There is not one archive fever, one limit or one suffering of memory among others: enlisting the in-finite, archive fever verges on radical evil.⁵⁵

The “ethico-political dimension of the problem” that Derrida projects as an “abuse” can be read as a fallout between virtual and actual histories, or read further, beyond a binary structure, and into the blackout between virtual, actual and unconscious memory. The problem of the techno-medial archive is its capacity to produce endless truths, ethically justifying the worst histories, fueling a politics of revisionism. Yet the tension between finite and infinite memory remains problematic. The reliance on image as the historical record shifts a sense of memory, already unstable, and proposes a stability and reliability that supersedes memory. Sontag suggests that the photographic image provides memory with a

finite structure that memory itself has abandoned, or perhaps has abandoned memory.

The problem is not that people remember through photographs but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding -- and remembering.⁵⁶

1.7 Paradox, Anxiety & the Question of Ethics

The remembered image, the captured one, and not the one that is imagined is something that troubled Walter Benjamin. He derided the attempt to aestheticize the catastrophe of war by making it beautiful through photography, lamenting an era of exploitive images that was just getting underway, threatening to politicize memory through aesthetics. “War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns,”⁵⁷ he wrote, quoting the Futurists’ sardonic manifesto on war. In the realm of propaganda the aestheticized events of

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 20

⁵⁶ Sontag, “Looking at War,” p. 94

⁵⁷ Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 241

war and politics are recorded without memory, rather they are recorded with the intention of reproducing an experience, producing a memory, attempting to override the crisis of memory that will emerge in the aftermath of the accident. Both the memory of the accident and the accident of memory collide unexpectedly, as Benjamin observed, evoking something beyond the experience itself, enveloping the void of the experience, where everything is measured as before and after.

An experienced event is finite - at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it.⁵⁸

Benjamin, too, refuses to fill in the gap that is at the core of the remembered event, only placing it in-between a past and future. The black hole is perhaps an opening for an ethical possibility as the only future in the face of an unknown that presents itself as the possibility of no future. Derrida fears the infinite production of archived memory as an abuse of memory, filling that which cannot be filled, cluttering and confusing the

space of ethical potentiality. If indeed we are disappearing into a virtual world, as Virilio posits, ethical relationship is imperiled. Descartes' philosophy of doubt has given way to what Virilio calls a "paradoxical logic" in which the virtual realism of the photographic image is more than a record of the past, but a "real-time presence" that constantly upsets logic, that constantly transmits trauma in the form of an ongoing accident, disrupting and displacing the real.

In the previous age of dialectical logic, it was only the delayed-time presence, the presence of the past, that lastingly impressed plate and film. The paradoxical image thus acquires a status something like that of surprise, or more precisely, of an "accidental transfer"⁵⁹

Paradoxical logic suggests a shifting ground in which contradictory truths impede ethical transaction, cancel its value, confuse its objective. Hinging on the x-spot, the blind spot, of crossed purposes, the paradox is close kin to anxiety, fired up and powered down. Media reflect the anxiety, overcompensating for an ethical fallout, placating with remedial memory. All roads have led to paradoxical points, intersections that have sparked desire and calamity. We were bound to converge in a world that

⁵⁸ *ibid*, p. 202

has gotten smaller and smaller, turning to our computers for a sense of expanded space, the virtual space of which we are yet to make sense, a space in which we are concealed from the actual, ethical catastrophe outside.

⁵⁹ Virilio, "The Vision Machine," p. 139

2. Delusion, Dementia & Atrocity

2.1 The Nature of Disaster

On the Natural History of Destruction is W.G. Sebald's meditation on Germany's repressed memory of the Allied bombing, a *blitzkrieg*, a lightning war, evolved from the German prototype -- the Panzer and air assaults that shattered Poland from the west as the Russians came in from the east. Poland would lose 20 percent of its own population, along with the millions exterminated, and end up the most devastated country of W.W.II. Like Russia and China, Poland "survived" W.W.II in a landscape of death. To end such a war, the Allied air assaults on Germany, not officially a *blitzkrieg*, but a de facto one, struck with a lightning force never seen before, incinerating 131 cities and killing 600,000 German civilians. Sebald's "natural history of destruction" is a phrase that conjures images of a world destined to destroy itself, a world in which war appears as a natural disaster, a phenomenon not unlike an earthquake or a tornado. Whirled through the hurricane-force torrent of fire, like Dorothy on her way to Oz, the catastrophic destruction, however, fails to deposit its melted corpses in a wonderful land. Blown backward into the firestorm, even Walter Benjamin's Angel of History may not have

survived. That is, if Benjamin himself had survived. Sebald's concern with the "natural" order of things is remarkable as he describes a scene of destruction that transpires like a secret nightmare. Fear of huge, catastrophic destruction is transfigured into fear of a smaller -- perhaps cellular -- decay that will occur in a world consumed by vermin.

Apart from the distraught behavior of the people themselves, the most striking change in the natural order of the cities during the weeks after a devastating raid was undoubtedly the sudden and alarming increase in the parasitical creatures thriving on the unburied bodies. The conspicuous scarcity of observations and comments on this phenomenon can be explained as the tacit imposition of a taboo, very understandable if one remembers that the Germans, who had proposed to cleanse and sanitize all Europe, now had to contend with a rising fear that they themselves were the rat people.⁶⁰

The "natural order" had been structured by the Nuremberg Laws, dutifully keeping parks free of dogs and Jews, a tidy world that Sebald designates as the German's natural world, the world that is remembered. The dismembered world, in contrast, the one that has been desiccated, blackened by smoke and ash, is a forbidden world with an uncanny resemblance to the unmentionable death camps. The "taboo" of becoming the exterminated and, worse yet, the nearly-extermiated vermin, is one that must be exorcized from

memory. Sebald argues that the Allied bombing of Germany is a catastrophe of such magnitude that it effects a regression toward an original state of being, a kind of historical senility. Marxist materialism is a casualty, obliterated as the man-made world is crushed by the human creatures who dared to conceive of their world as being-outside-of-nature.

Can materialistic epistemology or any other such theory be maintained in the face of such destruction? Is the destruction, not, rather, irrefutable proof that the catastrophes which develop, so to speak, in our hands and seem to break out suddenly are a kind of experiment, anticipating the point at which we shall drop out of what we have thought for so long to be our autonomous history and back into the history of nature?⁶¹

Material effacement and, even more, the effacement of place, reduces the homeland to its natural state, free of the constructionist theories that have marked its progress. In the natural history of things, the survivors of the disaster, now nomads, wander in stunned shock, no longer tied to their own invented order of being. That is, the survivors are forced to migrate ideologically, if not geographically, away from the destroyed homeland. “This is the necropolis of a foreign, mysterious people, torn from its civil existence

⁶⁰ Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 34

⁶¹ *ibid*, p. 66

and its history, thrown back to the evolutionary stage of nomadic gatherers,”⁶² writes Sebald of the homeless millions who emerged from the rubble.

Georges Bataille, on the other hand, is less inclined to link war to natural disaster in his reflection on the atomic destruction of Hiroshima, which closely followed the firebombing of Germany, but with a devastation far more expedient. War and the memory of war are imbued with a terror that extends to human and political entities as perpetrators of disaster, willfully inflicting suffering that punishes and humiliates as it destroys. Negating the role of God as the purveyor of all things natural, whose punishing acts of parting seas and inflicting plagues no longer pose a meaningful threat in an era of nuclear weapons, Bataille assigns the menacing role to humans.

The fear produced by a tidal wave or a volcano has no meaning, since neither of them makes one afraid *in order* to compel surrender; whereas uranium fission is a project whose goal is to impose, by fear, the will of the one who provokes it.⁶³

Yet, meaning, *per se*, in relation to the atom bomb or the firebombing of Germany is not so evident. Sebald is perplexed by the paucity of literature that reported, or even fictionalized, the horrific firestorms that finally

⁶² *ibid*, p. 36

⁶³ Bataille, “Concerning the Accounts Given by the Residents of Hiroshima,” p. 226

dismantled the Reich. History had produced a blackened slate on which to start over, soiling the *tabla rasa* that might have invited discursive inscription. The blank slate, an endangered surface, if not extinct, had maintained the historical record. But in the rush to rebuild, to forget and move on, progress is reinvented as the leap forward that Virilio calls “an empire of time,”⁶⁴ obscuring the slate, perhaps eliminating it altogether.

The invention, the original survey of the inscription of laws, of rights and responsibilities of every individual, not only on clay tablets but in the precise configuration of a town or land registry, has so thoroughly marked the history of nations and the memory of peoples, that no one seems to notice its progressive disappearance, as well as the imminence of a management of time, of an *emergency chronopolitics*, excluding all other representation.⁶⁵

2.2 Speed & the Aging of History

The race against time is history’s way of aging fast. Virilio’s obsessive observations of time have led him to say, “Speed is indeed the old age of the world.”⁶⁶ In Virilio’s vernacular, the child sees everything at a distance,

⁶⁴ Virilio, “The Strategy of the Beyond,” p. 83

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 83

⁶⁶ Virilio, “Polar Inertia,” p. 120

reaching across wide expanses, slowly making sense. In old age, the proximity of death, the close horizon, means that “everything becomes abruptly confined, at arm’s length.”⁶⁷ In this contest the long arm of the Gestapo, the totalitarian project to embrace Europe, appears as a senile delusion that confused the horizon of territory with its own impending doom. Senility, or senile dementia, implies a troubled and diseased aging, one in which memory deteriorates along with the ability to care for oneself. Faculties of language and reason are impaired, as is thinking, producing agitation, anxiety, delusion.⁶⁸ Virilio sees the world as diminished by speed, the rapid using up of resources deteriorating its corpus, as well as a psychological time that is increasingly fused with technology’s desire to control time, eroding a sense of being, eroding consciousness.

Since the Second World War, the question: “What can be said about the first minute of the Universe? about the intensity [*l’intensivité*] of a duration without duration, about zero time?” has succeeded the usual philosophical one: “What can be said about the consciousness of the instant? of the intensity, here and now, of our being?”

This displacement reveals an extermination of philosophy.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *ibid*, p. 121

⁶⁸ For more information on senility, also known as senile dementia, see the Alzheimer’s Association website: <http://www.alz.org/AboutAD/WhatIsAD.htm>

⁶⁹ Virilio, “Polar Inertia,” p. 121

Through Virilio's lens the relentless push toward all things faster can only be achieved through the command and control of technologies that enable speed, increasingly closing distances with remote control. The military implications are drastic, according to Virilio, creating "a transpolitical deconstruction: telecommand replacing progressively not only command, immediate command, but above all ethics (the Ten Commandments)."⁷⁰ The original slate is not only tarnished, it has become obsolete. Time and distance are shrinking, yet failing to bring us closer, within range of ethical immediacy. Telecommand relies on a virtual representation of the target, reducing, even eliminating, contact with the territory itself.

The Second World War marks the dying idea of war for territory, the last gasp of war as an expansive enterprise. Even the post-war proliferation of Soviet states and the Soviet control over Eastern Europe proved to be a shriveling empire at its inception, shrunken and purged by its own ideological repression. War in its old age asserts technological power but its body, that is its territory, is no longer robust. A new paradigm has emerged, according to Virilio, who sees the genocide in Cambodia as the model for war as suicide. (Extracted further, the suicide bomber, lone warrior on behalf of an impotent

⁷⁰ *ibid*, p. 122

state, enacts a suicidal transliteration of territory as terror.) As its life support systems fail, the state self-destructs with the inert consent of the civilized world. Standing by as a legitimate body of witnesses, one could imagine that the international community saw the remains of a retching colony taking a “natural” course back to its savage roots.

“Democratic Kampuchea” can serve here to analyze the end of territorial politics. More than 30 years after Auschwitz, it effectively constitutes the life-size model of a *suicidal state* capable of exterminating more than half its population in three years, and this, outside of any sanction.⁷¹

The space of war for Virilio, is one that opens in places of aggression that are both geo-centric and ego-centric. Cambodia’s suicidal rampage in a post-W.W.II world exposes the short memory of the international community on one hand, while at the same time projecting a history that cannot resist its black holes of destruction, sucked in by a desire to encounter death and therefore control it. The Allied attacks on Germany are characterized by Virilio as “total war,” that is war that exceeds its territorial destination, seeking instead the grandiose delusions of total control or, more apropos, total destruction, a dominion over life and death that excludes recourse. The explosion has transformed into an implosion that sucks the life out from the

⁷¹ Virilio, “The Strategy of the Beyond,” p. 85

inside, rather than attacking it from outside. The firebombings of Germany that literally sucked the air out of cities, gave way to the atom bomb that would speed up the process exponentially, irradiating its victims from the inside out. The asphyxiation of gassing also attacked its victims from the inside. From the Germans, in the century's last catastrophe of territorialism, the implosion was prophetic.

By eliminating boundaries, total war abolishes the protective fringes of national realities; what used to happen on linear fronts, now happens in the interior. It is with a certain somber drive that the German population establishes itself in a reality, which, every day, is disappearing.⁷²

An interior disappearance, akin to what Virilio calls "a forgotten zone,"⁷³ contains the devastation both privately and publicly, out of sight of the conventional border zones of war. The interior war, deep inside Germany where the Allied bombing could eliminate the opponent without damage spilling over to the outside world, allowed the destruction in all its horror to be discrete. The inner incineration of Germany, like the atom bomb that would evaporate its victims, was a technology of disappearance -- extermination, incineration, irradiation -- that has attempted to kill and destroy in ways that would be cleaner, faster, bigger. Indeed, these technologies have demonstrated

that such vast and thorough destruction does clear the way for rapid rebuilding that leaves little evidence of prior infractions. Moreover, the currency of endurance, in surviving such events, has speeded up the process of overcoming and eliminating past failures. So that once again, Germany is the powerhouse of Europe.

The project to restore order in the wake of the 20th century's tremendous upheaval is something Jean Baudrillard lists along with other pervasive forms of revisionism: "Restoration, regression, rehabilitation, revival of the old frontiers, of the old differences, of religions -- and even resipiscence in the sphere of morals."⁷⁴ Revisionism in itself implies a thwarted vision, a lack of vision, or sightlessness. The desire to make sense of the 20th century is a dementia that requires a reverse course in a history that had mistakenly been pushed toward its end. Baudrillard points to the fall of Soviet communism as a signpost of history's dead end, meaning the "end" as a dead concept when civilization backs up and reclaims its right to the repressed domains of God, crime, and fashion that have signified liberation in the former Eastern Bloc.

⁷² Virilio, "The Suicidal State," p. 34

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 37

⁷⁴ Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, p. 32

The fact is that, in a sort of enthusiastic work of mourning, we are in the process of retracting all the significant events of this century, of *whitewashing* it, as if everything that had taken place (revolutions, the division of the world, exterminations, the violent transnationality of states, nuclear cliffhanging) -- in short, history in its modern phase -- were merely a hopeless imbroglio, and everyone had set about undoing that history with the same enthusiasm that had gone into making it.⁷⁵

Avital Ronell describes a “mourning disorder”⁷⁶ in which we fail to mourn the death of the enemy, or fail to consider what this mourning might be. The mourning sickness of the 20th century is a failure of accounting, if not accountability. While we have rightfully mourned the six million Jews who died in the death camps, there are tens of millions more who were victims of war and genocide in this century of progress, most of whom remain largely unacknowledged. Pushing into a future we dread, knowing our newfound and profound capacity for destruction, we find ourselves lacking in both past and future. Or as Bataille said about the aftermath of the two world wars, “We live in a darkness without fear and without hope.”⁷⁷ Stunned, in a space between times, after the catastrophe and before the future, mourning is both

⁷⁵ *ibid*, p. 32

⁷⁶ Ronell, keynote address at the conference, “Zone 3 - The Enemy,” New York University, May 1, 2003

⁷⁷ Bataille, “Concerning the Accounts Given by the Residents of Hiroshima,” p. 221

compressed and perpetual, even if it is a mourning that has been repressed by the enmity of war.

The in-between space of compressed time is something Virilio assigns to the fast track of a speeded-up world. As he says, “everything plays out in very short spans of time.”⁷⁸ Militarily this “rapidity” has flattened time and blurred previously assumed distinctions, “destroying in the time of a thought (so much as is necessary in the declaration of war), the distinction between the offensive and defensive.”⁷⁹ An overwhelming presence of the present consumes our attention, literally eating it alive, through a blitz of hypermedial, technological distraction. Though the tendency has been to focus on the media phenomenon as one that breeds and disseminates “youth culture,” it might be more useful to see the compressed time as a symptom of old age in which the fragments of stimulus can no longer be distinguished from one another, collapsing time, distance, memory, reason, and language. A regressive old age in its delusional reminiscence is a condition plaguing history itself, according to Baudrillard.

⁷⁸ Virilio, “Critical Space,” p. 65

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 65

We are so used to playing back every film -- the fictional ones and the films of our lives -- so contaminated by the technology of retrospection, that we are quite capable, in our present dizzy spin, of running history over again like a film played backwards.⁸⁰

Baudrillard, spinning in reverse, and Virilio, the speed freak, both see a disappearance of history, or at least a dispersion of a history that was once imagined to have linear dimensions. Atomized by the sheer force of disaster, history regroups along familiar lines, attempting to connect the scattered dots, restoring the good old days, and destined to replay its worst encounters even as it forgets them. The collision of memory and forgetting is enacted in history's fusion and confusion with the "current event," according to Baudrillard. Awash in the ongoing regurgitation of "live" history, in instant replay, always retrievable, the attempt to preserve the moment is exactly what obliterates it.

Paradoxically, by dint of this zealous effort forcibly to bring back into the present what we no longer even remember, we live in a world which is both without memory and without forgetting. This is what heaven - or hell - must be like: the massive recall, at every moment, of all the patterns of our life. The penitentiary immortality, the carceral immortality of an unrelenting memory.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, p. 11

⁸¹ *ibid*, p. 7

2.3 The Disaster of Knowledge

The exaggerated condition of media and electronic memory, of everything ever known always in circulation and transmission, has its analogy in an end-of-life reflection on the running dream of life, randomly accessed and still never completely accessible. Senility also offers a sweetened sense of memory, that is a forgetting, that alleviates the pain of knowledge itself. Reading Nietzsche's concept of suffering for the sake of knowledge, Blanchot suggests that the distress of acquiring knowledge overlooks the latent potency of knowledge itself. Drawn by philosophy into a love of knowledge, we are led to believe that we will find contentment in our wizened years if we work through this difficult relationship.

Unless it be the case that knowledge -- because it is not knowledge of the disaster, but knowledge as disaster and knowledge disastrously -- carries us, carries us off, deports us (whom it smites and nonetheless leaves untouched), straight to ignorance, and puts us face to face with ignorance, of the unknown so that we forget, endlessly.⁸²

Knowledge itself may be the calamity that unravels truths and untruths without producing meaning. Blanchot proposes that knowledge shatters understanding and explodes the continuity that we are endlessly trying to

restore. No longer suffering for knowledge, but suffering *with* knowledge, the reconstitution of the disaster as knowledge, and knowledge as disaster, hurls us back to a biblical reenactment of Adam and Eve punished by the knowledge of their own ignorance. We are similarly hurled back to Sebald's description of the German synesthesia of learning that their supremacy was a ruse, that they are merely rats in a burnt-out, blacked-out world without meaning. In this sense, Benjamin's Angel of History could only be thrown backwards, refusing to face the future with knowledge, knowing too much. "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."⁸³ Worse yet, Benjamin's backward-looking angel risks withholding information, or maybe just shielding it enough that it fails to be acknowledged. "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."⁸⁴ In Benjamin's pre-digital world, retrievability still has an organic ring to it, implying that the retrieved image is one that is cherished and understood, kept safe and reviewed, studied and respected. Not so for Baudrillard, who describes an insidious retrievability, one that exists in a myopic flicker of indiscernability and displacement, undermining anything resembling assimilation. Clearly a chasm has opened between too much and

⁸² Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 3

⁸³ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (in *Illuminations*), p. 257

too little memory, particularly in the forms through which memory is represented.

2.4 **Hypermnesia**

Sebald, for all his concern about German literary repression of the Allied bombing of Germany, “a self-imposed silence, an absence also typical of other areas of discourse, from family conversations to historical writings,”⁸⁴ recognizes that much of the failure has been in the representation of memory, rather than in memory itself. A mythologizing and moreover a normalizing romanticism that verges on pornography is produced as an external representation of the catastrophe that will ultimately evoke a macabre but soothing pleasure. The prosthetic technologies of destruction, the massive genocides, the fear itself, titillate even as they disgust the sensibilities of the public. Bataille, always invested in libidinal tensions, finds this one “stupid,” inciting a fascination that competes with and undermines an ethical discourse in the aftermath of the two World Wars.

⁸⁴ *ibid*, p. 255

⁸⁵ Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 70

The last wars have broken out in spite of the general will; their slaughter revolted the conscious. But the dread they provoked, however, great, remained a stupid, inconsistent one...and laced with curiosity. [ellipsis in original]⁸⁶

For Sebald the literary romances set among Germany's destroyed cities, or the fictionalized and heroic adventures of survivors, were depravities in and of themselves. "Those who can salvage some metaphysical meaning from the destruction are usually spared such a wretched fate,"⁸⁷ he writes. Sebald believes literature itself is threatened by "the construction of aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic effects from the ruins of an annihilated world."⁸⁸ The implication is that memory's "islands of amnesia"⁸⁹ cannot be navigated so easily. Filling the vacuum of amnesia destroys it, eradicating the emptiness that is fundamental to memory's ebb and flow.

It is as if a diffuse ability to forget goes hand in hand with the recurrent resurgence of images that cannot be banished from the memory, and that remain effective as agencies of an almost pathological hypermnesia in a past otherwise emptied of content.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Bataille, "Concerning the Accounts Given by the Residents of Hiroshima," p. 221

⁸⁷ Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 52

⁸⁸ *ibid*, p. 53

⁸⁹ *ibid*, p. 149

⁹⁰ *ibid*, p. 149

2.5 National Memory: Delusions of Immortality

The task of filling in the holes of memory is one that has produced history and mediated our relationship to an indefinite time whose disappearance is in some sense intolerable. Our media reflect the desire for ongoing and endless time, a time in which death and catastrophe are replayed with the endless hope for redemption until the images are transformed into virtual, painless events. Nietzsche recognized the fear nations have of dying and the extremes to which they will go to prolong their lives. “To nations growing wretched and feeble war may be recommended as a remedy, assuming they want to continue on living at all.”⁹¹ The presumption is that war invigorates the haggard nation, and demonstrates its vitality. Nietzsche was probably not imagining a nation on the verge of suicide, but perhaps one already in decline or mid-life crisis, seeking the violent pleasures of dominance. But Nietzsche’s exuberance for life did not blind him to the hubristic delusion of supposing an endless time, an endless life. He saw the desire for immortality among nations as a sign of their deterioration. “The desire to live for ever [sic] and inability to die is, however, itself already a sign of senility of

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, p. 355

the faculties.”⁹² Derrida takes the delusion further by equating immortality with death, since it is only in death that we become immortal in any religious or symbolic sense. “Only someone who is dead is immortal -- in other words the immortal are dead.”⁹³

The senility of nations has largely eluded diagnosis, disguised by power structures that revere the elder statesman, that reward bombast, that aestheticize patriotism and remind us that we are part of a club, implanting a memory that is not our own. Alzheimer’s seems to have an eerie likeness to *alte Heimat*. For the Germans in the wake of the Allied bombing a national memory that would remember an intact homeland and retrieve its more functional attributes was preferable to one that would be embattled by stained victimization. There are irreconcilable differences between the memory of victims and the production of history. It is the difference between animal and human, according to Bataille. In reviewing the accounts of witnesses who survived the nuclear attack on Hiroshima, Bataille discovered that “the immediate experience of the catastrophe is isolated,” and it is therefore “reduced to the dimensions of *animal* experience.”⁹⁴ The recollections that

⁹² *ibid*, p. 355

⁹³ Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 67

⁹⁴ Bataille, “Concerning the Accounts Given by the Residents of Hiroshima,” p. 225

describe the event as pure sensory experience fail to give it human, that is historical, dimensions.

The *human* representation of the catastrophe is that given by President Truman; it immediately situates the bombing of Hiroshima within history and defines the new possibilities that it has introduced into the world.⁹⁵

Sebald traces a “human” dimension of the Allied *blitz* through writers who not only found romance among the ruins, but also used the event to aggrandize their own tainted experiences. The German writer Alfred Andersch is a case in point. Though he abandoned his Jewish wife , who perished with her family, Sebald characterizes Andersch’s autobiographical novels about the war as sentimental and eroticized stories of tragic loss. Sebald suggests a literary opportunism overtook other more authentic recollections, traumas that were not expressed publicly, particularly in relation to the Allied bombing, which had desecrated all prior forms of representation.

I do not doubt that there were and are memories of those nights of destruction; I simply do not trust the form -- including the literary form -- in which they are expressed, and I do not believe they were a significant factor in the public consciousness of the new Federal Republic in any sense except as encouraging the will to reconstruction.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ *ibid*, p. 225

⁹⁶ Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, p. 81

Sebald does not locate the “will” of this “will to reconstruction,” but it seems poised precariously between an instinctual will to survive and a will of a larger political and economic apparatus. The collective will -- or memory -- that takes on the public persona of a nation that cannot mourn, whose victimhood is obscene in light of its own perverse crimes, is one that must be rendered benign yet functional. Rage would be politically inexpedient as would incapacitation. Will was induced as a proper response to the atrocities, overriding memory’s destabilizing jolts. The nation attempts to impose a collective will as antidote to the private anxieties of memory, affecting a reversal on Blanchot’s sanctity of solitude in which fear is relegated to the outside.

Alone, and thus exposed to the thought of the disaster which disrupts solitude and overflows every variety of thought, as the intense, silent and disastrous affirmation of the outside.⁹⁷

The dreaded “outside” of the disaster is domesticated for the purposes of housing a new and improved national memory, or rather an old memory of the State as sovereign protectorate. It renders solitude improper, suspect even, drowning out the intense silence with a sense of purpose that goes into rebuilding and fortifying the nation. When the East Germans needed to be

reminded that they were in fact the communist victims of fascism, solitude needed to be abolished altogether through a ubiquitous network of informers, frequently neighbors or even spouses. In disrupting one's trust in one's own solitude, in eliminating the security of privacy, the State attempts to rupture the space in which unknowns are contemplated. Better to confuse the variables and dislocate the unknown from its unknowability as United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has shown to be an effective rhetoric for the 21st century War on Terrorism.

There are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns - that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know but there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we do not know we don't know.⁹⁸

Conflating the known and unknown as interchangeable terms, discourse is preempted with televised chatter that provides a context for the new rules of engagement. Numbingly redundant, less entertainment than a kind of surrogate presence, a surrogate reflection that prevents and distracts solitude, television fabricates a cursory collective memory. The incessant falling of the twin towers reminds us that we no longer have to remember an original experience, holding it close, retaining a sense of the moment. The moment

⁹⁷ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p. 5

⁹⁸ Seely, "The Poetry of D.H. Rumsfeld," online.

returns eternally, without regard to an original or distant time. Baudrillard, hypersensitive to the hyperreal, locates the epicenter of the “televisual” as a ground zero of indifference that migrates from the insensate to the apolitical.

The indifference of time: the non-distance between points in time, the promiscuity of points in time, the instantaneousness of real time. Boredom...

Political indifference: the superimposition, the proliferation of all opinions in a single media continuum.⁹⁹

Collapsing categories, the Gulf Wars demonstrate a sense of political indifference in which war, as Virilio predicts, is neither defensive.

Representing vague and unsubstantiated threats to national security, war in this sense creates a public perception of perpetual insecurity that sublimates resistance and enacts a return to the dark, but all powerful, days of insidious enemies that characterized the Cold War. Gulf War I and Gulf War II, post-territorial aggressions that promote an American ethic of bloodless war in which the only casualty that counts is an American casualty, are wars that project ambivalence about their very existence. As George Bush Junior willfully dismantled international diplomacy that might have prevented war, and sent hundreds of thousands of troops to the Gulf, he simultaneously

⁹⁹ Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, p. 108

decried war and urged the public to believe that he was doing everything possible to avoid war. Ronell's observations on the First Gulf War depict an uncanny resemblance to G.W.II, going beyond the idea of the war to end all wars, and into a realm in which the war itself is waged like a phantom of war.

In a sense, this war declared itself, when it declared itself, as a war about forgetting war. It was as if it wanted to play itself out as impasse, something accomplished by pressing the record and erase functions at once. In any case, this reflects the way the war was "covered" by the media, simultaneously recording and erasing its referential track.¹⁰⁰

The War on Terrorism, through which G.W.II was ostensibly ordained, creates the new template for a war without end, an immortal war, or as Derrida might project, a dead war, that presumes to breathe new life into the American oligarchy. The War on Terrorism instigates the Office of Homeland Security as a governmental bureaucracy without end, effectively eliminating the conservative project to keep government small and out of people's lives. Like the East German Staasi, Homeland Security equates patriotism with surveillance while offering the public the soothing advice to stock up on duct tape and plastic. The duct tape-and-cover tactics create nostalgia for the Cold War, when capitalism's first strike policy succeeded through the proliferation

of MacDonald's more than the proliferation of weapons. Yet the era of deterrence produced the historical event of the century that never happened, that is the Mutually Assured Destruction that shaped our sense of a suspended future, according to Baudrillard.

The hold deterrence has on us even extends to the past. It can remove all certainty about facts and evidence. It can destabilize memory just as it destabilizes prediction. It is a diabolical force which wrecks the actual acting out of events or, if they still take place -- if they have taken place -- destroys their credibility.¹⁰¹

Deterrence, a perpetually suspended animation of war, is trumped by the War on Terrorism's perpetual war that is both war and not war, perpetuating its nowness as it urges people to spend money and live frivolously, to live as though there is no tomorrow. Personal spending is driven upward as a patriotic act that has no civic value and simultaneously erodes public confidence. Rather than owe a debt to the nation, our debt is solitary and shameful. Credit, like credibility, is stretched to the limit as the War on Terrorism is waged on many fronts that are deemed to incessantly change and exchange hands. Incongruous mappings -- Iraq, North Korea, Colombia -- produce anxiety and anticipation that have no clear source or

¹⁰⁰ Ronell, "Support Our Tropes," p. 283

¹⁰¹ Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, p. 17

destination. “The true catastrophe is that we are living under a permanent threat of catastrophe,” says Slavoj Zizek. “The terrorist attack is taken for granted, but endlessly postponed.”¹⁰²

In perpetuating war and postponing the catastrophe, a fixation on postponed death seeps into the public consciousness, suggesting the New World is perhaps getting old. Death may be postponed, but it looms ominously and anxiously, as a revealed secret that has escaped its historical hideout. Vilem Flusser said that “historical being” is “being in a world of becoming,” in which we participate, engaged in the possibility of realizing change and progress. On the other hand, “posthistorical being” is suspended, “being in a world of absurd chance.”¹⁰³ Always in the present moment, the posthistorical condition is non-narrative, a field of possibilities and probabilities, in which an ethical relationship is not viable. Whereas the historical relies on creative endeavors, the posthistorical world is one of “calculating strategy.” Cut off from history, Flusser’s posthistorical being is literally killing time in a game of chance and probability. One could imagine a nation that ties its social welfare system to the stock market -- as proposed by George W. Bush.

¹⁰² Mead, “The Marx Brother,” p. 47

¹⁰³ Flusser, *Writings*, p. 118

The absurdity of the new way of being consists in the fact that man no longer plays games for others. Instead, the game is played for its own sake. The game becomes independent of man; it follows its own rules determined by chance; it becomes an autopathic game of permutations; thus transforming humans into game pieces, into numbers, and into functionaries.¹⁰⁴

Weary of progress, a posthistorical structure differs from totalitarianism. The game of chance lacks ideology. Nonetheless driven to win, to maintain power, the posthistorical game is played to preserve a status quo. Ideologies, on the other hand, are fundamentally historical, as Hannah Arendt observed. Situated in grand trajectories of beginnings and endings, ideologies are “concerned with becoming and perishing, with the rise and fall of cultures.”¹⁰⁵ The Gulf Wars and the War on Terrorism offer a picture of war that has more in common with cosmetic surgery than the clashes of empires. Holding no major grudges with the repressive regimes of the Middle East, the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein removes a nasty blemish and attempts to erase an unseemly history in which the American government supported and armed the Iraqi despot. Free of historical ties, the United States can resume business as usual. Derrida, in contrast, argues that historical ties are not so

¹⁰⁴ *ibid*, p. 123

¹⁰⁵ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 469

easily severed, that a secret responsibility is internalized and preserved even within political structures.

History never effaces what it buries; it always keeps within itself the secret of whatever it encrypts, the secret of its secret. This is a secret history of kept secrets.¹⁰⁶

2.6 Historical Secrecy & Dementia

The secret of history, according to Derrida is that, “Historical man does not want to *admit* to history,” rejecting, “the abyss that undermines his own historicity.”¹⁰⁷ Remembering is itself a form of secrecy that Derrida sees as taking place outside of either history or religion. The secret, as derived from sacred, has been pulled into religion, but its root is in the Latin as “separate, distinct, discerned,” and provides Derrida with a sense of the self “coming-to-conscience.”¹⁰⁸ Memory in its essence is a secret of the self, prior to history and the political apparatus of history, that keeps the self intact in a “subjectivizing interiorization.” Derrida contains memory within the body where it takes refuge and protects the self in its solitary mourning.

¹⁰⁶ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 21

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*, p. 4

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, p. 13

Remembrance restores something that has been mutilated or lost; it is an active, if not performative, state of recalling:

A fleeing of the body towards its interior where it withdraws into itself in order to recall itself to itself, in order to be next to itself, in order to keep itself in this gesture of *remembering*.¹⁰⁹

Remembrance as an inner encounter or embrace that reconstitutes a shattered self, or affirms a sense of being-and-loss, is a reversal of the inner child. Derrida posits this coming-to-consciousness as a responsibility, responding to the call of aging that looks back and accounts for itself in the world, in an economy of secrets that cannot disavow accountability. But the secret has been outed and hyperbolized in the media world, transforming privacy into a commodity and craze that has annexed airwaves, and even more the virtual world. Under such conditions the obscenity of a 24/7 televised war goes unnoticed. Insidious and licentious recordings are burned in our memories, taking up space, invading the space of secrets. “What is hidden from us are the ethical worlds we belong to,”¹¹⁰ writes Wolfgang Schirmacher, describing a world that is cloned by media, a world that has blurred the distinction between artificial and organic life.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, p. 13

¹¹⁰ Schirmacher, “Cloning Humans with Media,” p. 40

In media we simulate humanity to the point of not recognizing ourselves anymore, and this life-consuming activity helps us to stay clear of authentic humanity.¹¹¹

The atrocities of the 20th century, recorded and replayed, remembered indelibly in iconographic images and words, have been mirrored through media and revealed as the gigantic secret of our own depraved humanity. No wonder that we sense our demise and seek the distractions of retirement, masked as the folly of youth, but far too jaded and tired. The determination of the state, its fixation on destiny, is a death drive that compulsively repeats its gestures of power, even as the nation's corpus withers, a flaccid and impotent body politic. For all outside appearances a position of strength is maintained at all costs and a passive compliance assures that the open secret is not publicly shared. Not only does the emperor have no clothes, but neither do the subjects, a condition we are prone to forget.

To say that the nation is aging gracelessly, to say that it is senile, or to imply that our homeland senility is endemic, does not preclude a future, the chance to age with dignity. Bergson identified two kinds of memory: one is the recognition of that which surrounds us and allows us to maintain a context for living in the most basic sense of remembering who and where we are; the

¹¹¹ *ibid*, p. 40

other kind of memory recalls a past that has no direct application to the tasks of living, but is a memory that shapes our consciousness and opens imagination. The memory of recollection, according to Bergson, assumes a repose that resists the delusions of retribution. It is an acquiescence that yields to inaction, a ceasefire that recognizes its own, and the other's, mortality.

To call up the past in the form of an image, we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must have the power to value the useless, we must have the power to dream.¹¹²

¹¹² Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 83

3. The Figure of the Idiot in *Shoah*

3.1 The Incarnation of Memory

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. Macbeth*

Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* is seen as the definitive documentary film on the Holocaust, if such a thing is possible. At nine and a half hours it is epic and overwhelming, devastating in scope, thoroughly absorbed in an achronological structure that shiftshapes from present to past through characters who are asked to return to the scene of history's -- or at least the 20th century's -- most heinous crime. *Shoah* is a work of art, a reenactment, a reliving. Abandoning philosophy for film, Lanzmann attempts to incarnate, or re-body, the missing dead (whose bodies were obliterated). He needs time to do this, to establish the locations, to suggest the scale of the atrocity, to draw us into a sense of death that is inevitable and irreversible. Like a psychoanalytic process, truth is established

through the duration of time.¹¹³ The lived time of the film itself is demanding and relentless for the viewer, who is required to endure the recurrence of grueling themes in a world without end that has been inextricably deformed. Lanzmann believes the greatest suspense is achieved by knowing what will happen. We fight and deny the dreaded ending. The closer we get to the event, the more we want it to go away. Shunning the screaming, shrill force of it we are at the same time enraptured by the cool, calm pace of the film, carried into its circular structure in which we cannot escape the return to the sites of the disaster. Like Nietzsche's "eternal return"¹¹⁴ *Shoah's* encounters with the brink of death ask the viewers to die with the victims¹¹⁵ and dwell in their stupefying fate, an impossible identification that annihilates our own sense of meaning. Yet through this impossibility of meaning, in the film's incarnation of memory, the enormity of the crisis is revealed in the lapses, gaps, and silences where memory fails.

¹¹³ Lanzmann, statements made during a seminar at the European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, in August, 2002 (EGS 2002)

¹¹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

¹¹⁵ Lanzmann, EGS 2002

Facing the impossibility of documenting annihilation, Lanzmann seeks proximity in a strict aesthetic, which he equates with ethic, calling the two “exactly the same.”¹¹⁶ The film only asks what happened. The Nazis, for instance, are never asked why they did what they did, how they can justify the wholesale slaughter of millions of people. Lanzmann believes that to “understand” such moral fallout is an “obscenity,”¹¹⁷ that it is impossible to establish a chain of causality. “There is a gap between all the causes you can give and the immensity of the crime,” he says.¹¹⁸ The film approaches, approximates, and situates the phenomenon of extinction, focusing on people who were there at the last moment before death.¹¹⁹ Lanzmann disavows the “why” of human extermination. Meaning has been sacrificed by the crime itself, exceeding any possibility of understanding. “Not to understand was the iron law,”¹²⁰ says Lanzmann. Yet truth is resurrected and reconstructed. “In this film I am a geographer, a topographer, a maniac for details, an obsessed investigator

¹¹⁶ Lanzmann, EGS 2002

¹¹⁷ Obscenity of Understanding...

¹¹⁸ Lanzmann, European Graduate School seminar in Saas-Fee, Switzerland, June, 2003 (EGS 2003)

¹¹⁹ An exception to this “rule” is Lanzmann’s interview in *Shoah* with historian, Raul Hilberg, author of *The Destruction of the European Jews*.

¹²⁰ Lanzmann, EGS 2002

haunted by living places,” writes Lanzmann.¹²¹ In fact, his project is, he admits, a philosophical one, in which truth unfolds in an allegory of re-lived memory and re-lived death. These impossible encounters transcend historiography and place us in a black hole of being-with-death. This is the fundamental role of allegory, writes Avital Ronell.

Allegory puts into play the drama of catastrophic loss, permanent disruption, the *Nichtsein* (nonbeing) of what it represents. It is continually testing the limits of what can be owned, possessed, or had while it endures the noncoincidence of sign and meaning."¹²²

This framework for allegory contextualizes Ronell’s treatise on stupidity, where knowledge fails and the ensuing stupor eludes rational discourse. The dread of "nonbeing" draws us into an existential and Heideggerian construct of being-toward-death, although in *Shoah* death is always and already there in the film’s “perpetual present,”¹²³ demanding a being-with that attempts to abolish the distance of being-toward. *Shoah*’s opening allegorical formation performs a failure of knowing, confusing the

¹²¹ The original quote: “Je suis dans ce film un géographe, un topographe, un maniaque du détail, un enquêteur obsédé hanté par des lieux vides...” (English translation mine) is from a letter written by Claude Lanzmann, December 20, 1983, which is in his private collection.

¹²² Ronell, *Stupidity*, p. 108

¹²³ Lanzmann, EGS 2002

lyrical with the lurid, and transmitting a regression back to a childhood too horrific to reconcile. Ronell also places allegory in a performative mode in which we are helplessly thrown into the woods, onto the river, back to the foreboding darkness. "The suddenness of an unwanted return to a condemned site is what interests us here."¹²⁴ This active description of allegory could be a directive in Lanzmann's script, so apt is its evocation of the film's haunted zones.

The film opens like a fairy tale in a faraway place. Faraway, but familiar, the landscape is gentle, with warm light in a lush riverbed. It could be the American midwest, Indiana for instance, or Michigan, and yet it is not. This benign landscape belies its own secrets as noted by historian Simon Schama, whose meditation on eastern Poland weaves together the myth and memory that inhabits the land itself. Indeed, on a summer's day the former death camp, Treblinka, is bewilderingly lovely, as though the earth itself has swallowed the memory of its hideous past.

In our mind's eye we are accustomed to think of the Holocaust
as having no landscape - or at best one emptied of features

¹²⁴ Ronell, *Stupidity*, p. 109

and color, shrouded in night and fog, blanketed by perpetual winter, collapsed into shades of dun and gray; the gray of smoke, of ash, of pulverized bones, of quicklime. It is shocking, then, to realize that Treblinka, too, belongs to a brilliantly vivid countryside; the riverland of the Bug and the Vistula; rolling, gentle land, lined by avenues of poplar and aspen.¹²⁵

The opening sequence of *Shoah*, not far from Treblinka, is a stunning reconstruction of events both real and unreal, harrowing and gorgeous. The sublime journey of the film begins on a small boat on a wooded river. A man sings longingly of a white house. Lanzmann has brought Simon Srebnik back to relive the experience of being chained as a small boy to a boat and forced to sing like an angel. Little Simon is a singing slave to the Nazi officers and so they do not kill him. Srebnik's beautiful voice echoes through the trees to the villagers. Everyone hears him. His family already killed, he was left alone to sing for his life, while tens of thousands more were herded together and sent out to die in gas vans. Even Simon Srebnik was executed, shot in the head, only to survive the nonfatal wound. Srebnik's story is an allegory of surviving death, only to live with death. The scene sets the tone for a film that asks the viewer,

¹²⁵ Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p. 26

too, to live with death. Writing about *Shoah*'s use of testimony in film, in which the viewer is also witness, Shoshana Felman describes this seminal scene as poised, "On the borderline between dreaming and memory."¹²⁶ Simon Srebnik's singing lulls us into a distant, timeless past, a waking dream that does not know for certain if it is a memory or a memory of a dream:

A little white house
lingers in my memory.
Of that little white house
I dream each night.¹²⁷

Chelmno, Poland, is quaint and quiet. Srebnik is middle-aged, unchained, calm in the filtered light that passes through the trees. Serene and ominous, the scene prepares the viewer for encounters with a place that has been blacked out, philosophically-speaking from historical meaning. Undocumented, we can only imagine what it might have been like. The film footage that we associate with the Holocaust was either shot as Nazi propaganda, as in the depiction of Teresienstadt with smiling

¹²⁶ Felman, "The Return of the Voice," p. 279

¹²⁷ Lanzmann, *Shoah* (complete text), p. 2

residents enjoying the fruits of their labor,¹²⁸ or after liberation, when corpses living and dead were discovered en masse in unfathomable numbers. The enactment of the terror was conducted strictly off the record. The fact is, we do not know exactly what happened. We are heading blindly into the woods toward a radical rupture in history.

3.2 Perpetual Presence

In *Shoah* the river, the boat, the man singing are aesthetic devices; the scene was set up for filming, discussed and planned. The verdant moment has been captured, recorded, logged, and preserved. No one need doubt that this aging man did indeed float down this peaceful river singing of a primal home. But the rest is less comprehensible. Srebnik himself is astounded by the impossibility of his own remembered encounter:

¹²⁸ The Nazi SS produced a film about the concentration camp Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. The film was called “Der Fuhrer Schenkt den Juden eine Stadt” (The Fuhrer Gives a Village to the Jews), and was made in preparation for a visit by members of the International Red Cross in 1944. The film shows happy, healthy people working productively and living well in what was to become known as one of the worst death camps of the Nazis.

No one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here. Impossible? And no one can understand it. Even I, here, now... I can't believe I'm here. No, I just can't believe it. It was always this peaceful here. Always. When they burned two thousand people-- Jews every day, it was just as peaceful. No one shouted. Everyone went about his work. It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now.¹²⁹

“Just as it is now” describes the film’s ability as film to project this inconsistent truth and temporality, looking directly at the thing we cannot see, where Srebnik’s own disbelief produces a traumatic blind spot where the unrepresentable image fails to appear. Lanzmann has said that the river in the film appears as an apparition¹³⁰ dislocated from anything resembling the expected horrors. The River Styx comes to mind, knowing we are entering the underworld of history. One of several rivers surrounding Hades, Styx is the black river that connects to the rivers Cocytus (Wailing) and Pyriphlegethon (Burning), the chief river Akheron (Pain), and Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Here in the darkness of the River Styx, the hateful and abhorrent, one passes to Lethe, and drinks in the erasure of memory. Lethe, sister of Limos (Starvation), provides

¹²⁹ Lanzmann, *Shoah*, p. 3

¹³⁰ Lanzmann, EGS 2002

oblivion in the realm of Hades. It is a fitting setting, where only the dead will listen.

I will pass even to Akheron the River of Pain of my own free will, and with rapture even amid the many lamentations of all-forgetting Lethe, I will tell the dead of my fate, to awaken pity and envy alike in merciless Persephoneia.¹³¹

The idiot first appears in *Shoah* in this river scene, though "appear" is an inexact term. The idiot is nearly imperceptible, crouched in the brush, silent, still. Moving through the river the camera captures the idiot for only a handful of film frames, almost too few to be seen or remembered. Maybe he was there, or maybe not. Pause. Rewind. Now slowly. Yes, he is there, the village idiot of Chelmno. A man-child is sitting on the riverbank. His face beatific, a gentle figure who sees, but does not remember. We, the viewers, could just as well blink and never notice the idiot, an instant in a film of inordinate length, an accident no less since the idiot was not planned in this reincarnation of Simon Srebnik's boat ride. It is Lanzmann who mentions Macbeth, the "tale told by an

¹³¹ Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, 4.152 (online)

idiot." Sound and fury mutated into silence and fury, and then into silence, signifying nothing.

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.¹³²

One pauses to consider what exactly signifies nothing: life? the tale? the idiot? Jean-Luc Nancy has placed the "nothing" in a temporal aesthetic of Kantian time, "a time in which nothing takes place"¹³³ and wherein "the present in time is nothing: it is pure time."¹³⁴ There is an implicit and inevitable forgetting in the passing of time that can be read in Nancy, working with art's ongoing project of "how to grasp the ungraspable passing."¹³⁵ Where history has failed to grasp the nothingness of time, the idiot and artist persist with the impossible task.

Such is the logic of the present: at this precise moment, the moment erases itself, and this is how it is a moment . . .

The present is a spacing in which presence conceals itself.

¹³² Shakespeare.....

¹³³ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 64

¹³⁴ Nancy, "The Technique of the Present" (online)

¹³⁵ *ibid*

That is to say that it does not subsist there. It is not given, posed, deposed, available as an object, as a thing. The present opposes presence: it ruins it, abducts it, in the same movement by which it brings it.¹³⁶

"Nothing" is a suspension of being, immediate and immaterial, yet inevitably giving way and opening into and out of history. The idiot's telling of the tale is a presencing of time, a gesture that perhaps senses a moment of time, even in its failure to provide meaning. The idiot is an ever-present being, without past or future. The "hour upon the stage" is his perpetual presence, repeating and reenacting tragedies in which the wrongs will never be righted and the many will die again and again. We recognize the idiot, the shattered mirror he embodies, reflecting our own incapacitation, struck dumb in the moment of remembrance. The dumb silence, the nothing of pure time, innocuous and annihilating, the idiot's gaze portends a failure of redemption in the face of death, where redemption itself implies an economy of restoration as Derrida has

¹³⁶ *ibid*

noted.¹³⁷ Nancy, in referring to Lacoue-Labarthe's distinction between "the figure of death" and the "face of the dead -- the exterminated," describes a world in ruin that has been silenced in its fury:

The oppressive silence of our entry into the world, a world marked by pain without the least redemption. Here, "genocide" (as murder of a people and murder of the plural singular) exemplifies -- technically and materially, from Armenians to Jews, from Gypsies to Homosexuals, from Communists to the Asocial, from Refugees to the Marginal, from the Exploited to the Excluded, from the Mad to the Hungry and Controlled -- the putting to death of the world in the name of the earth, the planet, or the universe. The world will have begun with its end; the death of God as creator of the world, the hatred of this world itself as the remains of a lost creation, the will to re-create the world, to fashion it in the image or imprint of a Sense. The hatred of the Jew qua 'stateless' and 'cosmopolitan' is exemplary, insofar as the 'cosmopolitan' is, precisely and paradoxically, that which is without a cosmos.¹³⁸

Life, the tale, the idiot all collapse into this world of nothing. But here, the idiot, who materializes in *Shoah*, in his nothingness, persists as the object of inquiry. How easy it would be to assign the idiot to the Poles, compliant with the Nazis, fearing for their own safety, sorry for all

¹³⁷ Derrida has written and spoken at length about redemption. This citation is based on a series of lectures he gave at New York University in October, 2001.

the trouble, only happy to help. The village idiot returns later in *Shoah* as Lanzmann talks to a group of Poles celebrating the Birth of the Virgin Mary. The scene is festive, the church square is full of people, girls in frilly, white dresses. Holy, happy, all the bad stuff behind them, the villagers stand in front of the very church where Jews were assembled for the test drive of extermination, loaded into vans where they were gassed in motion, dead within a few minutes or miles. The gas vans of Chelmno were the first site of gassing, and proved effective and efficient. How could anyone have known how terrible it was? In fact, it's hard to remember at all. Just look at the idiot, standing there without knowledge, lacking evil, a man-child too young, too innocent to know. The idiot would be the perfect mascot for the Poles. But then again the Poles do know. They remember more than they know, filling in their own redemptive desires for those of the Jews, recalling how the Jews cried out to Jesus, Mary and God as their imminent deaths approached. (Even an idiot wouldn't say that.)

¹³⁸ Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 145

3.3 Madness & Forgiveness

The idiot in *Shoah* is neither perpetrator nor bystander. In one sense he signifies the telling of a tale that cannot be told. In another sense he becomes Simon Srebnik's "no one" as the one who knows. That is, "No one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here. Impossible? And no one can understand it....When they burned two thousand people -- Jews every day, it was just as peaceful. No one shouted." In the Nazi effort to destroy all evidence, to black out the historical record, an aporia emerges, a paradox in the burden of proof that Felman suggests is the nature of testimony, the word of the victim who did not die, who did not experience the extermination itself.

Shoah enables us to see-- and gives us insight into-- the occurrence of the Holocaust as an absolute historical event whose literally overwhelming evidence makes it, paradoxically, into an utterly proofless event; the age of testimony is the age of prooflessness, the age of an event whose magnitude of reference is at once below and beyond proof.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Felman, "The Return of the Voice," p. 211

Those of us who attempt the retelling find ourselves hopelessly inept, idiots in the face of the inexplicable, attempting an obscene identification. Ronell's expose on Dostoevsky's Idiot points to this disjunctive relationality. "Putting the self in place of another necessarily implies for the modern subject, a rupture in identity, a self-departure or significant interruption."¹⁴⁰ The idiot invites identification even as he destroys it. Seemingly transparent in one moment, the idiot is a black hole that sucks identity out of us. As in *Shoah*, Ronell points to Dostoevsky's Idiot as one who suddenly shows up, appealing to our better nature on one level, while exposing the worst fears of inadequacy and failure.

No matter how randomly appointed, however, each encounter remains overdetermined and fateful. Where his movements are imbued with sense or function, he keeps himself insistently out of place, with no place of his own, always at once host to the other and also, oddly, retaining the bearing of docile guest. He crashes every preconstituted party. His presence distracts, startles. At each juncture he recalls the traumatic, but beloved appearance of something altogether other. His arrival marks a massive interruption, dismantling identities only to have them momentarily reconstitute around his enigmatic being.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Ronell, *Stupidity*, p. 205

¹⁴¹ *ibid*, p. 205

The figure of the idiot in *Shoah* momentarily, in his moment of appearance, inhabits a desire for timelessness, suspended being, a reconciliation in which all transgressions are forgiven in the absence and displacement of past and future. The possibility and impossibility of forgiveness is perhaps what both mesmerizes and repels us, unable to identify who can forgive and who is to be forgiven, caught in the swirling vortex of what Derrida calls the impossible possibility of forgiveness. We are reminded by Derrida that it may not be possible to ask forgiveness on behalf of the dead.

The disappeared, in essence, are themselves never absolutely present, at the moment when forgiveness is asked for, the same as they were at the moment of the crime, and they are sometimes absent in body, often dead.¹⁴²

The idiot appears in the midst of the disappeared, as being and non-being, in sound and fury, silence and benevolence, challenging us, the viewers and witnesses of the film, *Shoah*, with the impossible return to the Shoah, and the possible encounter with truth. The film *Shoah* as an

¹⁴² Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 44

originary event in itself, as Lanzmann intended,¹⁴³ not a documentary (of that which was not documented), presents the very unforgivability of the event. According to Derrida, forgiveness itself would disappear without the unforgivable. In other words, that which is forgivable does not call for forgiveness.

Forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. It can only be possible in doing the impossible. For, in this century, monstrous crimes ('unforgivable' then) have not only been committed -- which is perhaps itself not so new -- but have become visible, known, recounted, named, archived by a 'universal conscious' better informed than ever; because these crimes, at once cruel and massive, seem to escape, or because one has sought to make them escape, in their very excess, from the measure of any human justice, then well, the call to forgiveness finds itself (by the unforgivable itself!) reactivated, remotivated, accelerated.¹⁴⁴

The call for forgiveness in the presence of the Shoah is feeble at best. The "universal conscious" -- perhaps the idiot himself -- informed yet forgetful, stunned by the colossal unintelligibility of what it knows but cannot assimilate, is suspended in the "madness" of forgiveness that

¹⁴³ Lanzmann, EGS 2002

¹⁴⁴ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 33

Derrida posits as irreconcilable, if not unutterable.¹⁴⁵ Migrating through history, transitory and unstable, madness appears as holy, then excluded, as “guardian of truth,” and as symbol of our own inevitable deaths, then conquering the whole of humanity and the world, according to Michel Foucault. Madness appears not as a force from the outside, but as that which originates inside us, our world consumed by a madness we have created.

It is no longer the end of the time and of the world which will show retrospectively that men were mad not to have been prepared for them; it is the tide of madness, its secret invasion, that shows that the world is near its final catastrophe; it is man’s insanity that invokes and makes necessary the world’s end.¹⁴⁶

Muted and mad, the idiot shows us that the sacred has been wounded and mutilated, according to Ronell. “In modernity the sacred has appeared, if at all, through the lens of vulnerability. Not in the emanation of pride and beauty, but as their shattering.”¹⁴⁷ Our humility has become humiliation in light of the atrocities humanity has perpetrated. Such

¹⁴⁵ Derrida calls forgiveness “mad” in *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 49, but has also spoken of its “madness” specifically during a seminar at New York University, October, 2002.

¹⁴⁶ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, p. 17

immense suffering evokes shame more than piety, isolation more than congregation. The idiot stands for a crippled spirit, writes Ronell. “Broken and mangled, isolated by its suffering, the sacred in our day pulsates, if at all, weakly.”¹⁴⁸

Yet the vulnerable as sacred is not the sole property of modernity. After all, the weak and the meek have been inheriting the earth since antiquity. The tired and poor have been invited into the arms of democracy as holy symbols of freedom's most sacred mission. Surely modernity has shattered beauty with its profane gestures, but modernity's most profound expression of the sacred has been the simulated, mediated and automated renderings of our most graven images. Modernity even industrialized the creation myth with awe-inspiring assembly lines of production, easily adaptable to assembly lines of extinction. Disavowing the sacred, the idiot stands as the void through which modernity has failed,

¹⁴⁷ Ronell, *Stupidity*, p. 206

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*, p. 206

something Ronell, too, recognizes in her deconstruction of Dostoevsky:
“The Idiot repeats and reworks the cry of abandonment in a disfigured
world evacuated by the sacred.”¹⁴⁹

3.4 The Vacuum of Historical Catastrophe

Shoah, the film, takes us into an evacuated world in which history collapses in exhaustion, in a kind of nothingness that is sheer depletion. The village idiot of Chelmno, empty-headed cipher that he is, fails to replenish the vacuum, dwelling in the neverland of the wooded riverside, watching the boat float by, maybe soothed by the song of the white house, tempting us into the emptiness. Even Lanzmann was pulled by a delirious swoon to resist the encounter and fade into oblivion. Working eleven years on the film, he feared for his own life, afraid that he may not survive its completion,¹⁵⁰ that he would be consumed by the film itself, more than the work of making it.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*, p. 177

¹⁵⁰ Lanzmann, EGS 2002

It is like a black sun, and you always have to struggle against yourself in order to go on. It's what happened during the process of the film. I had to struggle against my own irrepressible tendency to forget what I had done.¹⁵¹

Nietzsche believed that too much history was a bad thing, paralyzing action, preventing happiness. "There is a degree of insomnia, of rumination, of the historical sense, through which living comes to harm and finally is destroyed, whether it is a person or a people or a culture."¹⁵² We cannot function in the face of so much sickening despair without sacrificing our very sense of pleasure, says Nietzsche, urging, "that for the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential."¹⁵³ The idiot is the "unhistorical" figure whom we cannot help but envy, since his lack of history is no fault of his own. By dumb luck he will never be struck by a lightning bolt of guilt, a pang of dread, or humanity's self-loathing sense of inadequacy. The empty slate of idiocy, for Nietzsche as animal being, is preferable to the haunting realm of memory:

¹⁵¹ Felman, "The Return of the Voice" (quoting Lanzmann), p. 252

¹⁵² Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (online)

¹⁵³ *ibid*

A leaf is continuously released from the roll of time, falls out, flutters away—and suddenly flutters back again into the man's lap. For the man says, 'I remember,' and envies the beast, which immediately forgets and sees each moment really perish, sink back in cloud and night, and vanish forever.¹⁵⁴

The idiot reminds us that much as we forget, we do not forget enough. That is, we do not forget everything and will never be as happy as he is. Our happiness will be transient at best in a vanishing and forgotten moment. Nietzsche praised the need to “forget everything” and stand “on a single point,” on the nothingness of time, in an impossible freeze frame of being. The past is the domain of regrets and stupid mistakes, of failures that destroy our capacity to live without dread. Memory essentially poisons life's pleasures, according to Nietzsche.

The person who cannot set himself down on the crest of the moment, forgetting everything from the past, who is not capable of standing on a single point, like a goddess of victory, without dizziness or fear, will never know what happiness is.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*

Encrypted in Nietzsche's happiness is the fury of history, the underbelly of our being, the rage and resentment and violence of being-with-transgression, the breakdown of ethical limits, or in the case of the Shoah, the extinction of ethical being. Lanzmann has said that he could not believe the Holocaust took place in his time, that it could take place only "outside of human duration."¹⁵⁶ Through film the Shoah as *Shoah* can exist in another time, in our time to be exact, each time that it is viewed. In that sense the fury returns as a symptom of the incarnation that exceeds what might otherwise be "dead knowledge," that which informs without taking form.¹⁵⁷ Fury as vengeance and retribution imagines the underworld goddesses who inflicted madness and suffering on the damned. The film transmits an impossible fury toward a crime that cannot be punished, and is instead assigned to the idiot, in sound and fury, whose untold tale, still silent, is punishing in its very silence. Standing among the villagers in Chelmno in front of the church, happy with their "public secret,"¹⁵⁸ the village idiot emanates the largesse, attempted but missing in their faulty recollections. The idiot is the missing link to an imagined humanity, engendering fury as he silently, unknowingly intercepts the desired

¹⁵⁶ Lanzmann, EGS, 2002

¹⁵⁷ Lanzmann, EGS, 2002

forgetting that has informed the villagers' own tale. Felman writes that forgetting is endemic to history, a "passion" that fuels our history.

The film shows how history is used for the purpose of a historical (ongoing) process of forgetting which, ironically enough, includes the gestures of historiography. Historiography is as much the product of the passion of forgetting as it is the product of the passion of remembering.¹⁵⁹

It is unclear whether this "passion" is one of desire or suffering. For while history has been written in the vernacular of winning over evil, Cathy Caruth reminds us that history is the history of trauma.¹⁶⁰

3.5 The Blind Gaze

Shoah takes the unusual risk of exposing its own blindspots, not as an apology for the limitations of its form, but as an intentional aesthetic of exposure. Filmicly speaking the exposure as underexposure causes image to fall into darkness, shrouded in shadow where the black of the frame is

¹⁵⁸ Lanzmann, EGS, 2002

¹⁵⁹ Felman, "The Return of the Voice," p. 214

too black. In fact, the film is not underexposed technically, but it throws us into darkness nonetheless. Lanzmann sees “blindness as the purest way of looking,”¹⁶¹ an unlikely choice for the medium of film, which is nothing more than the projection of light as image. “Blindness” implies both more and less than image itself: more in the sense of that which is perceived outside of image, as in the case of the film’s “actors,” who were both willing and unwilling participants, according to Lanzmann.¹⁶² Simon Srebnik’s return to Chelmno, for instance, is enacted through the gestures of his past experience. Riding in the boat, singing of the white house, he is transported back to the original event through these physical actions, which Lanzmann directed with the intention of transcending and enhancing verbal and visual memory. It is a technique that is used many times in *Shoah* as an aesthetic of incarnation that takes us, the viewers, into an imagined re-lived world, filling in images that do not exist. Of course “blindness” also refers to the absence of images, the absence of witnesses, and ultimately the inability to possess an image, that is, the limits of assimilation. Blanchot has written about the fascination with image that disrupts and dislocates both itself and the gaze of the viewer.

¹⁶⁰ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 15

¹⁶¹ Lanzmann, EGS, 2002

Fascination is the gaze of solitude, the gaze of what is incessant and interminable, in which blindness is still vision, vision that is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing, impossibility that turns into seeing, that perseveres -- always and always -- in a vision that does not end: a dead gaze, a gaze that has become the ghost of an eternal vision.¹⁶³

The light of the image produces its own ghost, the afterimage a negative shadow of its former self, seen with eyes wide shut, dissolving into darkness finally, where the mind continues to search for it. Such is the nature of memory, unsettled and incomplete, we are forever seeking its missing parts, reiterating the course of the remembered moment, jarred by its irremediable abysses. Here is where we linger. Lanzmann recognizes this peculiar reversal as essential to *Shoah*.

The film is itself obscure: it sheds light where we least expect it to, and its heart of darkness is revealed as utterly unknown and perhaps unknowable. The film's role, however, is to physically shed light. It is in this way that the film speaks to the intelligence.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Lanzmann, EGS, 2002

¹⁶³ Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude," p. 413

¹⁶⁴ Felman, "The Return of the Voice" (quoting Lanzmann), p. 239

Film as the obscure light of desire, or more appropriately, the obscure desire of light, performs memory's struggle to produce meaning, and in failing produces the intelligibility of its failure. Felman recognizes *Shoah*'s numbing and dumbing effect as paramount to its ability to invoke feeling, to exert a shock treatment that both electrifies and anesthetizes, leaving in its wake the monstrous imprint of catastrophe.

If the film succeeds in reaching in the viewer the intelligence of the emotion, the very dumbness of the inside will have been transmitted, and the very shock of the event might generate its own process of historic intelligibility.¹⁶⁵

More precisely, she insists that the film's essential role is to help us know that we do not know, that we cannot know. The trajectory of our history has been structured around atrocities that are transformed into victories. The Holocaust ruptured this history, at least temporarily. Felman suggests that the film, *Shoah*, exposes the rupture by refusing to give it meaning, refusing to shed light on it.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid*, p. 239

To understand *Shoah* is not to know the Holocaust, but to gain new insights into what not knowing means, to grasp the ways in which erasure is itself part of the functioning of our history.¹⁶⁶

Blanchot, too, sees the darkness of light, in which we are alone, incapable of understanding. In Blanchot's solitude of the gaze, the "dead gaze" as a bewildered stare and as the image of bewilderment, one can find solitude itself as essentially dumb, a taciturn state of being that is both willful and unwilling (like the film's characters). The idiot in *Shoah*, alone on the riverbank, alone with the villagers, is a being being-in-eternal-solitude. The lush quiet of the riverbank, pleasant and solitary, is an instant in *Shoah*, a disintegrated moment that instantly dissipates into pure desolation, pure terror, solitude as pure helplessness, being alone in mute and primal fear. The idiot as helpless, hapless figure represents the unequivocal aloneness of the dead and the memory of the dead. Seen through Blanchot, we watch the idiot watching us in a gaze that produces blindness.

¹⁶⁶ *ibid*, p. 253

This realm of fascination, where our gaze solidifies into light, where light is the absolute sheen of an eye that we do not see, that we nevertheless do not leave off seeing because it is the mirror image of our own gaze, this realm is supremely attractive, fascinating: light that is also the abyss, horrifying and alluring, light in which we sink.¹⁶⁷

Blanchot writes for the writer who must succumb alone to the dark image, the non-place of solitude where the image -- perhaps truth -- is both held and withheld. Truth is sensed, but unattainable. For Blanchot it is the sensing of truth that forces a desire for truth, even if it cannot be known.

I do not know it, but I recognize it, and this recognition destroys the power in me to know, the right to grasp, makes what cannot be grasped into something that cannot be relinquished, the inaccessible that I cannot cease attaining, what I cannot take but can only take back -- and never give up.¹⁶⁸

Blanchot mirrors Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art," in which art reveals and conceals truth through a gaze that can never be

¹⁶⁷ Blanchot, "The Essential Solitude," p. 413

¹⁶⁸ *ibid*, p. 411

sustained without blinking, without blindness. Even more essential, Blanchot submerges writing in image, “language, by opening, becomes image,”¹⁶⁹ rendering language mute. Felman suggests that *Shoah* can only be film, requiring the stammers and silences that stretch time through image, through gesture, in the spaces of language.

Film would thus seem to be the very medium which accommodates the simultaneous multiplicity of levels and directions, a medium that can visually inscribe - and cinematically bear witness to -- the very impossibility of writing.¹⁷⁰

3.6 Failures of Language

Lanzmann’s project to “incarnate” memory can only exist as film, through a temporal medium that projects the spaces of silence, that exists in a medial timeframe that is extraordinarily prolonged not only by silence, but among other things, by translation. *Shoah* is in many languages --

¹⁶⁹ Blanchot, *The Essential Solitude*, p. 407

¹⁷⁰ Felman, “The Return of the Voice,” p. 248

Polish, Yiddish, German, English, Hebrew, etc. -- none of which are Lanzmann's own language of French. He has said that the foreign languages made the film possible for him, providing a distance from what would have been unbearably close in his own language.¹⁷¹ The film's spoken translation, a repetition that follows and simulates the original, but fails to be the original, reiterates the structure of memory itself, stretching time around the memory, producing an experience of not understanding that coincides with the attempt to understand. In *Shoah*, the crisis of the event, of memory, of remembrance, is a crisis of language that is revealed in the nonrepresentable space of translation, that is, the nontranslatable catastrophe itself.

The film is even named in a blank space of language. Intentionally seeking a title for the film that would be obscure, that would fail to illuminate, Lanzmann says his decision to call the film "Shoah" came at a time when the word was largely indiscernible and not used internationally to signify the Nazi extermination.¹⁷² More importantly, Lanzmann himself did not understand the word, insisting, "there is no name for such a

¹⁷¹ Lanzmann, EGS 2003

¹⁷² Lanzmann, EGS 2002

thing.”¹⁷³ Hebrew for devastation, calamity, catastrophe, annihilation, the word “shoah” outside of its own language, outside of its own alphabet, disfigured or transfigured, attempts to signify a destroyed destruction that evades translation. Incomplete, transplanted, inscribed in a “perpetual renewal of language,” translation, as Walter Benjamin observed, unleashes meaning, that is unties it from its origin.

In the individual, unsupplemented languages, meaning is never found in relative independence, as individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux -- until it is able to emerge as pure language from the harmony of all the various modes of intention.¹⁷⁴

“Shoah” as pure language both exceeds language and retreats to a pre-linguistic utterance, a gasping whisper that struggles to articulate. The idiot returns. Lacking language, his tale is told in sound, a fury that has been long-muted by the impossibility of finding language, or maybe silenced by a pure language that refuses language, like the Jews who refuse to utter the name of God.

¹⁷³ Lanzmann, EGS 2003

¹⁷⁴ Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (in *Illuminations*), p. 74

3.7 Beyond Knowability

The idiot in *Shoah* dislodges our attention, drawing us toward the thing we cannot focus on, and then is gone before we know what we might have seen. Chances are that most of *Shoah*'s viewers will never see the idiot, or rather, will not remember having seen him. The film is hardly dependent on these fleeting images of a figure who is never identified nor named, never speaks nor is spoken to, a figure of passivity, a shadow of little import, or Nietzsche's falling leaf perhaps. Yet in the structure of *Shoah*, a film that never asks why, that persists in exhuming the details of each encounter, urging each narrative back further even as it progresses, Lanzmann insists on stopping time, refusing its disappearance. In a scene where a former Nazi officer of the Warsaw Ghetto tries to explain how the Jews were maintained as a workforce, Lanzmann asks: "*Yes, but do you know how many people died in the ghetto each month in 1941?*" The former officer replies, "I don't know now, if I ever knew." It is here that we see how Lanzmann unravels this notion of knowing, forcing it beyond its knowability.

But you did know. These are exact figures.

I probably knew...

Yes. Five thousand a month.

Five thousand a month? Yes, well...

That's a lot.

That's a lot, of course. But there were far too many people in the ghetto. That was it.

Far too many.

Far too many.

My question is philosophical. What does a ghetto mean, in your opinion?

History is full of ghettos, going back centuries, for all I know. Persecution of the Jews wasn't a German invention, and it didn't start with World War II. The Poles persecuted them too.

But a ghetto like Warsaw's, in a great capital, in the heart of the city...

That was unusual.

You say you wanted to maintain the ghetto.

Our mission wasn't to annihilate the ghetto, but to keep it alive, to maintain it.

*What does 'alive' mean in such conditions?*¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Lanzmann, *Shoah*, p. 168-169

In asking what happened, Lanzmann is asking what is happening -- now -- as the story is recalled, in the moment of memory. What discarded fragments and fleeting images have been dismissed or dispersed? What can be found in the spaces between facts? Lanzmann already knows that 5000 people died of disease and starvation each month in the Warsaw Ghetto. The information as such could be conveyed more expediently. The number itself might make sense and provide an understanding of how many, and where. The number is atrocious. It is no small thing. It is a steady stream of people dropping dead each day in a small walled-in neighborhood that has become filthy and contaminated with death. And yet we are taken to an even darker place, the “non-space of memory” as Lanzmann says,¹⁷⁶ where a stumbling occurs, where the numbers, in their precision, still don’t add up. We are taken to a place where the very word “alive” has lost ground, its meaning irreparably suspended.

¹⁷⁶ Lanzmann, EGS 2002

4. The Art of Absence

4.1 The Missing Image

History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it -- and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.¹⁷⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

To propose an aesthetics of memory is to risk encompassing all of art and even much of thinking. The Greeks were the first to create an “art of memory” in which image and place were situated in imaginary architectures that stylized an artificial and creative mode of association.¹⁷⁸ Memory is arguably the project of art. In an era of cinema especially, time and history, corollaries of memory, have been artfully stretched and spanned, shuffled and reshuffled. The multi-media environment mirrors and distorts time even more intricately, deconstructing notions of time and memory, attempting to express a new aesthetic, a hybrid maybe. Yet it stands to reason that an aesthetic of memory failure would emerge, that

¹⁷⁷ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 65

¹⁷⁸ See Frances Yates' book, *The Art of Memory*, which deciphers an intricate history of memory from the Greeks through the Renaissance.

our documented catastrophes would remind us of loss as we experience a global loss, a loss of the world, that is, a loss of the undocumented world.

Where memory fails and philosophy falters, art may intervene. In fact, is the role of art to produce the thing we cannot see, to make visible the invisible, to shift and dislodge perception, to represent what is not representable, or more precisely, to represent nonrepresentability. In the 21st century we can no longer escape media's contamination of memory, its invasion, infusion, and instruction. Failures of memory, the catastrophes of history, have provoked an aesthetic that struggles with and against media, both appropriating and rejecting it, inhabiting the border zones between authentic and artificial memory, that is, lived and acquired memory and, as Walter Benjamin observed, the before and after of memory. A discourse on the blackout is inherently problematic, but it is enlivened by art, envisioned in ways that open into an ethical world. In Claude Lanzmann's "incarnation" of memory, or what he calls the "immemorial," he insists on a living presence, that is a living-with the event. The film cannot resurrect the dead through memory, but only recognize that the dead are in fact lost in the silence, irrecoverable here in

the living world. Lanzmann has said that he needed film, as art, to evoke a sense of truth that he could not have found otherwise.¹⁷⁹

To aestheticize failure, disaster, the loss of memory, or even the impossibility of memory for events never experienced, but incorporated into our national memory, our historical memory, is to aestheticize depletion, erasure, absence. Twentieth century movements in art have attempted to dislodge or transcend the known world, the world of appearances, through conceptual art, minimalism, abstract expressionism. But another aesthetic of absence has emerged in art that is responding to historical crises, an aesthetic that explores a destabilized memory, a memory that necessarily fails in the face of catastrophe, a memory in exile, absent from its place of origin.

The displacement of memory is performed as a replacement of memory by Lebanese artist, Walid Raad, who established The Atlas Group¹⁸⁰ as an imaginary foundation to research and document contemporary history in Lebanon. Blurring the distinction between found

¹⁷⁹ Lanzmann, EGS 2002

¹⁸⁰ See the Atlas Group website: <http://www.theatlasgroup.org/>

and created, or “authored,” documents on the Lebanese civil wars of 1975-1991, The Atlas Group is creating an imaginary archive of a national crisis in which Raad attempts to reveal “unexamined dimensions” through documents that assert the authority of truth, even in their fictions. Art critic Lee Smith sees authority and authenticity as the central premises of Raad’s work, attempting to recover, that is, to create, missing clues to wars that present themselves as fragmented stories of the missing. Raad’s “recovery” acknowledges the impossibility of actual memory, fictionalizing truth in the name of missing truths. Through photography, video, performance, writings, and other means, Raad documents fictive characters, creating dossiers on torture, car bombings, kidnappings, and other atrocities that mirror the truth of war in Lebanon, what Raad calls the “hysterical symptoms of war,”¹⁸¹ the unexpected or sudden calamities within the larger crisis.

This affinity between vanishing and speed—racehorses, cars, explosions—is a sort of signature of Raad’s, catching something by surprise, just after or just before its moment.

¹⁸¹ Smith, “Missing in Action” (online)

Audiences typically associate this gesture with mourning or melancholia, but Raad's word for it, "missing," is kind of a play on poststructuralism's "presence." "'Missing' has this idea of longing for," Raad says, "yet the inability to arrive. It's as if you're always longing for that which you missed."¹⁸²

The surprise element in Raad's work speaks to the accident, that which literally falls between the cracks, a chance occurrence, an unplanned event, and even a nonessential quality of being, as in the accident of nationality that may place someone in the wrong country at the wrong time. The accident as event is sudden, often inopportune, misplacing memory, interrupting history, vanquishing logic. Obliterating its own moment of impact, one thinks of an airplane crash, the evidence elusively trapped in a black box that cannot produce a complete picture, retaining fragments of something gone terribly wrong, an unthinkable crisis, unimaginable and unacceptable. Michel Foucault suggests that it is the accident itself that shapes our history, that maps our genealogy. The accident is unforeseen, even unseen, occurring out of sight, like a car bombing around the corner, a kidnapping that seizes the victim from behind, that blinds in its abruptness, rupturing time and memory, and

¹⁸² *ibid*

suddenly changing the course of all that follows. Foucault tracks an historical “descent” -- a reversal of our evolutionary ascent -- and points to the accident as the deviant factor.

Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations--or conversely, the complete reversals--the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth of being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.¹⁸³

Foucault’s “exteriority of accidents” implies a phenomenon that lacks interiority, or perhaps has lost interiority. Arriving from a seemingly outside place, the accident itself signifies an abandonment, a blindsided calamity that undermines structural integrity, collapsing interiority and evacuating a sense of known truths. The “missing” that Raad explores in his art can be read as a missing interiority; what we miss is experienced as an inner vacuum, an interior void. The accident can be seen as a force that opens the void, the event, the trauma. Virilio suggests that the accident as

an inversion of our constructed truths, as the failure of our constructions, is also an invention.

To invent the train is to invent the derailment; to invent the ship is to invent the shipwreck. The ship that sinks says much more to me about technology than the ship that floats!¹⁸⁴

The accident, according to Virilio, ruptures the intellectual integrity of invention. “It is the intellectual scapegoat of the technological; accident is diagnostic of technology.”¹⁸⁵ As diagnostic, the accident suggests symptoms of illness or disorder, and could be superficially relegated to the domain of anomaly, something which has deviated from truth, a thing in need of repair. But Virilio, like Foucault, suggests that the accident itself undoes discourse when it refuses to represent that which is reparable, that is, when it refuses to restore the course of history. War, especially, as an invented accident, always exceeding its intention, produces other unexpected accidents that disrupt the course of war, reverberating in its aftermath, in the missing, where memory staggers.

¹⁸³ Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” p. 81

¹⁸⁴ Der Derian, *The Virilio Reader*, p. 20

¹⁸⁵ *ibid*, p. 20

Memorials, monuments to the missing, have stood as an art form that aestheticizes loss, often in the service of political or national entities, further immortalizing the nation. Benjamin is concerned that our worst accidents, the catastrophic ones, may fall prey to an aesthetic pleasure. Failing to make sense intellectually, the Nazi politics of scapegoating produced a trove of images that stylized its own brand of self-aggrandizing hatred. For Benjamin this was a sign that our conception of disaster was changing through technology, through the reproduction of photographic image and ultimately through the aestheticizing of war.

Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.¹⁸⁶

The contemplation of destruction, of failure, that humanity has encountered is something that stymies public discourse. The Vietnam War Memorial redefined a sense of national monumentality by disregarding the

¹⁸⁶ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (in *Illuminations*), p. 242

nation and erecting a blank, black slab on which names of the missing, the dead are engraved on a polished stone surface that reflects the gaze of the visitor. “You look into the underground, where the dead are buried, and you see, behind their names, the ghost of your face,”¹⁸⁷ writes Louis Menand. The concept is startling, placing the viewer within the monument as an image of death, as a gaze or memory of death, or a reflection in the moment of contemplating the dead. “The Vietnam Memorial is a piece about death for a culture in which people are constantly being told that life is the only thing that matters.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Menand, “The Reluctant Memorialist,” (online)

¹⁸⁸ *ibid*, 2002-07-08

4.3 Praxis: “Accidents of Memory”

We have fled to the borders, of our cities, of our values, of our minds. All previous forms of representation, be they in art or politics or law, have become suspect.

Can we ever achieve focus again?¹⁸⁹

In my video work, “Accidents of Memory,” a collaboration with Polish artist Jadwiga Sawicka memory occurs by chance, if at all, in a world where memory is essentially missing. The piece is a gallery installation that features an enclosed cube in which four large video projections surround the viewer with locations from Eastern Poland that were sites of historical trauma, but now offer little evidence of the events that formerly devastated much of the region. The work is a meditation on historical erasure, seen as a visible depletion in the middle of nowhere, indistinct and forgotten. The rare evidence of historical disaster is seen in Soviet era monuments and memorials, which appear throughout the video, hinting at distant historic events. The memorials are stagnant and obtuse, inaccessible and remote, and seem to have little impact on the few people

¹⁸⁹ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*, p. 18

who encounter them. Still, the monuments signify a transgressive past, suggesting a sense of history even if it is a missing history, offering a gesture of recognition, albeit a deficient one. The installation is ambivalent about memory, placing it within the accident, and placing the accident within memory. The video reveals a physical erasure, one that has occurred through the disasters of war and genocide, through the impermanent, already crumbling, rebuilding of Poland under communism, and through time itself, that is, the erosion and overgrowth of empty places, places that have been emptied of human activity. In looking at a history we cannot see, we nonetheless see a living place, a place that can neither restore nor replace its missing parts, a place that exudes a palpable depletion. The video asks only that we look. “[The] installation suggests the presence of memory but resists an intentional (impossible) recovery of the past.”¹⁹⁰

Outside of the video cube, the gallery walls are covered with artwork by Jadwiga Sawicka, fragments of text from calendars, in which historic dates intermingle with trivial information in a clutter of facts that

¹⁹⁰ Grossman, *Accidents of Memory*, p. 31

are undifferentiated and incomplete. The text is a wallpaper that asserts an overwhelming volume of text, an overabundance of information that appears on one level as a graphic image, a visual pattern. But the text also presents a barrage of words, of language, a demand for comprehension. As fragments, the text offers bits and pieces from the original calendars, truncating an already truncated source of public information. The calendar stands as an instrument of memory, serving to organize and structure memory, to nationalize it with information that commemorates and celebrates the State with an acknowledgment of historic struggles. But the calendar also serves to domesticate memory, in a literal sense, by providing snippets of information about medicine and science, gardening and cooking, transmitting a contained and comprehensive context for the world we live in.

Large photos of old clothing are hung on the wallpaper. The clothes have been shaped by their deceased owners, suggesting memories of the body through stretches and formations that appear in the now uninhabited fabric. Worn by people who lived through a vacated history, the clothing can only offer ghostly impressions of human forms. The

photos are images of artifacts from another era in which human presence is sensed, but absent.

“Accidents of Memory” refuses to inform the viewer. The locations in the video are not overtly identified. The viewer has little means of grasping that a grassy hill, for instance, is the site of the former death camp, Treblinka, that a wheat field is the site of a destroyed Jewish cemetery, that a nearly defunct train station was a link for transports from the Warsaw Ghetto, or even that the images a drab little town are from the place where my grandfather grew up. Created for a Polish audience, the locations, despite their specificity, are part of a vast, injured landscape that has suffered for centuries, culminating in W.W.II, in which Poland was the epicenter of destruction and extermination. To propose that memory is possible, even as an accident, is to propose that a history that has been expelled, that has been blacked out, is a history that may still be present. And yet, what we see is the world that remains after the disaster.

4.3 An Ethical World in the Body of the Blackout

The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind.¹⁹¹

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

To talk about the blackout is to talk about the thing we cannot see, the thing we cannot know. Lanzmann calls the Shoah, that is, the event itself, “*la chose*,” the thing. He would prefer to leave it nameless, inexplicable, understanding only the immensity of inexplicability, the impossibility of seeing or of knowing. The blackout as trauma, as catastrophe, as senselessness, cannot be known in itself. One can even ask if the blackout exists. Perhaps not. Perhaps it interrupts existence. We can characterize the blackout as a virtual death, as that which surrounds death, is near death, and even produces death, but is not, in fact, death. And yet the blackout appears as death -- if one can even talk about appearance. The blackout appears as a disappearance of existence. The thing that cannot be remembered fully, the space that has been deadened by the experience itself, is the core of catastrophe, the core of history, of

¹⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 3

memory. This “deadening” may take place in the body of the experience, even in the body of the self, in the destruction itself, in the materiality that is damaged, destroyed, disintegrated, displaced. In the physical space of the blackout, we are blinded, stunned, brutalized. The body is betrayed, if not mutilated. Like the sensation of a phantom limb, memory in its most neurological formation attempts to account for, to replace and restore the body of destruction, the dead or deadened body. But an ethical potentiality is only possible among the living.

Here in the blackout, where memory fails, so does representation. Nonetheless, the blackout, that is an idea of the blackout, produces an image, a non-image, a blackness that we can imagine at least in symbolic form. Media has obliterated the blackout, replaced it with image. But at the same time image has produced the black screen, the eradicated image and the split-second image that disappears as it appears. When we think about the blackout of disaster we are thinking about the limits of perception, the limits of language and philosophy. Ultimately we are talking about a place, or non-place, that both destroys and enables ethical possibility. Stranded between mortality and immortality, suspended in

time, the blackout calls for an ethical response, but the call, paradoxically, is silenced, invisible, imperceptible.

Heidegger said that silence is the most authentic language,¹⁹² a language that both precedes and follows language, a language we cannot hear and, still, a language that speaks. The blackout, as silence, as emptiness and disappearance, even as a failure of power and memory, also gives memory. Without silence, without the blackout, there is no language, no reawakening. History has rejected its interruptions, seeking an unbroken line of progress, reinscribing disaster as destiny. We have denied the blackout, blinded it with light, washed it with knowledge, drowned its silence. We see this in media, the disavowal of silence, the noise of images, the production of memory that destroys memory.

To awaken, to come to consciousness, to come to presence, is a condition that demands a being-with, a responsibility, according to Emmanuel Levinas. “It is a question, in presence, of rediscovering life,”¹⁹³ he writes. In presence we are in the presence of the Other, in “vigilance,”

¹⁹² See Heidegger’s essay, “Language” in which he describes “the peel of stillness” as mode of authentic language.

Levinas says, toward an ethical relation. But even more importantly, the awakening is ongoing,. It is “a wakefulness watchful for a new awakening.”¹⁹⁴ The awakening from the blackout, from the disaster, is an awakening that can never be completed. History continues to arrive, taking form in a living world, arriving almost too late, but relentlessly arriving. Memory itself arrives as a living presence, that lives only in its ethical awakening, arriving from a deadened world into a world that is still alive. Levinas recognizes that the awakening can occur in darkness, in obscurity that may retreat from light, away from the insistence of knowledge into the unknowable: “A waking up in the heart of the awakening itself, a sobering up always deeper, an insomnia more vigilant than the lucidity of the evidence.”¹⁹⁵ The “sobering” is not painless. The awakening fails to be messianic, fails to shed redemptive light.

¹⁹³ Levinas, “From Consciousness to Wakefulness,” p. 27

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*, p. 30

¹⁹⁵ *ibid*, p. 32

The word “memory” comes from the Latin word *memor*, meaning mindful, implying a presence in the world and toward the world. Perhaps one can assign re-membrance to the world of the dead, but memory itself extends into a living world, not as that which can reconstitute the past or restore the missing, but as that which can mindfully open into a future.

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Appendix

The following pages feature images from the exhibition, “Accidents of Memory,” a video and visual art installation that was created as part of this dissertation.

The exhibition was at Zacheta Gallery in Warsaw, Poland, from November 16, 2002 - January 5, 2003. The first image is from the cover of the exhibition catalog. Video was produced by Joan Grossman; visual art was made by Jadwiga Sawicka.

As the piece was already discussed in the final chapter of this work, the images are left uncaptioned.

All photos by Marek Horwat.

**Problemy
z pamięcią
Accidents
of Memory
Joan Grossman
Jadwiga Sawicka**











