

Mutilated Images in Contemporary Martial Society: Between Mythology and Memory¹

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Abstract

In the present essay I consider contemporary mutilated images—a photograph of a child from the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, a picture of the assassinated Russian Ambassador in Ankara, a burnt photograph of writer Henryk Grynberg's mother, another of his father's grave, Moshe Ninio's photograph "Glass," and the images of the assassination of Gdansk Mayor Pawel Adamowicz. All of these images originate in a society I define as martial, i.e. society whose members are exposed to psychic and moral injuries comparable to those sustained in battle. In the martial society the presence of war is seemingly invisible but real, as we live in what Kurt Tsadek Lewin defined in 1917 as *Kriegslandschaft*, i.e. a landscape of war. Lewin writes that in positional as well as in mobile warfare, the line of combat is present, however invisible. His typology pertains to the kind of warfare ostensibly no longer present in the era of cyberwarfare and hybrid warfare in which the line of combat is not only invisible but crosses the landscape of peace as well as the landscape of war, making war and peace the two sides of the same coin. A similar scenario is at work in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. The invisible line of combat can cross the banknote, the letter, even the air. Yet, while in the past everyone was confronted with death and mutilation directly, now it mostly happens on the touch screen. Today, the primal mythical images are still within reach and nonetheless connect our modern selves to the past heroes.

Keywords: mutilated images, martial society, Kurt Tsadek Lewin, Henryk Grynberg, mythology.

1. *Noli me tangere*

One of the oldest prohibitions of Western culture, inscribed in the Decalogue, is that of making images (Exodus 20:4).² Forbidding all representation protects the divine from sacrilege: hence the original Temple in Jerusalem, ostensibly devoid of any iconography and sparingly furnished, whose secular echo are the early modernist buildings of Tel Aviv, without symbols and brutally clear in form.³ Religious aniconism,⁴ still upheld in strict Jewish and Muslim enclaves, is then at the opposite end of the spectrum from the contemporary culture of the image in which imperative cigarette box warnings come in the form of photographs of deformed body organs.⁵ In modernity, it is Catholic iconography—the representation of the body of Christ nailed to the cross, as well as other images of mutilation such as relics and reliquaries—that is responsible for placing the image of a mutilated body in the center of attention. In the Polish religious tradition, the most famous and most venerated image is mutilated as well: the Black Madonna of

Czestochowa whose right cheek had been, according to legend, slashed by a soldier in late Middle Ages. Neither the bleeding Christ, nor the bleeding Mother of Christ are a source of anxiety, at least to the believers: on the contrary, those images are venerated precisely because of their representation of elevated suffering.

2. *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*

If secular mutilated images trouble us, it is because we have been living in what Guy Debord already in 1967 called the society of the spectacle, in which relations between people are mediated by images.⁶ The images we behold daily, in the streets, shopping malls, and online, are idealized, photoshopped pictures of perfection.⁷ Between 1863, when Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* were published, and the trenches of World War I, enough time elapsed so that the public could, to some extent, lose sight of the horrors of war-induced mutilations. Thus, in the summer of 1908, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, faced with an ancient damaged sculpture in the Louvre, could still write the "Archaïcher Torso Apollos," eulogizing the power of a work of art missing its limbs and its head and yet demanding: you must change your life. In the aftermath of several more wars, having also been exposed to decapitations aired on television, we—the late modern viewers and beholders—are less convinced that the representation of a maimed human body could be an inspiration, unless it be in the context of Paralympic Games. At a 2014 academic conference in Warsaw, images of soldiers and civilians mutilated in the Vietnam War were projected on a loop while the speaker discussed the war itself.⁸ After the first few seconds the people in the audience—academics and students—uniformly looked down. Five years later all that remains in the mind of one of the conference participants are not the speaker's words, nor the images we could not bear to watch but the sense of unease they created. And yet, as Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn demonstrates in his video work entitled "Touching Reality" (2012),⁹ we are now in closer touch with mutilated and dead bodies than we might think: while in the past everyone was confronted with death and mutilation directly, now it mostly happens on the touch screen. Hirschhorn claims that:

Looking at images of mutilated human bodies is important because it can contribute to an understanding that the incommensurable act is not the looking; what is incommensurable is that destruction has happened in the first place—that a human, a human body, has been destroyed, indeed, that an incommensurable amount of human beings have been destroyed.¹⁰

3. *Vulnerant omnes, ultima necat*

Images can represent mutilation or damage, i.e. they can depict ruins, damaged objects, handicapped people or they can be mutilated physically, by external damage (fire, water, other kinds of destruction).¹¹ "There can be no image that does not emerge from the wounds of time and history that is not ruined," proclaims comparatist and new media critic Eduardo Cadava at the end of "Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruins," in which he analyzes the well-known 1940 photographic image of the bombed Holland House Library in London (2001, 35-60). Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990), whose first experiences as theater director and actor came in the midst of World War II, directed and put up *Return of Odysseus* by the Polish playwright and painter Stanislaw Wyspianski (1869-1907) in 1944 in Cracow:

At that time the Nazis were in full retreat and Kantor envisaged Odysseus as a German Soldier coming home by train after the German surrender at Stalingrad (02.02.1943). A war criminal and a traitor, Odysseus was also coming from the world of ancient fiction to the real world. At the dirty and ugly station nobody would notice him, nobody would care who he is and what he did. There was no Ithaca anymore. (Kocur 2011)

In the end the performance took place in a devastated room. Kantor's aim was not to recreate Ithaca but rather to act retroactively, as it were, on the mythical history and allow the 1944 Odysseus to make an imprint on the ancient myth, as if the degraded reality could affect the original chronotope.¹² For Kantor, the line from the Ancient Greek myth to the 1940s Cracow is dramatically short. The figure of a degraded Odysseus is the link between the world of gods and heroes and the lower order of the modern reality. It is as if there were only one chronotope, a single time-space in which the mythical past, the historical past, and the turbulent present coexist and that is why it is easy for Odysseus to cross from the mythical to the quotidian. Similarly, in Zbigniew Herbert's poetry and essays, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Electra, Orestes and other mythical personae penetrate the poet's present. In the prose poem "The Missing Knot," "Agamemnon stands in the vestibule, lights a cigarette and waits for his wife" (trans. John Carpenter and Bogdana Carpenter).¹³ The tenor of scene of Agamemnon's return, reminiscent of the return of Kantor's version of Odysseus, is brought down to fit contemporary reality—in this case communist Poland. The scene is also reminiscent of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Decalogue*, in which contemporary Polish characters *nolens volens* reenact motifs from ancient Greek tragedies. Thus, Greek antiquity persists, in a kind of colportage of time-space. As Katarzyna Stadnik has noticed, Herbert creates a time-space that encompasses "The overall effect," "that of establishing a panchronic reading of the text, in which the reader is mentally projected to the different moments embraced within a given space, as Greek landscape comes to be construed as a memoryscape."¹⁴ The visual staging of such panchronic or, as I prefer to call them, chronotopic, instances is especially striking in Giorgio de Chirico's paintings. The Italian de Chirico was born in Volos, Greece and assumed the Greek mythology as part of his birthright. In his 1968 painting, "Ulysses' Return," Odysseus returns to a room, or, rather, his entire voyage is a voyage around the room, in a boat with an ocean the size of a puddle on the wooden planks of the floor. This is, de Chirico seems to be saying, where mythology is today: within reach, somewhat downsized to our modern needs, domesticated and contained, it nonetheless connects us to the grand time of the heroes.

Kantor believed that the only way to show life is by lack of life, by images of death and thus in his famous *Dead Class* he had actors wear masks and carry grotesque mannikins representing themselves (see Pleśniarowicz 2018). In his 1927 essay "Photography," cultural critic and theorist Siegfried Kracauer argues already that the photograph does not refer to life, but rather to a form that resembles life but is not it, functioning like a fake form, a mannikin: "The ur-image has long since decayed. [...] The smiles of plastic manikins in beauty parlors are just as rigid and perpetual" (421-436). The photographic image as such, not necessarily damaged or deformed, only a bit darkened, is already an image of death, argues Kracauer, because it represents a *rigor mortis* of sorts—the permanently frozen smile of the figure in the photograph corresponds not to the actual smile of the long-gone grandmother (whose physical body has decayed much like the carcass eulogized by Charles Baudelaire in his eponymous poem) but rather to the generic plastic image of the mannikin: what Bruno Schulz calls a second-rate life, a

cheap knock-off, an intentionally handicapped mannikin (“Traktach o manekinach”).¹⁵ Kracauer then likens the persona on the photograph of the grandmother to a museum display dummy: “There the manikins are displayed solely for the historical costumes, and the grandmother in the photograph is also an archeological manikin that serves to illustrate the costumes of the period” (“Traktach o manekinach” 424). The photograph is no longer a photograph of the grandmother—“it is time that makes images of itself” (424). Thus, in so far as the photograph is always necessarily an image of time, one can venture to say that it is in the nature of the image to be a memento of a temporal wound. Simultaneously, in what cultural historian Giuliana Bruno (2014) calls the era of surface—we are surrounded by screens which are our daily membranes of expression, communication and projection—through the luminous screen, the image gains in materiality, becomes a physical entity that manifests itself on the surface through light. The image on the screen can be touched. While one should not touch a wound, one might touch the dressing.

4. *Jeno odmien czas kaleki*

In the present essay I consider contemporary mutilated images—a photograph of a child from the aftermath of the Yugoslav Wars, a picture of the dead Russian Ambassador in Ankara, a burnt photograph of writer Henryk Grynberg’s mother, another of his father’s grave, Moshe Ninio’s *Glass*, and the images of the assassination of Gdansk Mayor Pawel Adamowicz. All of these images originate in a society I define as martial, i.e. society whose members are exposed to psychic and moral injuries comparable to those sustained in battle.¹⁶ Modern Western society functions in a surreptitious landscape of war, in which the presence of mutilated images is both a symptom and a further cause of anxiety. As Cadava reminds us, “War not only names the central experience of modernity; it also plays an essential role in our understanding of technological reproduction in general and of photography in particular” (47). Our position is as follows: on the one hand most of the time in the contemporary Western world we no longer experience war directly—Antonio Scurati calls this the “myth of the war experience” (2007, 13) and thus speaks of the contemporary literature of inexperience—*letteratura dell’inesperienza* (2006)—but are exposed to it indirectly. War is present on the screen of our televisions, computers, and telephones, unasked for, mediatized, and we are necessarily passive in relation to it. On the other hand, the mere experience of travel can become what Jewish-German-American topological psychologist Kurt Lewin calls *ein Gefechtsgebilde* [battle formation] and a bottle of water found by the security guard at an international airport then becomes a thing-of-war (see Lewin’s essay “Kriegslandschaft”). In other words, by virtue of being at an airport, one can enter a war zone. Not only airports but shopping malls, museums, and even schools can become places of battle. This signals a mixing of spaces which used to be considered separate—and still are in some parts of the world. And yet, it is precisely in Europe that the aftermath of several wars—World War I, World War II, and the Yugoslav Wars—is still palpable enough so that a documentary-essay film by Radu Jude, *The Dead Nation* (Romania, 2017) can still rip a taboo subject over seventy years later simply by showing a trove of—often damaged—images from the years 1936 to 1944, juxtaposed with a text of a memoir and period radio broadcasts. The unspeakable becomes visible in *The Dead Nation* as the decaying images of a prewar and war *insouciance* are layered with music

and commentary. The message seeps through the breaks in the images: no longer intact, they are porous enough so that a different vision becomes possible. Moreover, the director makes us watch them long, while in our epoch “Nobody watches the same image for thirty seconds,” Carolina Crespi (2019) notes.¹⁷ The prolonged exposure to the viewer’s gaze, the fact that the images are still, and last but not least their damaged appearance all contribute to the film’s uncanny effect: all those characteristics are the exact opposite of most contemporary films, including documentaries, that are now focused on technical precision. The kitschy black-and-white perfection of Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Ida* or *Cold War* cannot achieve the effect of *The Dead Nation* and smacks of facile packaging.

5. *Schimmelgrün ist das Haus des Vergessens*

Unlike the United States, which has been waging various wars on foreign soil, away from the American continent, post-World War II Europe witnessed a series of wars in its midst: the 1991-2001 Yugoslav Wars. As in many recent ethnic conflicts, the wars, despite being front-page news, were not easy to follow for the lay public but have since been subject of numerous literary, cinematic and even video game representations. In the summer of 2018, in an international seminar for educators at Yad Vashem, I met Dr. Bojan Arbutina, Research Associate at the Museum of the Victims of Genocide in Belgrade. He comes from a Serbian family that for centuries was settled as a minority in what is now Croatia. In 2003 he returned with his parents to visit his father’s home in the Kordun region of Croatia. At the time he was eight years old and it was his first visit there. In a photograph he posted on Facebook (January 1, 2019), he—as a child—is touching the damaged image—a photo wallpaper—of a horse on a wall of his father’s room, long abandoned when the family was exiled. There is some burned debris on the floor, several pipes run on the wall and the ceiling, otherwise the beholder sees only the horse’s head, in natural size, and the boy, clad in a T-shirt and a pair of shorts, touching the torn photographic print with an extended arm. The photo wallpaper, a symbol of status in late 20th-century communist Europe, plays a double role in this image. Its realism contributes to a double-take: the viewer has to ascertain that this is not a horse, as it were (Fig. 1). It is, however, the white horse that looks at the beholder, while the boy is looking at the strip of the wallpaper. The illusion of a bucolic scene is utterly ruined by the flap of the photo hanging down from the top left corner and by the areas where the wallpaper had been torn off, leaving only remnants. The photographed horse, missing part of its muzzle and nostril, is not an image of horror. Rather, white as the wall around it, the horse seems to be an apparition, a phantom of better times. The unwitting mixture of inside and outside—the horse inside looks as if it were outdoors—makes the image uncanny, as does the fact that in the dingy room, the boy encounters an animal. The boy is whole but shy and his gesture tentative; the horse is torn to shreds and yet his gaze self-assured. The awe visible in the boy’s entire mien is caught—or perhaps held—by the mother’s gaze, as it is the mother who took the photograph. The mother’s eyes are not in the picture, but any subsequent beholder perceives the scene as she did at that moment. She knows more than the boy does and her gaze embraces him in his attempt to touch both the past—unimaginable to him—and the disintegrating present. The father whose room it used to be is not in the picture except as a trace. The war is present and tangible, even though the boy is not touching the carcass of a horse as he might well have done in any given war from antiquity to the present.



Fig. 1. Bojan Arbutina's first visit to his father's burnt home in the Kordun region of Croatia after the Yugoslav war, 2003.

Photo credit: Dinka Arbutina.¹⁸

The scene is primordial, archetypal: nostos, homecoming. Not an image of war per se, it echoes Odysseus' return. Odysseus is recognized by his old dog. The boy cannot be recognized by his father's wallpaper horse, neither is it a real return since the boy had never been there before but he has come to learn about the family's past, about illusion and reality. He approaches the wallpaper horse, or what is left of it, as gingerly as Martin Buber—the real horse he used to pet as a child. In *Meetings. Autobiographical Fragments*, Buber writes about the wounding mismeeting—*Vergegnung*—with his own mother, who had abandoned him when he was three, and then about the encounters with a horse, "When I stroked the mighty mane [...] and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, [...] really the Other itself" (Buber 2002, 32). But then one time the boy becomes conscious of the joy it gives him to stroke the horse and everything changes: it is as if the innocence were lost because he feels himself judged. The maimed image of young Bojan also depicts a loss of innocence. The home is not a home, the horse is flat and mutilated, the joy precluded. He has touched war.

6. *Frierend schutten wir ihnen Graber*

Serving as a field artillery soldier in the trenches of World War I, Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) develops his theory of "war landscape," published during a furlough in 1917 as *Kriegslandschaft* (2006 [1917], 129-139; same for the following citations). Lewin distinguishes between *Friedenslandschaft*—the landscape of peace—extending indefinitely in all directions, a "rounded" landscape without a front and a back—and the war landscape, which is delimited and directional: "[Kriegslandschaft] ist begrenzt." Thus, the landscape of peace is as if infinite while the landscape of war is not only finite but seems to have an "end" followed by a "nothing": "Die Gegend scheint da 'vorne' ein Ende zu haben, dem ein 'Nichts' folgt." Counterintuitively, despite its infiniteness, it is

the peace landscape that is reassuring, while the delimited war landscape, because it is followed by the unknown, provokes anxiety.

Lewin writes that in positional as well as in mobile warfare, the line of combat is present, however invisible. His typology pertains to the kind of warfare ostensibly no longer present in the era of cyberwarfare and hybrid warfare in which the line of combat is not only invisible but crosses the landscape of peace as well as the landscape of war, making war and peace the two sides of the same coin (Stowell 2018). Nonetheless Lewin makes several remarks that are applicable to modern war: using the landscape of peace, he describes an incident in Galicia (in what in 1918 becomes Poland), in which a village is attacked outside of the confines of the line of combat. As an artillery soldier, Lewin is nearby and perceives the attack to be unreal because it takes place in “peace landscape.” Therefore, despite the fact that he and his fellow soldiers note the grave danger, they do not act on it. On the contrary, when Thomas “Toivi” Blatt describes his mother being taken away to die in the Sobibor death camp in the middle of World War II, he notes—post-factum—that he had no emotional reaction to that event: “Slowly and sadly she turned to look at me [...]. To this day the scene comes back to haunt me [...]. I would give anything to be able to recreate that moment, to change it, to hug her and tell her I love her but by 1943 it was as if we were robots, moving like expressionless shadows” (Blatt 2008, 30). It is as if he had known that the event belonged to the landscape of war, hence he ought not to react to it in the manner proper to the landscape of peace. Seemingly a passive recipient of violence, Blatt became an active participant who subsequently was able to escape from the camp and survived the entire war.

In another case, Lewin describes the changed aspects of the “war landscape” that contains *Gefechtsdinge* [things-of-battle] while in the peace landscape the same things are the things-of-peace, *Friedensdinge*. A barn, a house, a forest—they all change their character depending on which landscape they are in. Most interestingly for the question of mutilated images that I raise in this paper, Lewin also distinguishes the in-between landscapes: for instance, a landscape which is no longer the theater of combat but where corpses of soldiers and horses still remain, is not part of *Gefechtsgebilde* [battle formation] any more but neither is it a *Friedenslandschaft*. When destruction takes place in *Gefechtsgebilde*, it would be meaningless to treat it as a destruction of a thing-of-peace. This is an extraordinary insight: it means that different laws—even emotional laws—govern the war landscape. Lewin does talk about civilians as well: those civilians who have ended up in the war landscape do not become *Dingen der Gefechtswelt* [things-of-the-battleworld] unless they are spies. Their very presence changes the nature of the landscape of war. Inversely, we might add in 2019, when one visits a Jewish school in Paris or a synagogue in Turin, one is faced with a disturbance of peace (*Friedensstörung*), such as the presence of dozens of well-armed French military at the École Normale Israélite Orientale in the 12th arrondissement or a military armored vehicle at the Piazzetta Primo Levi. Needless to say, the mere presence of soldiers is not a sign of war, but is simultaneously its trace and its potentiality. Lewin’s text ends with the mention of “villages reduced to ashes,” which he calls “Kriegsinseln im Friedensland” (isles of war in the land of peace).

As the Polish literary and cultural critic Adam Lipszyc argues in his essay “The Space of Exception,”¹⁹ the discussion of peace, the paradigmatic nature of the military violence and its lawmaking character form the core of Walter Benjamin’s 1921 “Critique of Violence” (*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*):

Benjamin makes the point that the original model of any lawmaking violence is the frontier- or border-establishing violence. It is **making a difference in space**²⁰ that paradigmatically distinguishes violence used by humans as means to an end from a simple predatory act. Benjamin writes: “In this sphere [i.e. the sphere of the constitutional law] the establishing of frontiers, the task of ‘peace’ after all the wars of mythic age, is the primal phenomenon (*Urphänomen*) of all lawmaking violence.”

If peace can be established by means of war, and if things-of-war are now an element of the landscape of peace, we function in the martial society in which the violence of mutilated images is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. In such a society of the spectacle, a photograph of the assassination of the Russian Ambassador in an art gallery Ankara (December 2016) wins top prize at World Press Photo contest. The photographer himself, Burhan Ozbilici, said of the moment: “I was afraid, but I did not panic.”²¹ Not a mutilated image per se, the infamous photograph, in its lucid perfection and acute focus, cuts like a knife: in the picture the fallen man does not even visibly bleed, he is extended on the floor straight and with extended arms. Interviewed, the photographer recounts that in the immediate aftermath of the murder, the Turkish assassin went about smashing pictures on the wall. The pictures were photographs of Russia. Therefore, it was not enough to fell Karlov, the images of the country he represented had to be destroyed as well: the murderer was making a difference in symbolic space. In a synecdochal gesture, the assassin drew a line through both the man and the images; in an iconoclastic gesture, he broke the images of the power he was against, but ultimately it was images that won the war: the photographer did not leave the battle scene, taking many more images of the event. What does it mean to be able to touch the picture of such violence? When Archduke Ferdinand was shot in Sarajevo, only a few people could see him. When JFK was shot in Dallas, there were many more witnesses, but the footage was imperfect. The contemporary Polish painter and photographer Janusz Zigmanski renders the assassination in an even more purposefully imperfect, blurred manner in his *JFK* series, as if insisting on the need to distort the feeble photographic image even further, in a blow-up of color and blinding light (Fig. 2). Instead of focusing on the mortally wounded President, Zigmanski places the witnesses—the bystanders—in the center and gives them the vague outlines of Greek tragedy figures, while the eponymous JFK is not even in the picture. Now, everybody willing to watch, can watch Karlov’s (the Russian ambassador’s) last moments and his demise again and again. His wife and children included.



Fig. 2: Janusz Zigmanski *JFK*. 2015. Oil on canvas, 60x80 cm. Private collection. Photo credit: Janusz Zigmanski.

7. *Вечная жизнь суждена только матери*

In Henryk Grynberg's 1969 short autobiographical novel *The Victory*, the child-narrator recounts how he and his fellow child survivor of the Holocaust Izak Fryd rummage through attics and cellars of houses in Lodz immediately after the war, finding various objects: gas masks, bayonets, letters, snapshots, stamp albums: "After taking a good look, we'd tear the papers into shreds and poke the eyes out of the photographs" (1993, 105). They smash porcelain figurines and tear up pictures of animals, keeping only the gas masks, army belts and bayonets. A lifetime later, in what will become *Memoir 2*, under the date of June 25th, 2012, in McLean, VA where he lives by himself, Grynberg describes "the last photographs with [his uncle] Aron" (2014, 255; translation mine) taken in Israel, blurry. In the same envelope he finds one of the last photographs of his mother, which he believes he had already destroyed by fire as "she looked as if dead on them" (256). He decides to burn the last image as well, so he sets fire to all four corners and watches the photograph smolder slowly while the eyes keep watching him. "I smelled a stench as if something more than just photographic paper were burning and, to my surprise, found that everything was burnt except for the eyes" (256). He then takes his mother's eyes and puts them in his wallet: "so now they come with me everywhere" (256). "The last image of a person is that person's actual 'history'," asserts Kracauer in "Photography," and by last image he does not mean the last photographic image, but the memory-image (1993, 426). "This history is like a *monogram* that condenses the name into a single graphic figure that is meaningful as an ornament," he continues. Grynberg's mother, whom the reader knows as the heroic figure of both *The Jewish War* and *The Victory*, as well as the one who had given him his "mother tongue," the Polish language, and to whose death the novel *Kadisiz* is dedicated, does not altogether die. If it is true, as Kracauer states, that "In a photograph a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow," then by burning the photograph Grynberg, as it were, melts the snow and makes visible his mother's monogram: her eyes. "A shudder runs through the beholder/viewer of old photographs. For they do not make visible the knowledge of the original but rather the spatial configuration of a moment; it is not the person who appears in his or her photograph, but the sum of what can be deducted from him or her" (Kracauer 1993, 431). If not for the fact that Grynberg is a writer and thus can transcribe his mother's monogram, the image would have won. In the ostensible landscape of peace, i.e. Grynberg's bucolic Franklin Park in Virginia, both the incineration and the eyes of the dead pursue him.

8. *Die Munder voll Gras*

And yet, Henryk Grynberg himself wishes to have his remains cremated and dispersed in the Potomac River (2011). While writing this article, rather out of the blue, I received a photograph of Grynberg's father's grave at the Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw (Fig. 3) where, as his readers know from the essay "Obowiazek" [Duty], a place is reserved also for the author. The sender was one of my doctoral students, who, moved by Grynberg's account of his father's heroism during the Holocaust and his death at the hands of his Polish neighbors, decided to pay homage to him by visiting his grave.

The photograph she sent was a bit dark but nonetheless showed clearly the memorial candle she had lit on the tomb. Touched by her thoughtfulness, I forwarded the photograph to Grynberg himself, convinced that it would please him that a stranger,

prompted by his writings, went to pay her respects to his father's resting place, especially since he is far away and unable to do it himself. His reaction took me aback: "These takes are very strange because they do not show the inscriptions (Polish and Hebrew). I RECEIVE PICTURES OF THIS GRAVE FROM MS. X AND EVERYTHING HAS ALWAYS BEEN IN ORDER (the oil lamp is surely from her). [...] The grave is OK, the photographer is not" (email Feb. 11, 2019, translation mine; all capitals Grynberg's). The anxiety over the effacement of the grave's meaning—the tomb is meaningless as a memorial and a marker unless it is marked with the name—is more than natural. Emily Dickinson's memorable poem 449 speaks precisely to that anxiety: "Until the Moss has reached our lips—/ and covered up—our names—" reads the final, abject line. There is no memory after death without the name, unless it be the Unknown Soldier, remembered as an abstraction. This is even more significant when the name is of one who died murdered and was meant to have neither a marker, nor a grave.²² To understand the driving edge of Henryk Grynberg's anxiety we must bring up another image: the penultimate frame of Pawel Lozinski's masterpiece documentary film entitled *Birthplace* (1992). Having returned to Poland with a film crew to look for his father's remains, Grynberg is at the bottom of a pit dug by helpful villagers, who, after nearly fifty years, come to assist him. In his hand is his fathers' skull.



Fig. 3: Abraham Grynberg's grave at the Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw, February 2019.

Photo credit: Anna Baranowska

The readers who know "Duty," know exactly how much pain it took to get Grynberg to accept Lozinski's suggestion to make the film and put himself in that untenable position in which the penultimate frame holds him as he holds the skull. They also know that after the catharsis of bringing his father's remains to a proper burial came the anticlimax: the coffin was not a coffin, but a small box, the shroud was but a rag, the funeral—a

lacking ritual, as it were, as he had never recited the words of the kaddish prayer before. The readers who have read Grynberg's debut short story "Ekipa 'Antygona'" [The "Antigone" Crew] know even more: that exhumation and burial of the victims of the Shoah have been one of his earliest concerns. The image of his father's grave itself bears a scar: instead of two dates, there are three: 1907, 1944, 1992; birth year, the year he was murdered, and the year he was exhumed. Asked for permission to be quoted for this article, Grynberg gave it reluctantly, fearing that attention drawn to his father's grave might backfire and cause someone to desecrate it. The artistically torn matzevah with the Polish and the Hebrew on separate sides is not a guarantee of resting in peace. Nothing is, short of being cremated and having one's ashes dispersed into a river that flows thousands of miles away.

9. *Chi ha visto la Gorgone*

In the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann at Beit Ha'am in Jerusalem, one of the prosecution witnesses is Yehiel De-Nur, the writer who called himself Ka-Tzetnik ("Eichmann Trial" 68-69). On the witness stand on June 7th, 1961 he is impeccably dressed in a white suit, but he speaks slowly and at times with difficulty. At the point when he introduces his name, Ka-Tzetnik (Yiddish for Concentration Camper), he bares his left forearm mutilated by the tattooed number 135633. The camera does not show a close-up of the number, only his sudden violent gesture of introduction. The session is televised and aired live in many countries all over the world—except for Israel which at the time does not have television. After a little over eight minutes of testimony, Yehiel De-Nur is asked by the judge whether he could answer some questions, at which point he stands up and falls to the ground. "It's difficult to see exactly what has happened," says the voice we can hear as viewers. The doubly mutilated image of a man stigmatized, marked by his time at Auschwitz, and the man who is literally disabled by his own status. His cup overfloweth.

In the summer of 2018 I was in Tel Aviv, visiting graduate school friends I had not seen in over twenty years. And yet I felt at home in their quintessential Israeli modernist house until, in the space of their home office, I felt an uneasy presence. A large painting on the wall represented an empty space, a glass cage of sorts. It was one of several images there, but only it called out to me. "Whose painting is this?" I asked my hosts. "It's not a painting but a photograph," answered my friend (Meira Kowalsky, Tel-Aviv, June 29, 2018). "Do you know what it is?" I looked again, feeling as if sucked in by the image. "It's Eichmann's booth," I said, almost incredulously, because if not for the fact that I had just been studying the Shoah at Yad Vashem, I would not have been able to recognize the image at all. Moshe Ninio's image is not mutilated, it is not damaged, it is not deformed (Fig. 4; March 2016). On the contrary, it is contained in its icy perfection, thus baring the deformity and mutilation of everything else: history, the Eichmann trial itself, his execution (as Gershom Sholem has written, Eichmann should not have been hanged because for the crimes he had committed death penalty was inadequate, it trivialized the crimes). Eichmann's ashes were scattered at sea, he is nowhere but in this most empty glass booth there is still too much of him. His presence mutilates the world.

Ninio's *Glass*, like a black hole, is hanging in the office of the daughter of a man and a woman who both survived Auschwitz. "Pour moi, les images sont des lieux de passage" (Colard 2001), confirms Moshe Ninio, but where does one go from here? This is it. *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*.



Fig. 4: Moshe Ninio, *Glass (II)*, 2011. Archival pigment print. 107x77 cm.

Photo: Elad Sarig.

10. Je suis la plaie et le couteau!

In *The Surviving Image. Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, Georges Didi-Huberman writes that for Warburg, the image was a “total anthropological phenomenon” (Didi-Huberman 2017), a condensation of culture at a given historical moment. This means that at extreme points in the history of civilization, images are imperative. Therefore Ka-Tzetnik had to faint or have a stroke to express himself, his books were not enough. Ninio's Eichmann's booth is like the temple after the death of god and like modernist architecture: sober, devoid of commentary, devoid of ornamentation. It is.

Gdansk, January 13th, 2019: a hellish image, full of people dressed in black, fireworks, noise, confusion, and red smoke—not an obvious, clear-cut picture of mutilation but an image that still cuts. On stage the assassin wielding a knife stabs the Mayor of the city at the climactic moment of a charity event. Everyone in front of the stage is filming it or taking pictures. Thousands of others are watching the live transmission. In the aftermath for several weeks not a single interlocutor omitted the event. Kurt Lewin's line of combat now passes through the middle of a Christmas market, through the middle of the WOŚP concert, through each and every screen we touch. Mayor Adamowicz's ashes may have been sepulchered in the heart of the Old City, but it is in the form of his mutilated image that he will be remembered.

Notes

- ¹ The author of this essay has received written permissions from all parties involved to reproduce all the images contained in the text.
- ² “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth” (Exodus 20:4). Needless to say, the divine is not at the center of modern preoccupations. Thus, Adorno writes in 1947, in Los Angeles, that the modern cult of the new “enmeshes and assimilates equally objects and the view of them” and that “Itself unattainable, newness installs itself in the place of overthrown divinity amidst the first consciousness of the decay of experience” (1978, 237). His analysis of sensationalism disseminated through technology in the culture of the masses, and especially of the new become pleasure, can apply well to the image of the exploding, collapsing World Trade Center, aired again and again on the news and watched again and again by the mesmerized audiences.
- ³ For a formidable account of the Israeli architectural project, see Zvi Efrat, *The Object of Zionism* (2018).
- ⁴ The claim that Israelites were not as aniconic or iconoclastic as once thought was put forth by Kalman Bland, in his 2000 study, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual*.
- ⁵ Pictorial cigarette pack warnings have been proven to be more effective than text-only warnings. (DOI:10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2014-051978).
- ⁶ “Le spectacle n’est pas un ensemble d’images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des images” (Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, 1967).
- ⁷ A proper historical analysis of mutilated images across the ages is beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to mention the well-known cases of mutilation of portraits and sculptures in the late Roman Empire: “The material record corroborates the central role that images played in violent political transitions. Intentionally mutilated portraits survive for almost every ‘bad’ emperor who suffered some form of memory sanctions, beginning with Caligula. Indeed, for certain emperors such as Macrinus or Maximinus Thrax, every surviving portrait has been attacked and mutilated” (Eric R. Varner, 2013, 124).
- ⁸ For a discussion of the mutilation of the dead in ancient Greece and Vietnam, see Tritle, L. A., “Hector’s Body: Mutilation of the Dead in Ancient Greece and Vietnam,” 1997 (123–136).
- ⁹ <https://vimeo.com/55482318>. Accessed February 20, 2020. Depicting and viewing mutilated bodies and corpses has been the artist’s preoccupation in many of his works since 2006.
- ¹⁰ https://ima.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/thomas_hirschhorn_touching_reality.pdf. Accessed February 20, 2020.
- ¹¹ The most notorious recent case of a purposefully damaged image is surely the affair of British street artist Banksy’s destruction—or, to be more precise, half-shredding—of his painting (a copy of one of his murals) entitled “Girl with Balloon” on October 5th, 2018, immediately after its being sold for over a million British pounds at a Sotheby’s auction. While Banksy’s graffiti and murals have a long history of being damaged or destroyed by virtue of their being situated on buildings in the midst of cities or in territories affected by war, this case was different and seemingly aimed at the capitalist enterprise of the art market.
- ¹² <https://www.cricoteka.pl/pl/theatrical-place/>. Accessed February 20, 2020.
- ¹³ *Gods and Mortals: Modern Poems on Classical Myths*, ed. Nina Kossman, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 239.
- ¹⁴ http://dlibra.umcs.lublin.pl/Content/28642/czas17868_35_1_2017_7.pdf. Accessed February 20, 2020.
- ¹⁵ “If they are going to be people, let us give them only one side of the face, one hand, one leg, namely the one that will be necessary for their role.” (Bruno Schulz, “Traktach o manekinach albo wtora Ksiega Rodzaju”)

- ¹⁶ Antonio Scurati, in *Dal tragico all'oscuro* (2016, 45-55), writes about the wave of PTSD experienced in the wake of the 9/11 attacks by the mere TV viewers. Since the images of the burning, collapsing WTC towers were transmitted repeatedly, individuals were subject to repeated trauma, even though they may have been geographically distant from the event.
- ¹⁷ "Nessuno guarda più la stessa immagine per trenta secondi."
- ¹⁸ On his father's side, Dr. Arbutina lost ninety-two family members in the Yugoslav Wars (Facebook post, January 1, 2019, cited with Dr. Arbutina's written permission).
- ¹⁹ The essay exists in manuscript form only and I quote it here with Lipszyc's permission (Adam Lipszyc, email communication to author, January 3, 2017).
- ²⁰ Emphasis is Lipszyc's.
- ²¹ This particular quote comes from Jack Shepard's article in the *Independent*, February 13, 2017, titled "Photograph of Russian ambassador assassination wins top prize at World Press Photo contest."
- ²² For a discussion of the role of names in post-Holocaust literary accounts concerned with memory and identity, see Katarzyna Jerzak's online essay "Phantom Jewishness in Contemporary European Novel."

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