

**REFLECTING ON ARTS AND POLITICS:
PHOTOGRAPHY AS AN ETHICAL-METHODOLOGICAL
PROPOSAL AGAINST THE ONTOLOGICAL DEATH**

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Abstract. This conference discusses how some artworks can have the possibility of illuminate [through conceptualized understanding] or obscure [through archetypes] the victim. The core is to discuss critically how photography may be a vehicle to fight against ontological death. I hold that the suffering of injustices, horrific events and clusters of testimonies have to be heard and shown by the researcher through a formal, epistemic and ethical framework. Therefore, the incorrect structure leads to the impossibility of the recognition and subsequent reparation. Hence, memory, I embrace, need to be *alive* and *active*.

Key words: Artwork, photography, Cole Thompson, political philosophy, memory, victims

**РАЗМЫШЛЕНИЕ ОБ ИСКУССТВЕ И ПОЛИТИКЕ:
ФОТОГРАФИЯ КАК ЭТИКО-МЕТОДОЛОГИЧЕСКОЕ
СРЕДСТВО ПРОТИВ ОНТОЛОГИЧЕСКОЙ СМЕРТИ**

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается возможность высветить посредством произведений искусства жертв насильственной смерти благодаря либо определенной их концептуализации, либо замещения их неким архетипом. Дается критический анализ ресурсов фотографии и ее потенциала стать средством борьбы с онтологической смертью. Автор показывает, что страдания, вызванные несправедливостью, как сами ужасающие события, так и свидетельства жертв о них должны быть вызволены из забвения исследователями и включены в формальные рамки эпистемологии и этики.

А неспособность сконструировать адекватную этой задаче структурную рамку сделает невозможными признание такого страдания и последующее возмещение ущерба. Следовательно, память должна оставаться живой и действенной.

Ключевые слова: произведение искусства, фотография, Коул Томпсон, политическая философия, память, жертвы

Estrada, following Agamben and his *bare life* idea, considers that the dehumanization reduces the complex socio-political subject to a biologist body. The body... “whose study is undoubtedly central to the understanding of human reality... the problematic of the body itself is implicit within the general problematic which ontology raises, since the body, in its original nature, belongs to a sphere of existence which is the subjectivity itself [6, p. 31]¹. Such dehumanization is what is understood as an ontological death. Such invisibilization of the other makes possible to see someone as an enemy and to identify it as an otherness who has nothing in common with me. Ontological death, therefore, can be understood as the attempt to deny the humanity of the human being through the use of the body as an iron branding which negates life. The body, the last bastion where the remaining humanity can be capable to hide, becomes the space where the violence is inscribed systematically.

Reaching such status of death, following Arendt, requires three key moments.

1. The first *key moment* is to kill the legal framework which protects the person. This *key step* emphasizes that the ontological death goes through the annihilation of human rights (the other is not recognized as a human anymore). 2. The next one is the murder of moral compatibilities. Here, it is important to highlight the lack of solidarity which is possible only through the identification of the other as a stranger. The murder of that other human moral, the understanding that it is not a human anymore, is the principle of the ontological death because such

¹ The translation is mine. The original text is in Spanish as it follows: “...cuyo estudio es sin duda central para la comprensión de la realidad humana... la problemática propia del cuerpo está implícita dentro de la problemática general que tal ontología plantea, dado que este cuerpo, en su naturaleza originaria, pertenece a una esfera de existencia que es la de la subjetividad misma.

murders is a direct attack to the possibility of recognizing the pain. 3. Finally, following the suppression of the legal framework that surround the subject and the murder of the moral being, appears the destruction of the individuality that constitutes the subject. In that way, he or she becomes it. Following that logic, for instance, “Adriel” or “Karmi” stop being themselves and easily become “Jewish” [1, p. 543–552].

Ontological death, according to Corbí can be also understood in terms of asymmetrical distance. In “Morality Self-knowledge and Human Suffering. An Essay on the Loss of Confidence in the World” [3], the author explains the special relationship established between the victim body and the perpetrator. This perspective is also stressed by Wiewiorka who expresses that, during war, violence may reach such point where the perpetrator play with the dead body: “The game with bodies destroyed after killing, for example, often combines symbolic dimensions with a sadism, that future victims and the affected population, understand very well” [4, p. 75]².

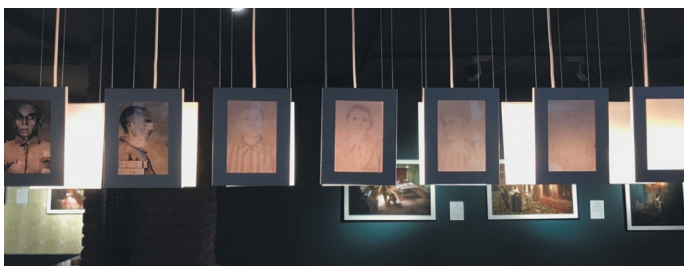
The body implies and establishes a relationship between me and the other, therefore, the horror printed in bodies works instrumentally because body becomes a path that transports a message. Violence is not violence for violence itself, it is an economy of violence: the victim is extracted from its world, without rights or recognition of its being; its systematically and technically degraded, abused and disappeared³. *Through the use of the body perpetrators may even generate an infinite grieving process due the impossibility of setting a final point to the pain. The disappeared bodies of the victims, for instance, make unfeasible for the mourners to assimilate the reality of death and left them in the incessant search of the remains.*

This work aims to argue that the ontological death previously described can be fought through photography. To achieve such goal, I would like to address to the work of Cole Thompson on victims in Auzwitch. In “The ghosts of Auzwitch — Birkenau”, Thompson tries to represent the evanesce of the victim and its body. The essence of the otherness

² The translation is mine. The original text is in Spanish as it follows: “El juego con los cuerpos destruidos después de matanzas, por ejemplo, combina a menudo dimensiones simbólicas con un sadismo que las víctimas futuras y la población afectada comprenden muy bien”.

³ On economy of violence, the first pages of Foucault’s “Discipline and punish” are a classic.

(in this case about Auzwitch), through Thompson lens and sensibility, is shown as a shadow-ghost. The victim is understood as those remains of human that the dehumanization produces: the ghosts, the shape of a body which lives without humanity⁴:



⁴ The pictures were taken from the Thompson's website: <https://coletompsonphotography.com> Excluding the last one which I took myself during a photography exposition in Center photography Mart (в Центре фотографии «Март»), in Ekaterinburg. More about the Center in <http://8mart1.ru/index.htm> and about the Cole's work exposition in Ekaterinburg in <http://8mart1.ru/exhibition/Jews/Jews.htm>

Thompson's photography work reveals the difficulty to understand the being, which is not there, the impossibility to catch it and to show it. The artist represented the disappearance using "an essence". The victims of the camps are represented, in the photographic work of this artist, as a sacred breath that vanishes and remains; it is like the victims are there while they are all gone.

The pictures which compose the artwork are released from names, dates or any kind of specific identity; thus, through the depersonalization of the object, Thompson allows each ghost to become any victim. The abstract, which is non-representational, nebulous and conceptual, is attached to a concrete figure: the disappeared person. These bodies which are nowhere cannot be represented through the exact and defined materiality which is clearly not there.

It is through the indeterminacy (the dualism of the concrete and the material) and the body that is not there, that the spectator triggers his memory and preconceptions of what is the war about. "Anyone can be that figure. This vapor looks like a human being. What happened to them. Where are they going?", reflects the spectator.

...Describing how the materiality of bodies remains contingent on their socio-political status, the recognition of socio-political relevance distinguishes the subject 'that matters' (i.e., that is relevant) from the domain of improper life... this distinction reflexively performs the materiality of the proper body... In sum, this distinction materializes the body as a legible and legitimate figure... [2, p. 260].

The ghosts of Auzwitch — Birkenau enjoys a conceptual body, a one which is not there and let the spectator thinking about the immaterial materiality of each victim of the war. The representation of the victim in this art piece embodies the constitutive elements which make possible to evoke the victim and therefore to bring it into life. The ghosts of Auzwitch — Birkenau possesses philosophical, social, political, ethical and aesthetic dimensions which conforms a movement of recognizing the victims which oscillates between the abstractness and concreteness (appearance and disappearance).

The figures, if I may call them like this, do not represent concrete bodies or identities, they are used as faceless and nameless; as unknown and inaccessible. Therefore, they can contact the purest abstraction and

universality; the result is indescribable and inenarrable as the war itself because through the suppression of all references, the artwork makes to confront the reality. This new truth emanates not from monolithic versions and its victims, but it has to be constructed by the spectator which assists to the art event.

...It is clear that the simple act of ‘reproducing testimonies’ cannot be mechanically equated as a critical, progressive or counterhegemonic proposal; it takes a certain elaboration, a certain critical distance to unleash the disruptive power of memory and testimony... the relativization of the testimonies does not seek to question the sincerity of the victims or the documentary value of the narrative; it is a call to make it more complex and historicize it, to analyze the context and the circumstances that surround them, to read them not as ‘the truth’ but as signs in the struggle for the construction of meaning [5, p. 35]⁵.

The ghosts of Auzwitch — Birkenau proved that the active memory requires pauses to think what the victim is, the catastrophe, the event or the war about. The total veiled abstractness can trigger the necessity to establish a dialog with the art piece due the compulsion to search and answer for the chaos and impersonality that is presented to his or her humanity. The fleeting and constant information of war and victims and the moral economy of humanitarianism may end to vanish victims and to create archetypes. Art has a serious function to accomplish: the construction of the world of victims.

The ghosts of Auzwitch — Birkenau reveals the necessity of not losing the history, invites to do and create memory once and over, to think about the events that made possible the social catastrophe and the invisibilization of the other (ontological death). Art may work as an ethical-methodological proposal against the ontological death, as a tool against lightness and banality because it invites the living ones to the encounter of the dead ones.

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⁵ The translation is mine.

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