

# GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN

## The “Blancs Soucis” of Our History

[\*Translator’s note: the word blanc can mean white, blank or space; the word souci can mean concern, solicitude, care or worry. In some cases I leave these words in French as otherwise the author’s argument would not make sense.]

Looking does not happen of its own accord. It only happens because looking comes and goes. It happens for instance that the French word *regarder* implies *keeping twice over*. Not simply keeping, unilaterally, keeping in the sense of the jailer who *watches over*, guards and from time to time looks at his prisoner through the spy-glass hole to make sure he is closed off from the world, that he is constrained. But rather keeping twice — or more keeping to enjoy, to make last, to draw near, and not keep at a superintended distance. Keeping to take care and keep alive. Keeping in the sense of a mother who protects her child from and against everything, looks at him/her from time to time, *watches over* him/her to be more certain that s/he is open to the world, free. It also happens that looking may consist of *keeping nothing* at all. It then entails accepting losing — or at the very least not retaining, not assimilating to the very end, not possessing — what we look at, when what we are looking at moves (a butterfly that beats its wings, and flies away from us into the distance), or when our own gaze shifts in its turn (I then accept giving up on the butterfly and letting my gaze stray elsewhere, for instance toward the slow movement of the clouds behind it).

Our gaze comes and goes. What it catches here (or now) it loses over there (or just before, or just after). There is no looking without this dialectic, no looking without this

perpetual movement, without this ceaseless interplay of loser-wins. For example, there are many ways of — or many moments for — looking at the sea. I can look at it in accordance with its immense horizontal plane, or else in accordance with its immense but slight curve; in accordance with the line of its horizon, or in accordance with the simple difference between the blue expanse of the water and that of the sky. I can look at it in accordance with the movement of its waves, and then I can look at it in accordance with the admirable morphogenesis of the volumes — or volutes — of spume and water (as Leonardo da Vinci was able to); but also in accordance with the just as admirable chaotic economy of the flashes of light that dance here and there, in anarchic myriads, on the surface of the water (as Claude Monet was able to). Each thing looked at can be looked at in accordance with the very different economies that are superimposed and increase in number — this goes well beyond the simple opposition between figure and background — to the point where I fail to look at them together, to keep them in the same sensory and meaningful country. For example, how is it possible to look at the features of a face and the constellation of moles or freckles running across it together? How can we keep together, at the same time, the face of the earth and the face of the sky? Looking comes and goes. Any new inflection of the gaze causes me to lose sight of — and commit to memory, which itself keeps nothing as it is — the previous inflection.

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The same is true of listening. Writing that sentence, I recall a disturbing experience that happened a long time ago while listening to the *Partita for solo flute* (BWV 1013) by Johann Sebastian Bach played by Marc Hantai, the son of a great painter who was himself a past master at the scansion of *blancs* — the *blanc souci de notre toile* [the white anxiety of our sail], as Stéphane Mallarmé expressed it so well.<sup>1</sup> Listening that was disturbing because it came and went unrelentingly between two levels of immanence, two

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<sup>1</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, "Salut" (1893), in Henri Mondor and Georges Jean-Aubry (eds.), *Stéphane Mallarmé. Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945 [1974 edn.], 27.

contradictory yet indissociable levels in the musical experience of that moment: on the one hand, amazed wonder at the composer's melodic *configurations*; on the other, almost embarrassing access — in reality vital, crucial, overwhelming — to the rhythmic *disruptions* created by the gasps for air, the player's intakes of breath (all things which standard recordings usually try to blank out). These intakes of air were undoubtedly not "the music" of Johann Sebastian Bach; but for all that they were not simple "defects" in the music. Marc Hantai of course had to breathe in, catch his breath in order for the notes to be played: the *blancs* were therefore the *soucis* [concerns] of the interpreter's body vis-à-vis the score to be interpreted. They were even its corporeal field of possibility. A person does not play music for flute without blowing into a flute, and breath itself does not work without this reserve of time, this necessary scansion of the slightly noisy, in-breathing *blanc*, this moving interval in the melodic line. All forms, even those made of stone, need to breathe. This ranges from the marbles lightly touched by Donatello to the poetic *blancs* of André du Bouchet by way of course of those of Paul Cézanne.

"*Le blanc souci de notre voile*" [The white anxiety of our sail] is the last line of a sonnet written in 1890 and entitled *Salut*. Stéphane Mallarmé placed this poem as an epigraph to his "complete collection of poetry," a collection he was almost finished arranging when death interrupted him in 1898; it was published by Edmond Deman in 1899. Mallarmé wanted this unassuming poem, initially entitled *Toast*, to be set in a small typeface — a preference Deman and subsequent publishers chose to disregard. When it came down to it, it was only about a modest *greeting*: welcoming the listener or the reader, opening the door of the collection. To do so, it was a matter of *rising to one's feet* to "offer this toast while standing," as Mallarmé writes, echoing a toast drunk at the end of a gathering of friends. For through this greeting it was a matter of *recognizing* in others, whoever they were, a shared "white anxiety," which the poet made rhyme with these three words: "*Solitude, récif, étoile*" [solitude, reef, starry veil].<sup>2</sup> As if the uttering of a poem — or the execution of a *partita*, or the composition of a picture — was specifically about that

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 27.

recognition of a common concern from the “solitude” of each individual, the “reef” of the work produced, and the “star” – or constellation – that is revealed in our thoughts by looking at it, reading it or listening to it.

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It seems that Esther Shalev-Gerz composes her works – to be looked at, read, and listened to – from a similar gesture. She rises to her feet to give a toast, she works in order to recognize, in herself as in others (for her works never fail to have specific interlocutors), something like a space populated by the *white anxieties of our history*. An installation she came up with in 2005 particularly prompted my desire to write, or, to put it another way, my anxiety, my own “solicitudes” in relation to history and to art. It was entitled *Between Listening and Telling: Last Witnesses, Auschwitz 1945-2005*, and was presented in a huge space in the town hall in Paris, between January and March 2005, as part of the commemorations of the liberation of the camp at Auschwitz.<sup>3</sup> The artist was called on to “put into space,” to *exhibit the words* of sixty or so survivors of the Nazi camps: they gave testimony of their experiences in front of the video cameras of four teams of interviewers coordinated by Bénédicte Rochas. The testimony gathered varied in length, according to the requirements of each narrator: between two and nine hours were recorded for each person.

But can we be made into *spectators* of such lengths of time, such words? Is exhibiting spoken words – and specifically words relating to this extreme history – not to threaten them in their very existence, exhibiting them so that they become pure forms devoid of meaning? Is it not consigning them to no longer being addressed to anyone at all, no longer affecting anyone? There was a great risk involved: the risk that an artistic

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<sup>3</sup> *Entre l'écoute et la parole: Derniers témoins, Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1945-2005* (Paris: Mairie de Paris-Mémorial de la Shoah, 2005). See also Stefanie Baumann, “Œuvres,” in *Esther Shalev-Gerz* (Paris-Lyon: Éditions du Jeu de Paume-Fage Éditions, 2010), 90-95.

gesture, however elegant it might be, might render this collection of terrible stories inaccessible – or at the very least secondary. Were we not condemned to the bad dilemma of “underexposing” these words (understating them as documentary epiphenomena of the work itself), or conversely “overexposing” them (talking them up as archival fetishes), two symmetrical ways of rendering something both *inaudible* and *unwatchable*? Archives as we well know are fashionable in the postmodern art world. But it is very often at the cost of being referred back to an ambiguous use value: either intimidating and auratic, or decorative and unusable – inaccessible in either case.

Well, Esther Shalev-Gerz’s main concern or *souci*, totally consistent with the ethical and political dimension of her work over the long term, was in fact not to “take” this corpus of spoken words in order to shape it for her own personal use and into her own personal “style,” but to *return* it to everyone, to all of us. In short, it was a question of *giving a form to the common good* henceforth constituted by these testimonies that had been brought together. It is not irrelevant that the artist’s installation occupied a *communal place*, by which I mean the large hall in the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, and not a private space or an art gallery. Esther Shalev-Gerz’s work very much questioned a *res publica* there, that public matter constituted by all of the testimony collected, those fragments of our shared history, before any *res artistica* in the form of a matter for “art buyers,” experts or aesthetes. *Between Listening and Telling* is a work of art, quite undoubtedly, but it was a work first conceived outside her own “specialty,” her professional body, or her “milieu”: hence a “republican” work in the literal meaning of the term.

Not only was the space communal, but in addition Esther Shalev-Gerz had wanted to preserve its usual lighting level, although it was also a question of putting video images in a situation where they could be watched. Would it not have been more effective – and spectacular – to have darkness around these images, as is so often the case in our museums of contemporary art? But the artist wanted to proceed to something like a *communal sharing* of the testimonies, the witnesses and the *témoignaires* (those to whom the testimonies were addressed), without anything intervening to reduce the *possibilities of coexistence* and meeting between all those involved. So it was that the sixty or so

testimonies could be viewed in their entirety in the hall at the Hôtel de Ville at some sixty workstations supplied with individual headphones, so that each viewer or listener had the opportunity to find him/herself, as if one to one, *confronting the image and spoken words of a single witness*, for the actual duration of the story. At the same time, the arrangement of the tables devised by Esther Shalev-Gerz – a serpentine arrangement, with each concave curve being occupied by a listening station – placed virtually every viewer *opposite the body and silence of the témoignaire*, or spectator positioned on the other side of the table. Through this very simple device, each person was thus simultaneously kept apart in his/her viewing and listening, but in the communal exhibition space.

Is not knowing how to keep *the singular and the plural together* exactly what a policy worthy of the name should aim at – just like an artistic decision?<sup>4</sup> The arrangement devised by Esther Shalev-Gerz had another virtue: where usually the plurality of the sound documents and that of the spectators-listeners at an exhibition ends up in a general racket, a composite noise that ruins any concentration in listening, the large hall at the Hôtel de Ville was strangely – but necessarily – silent. Words spoken into the headphones, close to each person's ears: *whispered words*, in a sense. And otherwise the silence of each individual, the *silent listening*, earnest and quite often devastated, the collective silence of the “spectators” of the exhibition. Now to this already prevailing silence the artist wanted to add something like a pause: on three large screens arranged between the blind arcades of the room, there was a loop – going from one screen to the other with a slight time lapse, seven seconds I think<sup>5</sup> – showing a *montage of silences* patiently picked out by the artist from the tens of hours of conversations held with the survivors.

*Silences shown* with care, since the brief “blank” moments in the speech – when the witness is searching for words, can no longer find them, is disheartened by his/her own description, lets a moved and silent recovery of memory take place, etc. –

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<sup>4</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être singulier pluriel* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 15-123.

<sup>5</sup> A time lapse of which the logic was initially hard to grasp: it started from the right and “spread” toward the left. In answer to my question about this, Esther Shalev-Gerz spontaneously evoked her two mother tongues: Lithuanian (which is written from left to right) and Yiddish (like Hebrew, written from right to left).

had been isolated by framing, usually in close-up, centered on the witness's face, and slowed down to half speed. This made it possible to make the *gesture* implied by each of these fragile moments visible. *Edited silences* too, so that a real "atlas of blanks" was constituted from which something like the *gestus* – but a *gestus* as a picture within a picture, so to speak – of the testimonies as such, finally emanates from it. On the basis of Wittgenstein's dictum, it would be possible to put forward the idea that what cannot be talked about should not only be *kept quiet*, but also *shown*. And not only shown, but *edited* as well, according to a visual consistency that Wittgenstein specifically wanted to theorize under the term *Übersicht*, an "overview," the "all-encompassing gaze."<sup>6</sup>

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Faced with this montage of silences, it would be possible to imagine something like the ultimate version of a famous Hassidic parable. When his people were in danger, the Baal Shem-Tov<sup>7</sup> used to go into a certain forest, stand in front of a certain tree and utter certain words; then the people would survive. Then the descendent of the Baal Shem-Tov, when his people were in danger, also went back to the forest that had been named to him by his ancestor, but he no longer knew which tree he should say the words in front of; he uttered them all the same, looking this way and that, and it sufficed for the people to survive. Later still, the descendent of the descendent went into exile, and nobody any longer knew where the forest was, perhaps it had been transformed into a military camp or a chemical factory; but too bad, the descendent of the descendent uttered the words in his Brooklyn slum, and the people find they survive in spite of everything. Then it came about that the last in the line had completely forgotten the actual words; then he simply told the story, and the people survived in their story.

After Chantal Akerman, who used this parable as the opening to her film *Histoires d'Amérique* (1989) – and I seem to remember that she added some musings

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<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's "Golden Bough"* (1930-1933), ed. And rev. Rush Rhees, trans. A.C. Miles (Harleston: Norfolk, 1991). See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet. L'œil de l'histoire*, 3 (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2011), 255-272.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Baal Shem-Tov (1698-1760) is regarded as the founder of Hassidic Judaism [editor's note].

about the question of knowing who this story should now be passed on to, as she herself had no child – it might be supposed that Esther Shalev-Gerz, in her montage of silences, is suggesting a *possibility of survival* even in the failure to utter a sentence of the story. All children of survivors know full well the extent to which what is transmitted from one generation to the next is first of all and above all silence. It could also be hypothesized that where Esther Shalev-Gerz – with her husband Jochen Gerz – had imagined her famous *buried monument*,<sup>8</sup> she now lets the silences of a few survivors float in the air, silences that might then form a sort of *hanging monument*. “Gestures of lead” in one instance – since the *Monument Against Fascism* (1986-1993) was covered with lead suspended on an aluminum frame – “gestures of air” here. Inscriptions on the one hand (lead as a surface to print on), the uninscribable in this case (where could these silences be inscribed?). It is the strange seriousness of what floats and does not settle, of what is addressed to us but is not uttered.

Things are, in reality, more complicated than that, I mean, more dialectic. It is not in fact because she had extracted all those moments of silence from the witnesses’ stories that Esther Shalev-Gerz actually wanted to isolate them. What she wanted to do was, on the contrary, to really *confront* the silences with the words themselves. Are not the breaths drawn by the flautist moving and meaningful precisely in their physical effort to reconstitute the music of Bach? Would isolating them from that music not render them pointless or abstract? Therefore it would be quite wrong completely to isolate – fetishize – these silences that were collected by the artist, assembled and shown by her, in *sight of the words*, restored in their entirety through the individual viewing and listening devices.

Thus this collection of silences is in no way a monument to silence as such. Or to put it in other words, a monument to the unspeakable nature of the Shoah. More modestly, it gives only the counter-motif – the counter-form, the indent, the lining, the time lapse, albeit effective and striking – of spoken words that are as necessary as they are lacunary (as are the images themselves, moreover). Could it not be said that the puzzle of

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<sup>8</sup> See Jochen Gerz & Esther Shalev-Gerz: *Das Harburger Mahnmal gegen Faschismus* (Ostfildem: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1994).



the slightest sentence uttered will never be finished, terminated, defined? The gaps are really there – not only as absences, but as fundamental *gestures* – and that is what the work of Esther Shalev-Gerz shows. The puzzle will never be completed, from the level of the least fragment of a sentence uttered to that of the whole society of witnesses of history. In 2005, shortly before the completion of the *Between Listening and Telling* project, one of the witnesses suddenly retracted his testimony: he took it back into his own possession, unable to disclose it to those near to him, perhaps waiting until he died for his words to become audible and able to be shared.

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A silence often appears at the most powerful moment of spoken testimony. A silence often carries – bears in silence – the very intensity of what is being said. That is one of the most compelling motifs of what could be called the cinema of testimony: in the framing and length of the shots, in the trim or cut of the sequences, and finally in the editing, the poetics and ethics of a representation of the spoken word capable of not censoring the “blanks” are truly decided. We see that throughout *Shoah* (1985), the film by Claude Lanzmann, without it being necessary, I feel, to call on the “irrepresentability” of that story or the “transcendancy” of those momentarily mute faces.<sup>9</sup> We will no doubt learn a lot about the choices made by Claude Lanzmann on the day when a comparative analysis of the rushes and the edited versions of *Shoah* has been carried out.<sup>10</sup> The great silence of Abraham Bomba, in the “second period” of the film, constitutes in this context a *moment when everything is played out* in terms of the fate of the testimony, between the incomparable strength of what is uttered and its tremendous fragility in being uttered.

Abraham Bomba, you may remember, tells the story of Treblinka with

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<sup>9</sup> As can be read in the book by Aline Alterman, *Visages de Shoah, le film de Claude Lanzmann* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2006), 219-270.

<sup>10</sup> See the doctoral research currently being undertaken by Rémy Besson under the direction of Christian Delage at the EHESS (Lhivic) in Paris on *La mise en récit du film Shoah*, as well as his presentation of the installation *Entre l'écoute et la parole* at the EHESS, in the presence of Esther Shalev-Gerz, as part of a seminar session entitled “La place du non articulé dans les témoignages filmés des survivants du génocide juif.”

surprising detachment: he formulates his account in faultless sentences pronounced unflinchingly, he therefore seems to be well distanced from his own affects and his remembered images, the words seem to come unprompted, a bit mechanically, in this language (English) which is not however his own, and as if “detached” by a strange syllabic scansion that seems to me to go beyond mere accent. The thing is that the very possibility of bearing witness is conditional on the impersonality of the account, for all that it is given in the first person. It is as if Abraham Bomba could tell the story only if he made his own “I” non-existent, decommissioned it. It is as if the neutrality of his practical gestures – he is busy doing someone’s hair in front of Lanzmann’s camera – allowed him to articulate his unbearable testimony. When Claude Lanzmann asks him what he “felt” at the time, Abraham Bomba replies with factual data, a way of not answering. When Lanzmann repeats his question, a little later, he answers that feelings had disappeared, another way of precluding his feelings in the hollow of his words. But when he starts to *talk about another man*, to remember another Jewish hairdresser, also from Czestochowa, another man whose fate we will not know – although Bomba obviously does – a terrible silence suddenly catches him by the throat and holds him in its grip for long minutes. The “I” of Abraham Bomba was hermetically sealed up, to be sure; but emotion rises up and leaves him speechless at the very moment when it is someone else – someone like him, a friend – who is evoked, invoked in a sense. Silence definitely does not say “I,” and is addressed at that other person. It requires the insistence, oppressive yet necessary, of Lanzmann, then a *detour through a different language* – a few phrases pronounced, as if for himself, in Yiddish – for the testimony to be able to resume.<sup>11</sup>

We could say, with Jean-Luc Nancy, that in these blank moments, representation – with the transmission of the story it authorizes – has been “bewildered in the sense of surprised, disconcerted, paralyzed.”<sup>12</sup> We could say, with Jacques Rancière, that such moments are part of speech itself and in no way “disconcert” the images: “The

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<sup>11</sup> See Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah* (1985).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “La représentation interdite,” in *L’Art et la mémoire des camps. Représenter, exterminer* (Paris: Le Genre Humain-Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 23.

irreparable does not forbid words, it modulates them differently. It does not forbid images. Rather, it obliges them to move and to explore new possibilities. The irreparable nature of what took place in no way obliges us to create monuments to absence and to silence. Absence and silence are there anyhow, in any given situation. The question is to know what the people of the present make of them – what they make of words that contain an experience or objects that contain a memory, and of the images that transmit that memory.”<sup>13</sup> Well, these suggestions, legitimate as they may well be – each with its special choice of vocabulary – seem very general, as if placed above or set back from the unique experiences they set out to subsume. We then understand that the *blancs soucis of the testimony*, as they are so clearly seen in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, or, set out in a different way, in Esther Shalev-Gerz’s montages, appeal to contemporary philosophical thinking as a *paradigm*.

A potent paradigm, at the intersection of questions fundamental to both aesthetics and ethics. Would the *screaming silence* of the survivors of the Shoah therefore today occupy a discursive place equivalent to that occupied, throughout the classical period, by the *silent scream* of the famous *Laocoon*? We remember how Lessing, starting from a consideration of the “scream [as a] natural expression of pain,”<sup>14</sup> praised that convention of representation intended to *avoid a gaping appearance* in the sorrowful figure of the antique sculpture: “A gaping mouth is a blot in painting, a hollow in sculpture, which produces the most shocking effect in the world, not to speak of the offputting appearance it gives to the rest of the twisted, grimacing face.”<sup>15</sup> We also remember how in Lessing’s eyes the image worthy of grief demanded the proposal of a “unique instant,” that *fecund instant*, “pregnant instant” capable of “leaving imagination a free field” and giving birth to the appropriate affective responses in front of this representation of pathos.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Work of the Image*, in *Esther Shalev-Gerz*, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, we know how Roland Barthes summed up that economy of representation under the heading of what he called a *classic picture*: “The picture (pictorial, theatrical, literary) is a pure cutout, with clean edges, irreversible, incorruptible, which represses into nothingness all the unnamed things surrounding it, and promotes everything it causes to enter into its field to essence, to light; this demiurgic discrimination involves high thinking: the picture is intellectual, it wants to say something (moral, social), but also says it knows how it must be said; it is simultaneously significant and propaedeutic, impressive and reflexive, moving and aware of the paths of emotion.”<sup>17</sup> As Barthes finds in Diderot – based on Lessing and *Laocoon* – the picture assumes a *pregnant instant* subject “always [to] the Law: the law of society, the law of fighting, the law of sense.”<sup>18</sup>

There is no room in such an economy for what Barthes calls the “unnamed” – those *blank instants* now welcomed by Claude Lanzmann in the context of the documentary film, or by Esther Shalev-Gerz in that of the art exhibition. However, by placing Brecht and Eisenstein at the same level of “classicism” as Diderot and Lessing, Barthes deprived himself of understanding the main thing, namely that we go beyond the economy of the “classic picture” only to bring about the breaking of the frames that were developed in the 1920s and 1930s by the arts – pictorial, theatrical, literary and cinematographic – *of montage and its intervals*. A long way from what Roland Barthes postulates, Brecht’s “tableaux” and Eisenstein’s “shots” open up the frame and leave room for gaps, silences, cracks in meaning, precisely in that they are edited or assembled, contrasted, given rhythm, and phrased in a certain way. Laocoon himself had been able to escape the classic (in reality neoclassical) economy of “convention,” as soon as he had no longer been looked at through Lessing’s static criteria – the “unique instant” or physiognomic convention – but through the moving criteria of Goethe when he speaks

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<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein” (1973), in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Fontana, 1979), 69-78.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

before the sculpture of a vertiginous economy of *transitory moments*.<sup>19</sup>

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The montage of silences projected by Esther Shalev-Gerz appears in this light straight away: it is a collection of transitory moments. Although in slow motion, every gesture associated with this break in speech is very quickly cut off by the following one, the resulting impression – which nothing softens – being that of *visual discontinuities*, while *the silences persist*. Discontinuities and duration, breaks and persistence: is that not the very status of the words giving testimony? In her installations Esther Shalev-Gerz has never ceased to instigate dialogues, to give shape to *interlocutory situations*: she asks this and that person questions, she confronts faces and points of view, she worries about stories – even simple opportunities to smile – from everyone, she questions objects (like those found in the earth of Buchenwald camp in the work *MenschenDinge – The Human Aspect of Objects*, 2004-2006), practices (like photography), in the prism of each unique story, as in collective history.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, she unceasingly questions transmission right down to its effects of disarray or perdition: one of her installations has the title *White Out* (2002), suggesting the total loss of any sense of direction for anyone trying to find the way in the middle of a snowstorm.<sup>21</sup>

The silences shown and edited by Esther Shalev-Gerz are not simply failures of speech on the part of the witnesses. They are moments of transition, dialectic infills, scansion in the *tempo* of history itself. Therefore they are events in speech, and even authentic *events in the testimony*. Events that are simultaneously *singular* and *collective*,

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<sup>19</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Upon the Laocoon" (1798), in *Essays on Art and Literature (Goethe: The Collected Works, Vol. 3)*, ed. John Gearey, trans. Ellen von Nardroff and Ernest H. von Nardroff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> See *Esther et Jochen Gerz. Raisons de sourire. Le fragment d'Arles* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997); *Esther Shalev-Gerz. Les portraits des histoires. Aubervilliers* (Paris/Aubervilliers: École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts-Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, 2000); *Esther Shalev-Gerz: Does your image reflect me?* (Hanover: Sprengel Museum, 2002); *Esther Shalev-Gerz: First Generation* (Fittja: Multicultural Centre Botkyrka, 2006); *Esther Shalev-Gerz: MenschenDinge — The Human Aspect of Objects* (Weimar: Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora, 2006); *Esther Shalev-Gerz: Der letzte Klick* (Braunschweig: Museum für Photographie, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> See *Esther Shalev-Gerz: Two installations* (Stockholm: Historiska Museet, 2002), 8-35.

belonging to the person whose discourse falters, but addressed to all of those who agree, in every failure of discourse to listen, to the burning desire to open still further the limits of what can be said, to go on sharing this *common demand of (hi)story* (and here I am intending the French word *histoire* in its two meanings of historical development requiring us to adopt a position, however discretely, and the historical account, however fragile, required from the testimony). As Gilles Deleuze emphasized so well in *The Logic of Sense*, “there are no private or collective events, no more than there are individuals and universals, particularities and generalities. Everything is singular, and thus both collective and private, particular and general, neither individual nor universal. Which war, for example, is not a private affair? Conversely, which wound is not inflicted by war and derived from society as a whole? Which private event does not have all its coordinates, that is, all its impersonal social singularities?”<sup>22</sup>

Editing her silences, for Esther Shalev-Gerz, meant *showing the break twice*: once the silent break in the witnesses’ speech; the other break, that from one image to the next – silence to the next – reveals the formal construction of a time dismantled then reassembled by the artist. Confronting these silences, in the economy of the installation *Between Listening and Telling*, including all of the testimonies uttered, also meant *showing the break with the connection*, a break in the connection (silences in the speech), and a connection in the break (editing of the silences with editing of the words). Then the break is in fact no longer “personal” or individual: its assembly with all the other breaks makes it possible to understand something that travels between all these silences, between all these spoken words, which would be a *community of the break*. “Method,” Eisenstein wrote, “is fracture and assemblage [made] visible.”<sup>23</sup> It is in this that the montage of a few singular breaks straight away appears to be a political decision as much as an aesthetic one, as is indicated to us by Gilles Deleuze commenting on Zola’s *La Bête humaine*, or recently by Pierre Zaoui when he wrote in *La Traversée des*

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<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (1969), ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, “Ermolova” (1937-1939), French trans. A. Zouboff, in François Albera (ed.), *Cinématisme. Peinture et cinéma* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1980) (republished in *Les Presses du réel*, 2009), 224. My italics.

*catastrophes* that a theory of the break is necessary in order to explain “how the most effective, most fruitful, most profound upheavals for *all human beings* can turn out to be the most silent, most imperceptible, least collective.”<sup>24</sup>

In what way could what concerns “all human beings” appear in the momentary silence in some unique spoken words, in short in “the least collective” exercise possible, since it in fact breaks the continuity of the dialogue, indeed the social connection with others? That is exactly the question the silences of these witnesses, these *blancs soucis* [blank anxieties] of testimony, direct at us here. But what is a *souci* [a worry, a concern, an anxiety] when it comes down to it? It is firstly a *malfunction*, as when one says faced with a telephone that remains silent for lack of a connection or a failed battery, “*il y a un souci*” [there is something wrong]. It is the “blanks” in the witnesses’ speeches as momentary “breakdowns”: in as far as they cause them to fail to say what their position as a witness nonetheless commits them to say. More fundamentally, *souci* is a *torment*: a symptom that can be more painful or less so and crosses and disrupts the normal exercise of any activity whatsoever. The witnesses’ “white solicitudes/blank anxieties” thus signal those moments when they cannot manage to name something, but also the psychological agitation that goes with its cause, and soon the consequence too.

The French word “*soucier*” comes from a Latin verb that means “to agitate, stir powerfully, trouble, worry, raise, provoke.” *Souci* agitates us because – like a tectonic movement – it stirs and brings to the surface whole areas of our consciousness, our language. It infiltrates through all our cracks and comes up – like sulfur fumes – as a “blank” in the space of our thoughts or our words. It is the escape of a fear or an unconscious desire that hampers the coming into operation of our will. How can we not see, in Esther Shalev-Gerz’s montage, that the “blanks” in the witnesses’ speeches are all emanations of suffering that come, so to speak, to poison their will to tell their story? And as a result they often experience that feeling of unease, impotence, and anguish that takes them back, freezes them, imprisons them mutely in the unbearable nature of a

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<sup>24</sup> Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*. Pierre Zaoui, *La Traversée des catastrophes. Philosophie pour le meilleur et pour le pire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2010), 320.

remembered image that fails to be unraveled in words?

The Latin verb that the French word *soucier* is derived from is *sollicitare*. Its physical meaning (to agitate, stir) has given rise to a whole vocabulary of psychological torment, worry, but also – or one might say even – of amorous desire (that is why *sollicitare* also means “to excite, provoke, attract”). *Souci* is torment because it is extended toward the other while the other keeps concealing itself: therefore it demonstrates the *solicitude* of desire, love, and in general the attention accorded to the world and to others. We know that Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, just after dealing with anguish as a “privileged revelation of being there,” accorded *souci* (in German, *Sorge*) a quite fundamental place, which was that of “the being of being-there,” no less.<sup>25</sup> But to express this legitimate position of preeminence or pre-existence – “*souci* is existentially and a priori ‘anterior’ to any de facto ‘behavior’ and ‘situation’ of being there, which means that it is always already present in all behaviour and in every situation” – Heidegger stated that he was providing against any “concrete anthropology.”<sup>26</sup> This would probably have exempted him from engaging in “concrete solicitude” in a historical period – the same one that the testimonies shown by Esther Shalev-Gerz are concerned with – a period when there was “something to get worked up about,” as it is expressed in modern parlance. It may be said in passing that the position of Georges Bataille was quite different when, in *Inner Experience*, he joined up the *existence* of each instant to a *demand* set as a concern (*souci*), an unappeasable disquiet in the face of time.<sup>27</sup>

Finally there is a poetic history of solicitude. I will sum it up in three simple factors.<sup>28</sup> The first is that of beauty: it is when Malherbe invents this admirable expression of desire or looking at what comes and goes, like a wave, between the given and the withdrawn: “*Beauté, mon beau souci, de qui l’âme incertaine / A, comme l’Océan, son flux*

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, rev. ed. 1962).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* (1943), trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (New York: State University of New York, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> It is possible to consult the poetic and philosophical collection formed by Richard Millet and Jean-Michel Maulpoix focusing on the motif “*Le souci*” in *Recueil*, no. 3 (1986), 65-170.



*et son reflux...*” [Beauty, my fine concern, whose uncertain soul / Has, like the Ocean, its ebb and its flow...]<sup>29</sup> The second factor is the antithesis I started from, that of Mallarmé hailing le blanc as a dialectic fill-in for all solicitude: “*Solitude, récif, étoile / À n’importe ce qui valut / Le blanc souci de notre voile.*” [Solitude, reef, and starry veil / To whatever’s worthy of knowing / The white anxiety of our sail].<sup>30</sup> The third factor could be that where montage takes on both of the two previous terms: it is when Jean-Luc Godard, picking up on and extending Malherbe’s choice of words, compares editing, his “*beau souci,*” to a “heartbeat,” a “link-up to a gaze” or again to what he names the “highlighting of an unknown woman” when, in working on images, you succeed in “bringing out the soul beneath the mind, the passion behind the scheming, [and in] making the heart prevail over understanding by destroying the notion of space in favor of that of time.”<sup>31</sup>

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The *blancs soucis* of the testimonies themselves bear witness to the *movements of times* – both words in the plural – at work in the narrative of each historical account. They have to do with montages and intervals, fractures and assemblages brought together anachronically according to processes of attraction, or conversely of conflict. Speaking in general about silence in speech, speaking of solicitude outside any “concrete anthropology,” does not take us very far, only to fine notions stripped of flesh, stripped of gestures. Looking at Esther Shalev-Gerz’s montage, we would have to know how to come back down from the grand paradigms – “the pregnant instant” according to Lessing, “the being of being-there” according to Heidegger – to the small syntagms: in short, to come back down from a philosophy of silence in general to those discrete

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<sup>29</sup> François de Malherbe, “Dessein de quitter une dame qui ne le contentait que de promesse” (1600), in Antoine Adam (ed.), *Œuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 21.

<sup>30</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Salut” (1893), in *Stéphane Mallarmé. Œuvres complètes*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Luc Godard, “Montage, My Fine Care” (1956), in *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1986).

segments or *strands of silences* we discover here and there in the course of the accounts produced by the witnesses of history.

Testimony does not “emerge” from silence, as might at first be thought listening to the accounts of those who have described how they reached the point where they could speak against the background of a previous muteness which felt like a prison, like a camp within the camp, so to speak.<sup>32</sup> We well know that at the other end of that spectrum memory can be threatened by its very saturation: “Memories saturated. What we need is silence,” as Régine Robin wrote.<sup>33</sup> Memory itself needs its own “blanks”: the reticulation of its veins, of its in-between places, of its own cracks. And that is what was well understood by some psychoanalysts,<sup>34</sup> but above all by some great writers such as Primo Levi or Samuel Beckett, appositely put together by Robert Harvey in his book *Witnessness*.<sup>35</sup>

The moments of silence in the testimony do indeed form *blancs soucis* of history, which then try to be recounted. They are its *symptoms*, in the etymological sense of what “coincides.” They interrupt the flow of the story at the very moment when it is about the time — a different time from that of the story — that comes up through the cracks between the words uttered. They mark the real *rhythm* of memory at work. They are therefore a matter of time and counter-time, blows and counter-blows. They crop up in special places, places where everything could suddenly bifurcate, which surveyors appositely call cusp *catastrophes*. They are the beam on the scales of destiny, the intersection of the paths of speech. They occur at the dialectic mainspring of the conflicts inherent to the memory itself: when the story fights with what wants to efface it from within (the pain of saying) or from without (the fright of hearing). A survivor of the Shoah once

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<sup>32</sup> See Sam Braun, *Personne ne m'aurait cru, alors je me suis tu. Entretien avec Stéphane Guinoiseau* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2008); Nathalie Heinich, *Sortir des camps, sortir du silence. De l'indicible à l'imprescriptible* (Brussels: Les Impressions nouvelles, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Régine Robin, *La Mémoire saturée* (Paris: Stock, 2003), 375.

<sup>34</sup> See Pierre Fédida, *L'Absence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 13-51 and 197-238; Fédida, *Le Site de l'étranger. La situation psychanalytique* (Paris: PUF, 1995), 7-220; Anne-Lise Stern, *Le Savoir-déporté: Camps, histoire, psychanalyse* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2004); Nathalie Zaltzman (ed.), *La Résistance de l'humain* (Paris: PUF, 1999); and Janine Altounian, *L'Intraduisible: Deuil, mémoire, transmission* (Paris: Dunod, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> See Robert Harvey, *Witnessness: Beckett, Dante, Levi and the Foundations of Responsibility* (New York-London: Continuum, 2010), 40-46 (on the gap) and 70-74 (on *whit, white and blank*).

said to Régine Waintrater that the witness is “a dumb person trying to speak to a deaf person who is trying to hear him.”<sup>36</sup>

The *blancs soucis* of our history are thus like stumbling blocks or wrenching points, central zones on the battlefield of the memory in action, at the place where everything is blocked, or on the contrary speeds up and branches out. They arise in the eye of the cyclone: where duty — “Good people, do not forget, good people, write and record!” in the words of the heartbreaking appeal made by Simon Dubnow just before he was murdered on December 8, 1941, when the Riga ghetto was liquidated<sup>37</sup> — fights with the powerlessness and failure of words. Where the agonizing double bind of producing a turn of phrase as close as possible to the experience and not being purely “subjective” while at the same time avoiding being too “distanced,” a way of appearing “artificial,” prevails. Where the greatest dignity is constantly fighting it out with shame, and *impersonal* modesty with the inevitably *private* character of any testimony.

Bearing testimony means constructing a filiation: it means unraveling threads (filaments, woven patterns of speech) so that sons (children in general, descendants) can themselves configure something of the history that has formed them. It involves trying to “rediscover the thread of one’s life” in the breaks in history.<sup>38</sup> It involves making movements of *association* confront moments of *dissociation*, it being well understood that association itself, that moral imperative, saves us from nothing and can cause all the grief of the trauma to resurface:<sup>39</sup> so that the *blancs soucis* appear in turn as mute *accesses* of grief, and as *screens* to protect ourselves from it, the space left by a silence, of a *plan blanc* or “blank shot,” an interval (a wall in front of our steps or a hole under our feet). But

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<sup>36</sup> Régine Waintrater, *Sortir du génocide: Témoignage et survivance* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003 [2011 edn]), 242.

<sup>37</sup> As in Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Simon Dubnov: l’homme-mémoire,” preface to Simon Dubnov, *Histoire moderne du peuple juif* (1923-1941), trans. Samuel Jankélévitch (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1994), V. This quotation also opens the book by Annette Wieviorka, *L’Ère du témoin* (Paris: Plon, 1998 and republished Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2002), 9. As early as January 1915, the Jewish writers Isaac Leib Peretz, Jacob Dinezon and Shalom Ansky wrote: “Therefore we turn to our people who are now and always have been swept along in the general maelstrom, to all the members of our people, men and women, young and old, who live and suffer, see and hear, to call to them: Become historians! ... Record, note down, collect documents!” As in David G. Roskies, “La Bibliothèque de la Catastrophe juive,” trans. J. Ertel, *Pardès*, nos. 9-10 (1989), 203.

<sup>38</sup> Régine Waintrater, *Sortir du génocide*, 30-32.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-226.

in each silence there also arises something resembling an *anachronistic editing* in which an erratic present comes into conflict with a past that is in tatters. It is a question each time of “surviving one’s past”;<sup>40</sup> each time of the sharpness of recollecting (the pain of when “I remember it as if it was yesterday”) and the necrosis of forgetting (the pain of when “I no longer remember anything”) touch one another.

That is how the witness manages to keep upright above the gap in a language given over to the unspoken emergence — or the inflammatory upsurge — of images. Silence falls like a cleaver when speech is thrown off balance by what survivors sometimes call “flashes” or “holes,” “badly closed gaps” from which the “nightmares,” the “closed-off images” of the trauma arise.<sup>41</sup> People remember having “seen without understanding,”<sup>42</sup> and silent images are then imposed — or interposed — like *dissociated sights*, visions still deprived of any symbolic association. Flashes devoid of meaning, freeze frames, or images in a loop turning desperately round and round on themselves: it is all these things, with the *associated affects*, still incapable of being freed into speech, that can come and jostle one another in every silence.

Thus there is nothing simple in the *blancs soucis* of the testimony. Silence is not a uniform material, far from it. It can alternate between being a dead end and a way through, a block or an intake of breath, an absence of sound, and I also mean an absence of meaning, or indeed their supreme resonance. “Speaking of what is ineffable is precisely saying nothing,” Jean Paulhan wrote at the opening of his *Fleurs de Tarbes*.<sup>43</sup> If, confronted with Esther Shalev-Gerz’s montage, we were to decide to indulge in the precise, micrological “concrete anthropology” of every silence picked up at every interruption of speech, every suspension of words — which words before? which words after? what tone? what wording? what gestures and facial expressions? — we would perhaps succeed in drawing up a cartography of the battlefields that take place, in the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 94-99.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 163-164.

<sup>43</sup> Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou la Terreur dans les Lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941 [1990 edn.]), 23.

course of the testimony, between every silence and every other silence and every word, between every word and every other word and every silence.

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The witness does not cease to be one at the point when his speech is suspended. The *blanc souci*, in the very measure in which it can arise as a symptom or *pang* of speech, does not stop manifesting that *solicitude*, that *concern for others* which are the basis of the ethical dimension of the testimony. The image “blocked” in the silence — at the sudden moment when discourse fails to describe, to tell — is still looking for a way out, for its capacity to be addressed, transmitted, and call on the listener’s imagination. To sum up, it is a question of *continuing to tell*, albeit in the blanks of the story. It is a question of *conveying images* in spite of — or through — the silences in speech: “Trauma has fixed the contours of the most private images once and for all, so depriving the survivor of any possibility of retouching them later. Then we are audience to a true ‘freeze frame,’ from which all movement has disappeared, leaving as its only trace a series of still shots that run through in a loop. Now, it is precisely those images that the witness is invited to *open* to allow them to be seen by a person hearing his testimony who has not seen them.”<sup>44</sup>

Falling silent does not mean denying anything whatsoever.<sup>45</sup> Nor does falling silent in the middle of a story mean abandoning telling it. For example, in *W, or The Memory of Childhood* Georges Perec found an admirable way of welcoming the holes in his memory in the actual wording of his story. He first suggests his *blancs soucis* are simple and objective *lapses of memory*: “I have no childhood memories. ... I do not know where the threads that attach me to my childhood are broken. ... My childhood is one of those things of which I know that I know almost nothing. ... I have other information regarding my parents, I know it will be of no help to me in saying what I would like to say

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<sup>44</sup> Régine Waintrater, *Sortir du génocide*, 220.

<sup>45</sup> See Catherine Coquio (ed.), *L'Histoire trouée: Négation et témoignage* (Nantes: L'Atalante, 2003).

about it. ... There was the Liberation; I have preserved no image whatsoever of it, nor of its ups and downs, nor even of the outpourings of enthusiasm that accompanied and followed it in which it is more than probable that I participated.”<sup>46</sup> It so happens, the writer notes at one point, that “Perec” is derived from “Peretz,” which in Hebrew means *the hole*.<sup>47</sup>

But Georges Perec also knows the extent to which such “blanks” run through his life like so many *pangs of memory*. It is this that is apparent in the affective strangeness that consists of loving first and foremost a missing memory (“of all the memories that I lack, that is perhaps the one I would most dearly like to have”<sup>48</sup>). This is what gives existing memories the appearance of scattered fragments, like bits of statues half buried in a site of ancient ruins (“the memories exist, fleeting or persistent, pointless or weighty, but nothing puts them together. They are like that unjoined-up writing, made up of isolated letters incapable of being welded together to form a word, ... or like those dissociated, dislocated drawings, the scattered elements which never succeeded in tying up with one another, ... scraps of life snatched from the void. No mooring rope. Nothing anchors them, nothing fixes them. Almost nothing confirms them”<sup>49</sup>). Memories tormented by blanks that predominate: hazy memories (“I was severely punished, but I don’t remember what the punishment was. That hazy memory raises woolly questions that I have never succeeded in elucidating”<sup>50</sup>); memories invented or borrowed from other people;<sup>51</sup> memories tormented by the discovery of images of the camps (“I remember the photos showing the walls of the ovens lacerated by the nails of those being gassed and of a chess set made from pellets of bread”<sup>52</sup>).

Ultimately we have to assume that that transmission takes place: Georges Perec’s *blancs soucis* then become *solicitations of memory*, solicitations to write despite

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<sup>46</sup> Georges Perec, *W, or The Memory of Childhood* (1975), trans. David Bellos (London: Vintage Books, 2011).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

everything, solicitude towards the person hearing the testimony, the interlocutor or reader. But that is possible only by *assuming the gaps* and inventing a device for that purpose capable of linking them with all the rest, in short, an art *in editing* that will give the story its full force, its full necessity. Assuming the gaps: this is when all that Perec has left, as the sole recollection of a certain episode in his life, the image of a letter, a sort of — false — Hebrew letter the outline of which surrounds a void; or else when the typographical sign of a break and ellipsis appears — “(..)” — on its own on a blank page.<sup>53</sup> But assuming the intervals do not work without constructing an editing process, for instance opening up a field of possibilities — or even that of a reminiscent fecundity — above and beyond all the boundaries of forgetfulness. It is in this way that three recorded, barely organized memories will conjure up a fourth suddenly rising from the void between the earlier ones.<sup>54</sup> It is in this way that memories will end up associated — by something resembling a parallel edit — to the imaginary story derived from the author’s childhood worlds. It is in this way that the Now will meet the Then, and political history will meet the world of writing.<sup>55</sup> In consideration of which Georges Perec will have found his own way of testifying with his gaps: his *form for writing with his blancs soucis*. “I know that what I say is blank, is neutral, is a sign once and for all of an annihilation once and for all. That is what I am saying, that is what I am writing, and that is all that resides in the words I write, and in the lines those words form, and in the blanks that the intervals between those lines cause to appear.”<sup>56</sup>

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When the witness breaks off in his story and for a moment — depending on reasons that can be very different — lets silence reign, does that mean that he stops telling his story? Certainly not. What he is doing then in only taking a byway, supposing

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

language to be the main highway. Thus *the story comes through in spite of everything*, as if it was being smuggled through, supposing language to be a legal trade. We know that people in ancient times did not come back speechless from their battlefields: they had an appropriate poetic style for talking about them, the *epos*, which had the very virtue, as Emil Staiger explained, of *putting the story under everyone's eyes*: "Epic language depicts. It points to something. It shows." Moreover, in this the epic story "demonstrates an affinity with the visual arts."<sup>57</sup> But how will it be for a person coming back from the camps and planning to tell a story obviously devoid of any epic ingredient, of deliberations by the gods or heroic rages, the splendor of shields, or grandiose lamentations?

Although he obviously did not know about this as yet unheard-of situation, Walter Benjamin, on the basis of the *crisis of storytelling* observed at the end of World War I — the first war involving large-scale mass slaughter, gassing techniques, etc. — set out all the terms of the problem in his 1936 essay on "Le conteur" (*der Erzähler* — the storyteller). "Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown — not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?"<sup>58</sup> That observation could at first seem at odds with the huge outpouring of testimony associated with the conflict from 1914 to 1918 and well beyond.<sup>59</sup> But Benjamin asked the question in philosophical terms in which the notions of testimony and story take on their full meaning: so what is the *transmission of an experience*? On this point, he says, we have to start by noting that "experience has fallen in value," which gives the *figure of the storyteller*, to which he wants to pay tribute, the problematic status of "already becoming something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant."<sup>60</sup>

Benjamin then identifies at least two reasons for understanding such a crisis in the story, such a "distancing" — or decline — of the figure of the storyteller. On one

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<sup>57</sup> Emil Staiger, *Basic Concepts of Poetics* (1946), trans. Janette C. Hudson and Luanne T. Frank (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State Press, 1991).

<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolas Leskov" (1936) in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn and ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

<sup>59</sup> See Christophe Didier (ed.), *1914-1918: Orages de papier. Les collections de guerre des bibliothèques* (Strasbourg-Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg-Somogy, 2008).

<sup>60</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller."



side there is the figure of the journalist who supplies *information* about history in accordance with a completely different time frame; on the other is the figure of the man of letters who makes novels based on history in accordance with a completely different subjectivity. The storyteller is less precise, less objective than the journalist; he is less original, less subjective than the novelist. All in all he appears just as a modest artisan of the experience to be transmitted. Hence his preference for anonymousness (as regards himself) and propensity for “practical wisdom” (as regards the lessons of his story).<sup>61</sup> In contrast to the domain of the journalist, the activity of a storyteller is “to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it”<sup>62</sup> Unlike the art of the novelist, the skill of the storyteller often amounts to not elevating his story to a matter of “I,” although he inevitably leaves unique traces on the story related, exactly “the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel.”<sup>63</sup>

Now, that practical or even down-to-earth dimension of the story passed on by the storyteller cannot be separated, according to Benjamin, from its ethical character: “The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today ‘having counsel’ is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing.”<sup>64</sup> There is nonetheless something of that in the work of exemplarily “modern” authors such as Bertolt Brecht, and above all Franz Kafka. Something that, so to speak, deconsecrates the *ethics of memory* that characterized the epic poetry of the Ancients: “*Memory* creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. It is the Muse-derived element of the epic art in a broader sense and encompasses its varieties. In the first place among these is the one practiced by the storyteller. It starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown. In each of them there is a Scheherazade who

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop. This is epic remembrance and the Muse-inspired element of the narrative.”<sup>65</sup>

Such is the fundamental wisdom of the story. It implies, on the part of the listener, the “gift for listening” and the art, transmitted to everyone by the storyteller, of “repeating the stories [for ourselves and for others]”<sup>66</sup> And that is why the *figure of the storyteller*, in the eyes of Walter Benjamin, stands alongside the *figure of the righteous man*: “The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.”<sup>67</sup> What does that imply? That the storyteller — not an artist, a scholar, or a genius — in all humility carries the burden of the world’s memory. And that his story, unlike the solitary lofty souls in novels, enlists memory as true *common property*.<sup>68</sup> In that, the storyteller “is the writer most deeply rooted in the people ... and will always be rooted in the people,” from the tales that stir our childish imaginations right up to the stories that relate to our adult worries.<sup>69</sup>

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Might not the witness’s silence be to his spoken word what *mortal remains* are to the living *face*? We often get the impression that the survivor of the camps — someone who generally states that he feels himself to be a kind of Orpheus, a ghost returning from the underworld — speaks from two intertwined but contradictory states: still a face and already mortal remains. It is as if the witness were speaking in the present, but also from a time when he has *already been dead*. He knows too — in any case this is how it seems in Esther Shalev-Gerz’s montage where all the witnesses who speak are elderly people — that he will *soon be dead*. And for that very reason his story is marked by a *strange vivacity*, a very special urgency that it should be passed on.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

It is doubtless no accident that the thoughts of Walter Benjamin about the figure of the storyteller are supported by the silent story offered, in his eyes, by the *face of a dying person*:

“It is, however, characteristic that not only a man’s knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of (*der Stoff, aus dem die Geschichten werden*) – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images (*eine Folge von Bildern*) is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end – unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it – suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable (*das Unvergeßliche*) emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story.” And so it is that, in the end, “death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell.”<sup>70</sup>

“‘No one,’ Pascal once said, ‘dies so poor that he does not leave something behind.’ Surely it is the same with memories”; and each one of us, Benjamin suggests, will be called on to recognize himself — or not — as their heir.<sup>71</sup> Even the sixtieth witness, in the case of the stories taken over by Esther Shalev-Gerz, will one day pass on something of the story of his life to someone who in turn, if he is willing, will pass on to everyone. We need only wait, knowing that a story can touch those receiving it a very long time after it has been produced, which demonstrates its incomparable strength, namely its *power to survive*: “It resembles,” Benjamin writes, “the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up airtight and have retained their germinative power to this day (*ihre Keimkraft*).”<sup>72</sup> It might be assumed that even the *blancs* in the story carry that germinating capacity within them: and it is firstly because they are carried, on the witnesses’ faces, by the very movement, the gestures of that capacity to survive.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

It is precisely this that we can see in Esther Shalev-Gerz's montage. Resorting to *magnification* — in terms of time as well as space — did not fail to involve some dangers: slow motion adds emphasis, it often seems like a visual figure of speech in which gestures and faces are amplified by the “magnification of time” (the *Zeitlupe*, as they say in German, on which Benjamin has more than once reflected); all this leads back to the imposing dimension of the images on the three screens in the town hall. But while the close-up can appear as a tragic figure (in Jean Epstein) or an epic one (in Eisenstein), it is used here as an experimental means of intensifying the look to be accorded to the *micro-events on the faces* at the very moment when the expressiveness of speech is suspended in them. Every instant of silence, magnified in space and duration, then seems like a virtual battlefield between those *little deaths* that run across the story — like flashes of light on the surface of water or like the flautist's intakes of breath in his interpretation of some *partita* — and the *living gestures* through which the witnesses struggle with their words, each time perpetuating the injunction of the dying who have gone before them: “Good people, tell!”

The power to survive depends on the capacity to record. When Janine Altounian analyzes the testimony from a “starting position of after the event” in which “an ineradicable emotion insists on wanting to imprint itself” and seeks her path for “becoming audible to herself and her descendants,”<sup>73</sup> she is basically raising the question of the *form in which to record that so complex temporality*. Therefore, central to all practice of giving testimony, there is a question of the form and the device, which would have to be closely scrutinized each time. Because it gives form — and in a much more radical way than in any documentary or collection of interviews with survivors — to the silences of the narrators, Esther Shalev-Gerz's montage strikes a balance between all that it *allows us to see* and all that it *does not allow us to hear* (and that is why the decision to confront these large silent faces and all the words spoken by the witnesses seems so right and so important to me: it is as if the artist had made the assumption that the flashes of light and

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<sup>73</sup> Janine Altounian, *L'Intraduisible*, XI-XVIII, 2-5 and 125-126.

the surface of the water, the intakes of breath and the music of Bach should not be separated).

Now, what such a form allows us to see, it makes perceptible in time, or to be more precise in the *tempo of the montage* itself. The “composed” silence of the witnesses in the work of Esther Shalev-Gerz contrasts with the “sounds” of the spoken word, of course, but not the *musicality* of which the rhythm of the moving images is a textbook demonstration. As in a *partita*, “there are silences that join and silences that break”; as in a *variation*, the form appears here in its “unlimited capacity for metamorphosis.”<sup>74</sup> As in a heartbeat, “the nothing has to count at least as much as the beat; and perhaps even more, for without the nothing there would be no beat, but without a beat there would be nothing, [a way of] considering the nothing, the blank, the silence (and perhaps even the void) as an element *constituting* the perception of rhythmic phenomena. ... One of the paradoxes producing rhythm is thus that it forces us to consider the interval itself, quantitatively as having a certain zero intensity, but qualitatively as having undoubted intensity. ... Is there not, at the very heart of time, intervallic space?”<sup>75</sup>

Thus, confronted with such a montage of silences, at the intersection of two dimensions that everything seems to make opposite: on one side, the special *emotion* inherent to what Georges Bataille called “man’s recognition of what dooms him to what is the object of his most powerful horror,” an emotion that leads him to the “profound silence introduced by tears”;<sup>76</sup> on the other, the *construction* inherent to what Jacques Rancière, speaking of Jean-Luc Godard, names the “phrasing of history.”<sup>77</sup> We understand that this double dimension has to be taken on board in order to understand something in what is transmitted to us by these witnesses who have come from hell. It is there that, for the poet, “the blank indefeasibly returns, a minute ago gratuitous, now certain, to conclude

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<sup>74</sup> Bernard Sève, *L’Altération musicale, ou ce que la musique apprend au philosophe* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 238 and 261.

<sup>75</sup> Pierre Sauvanet, *Le Rythme et la raison*, (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2000), 113-114.

<sup>76</sup> Georges Bataille, “[Attraction et répulsion]” (1938), *Œuvres complètes, II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 318 and 333.

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Le Destin des images* (Paris: La Fabrique Éditions, 2003), 41-78.

that there is nothing beyond and to authenticate silence.”<sup>78</sup> And it is there that the time comes for the historian himself to *break the silence* (to extend the gesture of testimony of all those who were at a moment reduced to silence, but nonetheless broke it) while at the same time agreeing, in accordance with the words of Mallarmé, and without being sure of anything, to *authenticate silence*.

In his dreams the historian ... often sees a crowd weeping and lamenting, the crowd of those who do not have enough, who would like to live again. That crowd is humankind. ...

But it is not only an urn and tears that these dead people ask of you. It is not enough for them that their sighs will recommence. It is not a Nenia, a female mourner that they need; it is a soothsayer, a vates. As long as they do not have that soothsayer, they will continue to wander around their ill-closed tombs and will not rest.

They need an Oedipus, who will explain their own enigmas to them, which they failed to see the meaning of, who will teach them what their words, their actions meant, which they did not understand. They need a Prometheus, and with the fire he stole they need the voices that floated, frozen, in the air, to melt, produce a sound, start talking again. More is needed, it is necessary to hear the words that were never said, that remained buried in people's hearts (search your own, they are there); it is necessary to get the silences of history to speak, those terrible organ stops where the organ no longer says anything, but which are in fact its most tragic notes.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “Quant au livre” (1895), in *Stéphane Mallarmé. Œuvres complètes*, 387.

<sup>79</sup> Jules Michelet, *Journal, I. 1828-1848*, ed. Paul Viallaneix (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 377-378 (January 30, 1842).