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Media Representation of Catastrophe, Holocaust Imagery, and the Politics of Seeing

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The representation of catastrophe is a dominant and lucrative genre in today's visual culture. One phenomenon of this representation is the use of Holocaust images as a genre for the visual recording of contemporary events other than this historically specific occurrence. There are innumerable examples of Holocaust conscriptions. The particular historical event comes to stand as a metaphor for events that are perceived as extreme. In the uncertainty over a right name for these events, the Holocaust turns into holocausts. Slavery, genocides, Hiroshima, Stalin's Gulag (the "red holocaust"), AIDS, the terrorist attacks on the United States, the slaughtering of animals in the wake of the foot-and-mouth disease in Britain, the continued cruelties towards animals, as, for example, in experiments or mass industrialisation: all of these have been called "holocausts".

This article argues that Holocaust imagery is used to produce, design and structure the verbal and visual recording of contemporary events perceived and constructed as large-scale disasters or catastrophes; it is used as a form of theory. This raises questions about the links between theory and Holocaust representation. The repetition and circulation of Holocaust imagery for representations of other events appears at two pivotal points: when there is concern about political acts and strategies that either lead to or respond to mass destruction, and when there is the social and physical fact or threat of dead bodies in excess. Such imagery appears when what remains is remains, and, more to the point, mass remains.

This essay wants to open up debate about what theory is and how we can use it when analysing the representation of catastrophe. I want to do so by relating two issues regarding the concept of theory: the Greek notion of *theoria* as a practice of looking, and the idea of theory as a practice of linkage, of establishing and grouping comparative phenomena (see Haraway 1988). Theory, as such a practice of grouping comparative phenomena, and the various uses and appropriations of the Jewish genocide as some form of 'Holocaust theory', are thus inherently similar activities. Events of extreme magnitude force the question of their material aspects into our discourses about them. This problem of the complex material realities of such events—ranging from physical destructions of various kinds to questions of reintegrating societies as well as individuals - has traditionally challenged theory and signification. Theory depends on what it is applied to, on what we turn into theory's objects, into objects for our contemplation. In his "Quandaries of the Referent", Vincent Descombes (1989) points out that in the wake of the linguistic turn the actual object behind the referent turned into both problem and challenge for theory. In the struggles of how to account for its materiality and possibility, Descombes reports, the object became more and more problematic and, finally, was almost lost. Within the context of these debates, I query theory's aptness as a tool for analysing imagery whose referents are factual corpses as remains. The practice of turning corpses into spectacles serves here as a test-case for the possibilities

of theory. Focusing primarily on representations of the Rwandan genocide in 1994, this essay probes the relation between theory and looking, aesthetics and images, and their socio-political functions.

According to the Greek notion of *theoria*, we practice theory by looking closely at things: at spectacles, objects, or images. A lot of the criticism voiced against theory is based on this notion: on an understanding of the classical Greek meaning of *theoria* as a visually determined contemplation of the world from afar. One such approach is taken by Michel Serres. In his essay "Panoptic theory", Serres insists that such a theory must give way to new forms of coded information, very different from objects in a visual field (1989). John Tagg calls this criticism the "theoretical trashing of opticality" (Tagg 1992: 119), and Martin Jay gives an impressive insight into the extent and often vitriolic character of "antiocularcentric" discourse, which is based on challenges to vision's allegedly superior capacity to provide access to the world and its complicity with political and social oppression through the spectacle and surveillance (Jay 1993). As Jay points out elsewhere, this criticism reflects a hostility towards visual distanciation, to the cold eye producing the modern subject, and to specularity, surveillance and the gaze (Jay 1998b: 19). Such a hostility towards visual distanciation has culminated in concerns about the photographic eye. For Susan Sontag, for instance, photography "creates another habit of seeing: both intense and cool, solicitous and detached" (99).

Nothing in the original meaning of the word *theoria*, however, implies this distance. Instead, it could be argued that *theoria*'s looking includes the desire for and enjoyment of the act of looking, both ideas that involve closeness and engagement rather than distance. This runs counter to the notion of aesthetic distance, as it has become dominant especially with Kant's philosophy and the Enlightenment. It is from this angle that the relation between notions of theory and looking, aesthetics and images, and their socio-political functions needs to be rethought. Why is it, in the context of graphic images, of what Susan Sontag has called "the photographic inventory of ultimate horror" (Sontag 1978: 128), that in an immense industry of highly aestheticized and stylised visual representation of catastrophe, we want to see all these grisly photographs and art productions, desire the intimacy of the experience rather than a visual distanciation?

Theory, the Holocaust, and the remainder of the dead body

In his book on the Rwandan genocide, Philip Gourevitch observes dryly: "The piled-up dead of political violence are a generic staple of our information diet these days" (Gourevitch 2000: 186). If the Greek verb *theorein* designates to look at, to contemplate, to survey (Godzich 1986: xiv), what kind of theory do we practice when we look at pictures of aftermath, of remains and leftovers so often embodied in the corpse? The political and moral implications of the events that lead to these kinds of remains urge us to probe the kinds of theory we can practice, or whether we need theory at all.

Contextualizing some by now iconic images that depict piles of corpses with explicit reference to Holocaust iconography, I want to elicit how they complicate the relationship between representations and their objects and representations and theory. This essay is primarily concerned with critiquing the operation of theoretical discourse, and especially Holocaust theory and its various related critiques and offshoots. To make my argument, however, a second kind of evidence is also employed: the field of representation that roughly coincides with the mass media's reporting of catastrophe. Theory and

popular journalism are not the same and work in different ways. At the same time, though, they are semi-autonomous at best. I make the move between these two sets of discourses because there are striking similarities in the structures (institutional and ideological) and patterns in using the Holocaust as a device to negotiate meaning-making in the face of contemporary catastrophe. In both discourses, the same shift from the Holocaust (the event of the Nazi genocide) to "The Holocaust" (its ideological representation) and Holocaust theory (its commodification for cultural production as well as critical discourse) occurs. Looking at both sets of discourses causes a certain degree of slippage between theory and journalism as the object of analysis, but is necessary because of these similarities, which suggest a relation between the two circuits of discourse in how they are made to perform their work in the face of extreme events. Holocaust uses occur not only at points of mass destruction, but also at the points of struggle to achieve some sort of understanding of such events and their aftermaths. Hence the search for the right name, which always reflects the political and social issues that arise in the aftermath. The socio-political and economic effects of catastrophe are of primary concern for both theoretical and journalistic work. In the case of AIDS, Paula Treichler has talked about an "epidemic of meanings or signification" (Treichler 1998: 32). Events that are not "fully knowable" because of their horrific excess, she suggests, have an enormous power to generate meanings. This provides the background for how I understand the trade between theory and journalism. In the face of catastrophe, journalism (and so-called popular culture) readily search for explanations and are more likely to accept theory, which is otherwise often criticized for its lack of relevance, its alleged non-engagement with material and practical concerns. But theory, too, undertakes a search for explanations when dealing with catastrophe. In this search for meaning, both theory and journalism perform the work of representation and signification.

The debate about representation has always been about the problematical relationship between how we can describe the world and how, by doing so, we can gain knowledge of the world. Its urgency lies in this epistemological question: "How can I know something? If our ability to represent things is limited, so also will be our ability to know them" (Descombes 1989: 52). This is what is at stake in representations of catastrophe: the facilitation of our understanding of real-life events. The ways in which the media construct and negotiate different meanings are problematized by the actual occurrence, as well as by the showing, of catastrophe. Important issues are raised, such as an awareness of our own expectations of what each representational code can and should do, and of how these images are processed for us and put before our eyes; the relationship between real events and their representations in the public sphere; the move between those two discourses; or, probably most importantly, the different impact of different discourses on social imagery.

With events like 9/11 and the Bali bombings, when not just visual but also actual physical access to the victims has become highly unsettled and more difficult, the role of visual experience needs to be addressed in new ways. The distinct historical manifestations of visual experience - Martin Jay's important distinction between vision and visibility that draws attention to the cultural rules of different scopic regimes (Jay 1993: 9) - enters a new mode in our times, in terms of both technology and content. The international media operate within a world of continuous and increasing human and non-human violence that also assumes the right to see and to be informed about them as much as possible. The development of ever-faster ways of transmitting visual data is just one phenomenon within this dialectic. Real-time and high-speed satellite feeds thus become the gatekeeping technologies for knowledge about the world. One of Vincent Descombes' points is interesting in this context: the epistemological link

between our ability to represent and our capacity to know necessarily culminates, in relation to any given thing, in the one question: "How can this thing become the object of my representation" (52)? In this vein, let me ask: How can these corpses become the object of our representations? The heaps of dead bodies we see in so many images from violent acts are not mere representations. They not only represent and stand in for the bigger narratives of genocides or wars or natural disasters, but are also material objects, real remains of these events. They are victims and, as such, demand a certain dignity in how they are handled. The body as remains is a special visual signifier and needs to be analysed with its specific characteristics and operations. As remains, not representations of objects but objects themselves, they rather work on us than we on them. Remains, by definition, linger; they haunt us by their very presence. And as remains and material objects they also are subject to physical influences, like decay, which involves different effects within the politics and processes of signification and representation.

In his influential account of the Rwandan genocide, Philip Gourevitch describes the experience of looking at the dead that had been left unburied for memorial purposes at Nyarubuye, a Catholic church and school where about 1,000 people had been massacred. Gourevitch saw them thirteen months after they had been killed. "The dead looked like pictures of the dead" (16), he begins. The first sentence thus already poses the central question of representation. The dead, the physical remains of the massacre that happened at Nyarubuye, look like their own pictures; they are object and representation at the same time, subject to both our imagination and physical influences. Later on in his description Gourevitch intimates how, despite the physical facts of the bodies and

the beds of exquisite, decadent, death-fertilized flowers blooming over the corpses, it was still strangely unimaginable. I mean one still had to imagine it (16).

Curiously here, neither the reality nor its representation, in the form of the memorial, manage to give sufficient explanation of or credence to what had happened in Rwanda. The event is still "unimaginable": we cannot help but imagine "what happened", and thus re-present the event to ourselves as a means of attempting to learn about it.

The fact that the corpses are overgrown with vegetation hints at yet another important question. What will happen to our opportunity for historical understanding about radical events, such as the genocide in Rwanda, once all the physical remains are vanished and only graphic images of remains will be left? The physical "leftovers" of the massacre at Nyarubuye have been used as a memorial, to provide such possibilities of understanding, a site for thinking of how to come to terms with the event in the aftermath. Sites like Nyarubuye signify that the genocide is not over, that the aftershocks are still felt, that there is still political work to do in the aftermath to counter its after-effects. The ongoing scramble over Ground Zero in the United States for instance - debates about what kind of memorial to build - reflects the same unrest. The international newspaper coverage, as well as journalistic, political and academic explorations of the events during the Rwandan genocide, still reflect these after-effects and Rwandan society's efforts to deal with them. Representations within this concern emphasize, for example, that ethnic hostilities are far from resolved, and that nine years after the genocide the country's prisons are still overflowing with enormous numbers of untried suspects. The trials in post-genocide Rwanda, particularly the international Rwandan genocide tribunal, still dominate the international news coverage of Rwanda nine years after the genocide. Rwandan trials and their difficulties—from international and local criticism, slowness, or boycotts to corruption - caused by the sheer mass of cases that have to be dealt with, form the main tropes used to reflect the difficulties of rebuilding Rwandan society. These

aspects go together with discussions of the possibility of reconciliation and the necessity of giving dignified burial to the dead, and they feature particularly strongly in the international press coverage recurring with each anniversary. These concerns with the reinstatement of civil society in Rwanda have been predominant in the 2001 and 2002 coverage of Rwanda, for example in BBC online, *The Guardian Weekly*, the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, or in the news magazine *TIME*. Academic and political texts address similar issues (see for example United Nations 1996; Melvern 2000; Maguarella 2001; Mamdani 2001). One journalist speaks of more than 115,000 possible and still untried perpetrators and quotes the Rwandan president Paul Kagame as speaking about how the shattered Rwandan society has yet to be freed from its genocidal past (Plate 2001). But will the “pictures of the dead”, rather than the dead themselves, be able to fulfil the same functions?

Questions of representation become more than solely aesthetic issues. The treatment of corpses often becomes a site where the politics of something, such as the politics of the representation of the dead, turn into actual politics; a plethora of social and political consequences follows suit. Issues of evidence, identification, preservation, mourning, or memory revolve around the bodies of the dead. The relevance of these issues becomes evident in the struggles of the UN international war tribunals, or, to name just one further example, in the memorial politics in Rwanda which are closely linked up with the political situation of how to reform society and political identity in that country. Memorials and the representations they provide can be seen as a direct outlet of how to get on in the aftermath and of how to make sense of the events. In determining how an event has to be remembered, they are the materialised agreed-upon meanings and understandings of an event. They clearly reflect the political decisions and processes at work in knowledge production and official acknowledgement, that is identification, of an event.

An iconic image, or figure, that many writers find helpful to think through the connections between questions of representation and politics, law, or the public sphere, is Antigone. She buried her brother after Creon, king and also her uncle, had prohibited a proper burial for him and wanted the body left lying bare and exposed. In her reading of the myth, Judith Butler elaborates on Antigone as “a figure for politics” who points “to that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed” (Butler 2000: 2). The remainder of the dead body, which performs this work of exposing as it turns into a sign, and the consequences of this work for politics - the possibility as well as necessity for actions it opens up - thus become the centre of political as well as philosophical concern: in Butler here, but also for example in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1970). As corpse, and with the turn into sign, the remainder of the body enters the public and political sphere, challenging their boundaries and manifestations within states, the imaginary and law respectively, which are linked via public and political acts, speech and speakability most notably (Butler 2000). Antigone thus embodies the concerns about rebuilding society as well as individual lives in the aftermath of catastrophic events; she is an image that provides tools for thinking through issues - and institutions - of memory and mourning, atonement and public national apologies, reconciliation, and representation.

Memorials and remains are related to each other, but also work differently in their aesthetic or political performance. Governments acknowledge and authorize memorials, and the visitor is supposed to identify with the meanings it supports, which more often than not exclude other meanings and realities. But remains do not demand that kind of work from us. They rather work *on* us, a “work” that is often described as haunting. This aspect of “haunting” is an integrative part of the desire to identify bodies.

What lies behind it is the wish to put something to rest. The memorial at Nyarubuye thus might be an example of dysfunctional mourning. Is it to violate the dignity of the dead to let them just lie there, unmoved, still in the state of their violation, a spectacle on display for us? Has the construction of a site for understanding and meaning-making been allowed to override the importance of putting things at rest? Sigrid Weigel has expressed this desire for the Jewish Holocaust, an event that, in her words, “can never be brought to rest by an explanation being produced for it” (Weigel 1996: 164). This restlessness indicates that issues about representing the corpse are not merely about aesthetics, or about a wider sense of aesthetics as a historicity of our sense-perception. A frequently referenced historical context that shows this very clearly is the case of visual representation during and in the aftermath of the Jewish Holocaust. Kaja Silverman draws our attention to the fact of the absolute surveillance and hyperbolic visibility of victims in the Nazi camps (Silverman 1996). Against this historical reality, Blanchot’s assertion that death makes of the body something like a work of art (Blanchot 1982) would have to be challenged by Arthur Danto’s considerations about the right of the subject to its images (Danto 2001). These issues of aesthetics and ethics need to be probed in the context of the representation of corpses and their endless reproduction.

One of the most widely circulated images from the visual coverage of the Rwandan genocide is by the prominent photojournalist James Nachtwey, who works almost exclusively for *Time* magazine. The image shows bulldozers removing and burying the mass of dead. It is published in Nachtwey’s recent collection *Inferno* (Nachtwey 1999), features in many articles on Rwanda, and has also been selected the *Time* magazine’s image of the year 1994. Several motifs resonate with Holocaust iconography: the mass of bodies that provides technical problems of disposal; the employment of machines for the burial or transportation of the corpses to the burial site; and the concerns about the possibility of a dignified human burial.

The similarities that surface in the composition of Nachtwey’s photograph also reflect the ways in which the Rwandan genocide has been compared with the Jewish Holocaust in public discourse. Philip Gourevitch quotes the British philosopher Sir Bertrand Russel, for instance, as describing Rwanda as “the most horrible and systematic massacre we have had occasion to witness since the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis” (Gourevitch 2000: 65). Other recent books on the Rwandan genocide also work with the Holocaust parallel throughout, most notably Mahmood Mamdani’s *When Victims Become Killers* (Mamdani 2001). The analogies constructed by Holocaust comparisons and whether these two different historical events are comparable continues to be contentious. To elide differences into similarities is obviously dangerous, but, disregarding certain taboos on comparison, the rhetorical use of the Holocaust comparison for talking about the genocide in Rwanda is an established media practice. The particular uses imply that to say of the Rwandan genocide that it is a “holocaust” does not necessarily mean to say that the two events are the same. Uses of the Holocaust do not necessarily equate events with each other. Rhetorical uses of the term “Holocaust” can also help to emphasize the differences in the similarities.

A metaphor, for example, never really implies an identity between the two terms. It rather implies equivalence, which means both a similarity and a difference. A rhetorical metaphor, rather than a conventional one, then, in order to make a point, can consciously negotiate and play on these similarities and differences, and become the more effective as the difference between the terms outweighs their similarity. The rhetorical figure of catachresis, for example, operates frequently by

metaphor and metonymy and it is interesting to note this figure's initial makeshift character. It comes into play when the usual rhetorical tools do not fit any more. In the case of Rwanda the term "holocaust" comes in whenever words like "massacre" or "civil war" are perceived as "not enough", as not grasping the reality and extremity of the happenings during 1994. Especially in the case of uses of the Holocaust, it is important to prevent the use of catachresis from being conventionalised. Condemning all Holocaust uses as either culturally insensitive, or as an ethically incorrect equation of differences, would paradoxically contribute to a naturalisation of a rhetorical and political tool that relies on its makeshift character and deliberate misuses.

Therefore, the particular contexts within which Holocaust analogies are being deployed and the particular points that are being made need to be looked at. Nachtwey's photograph from the Rwandan genocide depicts and uses as a parallel structure from the Holocaust the problems that arise from the necessity to bury the corpses. Facing innumerable bodies, the main issue becomes whether a dignified burial is possible. While it is not possible to say exactly what point James Nachtwey was seeking to make as a news photographer (and as part of the whole nexus of politics surrounding the events), it can be said that the concern about giving the dead dignity has been and still continues to be one of the main concerns in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. The specific uses of this photograph suggest that it has been functionalised as a metonym for the whole event. For example, the image is used in *Time* magazine as the last image of the magazine's whole 1994 coverage of the genocide in Rwanda. As one of the "images of the year 1994" it also comes to stand in for genocidal violence in general, serving as an almost allegorical trope for the extent of the destruction of human life that necessitates the employment of machines in the attempts to cope with it. Thus it evolves into an allegory for ultimate dehumanisation, in the same way as images from the Holocaust of innumerable bodies buried or cleared by bulldozers have been read as the "epitome of dehumanization" (see Hirsch 2001: 229-230).

Notwithstanding the obvious parallel here in how to handle enormous amounts of corpses, it is still necessary to draw attention to the fact that this photograph provides an example of the kind of displacements that occur in the use of Holocaust imagery. Not only does the well-known Holocaust image of bodies being cleared by bulldozers experience a spatial and temporal displacement to Rwanda. The Nachtwey image, used often in covering the Rwandan genocide, also is a displacement. The image is actually from Zaire, where large numbers of the Hutu population fled to after Tutsi rebels gained power, and where the refugee camps themselves turned into one of the worst human tragedies. With this spatial move a displacement on the level of the victims happens, since it is the Hutu refugees that die "en masse" because of both violence and diseases erupting in the camps. Zaire held heavily militarised Hutu Power enclaves, providing refuge for war criminals and perpetrators of the genocide on Tutsis in Rwanda. Towards the end and in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, numerous refugee camps for "internally displaced persons" (IDPs) under the supervision of first the French and then UNAMIR and the UN as well as private international humanitarian agencies, became inextricably entangled in the political complexities in the context of the genocide.

This striking displacement leads me to the supposition that a visual theory, which includes thinking about theory in the context of graphic depictions of corpses, needs to be from the very start about the prohibition of graphic images (*Bildverbot*), and also about the ob-scene, *ob scena* in its Latin meaning of offstage, the sights to be kept from the view and sight of the audience and onlookers. In the case of Nachtwey's image of "the dead [...] being gathered up by bulldozers for mass burial", as its caption in

Time magazine describes it (Time 1995: 48), it is important to note that using this one as “image of the year” and thus giving it a specific role in circulation, furthers the blurring of the deaths at the refugee camps of primarily Hutus, and the deaths from the genocide in Rwanda. International perception of this double tragedy had already focused on the media spectacle of Goma, the most notorious of the refugee camps. Contrary to this hyperbolic visibility, “the genocide in Rwanda”, as James Nachtwey rightly observes in introducing his photographs from it, “occurred in almost total obscurity” (285). Such displacements are not just part and parcel of media representations of catastrophe, but are also inherent in the practice of using the Holocaust as a tool to master one’s own representations of certain events. Another example is Gourevitch’s already-mentioned quotation from Bertrand Russel in his Rwanda book. In order to make his point, Gourevitch either mixes up, or conveniently forgets, that Russel made his Holocaust reference in writing for *Le Monde* on 6 February 1964, and was not talking about the 1994 genocide but rather the killing of Tutsis after the so-called *Inyenzi* (cockroaches) invasion in the aftermath of the 1961/2 elections; Mamdani associates Bertrand Russel with this timeframe repeatedly (Mamdani 1996: 15; Mamdani 2001). All of these issues are crucial for theory on the one hand, and for what might be called the politics of seeing on the other.

The politics of seeing is the dynamic interplay between seeing and not-seeing, looking and not-looking. But the politics of seeing is also the policing of what we can see, “the ‘game’ of being permitted or not permitted to see, and of casting doubt on what it is that is being seen” (Baker 1993: 217). It thus moves from the level of perception to the level of production. A politics of seeing is thus most closely linked with what theory traditionally has been. In ancient Greece, *theoria* functioned as the mediating (and authorized) instance between the event and its entry into public discourse (Godzich 1986: xiv-xv), the passage from the real event into its representations. This entry of events into public discourse forms the fulcrum of the issues raised here. Because of the social and political consequences, and because any thinking about images needs to account for the negative, the traditions of *Bilderverbot*, the economy of cruel images, and particularly images of the remains of violent acts, as an inevitable part of Debord’s all-encompassing “society of the spectacle” (Debord 1995) need to be addressed. Any thinking and theorizing about images needs to inhabit the tension and paradox of wanting to see, of not wanting to see, or perhaps not being able to see, because of certain events not having been allowed the passage from event to representation.

Given the extremity of the events that are represented in the images of catastrophe, can we talk about theory, or does theory have to die in the face of so many dead? For Paul de Man there are fundamentally non-theorizable questions, such as for example “good and evil”, or “pleasure and pain” (de Man 1986). If there are such non-theorizable questions, are there also fundamentally non-theorizable real events? The events that leave piles of dead bodies as remains and “leftovers” keep on happening. In the face of this endless “production” of corpses, what are the residues for and of theory? This question is of obvious significance when looking at the current global emergence of a catastrophe industry, an industry that is obsessed with human atrocity, natural disasters, or any form of “violence”. The “Holocaust industry”, as some have called it, or, rather, the Holocaust industries, are part of this wider cultural phenomenon. Thinking about theory in this sense might be important when examining the uses and abuses of the Holocaust imaginary: when considering, for example, the use of Holocaust material to form scripts about how to live in the face of catastrophe and how to respond visually to catastrophe. In this notion of fundamentally non-theorizable questions lies the challenge to theory. But if we cannot theorize these kinds of events, we can at least theorize the mechanisms of their construction

for and in public discourse, and consider practices such as the transfer of Holocaust imagery and theory.

The figure of thought constituted by “Holocaust” or “Auschwitz” comes together with contemporary experiences and forms the cultural and critical constellation at work today - “holocaust”, “catastrophe”, rubble and wreckage in the aftermath have become central figures in cultural production and public discourse. The visual reproductions of the Holocaust - not just for the historical event of the Jewish Holocaust but also for other events - are integral to these constellations and correspondences. The pictures of residue (the piles of bones and corpses) are easily repeatable motifs. Nachtwey’s repetition of the well-known image of a British soldier clearing corpses at Bergen-Belsen with earth-moving equipment shows this clearly.

As Barbie Zelizer has pointed out in the context of visualizing atrocities such as the Holocaust, “visualization works best when it plays to the schematic, iconic, and simplistic features of a representation”. She goes on to claim that we know that much, but that we do not know yet “the ways in which those dimensions facilitate our understanding of real-life events in certain ways and not in others” (Zelizer 2001: 1). If this is true in the uses of Holocaust visuals for its own referent, it is even more so when Holocaust visuals are appropriated for other events. The visual record of the Holocaust is already patterned and repetitive:

Photos of Bergen-Belsen faded into depictions from Buchenwald or Dachau, as photographers with varying levels of expertise, experience, and authority took fundamentally similar shots of fundamentally similar scenes. Stick-like figures, gaping mounds of human bodies, stark death machinery [...] (Zelizer 248).

But when the photos of the camps of Nazi atrocity not only fade into each other but also into the depictions from, for example, Rwanda we can see how images become powerful tools to translate historical events into representations that are produced for consumption within the global catastrophe industry.

By their circulation and repetition, images become more than mere depictions or illustrations of events; tracing certain powerful images and their motifs in their reproductions and their recontextualizations shows that they become intertextual and visualize certain tropes and figures. As the examples show, these tropes help to construct and define contemporary events and express the main concerns and interests at play.

The experience of the Nazi genocide has influenced international developments, especially in law, for example the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the genocide convention, and the new International Criminal Court. The examples clearly show the breadth of the cultural and political dimensions of the use of a Holocaust frame. Reading and seeing events through the lens of the Holocaust can change them, their interpretations, constructions, and significance; hence the need for a careful analysis of the possible import of a “Holocaust genre” for newsmaking, politics, law, ethics or other spheres. The examples show that the transfer of Holocaust material does not necessarily create a simplistic equation of events. Rather, it picks out and elaborates on single aspects in order to make a strong point. These points embody and materialize the stakes and interests, concerns and definitions of the problem, and therefore can give valuable insight into the construction of events and their mediation between reality and representation, showing how an understanding of them is constructed and acknowledged through

the media and other cultural institutions, such as governments. Looking at Holocaust inscriptions in detail can therefore be useful as a means of understanding the primary definition of topics and events for their subsequent discussion in the public sphere.

The uses of Holocaust imagery as a template are more than just unspecific signifiers of horror. Attributing various phenomena with the all-purpose label Holocaust, then, is to ascribe them with the sign "Holocaust" in the attempt to signify - which is also an attempt to arrive at some sort of understanding and explanation - and to translate the event into some sort of language, visual or textual. Such a practice, however, poses an array of political and social problems. The most obvious issues raised by the pragmatics of a Holocaust representation and its transfer lie in the tension between this cultural phenomenon and the single events that spark it, in the dialectic between real events and their representations. As Philip Gourevitch expressed it in the case of the Rwandan genocide, "a precise memory of the offense is necessary to understand its legacy" (19). But this notion of a "precise memory" is problematic: it is a memory that will always be mediated and constructed by the genres through which its representation happens. And how are we to distinguish between representations and their objects? Also the need and desire to "understand" the legacy of a catastrophe hints at how entangled the possibilities of signification and representation are. Given the vexed problems the remainder of the body presents to theory, epistemology, politics, and many other fields within societies, the move between reality, i.e. event, and representation - and the media and tools that facilitate this move - are of vital social importance. This is a move, as well, between subject and object, which happens when living beings are turned into physical objects by death, into remains but open to disappearance at the same time. Issues as complex and difficult as this dialectic between remainder and disappearance, or the question about the different forms of annihilation and remainder, hint at the importance of thinking about the politics of Holocaust templates. The real dangers of a transfer of Holocaust theory and imagery lie not so much in the often lamented dangers of trivializing the Jewish Holocaust than in what is at stake regarding an aesthetics that utilizes the Holocaust. The main concern is not how we can imagine the unimaginable, but rather the ethical and political questions of what actually becomes reproduced and initiated with the uses of the Holocaust.

"No one enjoys living among corpses" – aftermaths and the afterlife of images

Images of residue in the aftermath revolve around certain motifs. Piles of victims' objects, countless bones and corpses, as we know them as icons from the Holocaust resonate like a haunting spectre in the pictures we now see from so many contemporary events. As Gourevitch put it, images can revisit us, "remembered or imagined from various paintings or movies" (301), they have an afterlife. Representations and pictures of catastrophe are to some extent always after-images, produced in the aftermath of events. Theory, the systematics of looking, is also a part and a symptom of the "after". This is why the relation between theory and representation - the possibility, or impossibility, of knowing about the world by "describing" it - is so complex. Uses of the Holocaust, and of Holocaust theory as something that can give us instruction as how to signify extreme events, provide examples of this fraught relationship. When faced with piles of corpses, theory, caught up in these constellations, is yet another representation, producing (and reproducing) further images in the process of translating the experience of catastrophe.

Holocaust uses occur across languages and across media sectors, across different fields of cultural and political activity. Hence they appear across different zones of discourse: in academic or theoretical as well as in journalistic accounts, in “popular” as well as in “high” culture. The move between real event and representation poses the main challenge when talking about the representation of catastrophic events whose materiality is all too clear because of their volatility and excess. There is no semiotically unmediated existence, and thus the question about which discourse to interrogate, address or rely upon, is a vexed one. In the social concern about the remainder of the dead body, and in the face of catastrophe the realms of discourse more often than not blur. What is at stake is the importance of certain discourses for the social imaginary. Some have greater, or more immediate, impact than others. “Theory” as a practice of looking and observing negotiates the modes of mediation between various discourses, especially the mediation between the journalistic and theoretical fields of discourse.

Wlad Godzich, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas all remember the origin of *theoria* in the Greek verb for looking, surveying and contemplating. They also remember its origin in the Greek noun, as Martin Jay writes about Habermas’s *Knowledge and Human Interests* “for a collection of representatives who function as the authoritative witnesses for public events and sacred occurrences” (Jay 1998a: 26). Theory, Jay reflects on Habermas, is thus grounded in the power relations of those who practice it. Godzich and Habermas both focus strongly on this aspect. In *Truth and Method*, however, Gadamer adds yet another element to this political practice and places even more emphasis on the role of the observer in the act of looking, of “doing” theory by – paradoxically – emphasising the importance of the object of the gaze of the onlooker. *Theoria*, for him, is to participate in what is being seen. It is therefore not only active but also passive—a passive suffering and experiencing (*Erleiden*), *pathos* in Greek. This *pathos* Gadamer describes as the state of being absolutely lost in the act of looking. In this way, *theoria* is a hermeneutic tool for gaining access to what is seen or contemplated, a way towards understanding or knowledge (Gadamer 1990: 129-130). Theory, in this sense, is very different from the more modern understanding of theory as a means to construct a totalising explanation of experiences, a fact Gadamer draws attention to later in his book (458-459).

The semantic history of the term “theory” has experienced many shifts. While for Godzich theory’s function is to force “its expression [...] into the public realm” (Godzich 1986: xv), for Habermas it also is the collection of representatives who have the authority to enter what they have witnessed into the public realm. For Gadamer, however, theory is the events themselves that provide a means for understanding them by being the object of an act of surveying and onlooking. Why then the need to think about theory to understand the issues raised in this paper, to understand these events, as well as the representational practice of showing contemporary “catastrophes” by applying Holocaust images, through theory? With Gadamer a possible answer is because theory, in the sense of the older Greek concept, is part not only of events but also of their representations. Theory is thus part of the attempt to make sense of events and how we then act about them or support certain actions by public opinion; something highly important in a world of international politics. Gadamer’s thoughts about theory as participation can cast a different angle on the desire for closeness implied by our consumption of images of corpses and other remains in the aftermath of catastrophic events. Donna Haraway (1988) has described theory as a practice of linkage, the establishing and grouping of comparative phenomena. But what do we actually “see” when we see images from Rwanda or from other events, through the lens of another event? If we look at representations of these events produced with the Jewish Holocaust as a template, do we participate in them and facilitate an understanding and a coming to terms with them, or

do we rather construct yet new understandings of the Jewish Holocaust? In order to keep thinking about these issues, we need to think not merely “through” theory but also about theory.

“No one enjoys living among corpses”, the Protestant theologian Friedrich Gogarten once wrote in the context of the caesura caused by World War I. Since this is the obvious case, it would be easier to forget about them altogether, along with the circumstances that “produce” them (Gogarten 1968: 279). But we are still confronted with corpses by continuing wars and other acts of violence. The fascination with piles of corpses characterizes large parts of our cultural landscape, and the role of corpses as remains in public discourse and cultural critique urgently needs to be addressed. The question remains: how exactly are we looking at images of the residue; at representations of catastrophe as recordings, proof or explanation; at corpses as bodies of evidence in the most literal sense?

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