The Image in Evil:
Representation and Testimony

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The summer of 1944 saw the most swift annihilation of Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau, On a day in August, a member of the *Sonderkommando,* the group of prisoners entrusted with the unthinkably grisly task of filing their fellow inmates into the gas chambers, and then taking their lifeless bodies out again and "disposing" of them through burning in ovens or open pits, took four photographs of the "special unit's" activities. It is not easy to discern what is depicted in the images. In the first two, the naked bodies of the recently gassed lay in a heap, surrounded by *Sonderkommando* members, and partially obscured by the smoke that rises from the burning pit behind them. The images are framed in black and are slightly out of focus, yet they are considerably more readable than the other two images, which mostly show the black trunks of trees. Just visible in the bottom right hand corner of one are a group of naked women who are ostensibly preparing for a shower, yet we know that this is a deception.

These are images created under the most extreme of circumstances. The prisoner who took the images, who has been identified as "Alex" by a member of the unit who managed to survive, took the utmost risk in taking the pictures. After all, the Nazis did everything they could to conceal the terrible crime they were committing from the outside world. Photography was strictly forbidden in the camps, and they made sure that the *Sonderkommando* themselves would never tell of the grisly procedures they facilitated by isolating them from any contact with those who did not already know what was happening, including many member of the SS themselves, and by periodically liquidating the unit and replacing them. That Alex managed to snatch images of this hell and pass them along to the Polish Resistance in Krakow (hidden in a tube of toothpaste) is really quite astounding. It is, in my mind, a very significant act of resistance, of assertion of the necessity of telling and indeed showing the world, as precisely as possible I think given the circumstances, just what horrors were taking place.

It is because of the uniqueness of the situation in which these images were composed that they deserve close attention. The French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman wrote an essay about the images in the catalogue for the exhibition *Mémoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazis (1939–1999)*, 2001, which he expanded into the book *Images malgré tout* in 2003. In the images he identifies a glimmer of *imaginability* of the Holocaust, where there is often claimed to be none; not in a complete sense, suggesting that because there are images all is understood, but in the same sense in which it is just barely *sayable* as well in the testimony of survivors. "The 'truth' of Auschwitz," he writes, "if there is such a thing, is neither more nor less *inimaginable* than it is

unsayable."[1] Didi-Huberman's essay sparked a polemic in which he was accused of fetishising the images and of trying to attribute to them more "knowledge" than is appropriate. I do not wish to adopt Didi-Huberman's position wholesale, though I do value his willingness to face these images head-on.

For I do not feel equipped, as perhaps Didi-Huberman did, to analyze the "truth value" of these images, whether they are "accurate" enough in their content to constitute genuine and incontrovertible proof of the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Instead I would like to look at them closely and think about what they say about the conditions of their production. The images bear an important relationship to the particular evil that characterised the Holocaust. They cannot be said to represent evil itself; rather they represent what happens when one tries to produce an image in the face of evil, or more precisely, *within* it. Every aspect of the images bears witness to the evil that surrounded their production, and the evil appears precisely in the *obliqueness* of their imagery, in their furtiveness, or, in their "surprised" character[2].

I do not wish to stop here, however. I will argue that it is precisely the imperfection and incompleteness of the images that divulges their position within the economy of evil that surrounded their maker. This places the images and their photographer in the place of witness, and though they do not represent incontrovertible "truth" and "accuracy," they do represent an important act of *testimony*, which, Agamben argues, is necessarily partial in and after Auschwitz. As a counterpoint, and to underline the Auschwitz images' value as testimony, I will discuss these images in relation to another set of images, which is much more abundant: the images of lynchings against African Americans and other minority groups in America in the latter half of the 19th and first half of the 20th century. These images, which were created not to testify but to boast, are startling in their *completeness,* and as such, they do not represent testimony. Their relationship to the economy of evil of which they are also a part is starkly opposed to that of the *Sonderkommando* photographs, and they bring the partial quality of the latter into high relief.

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1 "La « vérité » d'Auschwitz, si cette expression a un sens, n'est ni plus ni moins *inimaginable* qu'elle n'est indicible." This and all translations that follow are my own. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout.* Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2003, 39.

2 I am referring here to Jean-Luc Nancy's argument in his essay "Forbidden Images" about representation in Auschwitz being "forbidden" in the sense of the French word *interdit*, which also means "surprised," "taken aback," or "suspended." I will discuss this in more detail later. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Forbidden Images," in *The Ground of the Image,* trans. Jeff Ford, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, 34.

Fig. 1. Anonymous member of *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz, Cremation of gassed corpses in open-air cremation pits in front of the gas chamber of crematorium V at Auschwitz, August, 1944. Oswiecim, State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

First, a look at the four images from Auschwitz. In the first two images (figs. 1 and 2) naked bodies lay on the ground with people walking among them. The bodies are the recently dead victims of the gas chambers, and members of the *Sonderkommando* walk among them, preparing them for incineration in the pits behind from which the smoke rises. Beyond the pits are barbed wire fences and dense forests concealing the activities from view from outside. The images are slightly fuzzy and their details difficult to discern, but we can gain a general sense of the scene, especially given our knowledge of Nazi extermination procedures from survivor accounts and otherwise. The scene is framed in black by a doorway: the photographer is standing inside one of the gas chambers to conceal himself from the SS. That the structure is indeed a gas chamber is confirmed by the

testimony of David Szmeuwleski who aided Alex in his mission, and survived the camp to tell about it.[3] Didi-Huberman suggests that the second image is taken from slightly nearer and is better focused, "as though the fear had disappeared for an instant before the necessity of this task, to snatch an image."[4] However, the correct order in which the images were taken is disputed. The edge of the image that Didi-Huberman identifies as "first" (fig. 2) bears along its right-hand edge a sliver of the next image on the roll. In it we can see the tree trunk that appears on the left-hand edge of the third image (fig. 3). This suggests the order in which I have presented the images here, the significance of which I will discuss later.[5]

[3] Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and operation of the gas chambers,* New York: The Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989, 424.
[4] "Comme si la peur avait un instant disparu devant la nécessité de ce travail, arracher un image." Ibid., 22.
[5] The edge of the image on fig. 2 was identified by Clément Chéroux, and is discussed in his article "Photographies de la Résistance polonaise à Auschwitz," in *Mémoire des camps. Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazis (1933–1999),* Paris: Marval, 2001.

Fig. 2. As above, Oswiecim, State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The second two images are even more difficult to discern, and are not framed nor focused at all. Szmeuleski testified that these were taken while Alex was out in the open, walking around the other side of the gas chamber structure and away from it among the trees, the camera hidden in his right hand.[6] Before a group of woman undressing to take a "shower," he was able to take two more pictures, but without being able to take the camera up to his eye to frame it properly, and instead taking the picture with his right arm pressed against his side and the camera in his palm.[7] We can just barely make out the naked women, three of whom walk in the direction of the camera in the foreground. But tall trees largely dominate the image. The second image is only the trees and blackness, completely unframed.

The images are visually remarkable for several reasons. First and most markedly, they do not look on their subjects directly. Instead, they look upon them from a distance and with imperfect focus and framing, suggesting, that they were taken from a vantage point that was not ideal for

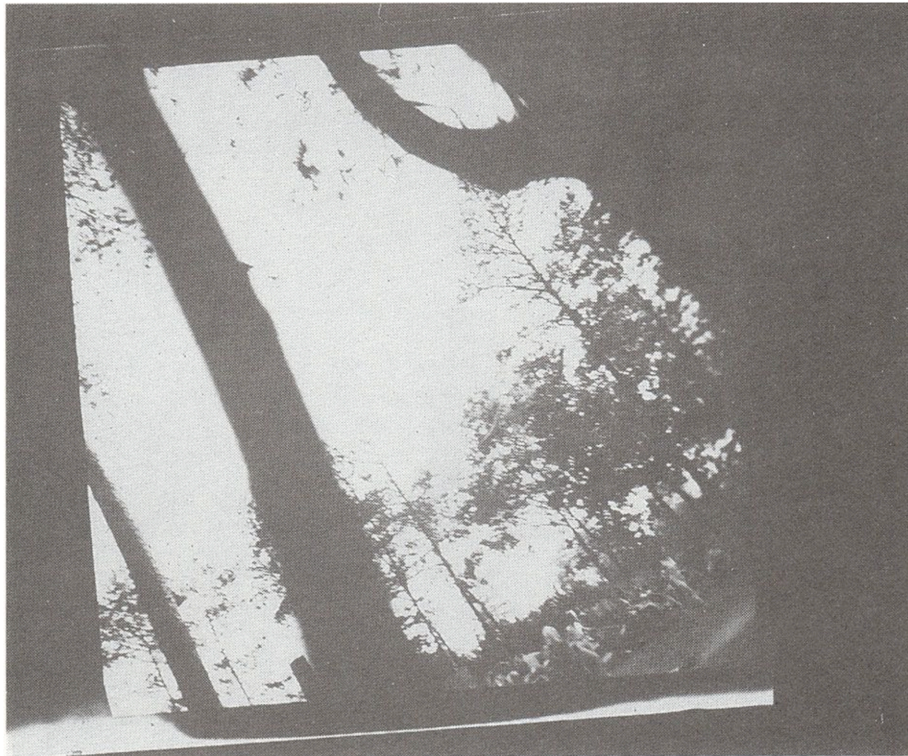

Fig. 3. Anonymous member of *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz, Women near crematorium V of Auschwitz, August, 1944. Oswiecim, State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

[6] Ibid., 23.
[7] Ibid.

capturing the content of the images themselves, but rather for being able to capture anything at all without being detected. Compare these images with a more standard reportage photograph, which, we could imagine, would gather as much detail of the scene as possible by being staged from an advantageous vantage point. Secondly, the lack of focus and framing, especially marked in the second sequence, suggests that they were taken while the photographer was moving stopping ever so briefly, if at all, to capture the images. These images bear on their surfaces traces of the conditions in which they were made, conditions beyond compare to those surrounding the privileged documentary photographer, from whose point of view we have grown accustomed to viewing atrocities.

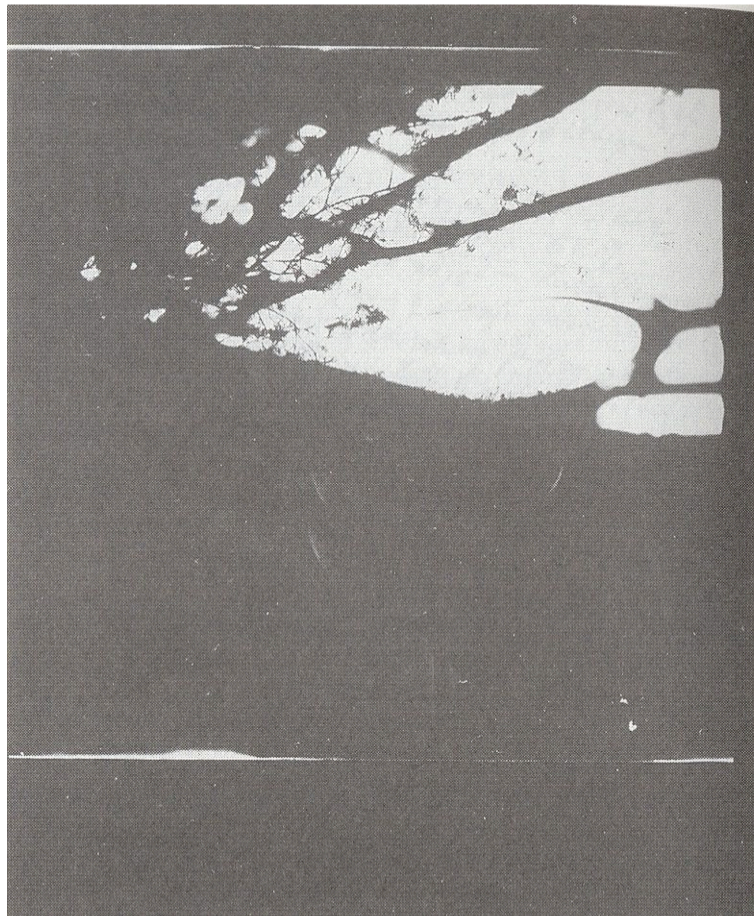

Fig. 3. Anonymous member of *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz, Trees near crematorium V of Auschwitz, August, 1944. Oswiecim, State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Evil

The territory in which these images were composed, and to which they testify, that of the economy or system of evil that was the Nazi extermination of Jews in the Second World War. This

terrible chapter of recent history is one among many instances that I would characterize as "evil," and it is the most visible and emblematic example from the twentieth century. The primary characteristic of this evil is that it cannot be summed up by any act or acts, or by the psychological disposition of any individual or group. It is not productive to think individual Nazis or SS officers as fundamentally evil people who just happened to wind up in the same place at the same time with a similar antipathy toward anyone who didn't fit the parameters of "Aryanism"; to do so misses the more salient—and scary—aspect of evil, which is its systematic nature. Evil is a mortgaging of individual consciousnesses in favour of a group's ideology and behaviour such that individuals become capable of doing things they would not do otherwise. We can conceive of this in the terms outlined by Freud in *Group Psychology:*

> "An individual in a group is subjected through its influence to what is often a profound alteration in his mental activity. His liability to affect becomes extraordinarily intensified, while his intellectual ability is markedly reduced, both processes being evidently in the direction of an approximation to the other individuals in the group; and this result can only be reached by the removal of those inhibitions upon his instincts which are peculiar to each individual, and by his resigning those expressions of his inclinations which are especially his own."[8]

As a member of a group, an individual acts and thinks very differently than he or she would normally. The individual loses his capacity for judgment based upon his own moral or ethical standards: "Whereas the intellectual capacity of a group is always far below that of an individual, its ethical conduct may rise as high above is as it may sink deep below it."[9] The individual becomes susceptible to suggestion, willing to accept the will of the group and its leader, and to perform acts that he or she would ordinarily oppose.

This effect is particularly clear in the case of Nazism with its cult of the leader and its very strong group culture. For example, Hannah Arendt identifies the prominence of clichés and slogans that became currency amongst members of the Nazi party and the SS, which members parroted, as though the group were speaking through them, and which acted as euphemisms to cover over the true nature of the activities which many would likely have seen as morally reprehensible under other circumstances.

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[8] Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVIII (1920–1922), trans. and ed. James Strachey, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955, 88.

[9] Ibid., 79.

Group psychology is thus characterised by the power of persuasion, by a "contagion" or even "hypnotism"[10] to prevail over individuals. It is this persuasive power that can be called "evil" when it is used to overcome the moral or ethical standards by which an individual would normally live and act. This conflation of persuasion with evil has existed throughout the history of Western civilisation, and can even be found in the text that established the primary definitions of "good" and "evil," the bible. The concept of evil is first introduced in Genesis 2–3, where Eve eats from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" from which God has forbade them with the threat that "in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Genesis 2.17).[11] This "original sin" is never identified as such in the text, and yet it has become the foundation of the Christian notion of sin as the breaking of God's commandments. I would like to think the evil of the scene a bit differently, however; it is not Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit that it is evil, rather it is the serpent's persuading of Eve that she should eat, and likewise Eve's persuading of Adam. The three figures can thus be said to constitute an "economy" of evil, a process of exchange amongst a system of agents. Eve's act and Adam's complicity are not motivated by their individual wickedness, but instead by the influence of another. Indeed, when asked by God why he has eaten the fruit, Adam responds, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree and I ate" (Genesis 3.12).[12] Likewise, Eve responds, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate" (Genesis 3.13).[13] Adam and Eve thus give up responsibility for their acts in favour of the persuasive power of the others in the group.

It is clear that when conceived in this way, it becomes impossible to think of evil as representable. No image could ever seek to contain all of the forces of persuasion and mortgaging of consciences that constitutes evil. All we can represent is the results of evil, the particular acts that are motivated by it, but not the evil itself. Adi Ophir's distinction between "Evil," as abstract concept, and "evils" as specific instances of harm or wrong, is useful here. He writes:

> "Evil never appears as such…only evils appear, in the plural, as particular entities, 'existents' with certain objective and certain subjective features. The manifold of evils relate to Evil in the same way that the manifold of beings relate to Being in Heidegger's thought: making it present and concealing it at one and the same time, articulating it in and through language (that names and describes this and that

[10] Ibid., 76.
11 Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

particular being, or evil), and making one forget the persistence of the yet, or forever, inexpressible Evil and the possibility of different kinds of enframing it."[14]

Evil cannot be summed up in any of its incarnations in particular acts. These only hint at it, revealing what evil can do, and simultaneously covering over its truly pervasive and persuasive nature by camouflaging it in particular acts, but never revealing the Evil itself. The horrible acts depicted in the images from Auschwitz are evils, but they are surrounded by a whole economy of Evil, which pervades and constitutes the whole of the Nazi's complex of actions and ideology, of which the *Sonderkommando* themselves are unwitting participants. What is represented in the images from Auschwitz then is not Evil, but its products, its remnants.

R e p r e s e n t a t i o n

If the images from Auschwitz do not represent evil, what do they represent? I do not wish to suggest, as is often done, that they fail to represent anything of the camps. Agamben writes of Auschwitz: "Why unsayable? Why confer on extermination the prestige of the mystical? To say that Auschwitz is "unsayable" or "incomprehensible" is equivalent to *euphemein*, to adoring in silence, as one does with a god. Regardless of one's intentions, this contributes to its glory."[15] The same is true, I think of visual representation. Yet I do not wish to suggest that representation, and especially photographic representation functions in Auschwitz as it does otherwise, with a view toward making *present* that which is not.

Jean-Luc Nancy's formulation in his essay "Forbidden Representation"[16] provides a way of thinking about what happens to representation in Auschwitz that I think sheds light on what these images "represent." Nancy suggests that the prohibition of representations of Auschwitz rest upon a logic akin to that of religious iconoclasm. The second commandment in the Hebrew and Christian bible says: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20.4–5).[17] What is forbidden here is the creation of an image, an idol, that stands in for God, or that is itself treated like a god that is fully *there*: "thus the

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[14] Adi Ophir, *The Order of Evils: Toward an Ontology of Morals*, trans. Rela Mazali and Havi Carel, New York: Zone Books, 2005, 14.

[15] Giorgio Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Rozen, *Homo Sacer,* New York: Zone Books, 1999, 32–33.

[16] Nancy, "Forbidden Representation," 31.

[17] Coogan, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible.*

idol is not condemned as an imitation or copy, but rather in terms of its full and heavy presence, a presence of or for within an imminence where nothing opens and from which nothing departs or withdraws."[18]

This notion of representation as a "full presence" misrepresents the true nature of representation in general, and especially that in Auschwitz. Representation never presents a whole presence or acts in the place of the thing that is represented itself; instead "it is the presentation of what does not amount to a presence, given and completed (or given completed), or it is the bringing to presence of an intelligible reality (or form) by the formal mediation of sensory reality."[19] Thus there is always an absence within representation, which has a double sense: it is both the absence of the thing itself, which no representation can make fully present, and it is "the absence that exists *at the very level* of the thing isolated within its immediacy."[20] Nancy calls this second aspect *absense*, "or sense inasmuch as it is precisely not a thing,"[21] such that a thing's sense is never completely present within it. Thus representation can never be complete in the sense suggested by the notion of an idol: it always contains a hollowness in this double sense.

In Auschwitz, this effect is even more marked. Nancy writes:

> "What the camps will have brought about is, above all, a complete devastation of representation or even of the possibility of representing, to such an extent that there is not even any way to represent this devastation or to put representation to its own test—to the test, that is, of making what is not of the order of presence come to presence."[22]

Thus what is represented of Auschwitz is precisely this ruin of representation, which is not to suggest that there should be no representation whatsoever. Representation should not be barred altogether, but it will always be "forbidden" by its very nature before "what is forbiddingly other than presence"[23] in Auschwitz, which is the whole complex of Evil itself. Nancy intends the word "forbidden" in the sense of the French *interdit*, meaning not only barred but also "surprised," "dumbfounded," or indeed "suspended." There is representation, but it stops short before Auschwitz, it is stunned by what it absolutely cannot recognise or hope to contain.

In Auschwitz, representation is *medusée* at the sight of that which it cannot bring to presence in an image as it normally would. It is overwhelmed by the absence at the heart of all

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[18] Nancy, "Forbidden Representation," 31.
[19] Ibid., 33.
[20] Ibid., 36.
[21] Ibid., 36.
[22] Ibid., 34.
[23] Ibid.

representations, which comes to constitute the image itself, and the four images from Auschwitz reflect this very clearly. As I described above, in none of the images does the camera look directly on its subject. The representation always happens by way of something else; the doorway of the gas chamber, Alex's shirt or bucket. This is a result of circumstance, but the effect is not negligible. Berel Lang writes that there is "a tacit preposition attached to the concept of representation and its exemplifications. Representations are characteristically representations *as*, with the implication in that locution of other possible 'representations as.'"[24] Yet Alex does not have the choice of representing "as" anything, he can only represent. Alex is not physically able to capture the horrible scene directly, for fear of being spotted by the SS committing what for them was the worst possible thing a prisoner could do, and this fact is inherent to the appearance of the images themselves; while they cannot represent their subjects directly, they do represent the condition of their production directly. This point is especially salient with respect to the last of the images, often ignored by those looking at the images for their documentary value, which shows nothing of Auschwitz itself but the trees. Despite knowing that the image might fail to "show" anything, Alex still took the picture, which becomes for us the pure manifestation of representation "struck dumb": it makes nothing "present" and becomes an abstraction. Considered in sequence, where this image is the last, representation itself seems to slow down, to deteriorate, to lose its ability to function until at last it is rendered completely incapable of capturing anything that could be called an "index" of Auschwitz. It becomes overwhelmed by absence—they become images of a "haunting"[25] at the very site of representation—and it is this aspect of the images, above and beyond anything they actually show, that makes them testimonies to Auschwitz.

Testimony

Giorgio Agamben's conception of testimony, elucidated primarily in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive,* parallels Nancy's notion of representation quite precisely, and it helps us to understand what these images ultimately succeed in doing, which is to testify to Auschwitz in a very specific way.

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[24] Berel Lang, "The Representation of Limits," in *Probing the Limits of Representation*, ed. Saul Friedlander, 300–317, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992, 300.
Press, 1992.
[25] Nancy, "Forbidden Representation," 46.

Agamben writes that in Auschwitz, "Testimony has at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to."[26] Just as representation in Auschwitz always bears within it an absence, so too does testimony. This absence is the testimony of those who could not testify, those living dead, the *Muselmanner*, who were rendered completely silent by what they experienced in the camps. Agamben cites Primo Levi, who writes that the *Muselmanner* were "those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance."[27]

In seeing the Gorgon, the *Muselmann* "sees the impossibility of seeing,"[28] just as the image represents the impossibility of representing, and like the image, he is *medusé,* struck dumb, and unable to speak about what he has seen. He is, as Nancy says, the truly exterminated: "he who, before dying and in order to die as the exterminator's representation would have it, is himself emptied of the possibility to represent."[29] Thus to testify is to bear witness to both the possibility of speaking that is proper to the witness, and to the *impossibility* of speaking that befalls the *Muselmann*, as testimony is the system of relations between the sayable and the unsayable.[30] The witness always bears within him the unspeaking *Muselmann*:

> "The subject of testimony is constitutively fractured; it has no other consistency than disjunction and dislocation—and yet it is nevertheless irreducible to them. This is what it means 'to be the subject to desubjectification,' and this is why the witness, the ethical subject, is the subject who bears witness to desubjectification. And the unassignability of testimony is nothing other than the price of this fracture, of the inseperable intimacy of the *Muselmann* and the witness, of an impotentiality and potentiality of speaking."[31]

It is this dual nature of testimony that gives its legitimacy: "*The authority of the witness consists in his capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak—that is, in his or her being a subject.*"[32]

This is also the authority of the Auschwitz images, as the *Muselmann* exists within them as well. He is that which is *unseeable*, which renders the last image an abstraction. The testimony of the survivors of Auschwitz is rendered incomplete by the conditions in which it was formed: the survivors survived, and thus they did not wholly experience the true depth of the evil that befell the

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[26] Agamben, *The Remnants of Auschwitz,* 13.
[27] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, New York: Random House, 1989, 83, cited in Ibid., 33.
[28] Ibid., 54.
[29] Nancy, "Forbidden Representation," 45.
[30] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 145.
[31] Ibid., 151.
[32] Ibid., 158. Emphasis in original.

Muselmann, which is impossible to see and yet impossible to overcome. Likewise, the images bear within them a similar lacuna. The photographer cannot hope to grasp the whole of the evil that surrounds him, and yet in their very nature, they give something of its character, as that which is impossible to see yet completely overwhelms the possibility of making an image. As such, rather than representing it directly, the images stand as testimonies to the economy of evil that enfolds and forbids them.

S u p e r - R e p r e s e n t a t i o n

I would like to conclude by making a comparison with images that seek to eliminate from within them the absence, the pervasive presence of evil, which is constitutive of both testimony and representation in Auschwitz. The images made of lynchings in the United States in the latter half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries stand as a counterpoint in that they seek to represent death directly, staring it right in the face, and emptying it of its absence. As such, they *cannot* testify.

Fig. 5. The lynching of Rubin Stacy. Onlookers, including four young girls. July 19, 1935, Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Lynching in the United States was a kind of vigilante justice perpetrated by whites against blacks and other minorities whom they looked upon as threats to their social order. Motivated by deep racial hatred, lynchings became public spectacles in which the whole community would

participate, and they are notable for their excessive *visibility*. The lynchings often followed a pattern, a standard choreography devised for spectacular effect:

> "[The lynching] opened with a chase or jail attack, followed rapidly by the public identification of the captured African American by the alleged white victim or the victim's relatives, announcement of the upcoming event to draw the crowd, and selection and preparation of the site. The main event began with a period of mutilation—often including emasculation—and torture to extract confessions and entertain the crowd, and built to a climax of slow burning, hanging, and/or shooting to complete the killing. The finale consisted of frenzied souvenir gathering and display of the body and the collected parts."[33]

And the whole spectacle was carefully recorded in photographs, which were then sold as souvenirs to those attending the lynching and to visitors to the towns. The images transmitted the message of racial hatred beyond those towns where lynchings took place, and they also served the function of "domesticating terror, normalizing it, and producing a numbing effect that allowed its perpetuation."[34] This worked precisely because the way of picturing the scene as carefully staged to minimize any sympathetic reactions toward the victims. Many of the images are similar in their content and composition; they show the victim hanging dead from a tree and surrounded by onlookers who look on the body with satisfaction. In the image of the lynching of Rubin Stacy in 1935 (fig. 5), a young girl looks on Stacy's dead body with a particularly chilling expression of approval. In the image of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith (fig. 6), which became one if the most emblematic images, a large crowd of people of all ages surrounds the hanging victims, some smiling, some holding scraps of cloth taken as souvenirs, and one pointing directly at one of the victims. In the lynching images, death is represented in all its gory "glory," on show for all to see. Nothing appears to be missing, the photographer looking upon the victim and the spectators with the intent to totalise the scene into one of rightness and justice. The photographers and the people surrounding the bodies all demonstrate their mastery of the death of those that differ from them by looking death straight on with a satisfied smile.

This looking straight at death stands in direct opposition to the four images from Auschwitz. Nancy writes that an important part of the Nazi programme was to create "a world that could be placed before the eyes and given presence in its totality, its truth, and its destiny: a question,

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[33] Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940*, New York: Vintage Books, 1998, 203–204, cited in Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

[34] James Allen, cited in Ibid., 42.

therefore, of a world without fissure, without abyss, without withdrawn invisibility."[35] This total presence is created through the elimination of everything that differs from it, that is, in the creation of a "pure" Aryan race in a regime of "super-representation" that overcomes absence: "The Nazi order, its Fuhrer, its Aryan archetype, the SS and the entire *Weltanshauung* cannot simply shine with

Fig. 6. The lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, a large gathering of lynchers. August 7, 1930, Marion, Indiana.

glory, they must be present and with a complete presence. This entire order refers to nothing outside of its won being-present, its immediacy or immanence."[36] This is a structure of representation similar to that surrounding an idol. Death becomes a spectacle through which this immanence is established, as the visible elimination of anything that might disrupt the order of "super-representation." Thus the SS seeks to overcome representation through death and by staring directly at it: "the SS requires the dead body in order to play out the spectacle of its own ability to command death and to plunge its own gaze into it."[37]

The lynching photographs seem to accomplish the same thing. They show whites looking on the death of that which would threaten their social order with great pleasure, rendering death present as that which seeks to annihilate the victims even before they are killed. The images intend

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[35] Nancy, "Forbidden Representation," 38.
[36] Ibid., 40.
[37] Ibid., 42.

to eliminate any space for judgment by presenting a complete picture, evacuated of absence. Nancy's statement about the SS in Auschwitz applies equally well here: "The *mise-en-scène* of the torturer involves the destruction of the representation of the other…the victim no longer has a space of representation, while his torturer has no representation other than himself, first in the process of accomplishing this obliteration of space, and then of filling it up again."[38] These images are not representations of injustice, or even of death, but instead they represent the whites themselves, constituted by their killing of non-whites.

The lynching images cannot testify to what has happened to the victims depicted within them. In their striving for completeness, for death depicted as necessary and good, they eliminate the possibility of saying anything about the horror that the victims experienced, which, like that perpetrated at Auschwitz, lies in the realm of that which it is impossible to say, and impossible to see. There is no space within these images for evil; of course we look at them today and we identify them with something we call evil, but it was not permitted within the images themselves when they were made.

Looking back to the Auschwitz images now, I think we can see just how they function as testimony. Their significance lies not in their ability to give incontrovertible proof of the gas chambers, but rather in the way that in its confrontation with the gas chambers, representation itself ceases to function normally. The images testify to that which prevents Alex from pointing his camera directly at death, that which renders the *Muselmann* silent: the economy of evil to which Alex is irrevocably subject. As such, the Auschwitz images, especially when compared to the lynching images which are very much their opposite, warn us of what can happen when we try to represent a wrongful death as though there is no absence. In doing so, the Evil disappears, and those who could testify are forbidden.

[38] Ibid., 45.

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