Photographs and Memories

Lutz Koepnick, Washington University in St. Louis

CLOSE-UP 1: ALAN SCHECHNER, "IT'S THE REAL THING (SELF PORTRAIT AT BUCHENWALD)"

WE SEE A MAN WHO STARES straight into the lenses of the camera. His eyes express untroubled resolve and self-confidence. His is a look we know all too well from the advertising pages of picture magazines: a look that is meant to testify to the charisma and intensity certain kinds of commodities bestow on our ordinary lives. And indeed, what the man holds in his hand—as if toasting to the spectator and thereby directly acknowledging our presence in front of the camera—is a can of Diet Coke. Even though the rest of the image is black and white, this soda can glistens in spectacular red and pink. Its flare attracts, arrests, and implicates our own look like a light house radiating signals from a dull beachfront setting. But what we see around and behind this man of confidence and determination is not monotonous nature. What we see instead are the bunks at a Nazi concentration camp, filled with emaciated men who seem to use their last energy in order to enter the photographic frame and gaze at the camera. Like the man with the soda can, the camp inmates pull the viewer into the space of representation (see fig. 1). They know they are being photographed, and their look urges the viewer to return their gaze. Yet our knowledge about their fate situates us in agonizing viewing positions. Forced to cast a cold and detached gaze at these men, a gaze that cannot but fail to establish reciprocity, we do not know how to keep our eyes open without experiencing our own selves under unbearable pressure.

In the early 1980s, the first wave of postmodernist photography—think of photographers such as Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince—explored the world of advertising and mass cultural spectacle in order to reveal the codes, conventions, norms, and ideological underpinnings of commercialized image circulation. By reproducing, recropping, and recontextualizing extant art and advertising photographs, artists such as Sherman tried to make visible the seductive logic of commodity culture and its blurring of any boundaries between serious and light art, politics and entertainment. Alan Schechner's "It's the Real Thing (Self Portrait

Figure 1. Alan Schechner, "Self Portrait at Buchenwald: It's the Real Thing" (1991–1993).

at Buchenwald)" is indebted to this early postmodernist impulse. It works with and recontextualizes well-known imagery in order to destabilize the viewer's ordinary perception. At the same time, his photograph engages digital technology in order to recall the legacy of surrealism: Diet Coke here seems to meet Buchenwald in the same way Surrealist art established unlikely conjunctions of sewing machines and umbrellas. Whether or not he succeeds with his work, Schechner's ambitions are considerable. On the one hand, he wants to direct our attention at the fact that photographic images—including those depicting the Holocaust—require contexts in order to assume meaning and carry messages. His is not a photograph aspiring to witness, mourn, or work through the traumas of the Holocaust. It does not aim at finding a new way of representing the unrepresentable. Rather, it wants to render problematic the way in which contemporary media culture makes use of the Shoah, the way in which images of the Nazi period and the Holocaust have become some of the most enduring commodities of postwar visual culture. On the other hand, Schechner seeks to lay bare that Surrealist tech-

niques have lost their ability to shock perception and explore the dis-
ruptive energies of the subconscious. "Today's photography," writes
Andy Grundberg,

> is a response to living in a world in which what challenges real-
> ity is simulated reality, not surreality. Ours is quite a different
> situation from that of the surrealists, who saw reality as a screen
> or blockade that masked the irrational, chaotic, childlike, and
> presumably genuine arena of the subconscious.[1]

Schechner's work wrestles with the waning of surrealist shock effects.
His photograph stresses the fact that in today's world of visual
overstimulation and digital mutability there is nothing remarkable any-
more about the encounter of incommensurable experiences and tempo-
ralities. What is solely shocking about Schechner's digital intervention
is that this technological conjunction of dissimilar realities no longer
really shocks the viewer.

   Schechner's use of the digital changes positions in space and time,
not as a consequence of physical labor, but of technological will and
skill. It privileges becoming over being, and it emphasizes protean trans-
formation, physical flux, and temporal reversibility. For this reason,
images such as "It's the Real Thing (Self Portrait at Buchenwald)" are
often seen as disrespectful of Holocaust memory, as ethically perverse
and amoral. They transgress, it is said, boundaries that we ought to pre-
serve in order to commemorate the evils of the past appropriately. At
closer inspection, however, Schechner is much more of a moralist than
this kind of argument suggests. In Schechner's work, photography docu-
ments its own inability to jolt unforeseen pictorial energies and thereby
open our eyes for the unimaginable. What Schechner's self portrait seeks
to exhibit is the failure of the photographic image not only to record
reality reliably and to authenticate memory, but also to address the shocks
and ruptures associated with traumatic experience. Instead of embrac-
ing an amoral universalization of Holocaust memory, Schechner wants
his viewer to understand how mechanical and mass reproduced images
today tend to anaesthetize perception and cloud our judgment. His work
deflates the gravity of photographic realism in order to reveal and con-
demn the hyperrealism of contemporary memory culture. Accordingly,
neither the photographic nor the digital image can provide adequate
measures to account for the horrors of the past: Whoever takes a picture
displaces the real and supplants the possibility of authentic remembrance.
Though transgressing dominant standards of reverence and representa-

tion, Schechner's ultimate aim is an ethical and political one. His work questions our conventional trust in mechanical images, and in doing so, it urges us to explore why and how we have come to encounter photographs as authenticating media of history and memory—as prosthesis of perception and recollection—in the first place.

This essay is meant to follow Schechner's lead and probe some of the measures we use in order to assess the mnemonic power and politics of mechanical images. The argument will alternate between a number of theoretical reflections and various more analytical discussions of different photographic practices, reflecting my contention that neither our writing on trauma nor on photography can ever succeed without fundamental acts of refraction. What unifies the conceptual exposures and interpretative close-ups of this essay are two principle concerns, namely (1) whether the culture of digitization has radically changed the prosthetic nature of photographic memory, and (2) whether photographic images can in some way assimilate to the temporal mobility of other media such as film and digital imaging so as to reframe the traumas of the past and change their bearing on the present.

Exposure 1: Against Ontologies of the Mechanical Image

It has become a truism to say that recent advances in computer-driven image processing—e.g., digital photography, magnetic resonance imaging, CAD-technologies, video games—have revised our thinking about the role of mechanical images in modern and postmodern culture. In both its aesthetic and vernacular uses, the emulsion-based photographic image was largely seen as an indexical representation of the real—a chemical transcription of light particles whose causal relationship to the pre-photographic world seemed to endow it with heightened referentiality, evidence, truth, objectivity, mimetic closure, realism, and perspectival verisimilitude. When looking at conventional photographs, we by and large considered them as traces of a continuous visual field that in the moment of exposure had surrounded the position of an embodied observer. We may have thought of the photographic camera as a technology able to penetrate quotidian surfaces, reveal what could not be seen by the human eye, and thus introduce us to unconscious optics like Freud introduced us to the hidden impulses of the mind. But rarely did this lead to a questioning of the photographic image's assumed status as an indexical sign, i.e., the assumption that in photography the relationship between image and object of representation is one of cause

and effect, of contiguity, resembling the relationship between a foot and its print in the sand. Surely, different historical practices, institutions, techniques, and meanings may have defined certain hierarchies of trust, evidence, and truth value. A police picture of a speeding car could serve as court evidence against its driver, whereas a snapshot of the Forbidden Palace in my photo album today would hardly persuade a judge that I really was in Beijing on July 22, 1988. Yet hardly ever did we, in our everyday use of photographic images, encounter them as something that could have been reworked or manipulated; nor did we expect these images to forge perspectives, invent impossible points of reference, or evacuate the viewer into a realm of seamless virtuality.

Emulsion-based photography was part of a process of modernization that dislocated what once had been firmly grounded in space and time, entering objects, appearances, meanings, and memories into an ever-expanding system of exchange and circulation. Across a wide range of different discourses, analog photography was routinely understood as a prosthetic viewing device: as an artificial eye extending and improving the physiological capacities of the human body; as an uncanny technique of representation allowing the beholder to experience different times, spaces, and perspectives as if he or she had been really there; as a synthetic, albeit fully operative limb, enabling the viewer to transcend any given visual field and establish cognitive or empathetic relationships—literally to get in touch—with different life worlds and perceptual possibilities. The digital revolution of the last decade, by way of contrast, has cautioned us to conceptualize mechanical images as prosthetic extensions of the human body and eye. For computer-generated imagery relocates vision to a plane increasingly independent from the position of an embodied observer. It replaces the human eye with practices and techniques that no longer refer to the presence of a viewer whose gaze may structure or even produce—however subjectively—the visual field.[2] What we see in the digital image does not mirror the world or reveal aspects of nature hidden to the human eye. Rather, it refers to a myriad of electronic data and mathematical formulae that redefine what it means to see, to display, and to be a subject in the first place. As William Mitchell suggests, due to their constitutive mutability and manipulation, digital images

> reflect traces (perhaps tinted or distorted) of other images. That loss of the external referent, and the growing self-referentiality of symbol systems, which has so preoccupied poststructuralist theory, are here escalated to a new level. Logical associations

of images in databases and computer networks become more
crucial to the construal of reality than physical relationships of
objects in space. Digital imaging now constructs subjects in
cyberspace.[3]

The photographic image was part of a modern regime of seeing which
lodged vision in the physiological make-up and opaque subjectivity of
contingent viewers and, in doing so, promoted the idea of the subject as
an active and autonomous producer of visual experiences. Computer-
aided image processing, by contrast, severs the act of looking and im-
age production from the human subject and remakes it as an entirely
technological process. Computer-generated images thus do not simply
beseech their users to question the narrative of indexicality and veridical
closure conventionally associated with the photographic image. As im-
portantly, they no longer seem to allow us to consider mechanical im-
ages as techniques of looking that seamlessly incorporate technology
and the observer's body into a new kind of homogenous organism. Digital
imaging ushers us into the era of post-prosthetic and posthuman image
production. Increasingly, as Jonathan Crary has argued, "visuality will
be situated on a cybernetic and electromagnetic terrain where abstract
visual and linguistic elements coincide and are consumed, circulated,
and exchanged globally."[4] Instead of inviting the subject to go traveling
through space and time, digital culture collapses modern coordinates of
spatial and temporal perception, reconstituting the subject as an abstract
effect of today's seemingly autonomous and boundless flow of images
at the global level.

Nowhere does this apparent process of abstraction associated with
computer-aided image processing become clearer than in how the digi-
tal image transforms the photographic image's articulation of temporal-
ity. In some of the most incisive writing about emulsion-based photog-
raphy, the photographic image was seen as a shock administered to the
flow of time. The photographic camera, in the view of Walter Benjamin
for instance, interrupts the ordinary continuum of history. Photographs
bring death to the photographed, but precisely in transforming history
into a cemetery, in converting the past into a specter haunting the fu-
ture, the photographic image can also stimulate a curious solidarity be-
tween the dead and the living. Photographic images, according to Ben-
jamin, turn time into space. They disclose that which has been forgotten
or overlooked in historical time, and in this way they no longer allow us
to conceive of history as continuous and linear and to see our present as
a mere reproduction of the past. Similarly, for Roland Barthes, photo-

graphic images do not simply serve as souvenirs but certify that corpses of the past are still alive and with us—as corpses. Photographs are living images of dead things; their primary function is to authenticate rather than to represent the pastness of the past:

> The realists of whom I am one . . . do not take the photograph for a "copy" of reality, but for an emanation of *past reality: a magic*, not an art . . . The important thing is that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation.[5]

Arresting temporality, photographic images establish and verify material connections across time; they display history as a discontinuous site of magic, epiphany, correspondence, and shudder. Like Benjamin's concept of the photographic shock, Barthes's notion of photographic reference revolves less around an image's visible content than around how photographs, precisely by disrupting temporal continuity, interconnect different instances of presence, refocus our sense of finitude, and thereby draw our awareness to the many ghosts that populate our own present. As it extracts a part of the photographic referent and hands it down to a future viewer, Barthes's photograph displays the survival of the photographed as a survival of its life as much as of its death.

The rise of digital imaging and networked computing in recent years has dramatically shifted this thinking about the temporality of mechanical images. Barthes and Benjamin considered the act of exposing, developing, and displaying a photographic image as an act of closure whose inherent finality enabled discontinuous contact between past and present times and thus, ironically, opened spaces for experiencing the infinite. The world of digital images, at least in theory, abandons the idea of photographic closure and in so doing transforms an image's relation to time, finitude, mortality, and memory. For neither does the digital image require one single and privileged moment of exposure, nor is its display resistant against ongoing acts of mutation and modification on the side of both its producer and its user. Because computer-aided rendering and rerendering has become an integral part of image production today, we can no longer say that digital images arrest time and transform history into a tomb of memory. Digital images emphasize process over product. They inscribe temporality in the image's existence itself, and they infuse spatial representations with temporal unfixity. More-

over, because in principle everyone can download digital images from the circuits of exchange, rework them on his or her personal computer, and feed them back into the networks of electronic connectivity, there is no longer any way to determine whether what we look at records a unique perspective on things past or has already undergone many acts of untraceable mutation. Therefore, it seems no longer possible to argue that digital images would bring death to the photographed. Instead of administering painful shocks to the flow of time, computer-aided images invite the producer to infinite processes of modification. And instead of dispensing mnemonic shudders, digital images enable the viewer to reframe the past from various angles and thereby move beyond the tombs of photographic memory.

But aren't we jumping to foregone conclusions here? Can we really define an image's meanings and effects, its ways of articulating dissimilar temporalities, first and foremost by elaborating on its technological base and its inherent logic of encoding? Can we understand an image's place in time, its mnemonic possibilities and historical referentiality, simply by examining formal processes of image production, circulation, and reproduction? Moreover, don't we, by arguing that computer-aided images defy closure and no longer mortify the photographed, evaluate digital culture from the conceptual terrain of the analog, that is to say, merely expose Benjamin's or Barthes's older notions in reverse onto the new? And don't we thereby ignore the fact that the advent of digital replication might have changed the very parameters according to which we want to think about the ethics and epistemology of mechanical image production in the first place?

"Because each photograph," Susan Sontag wrote well before the rise of today's digital culture,

> is only a fragment, its moral and emotional weight depends on where it is inserted. A photograph changes according to the context in which it is seen . . . As Wittgenstein argued for words, that the meaning is use—so for each photograph. And it is in this way that the presence and proliferation of all photographs contributes to the erosion of the very notion of meaning, to that parceling out of truth into relative truths which is taken for granted by the modern liberal consciousness.[6]

Sontag's remarks called attention to the fact that emulsion-based photography isn't as closed, homogenous, and clear cut as many of its commentators, including at times Benjamin and Barthes, often wanted it to be. Meaning and reference, according to Sontag, do not reside in the

photograph itself. They emerge from what we do with certain images, from how we invest them with knowledge and desire, from how we allow them to affect us under particular circumstances and position them against the background of competing discourses. According to Sontag, the meaning of photographic images, including what they have to say about life, death, and memory, always comes in the plural; they speak differently to different audiences and different times.

In the era of digital imaging, Sontag's Wittgensteinian pragmatism, her insistence on the conceptual limits of photographic interpretation, has become the order of the day. There is no way to ignore the fact any longer that practice and context define the meanings and truths of mechanical images today far more than symbolism, code, or iconography. As it questions former notions of photographic objectivity, reference, and evidence, computer-aided image processing accentuates the discursivity of all images, to the texts, words, names, ideologies, knowledges, desires, and institutions that invest the visual with myth and meaning to begin with. In contrast to Barthes's and Benjamin's thinking, we can no longer solely rely on pictorial reading or semantic decoding in order to examine the mnemonic power of mechanical images. Analog or digital images might adhere to certain codes and symbolic conventions, but their meanings and memories are constituted behind and beyond their pictorial surface. The most essential question is therefore not how different technological inventions *cause* different representations of temporality, but how we place certain images—digital or analog—in larger narratives of history and memory; how we make use of both their formal inventory and exhibition in order to connect different pasts and presents; how we rely on different strategies of naming, description and inscription, of discursive en-framing, in order to infuse them with temporal texture or pass them off as souvenirs of frozen time; and last but not least, how we engage older myths of reference, objectivity, and truth in order to define the relationships between image-makers, photographic subjects, and viewers as relationships of either asymmetrical authority or mutual recognition. No image, whether computer-processed or not, has an existence or memory of its own. It is what we do with them that decides over their life and afterlife. It is how we situate them against the backdrop of other narratives, discourses, images, and strategies of representation that enables them to speak in various ways about the past and its bearing on the present.

The history of media technologies is not simply a history of changing hardware configurations and software protocols. It is also, and as importantly, the history of their applications, of how we put these con-

figurations and protocols to use in the various public and private spheres that structure our lives. Digital imaging might have radically changed the way in which we think about mechanical images in general. But it is one of the consequences of this epistemological revolution that we must finally acknowledge the fact that use, practice, and institutional context constitute the primary meaning of mechanical images, no matter what an image's inherent technological program. While it is surely more fashionable to develop sweeping philosophies of photography and to contemplate the ontology of the digital image, what we really need to do is to take the epistemological challenge of the digital seriously, that is to say, withstand any technological determinism and understand our approach to mechanical images—whether digital or not—as part of the itineraries of cultural criticism and studies.

Close-Up 2: Hans-Ulrich Treichel, *Lost*

The photograph pictures a boy named Arnold, squatting on a white blanket and—like Schechner in Buchenwald—staring straight into the lenses of the camera. The image serves the boy's mother as a revered token of memory and meditation. She holds on to it as if touching the photographed with her fingers, and as if photographic images allowed their viewers to reverse the course of history. Arnold, we will read later, was lost during the last days of World War II. Facing a number of Soviet soldiers, Arnold's mother entrusted her son to an accidental bystander. What was meant to rescue the boy from the threat of violence, however, in the end caused his traumatic disappearance. *Lost* narrates the mother's and her husband's search for Arnold in the mid-1950s, their futile hopes to identify their son and overcome the family's enduring pain and guilt. In the novel's emblematic opening, the look at Arnold's photographic image seems to empower the mother to heal the rifts of time and space. Rather than simply attest that Arnold had once existed and hence confirm the dreadful pastness of the past, the photograph helps the mother to reconstitute this past as the primary site of meaning, happiness, and identification. Photographs, in the eyes of the mother, emanate their photographic referent. As indexical representations of the real, they touch the onlooker like the rays of a dead star. Instead of haunting the present like a specter, the photograph is seen and embraced here as a carnal medium. It links two bodies across the fissures of spatial and temporal dislocation, fusing past and present, here and there, mother and son, like an umbilical cord.

It is important to note that in this opening passage of *Lost* we learn next to nothing about the boy's actual features—the contours of his face, the shapes of his body, the gestures of his hands. For it is not the mother whose voice guides us through the novel, but that of Arnold's younger brother. And in the perspective of this nameless narrator, who was born after Arnold's disappearance, what counts is not what we see but what we do not see in the photographic image of Arnold, namely himself. By telling his story, the narrator wants to speak against the way in which his parents tend to mobilize the past against the present. His voice is full of contempt for his unknown brother simply because Arnold's image conceals the narrator's own life. Obsessed with finding their lost son, the parents are unaware of the needs, desires, and torments of Arnold's brother. Therefore, in the continuing absence of Arnold, the true lost one, according to the narrator, is no one other than the narrator himself, not Arnold.

> While my brother Arnold looked not just happy but important even when he was a baby, in most of the photos from my child-hood I am either only partly visible or sometimes not really visible at all . . . All subsequent photos taken of me in my child-hood continued this tradition, one way or the other, except that in later photos the foot was replaced by a right arm, or half a profile, or an eye, as in the picture from the swimming pool.[7]

To tell his story, for the narrator of *Lost*, is to reinsert himself into the family picture. His words are meant to counteract the mother's fetishistic veneration of the past, her relentless "I know, but . . ." when looking at Arnold's photographic image.[8] In stark contrast to his mother, the narrator insists that photographs block rather than incite memory; that rather than illuminate the past, they create blindness about the weight of historical traumas on the present. His narrative project is therefore to enter his voice into the family photographs; to turn them upside down; to recuperate what is hidden and forgotten in them; to correct their surfaces and change their points of view.

Photography, in the eyes of the narrator of *Lost*, is a very unreliable medium of recollection. It preserves fragments of the past, yet in doing so falsely protects us against recognizing our losses. But language and narration, for him, can correct the deceptive surface of the photographic image. They allow us to see and read photographs as images that re-member the past as something dead and over with—images in which we witness our own aging and can recognize the irreversibility and en-

tropy of time. Unlike the mother's gaze, which wants to make the past alive again, the narrator's voice stresses the death that fetishistic looking casts upon the present. And yet, in the end the narrator himself falls into the traps of fetishistic memory. In the final scene, he can no longer uphold his resistance against the canon of family photographs and identifies his own image as that of his lost brother. Reenacting a traumatic past that does not seem to go away, the narrator disappears in the very vortex his voice sought to contain throughout the novel.

EXPOSURE 2: TRAUMA, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND RECOLLECTION

In the modernist writing on photography of Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Roland Barthes, the photographic image was seen as a prosthetic memory device precisely because it seemed to be able to beat the violence of linear time at its own game. What we experience when looking at old photographs as a mnemonic shudder, according to the modernist writing on photography, repeats a previous instance of violence carried out by the camera's shutter. In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in 1887 that

> [m]an could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create memory for himself; the most dreadful sacrifices and pledges (sacrifices of the first-born among them), the most repulsive mutilations (castration, for example), the cruelest rites of all the religious cults (and all religions are at the deepest level systems of cruelties)—all this has its origin in the instinct that realized that pain is the most powerful aid to mnemonics.[9]

According to Benjamin, photography elevated the bloody rites and gory sacrifices of previous ages to a post-religious, albeit perhaps no less ceremonial, level. Photographic images—Benjamin suggested—administer mutilation and castration, cruelty and torture, not to the body of the photographed but to the time in which it once manifested itself. They aid or even produce memory by exhibiting the mortality, the painful finitude, of all that is living. As they break historical time into a discontinuous set of seemingly self-enclosed moments, photographic images—like the cruel ceremonies of religious cults in Nietzsche's view—define and transfix past, present, and future as nights of the living dead. In Benjamin's understanding, the photographic shutter extends a virtual shock to the photographed in order to prepare the object's afterlife. What

thus allows the photographic image "to set in motion an experience with history original to every new present"[10] is nothing less than its inherent mythical force—its Medusan nature.

The modernist view of photography as inherently violent and traumatic is no doubt incisive. However, it raises fundamental questions concerning the extent to which photography can represent, remember, and reframe profilmic experiences of trauma and violence. How can we adequately distinguish between historical violence and the violence of photographic representation? If all history, as seen through the photographic viewfinder, indeed bears the mark of trauma and catastrophe, how can photographic images appropriately picture the specificity of certain traumatic events? And finally, can photographic images help their viewers to refract—"work through"—traumatic memories, or do they simply force us to reenact that which ruptured the narratives of the past?

Some conceptual clarification seems to be in order. In the following, I shall refer to "traumatic experiences" as experiences that resist conventional narrativization. What we call trauma shatters the fabrics of narrative, memory, and historical experience. It produces a temporal vortex which threatens to consume our entire sense of self, identity, and belonging. Traumatic moments no longer allow us to perceive "events one lives through as part of a story later to be told."[11] They destroy any sense of temporal continuity or narrative integration, erasing what may enable us in the future to understand our present as a meaningful past. Trauma, then, means to live through extreme experiences without really experiencing them. Traumatic events puncture and obliterate our psychic shields of protection and integration. They freeze our normal perception of time and history, inserting a kind of experiential black box between that which had happened before and that which might happen after the incident in question.[12] In doing so, they produce "deep memories" that refuse easy recall or narrative closure.[13] Because traumatic occurrences challenge the very texture of memory and narrativity, any recollection of traumatic histories must negotiate the aporia of narrating what, ultimately, cannot be narrated.

Recent trauma theory, as developed by psychoanalysts, historians, and literary critics, has argued that conventional narrative arrangements—whether fictional or not—tend to paper over the temporal vortex of traumatic experiences. Teleological storytelling presents the work of memory as unified, uncontested, and undamaged. It highlights the power of narrative to contain, present, streamline, interpret, and transport the past, and it thereby falls victim to what Eric Santner calls narra-

tive fetishism, that is, strategies "of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere."[14] As a consequence, recent trauma theory stresses the extent to which the telling of traumatic experiences should embrace formal self-reflexivity and narrative experimentation in order to restrain fetishistic fantasy and defy teleological closure. Rather than subjecting traumatic events to self-assured and homogenous historical narratives, this telling should employ modernist techniques such as blockage of narrative, splitting of narrative functions, temporal deformations, and rhetorical interruptions.[15] Moreover, in order to open the black box of traumatic pasts and end their vertiginous pull, historians, novelists, biographers, and autobiographers should learn how to approach the traumatic incident from various perspectives at once. They need to listen to and incorporate a multitude of voices without erasing their heterogeneity. No single story, no coherent narrative, no singular viewpoint, can ever halt the way in which traumatic incidents swallow time, subjectivity, and selfhood into one amorphous vortex of experience.

Nothing, then, at first seems more inappropriate to represent and reframe traumatic residues than the Medusan violence of photography. For how could its shock-like intervention ever infuse painful pasts with temporality and thereby unlock trauma's black box of experience? How could photographic practice, being indebted to the scopic regime of central perspective, ever offer multiple views of traumatic moments and pierce the frozen temporality of traumatic perceptions? How could it ever tell competing narratives about the past that defy mnemonic closure and reinscribe the possibility of historical contingency, transitoriness, and agency? If all photography is charged with melancholy powers, how could it ever help overcome the kind of fixation on the past so typical for those who experienced traumatic events in their lives?

If we stay within the ontological bounds of modernist writing on photography, there are many good reasons indeed not only to question the ability of photographic images to work through traumatic histories, but also to claim that digital image processing can do a much better job. For unlike the photographic shutter, digitization seems to transform the image into a dynamic system in and of itself. It defies the Medusan aspects of conventional photography, infusing the photographic image with a sense of transitoriness and indeterminacy. In the age of digital manipulation, mechanical images are no longer time specific, that is to say (in Fred Ritchin's words), "the result of the momentary and privileged meeting of subject and photographer."[16] Digital technology stresses process and performance over product, malleability over closure. It al-

lows us to reach back in time and change certain pictorial values and perspectives, permitting individual users to insert their own desires, needs, pleasures, and narratives into preexisting visual representations. Thus, digital imaging seems perfectly suited to recuperate a sense for the fundamental openness and contingency of time. Rather than freezing time and reenacting previous moments of traumatic fixation, it puts us into a position to behold trauma's black box of experience from various angles and to learn how to manage its temporal pull.

So at least it seems in purely theoretical terms. But what about all those examples of digitally manipulated images whose primary purpose seems to be to expunge shadows of the past, erase traumatic traces, and showcase history as uncontested and hence essentially timeless? Think, for instance, of Andreas Gursky's digitally processed photograph *Rhein II*. Gursky's work of the 1990s has been fueled by the impulse to picture "things too vast to take in with either the human eye or a camera fixed at a particular viewpoint (mountains, public architecture, mass leisure, modern industry)."[17] As a result of this impulse, Gursky's photographs not only have assumed dimensions whose Wagnerian sweep overwhelms the viewer's perception and reclaims art photography's valorization of the distinct, singular, autonomous, and auratic art object. As importantly, his images have increasingly resorted to sophisticated strategies of digital manipulation that, by fusing multiple camera positions and points of view, render perspectival distortion absent and hence construct highly stylized pictorial vistas unattainable to any human eye. Like most of his photographs of the last decade, *Rhein II* also makes use of the large tableau format. Encased in a thick wood frame, the image measures no less than 203 x 357 cm. It features one of the most iconic signs of German mythology, a legendary river that once transported ships of ferocious warriors and buried powerful gold reserves, a waterway whose shores were inhabited by seductive muses and separated the Germans from their many enemies to the West. A river, in other words, crisscrossed by desire and displacement; a site evoking extravagant fantasies and traumatic memories; a topography where various histories and imaginaries have left unmistakable traces and scars.

And yet, none of this is visible in Gursky's photograph. Instead of capturing historical inscriptions, Gursky utilizes digital technology in order to erase any signs of human activity in both the foreground and the background. At the same time, in likeness to well-known photos such as *Montparnasse* (1993) and *Untitled V* (1997), he seems to utilize multiple camera positions in order to relocate vision to a superhuman or posthuman plane independent of the standpoint of any embodied view-

ing subject. As a consequence, *Rhein II* offers a highly stylized vista whose pictorial aesthetic treasures scrupulous calculation and absolute artistic control. As importantly, by transforming vertical tension into horizontal flatness, the photo freezes the river Rhine into an archetypical space void of history, void of memory, void of hope, and void of trauma. Digital manipulation here evacuates the texture of human temporality, of recall and anticipation, from either side of the camera. Though it evades the Medusan power of conventional photography, *Rhein II* is far from redefining the mechanical image as a dynamic system of competing temporal inscriptions. As Alex Alberro has pointed out, Gursky "in his ultimately nihilistic way, is clearly more interested in another game— a pictorialist celebration of style, craftsmanship, and the perfect photographic."[18] Highly advanced means of technological production in *Rhein II* aspire to the status of the mythic. Instead of opening the black box of painful memories, they evacuate time and history altogether, idolize the power of the artist to displace the real, and thus undo whatever could trouble our visual perception, pleasure, and historical imagination.

Gursky's universe denies traumatic sights and painful memories, not least of all because his painterly use of digital technology divorces vision from any notion of subjectivity and physical embodiment. There is no trauma and pain in Gursky's images because they know of no such thing as human subjects and their temporal contingencies. Whatever its aesthetic merits and international marketability, Gursky's work shall serve us here as a warning not to charge technological possibilities per se with emancipating or transformative powers. To think of digital imaging as inherently apposite to the representation of harrowing histories is to remain within a modernist, pre-digital thinking that wants to isolate individual media from each other, map their histories as linear genealogies of self-reflexivity and perfectibility, and denies the possibility of overlay, non-linearity, and messy hybridization. If digital photography teaches us anything it teaches us that media history is, and has always been, an on-going process, not of teleological refinement and ontological self-discovery, but of "re-mediation"[19]—of blurring the boundaries between old and new, of creative hybridizations and shrewd cross-overs. No medium contains its message in itself; no medium, in the words of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, can ever "function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning."[20] Newer media such as digital imaging feed on, redeploy, and incorporate the work of older modes of representation just as much as older media comment on, contain, reproduce, and remediate newer ones. As a result, the most relevant question to ask is not whether digital

imaging per se exceeds emulsion-based photography in the attempt to reframe traumatic moments and thaw impressions of frozen temporality. Rather, what we need to explore is how we can put either of the two media to use in order to break the spell traumatic histories have cast onto our presents; how we can produce images (digital or analog) that, by remediating other media, recuperate temporality and overcome melancholy reenactments of the past; how we can employ mechanical images so as to reconstruct the possibility of narrativity, and hence, redefine each present as a unique moment of our future's past; and last but not least, how our use of mechanical images can help express or mediate human relationships that reinstate a sense of subjectivity and corporeal integrity without disavowing former damages.

Close-Up 3: Tom Tykwer, *Winter Sleepers* / Christopher Nolan, *Memento*

Consider the photographic practice of Rene (Ulrich Matthes), one of the protagonists of Tom Tykwer's 1997 thriller *Winter Sleepers*. As a result of an accident which occurred during his army service, Rene has lost his short term memory. He knows who he is and where he comes from, he knows everything about the effects of his brain damage, but he is unable to recall what he did the day before or, for that matter, that there was a day before. Rene's strategy to deal with his condition is to take photographic images of whatever may appear of interest and record corresponding sound bites with the help of a walkman. His photographs border on the non-intentional. They mimic Surrealist practice as they aim at a form of automatic imaging. For Rene spends as little time as possible framing the visual field with his view finder. Although he develops his pictures in his own dark room, he is not a professional photographer. His images do not aspire to the aesthetic; they are not meant to aestheticize the real (see fig. 2). Instead, they seek to picture the unexpected and unseen, simulating the randomness and contingencies of ordinary perception. Their point is therefore not to authenticate that something is and was present in front of the camera, but rather that he was there even if he doesn't know it anymore. Photography here serves the purpose of authenticating Rene's very existence in time, of making the passing of time felt. In its dedication to chance and the incommensurable, Rene's camera pictures the fleetingness of time in the grammatical future perfect. It is part of an apparatical subconscious which may trigger at some point in the future memories of a past that exceeded Rene's conscious perception and directed attentiveness.

Figure 2. Transcending the Intentional: Video Caption from Tom Tykwer's *Winterschläfer* (1997).

In Rene's darkroom, technological configurations at first seem to take over the function of cerebral activities. To see something slowly appear on the photographic paper seems to resemble the work of memory as it recalls something previously believed to be forgotten. And yet, nothing would be more wrong than to think that Rene views these images in themselves as externalized memories—as objects that allow him to access the past in unmediated fashion. Memory, including that of his own most recent existence, is nothing that resides in these images themselves. You can't own memories like a property; there is no way to stick them in your pocket and take them home. Repeatedly, we witness Rene gluing fragmentary snapshots into different diaries and adding commentaries, dates, and question marks. For what chronicles the present as the future's past is not the photographic image itself, but how Rene inserts it into a highly dynamic, discontinuous, multitextual, and inherently unpredictable context (see fig. 3). In the eyes of Rene, memory emerges from the cracks and fissures of his unsystematic system; it materializes as a flash from the ruptured spaces in-between words and images, fleeting impressions and random inscriptions, the conscious and the unconscious, the voluntary and the involuntary. And it is precisely Rene's knowledge about the fundamentally unstable and non-photographic nature of organic memory that helps him cope with the traumatic experience of a car accident. Haunted by garbled and illegible recollections, Rene learns how to use the entries of his multimedia chronicle in order to reconstruct not only *what* might have happened but *that* something has happened. As he reads in-between the lines and images of his diary,

Figure 3. Images, Inscriptions, Narratives: Video Caption from Tom Tykwer's *Winterschläfer* (1997).

Rene unfetters himself from the uncanny dominance of the past over his present, of death over life.

Rene's photo albums defy what Benjamin attributed to the age of photographic reproduction: the favoring of public exhibition value over private cult value. Whatever these collage books may contain is not meant to circulate. Their content only speaks to Rene's own glance even though—at the time of releasing the shutter—Rene doesn't know whether his images will ever mean anything at all to him. In their endorsement of the spontaneous, non-intentional, and non-instrumental, Rene's photographs thus accrue a certain secular aura, constituted by photographic practice, contextualization, description, and interpretation. And it is precisely the auratic materiality of his pictures which allows Rene to understand his own life as one marked by temporality; it is the singular here and now of these images which enables Rene to reconstruct nothing less than the condition for the possibility of experience on a daily basis. In Barthes's terms: Rene's photographic practice emphatically privileges a photo's *punctum* over its *studium*. The point of taking a photo is not voluntarily to arrest a certain sight and encode it for future acts of reading and decoding. On the contrary, whatever makes these images meaningful to Rene's present is their ability to trigger unintended views and involuntary meanings. Exceeding representational codes, conventions, and expectations, these images allow Rene to experience mild shocks of recognition and to thus reassure himself about his own presence in time.

Worlds, then, separate Rene's use of photographic images from that of his cinematic counterpart Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce), the troubled

hero of Christopher Nolan's 2000 *Memento* whose traumatic loss of short-term memory causes him to document each of his steps with Polaroid images and tattooed notes on his body. Like Rene, Lenny is quite able to remember who he is, to explain his condition and to narrate how it came about. "How can I heal," we hear him say, "if I can't feel time." In contrast to Rene's condition, however, photographic images no longer help Lenny to recall what may have happened a moment earlier. So severe is Lenny's disability that Polaroids and body inscriptions themselves must serve as his memory. He encounters them like facts, objective descriptions of past states of affairs far superior to what he has come to understand as the unreliability of human memory at large. Accordingly, his photos are all *studium*; they owe no *punctum*, no flash of subjective recognition. Their purpose is to render the past entirely readable to the present. They are products of voluntary action and instrumental reason: the desire to document the past so as to navigate the present.

Forced by his physiological disability, Lenny clearly strains the mnemonic possibilities of photography. In the end, isn't it precisely Lenny's purely instrumental use of the photograph medium that subjects him to unforeseen manipulation? Isn't it his desire to own the past in the form of a photographic object that causes his complete mystification? Isn't it his view of the photographic medium as transparent and tactile that causes him to kill without knowing his victims? Contrary to Tykwer's *Winter Sleepers*, in which photography helps overcome traumatic experience and enables non-coercive relationships between photographer and photographed, in Nolan's *Memento* photographic practice fails to reopen the textures of experience because it can do nothing but reenact the traumas of the past. For Lenny, photography becomes murder with other means. Caught up in conventional myths of reference and indexical representation, Lenny's Polaroids endlessly reinscribe the power of the dead over the living. They fuel illusions of prosthetic control and unlimited understanding, and thereby pull Lenny into a temporal vortex from which there is no escape. Incessantly framing the present, Lenny becomes framed by the shadow of the past over the future.

Exposure 3: Reintegrating the Off-Frame

Christian Metz has argued that photographic images relate quite differentially to what he calls the off-frame than cinematic forms of spatial representation. According to Metz, the filmic off-frame is "substantial," whereas the photographic one is "subtle." In film, there is always a

succession of different frames, camera positionings, and character move-
ments, a plurality of shots over time which allow off-frame elements to
enter the frame at certain moments and disappear again at others. Cin-
ematic forms of representation tend to integrate the off-frame into their
temporal flow. Though something might be at certain points off-frame,
we know that it is not off-film and therefore expect it to enter or reenter
the frame at any given moment. In film, the off-frame is therefore a
space of relevance and meaning, of temporality and transformation, of
material interest and contingency. It is a dynamic and empirically sa-
lient space, a space of substantial transactions of which classical editing
styles often remind us by marking off-frame action through auditory
signals. None of this, according to Metz, can be said about photogra-
phy. For the character who is off-frame in a photographic image—pho-
tographer, bystander, viewer—

> will never come into the frame, will never be heard—again a
> death, another form of death. The spectator has no empirical
> knowledge of the contents of the off-frame, but at the same
> time cannot help imagining some off-frame, hallucinating it,
> dreaming the shape of this emptiness. It is a projective off-frame
> (that of the cinema is more introjective), an immaterial, "subtle"
> one, with no remaining print.[21]

According to Metz, photography reifies the boundaries between the vis-
ible and the invisible. Unlike film, it seals off whatever may lie beyond
the frame, denying any spatial and temporal interactions between framed
action and off-frame realities.

   Photographic images, in Metz's view, spatialize time and in so doing
define the gaze that looks at the photographed as one emerging from a
time- and spaceless nowhere, from a position of de-subjectivation. We
can find one of the most extreme examples of this de-corporealization
in the amateur photographs taken by German Wehrmacht soldiers who
witnessed and participated in the mass extermination of the European
Jewry during World War II. Some of these images of brutality and cor-
poreal disfiguration were shown in the exhibition "Verbrechen der
Wehrmacht," which opened in March 1995 and stirred great contro-
versy in the German public sphere. As Bernd Hüppauf has aptly argued,
rather than seeing these images as products of sadistic pleasure, we have
to understand them as strategic interventions that sought to define the
space behind the camera as one completely unaffected by the horror in
front of the lenses. To take a picture of the Holocaust, for these soldiers,
was to establish a radical divide between the two sides of the camera. It

endowed the photographer with a cold and monocular gaze of abstraction, and in doing so it defined the photographed as a morally indifferent space of essential alterity.

What makes these images so horrible, then, is not only what they depict but how they actively construct anaesthetized viewing positions that register things without seeing them. There is no way that, in the production of these pictures, the photographer's gaze could have ever been returned by the gaze of the photographed. For these soldier-photographers, the framing of violence through the viewfinder marked the off-frame space as a space, not of participant observing, but of incommunicable difference and atomization. Hence these images' dreadful silence and lack of language and reciprocity prevent the viewer's gaze to read anything into them that might have remained absent, invisible, or unspoken. Wehrmacht photos of the Holocaust emptied the visual field of any trace of human interaction. In Hüppauf's reading, they aimed at positing the space behind the camera as a realm of space-less and timeless power: a de-corporealized nowhere that we can neither call "substantial" nor "subtle." At the same time, these photographs aspired to deflate the very condition of the possibility of experience, for where there is no experience there is no feeling of pain, horror, trauma, or guilt about what might have happened in front of the camera.

> The brutal photos of the extermination were based on the misconception that power and powerlessness were absolute oppositions, removed from linguistic coding and communication. The world of these photos is silent in a way that differs fundamentally from the silence characteristic of most pictures. The impossibility of dialogue between the persons depicted in these photos and the person looking at them was anticipated in the mind of the photographer at the time of pressing the release button.[22]

Instead of documenting horror or aestheticizing violence, the Wehrmacht photos emptied perception and silenced affect. Instead of emplacing photographer and viewer in some relationship to the gruesome materiality of the real, they vindicated disembodied looking so as to reinforce the boundaries between self and other and to keep the soldier-observer from seeing his own position as part of the representation. In this sense, then, these photos at first recall ways of seeing the world that according to Jonathan Crary preceded the historical breakthrough of photography, namely the conception of sight according to the idealist model of the camera obscura.[23] Like the camera obscura, the Wehrmacht camera was

to deliver a transparent presentation of the real independent from the physical location of the observer. It situated the photographer's eye as a merely passive organ of intangible speculation. In contrast to the camera obscura model, however, the Wehrmacht camera no longer performed the earlier task of producing knowledge and insight. To take a picture was not only to neutralize your own sensitivity, but to self-censor all possible thoughts and judgments, as well as to produce prosthetic memories without really experiencing anything.

What Wehrmacht soldiers did with their cameras to "document" the German war of extermination is one of the most extreme examples of how the photographic process, by sealing off the photographed from the space of the photographer and viewer, can sustain fantasies of power and support politics of violence and destruction. Their cameras denied any experience of reciprocity between the frame and off-frame, converting the positions of the photographer, the photographed, and the anticipated viewer into three self-enclosed and self-sustaining locations. But we should clearly not assume that what we see in these pictures is the telos of the photographic medium, and that the soldiers' use of the camera epitomized what the apparatus' formal design programmed them to do.[24] For can't we also use the photographic medium in such a way that it questions or even liquefies the boundaries between frame and off-frame? A fish-eye panorama shot, for instance, can reduce the photographic off-frame to nothing less than the space inhabited by the photographer's body. A series of photographic images can capture the visual field from various perspectives over time and thus penetrate space in highly dynamic ways. Captions and descriptions can explore what might remain invisible in a single photograph more effectively than any film camera could ever do. Wehrmacht cameras may have exploited what Metz calls "the importance of immobility and silence to photographic *authority*,"[25] but this should not lead us to assume that photographs cannot picture violence without administering violence, that they cannot capture traumatic experiences without reifying the boundaries between subject and object. Aren't there abundant examples of photographic practice that puncture the boundaries between the frame and the off-frame, hoping to enable some kind of reciprocal relationships between the photographer, the photographed, and the viewer? Aren't there copious images of historical violence and trauma that, rather than emptying our affects and perceptions, "create empathic bonds between the contemporary subject and the person from the unimaginable past"?[26] Can't we point at various representational strategies that, by directing our awareness to the discursive nature of photographic meaning and

memory, enable language, dialogue, and exchange? Strategies, in other words, that work against photographic authority and fetishism, recognize the embodied subjectivity and mutual implication of photographer and photographed, permit the individual image to become part of larger narratives of memory, and thus help open the black box of traumatic experience?

In the perspective of film theorist Christian Metz, the medium of film turns out to be the most effective technology to counteract the neutralization of the off-frame as exemplified by the photographs of German Wehrmacht soldiers. For film, according to Metz, temporalizes space and can in this way work against reifying strategies of othering and distanciation. It involves the photographed, the cinematographer, and the viewer in a dynamic system of representation whose internal structure prevents perverse desires for de-subjectivization. In more recent years, some aficionados of digital culture have suggested that digital imaging can do even better than film in integrating frame and off-frame and thus open the door towards a triangulating politics of recognition. For thanks to its protean malleability, the digital image can dramatically shrink or expand existing spatial planes, collapse dissimilar points of view into mind boggling perspectives, and elevate the viewer to physically impossible vistas. Digital image manipulation, so the argument goes, not only redefines dominant templates of spatial organization and perception, it can also enable skillful users to produce representations of past and present that resemble the work of organic memory—its often unpredictable and resilient flexing of spatial order—much more effectively than conventional photography and cinematography. And it is for all of these reasons that digital photography not only blurs the boundary between the frame and the off-frame, but makes possible "substantial" relationships between the photographed and its onlookers—between image makers, the imaged, and image users.

In spite of fundamental differences of argumentation and technological preference, both Metz and the neo-liberals of digital culture implicitly agree that other equipment—a super-8 camera or a digital imaging device—would have kept Wehrmacht soldiers during World War II from doing what they did. While their respective attempts to explore substantial relationships between frame and off-frame is commendable, we should once again be suspicious about any essentializing definition of different media that locate their social relevance and politics primarily in their technological makeup. Metz as much as many recent aficionados of the digital not only identify the sum of all possible ethical meanings and uses of photography in the medium's structure itself, they also

seek to define this structure as pure, bounded, and fixed in time. On the other hand, there is little space in their thinking for exploring the messy, albeit highly instructive, margins of photography, that is to say, the constitutive and transformative interactions of photographic practice with other media such as language, writing, chrono-photography, film, and digital manipulation. What Metz as much as the devotees of the digital thus overlook is that different media have always gleaned their strength from the way in which they were able to incorporate and mimic other media, whether these other media were technologically more sophisticated or not. What they lose out of sight is the eruptive hybridity and creative transgression that typify the development of any medium. It is the task of the final section of this essay to explore the extent to which contemporary photography, by deploying the registers of other media, can capture images of trauma that resuscitate temporality and reciprocate frame and off-frame without entertaining fantasies of historical mastery and closure.

Close-Up 4: Alan Cohen, *On European Ground*

Think of Alan Cohen's photographic work of the 1990s, exhibited and published under the title *On European Ground* in Chicago in 2001. Cohen's images recall three traumatic moments of twentieth-century history: the trench warfare in France during World War I; the destruction of the European Jewry in Germany and occupied Poland during World War II; and the division of Berlin during the Cold War. As seen through Cohen's viewfinder, violent actions of the past become visible as deformations, disfigurements, cracks, and fissures of natural or man-made topographies. In these images, the historical and the natural are not pictured as radical opposites. On the contrary, they refer to each other according to a volatile dialectic. Trauma, here, transforms history into nature just as much as nature, under the impact of traumatic events, acquires uncanny historicity. Witness the surreal hills and bubbles left by former trenches in the Somme area; the mutual incorporation of barbed wire and tall grass in Verdun; the perimeters of what is left of the foundation of a Dachau concentration camp; the swollen crevice of dried-out soil in Buchenwald; the patterns of cobblestones and overgrown train tracks at Auschwitz; the innocuous steps and cracked walls at Ravensbrück; and last but not least, the seemingly trivial markings and breaches of Berlin road surfaces, indicating the former location of the wall. In images like this, Cohen's camera pictures history as a form of writing that eschews easy readership and may become legible only at

second sight (see figs. 4–9). In this way, Cohen's images emulate nothing other than the work of a psychoanalyst. Like the analyst, Cohen's photographs seek to create new ways of seeing the world by exploring history's optical unconscious. They render visible the way in which historical traumas continue to express themselves through enigmatic symptoms, in the hope of disturbing our ego's desire for subjective self-certainty, our imaginary positions of transparent knowledge and historical mastery:

> What is revealed in learning to read Cohen's photographs is our own sense of surprise that the world in its unseen details is so much shaped by the past. Cohen's gift to us is to show us how to comprehend traces of history that are more radical than any of the inherited images that populate our mental archive, that are no less radical for being ubiquitous and humble.[27]

Unlike most photographic work that communicates the effects of historical trauma, Cohen's *On European Ground* completely shuns any attempt to show us the victims of violent interactions. Cohen's sites of historical trauma are sites of overwhelming emptiness, absence, and silence, of abstraction, derealization, and introversion. As they appeal to anti-aesthetic conceptions of the sublime, they block any sympathetic gesture on the viewer's side. Topographical traces—the demolition and disfigurement of the ground—here allegorize former instances of human agony, suffering, and violence, but they do not allow the viewer to cast affectionate gazes at these images, and hence, to transfer his own self onto the other and identify his world with the world depicted. Cohen's images remain foreign. They defamiliarize our gaze and display the presence of the past as something initially incommensurable. Do we therefore have to come to the conclusion that Cohen, by reifying history and trauma, undercuts the possibility of ever escaping the shadows of a painful past? Does Cohen's strategy of abstraction, by solely focusing on topographical inscriptions, not duplicate the former victimization of the victim, true to Jean Baudrillard's provocative statement that non-representation and forgetting simply reenact former practices of mass annihilation?[28] Is Cohen's style of distanciation and allegorization not just another version of emptying the gaze and extricating the viewer from the image's referent?

Nothing, of course, would be more misleading than to equate Cohen's viewfinder with that of the Wehrmacht soldier during World War II. For Cohen's photographs are precisely engaged in exploring and interrogating the contours of subjectivity in light of how traumatic events such as
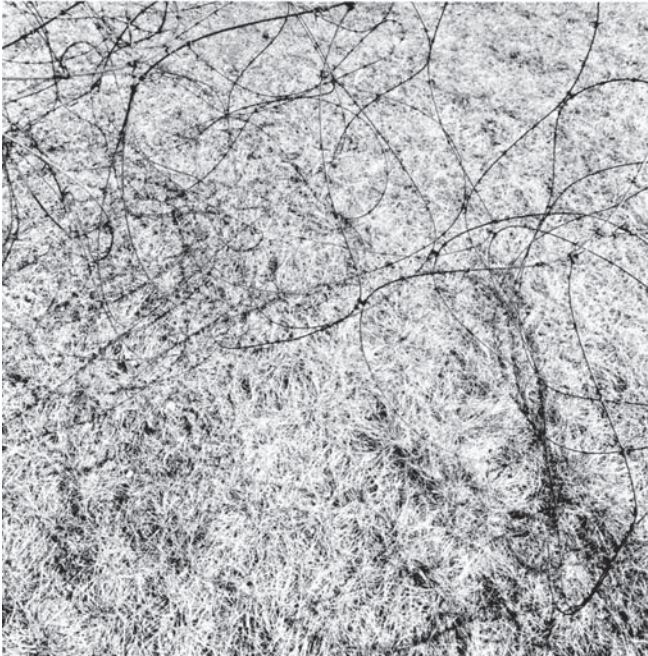
Figure 4. Alan Cohen, "Somme, 1998."

Figure 5. Alan Cohen, "Verdun, 1998."

Figure 6. Alan Cohen, "Dachau, 1992."

Figure 7. Alan Cohen, "Buchenwald, 1994."

Figure 8. Alan Cohen, "Auschwitz, 1994."

Figure 9. Alan Cohen, "Berlin, 1996."

the Holocaust have been captured in the past and may encounter us today in our own present. All shot from a similar viewing angle and with similar focal lengths, Cohen's images take the viewer along on a journey across Europe's painful topography. They consistently direct our gaze downward at the sight of seemingly insignificant remnants of the past. In this way, these images actively draw our awareness to the subject who looks through the camera, emphasizing the embodied nature of the photographer's movements through space and time as much as our own position as embodied viewers of his images. Far from emptying the gaze, Cohen's images explore the extent to which we can uphold our subjective look and temporality vis-à-vis the signs of catastrophic history. Instead of clinically separating viewing subject and visual field and thereby anesthetizing our perception, these photographs ask us to experience the reified signifiers of traumatic pasts with our own bodies so as to beat the spell of historical forgetting and reification at its own game. The emptiness of these images encourages the viewer to look beyond what is merely visible. Their silence asks us to expand their frames with words and narratives. In this sense, Cohen's images can be seen as a creative variant of what Marianne Hirsch has called post-memory: a delayed, indirect, and secondary form of memory that is mediated through the prism of prosthetic memory devices such as photography and film.[29] In the absence of direct experience with the recalled events, Cohen resorts to strategies of conceptual abstraction, not in order to disconnect the different spaces of photographic reproduction, but to provoke new ways of connecting to that which was never experienced by, but continues to overshadow, the life of the viewer. Instead of collapsing (like Hollywood) any sense of difference and alterity, and instead of reifying (like the Wehrmacht soldiers) the borders between the image space and the viewer, Cohen's images of European trauma ask us to negotiate the boundaries between the abstract and the mimetic. By stressing their own status as post-memories, these images catalyze forms of memory that make the viewer feel for, but also feel different from, the kind of history whose symptomatic presence in the present is traced in these images.

Philip Rosen has suggested the term "digital mimicry" in order to describe how today's digital image processing often mimes the properties of nondigital images—their sense of linear perspective, their pathos of reference, their temporality and historicity.[30] According to Rosen, by imitating the photographic, digital images can retain or regain a compositional form associated with indexicality, and hence, with photography's unique relationship to profilmic space and time. A simi-

lar act of transgression and formal hybridization seems to be at stake in Cohen's *On European Ground*. Mounted in sequence like a series of film stills, Cohen's photographs mime the medium of film and the spatio-temporal mutability of the digital in order to charge the photographic medium with a heightened sense of temporality. In fact, Cohen's images of time are time-images in Gilles Deleuze's sense. They imitate a filmmaker's storyboard with the aim of displaying the layered coexistence of different durations and temporalities within one and the same space. Unlike a classical film based on the principle of continuity editing, Cohen's time-images actively refuse to integrate time, space, and motion into any kind of seamless totality. When looking at Cohen's assemblage of shots, we leap from one site to another, but we can no longer think of the photographic medium as something that could ever exclusively refer to and be in the present; as something that could ever have the power to fully actualize the past. Cohen's images are connected to each other through "irrational," noncontiguous cuts, and in so doing, they create the impression that "people and things occupy a place in time which is incommensurable with the one they have in space."[31]

Modernization has often been theorized as something accompanied by a fundamental disruption of space, time, and matter. In Cohen's *On European Ground*, by contrast, strategies of spatial and temporal fragmentation—the decentering of the signifying chain—become allegories for the catastrophic nature of modern German history. Cohen's images decry any desire for interconnecting here and now, between yesterday and today, with the help of mechanical reproduction. They confront the viewer with fragmentary glimpses of historical violence, yet they repudiate any attempt to think that we could access that past entirely in form of an image, or that by narrating this hidden past we could regain an unproblematic sense of personal intactness. Therefore, though Cohen's images locate perception and memory in embodied forms of subjectivity, they stay away from affective forms of recollection in which the very process of imaging would clear away persistent traces of trauma and historical violence. Cohen incorporates the capabilities of film and digital photography to temporalize space so as to picture historical traumas as unremitting ruptures and fissures in the temporal flow. What lies in-between Cohen's time-images is as significant as what we can see within their frames. And it is precisely this space in-between Cohen's images, understood as an interstitial space of dislocation and deferral, that cautions us not to close the gap between the traumas of the past and our own present. Cohen's cuts oblige the viewer not to subject incommensurable experiences to user-friendly fantasies of sympathy and iden-

tification. They open up the framed toward the off-frame with the intention of undermining narratives of historical closure and reconciliation.

Cohen's topographies are landscapes of forgetting. His images redefine memory as postmemory by referencing the historical as enigma and riddle. Nothing in these pictures themselves can evidence that what we see really is the former entrance of the crematorium at Auschwitz, the erstwhile outline of a former barrack at Dachau, or a residual trace of the Berlin wall near the Brandenburg Gate. Memories of history, in Cohen's images, enter the present halfway in-between the metonymic and the synecdochic. *On European Ground* signifies upon the traumas of the past, not by substituting the real with metaphors and symbols of similarity, but by drawing our attention to the materiality of historical inscriptions in all its disrupted and hermetic appearance. What we see is to be seen as part of something larger; it connects by means of contiguity. But nothing of what we see here can ever stand in symbolically for what it is meant to signify. For in the end, the signified remains elusive simply because its traumatic violence destroyed the very instruments which could measure and represent this signified as a totality in the first place.[32] Cohen's images of battlefields and Nazi camps thus capture the aftershocks of historical traumas—in Roman Jakobson's words—as a contiguity disorder, as incidents that fundamentally damaged our capacity for maintaining conventional hierarchies of symbolic signs, for relating signifier and signified.[33]

Which also explains the minimalist, albeit compelling, use of captions in Cohen's work. Solely identifying the shot's location and year, Cohen's captions at first seem to simply supplement what we need to know in order to endow his time-images with meaning, true to John Berger and Jean Mohr's contention that,

> [t]he photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalisation, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photographs. Together the two become very powerful; an open question appears to have been fully answered.[34]

Cohen's work clearly acknowledges photography's weakness in meaning. It directs our gaze at the detail, the forgotten, and the obscure, at the allegorical, the metonymical and the synecdochical, in order to reveal the discontinuous temporalities that structure our present and keep us from ever achieving fulfilled self-presence and anamnestic closure. But—pace Berger and Mohr—topographical names and time stamps in

Cohen's *On European Ground* make no effort to answer all of the viewer's open questions. In their utter generalization and simplicity, Cohen's captions instead open interstitial spaces between the visible, the imaginary, and the symbolic which stress the extent to which meaning and memory are products of transient enunciation. To name an image of train tracks "Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1994" is not to celebrate the indexical power of photography as a catalyst of irrefutable and timeless evidence (see fig. 10). On the contrary, it is to accentuate the fundamental instability and unfixity of photographic meaning, memory, and perception, their dependence on the viewer's subject position in the transitional fields of postcontemporary time and space. In Cohen's work, the work of postmemory is shown as an ongoing and highly fissured process of signification. Neither visual images nor linguistic signs can fix the meaning of a past whose immense horrors denied the very possibility of meaning and experience. No single answer can be found here to bring the unsettling questions of historical violence and trauma to closure.

Cohen's *On European Ground* is part of a project that continually resituates and re-visions the symptomatic expressions of historical traumas. Its aim is neither to simply reenact nor to transcend traumatic residues. Instead, by reiterating and reframing the signs of traumatic rup-

Figure 10. Alan Cohen, "Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1994."

tures over time these images hope to change their symptomologies. In doing so, Cohen's *On European Ground* moves history beyond the temporal vortex of traumatic events—the black box of traumatic experience—without glossing over their lasting scars. As they recast symptoms of historical trauma along a ruptured axis of sameness *and* difference, Cohen's time-images reconstruct the grounds of historical temporality. Mimesis of anamnestic abstraction, they reinscribe the possibility of history, subjectivity, agency, and memory in the reified topographies of forgetting and traumatic reenactment. For Cohen, sympathetic identification with the victims of history is not—or no longer—a viable strategy to bear witness to the horrors of the past. Unlike the many Spielbergs of contemporary memory and museum culture, Cohen does not want us to wear history on our body, as a sensuous (post)memory produced by our immersion into prosthetic simulations of the past. Instead, similar to Schechner's digital collage and Tykwer's filmic ruminations, Cohen's work opens a fragmented image space in the present in whose ruptures and discontinuities we can reinsert the possibility of meaningful narration, understood here as an open-ended activity that in establishing connections—connections between people, objects, sites, and different temporalities—allows us to recuperate a sense for the aleatory and transitional nature of historical time. In Chris Marker's essay film *Sans Soleil* (1982), the voice-over narrator muses: "I wonder how people remember who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape." Cohen's work reverses Marker's query so as to speak up against the way in which today's entertainment industries commodify the past and replay its traumas forever as film and photography. Cohen hybridicizes photography and remediates other visual media in order to show how we can still remember *in spite of* all those images that reproduce history today as an object of trouble-free consumption.

NOTES

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1. Andy Grundberg, "On the Dissecting Table: The Unnatural Coupling of Surrealism and Photography," in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squiers (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 87.

2. Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

3. William J. Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 52.

4. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 2.

5. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 88–89.

6. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 105–06.

7. Hans-Ulrich Treichel, *Lost*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 4–5.

8. Victor Burgin on fetishism and photography:

> Fetishism accomplishes that separation of knowledge from belief characteristic of representation; its motive is the unity of the subject . . . The photograph stands to the subject-viewer as does the fetishized object . . . We know we see a two-dimensional surface, we believe we look through it into three-dimensional space, we cannot do both at the same time—there is a coming and going between knowledge and belief.

Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1986), 44.

9. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969), 61.

10. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1972 ff.) II, 468.

11. Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge: Including the Integral Text of Analytical Philosophy of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 342–43; quoted in Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 159.

12. Gertrud Koch, *Die Einstellung ist die Einstellung: Visuelle Konstruktionen des Judentums* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1992), 167.

13. For a discussion of "deep memory" and its incompatibility with narrative, see Saul Friedlander, "Trauma and Transference," in *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 117–37; and James E. Young, "Between History and Memory: The Uncanny Voices of Historian and Survivor," *History & Memory* 9 no.1–2 (Fall 1997): 47–58.

14. Eric Santner, "History Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 146.

15. Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 31–36.

16. Fred Ritchin, "Photojournalism in the Age of the Computer," in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squiers (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 30.

17. Katy Siegel, "Consuming Vision," *Artforum* (January 2001): 105.

18. Alex Alberro, "Blind Ambition," *Artforum* (January 2001): 114.

19. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

20. Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 55.

21. Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squiers (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 161.

22. Bernd Hüppauf, "Emptying the Gaze: Framing Violence through the Viewfinder," *New German Critique* 72 (Fall 1997): 38.

23. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*.

24. For more on the understanding of photography as a program programming its user, see Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

25. Metz, "Photography and Fetish," 157.

26. Andrea Liss, *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xii.

27. Sander Gilman, "Alan Cohen's Surfaces of History," in *On European Ground*, by Alan Cohen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 10.

28. Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images* (Sydney: The Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1987), 23.

29. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

30. Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 309.

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32. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

33. Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 95–114.

34. John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 92.