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Gauta 2005-12-20

THE OTHER PHILOSOPHY-POLITICS OF JACQUES DERRIDA: « L'AMOUR DES RUINES »

*Kitas Jacques'o Derrida filosofijoje ir politikoje:
„meilė griuvėsiams“*

SUMMARY

Memory in ruins is the “difference of the other” in the thought of Jacques Derrida.

The aim is to analyse and interpret Derrida's texts in their aesthetics, ethics and politics as Other philosophy of difference and social space. The issue to be examined is the presence of the non-presence, the non-presence of the presence. As Derrida wrote, “Memory stays with traces, in order to ‘preserve’ them, but traces of a past that has been never been present, traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence and always remain, as it were, to come.” This opens the problematics of experience-expectation, past-present, trace-ecart and Derrida's spectrology in his *Denkbild* of the spectres. Is this a non-place of the Benjaminian weak messianic power (*schwache messianische Kraft*), a political utopia or a philosophical, Socratic a-topos? To grapple with the indeterminacy, we enquire in to Derrida's quest between psyche and polis, law and justice, and forgiveness, life and death. Our investigation refers to the writings of Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, Julia Kristeva and the paintings of a contemporary Belgian artist, Luc Tuymans, whose theme is absence-presence of the memory of the Holocaust and of today's evil. We interpret Derrida's diagnosis of contemporaneity: “never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity.” Jacques Derrida's is an attempt at thinking a space of meeting, reflecting and sheltering otherness, e.g. in the idea of the cosmopolitan open city (*ville franche*) or refuge city (*ville refuge*) as his philosophy of difference and social space.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI. Derrida, Kitas, pėdsakas, kitybė, holokaustas, atmintis, priegloba.

KEY WORDS. Derrida, Other, trace, difference, Holocaust, memory, refuge.

SANTRAUKA

Atmintis griuvėsiuose yra „kito kitybė“ Jacques'o Derrida mintyje.

Straipsnio tiklas – analizuoti ir interpretuoti Derrida estetinius, etinius ir politinius tekstus kaip Kito filosofijos apraiškas. Analizuojamos buvimo-nebuvimo ir nebuvimo-buvimo problemos. Derrida rašo: „Atmintis pasilieka pėdsakų, kad juos 'išsaugotų', bet praeities pėdsakai, kurių niekada nebuvo, pėdsakai, kurie niekada neužima buvimo formos, bet visada išlieka, vadinas, kad ateitų“. Tai atveria patirties ir laukimo, praeities ir dabarties, pėdsako ir žingsnio problematiką bei Derrida šmėklamokslį, šmėklų *Denk-bild*. Argi tai ne benjaminiškojo silpnosios mesijinės galios (*schwache messianische Kraft*) vieta, ne politinė utopija arba filosofiškas, sokratiškasis *a-topos*? Kovodami su neapibrėžtumu, mes tiriamo Derrida ieškojimus, nusidriekusius tarp *psyche* ir *polis*, įstatymo ir teisingumo bei atlaidumo, tarp gyvenimo ir mirties. Mūsų tyrimas remiasi Franzo Kafkos, Walterio Benjamino, Giorgio Agambeno, Julios Kristevos raštais ir šiuolaikinio belgų menininko Luco Tuymanso tapiniais, kurių tema – Holokausto ir šiandienos blogio atminties buvimas-nebuvimas. Derrida pateiktą šių laikų diagnozę mes interpretuojame šitaip: „prievara, nelygybė, deportacijos ir badas per visą Žemės istoriją žmonių nepaveikė labiau negu ekonominis išnaudojimas“. Reflektuodamas ir puoselėdamas kitybę, Derrida siekia mąstyti susitikimo erdvę, reflektuojančią priglobiantį kitoniškumą, pavyzdžiui, kosmopolitinio atviro (*ville franche*) arba pabėgėlių miesto (*ville refuge*) idėjoje kaip jo kitybės filosofijoje ir socialinėje erdvėje.

How to represent a ghost? Is there a spectral representation? These are the key questions which Derrida raises in his book *Specters of Marx* and, as such, become central elements of the particularly rich legacy his oeuvre has endowed us with. How to behave in the presence of ghosts? How to look at this “Thing that is not a thing, this thing that is invisible between its apparitions, when it reappears”¹? How to see when we know that ‘we do not see who looks at us’²? Is there a form of representation that eludes the hubris that lies concealed in its own term – a representation that deconstructs its own promise to re-present, thus remaining conscious of the ways in which true presentation does not renounce the Other and inevitably refers to an absence?

A suggested answer – an answer that, since the question itself consists of a process of unfulfilled postponement, is

always yet to come, though never in a conclusive way – is depicted in Derrida's description of the ruin in his study *Force de loi*: “La ruine n'est pas une chose négative. D'abord, ce n'est évidemment pas une chose. On pourrait écrire ... un court traité de l'amour des ruines. Que peut-on aimer d'autre, d'ailleurs? On ne peut aimer un monument, une architecture, une institution comme telle que dans l'expérience elle-même précaire de sa fragilité: elle n'a pas toujours été là, elle ne sera pas toujours là, elle est finie. Et pour cela même on l'aime en mortel, à travers sa naissance et sa mort, à travers le fantôme ou la silhouette de sa ruine ... Comment aimer autrement que dans cette finitude? D'où viendrait autrement le droit d'aimer, voire l'amour du droit?”³

The ruin⁴ is what moves on the limits of presence and absence, re-presenting what inherently eludes representa-

tion and thus rendering presentation itself into its spectral form. It shows what can be learnt from Derrida's description of how to learn how to live, namely, that it is "something that remains to be done" and "can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone*. What happens between two, and between all the 'two's' one likes, such as between life and death, can only *maintain itself* with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghost."⁵ The ruin is what depicts the necessity "to learn spirits. Even and especially if this, the spectral, *is not*. Even and especially if this, which is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, *is never present as such*. The time of 'the learning to live,' a time without tutelary present, would amount to this, to which the exordium is leading us: to learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts."⁶ Or, to conclude this long list of quotes: this "short treatise of the love for ruins" could make us "live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. But *with* (the ghosts). No *being-with* the other, no *socius* without this *with* that makes *being-with* in general more enigmatic than ever for us.' In short, it would show us that "this being with spectres would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations."⁷

It is this intuition of a particular power of ruins, briefly explored by Derrida in *Force de loi*, that lies at the basis of this essay. For, what is it pre-

cisely that makes ruins so powerful? The suggestion at issue here is that the ruin is characterized by falling outside any narrative that would provide a complete explanation of its presence: it is the meaning-less that, for that reason, succeeds in eluding the determinateness of a historical time-frame. It draws attention to the stubbornness with which material reality refuses to adopt the totality of thoughts, meanings or memories that are conferred on it by humankind. Through this, it points relentlessly to the irreducible limits of each human way of understanding. Hence, if the ruin can be seen as measuring the distance between THE world and man, it is only to the extent that it reveals their incommensurability: the ruin is that part of the world that remains unmasterable by the human being. Its particular relevance stems from the distance between, on the one hand, a notion of "pure", unmediated and – in a way – non-expressive matter and, on the other, a concept in which reality *does* lend itself to meaning, significance and expression. The ruin is what constantly shifts between the "brute" form of reality and an 'expressive' one. Or, rather, precisely by presenting the gap between 'pure' reality and expressive reality, the ruin is capable of taking in the singular place in which both have become indistinguishable. It is therefore a *Denkbild* to reflect on the distance between – the terms are borrowed from the title of Henri Bergson's book, *Matter and Memory*. Ruins do not represent. On the contrary, their power is made

up OF nothing else than this inability to represent: as such, paradoxically, it is only the absence of a narrative that “makes them speak”.

The ruin is the presence-absence of memory: let us explore the ruins of the Topography of Terror site in Berlin. It is our view that the ruinous state in which this open-air exhibition is kept makes up the largest part of its significance. This depiction of the Topography of Terror site and the notion of a gap between an “expressionless” reality and a “meaningful” one will then serve as ways to approach the discussion of the (non-) representability of the atrocities of the Third Reich, keeping in mind the issue of the specific logic of the ruin that lies at the basis of this text. In this context, the ruin will, precisely because it shows reality in its ‘unmediated’ form – a revelation that doesn’t consist of anything other than a lack of revelation, be considered in its power to maintain the past *as past*, that is, in its “purity” that eludes the attempts of the present to fully understand it. What follows is a tentative suggestion about the stakes in this discussion. The argument that will be made here is that Derrida’s *Denkbild* of the ruin doesn’t only have a relevance for the discussion about memory and history but that it has a profoundly ethical and political significance for the present as well.

The Topography of Terror site is on unconcealed ruin of the war in the heart of Berlin. Stretched out along Niederkircherstrasse (former name Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse) are the remnants of the

buildings in which, from the mid-Thirties on, the Nazi regime organized some of its most important institutions: the Gestapo, the SS and the Reich Security Main Office. As such, the terrain bound by Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, Wilhelmstrasse and Anhalter Strasse was the location of not only an extraordinary concentration of power but also of one of the most dreaded centralisations of terror. To illustrate how it was in the unusual confinement of that one spot that some of the gravest atrocities of the Third Reich were both planned and executed, we quote extensively from one of the publications about this specific location: “it is justified to call the ‘Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain’ the actual administrative centre of the SS state. Here was Heinrich Himmler’s headquarters where he functioned in his capacity as Reichsführer-SS and Head of the German Police until his appointment as Reich Minister of the Interior in 1943. Here the ‘Special Units’ [*Einsatzgruppen*] of the Security Police and the SD (Security Service) were formed, and it was to this part of town that they sent their reports about the mass murders which they had carried out. Here the genocide on the German and European Jews was planned; here the organizational foundations were laid for the deportation and extermination; here the ‘Wannsee Conference’ was prepared. Here it was decided to segregate large numbers of Soviet Russian prisoners of war within the camps and to kill them. Here was the centre out of which the Gestapo conducted all its activities directed against

real and alleged opponents of the NS System. Here, based on accounts of informants, the SD compiled its 'Reports from within the Reich,' intended to provide the men in power with as reliable information as possible about the mood of the population. Here was the command centre for the system of Higher SS and Police Leaders, including also the occupied territories (...) Finally, concrete physical violence was practiced also at Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8 itself. In the Gestapo prison (*Hausgefängnis*) members of the opposition against the NS System – from the Communists and Social Democrats to the officers and public officials of July 20th (1944) whose interrogation was particularly important to the persecuting administrative agencies – were held in confinement for days, weeks, months, and some even for years. Many were brutally tortured during their interrogations, and some committed suicide while in prison. For these reasons Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8 was considered by the political opponents of National Socialism the 'most dreaded address' in Berlin."⁸

Today, the Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain has become the site of an open-air exhibition that, under the name of Topography of Terror, provides documentation about the history of the buildings and institutions that were located there under the Nazi regime. Because it was severely damaged during the war years and, afterwards, remained largely neglected until quite recently, the terrain contains at present little more than rubble and debris: the walls of the base-

ment and some of the foundations of the buildings are the only things that have survived and testify to the particular terror that they once witnessed. Visitors to the exhibition are invited to walk along the stretch of ruins and read the signs with illustrations and explanations that here and there have been attached to whatever small parts of the walls of the building still stand upright. The site seems haunted by the uncanny: it is as if, while looking at the tiny rooms where, some decades ago, innocent people were kept in prison and, while going through the basements where the Nazi officials tortured some of their political enemies, one grows aware of a certain incapacity to respond in an appropriate way to a place where so much terror has once been "so narrowly confined in one spot".⁹

It is through ruins that one is confronted with a past of evil. As goes the argument that has been repeated so many times that it has become an indispensable part of the discussion about the Third Reich, the atrocities of the Nazi regime do indeed lie beyond the limits of human imagination and understanding. The zeal with which it organized its deportations and mass-killings was not only historically new and had never before been imagined – never before had the process through which human beings were being exterminated achieved this level of systematisation – but it was *in essence* unimaginable. And, important to note, even if history has proven the possibility of such a level of atrocity to

occur in reality, it *remains* in essence unimaginable. In the first pages of his book on Auschwitz, philosopher Giorgio Agamben gives what is, in our opinion, one of the most eloquent elaborations of the argument that we can only think of the horror of the concentration camps in terms of the intrinsically incomprehensible: "Grâce à une série de recherches toujours plus amples et rigoureuses ... la question des circonstances historiques (matérielles, techniques, bureaucratiques, juridiques...) dans lesquelles fut mise en oeuvre l'extermination des juifs est suffisamment éclaircie. Des recherches ultérieures jetteront peut-être une lumière nouvelle sur tel aspect particulier, mais l'on peut désormais considérer le tableau d'ensemble comme acquis. On ne peut en dire autant de la signification éthique et politique de l'extermination, ni même de la compréhension humaine de l'événement – c'est-à-dire, en dernière analyse, de son actualité. Non seulement il nous manque ici quelque chose comme une tentative de compréhension globale, mais même le sens, les raisons du comportement des bourreaux, des victimes, et souvent jusqu'à leurs propos apparaissent toujours comme une énigme insondable, confortant dans leur opinion ceux qui voudraient qu'Auschwitz demeure à jamais incompréhensible. Du point de vue historique, nous savons par exemple, jusque dans le moindres détails, comment à Auschwitz d'accomplissait la phase finale de l'extermination, comment les déportés étaient conduits dans les

chambres à gaz par une équipe composée de leurs propres camarades (baptisée Sonderkommando), qui se chargeait ensuite d'en extraire les cadavres, de les laver, de récupérer les dents en or et les cheveux, pour les introduire enfin dans les fours crématoires. Et pourtant ces mêmes faits et gestes, que l'on peut décrire et ranger l'un derrière l'autre dans le temps, demeurent singulièrement opaques si l'on s'efforce de les comprendre vraiment."¹⁰ In the pages that follow, Agamben reflects on the causes of this irreducible incomprehensibility. In his view, the intrinsic impossibility to imagine the horror of the concentration camp has to do with a structural lack that characterizes all efforts to fully testify to it. For, whoever tries to testify to the degree of suffering that occurred in the concentration camps cannot but fall short since, however severe the atrocities that were suffered by the survivor, the mere fact of survival makes it impossible to *completely* testify to the specificity of its horror. According to Agamben, following an idea put forward by Primo Levi, the only form of complete testimony can come from the one person who has been deprived of his capacity to testify, i.e. the person who has not survived the concentration camp: "Il y a aussi une autre lacune, dans tout témoignage: les témoins, par définition, sont des survivants, et ils sont donc tous, d'une manière ou d'une autre, joui d'un privilège. [...] Le sort du détenu ordinaire, personne ne l'a raconté, parce que pour lui il n'était pas matériellement possible

de survivre."¹¹ "... nous, les survivants, ne sommes pas les vrais témoins. [...] Nous, les survivants, nous sommes une minorité non seulement exigüe, mais anormale : nous sommes ceux qui, grâce à la prévarication, l'habileté ou la chance, n'ont pas touché le fond."¹² As such, so called "complete" testimony becomes characterized by the paradox that it cannot escape its structural incompleteness; it cannot but come from the person who isn't any longer capable of testifying, that is, the person who has not survived the horror he or she has witnessed, just as the person who does testify, that is, the survivor, cannot but testify to someone he is not and to a horror he hasn't witnessed to its full and most dreadful extent: "le témoignage vaut ici essentiellement pour ce qui lui manque; il porte en son coeur cet « intémoinable » qui prive les rescapés de toute autorité. Les vrais « témoins », les « témoins intégraux », sont ceux qui n'ont pas témoigné, et n'auraient pu le faire. Ce sont ceux qui « ont touché le fond », les « musulmans », les engloutis. Les rescapés, pseudo-témoins, parlent à leur place, par délégation –témoignent d'une témoignage manquant."¹³

Hence, it is solely through the very lack of authenticity that seems to problematize every account of the horror of the Second World War (the irreducible non-existence of a « témoins intégral ») that they can attain some form of authority (the « pseudo-témoins » who speaks in his place and thus testifies to something he hasn't witnessed).

Yet it is only in the lines that immediately follow the passage that was just quoted that Agamben reveals what is essentially at stake in this paradoxical structure of a "testimony" that can only be complete by virtue of its non-completeness: "Mais parler de délégation n'a ici guère de sens: les engloutis n'ont rien à dire, aucune instruction ou mémoire à transmettre. Ils n'ont ni « histoire » (Levi), ni « visage », ni, à plus forte raison, « pensée ». Qui se charge de témoigner pour eux sait qu'il devra témoigner de l'impossibilité de témoigner."¹⁴ Thus, the fact that no account of the atrocities of the Second World War can overcome a structural lack doesn't only originate in the way in which the *subject* that expresses it cannot but remain absent but, even more importantly so, it follows from a particular stubbornness with which its *object* eludes every effort to become fully expressed. If these forms of testimony cannot escape a certain imperfectness, it is as much due to the events that are testified to than to the person who testifies, no less to the testified than to the testifier. The horror of the Second World War is deemed to be of such magnitude and dreadfulness that no human being can fully grasp it; its sheer reality, its pure having-been-present is perceived as so unimaginable that it eludes all our attempts to fully grasp it. One of the origins for its status as that what eludes the human faculty of imagination seems related to the way in which these efforts to re-present it, that is, our attempts to endow the atrocities of the Nazi regime with some sort of

“presence”, inevitably take place in the security of the spaces behind our desks or in front of our television sets and, for that reason, cannot but strip them of their essence of terror and dread. Hence, it is nothing less than an unbridgeable difference between the context in which the actual events occurred and the context of their representation that lies at the basis of the capacity of the expressed, the atrocities of the Third Reich, to defy its expression. Every attempt to distance ourselves from our present situation and decrease the gap that separates us from the people who experienced the actual horrors cannot but reveal the limits of our faculty of imagination and the unbreakable bond with which we are attached to the particularity of our own identities. As such, this inability to represent the horrors of Nazi Germany draws attention to a remarkable paradox that is profoundly disturbing but no less reassuring at the same time: to the exact extent that the actual moment when the atrocities took place made it absolutely impossible for the people involved to withdraw, to close themselves off and take some kind of distance, it has for everybody that was never part of that history and in all the moments that came after the atrocities, become impossible to bring them closer and, in one way or another, decrease the distance between past and present. It is as if the violence with which the reality of the horror must have made itself felt, as an absolute presence that didn't allow for any mediation or distancing at all, has transposed itself to an absence of that

reality that is no less absolute. No human effort can ever succeed in attaining the reality of a past that is forever absent; no imaginative movement can establish the *Aufhebung* of the absence of the past that would allow for the re-presentation of its reality: there is no dialectics possible between reality and imagination or understanding.¹⁵ What the discussion about the inability to adequately imagine the atrocities of the Third Reich thus illustrates is – a point that Agamben probably deemed too weak to even mention – that they do not only fall outside the “grand narratives” of modernity, but remain ungraspable for any narrative construction whatsoever. For, the particularity of the horrors of the Second World War did not merely consist of the quantity of suffering that was caused nor of the new, extremely systematized, way in which the Nazi regime organized its killings, but it is also due to the violence with which these horrors revealed the incompetence of the psychological, anthropological, philosophical and juridical categories that normally help us to find at least some slight form of understanding of the past and present misery in the world.

Beginning with the title of Primo Levi's book *Se questo è un uomo* (*Is this still a human being?*) Giorgio Agamben explores our task as human beings to look beyond the actual prisoners and determine how even the very concepts with which we would have thought to grasp what happened to those people have suffered from the atrocities that were committed in the concentration

camps. The camps forced us to reconsider the categories with which we used to think about phenomena like fear (some people in the camps reached the point where they became so isolated from their environment that they didn't even feel any fear at all), or human dignity (the camp prisoners didn't so much lose their dignity as the ability to even care about it). Even the core of our humanity, that is, our understanding of the notions of human life and death, has become an endangered concept. For, according to Agamben, in the very worst case (the "muselman"), people were reduced to what he calls non-human or "naked" life, a state in which life and death have become no longer distinguishable. For that reason, the "muselmänner" were not only deprived of their lives but also of what cannot but make up an intrinsic part of people's lives; their deaths. Moreover, the systematized way in which the killings were organized in the extermination camps did not only rob the victims of a personal death but even of the human ability and need to care about and anticipate the possibility of death. In the book he wrote about the (in)ability to represent the atrocities of the concentration camps, "Images malgré tout". Art historian George Didi-Huberman describes it as follows: "Cette expérience est au-delà de la peur. Au-delà de la mort en tant que représentation accessible. Elle atteint en l'homme l'étant même: elle en détruit même le temps."¹⁶ In a similar way, after 1945, the atrocities that were com-

mitted during the war years proved to be capable of seriously affecting our trust in juridical categories to clearly determine the guilt and responsibility of crimes; without in the least denying the necessity to pass judgement on who is responsible for the atrocities that happened during the war, Giorgio Agamben realizes the profound difficulties that come with it. Agamben acknowledges a structural inability to come to a final conclusion in the question of guilt by pointing to a realm that falls outside the categories of good and evil: «La découverte inouïe qu'a faite Primo Levi à Auschwitz concerne un matériau réfractaire à tout établissement d'une responsabilité; il réussit à isoler quelque chose comme un nouvel élément éthique. Levi le nomme la « zone grise ». En elle se déroule la « longue chaîne qui lie la victime aux bourreaux », l'opprimé y devient oppresseur, le bourreau y apparaît à son tour comme une victime. Alchimie incessante et grise, où le bien, le mal, et avec eux tous les métaux de l'éthique traditionnelle atteignent leur point de fusion. (...) Il s'agit donc d'une zone d'irresponsabilité et d'« impotentia judicandi », qui ne se situe plus par delà bien et mal, mais se tient, dirait-on, en deçà de l'un comme de l'autre.»¹⁷

The testimonies and analyses presented by authors such as Primo Levi or Giorgio Agamben demonstrate that our concepts fall short in constructing an all-explaining and homogenous narrative that would somehow provide complete understanding of the concentra-

tion camps. Faced with what happened there, our language cannot conceal its inaccuracy. In these experiences in which our categories discover their limits we are given front-row seats for the non-dialectics between reality and understanding; there is something about the very reality of the atrocities that stubbornly refuses to give way to meaning and significance. They are un-intelligible in the literal sense of the word. It is, however, absolutely crucial to raise the issue and particular relevance of this structural inability to understand and adequately represent the horrors of the Nazi regime against the background of these horrors themselves. For the capacity of the atrocities to defy their expression forms nothing less than an intrinsic part of their dreadfulness. In the words of Jean-Luc Godard, the forgetting of extermination is part of extermination.¹⁸ For this reason, the tendency of the horrors of the Third Reich to elude human representation and understanding has already been able to prove its particular danger as a weapon in the hands of the Nazis – a weapon that, as becomes clear from the following warning uttered by an SS soldier in Auschwitz, was even consciously put into use at the actual moment when these horrors took place: ‘Peut-être y aura-t-il des soupçons, des discussions, des recherches faites par les historiens, mais il n’y aura pas de certitudes parce que nous détruirons les preuves en vous détruisant. Et même s’il devait subsister quelques preuves, et si quelques-uns d’entre vous devaient survivre, les gens diront

que les faits que vous racontez sont trop monstrueux pour être crus.’¹⁹ Comparing these words with notes, written down by the prisoners on the same moments and in the same places, that say that “ce qui se passait exactement ... aucun être humain ne peut se le représenter”²⁰ makes one wonder if the only experience accessible to both sides of the exterminations, oppressor and oppressed, perpetrator and victim, consisted in nothing else than precisely this feeling that the atrocities in which they were involved intrinsically escape human understanding and representation.

It is for this reason that Georges Didi-Huberman radically defends the absolute necessity to continue our efforts of imagination and understanding, however in-imaginable or un-understandable these events might appear to be: “Que signifie cette troublante unanimité? Que le recours à l’image est inadéquat, lacunaire, toujours en défaut? Certes. Faut-il redire, alors, qu’Auschwitz est *inimaginable*? Certes non. Il faut même dire le contraire: il faut dire qu’Auschwitz *n’est qu’imaginable*, que nous sommes contraints à l’image et que, pour cela, nous devons en tenter une critique interne aux fins même de nous débrouiller avec cette contrainte, avec cette *lacunaire nécessité*.’ One could therefore say that Auschwitz may have destroyed the accuracy with which we expect to gain an understanding of past events and the possibility to adequately represent them, but never succeeded in affecting our need for understanding and the impulse for rep-

resentation. In his depiction of the so called “Rouleaux d’Auschwitz”, the four photographs that were secretly taken in Auschwitz by members of the *Sonderkommando* and could only survive because they were buried on the grounds of the camp, Didi-Huberman describes how in the face of the atrocities of the concentration camp the need to testify to that inhumanity had become the only possible way to remain human: “Maintenir l’image malgré tout: maintenir l’image du monde extérieur et, pour cela, arracher à l’enfer une activité de connaissance, une sorte de curiosité quand même. Exercer son observation, prendre des notes en secret ou tenter de mémoriser le maximum des choses. « Savoir et faire savoir est une manière de rester humain », écrit Tzvetan Todorov à propos des Rouleaux d’Auschwitz.”²¹ According to Didi-Huberman, the incredibly courageous efforts of camp prisoners to express what happened in the concentration camps originated in the fear that no proof or testimony of the horror would survive. In his opinion, this feeling was caused by the two reasons we have mentioned before: the idea that the true witness (Agamben and Levi’s “complete” witness) will never be able to testify because of the limited chances of survival and, secondly, the structural impossibility to testify to events that go beyond the realm of representation. “Ces écrits sont hantés par deux contraintes complémentaires. D’une part, l’inéluctable disparition du témoin lui-même: « Les SS nous répètent

souvent qu’ils ne laisseront pas survivre un seul témoin ». Mais, aussi, la crainte que le témoignage lui-même ne disparaisse, fût-il transmis à l’extérieur: ne risquait-il pas, en effet, d’être incompréhensible, jugé insensé, unimaginable? « Ce qui se passait exactement – comme le confiait Zalmen Lewenthal au bout de papier qu’il s’apprêtait à enfouir dans le sol, aucun être ne peut se le représenter. » C’est dans le pliure de ces deux impossibilités – disparition prochaine du témoin, irréprésentabilité certaine du témoignage – qu’a surgi l’image photographique.”²² Thus arises a remarkable paradox: the camp-prisoners realized that, although they cannot but be deficient vis-à-vis the reality they aim to represent, the particular significance of the images that were shot inside the concentration-camp of Auschwitz would consist in nothing less than their ability to allow the prisoners to remain part of that reality. Though the prisoners acknowledged that the images they were about to produce couldn’t but fall short as adequate representations of the reality, they knew that these images would somehow overcome their structural inadequacy and testify to the reality of the events that took place in the concentration camps. It is thus precisely through images that can never accurately represent reality – because that reality structurally lacks an image (“Ce qui se passait exactement ... aucun être ne peut se le représenter) – that the camp-prisoners succeeded in, as Didi-Huberman put it, maintaining the image of reality.²³

As such, despite the awareness of their structural lack in the mind of the people who made them, there is something in the nature of the Rouleaux d'Auschwitz that allows them to transcend their own limits and become a true means of expression. As a crucial part of the imagery that remains from the atrocities of the Third Reich they are '[im]possible, mais nécessaire, donc possible malgré tout (c'est-à-dire lacunaiement)'.²⁴ Though problematical in their very nature, images of the Holocaust and efforts to represent it are indeed extremely valuable; as Didi-Huberman writes in the first line of his book, 'pour savoir, il faut s'imaginer'.²⁵ It seems liable to say, however – as does Didi-Huberman himself – that, in these efforts of representation, *what* we see (that is, their content, the pure information that can be discovered in them, researched and inventoried) is less important than the brutality of the fact *that* these pictures originated in and testify to what is commonly regarded as one of the most horrifying places that ever existed. The particular power of expression of these pictures seems therefore more caused by their sheer presence than by what they aim to re-present. It is their status as (surviving) remnants of Auschwitz rather than their status as images that makes them so expressive²⁶. But, it is in the paradox that characterized the people in Auschwitz that were responsible for the four photographs that survived the concentration camp, being conscious of their structural inability to represent but no less con-

vinced of their power to testify to the reality of their suffering, that a shared horizon between the camp prisoners and the generations that come after them can be found – perhaps the only shared horizon that can allow us, who were fortunate enough to never be part of the atrocities, to decrease some of the distance with the people who did witness the reality of these atrocities, without forgetting our structural inability to adequately represent (and, hence, identify with) their suffering. If the awareness of the non-representable nature of horrors of the concentration camp could be seen as the only common factor between the guards and the prisoners, the experience that this non-representability doesn't in the least affect the *effort* to represent and understand can, on the other hand, become the element that links the people who suffered from the horrors with the people who try to memorialize them. Therefore, if forgetting about the atrocities of the Third Reich is nothing less than a continuation of them, it is a huge part of the responsibility of the generations that come after the Holocaust to seek ways to commemorate it, though never without an awareness of the profoundly problematical nature of these attempts. In this respect one can notice, as Didi-Huberman does, the danger of absolutizing the viewpoint of the non-representability of the horrors of the concentration camp: in some cases this attitude can lose its critical nature and turn into a particular type of historical laziness that, while claiming to pay heed to the

singularity of the Holocaust, doesn't sufficiently acknowledge it. For this reason, the question of how the inability to represent the Holocaust affects our own way of remembering it becomes extremely important. How can people who were never part of that history memorialize a past that cannot be entirely imaginable, though without in the least questioning the necessity to seek ways to understand or imagine them?

It is here that Derrida's *Denkbild* of the ruin becomes particularly relevant. For, just like the "Rouleaux d'Auschwitz" that managed to overcome the structural inability to testify to the horror in which they originated, ruins become expressive not so much through *what* they might possibly be considered to represent but through the sheer fact of their being there. In them, nothing can be met that transcends their pure presence. Hence, their relevancy consists precisely in their capacity to testify to a past that has lost the means to adequately testify – a past, however, that through this lack of adequate expression deserves to be remembered and, as such, has to find its place in the present. Thus, in their inability to represent, ruins do not in the least defy the non-dialectics of reality and representation but, on the contrary, make this radical impossibility to mould the facts of the past into a complete and conclusive understanding manifest by pointing toward exactly that part of reality that remains irreducibly *unaufgehoben*, that is, without signification. It is therefore not *despite* an inability to reach the

point in which they become adequate representations but rather *because* of it that ruins are endowed with a particular power of expression. As such, what the ruin testifies to is nothing less than its inability to testify: it allows a past that is absolute – that is, non-representable – to present itself. For this reason, the ruinous state in which the Topography of Terror site in Berlin is kept forms an irreducible part of its expressive abilities. Contrary to the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, where the visitor is given a tag with the name and information of a Holocaust victim, almost as if, through an act of identification, he or she is granted the means to look at the Holocaust through the eyes of an actual witness, the Topography of Terror site pays heed to the particularity with which the Nazi horror defies our efforts to re-present it at our own will. In this way, the Topography of Terror succeeds in including, in its efforts of representation, an expression of the limits of representation and as such attains the paradox of what Agamben calls a testimony that is only complete by virtue of its incompleteness: what becomes manifest through the presence of pure and meaningless matter is nothing less than a structural part of the horror the ruin testifies to, that is, the absence of any complete form of testimony. It is through the brute reality of its rubble and debris that the Topography of Terror site testifies to the Holocaust as something that cannot but contain 'a lacune ... dans tout témoignage'.²⁷ It is through its inadequacy as a

means of representation that it remembers the atrocities that happened there and, as such, through its imperfectness as a form of expression that it proves the power of ruins to illustrate that what cannot be adequately memorialized (what cannot but be inadequately memorialized) is therefore not automatically cast into oblivion.

“The interest which the materialist historian takes in the past is always, in part, a vital interest in its *being* past – in its having ceased to exist, its being essentially dead. To have certified this condition with respect to the whole is the indispensable prerequisite for any citation (any calling to life) of particular parts of this phenomenon of what-has-been. In a word: for the specific historical interest whose legitimacy it is up to the materialist historian to establish, it must be shown that one is dealing with an object which in its entirety, actually and irrevocably, ‘belongs to history.’”²⁸

In their exploration of forms of – more profound – memory that go beyond our conscious efforts to remember events (the so-called involuntary memory), authors such as Henri Bergson, Marcel Proust and Walter Benjamin already revealed that experiences in which the past makes *itself* felt cannot but go accompanied by a certain shock. What makes up the particular power of those moments of *self*-manifestation of the past is the way in which they reveal that it, on the one hand, remains independent of our attempts to re-present it at our own will but, on the other, that this gap

between our “voluntary” memory and the true past doesn’t in the least entail that the latter is devoid of means to become expressed. On the contrary, what is met with in these experiences of *self*-presentation is a past that is still, as Gilles Deleuze wrote, ‘pure’. The shock of the involuntary memory is a token that makes us acknowledge that what presents *itself* is a past that has escaped its contamination by the present: it is what lies beyond the coherent story through which we try to give stability to our identity and try to structure our history in a logical chain of events. When it reveals itself, the past seemingly comes from an outside that breaks apart the image we have of ourselves and the well-balanced whole of memories from before, perceptions of now and expectations for later through which we aim at a consistent perception of who we are. As such, in these involuntary memories the past shows that side of itself that remains ungraspable for the present and thereby proves that it defies the attempts of the present to re-evoke what is no longer here. It captures the inability of the human faculties of memory to attain an uncontaminated past at their own will (voluntary) by unveiling the inadequacy of the means through which the present seeks the re-actualisation of its history. Hence, the involuntary memory in which the “pure” past makes itself felt isn’t a re-collection: the moment of its *self*-presentation doesn’t contain a new narrative that seeks to homogenize our identities since it is, on the contrary, precisely what draws attention to our in-

ability to mould the dispersed whole of our experiences into a stable and well-structured identity. What the self-revelation of the 'pure' past makes manifest is that every narrative has an irreducible 'outside': to the extent that the act of constructing a narrative can and has to be considered as an effort of homogenisation, what these involuntary experiences bring to the surface is the distance that separates a past that has been kept intact (pure) and independent of the present from a past that has been modified to serve the identity we want to endow ourselves with. As such, experiences in which the past presents itself reveal in essence nothing less than the intrinsic difference between the past *as past* and the past as a *re-presentation*, that is, as something that is stripped of its pastness in order to better fit the present.

It is only against this background of the distance between a pure past and a past that has been modified by the present that Derrida's *Denkbild* of the ruin gains the most significance. For, only the process of maintaining destroyed buildings in their ruinous state allows the past to remain really past and doesn't force it to adapt itself to the needs of a present. As was illustrated in the above, by virtue of its ability to testify to what has, itself, lost the ability to testify, the ruin gains the capacity to express the past *as past* and presents it as that what cannot but undergo and essential change when it is taken as the object of re-presentation. But the ruin is more than a medium that allows the past to reveal itself beyond the (volun-

tary) efforts of representation. No less important than how the ruin affects our view on the past, namely, is the way in which it affects our perception of the present. Or, more specifically, what makes up the greatest part of the expressive powers of the ruin is its ability to show how the former cannot but have a serious impact on the latter: if it was already important to acknowledge that our perceptions of the past cannot be seen as unaffected by our perceptions of the present (hence the difference between the "pure" past and the past as a re-presentation) it is now no less essential (quite the opposite even) to draw attention to the ways in which our perceptions of the present do not in the least remain independent of how we read the past. Just like, according to writers such as Henri Bergson, Marcel Proust and Walter Benjamin, the experience of involuntary memory and the immediate self-expression of the past disrupted the consistency of our self-perception and the steadfastness of our belief that, through the efforts to capture our history in a well-structured and logical chain of events, we gain mastery over our identities – or, as Jacques Derrida would say, that we become entirely *contemporains à nous-mêmes*.

What the ruin affects most through its presentation of the pure past is our confidence in the present. For, what seems no less substantial to the power of ruins than their ability to reveal what falls outside every narrative is their ability to reveal that in *every* narrative something falls outside. It is only in this

sense that the ruin can, as was briefly stated in the introduction, go beyond the realm of the purely historical. Only in this way does the ruin prove its singular capacity to transcend both the context in which it originated and the one in which it still exists. As such, what it conveys will no longer merely reflect the specific moment in time that gave rise to the building it once was nor the particular circumstances that were responsible for the decay of the latter since, what is made visible in this moment of going beyond the merely historical, is nothing less than a (very brief and imperfect) glimpse on the realm of the a-historical.

In this respect, the Topography of Terror in Berlin can be seen as the concretisation of what, in first instance, might appear a little obscure and difficult to grasp but nevertheless forms an essential element of the expressive powers of the ruin. Particularly fascinating to the Topography of Terror is, namely, that it brings together two radically different but no less powerful symbols of Berlin's twofold impact on the history of the twentieth century. For, apart from testifying to the atrocities of the Third Reich by housing the remnants of the buildings in which, from the mid-thirties on, the Nazi regime organized itself, the Topography of Terror refers to the post-war era as well: its very terrain, stretching out along Niederkircherstrasse, is, on the north side, marked out by the longest part of the Berlin Wall still to stand upright. Here, on one and the same spot, that is, in one *topos*, Berlin

presents the two irreducibly different layers of its recent past. Here, the singularity of rubble and debris and their potential to incarnate what Anselm Kiefer referred to as a specific form of poetry ("the fact that you see both things at the same time (just like) Isaiah (who) sees the city and the different layers over it, the grass, and then another city, the grass and then another city again."²⁹) becomes tangible. It is in such a way that the ruin can be said to surpass the historical context of the buildings and constructions that it once was: the Topography of Terror site doesn't only express what is – and rightly so – considered to be un-expressible or, at least, never entirely expressible and re-presentable, but transcends this specific historical background of the Second World War by presenting a no less relevant remnant of Berlin's past in the very same location. It is crucial to note, however, that it is not the mere presence of two historical layers, both very visible in decay, and the way in which they are part of one and the same location but still remain at an irreducible distance from each other (*both* are visible at the same time, there is no perception of totality possible) that endow the Topography of Terror site, and ruins in general, with such powerful means of expression. The main argument we would like to hold is, namely, that through this co-presence of specific historical contexts and the moment in which they are thus surpassed it is nothing less than the realm of the historical as such that is being

transcended. Moreover, if the ruin goes beyond the historical itself and not merely beyond specific instances of history, it is through its capacity to express precisely that realm of the historical. For, if, in this context, the notion of the historical refers to that part of reality that cannot elude the process of time and hence denotes that side of the surrounding world that doesn't allow for any experience of transcendence towards the realm of an absolute and eternally valid, then, what makes it possible for, e.g. rubble, debris, worn down buildings and empty lots to surpass this realm is their capacity to express the historical *as historical*, that is, in its irreducible imperfectness. The ruin brings the temporal and finite nature of everything that belongs to history to the surface and thus makes manifest that if anything remains the same throughout history it is only the very transience of its phenomena. Therefore, when to the juxtaposition of different pieces of history is added the effect of their visibility as fragments of reality in decay, what becomes within reach for history is the one act that allows it to transcend itself; its self-expression as something merely historical. In this way, through the rubble and debris of the Topography of Terror site the historical periods of the Second World War and the post-war era in which Berlin was a divided city only transcend themselves to the extent that they become visible in their inability to maintain themselves. What is expressed in the remains of the buildings that

were once located in the Niederkircherstrasse and in the piece of the Berlin Wall that stretches out along it is their very historicity and the way in which the mere fact that those constructions were made by human hands has rendered them mortal and imperfect.

Hence, the argument that the Topography of Terror has gained such expressive abilities *because* it is kept in its ruinous state and not *despite* it does not merely originate in the specificity of its past as one of the organisational centres of the Third Reich and the way in which it bears witness to what cannot be adequately represented; as a ruin, it expresses the finitude of the historical realm as such. The Topography of Terror site does not only testify to what happened there during the war years, nor to the events of the post-war era but, through the juxtaposition of the ruins of the buildings of the Nazi regime and the remainder of the Berlin Wall, to the limits of *every* human effort to give shape to a narrative, or for that matter a political regime, that would succeed in overcoming its imperfection and lack of eternal validity. If, earlier, it was suggested that the ruin expresses the fact that *every* narrative cannot but have an outside, what was meant was precisely this effect of time to forfeit human claims on a-historical truth and jurisdiction that, in particular, are tokens of totalitarianism but, all too often, seem characteristic of human projects as such. What, in the presence of ruins, strikes the eye is decay in its least adorned form; it is their very lack of life

and significance that makes ruins so powerful. As such, it is not so much the juxtaposition between different historical layers that is responsible for the particular poetry of the ruin than a clash between the historical and the a-historical, in which it becomes clear how the former cannot but obstruct the view on the latter that, as such, is bound to remain inaccessible. If *both* historical layers are visible at the same time, it is only because they are both visible at the *same* time, that is, against the very same background of essential imperfectness and finitude. The historical may, in the ruin, be continuously transcended, but not at all in dialectical way: the imperfectness of the historical realm stands in the way of every process of *Aufhebung* that, ultimately, would bring the a-historical within reach. The ruin only transcends the historical by making visible the irreducible lack of transcendence that seems to characterize that realm. Thus, it illustrates a perception of what really surpasses the historical that cannot but be brief and imperfect, as if the a-historical seeks its expression in a medium that remains at all time alien to it.

As a token of the meaning-less, drawing attention to the limits of every human effort of understanding, the ruin goes beyond its status as a witness of the (pure) past and becomes able to testify to the finitude of the present. It is therefore only in this moment when the ruin points to the outside of *every* narrative that it transcends its status as a site of memory and its ability to remember the past *as past* (as opposed to

a re-presentation of the past) and attains a profoundly political and ethical significance. For, by expressing what in essence cannot be adequately expressed (or rather, by expressing that it belongs to the essence of the historical that its narratives cannot adequately express everything), the ruin inspires to modesty: it confronts us with the inherent danger of every human project that oversteps its limits by aiming for all-explanatory answers to our questions and conclusive solutions to our problems. By revealing the finitude of human ambitions, that is, the historicity of history and, by that token, the non-attainability of the a-historical, the ruin can deepen our perception of the present. For this the Topography of Terror can, again, serve as an illustration. Though the remains of the buildings are deliberately kept in their present state and though there are, to our knowledge, no plans to redesign the location completely, the bad shape the terrain is in is not at all the effect of a conscious decision. An explanation sheet at the entrance of the open-air exhibition warns the visitor that, due to the lack of sufficient means to better maintain the site, to make it more accessible and, one is inclined to say, to turn it into a "proper" memorial site, a visit to the terrain is on one's own responsibility. As such, in its form as a ruin, the Topography of Terror adds to the layers of the past, a layer of the present. Left behind by capitalism, in the shadows of the buildings that line Potsdamer Platz, it encapsulates an inability to take care of the past and de-

iciency to pay heed to history. By presenting what stubbornly refuses to give way to the continuous efforts for renewal and deterritorialisation that lie at the heart of neo-capitalism and thus maintaining the past in a world that seeks to live as close to the future as possible, the Topography of Terror site highlights the outside of the narrative that rules our society – a narrative, therefore, so grand that it doesn't only expand in space but also in time, no less globalising the past of which we are the product than the planet on which we live our present. Hence, its rubble and debris aren't merely manifestations of the past as past but have become illustrations of the capacity of the past to reveal the blind spots of the present. The true power of ruins therefore arises from a constellation of past and present: through the expression of the temporality of everything that belongs to history, they surpass this initial awareness of fragility and testify to a past that, unlike the present, does not lack the ability to maintain itself but, as such, can even reveal itself in its pure form. The unadorned decay of what was once present thus becomes the medium of expression of the indestructibility of the past and, by this token, a means to expose our own present in its finitude.

Perhaps, it is *ex negativo* that the importance and ethical significance of the ruin becomes most clear. For, if the ruin is able to illustrate that a past that is not "adequately" memorialized is not automatically prone to oblivion – on the contrary –, the other extreme of the spectrum, where the commemoration of

certain events from the past can be interpreted as little more than an attempt to forget them, is no less relevant to this discussion. This second attitude, in fact, can often be discovered in discussions about monuments for events that took place relatively recently and, for that reason, very much affect the politics of the present. In this respect, whereas the necessity to commemorate the Shoah cannot itself be questioned, the various needs that go under that name can. As such, the Germans who pleaded for the Holocaust Memorial that was built in Berlin were, for instance, often accused of caring more about ways to resolve their own past than about the demands of the Jewish community, just like the actual monument is sometimes seen as an expression of the German desire to move forward, rather than as a medium to commemorate the past. In this context, Jane Kramer's article "The Politics of Memory" deals with the attempts of the present generation in Germany to see the German population, no less than the rest of the world, as victims of the Nazi regime. While some people understand the Second World War as an inevitable consequence of the First World War, almost as if "it were History, and not Germans, that set the country on its *Sonderweg* to Fascism",³⁰ the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin runs, according to Kramer's article, the risk to be used as a *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, that is, as the management of its past that, once and for all, allows Germany to move into the future without the burden of a guilty conscience.³¹ In a way, and seeing the Holocaust memorial against the

background of a country that fifty years after the Second World War rereads its history and creates its own coherent and well-structured narrative about the past, this discussion illustrates how strangely commensurate the distance between memory and politics appears to be with the gap that separates, in the ruin, the “pure” and *unaufgehoben* past from the way one, in hindsight, wants to re-present it. For, when a memory site is all too contaminated by certain political interests, it has to be considered as the outcome of the desires of the present rather than as a commemoration of the past. This became strikingly clear from the words of one of the initiators of the Holocaust Memorial, Lea Rosh, that [it’s] the successors of the perpetrators who are building this memorial, not the Jews³². If ruins are replaced by an overabundance of newly constructed and beautifully designed memorial sites and thus disappear as the singular way to measure the gap between the “pure” past and the present, memory and politics are bound to become indistinguishable. When a monument becomes visible as nothing but the result of an effort to capture the past in a coherent narrative and logical chain of events, it is emptied of its expressive abilities. While seeking ways to modify the past in such a way that it serves the desires of the present, commemoration forsakes its ability to maintain the past in its pure form and is drained of the capacity to draw attention to the finitude of the present and the irreducible outside of every narrative. Political manipulations of memory

are more widespread than ever and contaminate fragile efforts of commemoration.

The ruin of writing is the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. By Derrida’s anagram, trace is *écart*. Trace, mark, sign, trail is – at one and the very same time – gap, gape, swerve, movement apart. They are remains, cues, hints, vestiges, “traces of traces.” Ruins.

Horror is unsensed and sensed in the ruins. Horror is unthought and thought in the ruins. Horror is unwritten and written in the ruins. In the ruins of (their, your, his, our?) writing. Why do we write? Why do we continue the absurd and, more often than not, abject act of writing? Writing is between the ghosts of writer-reader and back again.³³ Writing is mourning, mourning others and oneself. Mourning and celebrating life.³⁴

The book constitutes a memorial,³⁵ writes the traces of otherness. The loss, grieving or lack of it and emptiness are there in the text’s sounds, silences and their senses. The ruined Temple, ruined garden, museum ruins,³⁶ ruined book. Ruined memory.³⁷

The ruin of art is the painting of Luc Tuymans. We see his art as a depiction of reality stripped of memory. Blurring the lines between self and other. The reality he paints is the same as ours, the gas chambers become almost intimate. They are stripped of the immediate recognizability that would allow us to put them at a distance and thus make the presence of the other felt. Here are Tuymans’ paintings-unpaintings: the artist himself explores – visually and

textually – fading. He conceals-reveals the evil of history and of the here and now.³⁸ Tuymans' art is the trace that is an *écart*, a trace that is invisible and therefore all the more haunting. Compare Benjamin on Atget's photography (ordinary streets turn the site of crime) and Tuymans (sites of crime turn banal). The other is becoming unrecognizable, inseparable though distinct in a Deleuzian way from the self.

The end of the official tour of Majdanek-Konzentrationslager Lublin: a crematorium with ovens and with a single dissecting table. The memory chokes us. We look at Luc Tuymans's watercolour *Altar*: spectral, far, close, fading, looming, choking. Next to the table at Majdanek stands a bathtub, a tin tub for the overseer of this place. Next to the *Altar* watercolour, the Tuymans book has *soap*. Soap: the produce of extermination.

The Shoah calls for continuous efforts of commemoration. But it is the past itself, and not merely certain events from it, that eludes all attempts to become adequately memorialized; it changes in essence when it is taken as the object of a re-presentation. The ruin, however, reveals the past as past and, for that reason, has the power to express the finitude of everything that belongs to history and contemporaneity.

Painter Anselm Kiefer: "Rubble is the future. Because everything that is, passes. There is a wonderful chapter in Isaiah that says: 'Grass will grow over your cities. This sentence has always fascinated me, even as a child. This poetry, the fact that you see both things

at the same time. Isaiah sees the city and the different layers over it, the grass, and then another city, the grass and then another city again."

Today lush grass covers the former death camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek. Shooting her Auschwitz film *The Last Stage* (1948), Wanda Jakubowska ordered the extras to stamp the ground in order to produce mud and "recreate" the camp where she had been an inmate.

"They had condemned us to die in our own filth, to drown in mud, in our own excrement,"³⁹ recalled Auschwitz inmate Pelagia Lewinska. To disappear in the banality of evil,⁴⁰ abject, desublimation, unmemory. Author of Washington's Vietnam Memorial, Maya Lin, says: "I thought about what death is, what a loss is ... a sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on the site. Take a knife and cut open the earth, and with time the grass would heal it. As if you had cut open the rock and polished it."

But grass does not heal.⁴¹ Philosophy does not heal. Mourning does not heal. Have we – at least – mourned? Words elude us: sufferings, horror, the real, abject, evil ... Suspension points. How to attempt to speak the Shoah? Holocaust survivor, writer Hanna Krall inscribes suspension points to attempt to speak the evil of the Shoah. Holocaust survivor, writer Lisa Appignanesi inscribes the experience of "losing the dead" to attempt to speak the Shoah and the post-Shoah void. The unspeaking and unspeakable emptiness.

Horror, the real, evil unsayable and unsaid. To attempt to speak the unspeakable Derrida developed the idea of transgenerational haunting in the psychoanalysis of Maria Torok and Nicolas Abraham. Derrida investigated Gothic memory. Fredric Jameson was doubly wrong: memory turned out the heart of postmodern politics;⁴² the Gothic turned out the heart of postmodern poetics.⁴³ Spectral psychoanalysis is a Gothic non-narrative of memory, which Jacques Derrida cultivated. The Gothic provided Derrida not only with its trappings, but with its *Denkbilder* of the spectre, revenant, phantom. Derrida wrote the traces of traces, gaps, memory lacunae, ruins. The ruins are deconstruction: outside of the proper, selfsame, one's own and clean.

By maintaining traces-gaps, the ruin bears witness to the fragility of the present and draws attention to the way in which every narrative cannot but have an outside. The ruin problematizes all historical claims to validity. In its ability to testify not only to the irreducible outside *to* every narrative but also to the irreducible outside *of* every narrative, the *Denkbild* of the ruin is a critique of the politicisation of memory and its efforts to modify the past in such a way that it serves the present. By encapsulating, epitomising or rather embodying what cannot be adequately

remembered is therefore not immediately forgotten, the ruins counter politicised memorial sites that seek ways to remember the past in order to forget it. Powers that be espouse jingoism to expand, appropriate *arché*, archives and architecture, possess remembering and forgetting. Ruination awaits them. And yet, nowadays, we live with the spectre of totalitarianism, writes philosopher Richard J. Bernstein.⁴⁴ If history is written by the winners, it is always in the blood of the victims.

After death camps: ruins, grass, blood. Sites of memory – grass-grown nor muddy – do not heal the wound. The blood is here – today, too ... Omnipresent and *gestaltlos*, spectral police violence, predicted by Benjamin ... The contemporary human condition modelled on the concentration camp, diagnosed by Agamben ... Let us remember Jacques Derrida's diagnosis of contemporaneity in his book *Specters of Marx*: "Never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity." Derrida's is an attempt at constructing a space of meeting, thinking and sheltering otherness in the idea of the cosmopolitan open city (*ville franche*) or refuge city (*ville refuge*)⁴⁵ as his philosophy of difference and social space. Cities in ruins?

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Literature

- ¹ Derrida, J. *Specters of Marx*, Peggy Kamuf [trans] (New York, London: Routledge, 1994), p. 6.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ³ Derrida, J. *Force de loi* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 105.
- ⁴ On account of both its topic, the Denkbild of the ruin, and how this topic is interpreted, that is, as a witness to the fragility of all human forms of knowledge, this text is heavily indebted to the work of Walter Benjamin.
- ⁵ Derrida, J. *Specters of Marx*, p. xviii.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xviii-xix.
- ⁸ *Topography of Terror. Gestapo, SS and Reichssicherheitshauptamt on the "Prinz-Albrecht-Terrain"*. A Documentation, Rürup, R. [ed], Werner T. Angress [trans] (Berlin: Verlag Willmuth Arenhövel, 1989), p. 7–8.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ¹⁰ Agamben, G. *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, Pierre Alferi [trans] (Paris: Editions Payot & Rivages, 1999), p. 9–10.
- ¹¹ Wiesel, quoted by Agamben, *ibid.*, p. 40.
- ¹² Levi, quoted by Agamben, *ibid.*, p. 40–41.
- ¹³ Agamben, G. *ibid.*, p. 41–42.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ¹⁵ In a way, the stakes of this discussion about the representation of the horrors of Nazism stretch out to the philosophical topic of an essential difference between reality and the image of reality. It can be interpreted as the most powerful illustration of an inherent lack that lies at the roots of every effort of representation. For, reality *as such* can be seen as defying all efforts of representation; the unexpectedness with which events occur in reality or the possibility to be discovered as something unanticipated that lies enclosed in the reality of a phenomenon make up an *essential* difference with

the structure of an image and are therefore intrinsically non-representable (for an account of similar arguments, cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imaginaire*). As such, imagination doesn't ever succeed in really re-presenting its object; it is never able to strip it from its absence. As will become relevant later on, if the horrors of Nazism are not different from any other event in so far that the impossibility to be represented is characteristic for reality as such, what does set the topic of the representation of the atrocities of the Third Reich apart from the representation of reality in general, is the necessity, for the former, to testify to this structural lack of representation.

- ¹⁶ Didi-Huberman, G. *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2003), p. 59.
- ¹⁷ Agamben, G. *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, p. 23-24.
- ¹⁸ Godard, J.-L. quoted in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, p. 34.
- ¹⁹ SS soldier quoted (by Simon Wiesenthal) in *ibid.*, p. 30.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ²⁶ In this way, one can also point to the similarity between how the "Rouleaux d'Auschwitz" testify to what happened in Auschwitz and how the objects that are, at present, shown in the permanent exhibition that is housed in the buildings of the camp in Auschwitz do so; just like human hair (together with nails, one of those parts of our body that, even before physical death, lack the ability both to perceive and to express) the "Rouleaux d'Auschwitz" can, to a certain degree, be seen as devoid of representational power. It is, however, pre-

- cisely through this problematization that both become very powerful forms of expression. Paradoxically, what is lifeless during our actual lifetimes has the strongest chances of survival and thus seems entitled to the longest afterlife.
- ²⁷ Agamben, G. *Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz*, p. 40.
- ²⁸ Benjamin, W. *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, London; Harvard University Press, 1999) H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin [trans.], p. 363
- ²⁹ Anselm Kiefer, quote depicted on the wall of the central exhibition hall of the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2005.
- ³⁰ Jane Kramer, "The Politics of Memory," *New Yorker*, Aug. 14, 1995, p. 58.
- ³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 62: "There is a word in German one of those long compound words that Germans put together to extend a concept. The word is *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and it means 'management of past' but always in the sense of mastering the past, even of manipulating the past."
- ³² Lea Rosh, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 60.
- ³³ Cf. psychoanalyst André Green regards writing as "site of a trans-narcissistic communication where the author's and reader's doubles – ghosts which never reveal themselves – communicate"; André Green, *On Private Madness*, (London: Maresfield Library, Karnac, 1997), p. 322.
- ³⁴ Celebrating life in Jacques Derrida's humour calls for research. In his discussion of, mainly, Fackenheim and, marginally, Derrida, Zachary Braiterman notes, "How does one trace the movement from catastrophic suffering into joy and vigor? What does it mean to enjoy life when others still suffer? 'To life, to life, *l'hayim*' becomes doubly grotesque after Auschwitz. And yet, the rabbis (e.g. in tractate Moed Katan of the Talmud) had the good sense to warn against excessive mourning. Zachary Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz. Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1998), pp. 158-159.
- ³⁵ Hence the importance of memorial books in the Jewish tradition.
- ³⁶ Cf. the art-historical work on the ruins of Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster and Alex Coles.
- ³⁷ See the telling title: Langer, L. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).
- ³⁸ Like Derrida, Tuymans is suspicious of nationalism: "I have tried to rebel against a certain identity which is pretty strong in my country, this Flemish idea of a mystical, fixed identity." And the country of another author, Poland, still neglects the memory of the Shoah and rejects mourning. Instead, there are manic, ideological uses of selected vainglorious moments in chauvinist history.
- ³⁹ Post-Holocaust theologian Emil L. Fackenheim cites Pelagia Lewinska in his study *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought*, (New York: Schocken, 1982), p. 25.
- ⁴⁰ Cf. the simile of Auschwitz to *Anus Mundi* and excremental imagery in the short stories of camp inmate Tadeusz Borowski. In *La Douleur* Marguerite Duras recalls the spectre of excrement when Robert returns from Dachau; similarly, Holocaust scholar Terrence Des Pres diagnoses "excremental assault." If the ruins of the Topography of Terror were literally dug, excavated, is that why they attempt to speak the unspeakable?
- ⁴¹ Psychoanalyst Pierre Fédida develops Freud's reflection on mourning: the relic is immersed in anality so as to hinder the "representation of one's death to oneself." Do we grow grass at former death camps to avoid the narrative of our own death? Or is grass necrophiliac fetishism here? (cf. Erich Fromm and his *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*).
- ⁴² "[M]emory has been weakened in our time," wrote Fredric Jameson in his *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991) p. 364.
- ⁴³ The Gothic as "that boring and exhausted paradigm"; *ibid.*, p. 289.
- ⁴⁴ Richard J. Bernstein, 'Did Hannah Arendt Change Her Mind?: From Radical Evil to the Banality of Evil,' in *Hannah Arendt Twenty Years Later*, Larry May and Jerome Kohn [eds] (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 144.
- ⁴⁵ Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney define *villes franches* or *villes refuges* as spaces where "migrants may seek sanctuary from the pressures of persecution, intimidation, and exile." Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney, 'Preface,' in Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) p. ix.