

Reality Would Have to Begin

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In 1983, as preparations were underway to install even more nuclear weapons in the Federal Republic of Germany, Günther Anders wrote:

Reality has to begin. This means that the blockade of the entrances to the murder installations, which continue to exist, must also be continuous.[...] This idea is not new. It reminds me of an action -- or rather a non-action -- more than forty years ago, when the Allies learned the truth about the extermination camps in Poland. The proposal was immediately made to block access to the camps, which meant bombing the railroad tracks leading to Auschwitz, Majdanek, etc. extensively in order to sabotage, through this blockade, the delivery of new victims -- that is, the possibility of further murder. (1)

Nuclear weapons stationed in the Federal Republic of Germany arrive by ship in Bremerhaven where they are put on trains, whose departure time and destination are kept secret. About a week before departure, Army aircraft fly the entire length of the route and photograph it. This *status report* is repeated half an hour before the train is to pass, and the most recent set of images is compared with the first set. Through their juxtaposition one can discern whether any significant changes have occurred in the interim. If, for example, a construction vehicle has recently been parked along the tracks, the police will drive to or fly over the spot to investigate whether it is providing camouflage for saboteurs. Whether such sabotage has been attempted is not made public.

The reconnaissance [*Aufklärung*] of enemy territory by means of photographs taken from airplanes was already in use in World War I. And even before there were airplanes, balloons and rockets carried cameras aloft, and even carrier pigeons were outfitted with small cameras.

In World War II, it was the English who were the first to begin equipping their bombers with photographic apparatuses. Since they had to fly through enemy flak (anti-aircraft artillery fire) and enemy fighters, the bomber pilots always tried to drop their bomb load as quickly as possible (often one third of the planes were lost on flights from England to Germany). In their fear the pilots believed all too readily that they had delivered their bombs on target. The introduction of cameras on board aircraft significantly diminished the space previously accorded to their oral reports. The English bomber pilots had the first work place in which the camera was installed to monitor performance.

Up to that point, men in war did work that was much less monitored and capable of being monitored [*kontrolliert und kontrollierbar*] than all industrial, commercial, or agricultural activity, since the object of their labor, enemy territory, was not under control. In the case of the bomber pilot as well, the worker's perception and description still counted for something. Photographs would destroy this last remaining authority.

A photographic image is a cut, a section through the bundle of light rays reflected off objects in a circumscribed space. Photography reproduces the three-dimensional object on a flat plane, based on the laws of projective geometry. In 1858, it occurred to Meydenbauer, the director of the Government Building Office, to make use of this optical principle and to think of photographs as images for scale measurement. Faced with the task of measuring the facade of the cathedral in Wetzlar, he traversed the length of the facade in a basket suspended from block and tackle (in the same way that window-washers do), in order to avoid the expense of erecting scaffolding. One evening, in order to save time, he tried to climb from the basket into a window of the tower, when the basket swung away from the facade and put him in danger of plummeting to the ground.

In the nick of time I grabbed the curved edge of an arch with my right hand, and with my left foot I shoved the basket far into the air; the counter action sufficed to push my body into the opening and I was saved.[...] As I came down, the thought occurred to me: is it not possible to replace measurement by hand by the reversal of that perspectival seeing which is captured in a photographic image? This thought, which eliminated the personal difficulty and danger involved in measuring building constructions, was father to the technique of scale measurement. (2)

Meydenbauer often repeated this story from the 19th century. It is a narrative of endangerment and redemptive insight: the hero is in the process of making a construction into a calculation, is engaged in

the labor of abstraction, at which point the measured space wants once more to prove its actuality. The greatest danger is posed by the objectivity and actuality of things. It is dangerous to remain physically near the object, to linger at the scene. One is much safer if one takes a picture and evaluates it later at one's desk.

Immediately following the initial publication of Meydenbauer's idea, the military, an organization with many desks, offered to cover the cost of a practical experiment, but this could not be undertaken right away, as there was a war on at the time. The first scale measurement based on photographs took place in 1868 at the fortress of Saarlouis. The military immediately recognized in the technique of photographic scale measurements the possibility of capturing objects and spaces at a distance, numerically, spaces which soldiers otherwise could only traverse and measure at the risk of life and limb. The military took Meydenbauer's formulation of death or measurement literally.

The first image taken by the Allies of the concentration camp at Auschwitz was shot on April 4, 1944. American planes had taken off from Foggia, Italy, heading towards targets in Silesia: factories for extracting gasoline from coal (gasoline hydrogenation) and for producing Buna (synthetic rubber). While approaching the I.G. Farben complex, still under construction, an airman turned on the camera and took a series of 22 aerial photographs, three of which also captured the "main camp" located in the vicinity of the industrial plants. These images, along with others, arrived at the center for aerial photography analysis in Medmenham, England. The analysts identified the industrial complexes pictured, recorded in their reports the state of their construction and the degree of their destruction, and made estimates of the production capacities of the Buna plants -- they did not mention the existence of the camps. Again and again, even in 1945, after the Nazis had cleared out the Auschwitz camps, having dismantled some of the murder complexes and either killed, abandoned, or transferred the prisoners to other camps in the West, Allied airplanes flew over Auschwitz and captured the camps in photographs. They were never mentioned in a report. The analysts had no orders to look for the camps, and therefore did not find them.

It was the success of the television series *Holocaust* -- a program that tried to make suffering and dying imaginable through visual narratives, thereby turning it into kitsch -- that gave two CIA employees the idea of looking for aerial photographs of Auschwitz. They fed into the CIA computer the geographic coordinates of all camps that were located in the vicinity of bombing targets, and thus also those of the I.G. Farben factory in Monowitz.

I.G. Farben had built large plants in Monowitz and allowed the SS to provide them with slave laborers. For a time, they operated a camp (Auschwitz III, also known as *Buna*) located immediately adjacent to the factory grounds. Here, Jewish prisoners from across Europe, prisoners of war primarily from the Soviet Union, and others who had been declared enemies of the Reich, were worked to death. Sometimes, one seventh of a group died in one day; 30 out of 200 perished in one day. Those who did not die from overwork or undernourishment, and those who were not beaten to death by the SS or *kapos*, soon became too weak to work and were transferred to Birkenau, the extermination camp (Auschwitz II). The I.G. Farben Monowitz factories served the aircraft industry and consequently were of strategic interest to the Allies, which is what attracted the bombers and cameras and later helped to re-discover the images. Thirty-three years after the pictures were shot, two CIA men undertook a new analysis of the images. In the first image from April 4, 1944, they identified the house of Auschwitz's Commandant and marked the wall between Blocks 10 and 11 where executions took place. They also identified and marked the gas chambers of Auschwitz I and wrote:

a small vehicle was identified in a specially secured annex adjacent to the Main Camp gas chamber. Eyewitness accounts describe how prisoners arriving in Auschwitz-Birkenau, not knowing they were destined for extermination, were comforted by the presence of a "Red Cross ambulance." In reality, the SS used that vehicle to transport the deadly Zyklon-B crystals. Could this be that notorious vehicle? (3)

The analysts are not entirely certain since, while they are able, at a distance of 7,000 meters, to make out the spot as a vehicle, they can establish neither what type of vehicle it is nor discern any markings on it. What distinguishes Auschwitz from other places cannot be immediately observed from these images. We can only recognize in these images what others have already testified to, eyewitnesses who were physically present at the site. Once again there is an interplay between image and text in the writing of history: texts that should make the images accessible, and images that should make the texts imaginable.

On the night of April 9th ... we suddenly heard the distant rumble of heavy aircraft, something which we had never known in all the time we had been in Auschwitz. ... Was the secret out? Were high explosives going to rip away the high tension wires and the watch towers and the guards with their dogs? Was this the end of Auschwitz?(4)

The two prisoners listening for the sounds of aircraft on this April 9th were attempting to escape from Auschwitz. One of them, Rudolf Vrba, then 19 years old, had already been in the camp for two years, first working on the construction of the Buna factory and later in the "effects" detachment. When a train with deportees arrived at the camp, the new arrivals had to drop all their possessions which were collected and sorted by a special detail, a *Sonderkommando*. The Nazis called these possessions "effects," and among them Vrba found food, which helped him to sustain his strength and stay alive. The other prisoner, Alfred Wetzler, a Jew from Slovakia like Vrba, worked in the camp administration office. There, he committed to memory the arrival dates, places of origin, and the number of deportees newly arrived at the camp. And since he was in contact with men in the special details forced to work at the gas chambers and the crematoria, he also learned the statistics of those murdered --and memorized long lists of numbers.

Vrba and Wetzler decided to flee when it became clear to them that the resistance groups in the camp would not be able to revolt, but could at best fight for their own survival. They wanted to flee because they could not imagine that the existence of the camp could be known to the resistance in Poland and the Allies. Vrba was convinced that Auschwitz was possible only "because the victims who came to Auschwitz didn't know what was happening there."(5)

"Some may find it hard to believe, but experience has proven that one can see, not everything, but many things, better in the scale measurement than on the spot,"(6) wrote Meydenbauer in a text in which he sought to lay the groundwork for historic preservation archives. Again, he described how unnecessary a long stay at the site is, even for the purpose of measurement. "At this mentally and physically strenuous occupation, the architect is exposed to the weather; sunshine or rain fall on his sketch book, and when he looks up, dust in his eyes." In these passages a horror for the objectivity of the world is noticeable. Meydenbauer's meditation gave rise in 1885 to the foundation of the Royal Prussian Institute for Scale Measurement, the world's first. The military took up the idea of measuring from photographs, as did the historic preservationists of monuments -- the former destroy, and the latter preserve. Since 1972, the Unesco "Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" obligates all member states to document special buildings photographically. Using these archived photographs, one ought to be able to read and calculate the building's plan, in the case of its destruction -- a destruction already conceived in these protective measures.

The mathematical artists of the Renaissance stretched transparent papers in frames and traced on the plane the outlines of the spatial objects shining through. With the invention of photography these founders of the perspectival method seem to be the precursors of photographers; with the invention of scale measurement, they seem to be early scale measurement engineers. Erwin Panofsky wrote that one could understand perspective observation both in terms of ratio and objectivism, and in terms of chance and subjectivism. "It is an ordering, but an order of the visual phenomenon."(7) If one considers an image as a measuring device, then one should ignore chance and subjectivity.

To conceive of a photographic image as a measuring device is to insist on the mathematicality, calculability, and finally the "computability" of the image-world. Photography is first of all *analog technology*: a photographic image is an impression of the original: an impression at a distance, made with the help of optics and chemistry. Vilém Flusser(8) has remarked that *digital technology* is already found in embryonic form in photography, because the photographic image is built up out of points and decomposes into points. The human eye synthesizes the points into an image. A machine can capture the same image, without any consciousness or experience of the form, by situating the image points in a coordinate system. The continuous sign-system image thereby becomes divisible into "discrete" units; it can be transmitted and reproduced. A code is thus obtained that comprehends images. This leads one to activate the code and to create new images out of the code language. Images without originals become possible -- *generated* images.

Vrba and Wetzler hid themselves outside the high voltage fence around the camp, under a pile of boards they had protected with tobacco soaked in petrol. An experienced fellow prisoner had advised them to do

so, because this would keep the tracker dogs at bay. After three days, the SS gave up their search and reported the escape of both men in a telegram addressed to Himmler; this indicates the extent to which they must have feared an eyewitness account from the concentration camps. Vrba and Wetzler made it to the Slovakian border by marching at night, crossed it and made contact with the Jewish Council in the city of Zilina. Over several days they reported on the death camp at Auschwitz. They drew the ground plan of the complexes, and recounted the lists of statistics on the people delivered and murdered. What they reported they had to reconfirm time and again, as they were cross-examined and the questions rephrased. The Jewish Council wanted conclusive, irrefutable material, in order to prove to the world the barely-believable crime. The unimaginable was repeated to make it imaginable.

Three copies of the Vrba-Wetzler report were drawn up and sent out.⁽⁹⁾ The first was supposed to go to Palestine. It was sent to Istanbul, but it never arrived there since the courier was probably a spy paid by the Nazis. The second copy was sent to a rabbi who had contacts in Switzerland, and reached London via Switzerland. The British government passed the report on to Washington. A third copy was sent to the papal nuncio and arrived in Rome approximately five months later. When Vrba and Wetzler fled in April, the deportation and murder of about one million Hungarian Jews was imminent. It was only in July of 1944 that the Horthy government stopped handing over Hungarian Jews to the Germans. As the Red Army was approaching and the war was on the verge of being lost, Horthy sought an arrangement with the West, which now had accurate knowledge of Auschwitz and demanded, through diplomatic channels, an end to the mass extermination. Vrba and Wetzler's report had thus helped save hundreds of thousands of lives. On June 25th and 27th, the *Manchester Guardian* reported on the Nazi death factory and mentioned for the first time the place name, Oswiecim. The mass extermination of the Jews by the Nazis was now occasionally mentioned in the newspapers; however, only as one among many stories of dramatic war events, as news that soon disappeared into oblivion.

A year later, when the Germans had lost the war and the concentration camps were liberated, the Allies photographed and filmed the camps, the survivors and the traces that pointed to the millions murdered. It was above all the images of piles of shoes, glasses, false teeth, the mountains of shorn hair, that have made a profound impression. Perhaps we need images, so that something that is hardly imaginable can make an impression -- photographic images, impressions of the actual at a distance.

The Nazis, in fact, also took photographs in Auschwitz. When Lili Jacob -- who had been transferred from Auschwitz to a Silesian munitions factories and from there to the Dora-Nordhausen camp -- was looking for warm clothes in the guards' quarters after the liberation, she found an album with 206 photographs. In the pictures she recognized herself and members of her family who had not survived Auschwitz. ⁽¹⁰⁾ Photography was forbidden in Auschwitz, but apparently two SS men were charged with documenting the camp. They captured the "sorting" or "selection" procedure in one comprehensive high-angle shot. In the foreground we see men in SS uniforms, behind them the newly-arrived deportees in two columns. Seen from the camera's perspective, men and women up to roughly the age of forty are standing on the left, wearing lighter colored clothes; on the right are the older ones, women with children, and all those too sick or weak to work. Those standing on the right will be taken immediately to the gas chamber. Those standing on the left will undergo the admission procedure; they will be tattooed, they will be shaved bald, and they will be assigned work. Work that is also a form of extermination, that delays death and prolongs dying.

Once the authorities started to take photographs, everything had to be captured in images; even the crimes they themselves commit are documented visually. A mountain of images rises alongside a mountain of files.

An image from this album: a woman has arrived at Auschwitz and the camera captures her in the act of looking back as she walks by. On her left, an SS man holds an old man, also recently arrived at Auschwitz, by the lapels of his jacket with his right hand: a gesture of sorting. In the center of the image the woman: the photographers always point their cameras at the beautiful woman. Or, when they have set up their camera somewhere, they take a picture when a woman who in their eyes is beautiful passes by. Here, on the "platform" at Auschwitz, they photograph a woman the way they would cast a glance at her in the street.

The woman knows how to take in this photographic gaze with the expression on her face, and how to

look ever so slightly past the viewer. In just this way, on a boulevard she would look past a gentleman casting a glance at her, into a store window. She shows that she does not respond to the gaze but is still aware of being looked at. With this gaze she transplants herself into a different place, a place with boulevards, gentlemen, shop windows, far from here. The camp, run by the SS, is meant to destroy her, and the photographer who captures her beauty for posterity, is part of that same SS. How the two elements interplay - destruction and preservation!

This is how we come to have an image like this, an image that fits well with the story the Nazis spread about the deportation of the Jews. They said the Jews would arrive in a kind of large ghetto, a kind of colony, a place "somewhere in Poland." The Nazis did not make public even these images, since they deemed it more appropriate to withhold everything that pointed to the actuality of the extermination camps. It was more useful to allow the place "somewhere in Poland" to remain uncertain.

The structure of the album Lili Jacob found follows the ordering principle of the camp. It classifies the people in the camp according to the designations "still able-bodied men," "no longer able-bodied men," "still able-bodied women," "no longer able-bodied women." In the future they looked forward to, the Nazis could have displayed these images; here, there would be not a single kick, not a single dead person, to be seen -- the extermination of the Jews would appear as an administrative measure.

Vrba and Wetzler's report was not the first news of the extermination of the Jews in camps and death factories, but due to the precision of its details about places and numbers it had a much greater impact than those that had preceded it. In its wake, Jewish functionaries repeatedly appealed to London and Washington for air raids to destroy the train tracks leading to Auschwitz. Yitzak Gruenbaum of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem telegraphed to Washington: "Suggest deportation would be much impeded if railways between Hungary and Poland could be bombed."⁽¹¹⁾ Benjamin Akzin, of the US government's War Refugee Board, advocated bombing the gas chambers and crematoria themselves, as this would constitute "the most tangible -- and perhaps the only tangible -- evidence of the indignation aroused by the existence of these charnel-houses. [...] Presumably, a large number of Jews in these camps may be killed in the course of such bombings (though some of them may escape in the confusion). But such Jews are doomed to death anyhow. The destruction of the camps would not change their fate, but it would serve as visible retribution on their murderers and it might save the lives of future victims."⁽¹²⁾ In fact, had the gas chambers and crematoria been destroyed in 1944, the Nazis could no longer have rebuilt them. The military and political leaders of England and the USA refused, however, to attack the means of access to the camps or the murder installations themselves. They let the pleas, suggestions, petitions, and demands for this circulate for a long time in their machinery, and then justified their refusal with the argument that they should not divert their forces. The only way to help the Jews would be a military victory over Germany.

When on August 25, 1944, American planes once more flew over Auschwitz, one again took a picture from which we can tell that a train has arrived in Auschwitz II (Birkenau). One of its freight cars can be made out near the left edge of the image. A group of deportees is walking along the tracks toward the gas chambers: crematorium complex 2, the entrance gate is open. Behind the gate a decorative flower bed ("landscaping"): courtyard and buildings are meant to convey the impression that this is a hospital or a sanitarium. Above the flower bed a flat building, barely recognizable only through the shadow of its front wall ("undressing room"). In this room, those arriving were told to undress in preparation for showering. Diagonally across is the gas chamber. Its furnishings were meant to simulate a shower room. It could hold up to 2000 people, who were often forced in violently. Then the SS would lock the doors shut. Four openings can be discerned on the roof ("vent"). It was through these openings that, after a short waiting period to allow the temperature in the gas chamber to rise, SS men in gas masks dropped the Zyklon-B poison. Everyone in the gas chambers died within three minutes. Others, who did not have to go to their deaths immediately, can be seen here waiting in line for registration. They are waiting to be tattooed, to have their heads shaven, and to be assigned work and a place to sleep. The doubly curved figure of their waiting line extends all the way to the trees on the lower right.

The Nazis did not notice that someone had noted their crimes, and the Americans did not notice that they had captured them on film. The victims also failed to notice. Notes, as written in a book of God. Meydenbauer's fear of death established departments and administrative authorities that process images. Today, one speaks of "image processing" when machines are programmed to screen and classify

photographs according to given criteria. A satellite continually takes pictures of a specific region, a program examines all the images to determine whether their details betray differences with earlier images. Another machine examines all the images given it in order to detect the traces of moving vehicles. Yet another is programmed to read and report all forms that indicate a rocket silo. This is called "image processing;" machines are supposed to evaluate images made by machines.

The Nazis talked about the "eradication" of cities, which means the suspension of their symbolic existence on the map. Vrba and Wetzler wanted to put the names Oswiecim/Auschwitz *on the map*. At that time, images of the Auschwitz death factory already existed, but no one had *evaluated* them.

In the fall of 1944, Jewish women who worked at a munitions factory inside Auschwitz managed to smuggle small amounts of explosives to members of the camp underground. The material was relayed to male prisoners who worked in the gassing-cremation area. Those few wretched Jews then attempted what the Allied powers, with their vast might, would not. On October 7, in a suicidal uprising, they blew up one of the crematorium buildings.(13)

None of the insurgents survived. On an aerial photograph the partial destruction of crematorium IV can be discerned.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Günther Anders, "Schinkensemmelfrieden -- Rede zum Dritten Forum der Krefelder Friedensinitiative," *Konkret* (Hamburg), November 1983.
2. Cited in Albrecht Grimm, *120 Jahre Photogrammetrie in Deutschland: Das Tagebuch von Albrecht Meydenbauer*, Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1977, 15-16.
3. Dino A. Brugioni and Robert G. Poirier, *The Holocaust Revisited: A Retrospective Analysis of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Complex*, Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, February 1979, 5.
4. Rudolf Vrba and Alan Bestic, *I Cannot Forgive*, London: Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd., and Anthony Gibbs and Phillips, 1963; reprinted, with additional material, as *44070: The Conspiracy of the Twentieth Century*, Bellingham, Wash.: Star and Cross Publishing House, 1989, 233.
5. Rudolf Vrba in a statement from the film *Shoah*, in Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust* (The Complete Text of the Film), New York: Pantheon Books, 1985, 166.
6. Albrecht Meydenbauer, *Das Denkmäler-Archiv*, Berlin 1884.
7. Erwin Panofsky, "Die Perspektive als 'symbolische Form,'" in *Aufsätze zu Grundfragen der Kunstwissenschaft*, Berlin: Hessling, 1974; trans. Christopher S. Wood as *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, New York: Zone Books, 1991, 71.
8. Vilém Flusser, *Für eine Philosophie der Fotografie*, Göttingen, 1984; *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Göttingen: European Photography, 1984.
9. [Trans. note: the full text of the report is reprinted in Vrba and Bestic, *44070*, 279-317.]
10. [Trans. note: Serge Klarsfeld, ed., *The Auschwitz Album: Lili Jacob's Album*, New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1980; reprinted in a trade edition, with text by Peter Heller, as *The Auschwitz Album: A Book Based Upon an Album Discovered by a Concentration Camp Survivor, Lili [Jacob] Meier*, New York: Random House, 1981.]
11. Cited in Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981, 220.
12. Cited in Gilbert, 247-248.
13. David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-1945*, New York: Pantheon, 1984, 307.