History and Theory, Theme Issue 47 (May 2009), 54-76 © Wesleyan University 2009 ISSN: 0018-2656

PHOTOGRAPHS, SYMBOLIC IMAGES, AND THE HOLOCAUST: ON THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF DEPICTING HISTORICAL TRUTH

JUDITH KEILBACH

ABSTRACT

Photography has often been scrutinized regarding its relationship to reality or historical truth. This includes not only the indexicality of photography, but also the question of how structures and processes that comprise history and historical events can be depicted. In this context, the Holocaust provides a particular challenge to photography. As has been discussed in numerous publications, this historic event marks the "limits of representation." Nevertheless there are many photographs "showing" the Holocaust that have been produced in different contexts that bespeak the photographers' gaze and the circumstances of the photographs' production. Some of the pictures have become very well known due to their frequent reproduction, even though they often do not show the annihilation itself, but situations different from that; their interpretation as Holocaust pictures results rather from a metonymic deferral. When these pictures are frequently reproduced they are transformed into symbolic images, that is, images that can be removed from their specific context, and in this way they come to signify abstract concepts such as "evil." Despite being removed from their specific context these images can, as this essay argues, refer to historical truth. First, I explore the arguments of some key theorists of photography (Benjamin, Kracauer, Sontag, Barthes) to investigate the relationship between photography and reality in general, looking at their different concepts of reality, history, and historical truth, as well as the question of the meaning of images. Second, I describe the individual circumstances in which some famous Holocaust pictures were taken in order to analyze, by means of three examples, the question what makes these specific pictures so particularly suitable to becoming symbolic images and why they may—despite their abstract meaning—be able to depict historical truth.

Keywords: Photography, theory of photography, reality, indexicality, Holocaust photographs, symbolic images, historical truth of images

There are many pictures we all know fairly well. The frequency of their reproduction brings them to our eyes time and again, and thus these pictures have become a part of our memory. Photographs can give us a sustainable image of events in which we were not personally involved. Beyond that, as images of collective memory, they comprise part of the visual imaginations that are shared with others; hence they can underwrite a mutual interpretation of certain events. Their impact on our imagination and on the definition of the past is undoubtedly one quality marking their success.

In this way our imaginations of the Holocaust—despite the problem of how to depict it, a problem I will refer to later—are shaped by photographs that are part of our cultural memory. If we assume the number of available pictures to be several million, the repertory of pictures that we can recall is comparatively small. Repeatedly we remember the same pictures because they have been continuously reproduced and recycled in film and literature. The reasons these pictures are continuously repeated can be found in their availability, their aesthetic quality, and the motifs shown, as well as in the fact that they permit adaptation to the relevant interpretation of the incident. To what extent these photographs, which have been transformed into symbolic images by their repeated use, are able to depict or convey "the" historical truth is a question I would like to explore in this essay. In order to do so, first I will refer to several theoretical positions that analyze the relationship between photography and reality or truth, and second I will distinguish different categories of Holocaust photographs before I, third, investigate the difficulty with, and the efficacy of, symbolic images by analyzing three examples of "successful" Holocaust pictures.

I

The particular relationship between reality and photographs results from the nature of the latter's technical production: photographs are, as we all know, products of physical and chemical processes. They are produced by capturing the light emitted or reflected by an object through a lens onto the light-sensitive carrier of film or a photographic plate. The exposure itself happens completely "without the creative intervention of man," who "enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed and by way of the purpose he has in mind" but who does not play a part in the actual production process.[1] This automated production grants all photographs particular powers of evidence and persuasion. Due to the absence of human interference, "photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature," and gains its objectivity from its very production process.[2] At the same time it assures the existence of the object depicted, as this is a necessary prerequisite for the photo-chemical process. As a "sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object,"[3] each photograph has an additional indexical quality that reinforces its apparent ability to depict reality as it is.

The objects or persons thus depicted are "*necessarily* real thing[s] which [have] been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph."[4] It is this indexical relation to the object depicted that makes photography appear as "the world being inscribed onto a light-sensitive surface," even though the

1. André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1967), 13.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Nomenclature and Divisions of Triadic Relations, as Far as They Are Determined," in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings. Vol. 2 (1893–1913)* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 291.

4. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 76.

exposure is preceded as well as succeeded by "deeply-rooted cultural, coded gestures that depend entirely on decisions made by humans."[5] This inscription is the cause of the special power of photographs to ascertain knowledge about the world because, as Roland Barthes puts it, "every photograph is a certificate of presence."[6] Moreover, photography brings time to a standstill, and thus always refers to the past. Each photograph freezes the moment in which it was exposed, and captures a moment of time that is already a part of the past after it has been exposed. Therefore, the present that is at hand in a photograph due to its indexical nature is already a moment of time past: photography connects reality and the past. According to Barthes, in photography it can never be denied "that *the thing has been there*."[7]

Because of these qualities, photography seems to be an extraordinarily suitable medium for history. In private use photographs recall memories of events experienced in the past (and often trigger tales about them). If they are used as historical documents, they evince incidents or situations of the past: heads of state meeting each other; historic views of a town; horrible disasters or huge triumphs. Photos are able to inform especially on matters of everyday life when they capture the way people work or live at a specific time.[8] Their immediate power of evidence helps photographs support the display of history as they may be used to illustrate descriptions or to justify explanations in pictures.

However, despite the particular relation of photography and the past, many theorists involved in analyzing photography doubt its usefulness for history, or even reject this idea altogether. Although photographs may confirm a past presence, it is often not possible from their depiction to make out the incidents captured or the situation in which they were taken. To do this, the viewer needs to construct a context, which can happen in the form of a narrative or a caption.

In 1931 Walter Benjamin, in his "Small History of Photography," pointed out the necessity of written information in order to read photographic images with a claim to authenticity (in contrast to photography used in art or advertising). There he quotes Brecht, saying that "less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the A.E.G. tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional." In order to show reality that is no longer explicit, Brecht pleads that "something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed."[9] But even these photographic constructions that aim at grasping "the human connexions in which [they] exist" and at gaining insight[10] require a caption, according to Benjamin, "without which all constructivist photography must remain arrested in the ap-

5. Philippe Dubois, *Der fotografische Akt: Versuch über ein theoretisches Dispositiv* (Amsterdam and Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1998), 54 [translated from German].

6. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.

7. *Ibid*., 76.

8. Cf. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

9. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London and New York: Verso, 1979), 255.

10. *Ibid*.

proximate."[11] His question "Will not the caption become the most important part of the photograph?" implies that only this writing will ensure the decipherability and legibility of photographic images.[12]

With his emphasis on literalizing, Benjamin focused mainly on a phenomenon of social theory, that is, the vanishing of structures and connections. Contrary to his approach, Roland Barthes, who also studied photographs in his writings on semiology, is interested rather in issues of semiotic theory. He also emphasizes the relevance of written supplements when he asks how images convey messages. On the one hand is the connotation, which "is elaborated at different levels of photographic production"[13] through several procedures such as selection, technical treatment, cropping, and so on; on the other hand, the accompanying text especially limits the polysemic meaning of the images, and instead ascribes meaning to them out of a "'floating chain' of signifieds."[14] Contrary to Benjamin, Barthes sees captions not as signposts helping the reader to perceive them as "evidence for historical occurrences,"[15] but as a way to select and anchor meaning.

When dealing with the relationship of writing and image both authors focus on the potential of photographic images. Nevertheless, they identify difficulties opposed to each other: according to Barthes, who underlines their polysemic meaning and their plenitude, photographs contain an overflow of information; according to Benjamin, photographs show too little reality, that is, they omit structures and context.

Susan Sontag also assumes that "any photograph has multiple meanings" and "cannot [itself] explain anything."[16] Besides the lack of interconnectedness, she expresses doubts about photographs' suitability for historical purposes due to their temporal structure. She does not describe photography as a medium of history, but instead as a *memento mori*, as "all photographs testify to time's relentless melt"[17] and are thus "a token of absence."[18] Since the camera records a moment of time, it "makes reality atomic,"[19] and "reinforces a nominalist view of social reality as consisting of small units of an apparently infinite number—as the number of photographs that could be taken of anything is unlimited. Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers*."[20] For Sontag, however, such a conception of reality is opposed by our knowledge of the world, a knowledge that cannot manifest itself by depictions, but only by the understanding of functions in which

11. *Ibid.*, 256.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *The Responsibility of Forms* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1991), 9. Here Barthes refers in detail to trick effects, poses, objects, photogeny, aestheticism, and syntax.

14. Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of Image," in *The Responsibility of Forms*, 28.

15. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies,* ed. Philip Simpson, Andrew Utterson, and K. J. Sheperdson (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), I, 242.

16. Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," in *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday: 1977), 23.

17. *Ibid.*, 15.

18. *Ibid.*, 16.

19. *Ibid.*, 23.

20. *Ibid.*, 22f.

"functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand."[21] Analyzing the temporal structure of photography, Sontag shifts the emphasis to the atomizing and freeze-framing nature of photographs, two qualities that have the effect of preventing an explanation of historical events, and that make it impossible for photographs to do justice to the processual quality of history. Thus we may come, like Sontag, to the conclusion that "photography shows neither history nor stories, but, on the contrary, suspends history and renders each form of historical representation impossible."[22]

The objections raised by these three theorists illustrate that in order to come to any conclusion about the relation of photography and history, it is necessary first to clarify what is meant by the terms "history" and "social reality." Nineteenth-century historicists, for example, did not regard photographs as a source because historiography was interested mainly in people in public life and their activity in political history; because of its automated production, photography could not contribute to their acts of will as it did not show any "traces of the human spirit or the human hand."[23] However, the increasing interest in topics of social and cultural history has resulted in photographs being accepted as part of the canon of sources; in addition, methods of historical picture research—analogous to the standard methods of source criticism—have been established that can help to interpret or decipher pictures. The assumption, however, still remains that photographs cannot depict the processual nature of history or the structural and causal interconnectedness of occurrences, despite this methodological interest.

In an essay published in 1927, Siegried Kracauer tried to answer the question of how to interpret "history" and "reality" by drawing an analogy between photography and historicist thinking, both of which he opposed to history. He notes that photography seems to lack the essence of the original, and compares it to historicist thinking, whose advocates seem to "believe at the very least that they can grasp historic reality by reconstructing the series of events in their temporal succession without any gaps."[24] However, "The truth content of the original is left behind in its history; the photograph captures only the residuum that history has discharged."[25] Thus, according to Kracauer, while both photography and historicist thinking record the appearance of events without considering their meaning, history itself tries to grasp their meaning and thus that which "has been perceived as true."[26] As a consequence, photography might be able to illustrate "the spatial configuration of a moment" but not its truth.[27] Kracauer's conception radically distinguishes reality and truth as two quite different ideas, a similar distinction to that made between historicist thinking and history, or between photography and memory.

21. *Ibid.*, 23.

22. Bernd Stiegler, "Zeigen Fotografien Geschichte?" in *Fotogeschichte* 95 (2005), 3 [translated from German].

23. Johann Gustav Droysen, *Historik*, ed. Peter Leyh (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977), 87 [translated from German]

24. Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (1993), 424f.

25. *Ibid.*, 429.

26. *Ibid.*, 426.

27. *Ibid.*, 431.

Likewise, Roland Barthes distinguished reality and truth in his book *Camera Lucida*, though he thought, contrary to Kracauer, that the former can sometimes lead to the latter. The *noema* of the photograph, its "that has been," nourishes the hope that the truth of "that" will be revealed (though admittedly, there is typically only a picture that is "chafed by reality").[28] Thus, when he describes the moment at which he is looking at an old photograph of his mother who has just died a short time earlier, he believes he finds his late mother's essence depicted in one special picture of her. Any experienced movement from seeing the reality of an entity to grasping its truth, however, occurs only when the truth of an object is entwined with the truth of the subject who views it.[29] Such a connection always requires an emotional surplus since it happens at a point "where affect (love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire) is a guarantee for Being."[30] Thus it is no coincidence that both Kracauer and Barthes refer to photographs of loved ones in order to trace the truth of photographic images, and both judge them against their own memories. But whereas Kracauer did not see himself as able to encounter his grandmother in a photograph of her, Barthes claimed to recognize his mother's essence in an old photo. This may be the reason why Barthes (contrary to Kracauer in his early writings) does indeed think photography can contribute to the acquisition of knowledge, even though this might happen in a way different from the standard procedures of historical studies.

In which form photographs may release historical knowledge is shown by Barthes using a portrait with the title *William Casby, Born a Slave*, taken by Richard Avedon. This photo attests to past reality "not by historical testimony but by a new, somehow experiential order of proof," as Barthes puts it. This order of proof—let us call it "tactile proof"—is not one "merely induced." The "proof-according-to-St.-Thomas-seeking-to-touch-the-resurrected-Christ" is one that is deeply rooted in our nature as physical beings: the basic assumption of doubting Thomas—standing for all doubters—is that only by touching an object can we assure its physical reality.[31] Thus Barthes comes to the conclusion that, because of the physicality of photographs, in them "the past is as certain as the present, what we see on paper is as certain as what we touch."[32] This interpretation is based on the concept of the photograph being a print of light that leaves on the photographic plate the "touch" of the object photographed. Photography, as André Bazin has it, is like a fingerprint, "a kind of decal or transfer" of the object itself, and therefore "shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model."[33] Due to this idea of a physical touch that results in a photographic depiction, the lack of materiality any object has in a photo moves into the background; one might even say that this lack is part of a concept of how to substantially transfer reality. Indeed, it seems that photography enables direct access to past reality.

28. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 115.

29. Bernd Stiegler, *Theoriegeschichte der Photographie* (Munich: Fink, 2006), 349 [translated from German].

30. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 113.

31. *Ibid.*, 79f.

32. *Ibid.*, 88.

33. Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 14f.

According to Barthes, the portrait by Avedon, like the photo of a slave market, "certifies that slavery has existed, not so far from us;"[34] in this way photography contributes to historical knowledge. This knowledge about history, however, does not result from a critical discourse of historical documents. Rather, its evidence is brought along in an experiential way to the extent that photographs enable immediate access to the past. By enabling this to happen, photography undermines traditional historical methods that claim that history cannot be accessible without the intermediary of a historian. The historical reality of slavery, as Barthes puts it, "was given without mediation, the fact was established *without method*."[35]

If we follow Barthes's phenomenological ideas, then photography can indeed provide us with historical truth. But of course this assumes that the pictures can be deciphered or read, that is, that they can be put into the context of a historical narrative. This means, in turn, that it is necessary to have gained knowledge about the subject of a photograph already in order to encounter its truth in photographs. This prior knowledge may derive from one's own experience (memories—as in the case of Barthes's knowledge of his mother and of the circumstances under which she was photographed), or from obtaining historical knowledge (as is typically the case of certain Holocaust pictures that have become emblematic). In these ways the knowledge that the viewer brings to a photograph is essential to its capacity to display the truth about its subject matter.

II

The Holocaust provides an even stronger challenge than usual to visualizing historical truth in photographic depictions. This genocide, which was planned as a total extinction (the *Endlösung*, the Final Solution), was preceded by decisions and acts according to the rules of law and bureaucratic administration that allowed different institutions to interact and to guarantee a smooth and seamless procedure of dispossession, resettlement, and acts of killing. The Holocaust was marked by the fact that the structures of different layers of politics and administration were interlocked; thus the incident itself can be described, quoting Brecht, as something that "slipped into the functional." It may be possible to visualize these structures and organizational procedures by means of graphs; but photographically they must remain undepicted. Even where captions may provide some intelligibility to photographs, their level of information will always be constrained. For example, a picture of the mansion where the "Wannsee Conference" took place can be labeled accordingly, and thus may hint at how the responsibilities for the execution of the systematic destruction of the Jews were divided; nevertheless, the photograph even in this set context will not be able to depict the complexity of this "Holocaust occurrence."

The tracelessness and the scope of the extinction are two more elements that complicate a photographic depiction of the Holocaust even more. The number of people murdered not only exceeds human imagination; they cannot be visually shown, but can only be implied in the form of metonymies (for example, piles of

34. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 89f.
35. *Ibid.*, 80.

spectacles, shoes, or dead bodies). Simultaneously, the tracelessness of the Jews in Europe who vanished makes any visualization of them and what happened to them impossible, since visualization requires the visibility of the object for it to be depicted. What is visible of the Holocaust is only that which was not totally destroyed because the incident had not been brought to its ultimate end (yet). Therefore, the piles of bodies, the surviving prisoners, or the camp constructions shown in the photographs represent those traces of the systematic extinction that had not yet been eradicated.

It is especially these pictures showing the "litter of tortured human bodies in the films made of the Nazi concentration camps" that Kracauer hoped could "redeem horror from its invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination,"[36] as he put it in his *Theory of Film* of 1960. What he expected is that their concreteness and experienceability help to redeem "physical reality," as the subtitle of his book implies, because these "mirror reflections of horror . . . beckon the spectator to take them in and thus incorporate into his memory the real things too dreadful to be beheld in reality."[37] However, looking at the visual limits inherent in the Holocaust as an occurrence, one may be doubtful regarding Kracauer's hopefulness. As Gertrud Koch reminds us:

> The concretism of descriptiveness that has to be fastened to an existing object blocks from the outset against that which marks *mass extinction*. Thus a horrid hierarchy is established, stretching from the piles of bodies of the ones who survived long enough to have their dead bodies captured in a picture, to those who were forced to literally vanish in fire and smoke without leaving a rescuing trace of visual memory.[38]

Likewise, Hannah Arendt pointed out that the pictures taken in the concentration camps are "misleading" as they show the camps "at the moment the Allied troops marched in." The sights that especially upset the Allied soldiers and that constitute the horror of the camps, that is, human beings reduced to mere skeletons, "were not at all typical for the German concentration camps; extermination was handled systematically by gas, not by starvation."[39]

The definition of the Holocaust as the traceless extinction of the Jews in Europe has not always been how it has been defined; indeed, its definition has been subject to continuous change. After the end of the War, it was first perceived as one of the many horrors committed during the War, but gradually the genocide received an independent interpretation, one that conveyed the scope and process of the Final Solution, and the politics of extermination.[40] Along with this development, the pictures that illustrated this historical event changed, too. The photos taken in the liberated concentration camps, for example, associate the early interpretation

36. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 306.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Gertrud Koch, *Die Einstellung ist die Einstellung: Visuelle Konstruktionen des Judentums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 137 [translated from German].

39. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1973), 446.

40. Cf. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000); Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

of the Holocaust as a crime of war, as pictures of men behind barbed wire or in barracks echoed pictures taken in POW camps, and photos of undernourished people or dead bodies underlined the inhuman and cruel way the prisoners were treated. These pictures, however, with their actual and visible objects, oppose the perception of the Holocaust as a traceless destruction. Instead, the visualization of the latter concept has taken place in pictures of landscapes or of empty places that simultaneously reflect on the impossibility of photographic depiction.

The changes in the visualization of the Holocaust, however, have occurred not only in the relevant context of its different conceptions: they also result from the specific frame of interpretation established by national or group interests into which the pictures are placed.[41] Therefore, it makes a difference whether the extinct lives of the murdered Jews are commemorated, whose existence can only be referred to by the photographs remaining; or whether the liberation of the prisoners of the concentration camps is understood as part of a military victory. Depending on the "national" meaning of the Holocaust and the dimensions that one part of the population experienced, the use of pictures and their underlying motifs vary enormously. For example, the achievement of the Allied soldiers is emphasized by pictures showing the number of survivors and the cleaning up of the camps, pictures that in a way legitimize the war at the same time that they show its horror. Implicitly, these photos always pick the soldiers' point of view as central, showing the unimaginable horror "[our] own boys" had been exposed to. If one wanted to deny one's own accountability for the Holocaust, as (has) happened in West Germany, those photos that avoided explicit depictions—for example, the motif of the gate through which the deportation trains entered Auschwitz-Birkenau—were deemed suitable. Even the landscape pictures mentioned above, which illustrate the tracelessness of extinction, favor an "abstract" discussion of the Holocaust without triggering an imagination of what had actually happened inside the concentration camps.

III

Despite the general problem of how to capture in photographs the systematic destruction of the European Jews, numerous photographs exist that depict events that constituted part of the Holocaust. Marianne Hirsch points out "that the Holocaust is one of the visually best-documented incidents in the history of an era marked by a plenitude of visual documentation."[42] These pictures were either made by the perpetrators for official purposes, or as snapshots and souvenirs; or they were taken after the concentration camps had been liberated. In addition, pictures exist that were taken clandestinely by Jewish photographers and resistance fighters.[43] All these photographs show only a minuscule fragment of an occurrence whose

41. On the specific national construction, cf. Levy and Sznaider, *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*.

42. Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001), 7.

43. A discussion of the photographs can be found in Sybil Milton, "The Camera as Weapon: Documentary Photography and the Holocaust," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1 (1984), 45-68.

structure and scope cannot be simply visualized in photographs; nevertheless they allow, as Jürgen Zetzsche puts it, "human imagination to envisage what people experienced in these death camps. The photographs of the Holocaust achieve an explicitness in their historical statements that reaches beyond the gap between what really happened and its representation in photographic pictures."[44]

The majority of photographs documenting the Holocaust were taken by the perpetrators. The functions and use of the pictures were manifold, stretching from official assignments to secretly taken snapshots. For official purposes, pictures were taken in the concentration camps and ghettoes—among other reasons—to supply visuals for reports in the illustrated press where concentration camps were described as "education camps,"[45] or where the ghettoization was justified by pointing out the Jews' way of life and appalling hygiene standards.[46] The reports from the concentration camps served to disprove any rumors about how badly the prisoners in the work camps were treated: thus the photographs record how the prisoners worked or spent their spare time.[47] Here, the the Nazis made use of the apparent verisimilitude of photography as a medium in order to deceive and spread untruth. After the War, this procedure would contribute to diminishing Holocaust photographs' visual power of evidence. The illustrated reports about the ghettoes reinforced anti-Semitic stereotypes by visually supporting biases such as the Jews' "lack of personal hygiene," or that they were "layabouts," and "criminals." The fact that these stereotypical behaviors and characteristics were themselves created by Nazi politics (ghettoization, prohibition on work, and so on) did not erase the long-lasting impact of the photographs that depicted them precisely because of the power of the images themselves. All this shows the difficulty one faces in using these pictures again.

Most of the pictures taken of the camps and ghettoes, however, were not intended for publication. Rather, they served official purposes and were commissioned, for example, to document the construction of the camp buildings in Auschwitz (archive of the *Bauleitung*, that is, construction office), medical experiments, or suicides of the prisoners. There were internal activity reports, too; for instance, in his final report on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in May 1943, Jürgen Stroop included more than fifty captioned photographs. The pictures document how blocks of houses were set on fire in order to force the resisting inhabitants to leave their hiding places, and how these people were then rounded up, arrested, and deported. One of the best-known Holocaust pictures originates from this report, a picture I will refer to later: that of the little boy who, together with other ghetto inhabitants, is rounded up on the street by SS men armed with machine guns.[48] Likewise, the leather-bound Auschwitz album, whose original purpose has never been clarified,

44. Jürgen Zetzsche, "Beweisstücke aus der Vergangenheit. Photographs des Holocaust und ihr Spuren in der Literatur," *Fotogeschichte* 39 (1991), 50 [translated from German].

45. *Münchener Illustrierte Presse* (July 16, 1933); *Illustrierter Beobachter* 49 (1936).

46. *Illustrierter Beobachter* 24 (1941); *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (July 24, 1941).

47. For a more detailed discussion of these press articles, cf. Habbo Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild: Fotografien des Holocaust in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur (*Hamburg: Hamburger Editionen, 2001), 75ff.

48. On the Stroop report, cf. Richard Raskin, *A Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study in the Life of a Photo* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2004).

contains 193 photographs that show the arrival and selection of Jews deported from Hungary. The pictures are sorted into systematic units (for example, "deployable men," "deployable women," "non-deployable men," "non-deployable women"), and their arrangement emphasizes the efficiency with which the work was done at the platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau.[49] The majority of the photographs taken on official commission, however, are those taken for the concentration camp records of inmates. The names of prisoners who were not killed immediately after they had arrived in the concentration camps were recorded in a prisoners' register, and they were photographed for that purpose. From Auschwitz alone, 39,000 records remain.[50]

Apart from the official photographs are numerous amateur pictures showing single aspects of the Holocaust. For example, the pictures were taken—among others—by German soldiers who went on excursions on their off-duty days to visit the Warsaw Ghetto. Like tourists they recorded their impressions in photographs. Their pictures show typical street scenes, and can be read as documents of the systematic isolation and insufficient provisioning of the Jewish population. The Warsaw tram, a recurring motif, is marked by a Star of David, and thus refers to the segregation of the spheres of living and of public facilities; the barricades and the checkpoints emphasize the internment of the ghetto inhabitants; and pictures that show people dressed in rags, begging on the streets, or lying exhausted on the pavement clearly underline the lack of basic necessities.

Yet the amateur photographers used their cameras not only on such day excursions. Private snapshots were taken, too—despite their explicit prohibition—of executions and hangings, and of the humiliation of the population in the regions occupied. Thus pictures exist in which Jewish men were forced to pose for "funny" group pictures together with the German soldiers. In other photographs, the soldiers are standing proudly behind a row of bodies lying on the ground, and seem to present these bodies as some kind of trophy to the comrade photographing or to the viewer. In addition to these posed shots are numerous pictures that document murder—often as a series of photographs—in which the action is not performed for the camera: the actors focus on their activities, which are fixed by the photographer so that he can recall the situation later using the pictures, thus contributing to the narrative he will construct from his memory. That they were mainly personal snapshots is shown by "the place of discovery of these individual pictures: most of these photographs were found in the wallets of dead or captured soldiers or SS-men, often together with pictures of their mothers, fiancées, and families. Like these, the snapshot plays a fetish-like role in the owner's personal balance of memories and emotions."[51]

Some of these amateur pictures have gained wider publicity in recent years. For instance, since the mid 1990s they have been shown as part of the exhibition on

49. On the Auschwitz Album, cf. *The Auschwitz Album: The Story of a Transport*, ed. Israel Gutman and Bella Gutterman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2002).

50. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Bilder trotz allem* (Munich: Fink, 2007), 43.

51. Dieter Reifarth and Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Die Kamera der Henker: Fotografische Selbstzeugnisse des Naziterrors in Osteuropa," *Fotogeschichte* 7 (1983), 59 [translated from German].

the *Wehrmacht*, the former German army, in several German and Austrian towns. The aim of this exhibition is to document that the *Wehrmacht* was waging a war of destruction in the former Soviet Union. This central thesis contradicts the image of the German army as a "clean army" that acted purely on a military basis and that adhered to both the law of war and the law of nations, an image that had been popular up to then. Therefore, it hardly came as a surprise that this exhibition encountered massive opposition. One point of criticism was the use of these same amateur photographs. Their presentation was dismissed as highly inflammatory, and their lack of context was criticized. However, it was the allegation of their erroneous historical placement that led to an investigation of their sources by an expert commission, and consequently to a revision of the exhibition. But this allegation not only challenged the way the curators of the exhibition critically assessed their sources; implicitly, the historians who uttered such criticism doubted in general whether photographs can serve as a historical source.

The personal, souvenir pictures of executions and hangings were all made despite the explicit prohibition against photographing such activities or reporting about them. On August 14, 1940 a decree signed by SS Lieutenant General Krüger on the "Implementation of Executions" states that "any participation of spectators and photographing are forbidden."[52] In 1941 Otto Woehler, Chief of Staff of the Eleventh Army, threatened punishment, and gave the order to confiscate all amateur pictures taken of executions:

> No photographs will be made of such abominable excesses and no report of them will be given in letters home. The production and the distribution of such photographs and reports on such incidents are looked upon as undermining the decency and discipline in the armed forces and will be severely punished. All existing photographs and reports of such excesses are to be confiscated together with the negatives. . . .[53]

Likewise, Reinhard Heydrich, Head of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Gestapo and Security Service combined), repeated the prohibition against taking photographs, and, in 1942, interdicted "the taking of pictures at mass executions and requested that the commanders of the Order Police hunt for pictures, films, or plates circulating among their own men."[54] That this prohibition was ignored by so many amateur photographers, despite the unmistakable threat of punishment, can be explained either by their curiosity or by an emptying of their gaze.[55] In any case, the special situation, which displayed the loss of taboo where human dignity and human life were concerned, required the production of photographs in order to assist in remembering the occurrence. Only in exceptional cases might these amateur photos have been taken with the intention of documenting history, although later they came to be used, as in the case of the "Wehrmachtsausstellung," as historical documents.

52. Cited in *ibid.*, 62.

53. Cited in Sybil Milton, "The Camera as Weapon: Documentary Photography and the Holocaust," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1 (1984), 48.

54. Cited in *ibid.*

55. Cf. Bernd Hüppauf, "Emptying the Gaze: Viewing Violence through the Viewfinder," *New German Critique* 72, no. 3 (1997), 3-44.

Besides the photographs taken by the perpetrators, the pictures that were produced after the liberation of the concentration camps constitute a second large field of Holocaust photography. Here too, a distinction can be made between official photographs and amateur pictures; the latter were taken by Allied soldiers who took part in the liberation of the camps, or who visited them a few days later in order to see the incredible situation with their own eyes. The visiting tours were part of an education program in which journalists and politicians, as well as German people living in the vicinity of the camps, were forced to take part so that they could form a picture of the incidents in the concentration camps in order to attest to their reality and to give evidence about this reality to others. In this project, photography played an important role, too: due to their quality of indexicality, the photographs guaranteed the factualness of the situation, and they confirmed once more in a kind of duplication the statements of the eyewitnesses. More than once the camera took over the witness position completely, as many visitors participating in those tours perceived the camps as unreal, and said that only the pictures enabled them to ascertain their reality. This phenomenon involved the photographers, too, who were able to "rationalize and integrate" the atrocious scenes into "familiar patterns of perception and behavior" only by the act of photographing.[56] Margaret Bourke-White, who took pictures in Germany for *Life Magazine*, commented on her emotions and the doubts of her own perception: while visiting Buchenwald she repeatedly told herself that she would only believe in the indescribably atrocious scene of the yard in front of her if she were to see her own photographs of it: "Using the camera was almost a relief. It interposed a slight barrier between myself and the horror in front of me."[57] The Allied soldiers, too, repeatedly referred to the pictures they had taken in the camps to make sure that what they had witnessed was real. Joseph Kushlis, who was one of the soldiers liberating Ohrdruf, describes the function of these pictures as follows: "I have pictures that I took at that time. Time and again I pick them up to remember that it really happened."[58]

The photographs taken by amateur photographers were often more convincing than pictures taken by professional photographers on official commissions. Their power results mainly from the way they were presented: in their ameteurishness the photographs seem to depict directly the situation the photographers had experienced. Thus their own pictures seem to be more truthful than the more composed pictures of professionals, and the emotional response when viewing such raw pictures also helps to validate them for people who had not been there. Moreover, the amateur photos also differ from the official pictures of the liberated concentration camps published in newspapers, brochures, and on posters in the motifs each type presents. As the latter pictures became part of the Allied information program, and their publication was done for educational, moral, and political reasons, they showed the situation in the camps in a specific way. The pictorial motifs in them

56. Cornelia Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung: Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Photographs aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998), 29. [translated from German]

57. Margaret Bourke-White, *Dear Fatherland, Rest Quietly* [translated from German version].

58. Cited in Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung*, 29 [retranslated from German].

corresponded with the (subsequent) legitimization of the war, and so they present a picture of the inhumanity with which the prisoners had been treated and their subsequent rescue by Allied soldiers. By doing this they were in line with the interpretation of Germany as a country of cruel sadists and of the Allied forces fighting for the cause of humanity and democracy, an interpretation that made them not only the military, but also the moral, winners of the war.[59] This construction of meaning was visualized, for instance, by pictures that showed masses of dead bodies or particularly cruel discoveries of bodies. "Taken together, the images portrayed both individual agony and the far-reaching nature of mass atrocity, suggesting that the depiction of each individual instance of horror represented thousands more who had met the same fate;"[60] in so doing the pictures connote the idea of the vastness of the evil that occurred in Germany. Again, Allied soldiers can be seen in some of the pictures; this not only enhances the credibility of the photo, as the soldiers are eyewitnesses being photographed, but it also suggests that the Allies were fighting in order to liberate the camps.[61] Other photos show how the rescuers helped the survivors, who are in a pitiful state. These photos acquire meaning by their motifs as well as by a specific composition, which more than once echoes conventions of Christian display (for example, the motif of "ecce homo" or of a "martyr," a person in pain),[62] and also by relevant captions that reinforce the connotations of "cruelty" and "rescue."

Publishing the photographs from the liberated concentration camps had one aim: to mercilessly bring to light the crimes committed. In order to reveal the facts, the Allied forces used photography not least because it seemed to be an appropriate medium for this project due to its indexicality and its evidential quality. The presentation of visual information about the incidents in the camps can initially be seen as successful, as many viewers were convinced by the factualness of the pictures. Even though some thought the reports about the camps were exaggerated, "the vast majority of the U.S. and British publics believed the photos."[63] The German population, on the other hand, was more skeptical, which is hardly surprising, as the pictures were taken by the military enemy who was likely to use them for propaganda reasons; also, they required the admission of guilt. Furthermore, the politics of images that the Nazis had fostered, and which had taught the Germans how photographs can be selected and manipulated, was one reason to doubt the authenticity of the photographs taken in the liberated concentration camps.

In the years to follow, these photos played a central role when the Holocaust was remembered at different stages in different countries.[64] To the extent that they

59. *Ibid.*, 31.

60. Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 111.

61. Cf. *ibid.*, 100ff.

62. Cf. Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung*, 57f.

63. Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 146.

64. For the stages of remembering the Holocaust, cf., for example, Levy and Sznaider, *Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age;* Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life;* Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006).

shaped the visual imagination regarding the concentration camps, and even became their own category ("atrocity photos"), these pictures have been extremely successful. At the same time, there has been a shift of meaning in them over the years, which has increasingly disconnected them from the concrete situation shown in each picture. Thus the photos have lost their referentiality, and now predominantly signify abstractions such as "cruelty," "National Socialism," or "history." Therefore they are of only limited use when it comes to reconstructing or conveying historical knowledge. Although a verbal context has always been necessary in order to transmit historical facts via pictures, the transformation of Holocaust photographs into symbolic images impedes this enterprise even more.

IV

"Although more than two million photos exist in the public archives of more than 20 nations, the quality, scope, and content of the images reproduced in scholarly and popular literature has been very repetitive," Sybil Milton stated in 1986.[65] Even today, this statement remarking on the recurrence of the very same pictures is valid, although in the meantime Holocaust photographs have received distinctively more attention, and the repertory of the pictures has been significantly enlarged. This ongoing recurrence can be interpreted as testifying to the success of individual photographs. Nevertheless, as Barbie Zelizer complains, "certain atrocity photos resurfaced time and again, reducing what was known about the camps to familiar visual cues that would become overused with time."[66] Clément Chéroux sees the pictures emptied of their information, as their sources lose accuracy with each reproduction, and the pictures are thus "degraded from a document containing context to a symbol lacking substance."[67] Nevertheless, these symbolic images, this congealed form the photographs have assumed over the course of time, can also be described in a positive way: they have the ability to reinforce knowledge that already exists. They can never impart comprehensive knowledge of the Holocaust (no picture could), but their actual depiction can refer to a wider context in a metonymic way. By triggering associations and calling upon existing archives of knowledge, the symbolic images may be able to transmit historical truth even though this truth cannot be depicted in the picture itself. Thus the photos of the immense number of shoes, suitcases, and spectacles that were left behind at Auschwitz echo the unimaginably high number of murdered people; and the pictures showing scenes of historical locations prompt a reflection on the tracelessness of extinction.

Photographic records can turn into symbolic images if they are constantly reused. Chéroux describes this transformation as a loss of identifying features because mass reproduction causes the details of time, context, and actual motif to be

65. Sybil Milton, "Photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto," in *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 3 (1986), 307.

66. Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 158.

67. This is how Nicole Wiedenmann summarizes Clément Chéroux's position in her essay "'So ist das, was das Bild dokumentiert, das Gegenteil dessen, was es symbolisiert': Holocaustfotografie im Spannungsfeld zwischen Geschichtswissenschaft und Kulturellem Gedächtnis," in *Die Macht der Geschichte*, ed. Fabio Crivellari *et al*. (Konstanz: UVK, 2004), 324.

less and less precise. Therefore, the pictures lose their content of information and become symbols of more generic abstractions like "evil" or "the Holocaust."[68] Besides the loss of context, the emergence of symbolic images can also be explained by the abundance of possible information and meaning they can convey. As we all know, pictures receive their meaning from their contextualization and usage, such that the same picture can come to signify varying things. One form of contextualization is to state the time and place the picture was taken; another is to identify the people shown or to explain the situation recorded in the picture. With each new usage, the meaning of a photograph shifts. If sparse usage of the pictures leads to deletion of meanings that were once emphasized,[69] their permanent recurrence in different contexts and usages results in several meanings overlapping one another. Paradoxically, this leads to diminished referentiality of the photographs, as they are no longer perceived in the materiality of their depiction. Their transformation into symbolic images turns the photographs into objects suitable for popular and artistic processing because their high profile assures that they will be recognized when cited, and they can thereby unfold their specific effects. For example, the restaging of well-known film footage in *Schindler's List* helps to authenticate the film narrative, and the quotations in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* can be read as an expression of the "work of postmemory."[70]

This loss of substance can be illustrated with the example of a black-and-white photograph that, according to Sybil Milton, is one of the "two images [that] have come to symbolize the complex series of events now known as the Holocaust" (Figure 1).[71] What we can see in the picture is a bulldozer pushing dead bodies; the bulldozer is placed in the center of the photograph and is seen in a full frontal view. The dead bodies in the foreground make up a small pile. In the background of the picture stretches a barracks, running parallel to the top and bottom edges of the picture, thus dividing the premises and the sky visually into two equal parts. The bulldozer is driven by a man whose slightly inclined head is covered by a cap. The front view of the machine, the presence of its driver, and the position of the dead bodies in particular—bodies that are partly cut out of the picture, leaving the impression that their extremities continue outside the frame at the bottom-left corner of the picture—evoke the impression that the bodies move straight on to the beholder of the picture.[72] In its explicit display of the human bodies and extremities, the photo—if studied closely—is an extremely unsettling and shocking one.

68. According to Chéroux, the loss of information involves both the quality of the picture, which is diminished by its reproduction, as well as its contextualization; cf. Clément Chéroux, "Du bon usage des images," in *Mémoire des Camps: Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazi (1933–1999)*, ed. Clément Chéroux (Paris: Marval, 2001), 13.

69. Allan Sekula says that when pictures are returned to the archive, their meaning is extinguished. Cf. Allan Sekula, "Reading the Archive," in *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*, ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press. 1989), 116.

70. On *Schindler's List*, cf. Miriam Hansen, "*Schindler's List* is not *Shoah*: Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory," in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives on* Schindler's List, ed. Yosefa Loshitzky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 77-103; see also Christoph Classen, "Balanced Truth: Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* among History, Memory, and Popular Culture," *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 47 (2008), 77-102 (this issue). On *Maus* and postmemory, cf. Hirsch, "Surviving Images.".

71. Milton, "Photographs of the Warsaw Ghetto," 307.

72. In the existing film footage of this scene, which is incorporated, for example, in *Nazi*

In his critical discussion of symbolic images, Chéroux uses this photograph to show how falsely photographs may be perceived if they are not put into an appropriate historical context. The photo, which was published in numerous books and journals, is used as a symbol of the industrial murder carried out by the Nazis.

Figure 1. Used with permission of Imperial War Museum, negative number BU 4058

But the photo was neither made by one of the perpetrators, nor does it show a moment of organized extermination of humans; instead, it was taken by Sergeant Oakes, a British photographer with No. 5 Army Film & Photographic Unit, on April 19, 1945, that is, four days *after* Bergen-Belsen had been liberated.[73] In fact, the picture documents how the Allied soldiers buried the dead bodies that were lying everywhere in the camp in order to prevent an epidemic. "What is shown is not the inhuman way the Nazis treated their victims even after they had died," but instead the sanitary precautions taken by the Allied forces.[74] Nevertheless, the picture can serve as a symbolic image of the Nazi atrocities once it has been removed from its contextual frame and if it is not studied closely (the driver's cap makes it clear that he is not a member of the SS, the mouth protection indicates the danger of epidemic, and so on). In the case of this picture, the lack of context and the inevitably short glimpses given to it by its viewers led to a fundamental misreading of the picture and what it depicts. Indeed, as Chéroux notes, "the ob-

Concentration Camp by George Stevens (1945), the dead bodies indeed move toward the spectators.

73. According to the details stored in the database of the *Imperial War Museum*.

74. Wiedenmann, "'So ist das, was das Bild dokumentiert...'," 324.

ject that is documented by the picture is the very opposite of what is symbolized by it."[75] Besides its well-done composition, the track record of the picture as a Holocaust photograph can be traced mainly back to the fact that it offers a plausible visualization of how we interpret the incident. As a symbolic image the photo may, despite its misreading, trigger historical knowledge of the Holocaust, for example, if the situation shown is understood as the remains of an extermination program that had not been brought to its end.

Figure 2. Used with permission of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Another photograph that has come to be a general symbol of the Holocaust is the picture of a boy being arrested together with other people in the Warsaw ghetto (Figure 2).[76] What we see in the picture is a number of people coming out of a house onto the street with their arms raised, guarded by either SS or Gestapo men. They are led by a woman in a black coat shown on the left in the foreground of the picture; she is moving diagonally to the right toward the photographer or beholder. In that movement she is turning her head to the left so that we get a good look of her face in profile. On her left a small boy is walking. He is also raising his arms. His face is clearly visible as he was photographed in a nearly frontal view. His head is covered by a cap, and under the buttoned-up coat his naked legs are visible, his stockings having slid down. The woman and the boy are walking side by side, but there is a small distance between them that distinguishes the boy from the group of people that forms a unit close behind the woman; this group is depicted in the background of the picture. This distance, which is located nearly in

75. Chéroux, ed., *Mémoire des Camps*, 16.

76. The view or opinions expressed in this article and the context in which the images are used do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of, nor imply approval or endorsement by, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

the center of the picture, divides the photograph into two halves, which additionally separates the boy from the other ones arrested. One of the Gestapo men in the far right corner of the picture, shown in front, holds in his arm a gun whose barrel is pointing toward the boy. Likewise, the woman's glance is directed at the boy. In this way the composition focuses all attention on the boy.

Originally, the photo of the boy was a part of the Stroop report, which described how the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto (April 19 to May 16, 1943) was put down. Labeled with the caption "Mit Gewalt aus Bunkern hervorgeholt" ("Pulled from the bunkers by force"), the picture served as evidence of the accomplishment of the German troops, which, during the "clearance," searched all houses in the ghetto, uncovered numerous hide-outs, and arrested the people hiding there. As a symbolic image, however, the picture has left out the context of its origin as well as the context of its usage; it has come to symbolize the defenselessness and innocence of the victims of National Socialism. The little boy serves as the perfect representative, as his childishness (comparable to Anne Frank's) encompasses exactly these qualities. Here, too, the documentary content of the picture is quite different, as the arrest depicted in the photograph was preceded by an act of resistance. Whereas the historical contextualization of the picture underlines that the residents of the ghetto were not fully defenseless but indeed fought their deportation for days, the symbolic image lacks all hints of the uprising itself. Similarly, the innocent child incorporating all victims of National Socialism represents a significant reduction of the victims' diversity; in this way the photo does not do justice to the Uprising's historical complexity. But just like the photograph of Bergen-Belsen analyzed above, the photo of the small boy may also help to recall the historical events and their complexity. The moment captured in the photo may trigger speculations on a further course of events; in turn, these may connect to historical knowledge about the Holocaust, and be able to give an idea of the historical reality of what happened.

The photograph of the arrest was widely published, but often incompletely: the picture was often cropped in order to focus attention on the little boy. (The extent of the cropping varied so that sometimes only the little boy is visible, sometimes also the woman beside him, and sometimes even the man in the background who seems to be pointing his gun at the boy.) These changes of detail not only mask the situation or environment in which the boy is shown, but also the visual signs that would allow readings other than that of the innocence and defenselessness of the victims. The cropping of the picture especially favors the way (West) Germany dealt with its National-Socialist past. In this symbolic image, stripped of any political and social context, the Holocaust becomes an accident without any actors or, rather, with the Gestapo and SS as the only actors. At the same time the innocent child's face evokes a feeling of empathy, and enables a consciousness of guilt that lies outside any actual analysis of historical responsibility. The opportunity to feel guilty without having to reflect upon one's own involvement in the incidents or to take any ameliorative steps explains the picture's success in West Germany in particular.[77]

77. On the relationship between photographic and political discourse regarding the National-Socialist past of West Germany, cf. Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild*.

Figure 3. Used with permission of Centre de documentation Juive Contemporaine

A third photograph, also very well known, supports this suppression of the sense of individual involvement even further, as it shows neither victims nor perpetrators. The picture in question shows the gateway of Birkenau through which all deportation trains passed when arriving at the camp (Figure 3). What we see are rail tracks that reach from the foreground of the photo into its depth. They are linked by switches, and the construction of the photo in central perspective increases the impression of the tracks meeting each other at the vanishing point of the picture, which is placed exactly in the center of the gateway. The elongated building occupies the whole upper half of the photo, and runs parallel to the top and bottom edges of the picture. The gate is located in the center of the building under a tower flanked by low wings on the left and right. The passageway is clearly visible due to the contrast of the dark building and its bright, snow-covered surroundings. In the foreground we can see plates and bowls scattered across the tracks, which are slightly covered by or filled with snow.

The picture was taken shortly after Auschwitz had been liberated (January 27, 1945) as part of a status report of the circumstances the Allied army encountered. It was taken by Stanislav Mucha, a Polish photographer who accompanied a unit of the Red Cross, and whose photographs that document Auschwitz-Birkenau—apart from the gateway—also contain motifs such as the ruins of the crematoriums, dead bodies, or parked transport railcars. However, only the picture described managed to gain a high profile. (The success of this picture cannot be measured only by looking at the frequency of its publication. In addition, it has served as a model, because many visitors to the memorial at Auschwitz have adopted the viewpoint of the picture.) Its motif is often compared to an abyss ripped open, an association based on the assumption that the picture shows the entrance to Birkenau. But once more, as Chéroux informs us, this is a misreading, as the

picture does not show a view from outside the premises, but was taken inside the camp and thus shows its exit, not its entrance. The impression of being devoured, however, is evoked by the picture independently of knowing the "right" direction of the gaze, as the central perspective of its construction pulls the beholder inside. At the same time, it transmits a feeling of desertedness, a feeling created by the vastness of the area, the snow, and the absence of people. The lack of human bodies especially enables the beholder to see the picture removed from what the Holocaust actually meant to each victim. The presentation of an empty place with no people, however, can also be read as a hint at the tracelessness of the victims and the horrors that befell them, implying the impossibility of a photographic depiction of them. The photograph seems to offer several readings (suppression and abstraction of actual events, reflection on the problem of presentation), and in this way appeals to different types of viewers. This potential is another reason for the frequency with which this and other pictures have been published.

The power of Mucha's photograph, however, does not result only from its perspective: it especially succeeds in rendering an atmosphere of desertedness because of the snow-covered crockery that leaves a trace, implying that this place had not always been empty and depopulated. The scattered plates also contribute to a deferral by concreteness or "delay of density,"[78] as they cannot be instantly recognized as such. A close study of the picture is necessary in order to identify the objects under the cover of snow. Moreover, only the anticipation of what might be buried under the snow provides an approach to the picture's historical truth.

If we define the enabling of historical knowledge as an approach to historical truth, photography may be said to possess the potential to show historical truth. This is the case even with the three pictures described that have been removed from the concreteness of the scene they depict and that have come to symbolize something quite different from the objects they document. If one wants to create a link to existing knowledge, it is irrelevant if these pictures have been placed in their correct historical context. Knowledge can also be enabled by pictures that have turned into symbolic images and that signify abstraction. The access to historical truth does not seem to require contextualization or a high profile, but rather matters of perception and reception.

V

Even if the success of individual photographs can be explained by their symbolic content, their aesthetic design, their manifold readings, and their ability to be integrated into specific practices of memory and commemoration, there still remains the question of other pictures of (aspects of) the Holocaust that have not become well known. Among the millions of photographs stored in the archives are undoubtedly a large number of photographs that meet these criteria and that are of useful quality as pictures. Nevertheless they are hardly utilized—if at all—a fact that has to be discussed with regard to the different economies into which the circulation of Holocaust pictures is tied. Detailed research would be neces-

78. Roland Barthes, "Shock-Photos," in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997), 73.

sary in order to trace these pictures, despite the fact that many photos have been catalogued in databases; this is an effort many editors will not make. And the decipherability, the storage of historical knowledge, and so on require a certain "investment" (research into context, explanations, captions, and so on) in order to provide the photographs with meanings that will recall the symbolic images immediately without the need to read them closely.

Among the pictures that have come to public attention only quite recently are four highly unusual photographs taken in August 1944 by prisoners with a camera that had been smuggled into Auschwitz-Birkenau. Two of the pictures show a large number of dead bodies being burned; a third one shows an unidentified view of single trees among which, in one corner of the photo, some naked women can be seen; the fourth one is backlit and makes one sense rather than see the treetops. The low quality of these photos may be one reason they are hardly used: they are partly blurred, and details are recognizable only in some parts. The two photos of the burning bodies, for example, were taken from inside so that where one part of the picture shows the view outside, the rest of the picture remains black.[79] Thus an enlargement was made of one of these pictures, which has been published several times (Figure 4). The unusual composition alone leads to an initial confusion, which provokes a closer study of the pictures. But even in the blow-up of one detail, that is, after eliminating the formal confusion, the motif contains a "delay of density." The rising smoke obstructing the view, and the posture of individual people standing among the bodies in the center of the picture, guide the viewer to the actual situation depicted. The visibility of the labor that was necessary to exterminate people, and

Figure 4. Used with permission of The State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau in Oświęcim

79. The interior room, from which the two photos were taken, is the inside of a gas chamber. The camera position not only explains the unusual composition of the pictures, it also points to the circumstances of their production; these circumstances led Georges Didi-Huberman to understand them as "wrest from hell" as well as an act of resistance; cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Images malgré tout," in *Mémoire des Camps: Photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination nazi (1933–1999)*, ed. Clément Chéroux (Paris: Marval, 2001), 219.

the matter-of-factness with which this was executed, cause quite a shock. The explicitness of this photo and of its enlargement, respectively, seems to be too great to turn it into a symbolic image.

These four photographs were seen in public in 2000 as part of the exhibition *Mémoire des Camps*. In the catalogue of the exhibition is a text about these four photographs written by Georges Didi-Huberman, who describes them as an act of resistance in which the prisoners tried to defy the absolute extermination on the one hand, and to counteract the unimaginability of the event on the other. In France, Didi-Huberman was fiercely attacked for his position, which led him to state it more precisely in quite a polemic response to his critics, a response that was then published together with the catalogue text as a book in 2003. The publication of the book, which also contains the four photographs in question (the German edition shows one of the pictures of the burning bodies on the cover), increased public knowledge of them and their original context. If it is true that photographs can be transformed into symbolic images by their recurring use, then we might be witnessing such a process at the moment.

Didi-Huberman not only submits the photos to a close reading, he also formulates a theory of the image in which he focuses on the historical truth of images on the one hand, and specifies the relevance of their reception on the other. Following Hannah Arendt's argument, he sees the four photographs as "moments of truth."[80] "It goes without saying," he writes,

> that the four photographs of August 1944 do not *tell* the "whole truth." One would have to be quite naïve to expect that of any kind of witness, be it in the shape of things, words, or pictures. The four photographs are tiny details of a complex reality, short moments of an incident that stretched over five years in total. But for us and for our view today they *are* the truth, a trace of it, a poor scrap, of what remains visible of Auschwitz.[81]

Whether the pictures will really be perceived as truth depends, as it always does, on the way they are viewed. Didi-Huberman worries that their iconic use as well as their documentary use bespeak an "inattentiveness" shown to the pictures.[82] To counter this he urges the "effort of *archeological work*, the time for a *work on the pictures* that will relate them in a constant sequence of collisions and connections, fractions or transformations."[83] Only by engaging in this work can truth come to the surface in these photographs.

Utrecht University

TRANSLATED BY KIRSTEN WÄCHTER

80. Didi-Huberman, *Bilder trotz allem*, 55 [translated from German].
81. *Ibid.*, 63.
82. *Ibid.*, 58ff.
83. *Ibid.*, 171.