

## Between Memory and Oblivion of the Shoah. The Problem of Aesthetic Neutralization of the Past in Saul Friedländer's Historical Thinking

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### Abstract

In his writings, Saul Friedländer described the problem of individual memory of the *Shoah* as one of the main limits of discourse. The critical point of his reflection on memory can be found in the issue of social redemptive thinking, which constituted a defence reaction against catastrophe. This phenomenon was particularly distinct in the public form of memory, which, on the one hand, demanded simplicity and clear interpretation, since its role was to neutralise incoherence, eliminate the pain, and raise hope among the contemporaries; on the other hand, the deep individual memory of the survivors – which knows no rules – did not accept the forms of public memory, even though it could defy them. According to Friedländer, the expansion of public memory and the decline of individual memory suggest that "the memory of the *Shoah* will probably not escape complete ritualization."<sup>1</sup> He also argued that art cannot oppose the process of coming to terms with the horror, because it needs to express the individual memory of the past in certain empty forms. What became equally problematic was the fact that the categories of art after the Holocaust have been taken over by cultural industry and politics, which instrumentally used the issue of memory for other purposes. Referring to Friedländer's reflections on the present impasse related to the neutralising mechanisms of memory, I shall consider the issue of the limits and possibilities of creating an aesthetic link between the past and the present.

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### Introduction

[1] Saul Friedländer's works in the field of historiography constitute an important breakthrough in the discourse of Nazism and the Holocaust<sup>2</sup>. In this article, I would like

<sup>1</sup> Saul Friedländer, "History, memory, and the Historian. Dilemmas and Responsibilities", in: *New German Critique* 80 (2000), 3-15, here: 5.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Christian Wiese, Paul Betts, *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedlander and the Future of Holocaust Studies*, New York – London 2010; Dan Stone, "Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust", in: Dane Stone, ed., *The Holocaust, Fascism and Memory: Essays in the History of Ideas*, New York 2013. – Saul Friedländer (b. 1932), Professor Emeritus of History at the University of California, Los Angeles, was born in Prague in a German-speaking Jewish family. At the outbreak of the Second World War he emigrated to France with his parents, who gave him away to be taken care of by the principals of a Catholic school in Montluçon; his parents were captured when they were attempting to cross the German border and both died in Auschwitz. After the war, Friedländer emigrated to Israel and participated in the war for independence. From 1953

to discuss his reflections on the "event at the limits" in the context of the challenge for the aesthetic and historical considerations on individual memory.<sup>3</sup> For Friedländer, this challenge became over time increasingly important, dating back to the moment when recurring aesthetic representations induced him to reflect on the double meaning of liminality, revealed in the exterior transgression of perpetrators and the interior limit of the Inexpressible in the experience of the victims<sup>4</sup>. In this context, the reflection on the representations of the Nazi transgression and the orgiastic dimension of extermination was expressed through the simplest question: "Is there a work of art, a work of literature, for example, that has been able, in a decisive way, to confront these events?"<sup>5</sup>.

[2] Positive responses to this question inspired Friedländer's criticism, sharing Adorno's thesis about the limits and possibilities of aesthetics after the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> However, what he found particularly disturbing were the cases of shifts of meaning, against the duality of transgression, when "in the midst of meditation rises a suspicion of complacency. Some kind of limit has been overstepped and uneasiness appears."<sup>7</sup> Friedländer found this kind of overstepping of the limits unacceptable in the case of a negative effect of art's indefinite nature, that is why he endeavoured to examine it in the context of the development of memory on the one hand, while, on the other, he attempted to find some permanent truth about the past, so as to define the moment of what has been lost.

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to 1955 he studied political sciences in Paris; in 1963 he received his doctoral degree in Geneva. In the 1960s he worked in various places in state administration, among others as an assistant of the Minister of Defence of Israel, Simon Peres. In the 1980s his political sympathies moved towards the left, resulting in his joining the Jewish movement "Peace Now" and leaving Israel for the United States. Friedländer wrote numerous works on anti-Semitism, Nazism, and the Holocaust: *L'Antisémitisme nazi: histoire d'une psychose collective*, Paris 1971; *History and Psychoanalysis: an Inquiry Into the Possibilities and Limits of Psychohistory*, New York 1978; *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "final solution"*, ed. Saul Friedländer, London – Massachusetts 1992; *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Bloomington 1993; *The Years of Persecution: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933–1939*, New York 1997; *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945*, New York 2007. Friedländer was also a co-founder of the magazine *History and Memory*.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Sidra Ezrahi, "See Under: Memory. Reflections on *When Memory Comes*", in: *History and Memory* 9, 1-2 (1997), 364–375; Hans Rudolf Vaegt, "Saul Friedländer und die Zukunft der Erinnerung", in: Dieter Borchmeyer and Helmuth Kiesel, eds., *Das Judentum im Spiegel seiner kulturellen Umwelten: Symposium zu Ehren von Saul Friedländer*, Neckargmünd 2002; Karolin Machtans, "History and Memory: Saul Friedländer's Historiography of the Shoah", in: Martin Davies and Claus-Christian Szejnmann, eds., *How the Holocaust Looks Now: International Perspectives*, Basingstoke 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 3. On the double meaning of transgression in the event at the limits see: Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago – London 2004, 254.

<sup>5</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, trans. Thomas Weyr, New York 1984, 93.

<sup>6</sup> Theodor W. Adorno formulated this thesis for the first time in: *Prismen. Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main 1955, 30. He came back to it in his later works: *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt am Main 1966; *Ohne Leitbild*, Frankfurt am Main 1967, 452-453; *Noten zur Literatur*, T. IV, Frankfurt am Main 1974, 603.

<sup>7</sup> Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 21.

- [3] The aim of this text is to present Friedländer's considerations on the historical and aesthetic aspects of the memory of the Shoah. In the first part, I shall make use of the author's memories to show how the neutralising effects of the mechanisms of individual memory hinder the representation of traumatic experience. In the second part, I shall attempt to trace Friedländer's arguments on the means of neutralising the horror of the past in post-war public discourse. The third part presents my discussion of Friedländer's project of integrated and integrating history, which marks the orientation point for aesthetic possibilities in the context of neutralising of the past. Finally, I shall attempt to contrast narrative and image to present their relation with experience that is forced to liberate itself from redemptive thinking.

### **Individual memory**

- [4] The mystery of the complex work of individual memory was explicitly discussed by Friedländer in parts of *When memory comes*<sup>8</sup>, where he described the chaos and lack of logic of his own memories. The text disintegrates into three main lines of narrative: the memory of childhood, the memory of the journey to Israel on "Altalena" ship, and the memory of contemporary events. The motifs constantly recur in the course of these memories, becoming mutually intertwined and producing certain rupture of meaning. The historian notices how exceptional this recurrence is, constituting a limit for the discursive expression.<sup>9</sup> Thus, throughout presenting the conditions of the possibility of describing the work of his own memory, Friedländer examined the double moment of abstraction from the time of experience and language. Perhaps this is why a reader can at times sense how every attempt at presenting his own memories is blurred at the very source. Friedländer described this tedious journey "against the grain" of his own memory in the following way:

It took me a long, long time to find the way back to my own past. I could not banish the memory of events themselves, but if tried to speak of them or pick up a pen to describe them, I immediately found myself in the grip of a strange paralysis.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Saul Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, trans. Helen Lane, New York 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Reflection on the discursive neutralisation of the extraordinary is discernible in nearly all of Friedländer's works. In his book on Kurt Gerstein, he starts his narrative from a 'protocolar' statement included in the verdict on his death, subsequently quoting the doctor's opinion: "To the doctor who performed the official autopsy, this seemed a certain case of suicide. Dr. Piedelièvre wrote in his report of August 1, 1945: 'The autopsy shows that this was an *ordinary* case of hanging'" (Saul Friedländer, *Kurt Gerstein, The Ambiguity of Good*, trans. Ch. Fullman, Knopf, New York 1969, vii, my emphasis - M.S.). The following story focuses in its essence on subverting the neutralizing gaze on Gerstein's death: "The mystery surrounding the death of Kurt Gerstein constitutes the final phase of the enigma that was his life" (Friedländer, *Kurt Gerstein*, x). Similar meaning can be found in his introduction to *History and Psychoanalysis*: "Dilthey's interpretation of Schleiermacher's religious thought has universal implications, but his analysis of Hölderlin's madness smacks of musical comedy" (S. Friedländer, *History and Psychoanalysis: an Inquiry Into the Possibilities and Limits of Psychohistory*, trans. S. Suleiman, New York 1978, 2). In the introduction to his last book about Kafka, he writes openly about the relation towards the ordinary and the extraordinary: "Kafka's discovery was that the extraordinary is the ordinary" (Saul Friedländer, *Franz Kafka: the Poet of Shame and Guilt*, Yale 2013, 12).

<sup>10</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 102.

- [5] Friedländer tried to examine the reasons of this condition, exploring the interiorised contents of his own life. Their differences occurred, on the one hand, in the ordinary and trivial situations, the memory of which could be communicated to others; on the other hand, there were also exceptional moments (such as the war), which made it impossible to communicate one's experience to those who had not shared it. In this way, the historian comes to the conclusion that the work of memory reveals its dual structure, consisting of "ephemeral" and "essential" memory: "It is absolutely imperative to distinguish between the ephemeral and the essential [memory – M.S.]: the ephemeral leaves its painful marks, the essential still remains."<sup>11</sup> An example of this situation can be found in Friedländer's recollection of his stay at the Catholic school at Montluçon, where he was hiding during the war: "Memory's strange reconstructions. The perfect clarity of a summer morning, but at the same time, a pervasive fear. A fear with no apparent justification, but one that was there nonetheless, lurking in every corner."<sup>12</sup> In other fragments, he wrote about memory in a similar vein: "The extraordinary mechanism of memory: the unbearable is effaced or, rather, sinks below the surface, while the banal comes to the fore."<sup>13</sup>
- [6] Discursive attempt to describe the tension between essential memory and ephemeral memory became impossible, because it was being automatically neutralized by the surrealist form of the work of memory. The grotesque recollection of wearing a gas mask is linked with the memory of his aunt who was trying on the mask and, when a breathing opening got stuck, she almost suffocated.<sup>14</sup> The memory of his father giving his son a ring so that he would remember his Czech homeland epitomised his old-fashioned romanticism: "But did I really need a ring to remember?"<sup>15</sup> – asks Friedländer. The trivialising work of memory is also expressed in the memory of the legend of Golem, where two interpretations prefigure for the author the meaning of the fate of the Jews – during the war and after the war.<sup>16</sup>
- [7] It seems that life in a historical world requires this trivialising generality, which can give shape to the possible existential synthesis towards the radically contradictory contents of memory. In his memories, Friedländer speculates that this kind of form is developed by tradition: "Perhaps the essence of a tradition, its ultimate justification, is to comfort, to bring a small measure of dreams, a brief instant of illusion, to a moment when every real avenue of escape is cut off, when there is no longer any other recourse."<sup>17</sup> It is

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<sup>11</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 95-96.

<sup>12</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 72.

<sup>13</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 70.

particularly tradition as a form of national self-knowledge that defines existential possibilities, thanks to which one can interiorise various contents of experience. According to the historian, this kind of work of memory is exemplified by the Jewish nation:

We Jews erect walls around our most harrowing memories, and our most anxious thoughts of the future. Even a story complete to the last detail sometimes turns into an exercise in hiding things from ourselves. These necessary defences are one of the chief features of our most profound dread.<sup>18</sup>

- [8] Religion is perhaps the most powerful means of neutralising the immediacy of the horror that finds its way into individual memory, so it makes possible investing extreme memories with a complete meaning. After several years, Friedländer recalled his youth spent with monks, about whom he wrote that "they had the perfect coherence that marks any total belief. One could not be mistaken about the nature of Good and Evil at Montluçon."<sup>19</sup> The drive for absolute form must have been very attractive for a young boy, since he even considered becoming a priest. Over time, however, when he started asking about his own identity, he grew distant from the Catholic Church and moved towards Judaism through exploring the mysteries of the Bible. Yet, the element of religious desire for coherence remained with him even after his subsequent detachment from religion. Friedländer described his experience in an impersonal way after a meeting with a friend who remained in the convent: "A need for synthesis, for a thoroughgoing coherence that no longer excludes anything."<sup>20</sup>

### **Public memory**

- [9] The internal need for coherence became impossible to fulfil in the sphere of public memory, since deep memory of the survivors revealed its own presence when it was confronted with the very different common memory.<sup>21</sup> In a text titled "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the *Shoah*" the historian wrote that:

Deep memory and common memory are ultimately irreducible to each other. Any attempt at building a coherent self founders on the intractable return of the repressed and recurring deep memory.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 75.

<sup>19</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 109.

<sup>20</sup> Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 114.

<sup>21</sup> See for example Saul Friedländer's: "Some German Struggles with Memory", in: Geoffrey H. Hartman, ed., *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, Indiana 1986; "A Conflict of Memories? The New German Debates About the 'Final Solution'", in: *The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture*, New York 1987, 3-21; "West Germany and the Burden of the Past: The Ongoing Debate", in: *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 42 (1987), 3-18.

<sup>22</sup> Saul Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah'", in: *History and Memory* 4, 1 (1992), 39-51, here: 41.

- [10] The critical point of Friedländer's reflection on individual memory can be found in the issue of social redemptive thinking, which worked as a defensive reaction against the catastrophe. Friedländer found an instance of this kind of redemptive memory in early works of a Jewish poet and writer, Aharon Appelfeld. His narrative refers to the "miracle" of recovering the self thanks to the heroic and moral effort of Jewish youth who arrived after the war to Jerusalem. In his commentary, the historian notes that the peculiar case of Appelfeld was indeed conditioned by a general social reaction to the *Shoah* in a newly created Israel:

Appelfeld's narrative of a redemptive recovery of the past is undoubtedly the expression of a genuine individual experience, although somewhat atypical. Moreover, it is consonant with the structure of previous attempts at public integration of the *Shoah* in early Israeli consciousness and its national rituals. A catastrophe like no other in the history of the Jewish people led to a quintessential historical redemption, the birth of a sovereign Jewish state. This sequence of "Catastrophe and Redemption", deeply rooted in visionary tradition, found its expression in the official equalizing of *Shoah* and *Gvurah*, of Martyrdom and Heroism.<sup>23</sup>

- [11] What was crucial for Friedländer in these representations of the past was the rhetorical context in which "these 'responses to apocalypse' become less convincing – and their authors seem less certain of their validity – when they confront the *Shoah* both during the war and after it."<sup>24</sup> This is why he juxtaposed the neutralising work of redemptive memory with the postwar memory of the survivors that defied such neutralisation. In his reflections, Friedländer referred to Lawrence Langer, who conducted interviews with the survivors (they were written down and published in *The Ruins of Memory*<sup>25</sup>). Langer's goal was to "liberate a subtext of loss,"<sup>26</sup> where "memory and survival do not seem to entail any cathartic rediscovery of a harmonious self."<sup>27</sup>

- [12] The motif of loss triggered certain mechanism of memory expressed in art that Friedländer calls the unconscious stealing of memory. He illustrates it with the example of the German director Edgar Reitz, who complained in one of his interviews that the American miniseries *Holocaust* (screened by the NBC between 1978 and 1979) had stolen German memory and provoked him to make his film *Heimat* (1984); *Heimat*, on the other hand, stole the memory of the victims, which led to the release of Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), although it had been made earlier. In this way, tracing the work of memory in film allowed him to identify in the reception of historical events a dangerous

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<sup>23</sup> Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah'", 41-42.

<sup>24</sup> Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah'", 42.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *The Ruins of Memory: Holocaust Testimonies*, New Haven 1991.

<sup>26</sup> After Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah'", 40.

<sup>27</sup> Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah'", 40.

problem: "Almost of necessity, the aesthetic enticement to remember the *Heimat* will prevail over the ethical imperative to remember the *Shoah*."<sup>28</sup>

- [13] In *History, Memory, and the Historian*, Friedländer carefully traces the process of neutralisation through which private memory becomes integrated into public structures. He refers to the first twenty years after the end of the war as the period of silence, which for many survivors marked a time when they attempted to come to terms with the past through repression and forgetting the horror; however, not everyone was able to accept this movement for renewal, seeing only a possibility of suicide. It was also a time when the war generation dominated the public scene, preventing survivors from speaking, for their presence made social life in a reconstructed world more difficult. Friedländer argued that "the survivors chose to remain silent, since very few people were interested in listening to them (even in Israel) and since, in any case, their own main goal was social integration and a return to normalcy."<sup>29</sup>
- [14] The 1960s brought the first wave of the generational difference. The young generation – born during the war and right after it – rebelled against contemporary culture that was seen as distorting the actual image of the era. It was also a moment when occurred first shifts of meaning, discernible both in case of the Jews, as well as the Germans. The French Jew, Daniel Cohn-Bendit – one of the leaders of the Paris March of 1968 – exclaimed with a slogan: "we all are German Jews!" ["*nous sommes tous des juifs allemands*"]<sup>30</sup>. What was taking place at the time was that the memory of the *Shoah* was becoming blurred because of the disintegration of the mythological self-representation of history, which opened the way to various controversies about the past.
- [15] In the 1970s and 1980s Friedländer noted the increased significance of the aesthetics of subjectivity, on the one hand, and on the other, he discerned the deepening of the problems that researchers had with the question of the possibilities of their theoretic constructions. At the time, there could be observed a renewed interest in the Nazi period, which resulted in the expansion of biographies, memoirs, film productions, etc.

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<sup>28</sup> Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah'", 47. The same problem was addressed by the historian in his *Probing the Limits of Representation* (16), where he wrote that "the perpetrator's voice carries the full force of aesthetic enticement; the victims carry only the horror and the pity." In a sense, the juxtaposition of two kinds of memory of the past, as represented by Friedländer and Martin Broszat, reveals two modes of reference to given historical era, that is, ethical and aesthetic respectively. As a witness, the former expressed the necessity to write by saying: "I must write, then" (Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 135), the latter, on the other hand, as a former soldier of the Hitlerjugend, seemed to express a kind of longing, which he shared with Hillgruber, who wrote about the "delight of historical writing" [*Lust am geschichtlichen Erzählen*] (Saul Friedländer, Martin Broszat, "A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism", in: *New German Critique* 44 (1988), 85-126, here: 123). In his last letter to Broszat, the Jewish historian wrote: "I asked *where* in that epoch one could find an expression for it [pleasure in historical writing – M.S.]?" (Saul Friedländer, Martin Broszat, "A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism", 123).

<sup>29</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 5.

<sup>30</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 5.

Nevertheless, the historian points to the fact that this period involved also open attempts at neutralisation of the past: "some of these endeavors, in Germany in particular, also carried an unmistakable apologetic urge and early postmodern representations of the Nazi were not devoid of perverse fascination."<sup>31</sup> However, the clear ambiguity of such images, as Friedländer emphasised, came with a concurrent increase of interest in the fate of the victims, exemplified by the already mentioned miniseries *Holocaust*, which became "a turning point all over the West, drawing increased attention to the extermination of the Jews as the defining event of Nazi period."<sup>32</sup>

[16] In his reflections on the neutralising nature of public memory of the *Shoah*, Friedländer distinguished three main motifs: the generational problem, the question of justice, and the problem of ultimate Evil. The situation of the lack of transference of generational experiences aroused the interest on the part of public memory, which led to the increased diversification of discourse. In the context of the different contents of memory, according to Friedländer, the urge for justice occupied the central position in Western discourse, in which "the Holocaust has become a focus of resentment."<sup>33</sup> This is why, following Arendt's thesis on the "banality of evil", the Western judicial power finally pronounced Nazi crimes the ultimate Evil.<sup>34</sup>

[17] Friedländer emphasised that this kind of solution of the problem of the past had important consequences for the discourse of contemporary liberal world. In his arguments, he pointed to "a link between the simplification in the representation of Nazism and the Holocaust in popular culture and the function of this simplified representation in our society."<sup>35</sup> He analysed representations of the Nazi transgression predominantly in the context of socio-political problems, in particular, the problem of power that confirms its image when it recalls the crimes against the victims: "The most basic function of this representation of evil is inherent to the self-image of liberal society as such"<sup>36</sup>. Since the dissolution of the USRR, the world of liberal democracies has lost its one major enemy, therefore it "needs to define the quintessential opposite of its own

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<sup>31</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 6.

<sup>32</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 6.

<sup>33</sup> Friedländer, "History, memory, and the Historian", 9.

<sup>34</sup> Friedländer discerned Arendt's uneasiness in her reflections on the limits of judicial power which were expressed in her letter to Jaspers: "The Nazi crimes, it seems to me, explode the limits of law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness. For these crimes, no punishment is severe enough. It may well be essential to hang Göring, but it is totally inadequate. That is, this guilt, in contrast to all criminal guilt, oversteps and shatters any and all legal systems. That is the reason why the Nazis in Nuremberg are so smug. They know that, of course. And just as inhuman as their guilt, is the innocence of their victims. Human beings simply can't be innocent as they all were in the face of the gas chambers [...] We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and innocence that is beyond good and virtue." (Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence 1926–1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler, Hans Saner, trans. Robert Kimber and Rita Kimber, New York 1992, 54).

<sup>35</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 10.

<sup>36</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 10.



image"<sup>37</sup>. Nazism, then, plays the role of a true enemy for the whole liberal world, where "the memory of *Shoah* is paradoxically linked to a simplified, watered down, yet real and probably deep-seated longing for the tragic dimension of life."<sup>38</sup>

[18] This longing, inscribed in the project of neutralisation of the past, emerged not only through the metaphor of Evil, but also through the opening of discourse for exorcisms whose enticement situates the past horror "beyond good and evil". Friedländer presented a detailed characteristic of those incredible attempts at aestheticising horror in his work *Reflections of Nazism*, where he argued that "beneath the visible themes one will discover the beginning of a frisson, the presence of a desire, the workings of an exorcism."<sup>39</sup>

[19] Friedländer exposed exorcisms of death in contemporary discourse, for instance, in the postmodern films made by Hans Jürgen Syberberg. In a 1975 work titled *Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried von 1914-1975*, Syberberg used the term "the work of mourning" (*Trauerarbeit*), which later resurfaced in his famous film *Hitler – a film from Germany* (*Hitler – ein Film aus Deutschland*, 1977). The necessity to liberate society from the burden of the past through exorcism was made possible in film (and only in film), where the guilt of the perpetrators "ultimately loses all significance from the cosmic perspective [...] about beginning and the end of the world."<sup>40</sup> By creating such narratives, Syberberg became "the inventor of an almost endless chain of representations."<sup>41</sup>



1 Still from Hans Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler – a Film from Germany* (*Hitler – ein Film aus Deutschland*, 1977)

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<sup>37</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 10.

<sup>38</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 10.

<sup>39</sup> Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 131.

<sup>41</sup> Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 15.

- [20] In *Reflections of Nazism*, Friedländer widened the context of mechanisms of transformation of memory including several other examples of cinematography. For instance, he analysed how in the new discourse of Nazism the motif of extermination of Jews was discretely hidden behind motifs of sexuality, which he traced in Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (*La caduta degli dei*, 1969), Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (*Il Portiere di notte*, 1974) and Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974). In other films death was hidden behind motifs of love, as in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955) or Marcel Ophüls's *The Sorrow and the Pity* (*Le Chagrin et la pitié*, 1969).
- [21] In Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Lili Marleen* (1981) the image of the Nazi crime is blurred by the metaphor of the fight between good and evil, while the "real" evil is hidden. What points to the perpetrator is just a flickering image of a Jew that at times emerges from the dark: either in the picture hidden in Lili's brassiere, or in a departing limousine.
- [22] The Nazi transgression was also blurred by the experience of the will to power, which was very clearly articulated in Joachim Fest and Christian Herrendoerfer's *Hitler – A Career* (*Hitler – Eine Karriere*, 1977)<sup>42</sup>. The directors explicitly showed Führer as an artist-demiurge, who can happen to make a historical "mistake". This way, they speculated about what the world could be if Hitler had died in 1938 in an accident or an assassination. If this had happened, Hitler could have been considered one of the most remarkable statesmen in Germany, becoming a man who is the fulfilment of German history.
- [23] Noteworthy, the tendency for neutralisation constituted a trap not only in case of anti-liberal or conservative representations. The neutralising power of memory can also be found in left-wing art, for instance, in the already mentioned *Shoah* (1985) by Claude Lanzmann, where the projected experience was designed in a form of allusion and detached realism: "Reality is there, in its starkness, but perceived through a filter: that of memory (distance in time), that of spatial displacement, that of some sort of narrative margin which leaves the unsayable unsaid"<sup>43</sup>. Dirk Rupnow, who accepted Friedländer's position, added that Lanzmann enchanted the French public through the power of his spatial images, through which it was "still focused on the gas chambers as a quasi-sacred spaces and a pictureless 'Shoah'"<sup>44</sup>.
- [24] Although he recognised the necessity of the process of public neutralisation of the horror, Friedländer postulated that in the face of amnesia and expansion of public memory there should be preserved the awareness of what he called "the horror behind the words."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Friedländer described his impressions after watching the film: "The dazzling rise, the titanic energy, the Luciferian fall: it is all there. As for the Jews, a few words in passing, no more. [...] For anyone who does not know the facts, the power and the glory still remain, followed by a veritable vengeance of the gods" (Friedländer, *When Memory Comes*, 146).

<sup>43</sup> Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Dirk Rupnow, "The Invincible Crime: Nazi Politics of Memory and Postwar Representation of the Holocaust", in: *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 1.

Significantly, his call for awareness exposes the lack of applicable discursive tools: "For further analysis, we would need a new category equivalent to Kant's category of the *sublime*, but specifically meant to capture inexpressible horror."<sup>46</sup>

### **Integrated and integrating memory**

[25] Reflections on the aesthetic development of the memory of the Holocaust led Friedländer to a conclusion that "it seems impossible to situate its historical place."<sup>47</sup> This impossibility posed a challenge for historical writing, whose aim is to keep watch over "absent meaning."<sup>48</sup> However, Friedländer warned that in the face of the necessity to understand this lack, a "historian cannot be and should not be the guardian of memory."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the task for the critical "working through" is to historicise the Nazi transgression and extermination in their actual time.

[26] Friedländer referred the negative moment of historical work in the context of the problem of representation to Adorno's thesis on the limits and possibilities of aesthetics after the Holocaust. According to him, the core of the problem was the reflective power of judgement, which postmodernism has taken from Kant, because its form is not capable of presenting simultaneously the fate of the perpetrators as well as that of the victims, making their direct reference disintegrate into pieces. Therefore, since Jean-François Lyotard, the differences between the actions and experiences of perpetrators and victims have thwarted any possibility of capturing them in one representation, for the difference between them seems infinite.<sup>50</sup> Friedländer traced the sources of this difference in postmodernist orientation determined by the forms of spatial eye-witnessing, which are incapable of presenting the development of historical experience over time. Nevertheless, the historian showed how the paradigm of postmodern imagination, which in its images produces one-sided spatial representations of the Nazi transgression, reveals at the same time an ineffaceable moment of what remains absent. This is why, a certain expression of this significant lack of representation can be found in the "victim's voices" of the Nazi transgression.

[27] In his "An Integrated History of the Holocaust" Friedländer proposed his own vision of a total narrative that constitutes a response to the challenge of growing "entropy" (Jean Améry) of the memory of the *Shoah*.<sup>51</sup> Above all, he pointed to the need of working through the previous abstraction of imagination marked by memory, because its

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<sup>46</sup> Friedländer, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, 115.

<sup>47</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 12.

<sup>48</sup> Friedländer, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, 134. Friedländer drew his postulate for historical imagination from Maurice Blanchot (cf. Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah'", 55).

<sup>49</sup> Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian", 13.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the Jews"*, Minneapolis 1990.

<sup>51</sup> Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah'", 47. He refers to the excerpt from the selection of essays: Jean Améry, *Humanism: Selected Essays*, Bloomington 1984, 65.

foundations included forms of omission or mechanisms of separation. Hence his postulate of dismissing "analytic categories" (as seen, for instance, in Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*) and substituting them with "time units."<sup>52</sup> One of the aims of this type of historical writing was a comprehensive presentation of the meaning of the experience of the victims during persecution and extermination. In two historical works, *The Years of Persecution* and *The Years of Extermination*, Friedländer illustrated the essence of this specific historical interpretation in the context of time and historical experience. In the first volume, spanning the period from 1933 to 1939, he wrote about the "sense of estrangement"<sup>53</sup> in the face of persecution, while in the second volume that addressed the development of the Nazi transgression from 1939 to 1945, he wrote about the "sense of disbelief"<sup>54</sup> in the face of the unfolding of the Holocaust.

[28] This method of historical work has produced a kind of interpretive hybrid, combining the possibilities of in-depth historical research and literary aesthetics.<sup>55</sup> On the one hand, individual voices of victims were juxtaposed with moments of interiorizing the myth of "redemptive anti-Semitism"<sup>56</sup> by the perpetrators, which indeed constituted the main narrative axis; on the other hand, the pattern that described historical universe was deconstructed by the sense of estrangement and disbelief to reveal the general horizon of the absent meaning.

[29] The aesthetic aspect of Friedländer's attempt at constructing a different kind of representation of the *Shoah* becomes especially clear in the historian's use of the power of the metaphor of fire.<sup>57</sup> He employs this motif in the introduction to his *opus magnum*, where he refers to Heine's argument that where books are being burned, people can be burned as well. This way, Friedländer tries to describe the objectification of the Nazi transgression: from the burning of the Reichstag, through the exposure of the actual arsonists of Europe, to the final result of extermination of the Jewish population and the

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<sup>52</sup> Saul Friedländer, "An Integrated History of the Holocaust: Some Methodological Challenges", in: *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, 186.

<sup>53</sup> Friedländer, *The Years of Persecution*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, xxii. This term was coined by Geoffrey H. Hartmann, who wrote about the problem of disbelief in testimonies, as discussed by Primo Levi (cf. Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 19; see also: Geoffrey H. Hartmann, "The Book of Destruction", in: Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 318-334).

<sup>55</sup> On the difference between possibilities of interpretation in historical and literary approaches see: Dominick LaCapra, "Historical and Literary Approaches to the 'Final Solution': Saul Friedländer and Jonathan Littell", in: *History and Theory* 50 (2011), 71-97. For Aue, the protagonist of Littell's book, *Endlösung* is "a beautiful word". LaCapra emphasises here the presence of a mythological substructure, which exposes eschatological thinking in the aesthetic association of "the Final Solution" (*Endlösung*) with salvation (*Erlösung*).

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Saul Friedländer, "Ideology and Extermination. The Immediate Origins of the Final Solution", in: Ronald Smelser, ed., *The Holocaust and Justice*, Evanston – Illinois 2003.

<sup>57</sup> As Kansteiner argues, the metaphor of fire present in *The Years of Extermination* "brings all the layers [of text] together" (Wulf Kansteiner, "Success, Truth, and Modernism in Holocaust Historiography: Reading Saul Friedländer Thirty-Five Years after the Publication of *Metahistory*", in: *History and Theory* 48 (2009), 25-53, there: 40).

act of burning their corpses. The disbelieving look into the fire that devours human remains can be found in testimonies, for instance, in the account by Zalman Gradowski, who as a member of the *Sonderkommando* described with solemn calmness the work of the crematorium.

- [30] Moreover, Friedländer's historical narrative, focused on the representation of blazing fire, was also opened up to fragments of historical poetry. His description of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising begins with a mention of a merry-go-round placed in front of the ghetto wall, when extermination was taking place on the other side. Friedländer interrupts his brief description with an excerpt from Czesław Miłosz's *Campo di Fiori* (1943):

Sometimes the wind from burning houses  
Would bring the kites along  
And people on the merry-go-round  
Caught the flying charred bits.  
This wind from the burning houses  
Blew open the girls' skirts  
And the happy throngs laughed  
On a beautiful Warsaw Sunday."<sup>58</sup>  
\* \* \*

- [31] This sense of disbelief in the face of extermination constitutes the limit for the historical positioning of the past in the context of the relation between individual, social, and public memory and its link with the catastrophe. This entanglement of memory enforces a fundamental question: "whether at the collective level as well an event such as the *Shoah* may, after all the survivors have disappeared, leave traces of a deep memory beyond individual recall, which will defy any attempts to give it meaning"<sup>59</sup>?

- [32] The significance of this question becomes especially clear after the end of the war, since individual memory and public memory have been engaged in a kind of struggle for meaning.<sup>60</sup> Friedländer recalled the impossibility of accepting this meaning in the final words of *The Years of Extermination*, where he pointed to the unbearable nature of internalised death:

From among the few hundreds of thousands of Jews who had stayed in occupied Europe and survived, most struck roots in new surroundings, either by necessity or by choice; they built their lives, resolutely hid their scars, and experienced the common share of joys and sorrows dealt by everyday existence. For several decades, many evoked the past mainly among themselves, behind closed doors, so to speak; some became occasional witnesses, others opted for silence. Yet, whatever the path they chose, for all of them those years remained the most significant period of their lives. They were entrapped in it: Recurrently, it pulled

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<sup>58</sup> Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 533.

<sup>59</sup> Friedländer, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the 'Shoah'", 41.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Angelica Nuzzo, *Memory, History, Justice in Hegel*, New York 2012, 183, 194. The authoress develops Hegel's notion of *Er-innerung* in the context of subjective and objective spirit, which she confronts with Friedländer's reflections on memory in *When memory comes* to expose in his thinking absolute exclusion of individual memory of victims in public structures.

them back into overwhelming terror and, throughout, notwithstanding the passage of time, it carried along with it the indelible memory of the dead."<sup>61</sup>

### **Image and narrative and the problem of redemptive thinking**

- [33] Since historiographical memory of the horror of Nazism and extermination fell into the trap of "post-history", the postmodernist paradigm has questioned the very relevance of narrative as a viable tool. Narrative, therefore, has been substituted with images, which have introduced the element of the spectacularity into history, and together with it came an apocalyptic tone and affirmation of nostalgia.<sup>62</sup> Cultural industry readily made use of this change, which led to certain transformation of the medium, introduced at the cost of historiography.<sup>63</sup> What emerges from this situation is an important task for history, whose narrative is expected to describe the transformation of the work of memory confronting images, without being pulled inside their inherent rhetoric which directs the attention away from actual death and introduces some kind of abstract division of attention. The difference between writing and image seems to lie in the one-sided positioning of the "protagonist" of the image, resulting in a semantic closure, which is, indeed, very different from closure found in writing. For instance, a comparison of Syberberg's and Lanzmann's films clearly suggests that the former directs his attention towards an infinite ecstasy, while the latter towards certain emptiness exposed through an investigation of the infrastructure of the Nazi crime.<sup>64</sup>
- [34] The problem of disbelief invites perhaps one more reference to Adorno's remarks about the power of images that seek to affect us "in spite of all."<sup>65</sup> The significance of the presence of imposing images was indicated by Marianne Hirsch, who wrote that "the Holocaust is one of the visually best-documented incidents in the history of an era marked by a plenitude of visual documentation."<sup>66</sup> Judith Keilbach, on the other hand, reflected on documentary possibilities of photography, whose significance is valid for us in the present, despite various shifts of meaning, when "the photos have lost their referentiality, and now predominantly signify abstractions such as 'cruelty', 'National Socialism' or 'history'. "<sup>67</sup>
- [35] However, isn't something lost in this incessant stream of images in the world where the unreality of death has reached its fulfilment? Isn't the directness of images merely a

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<sup>61</sup> Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 663.

<sup>62</sup> Anton Kaes, "Holocaust and the End of History: Postmodern Historiography in Cinema", in: Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation*, 206-222.

<sup>63</sup> Friedländer, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, 47.

<sup>64</sup> Kaes, "Holocaust and the End of History", 221.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Paris 2004.

<sup>66</sup> Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", in: *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14 (2011), 62.

<sup>67</sup> Judith Keilbach, "Photographs, Symbolic Images, and the Holocaust: On the (Im)possibility of Depicting Historical Truth", trans. Kirsten Wächter, in: *History and Theory* 47 (2009), 67-68.

reflection whose sources stem from that particular epoch?<sup>68</sup> Perhaps its peculiar nature attracts our attention through images, which pull us away from the past? If so, then this kind of dispersion would have its source in the very "event at the limits", with which we have been thrown into the world, where basic human relations have disintegrated.<sup>69</sup> This way, the radical division of experience, language, and image would subvert the meaning of the existential of death, therefore, this is why it is so difficult to understand a situation when a young survivor from Auschwitz "peers at himself disbelievingly" when confronted with his image reflected in the mirror<sup>70</sup>.

[36] It seems that in the case of the *Shoah* it is impossible to accept the claims of images to exist "in spite of all". In the context of Friedländer's reflections, Didi-Huberman's thesis should be developed up to the point of contradiction: the postulate of "images in spite of all" should be substituted with the imperative of "working through" images, to expose their nature in neutralising the past through the opening to the mythological power of redemptive thinking.<sup>71</sup> This is the last step that has to be made to indicate the absent meaning hidden by the image. Further "working through" requires, however, a cathartic moment coming in the face of imposing images, for, as Jörn Rüsen argues: "we must learn how to mourn historically."<sup>72</sup> Images that document extermination dehistoricize the actual possibility of mourning, therefore the aim of historical reflection is to examine mythological content whose "authenticity is praehistorical, but not nonhistorical."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Friedländer only signals at this context at the end of his last letter to Broszat: "The *intermediate categories* of representation which contain just enough elements of the nature of the regime to make them plausible will become the dominant mode of perception" (Friedländer, Broszat, *A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism*, 126).

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Eine Art Schadensabwicklung*, Frankfurt am Main 1987, 163.

<sup>70</sup> Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington 1980, 59.

<sup>71</sup> At first sight, it seems that Friedländer uses photographs in a way that is not dissimilar to that of Didi-Huberman's, that is, he presents the implausible process that resulted in a photograph construed as the moment of the emergence of testimony. For both of them, a picture is a proof of an act of resistance that was provoked by the need to leave a trace of the Nazi crime. Yet, I suggest, while for the former the presence of a picture could move the attention away from the crime, for the latter, this attention, though it could pose a distraction for reflection, paradoxically neutralises it through the very presence of the picture. In *The Years of Extermination*, Friedländer discusses only one photograph, which he does not publish in his book not to domesticate disbelief. Perhaps the aim of his ekphrasis of the photograph was to dispel the redemptive power of thinking that can be produced by the direct presence of the image of the victims in Western discourse. In their recent book, Beata Anna Polak and Tomasz Polak addressed this issue in the following way: "Didi-Huberman asks, and we are asking with him: what does it mean to send them [photographs from the death camp – M.S.] out?" (Beata Anna Polak and Tomasz Polak, eds., *Porzucić etyczną arogancję. Ku reinterpretacji podstawowych pojęć humanistyki w świetle wydarzenia Szosa*, Poznań 2011, 216). One can suspect that apart from the disturbing content of the testimony itself, additional words expose redemptive thinking, that is, certain hope that the liberal world will see the truth and remember about it. It is the very semblance of directness inherent in the outside stills / frames that makes the testimony potentially susceptible to be used instrumentally to justify certain structures of discourse and power.

<sup>72</sup> Jörn Rüsen, "The Logic of Historicization. Metahistorical Reflections on the Debate between Friedländer and Broszat", in: *History and Memory* 9 (1997), 113-144, here: 141.

<sup>73</sup> Rüsen, "The Logic of Historicization", 122.

- [37] In the high point of the *Shoah*, Hannah Arendt attempted to illustrate the fatal fate of Jews through the figure of the "Pariah"<sup>74</sup>, developed before the war by Moritz Goldstein.<sup>75</sup> According to the philosopher, the meaning of this image was represented by the fate of the main protagonist of Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. During one of his lectures, Friedländer made a reference to Arendt's reflection on this novel to pose a question on the meaning of the messianic message inherent in the tradition of antiquity that resounds in the writer's imagination. According to Friedländer's arguments, "the hero of *The Castle* represents the whole Jewish situation in modern society."<sup>76</sup> In Kafka's text, however, there is not a single word that would indicate a possibility of an event at the limits:

Kafka never finished the novel, but he mentioned to some friends the end which he envisaged. According to his biographer, Max Brod, Kafka planned to show the hero falling lower and lower; suddenly a message is sent from the castle: he is accepted. But the message is too late; the hero is dying or dead.<sup>77</sup>

- [38] Friedländer ends his lecture with a messianic question, which in a sense exposes the disturbing horizon of possibilities and limits of the historical significance of the Holocaust:

When, after the end of war, Western society opened its arms to the Jews; when, in reaction to the discovery of the whole magnitude of the Nazi massacres, the Western anti-Semitic tradition was – temporarily at least – discarded, most of the Jews of Europe could no longer enter into the new society. But the most terrible question remains to be answered, the one question that will probably never find its answer, although for us it is the most crucial one to understand the past or foresee events to come: did the castle send the messenger because the injustice, the evil done, was recognized? Or was the messenger sent because the hero was dead?<sup>78</sup>

- [39] If writing after the Holocaust is to preserve accurate conditions of possibility, it will need to recognise the factuality of the historical death of the hero. Nevertheless, this postulate becomes incredibly difficult to fulfil, because from the moment of dominance of "the age of the world picture"<sup>79</sup> (Heidegger), aesthetic imagination is automatically pulled into various projects that appropriate the mystery of death. This is why imagination in the form of objectifying reflection immerses in deep emotional strata, inspired especially strongly when it interiorizes the death of the hero, because his death opens up memory

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt, "The Jews as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition", in: *Jewish Social Studies* 2, 6 (1944), 99-122, here: 115.

<sup>75</sup> Moritz Goldstein, "Deutsch-jüdischer Parnass", in: *Kunstwart* 25, 11 (1912), 281-294; Cf. Friedländer, *The Years of Persecution*, 78.

<sup>76</sup> Saul Friedländer, *Some Aspects of the Historical Significance of the Holocaust*, Jerusalem 1977, 37.

<sup>77</sup> Friedländer, *Some Aspects of the Historical Significance of the Holocaust*, 38.

<sup>78</sup> Friedländer, *Some Aspects of the Historical Significance of the Holocaust*, 38. Perhaps the final words of Saul Friedländer's lecture (published for the first time in Autumn 1976 in *The Jerusalem Quarterly*) constitute at the same time a critical response to the apocalyptic tone of Martin Heidegger's statement: "Only God can save us" ["Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten"] (*Der Spiegel* 1976, 30 May).

<sup>79</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture", in: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, New York and London 1977, 115-154.



and hope.<sup>80</sup> However, the mourning of heroes expresses the hidden desire for self-affirmation in the face of destruction, for which the writer gives the shape of "temporary illusion, necessary but ephemeral, a mere 'ceremonial performance'."<sup>81</sup> In consideration of Jörn Rüsen's reflections on the possible orientation after the Holocaust and on the historical significance of mourning, a disturbing question needs to be posed: Is it not so that through the aesthetization of the death of the victims of the *Shoah*, whose image is being displayed in museums all over the world, "sites of memory"<sup>82</sup> (Nora) are invested with the aura of Benjamin's passages, while the observer is transformed into a *flâneur*?<sup>83</sup>

*Translated by Karolina Kolenda*

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. Saul Friedländer, "Kitsch and the Apocalyptic Imagination", in: *Salmagundi* 2 (1990), 201-206.

<sup>81</sup> Friedländer, *Franz Kafka*, 161.

<sup>82</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", in: *Representations* 26 (1989), 7-24.

<sup>83</sup> On the possible results of neutralization of memory and avoiding the horror through strategies of aesthetization see: Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*, Bloomington 2011. In the context of this article particularly surprising is the case of Judy Chicago, American artist and feminist, who went on a journey to Europe tracing the victims of extermination. In one of the camps her husband took pictures of her when she was lying inside a crematorium furnace in order to better understand the suffering of victims. Chicago's pictures were displayed at the exhibition *Holocaust Project*.