

Trace, Archive, Imaginary

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ABSTRACT: In his major treatise *Memory, History, Forgetting*, first published in 2000, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) thoroughly examines the relationship between facts, memories, and transmission, both collectively and individually. This ambitious meditation considers the use not only of scientific historical methods but also of fiction and widely refers to the notion of “images.” But it should be pointed out that the images under consideration in *Memory, History, Forgetting* are only mental or literary constructs; Ricoeur focuses exclusively on words as mnemonic tools to describe, remember, and forget.

Encompassing over six hundred pages, Ricoeur’s magnum opus thus overlooks a fruitful field of understanding coterminous to the processes he analyzes, if one also acknowledges the powers and efficacy of visual images, particularly of filmed images. Nowhere is this potential more visible and pregnant than in a consideration of the Holocaust—more appropriately known as the Shoah—which in its extreme consequences is at the very center of Ricoeur’s ruminations. Elaborating on the practices, theorizations, and polemics regarding the Shoah and filmmaking, this article shows how Ricoeur’s study can be further developed, in both perception and understanding, by calling upon the cinema and thinking with its images.

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FROM MY POINT OF VIEW AS A FILM CRITIC and someone who writes about film, let's say someone who tries to think with film, a reading of Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* arouses a strange feeling.¹ Completely absent from this extraordinarily precise and demanding reflection on certain issues—issues that have been worked on for a very long time and in very different forms by a tremendous field of practice, production, and reflection—is the field of the *image*. I am not referring to “image” in the sense that Ricoeur gives to this word when he uses it, which is often, to designate the processes of mental representations that some texts and words, occasionally traces, can elicit. Rather, I mean the image as a figurative and representative object in and of itself. And within this enormous field, whose stakes go back to the Bible and classical antiquity, we find the construction of a more specific theoretical continent drawn from specificities of the *recorded image*, which is my concern here. It too has a long history, this time not biblical (the “graven images” of the second of the Ten Commandments are clearly not recorded) but nevertheless ancient: the myth of the daughter of the potter Butades, drawing the outline of her lover's shadow, is certainly the recording of a trace of the real on a sensitive surface, as is her father's construction of a clay model of the youth based on her outline.² And the pre-historic negative and positive handprints in caves are the anthropological and not mythological hallmark of the founding prevalence of the work of the constructed trace, produced as human practice. This long story took a new turn with the invention of photography and then of cinema, where it was confronted with the most extreme developments of History.

Consequently, a kind of dizziness accompanies Paul Ricoeur's rigorous reasoning. His is an anxious meditation on the issues of visibility, preservation, understanding, and effective trace, but without recourse to the recorded image, in particular cinema, itself full of questions of invisibility, of doubt concerning its ability to show, to make clear, to retain the traces and, even more, the meaning of these traces. Invisible becomes the stake of visibility itself in this process of this discursive construction. In reading Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting*, I feel a dizziness but also a regret. Because the cinema could easily have helped him develop his concept of “*représentence*” (“representence,” a neologism), which is above all a procedure of the presence of the absent as absent, an apparatus for sensitive production of the “have been” as have been, without the aporias of metaphor and literary devices, both of whose risks Ricoeur will have exposed while deeming to have nothing better as possibility to construct analogies.

Nonetheless, a very rich dialogue exists between Paul Ricoeur's thinking and the reflection on relationships with the real and the visible in memory and history that have been constructed with regard to cinema, in particular thanks to the works of Walter Benjamin, André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, Serge Daney, Georges Didi-Huberman, Jacques Rancière, and Sylvie Lindeperg, as well as the theoretical and artistic work of major filmmakers, such as Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Lanzmann.

And very logically, a decisive part of Ricoeur's elaboration revolves around what he calls “an exemplary challenge” (*MHF* 254; *MHO* 329), namely the Shoah, in the way it crystallizes

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pallauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), originally published as *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000). All subsequent references to these works will be given in parentheses in the text after, respectively, the abbreviations *MHF* and *MHO*.

² According to Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, 35.151–52), Butades was the first ancient Greek modeler in clay, while painting is thought to have originated with his daughter Kora. Upset about her lover's imminent departure for a faraway land, she traced his outline on the wall.

“the impossible adequation of the available forms of figuration to the demand for truth arising from the heart of vivid history” (*MHF* 260; *MHO* 337). Cinema frequently plays a critical role with regard to supposedly stable categories. Thus, the cinema facilitates a reconsideration of a separation that is accepted by Ricoeur but that seems to me problematic: that is, the separation between “trace” and what he calls “form of figuration,” which Ricoeur limits uniquely to texts, which he separates into novels and historical texts. To understand the critical resources of this reconsideration, we must leave behind another dichotomy, long called into question by cinema’s reflection: that between fiction and documentary.

To this general issue other, more particular aspects are added: first and foremost, the issue of filmed testimony. And here again, it is around the Shoah that questions and reflections have arisen, from the [Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies](#) at Yale University and then the [Spielberg Foundation](#). This issue comes with multiple ramifications regarding the selection of witnesses, the temporal distance from the event, the conditions in which testimonies are prepared, produced, archived, broadcast, etc. And this issue resonates with yet another, also prevalent in Paul Ricoeur’s work, namely the judicial dimension, with the emergence of filmic evidence both as incriminating proof and as a litmus test for the accused at the Nuremberg trials. They were filmed, as was another key moment of historical and political work concerning the Shoah: the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961. Continuing her groundbreaking work on the implications of the apparatus of testimonials in her book *The Era of the Witness*, Annette Wieviorka has further contributed to this reflection on the filmed witness in her contribution to *Cinema and the Shoah: An Art Confronts the Tragedy of the Twentieth Century* and in her research with Sylvie Lindeperg in their *Univers concentrationnaire et génocide* (Concentration-camps universe and genocide).³

The nature of the trace, its relationship to narrative form as in its materiality of which it is a trace, the issue of the witness in the context of a filmed recording, the use of films having multiples statuses but whose content can always be called into question as a “crude document”: these are just some of the essential dimensions that have been crystallized and carried to their maximum intensity by Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*, both as they concern the extermination of European Jews in its singularity and as they represent, in an exemplary fashion, questions of representation and history.

It is worth recalling that it was this film that first inspired the use of the word *shoah* to designate the event, not because it invented the term but because of what transpired in and around the film, which justified the use of this term. In an interview with Lanzmann on his approach to making the film, I asked him if *Shoah* could have been something other than a film, for example, a book. Lanzmann, who is also a writer and who certainly doesn’t spurn the powers of the written word, became angry (which happens often). My question, he retorted, was “stupid.” *Shoah* is a film, could only be a film, certainly not a book. When I pressed him further, his response this time was as deeply reflected and carefully formulated as his previous reaction had been energetic

³ Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), originally published as *L’ère du témoin* (Paris: Plon, 1998); Annette Wieviorka, “The Filmed Witness,” in *Cinema and the Shoah: An Art Confronts the Tragedy of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jean-Michel Frodon, trans. Anna Harrison and Tom Mes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 191–204, originally published in Jean-Michel Frodon, ed., *Le cinéma et la Shoah* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 2007); Sylvie Lindeperg and Annette Wieviorka, *Univers concentrationnaire et génocide* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2008).

and utterly spontaneous: “Because of . . . the faces.” Then pausing, he added: “It is a material that cannot be expressed in any other register. The faces, the trees, nature. Shoah is an incarnation.”⁴

The film *Shoah* has “made” many things. It made history; it made memory; it made politics; and it made art. And it proposed an answer to Ricoeur’s well-known dictum “the impossible adequation of the available forms of figuration to the demand for truth arising from the heart of vivid history.” *Shoah* did so in its unique arrangement of traces and testimonies and in the construction of a vast imaginary, of which the cinema alone is capable.

This imaginary arises out of the union *and* the discrepancy between what the words of the witness and what his presence elicits today in the place where he once took part in the event, as victim, executioner, or witness; the union and the discrepancy between what words say and what bodies, silences, voices, and use of idioms express; the relationship to space and time; this boundless arrangement of heterogeneous elements joined together not only by the burning sensation of what is evoked but also by the very nature of the filmmaking process and carried to a maximum intensity by Claude Lanzmann’s extreme sensitivity *simultaneously* to the burning evoked by the tragedy and to the nature of filmmaking: this is why *Shoah* could only be a film, and why, as a film, it possesses an incredible power of performance or, in the words of Ricoeur, articulation “of the modes of representation in terms of those of explanation/understanding” (*MHF* 254; *MHO* 328). But in this context, this phrase must be used only if we refrain from believing in any form of a final or definitive “explanation/understanding”; a lot can be learned and understood from *Shoah* without, however, abolishing the terrible *Kein Warum* (No “Why”). Which in no way is done in distinguishing it from an artistic construction, notably a narrative, fictional one—after all, aren’t the very first words of *Shoah* those of an adventure story: “The action begins nowadays . . .”?

This dynamic is still that of the relationship between an *idea*, the film’s project, and its production process, which alone will make it what it is: there was no script for *Shoah*; nothing was written in advance. This is an essential characteristic of the powers of construction unique to filmmaking. The making of Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* offers another stunning example, especially since it breached its own conditions of production that similarly played an incredibly important role for memory and for history. In the spring of 1955, the film was initiated as an illustration, via an editing of archival documents and a literary commentary, of a historiographic project overseen by the historians Henri Michel and Olga Wurmser. But the internal logic of the filmmaking process became progressively independent, ultimately leading Resnais far from where he was supposed to film: to Auschwitz, which was nowhere mentioned in the original project. It was there that he filmed the shots in the present, and in color, with which the film ends. In her article “*Night and Fog*: Inventing a Perspective,” Sylvie Lindeperg very effectively describes this complex, painful, and political development.⁵

Logically, Ricoeur once again turns to the Shoah as the focus of his reflection on the major issue (*MHF* 251; *MHO* 324) of the *historical imaginary*. He does so citing the works of Hayden White, which study discourse in regimes of a different scientific nature, even if Ricoeur always insists on the fact that he considers only what happens inside what he calls “verbal artifacts,” writings, the order of discourse. Standing by White, he invokes Roger Chartier, Michel Foucault, and Paul Veyne for support for the crucial idea of the “tie that the imagination establishes between

⁴ Jean-Michel Frodon, “The Work of the Filmmaker: An Interview with Claude Lanzmann,” in Frodon, *Cinema and the Shoah*, 99.

⁵ Sylvie Lindeperg, “*Night and Fog*: Inventing a Perspective,” in Frodon, *Cinema and the Shoah*, 63–84.

creativity and codification” (*MHF* 253; *MHO* 327). But the requirement of rationalism in the construction of representational modes leads him ultimately to oppose White for condemning a report of historical imagination, which through what Ricoeur calls “introducing a plot” and “style” does not allow one “to draw a clear line between historical and fictional narrative” (*MHF* 253; *MHO* 328). On the same page, Ricoeur also makes two distinct assertions of great importance. He takes note of “the relevance of the problem posed by the idea of an encoding that functions both as a constraint and a space for invention,” while also claiming that the study of such a connection remains to be done, which seems to overlook Walter Benjamin and André Bazin, not to mention Aby Warburg (and those who have researched his work) or even André Malraux. And immediately after he objects to the literary dimension, the only representative admitted by narrative modes, by the “tie that the imagination establishes between creativity and codification” and where another formulation would be properly “produced.” He objects to it for causing unacceptable turmoil concerning the distinction between the factuality of a discourse of proof, the one attributed to a witness, and the suspicions unique to all storytelling—the exact opposite of what Robert Antelme wrote in *The Human Race* regarding the collection of testimonies in the camp itself and of their very mediocre reception: “All the stories that the guys are telling are true. But it requires considerable artfulness to get even a midget of truth accepted, and in the telling of these stories there wants that artfulness which must vanquish necessary disbelief.”⁶

Now, many of those who think with images and particularly with film images from the past century have highlighted, in contrast, the special, albeit unstable and ever-searchable, resources of the production of images, in particular images in movement and above all images that have been edited, and even more with images composed in filming and in editing and reediting, this time with sounds and notably words, whether these words are spoken by those we see or others, including those who make the films. This polysemy takes place at the exact place that Ricoeur designates as the “tie that the imagination establishes between creativity and codification.” It is this adventure in the ever-commingled waters of the *presence* of the real (as absent) and its physical expression that Jean-Luc Godard has expressed in an image, a verbal image, with the now-celebrated title of his magnum opus, to which he devoted the last twenty years of the twentieth century, the *Histoire(s) du cinéma*—story(ies)/history(ies) that focus all the singularity of cinema’s contribution to history and its complexity.

This well-known imagination must not be confused with the image in the sense of visibility, of illustration, of photos, or of filmed documents that would have some superior or absolute evidential value. Imagination is a mental construction that plays out in each of us, splicing, and which is always the articulation or, better, the splicing of editing of representational and linguistic elements, as Georges Didi-Huberman aptly points out in *Remontages du temps subi, L’œil de l’histoire* (Reeditings of the endured time, The eye of history).⁷ In contrast, Didi-Huberman was less inspired when he absolutized the power of four images taken at Auschwitz by a Polish resistance fighter (*Images in Spite of All*).⁸

When the *Sonderkommando* survivor Filip Müller says in *Shoah*, following his staggering description of the sight replayed each time that he had to open the doors of the gas chambers to

⁶ Robert Antelme, *The Human Race* (Evanston, IL: Marlboro Press, 1998), 289.

⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Remontages du temps subi*, vol. 2 of *L’œil de l’histoire* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2010).

⁸ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), originally published as *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2003).

pull out the blocks of corpses that he had to burn in the crematoria, “Yes, we must imagine,” he certainly does not mean “We must look at photos,” even if these exist. But neither does this formulation, “Yes, we must imagine,” justify saying that “the Shoah was and remains without image.” Such a symmetrical rhetoric of denial of the image was held by, for instance, Gérard Wajcman, when in the heat of a controversy he lent his support to Claude Lanzmann. Wajcman failed to understand that what he said negates the very existence of the film *Shoah*, which forms images of the Shoah for over nine and a half hours. This time exactly in the way intended by Filip Müller.

There is no event without images, but these images are always constructions. The words “We must imagine” mean that we need to find the means to construct a mental image that comes close to what happened there, in a process that owes at least as much to an invocation as to a description. We need here to be able to speak about ghosts, about the presence of the dead among the living, about the haunting that is often, even in Ricoeur, considered an unhealthy pathological process but that nevertheless has complex virtues, including in terms of ethics, of building a social tie, of a civic process. The major concern that runs through the last half of *Memory, History, Forgetting*, between the necessity of the “re-production” of a shareable world and the ethical imperative of the nondissolution of the uniqueness of the catastrophe in the “as the days go by,” is also precisely the legacy of *Shoah*, a work of remarkable uniqueness. Ultimately, Lanzmann’s film evokes Ricoeur’s moving pronouncement when the philosopher affirms that “to write the history of the ‘final solution’ is not a hopeless undertaking” (*MHF* 260; *MHO* 338). Here one can hear, together with the incentive to work and to refute a prohibition that would also be laziness and defeat, that such a history could not be made without despair. A