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Holocaust in Literary and Cultural Studies

Przemysław CZAPLIŃSKI

The Holocaust as a Challenge
for Literary Reflection

Joanna TOKARSKA-BAKIR

Prodigal Son Ten Years Later

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Das Ereignis Auschwitz

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A Holocaust Soap
and the Story of Its Production

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Exiting the Grave

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Andrzej LEŚNIAK

The Problem of Formal Analysis of the Representations of the Holocaust: Georges Didi-Huberman's Images in Spite of All and Harun Farocki's Respite

To seriously speak of the experience of the Holocaust, one has to consider the forms used to talk and write about it and the forms which shape the structure of films, images, and photographs related to it. This thesis seems rather obvious as it calls up a whole assortment of research practices concentrating around the issue of the representation of the Holocaust. The significance attributed to form becomes more problematic, however, when we examine ways in which the visual works and testimonies related to the Holocaust are spoken about. Morphological issues are very often marginalized and defined as secondary to the ethical issues. In line with consistent anti-formalism, morphological issues, labeled as “aesthetics,” are excluded from discussion. The most vivid and symptomatic example of this phenomenon is the latest phase of the debate about representations of the Holocaust related to the text by Georges Didi-Huberman published in the catalog to the exhibition *Memoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination Nazis (1933-1999)*,¹ subsequently reprinted in the book *Images malgré tout (Images in Spite of All)*,² with an extensive appendix which was a response to the polemic in the press. I wish to demonstrate how in the above mentioned

¹ See: G. Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, in: *Memoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination Nazis (1933-1999)*, dir. C. Cheroux, Marval, Paris, 2001.

² G. Didi-Huberman, *Image malgré tout*, Minuit, Paris, 2003. English edition: *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis, University of Chicago Press, 2012 All references in the text are to this edition.

texts and the images they discuss, and in Harun Farocki's film *Respite*, the formal aspect of representation is the condition for the possibility of asking ethical questions and to explain why in the analysis of visual materials it is necessary to simultaneously take into consideration the ethical and epistemic efficacy of the images. Didi-Huberman's essay concerns four photographs taken by the member of the Sonderkommando of the Auschwitz concentration camp in August 1944. The photographs, reproduced in the first part of the book, are meticulously analyzed in Didi-Huberman's text which consists of three interconnected layers or argument.

The first layer consists of detailed descriptions of each of the photographs. Each visual level is discussed separately, and the author attends not only to the visible figures, but also to those elements which have been omitted in earlier interpretations as unimportant. Particularly crucial are the large black frames significant especially in the first two photographs. The scenes representing the burning of the bodies, the laying of the corpses, and the smoke rising above, even if clearly decentered, can be located more or less in the middle visual level. Their presence reveals the place from which the photograph has been taken and simultaneously the need to hide at the moment of pressing the shutter release. Although the black elements do not represent anything, their analysis may say more about the photograph than what is visible on it at the first glance. Earlier no particular importance was placed on those elements as evidenced by the characteristic photo editing of the photographs: they were cropped in such a way as to eliminate the "redundant" element, to remove it from the field of vision.

As strange as that might seem in a context – history – that normally respects its research material, the four photographs of the Sonderkommando have often been transformed to make them more informative than they were in their official state. This is another way of making them "presentable" and of making them "present a face"... There is, no doubt, in this operation a desire – both good and unconscious – to approach by isolating "what there is to see," by purifying the imaging substance of its nondocumentary weight. (34)

The photographs were also subjected to other manipulations; for example the disturbed line of the horizon was returned to its "natural" position, as if the photographs had been taken in comfortable conditions, without the need to hide from the guards, with the use of a tripod or some other stable support, with the camera resting on the hip. Thus Didi-Huberman attends to the formal aspects of the four specific photographs and those formal qualities become the grounds to determine what happened. In other words, morphological analysis allows to describe the epistemic efficacy of those images, efficacy not directly dependent on their readability, on the obviousness of what is represented, but on the expressiveness of the material visual layer. The black margins, removed when the photographs have been reframed, reveal the circumstances in which the photographs had been taken.

The second layer of Didi-Huberman's text, directly resulting from the first, is the history of the four photographs: narration based on the photographs. Didi-Huberman begins at the beginning of the whole project. Next, after describing the circumstances in which the members of the Sonderkommando prepared the event and the taking of the

photographs, he reaches the moment when the photographs can be sent, taken outside the camp. Scrupulously he reconstructs those events using the visual materials but also a number of other documents and memoirs describing the functioning of the camp (especially the strict prohibition of photography), the activities of the Sonderkommando and the efforts of the Polish opposition to get a hold of photographs of the camp and transport them to Great Britain. The reconstruction of those probable events would not be possible had not Didi-Huberman relied on images which decide how the documents related to the background of the events are to be interpreted. For example, the scene of the burning of the corpses in the incineration pits recorded on two of the photographs makes possible an interpretation of the memoirs of Filip Müller in which he talks about the material process of the destruction of the bodies:

The gestures of the living tell the weight of the bodies and the task of making immediate decisions. Pulling, dragging, throwing. The smoke, behind, comes from the incineration pits, bodies arranged quincuncially, 1.5 meters deep, the crackling of fat, odors, the shriveling of human matter – everything of which Filip Müller speaks is there, under the screen of smoke ... (14)

Here images are an equally valid point of departure for history; they make it possible to acquire knowledge of the events; they guarantee the legitimacy of historical narration. At this point, one needs to emphasize the significance of the solution presented by Didi-Huberman. His point is not only to illustrate the memories of eye witnesses or to give weight to their accounts. The narration of *Images in Spite of All*, focused on four specific photographs, posits those very photographs as a legitimate source of knowledge.

In *Image malgré tout*, photograph analysis provides the grounds for asking questions about ways of practicing the historical sciences. The third, most general layer of Didi-Huberman's text concerns the conditions of the possibility of constructing historical discourse in the context of the category of the unimaginable, which dominates the discourse of the Holocaust. The discussion provoked by *Image malgré tout* concentrated on that issue: while Didi-Huberman's opponents vehemently contested all attempts to move beyond the codified ways of speaking in which imagining is strictly forbidden, *Image malgré tout* concentrate on the question about the possibility of using visual sources in the field of historical discipline. The four photographs taken in the Auschwitz camp are treated as visual phenomena which allow a thinking through of the dialectical relation between what is unimaginable and the process of imagining. Were we to define the two most extreme epistemic options in relation to history – in the context of the problem of imagining – we would define them in these very categories: on the one hand there is the unimaginable, surfacing in the various forms of the prohibition against imaging, on the other, there is imagining, the potentially unlimited ability to produce, assimilate, watch, and absorb images. The discourse on the Holocaust is based on the category of the unimaginable. Didi-Huberman's critical proposition is not, however, a voice defending the latter, oppositional option, embracing unlimited imagining irrespective of the form it would take. The author of *Images malgré tout* suggests a third solution, one that is least obvious and most difficult to theorize, but which constitutes the most momentous proposition of his essay. He disagrees with the imposed prohibition of imaging; he resists

the arbitrary decision according to which images become suspect, inappropriate, and finally invisible and overlooked as in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, in which testimonies of the survivors entirely replace the visual archival materials:

In particular, we will note that certain important works of art have caused their commentators to give misleading generalizations on the "invisibility" of the genocide. Thus, the formal choices of *Shoah*, the film by Claude Lanzmann, have served as alibis for a whole discourse (as moral as it was aesthetic) on the unrepresentable, the unfigurable, the invisible, the unimaginable, and so on. (26)

But neither does Didi-Huberman choose the opposite solution, such as would advocate an uncritical use of images. *Images in Spite of All* are committed to researching the possibility of creating knowledge based on fragmentary visual materials and analyzing the conditions of the possibility of knowing history based on specific pictures and their formal qualities. Beginning with the first pages of his book, Didi-Huberman justifies the necessity of speaking about those materials:

Let us not invoke the unimaginable. Let us not shelter ourselves by saying that we cannot, that we could not by any means, imagine it to the very end. We *are obliged* to that oppressive imaginable...How much harder was it for the prisoners to rip from the camps those few shreds of which now we are trustees, charged with sustaining them simply by looking at them. Those shreds are at the same time more precious and less comforting than all possible works of art, snatched as they were from a world bent on their impossibility. Thus *images in spite of all*: in spite of the hell of Auschwitz, in spite of the risks taken. In return, we must contemplate them, take them on, and try to comprehend them. *Images in spite of all*: in spite of our own inability to look at them as they deserve; in spite of our own world, full, almost choked, with imaginary commodities. (3)

From the above fragment we may gather that the researcher does not have a choice between alternative ways of proceeding. The rhetoric of this introduction, based on repetitions, written in the form of an appeal, speaks about the absolute necessity of analyzing the photographs. Only they can allow an interpretation of history which had been deemed unrepresentable already within the directives regulating the operation of the camp. Indeed, numerous fragments of *Images in Spite of All* refer to the camp policy based, among others, on the consistent prohibition of registering camp events. In fact, Didi-Huberman claims that only these photographs may allow us to experience what is left of the truth about Auschwitz:

The four photographs from August 1994, of course, don't tell "all of the truth" (it would be very naïve to expect this from anything at all – things, words, or images): they are tiny extractions from such a complex reality, brief instants in a continuum that lasted five years, no less. But they are for us – for our eyes today – truth itself, meaning its vestige, its meager shreds. (38)

Didi-Huberman's position and argument may serve as a justification for an entire theoretical model of rethinking the experience of the Holocaust. In line with this alternative way of thinking, the formal dimension of the image (which, in itself, demands further definition) has to be taken seriously as grounds for analysis in which the ethical aspect

and the epistemic value of the photographs are considered to be inseparably related. In other words, to convey the experience of the Holocaust, one has to take into account how the images of the Holocaust are structured. The discourse Didi-Huberman is critical of, in which the unimaginable is an endlessly recurring motif and a substitute for argumentation, is dominated by ethical rhetoric. There is talk of the suitability of representations, of responsibility in relation to the imaging of historical events, of inappropriateness of images in the face of genocide. The domination of ethical categories is so strong that the mark of impropriety touches not only images but also the very questions about their meaning and form.

In this context, a theoretical model which emphasizes formal analysis is not obvious at all, not only because of the interrelation of the ethical and epistemic discourse mentioned above, but also because of the need to work out such research practice as would allow a redefinition of the general categories which define visibility on the basis of specific visual experiences. Here it may be useful to refer to one of the texts by Jacques Rancière.³ In *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Rancière addresses the relationship between psychoanalysis on the one hand, and art and literature on the other. He does not repeat, however, the most obvious move of applying Freudian concepts to the works of art (a practice present, as we know, already in Freud's own writing). In this well-known method, psychoanalytical concepts are used as a ready system of tools to be applied to the material analyzed in order to arrive at an interpretation. The meaning of the work is based on references to psychoanalytic theory and its assertions concerning psychic structures. Rancière, however, begins with specific works, with particular interpretations considered central for the operation of psychoanalytic concepts. In other words, the aim of his strategy is to determine how specific art works may influence psychoanalytic concepts:

I will...ask why the interpretation of these texts and works occupies such an important strategic position in Freud's demonstration of the pertinence of analytic concepts and forms of interpretation. I have in mind here not only the books or articles that Freud specifically devoted to writers or artists – to Leonardo da Vinci's biography, Michelangelo's *Moses*, or Jensen's *Gradiva* – but also the references to literary texts and characters that frequently support his demonstrations, such as the multiple references made in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to both the glories of the national literary tradition, such as Goethe's *Faust*, and contemporary works like Alphonse Daudet's *Sapho*.⁴

Rancière analyzes the efficacy of the figures of discourse and their ability to generate effects of signification and to influence the meaning of concepts. He thus assumes that artistic and literary forms remain in a direct relationship to the configurations of thought and to what is unthinkable:

These figures are not the *materials* upon which analytic interpretation proves its ability to interpret cultural formations. They are *testimony* to the existence of a particu-

³ I have referred to the essay discussed below in my analysis of the works by the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar. See: A. Leśniak, "Ukryte Obrazy Alfredo Jaara. Konfiguracja widzialnego," *Konteksty*, 2010, no 1(288).

⁴ J. Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, Polity, 2010, 1-2.

lar relation between thought and non-thought, a particular way that thought is present within sensible materiality, meaning within the insignificant, and an involuntary element within conscious thought.⁵

Rancière recognizes the value of work which constitutes artistic and literary figures, and thus opposing the tendency to treat them as objects of analysis that are simultaneously independent of any process of interpretation and reveal their value only through interpretation. In *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, a figure is defined as a visual or textual element that permanently transforms some way of thinking, reformulates a concept, changes or decides the meaning of a descriptive category.

The above way of defining a figure and the work of figuration has been present in the French humanities before Rancière. The motif holds a special place in the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard,⁶ who speaks of figures as units which disturb discourse. According to the thesis of *Discours, figure*, the experience of visual figures presupposes the co-presence of the receiver and the matter of the image. Reference to physicality and desire makes this experience indeterminate, unstable, and transforms the units of discourse meant to describe it. Rancière continues Lyotard's way of thinking in the psychoanalytic vein, which allows him to offer a vision of theory with a source (or one of the sources) in art and literature. At this point we return to the reversal proposed in *L'inconscient esthétique*, and to the emphasis on the necessity of close analysis:

[I]f it was possible for Freud to formulate the psychoanalytical theory of the unconscious, it was because an unconscious mode of thought had already been identified outside of the clinical domain as such, and the domain of works of art and literature can be defined as the privileged ground where this "unconscious" is at work.⁷

According to Rancière, visual and literary figures precede psychoanalysis, at least from the point of view of one who considers the mutual relation between the arts and analytical practice from a contemporary perspective. That is why all interpretations based on psychoanalytical categories considered to be unambiguous cease to be obvious; in the case of such interpretations it is impossible to take into consideration the work of figures which disrupt the operation of concepts. We cannot at this point engage in the analysis of specific examples of interpretations inspired by psychoanalysis, but it seems that Rancière's proposition encourages us to rethink the practice which until today has been defining our thinking about art and literature, from Freud's essays on Leonardo da Vinci's paintings and *Gradiva*, to the works of Hal Foster and, in the Polish context, Paweł Markowski or Luiza Nader. The question, however, does not concern the legitimacy of those analyses but, above all, the status of the applied concepts and the very possibility of their application.

How can one make use of the critical potential of the argument proposed in *L'inconscient esthétique* in the field of research on the representations of the Holocaust?

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ See: J-F Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, Klincksieck, Paris, 1971.

⁷ Rancière, *The Aesthetic Unconscious*, 4.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to develop an analogy between the field of psychoanalysis and the whole arena of problems related to the representation of the Shoah. What I have in mind is the hypothesis that specific works of art, material practices, and formal qualities of representation influence the operation of the basic concepts defining the thinking on the Holocaust. In other words, what is at stake is such experience of visual forms as would allow psychoanalytic work and also precede the possibility of posing ethical questions.

Representations of the Holocaust should be considered from the formal and aesthetic perspective. This statement, if rather uncomplicated, requires some explanation. To attend to the formal and the aesthetic does not mean to aestheticize the visual. Didi-Huberman himself posits a clear-cut difference between aesthetization and analysis when he mentions the retouching of photographs from the Auschwitz camp and the corrections of anatomical detail. The analysis of the formal aspects of the image, on the other hand, allows one to refer to its function, to determine how the image shapes the meaning of the represented event and how it may be possible to memorialize the past. If ethical questions concerning the adequacy of representations can be sensibly posed at all, it is only thanks to the prior analysis of the aesthetics of those representations, of how they have been formed.

A similar hypothesis may be posited in relation to *Respite*, a 2007 forty-minute film by Harun Farocki. The work is a montage of documentary materials on the everyday life of the Westerbork camp established in the Netherlands in 1939. Initially the camp had served the refugees from Nazi Germany. After the occupation it was transformed into a transitory camp for Jews who were later transported to Auschwitz. Materials used by Farocki are from 1944. They had been commissioned by the Nazi camp commandant. Farocki adds commentary to the silent sequences of archival materials which show the life of the camp. White strings of letters on black panels coming together as sentences or single words are used to divide the film into fragments, function as captions, and structure the whole film. The meaning of the work can be discerned only when one takes into consideration aspects of its formal structure. The strategies employed by the director, particularly the decision not to add sound to the silent documentary materials further emphasize the significance of the image's form. If we were to use Fred Camper's classification of films based on their relation to sound, *Respite* belongs to the category of "true" silent films, that is films which technically could have been produced or shown with a soundtrack, but remain silent by the decision of the director: "the 'true' silent film was made fully possible only by the invention of sound."⁸ Watching such a film creates a special state of concentration on the visual and isolation from the external world beyond the movie theater that produces a change in the viewer's behavior. Talk in the theater becomes rare because there is no music or dialogue to mask it. The absolute silence during the screening sharpens the attention of the viewers:

⁸ F. Camper, "Sound and Silence in Narrative and Nonnarrative Cinema," in: *Film Sound. Theory and Practice*, ed. F. Weis and J. Belton, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, 377. I would like to thank Prof. Iwona Sowińska for drawing my attention to this text.

Silent film has the potential...to place the viewer in a new state of isolation. Presented with images drained of the "life" that sound can impart, the viewer is thrust more deeply into a contemplation of their inner mysteries, and of his own state of being as well. The silence of such films is not merely the silence that comes from the absence of sound; it is a deeper silence, in which the noise of the external world has been stilled, in order to allow the contemplation of other sounds – as from the body, the nervous system, the mind, in a revelatory purity.⁹

Yet the quieting down of the viewer does not lead merely to self-absorption; Camper mentions "the inner secrets of images" or their formal qualities, the details which would not be noticed under different circumstances. They become more apparent (or more expressive, more painful) due to the silence during the screening.

Hal Foster describes Farocki's projects as "a genealogy of visual instrumentality."¹⁰ His works are political precisely because they use strictly visual film strategies to reveal the significance of the image as a political tool. Farocki allows us to confirm the thesis that images functioning in the public sphere are inevitably political. The point is not, however, following the popular understanding of engaged art, to search the visual sphere for the possibility of propagandist uses of art. The sources of the effectiveness of art lie in the interrelationship of the formal, the ethical and the political and that means, above all, that each analysis of the image has to account for its morphological characteristics.

The title "respite" (which means not only delay, but also an interval of rest, relief) which refers to the period before the Holocaust, can be represented only thanks to the respite inscribed in the film's structure. In this sense *Respite* is not merely a collection of archival fragments, not merely the result of the simple bringing to light of the tapes recorded in a transitory camp, but it is a complex whole that allows the creation of alternative historical narrations. Along the same lines, the interpretation of Farocki's work by Thomas Elsaesser points to a paradoxical epistemology of forgetting that provides an alternative not so much to the insufficiency of knowledge as to its excess:

Respite thus returns to the Westerbork past, not exactly its future (cruelly taken from so many thousands of human beings), but its lacunary present, creating out of Breslauer's images and Gemmecker's narrative a history with holes, so to speak – once more open, without being open-ended. In the claustrophobic world of Holocaust memory, he cuts the breathing room that re-invests the history of Westerbork with the degrees of contingency and necessity, of improbability and unintended consequences, that serve as a "counter-music" to the relentlessness of the destruction machine that the extracted footage of the transports has so vividly bequeathed to us.¹⁰

Respite is not "a film to watch" that would make possible some specific narration, but "a film which allows watching," that makes possible a variety of narrations and a variety of answers to the question about the meaning of the images of the Holocaust and about

⁹ Ibid., 380. Hal Foster, "Vision quest. The Cinema of Harun Farocki," *Artforum*, November 2004, 156.

¹⁰ T. Elsaesser, "Holocaust Memory as the Epistemology of Forgetting? Re-wind and Postponement in *Respite*" in: *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. A. Ehmman, K.Eshun, Koenig Books, London, 2009, 68.

their adequacy. The last problem deserves special attention for it brings us back to the question of the relation between the formal (or, in this particular case, the aesthetic, although thanks to Rancière's proposition those two terms define related phenomena) and the ethical.

The formal complexity of *Respite* is revealed on two basic levels: the function of the captions and the effects of montage. As the layer added by the director, the captions are the most obvious aspect of authorial intervention. In the opening fragments of the film, however, the text panels have a neutral, purely descriptive character. They offer information allowing us to situate in time and space both the represented places and people and the descriptions which allow us to identify individual figures. After the first three panels bearing the projected information: "silent film," the title of the film, and the name of the director, we watch the first image: the still panorama of the camp, the barracks seen from above, and a small group of people. Movement is not visible; the stilled frame performs the function of an introduction. After several seconds text appears: dry information about the camp. "In 1939, in the north of the country, the Dutch government created Westerbork, a camp for the Jewish refugees from Germany." The following panel contains another historical information: "In 1940 Germany attacked the Netherlands and begun its occupation. As in Germany, Jews were deprived of their rights and possessions. In 1942 the German SS became the camp's warden." Several images that follow show the inside of the barracks; text panels refer to the operation of the camp, to the way the prisoners are treated, to living conditions, and finally, to the circumstances under which the film material was produced. Here Farocki's film introduces the figure of Rudolf Breslauer who was commissioned by the commandant to make the film about Westbork; this figure will reappear in the film several times. A moment later we see the first moving image: a train entering the camp; there are third class carriages with Jewish families inside. The camp police forces maintain order on an improvised platform. In these early fragments the relation between the image and text, documentary material and Farocki's interventions seems unproblematic. Text performs the function of a caption under the photograph or film fragment or supplements the changing images. Directorial intervention is minimal and consists only of the selecting of documents and outlining the context. With time, however, the relation of the text to images changes. Captions become critical of what is represented on the visual level. At some point a panel appears on the screen asking "Do these recordings make reality more beautiful?" For the first time we experience a crack between the two layers of the film; a distance is introduced by the director toward the documentary material used. Obviously, the question relates not only to Farocki's work but also to the documentary materials he uses, his responsibility as an author, and the meaning of archival work. Only at this moment the question about adequacy and responsibility of representation can be posed, because we begin to be aware how the images we are watching operate. They cease to be obvious; they become problematic thanks to the complexity of the film, its formal qualities, the deepening mismatch between word and image the film introduces. The film's form provokes questions about the adequacy of representation. The viewer, accustomed to representations of the camps which fore-

ground the suffering of the prisoners doomed to a certain death, may be surprised or even disturbed by the materials shown by Farocki. At the beginning of the film we see neutral or even happy scenes, episodes from the life of the temporary community, work, numerous images meant to testify to the productivity of the camp, even play and sports games. All of those may be considered inappropriate, even if we are aware of the circumstances in which the film was made and of the fate of the author of these images and his protagonists.

Farocki goes beyond exposing the ambiguity of images. He employs the effects of montage; repetitions reproduce the act of establishing the identity of the characters and deepen the viewer's sense of the reality of history. The name of the camp commandant, Albert Konrad Gemmeker is repeated: he is identified twice in the film. We also repeatedly see the face of a Roma girl; it is the only close-up in the film, perhaps also the only image which captures the dread caused by, at the time unknown but sensed, fate of the prisoners. At another moment, Farocki decides to perform a subtle intervention into the documentary material, by enlarging a fragment of the frame to decipher the inscription on the suitcase of an elderly woman put on the departing transport. Based on the transport lists Farocki can unequivocally establish her identity. This short sequence of images stands out clearly against the rest of the film; the intense experience of reality created by the material transformation of a fragment of the archival document, thanks to the identification of the specific person, a future victim of the Auschwitz concentration camp, changes the way in which we perceive the film as a whole. Images acquire a different meaning; sequences which earlier may have seemed neutral or even joyful now seem to pre-figure the future fate of the characters.

What is more, several scenes in Farocki's film are legible allusions to the representations of the Holocaust. Bundles of used wire from Westerbork are simply recycled product, but we look at them through the prism of photographic and film images showing hair piled on heaps next to the Auschwitz gas chambers. All of these scenes influence our reading of the film: our initial perception of the film as pure documentary almost entirely free of the archival work mediation, disappears. *Respite* is a complex work, which in this case means not only that the formal construction of the film is not uniform, but also that the layers it is constructed of engage in critical relationships to one another. Farocki tests the operation of the image, juxtaposing it with the textual order and emphasizing the difference between the two. The textual layer, progressively more distanced toward the images as narration develops, to the point of almost denying their message, undermines our ability to read those images correctly. Archival materials presented at the beginning as the source of knowledge, as artifacts belonging to the historical context, raise more and more doubt. This fact, however, does not deny their epistemic efficacy. On the contrary, Farocki's film, combined with knowledge we have on the subject of concentration camps and the Holocaust, appears to be an analytical historical study describing the moment in life right before the Holocaust, the moment when the Holocaust is present as a presentiment and a forewarning. "Only knowledge of the event and the context of its recording allows us to restore to these images their hidden violence, to take the measure of what is not immediately represented, to see how these elderly people, these women and children

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are caught on the threshold of death.”¹¹ And yet, Sylvie Lindeperg’s commentary, even if it points to a certain possibility of interpretation, seems to miss something. *Respite* is not illegible; its interpretation does not depend entirely on the knowledge we possess prior to watching it. Images put together by Farocki, supplied with a commentary, create a knowledge of their own thanks to the juxtaposition of images and texts. What is more, confronted with commentary and critique, those images allow to pose questions of an ethical order concerning the adequacy and responsibility of representation, but also concerning the ways images are and may be used for political ends.

Translation: Krystyna Mazur

¹¹ S. Lindeperg, “Suspended Lives, Revenant Images. On Harun Farocki’s Film *Respite*,” in: *Harun Farocki. Against What?*, 29.