

**Witnessing and Visualizing Trauma.  
Peter Weiss, Alexander Kluge and Claude Lanzmann  
Representing the *Shoah***

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*Abstract.* This article deals with the ethical and aesthetical implications of witnessing, visualizing and representing the *Shoah* in German literature of the 1960s. In order to analyse the limits of representation of such an individual and collective traumatic event, the text focuses on Peter Weiss's theatrical production (*The Investigation*) and on Alexander Kluge's literature and film (*Lebensläufe* and *Abschied von gestern*). Actually, the artistic outputs of these authors made it possible, on the one hand, to "perform" at the same time collective and individual memories of both the victims and the murders of the *Shoah*. On the other hand, they paved the way for one of the most telling visual representation of the Holocaust: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). As it is argued in the article this was possible by way of "montage", i.e. thanks to an aesthetic artefact that, eventually when Claude Lanzmann shot his most important film, forced the limits of realism and documentarism in the visualization of the Holocaust.

*Keywords:* Shoah, Witness, Montage, Literature, Film

«Uns trennt von gestern kein Abgrund,  
sondern die veränderte Lage»  
(Alexander Kluge, *Abschied von gestern*)

Since the sixties German literature has started representing collective traumatic events like the *Shoah* and the Second World War in the archive of testimonies, i.e. in such aesthetic montages of authentic – even pseudo-authentic – materials as Alexander Kluge's *Lebensläufe* (1964) and Peter Weiss' *Die Ermittlung. Oratorium in 11 Gesängen* (1965) that eventually paved the way for Walter Kempowski's monumental collective diaries collection published under the title *Das Echolot* (1993-2005) (Damiano, 2005).

In his controversial *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (1999) – a study on literature and the air raids of World War II appeared in English translation along with other essays as *On the Natural History of Destruction* – the German writer and academic recognized the reason for German authors' interest in montage in the fact that «it is with this documentary approach, which has an early precursor in Nossack's *Der Untergang*, that German postwar literature really comes into its own and begins the serious study of material incommensurable with traditional aesthetics» (Sebald, 2003, p. 58-59).

By relying on some fundamentals of the theoretical framework for montage as laid by Alexander Kluge with respect to both literature and film, it is possible to discuss how such writers as Weiss and Kluge himself, before the film maker Claude Lanzmann, faced those ethical and aesthetical questions of witnessing Auschwitz (Margalit, 2002) summoned up at the turn of the forties by Theodor W. Adorno in the well-known and debated following *dictum*: «to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today» (Adorno, 1967, p. 34).

Peter Weiss and Alexander Kluge eventually offered us glimpses of German Nazi past through such a (pseudo-)documentary perspective that still informs much of contemporary literature, i.e. W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten. Vier lange Erzählungen* (1996) and Austerlitz (2001), or Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room* (2001). Actually through the example of Kluge's first film *Abschied von*

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*gestern* (1966), which has shattered frontiers on the topics of testimony, as well as on the role of the witness, language, memory, and representations of the Holocaust (De Matteis, 2009), one can learn to understand the aims and the significance of those pseudo-documentary literary works which approach the past by means of montage of texts and images in order to tell the life of a «girl without history» (Costagli, 2004). *Abschied von gestern – Yesterday's Girl* in English – was adapted from one of Kluge's own short stories, namely *Anita G.* contained in *Lebensläufe*, and it is an early example of that re-working of material, which has become one of the distinctive features of Kluge's work. Nevertheless, the film faces indirectly the topic of the Holocaust, since its heroine appears

«before a judge for shoplifting. After going through her personal data and noting that her parents had been deported to Theresienstadt and their property confiscated, the judge provocatively asks whether Anita claims that what happened to her parents in 1938 had any bearings on the case for which she had been tried. “No”, replies Anita, “none whatsoever.” This scene, one could argue, makes denial visible, aggressively on the part of the judge, auto-aggressively on the part of Anita, and thus drawing the spectator's attention to the fact that “Theresienstadt” and what it stands for may indeed be a crucial fact in Anita's life and thus her actions» (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 37).

By establishing *Die Ermittlung* and *Abschied von gestern* as basis for comparison, it is possible to come closer to understanding the literary production of both Weiss and Kluge and the artistic, ethical, and historical dimensions, which inform their works and cast a shadow over writers and film-makers of the last decades who faced the issue of the «moving image» of the Holocaust (Haggith, Newman, 2005). Apart from the montage construction, the most common feature these works share is that each of them addresses WWII and the Holocaust, and each in its own way exposes the Germans and their complicity in these events. In addition, these works bear witness to this period in history which, in spite of repeated efforts to accurately represent it, remains elusive (Friedländer, 1992):

«Anyone looking for traces of the Holocaust in postwar West German films of the 1950s and 1960s, is likely to be disappointed: such, at any rate, is the common assumption. But the same seems no less true of the so-called “New German Cinema” of the 1970s: While in the films of some of the well-known names-Edgar Reitz, Alexander Kluge, Hans Jürgen Syberberg, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff-Fascism and especially the German family under National Socialism eventually became major topics, the Jewish experience-persecution and annihilation-rarely figured. Nor did the postwar Jewish Diaspora and the difficult Jewish-German dialogue, sometimes known as the “negative symbiosis” after Auschwitz. [...] What is more plausible than to note a pervasive disavowal, and to conclude that in the face of these unimaginable crimes at such close proximity, repression and invisibility had set in? One could be forgiven for fearing that the most gifted generation of film-makers in Germany since the 1920s had been guilty, if not of complicity, then at very least, had sinned by omission not breaking the silence: surrounding the Jewish victims, among the clamor and violence with which the “sons” accused the “fathers” of their Nazi past» (Elsaesser, 2014, p. 35).

As Elie Wiesel claimed in his famous response to the 1978 TV series *Holocaust*, «Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it visualized [...] The Holocaust transcends history», because it is «the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be transmitted» (Wiesel, 1978, p. 2:1). Essentially what Kluge and Weiss have confirmed is that knowing the Holocaust is impossible and that even in post-war Germany «the economic conditions, considerations, and forms of organisation making genocide possible continued to operate» (Sebald, 2003, p. 187). Through his theoretical discussions, which are put to practice in his artistic creations, Kluge illustrates however how, whether it be through literature or film, the montage construction operates on essentially the same fundamental principles: regardless of the medium, it has the ability to render similar effects, i.e. to attain an «effect of reality», in Roland Barthes's sense of the concept (Barthes, 1986), although «not by means of descriptions ... but by means of contrasts and discords» (Machery, 1992, pp. 117-118).

Rather than claiming that their works themselves offer up the true accounts of what took place, Weiss and Kluge instead show us a wide range of possibilities for what might have taken place. Essentially the “facts” are presented to us and we are left to draw our own conclusions. Furthermore, these two artists haven’t created similar works, given that Kluge experienced the war as a boy on the side of the perpetrators, while Weiss on the side of the victims, even if – as W. G. Sebald highlights in his essay *The Remorse of the Heart. On Memory and Cruelty in the Work of Peter Weiss* – the author «once described angrily by his Jewish father as a young rascal of a Jew, is also a German, at least of morality prevailed in his parental home. That relationship dictated his attempt to identify with both the victims and the murders» (Sebald, 2003, pp. 186-187). Actually the overwhelming majority of Kluge’s *Lebensläufe* witnesses represent the Germans, whereas Weiss’ play *Die Ermittlung*, based upon the proceedings of the Auschwitz trials celebrated in Frankfurt in 1965, represents a more even distribution between perpetrators, bystanders, and victims. Since both are «constructed» works (Burmeister, 1985), through the use of the montage technique and juxtaposition, verbal and visual images – performed ones in the case of the theatrical scenes of *Die Ermittlung* – may stand alone to speak for themselves, or words and images may unite to create new or separate dialogues.

Each artist manages to keep the Holocaust before our eyes, but he witnesses Auschwitz in his own way. As he makes emblematically known in *Lernprozesse mit tödlichem Ausgang* (*Learning Processes with a Deadly Outcome*, 1973), Kluge wants to preserve the past in order that we might learn from it. Thus he draws from a multitude of written and visual sources, which combine to tell their own story of the Germans’ willing complicity in the Holocaust. Weiss, on the other hand, attempts to re-construct a past from which no trace was meant to survive. His “investigative” tactics – *Die Ermittlung* means *The Investigation* – is meant to uncover “evidence”, that was not intended to be left to testify, and thus to show how traces and absence may combine to tell a frightful story.

When he planned *Die Ermittlung*, Weiss took inspiration from the *Divina Commedia* and Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* (*If this is a Man*, 1947) (Subiotto, 1991) he developed the action in three stages: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* (Castellari, 2010). In his handling of characters Weiss wished to portray the dehumanisation of the victims by stressing their anonymity; they actually are designated by registration number, so that their anonymity sharply contrasts to the publicized names of the camp officials. Even the words «Jew» and «Auschwitz» are absent from the stage, because Weiss aimed at «making a picture of the present-day in which the past could be seen as alive and still at work» (Weiss, 1967, p. 103). As a result, Weiss staged the testimonies and the proceedings of the German *Auschwitz-Prozesse* in order to corroborate the idea that the concentration camp was «the logical and ultimate consequence» of the capitalistic expansion. As Witness #3 highlights in the drama, this is a place

«where the oppressor  
could expand his authority  
to a degree never known before  
and the oppressed  
was forced to yield up  
the fertilizing dust  
of his bones»  
(Weiss, 1968, p. 22).

«Audiences and critics bought very little attention of such anticapitalistic extrapolations from the evidence» (Ellis, 1987, p. 53) and *Die Ermittlung* was therefore accused of irresponsible distortion of the documents it was based upon. As Walter Jens immediately maintained: «the more resolutely Weiss ties up and packages the material, the more he interprets and adds» (Jens, 1970, p. 93). T. W. Adorno warned against the «homely existential atmosphere» of works like Weiss’ *Die Ermittlung*, where «the distinction between executioners and

victims becomes blurred; both, after all, are equally suspended above the possibility of nothingness, which of course is generally not quite so uncomfortable» (Adorno, 1979, p. 61).

Kluge's documentary literature on the Holocaust instead didn't face such criticism, because his works and films are meant to bear witness of the *Shoah* by way of an «archaeological excavation of the slag-heaps of our [German] collective memory» (Sebald, 2003, p. 60). In other words:

«central to Kluge's detailed description of the social organization of disaster, which is pre-programmed by the ever-recurrent and ever-intensifying errors of history, is the idea that a proper understanding of the catastrophes we are always setting off is the first prerequisite for the social organization of happiness. However, it is difficult to dismiss the idea that the systematic destruction Kluge sees arising from the development of the means and modes of industrial production hardly seems to justify the principle of hope» (Sebald, 2003, p. 64).

In order to describe «the social organization of disaster» Kluge supplements his written testimonies with photographs, adding a visual dimension to his literary works that lends itself well to comparison with individual frames from Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), a film entering into «the heart of hell in order to account for an event that was always considered without witnesses» (Sessi, 2014, p. 1). Not only begins this film with a text that, along with the ever-present subtitles, adds a literary element to *Shoah*, but Lanzmann's *Shoah* and Kluge's *Lebensläufe* also share other features. Perhaps the most obvious shared feature is that both artists built their creations from a foundation which consists mainly of eyewitness testimonies and documentary materials. This creative process can lead to the misconception that their works are of a documentary nature. However neither work can directly be labelled a documentary, nor a fictional interpretation of the historical situation: *Shoah* and *Lebensläufe* are aesthetic artefacts. Kluge refuses to accept documentation as truth, and thus dares to defy its authority by reinventing it in new contexts through his montage constructions, which clearly challenge the facade of objectivity: «Documentation, in Kluge's understanding, always takes sides and never allows itself to be objective or balanced» (Rentschler, 1990, p. 34). In a manner similar to Kluge, Lanzmann, insisted that his film «is not a documentary [...] is not at all representational» (Lanzmann, 1991, p. 96), and most provocatively, he said that *Shoah* is «a fiction of the real» (Lanzmann, 1990, p. 301). Lanzmann emphatically insists on *not* classifying *Shoah* as a documentary, severely limiting the interpretive possibilities, and minimizing the importance of his role as artist and creator (LaCapra, 1998, pp. 95-138). By insisting that their works are not a documentary respectively, both Kluge and Lanzmann are once again underscoring that the artefact is the way it is because they, as creators, selected, juxtaposed, and manipulated the constituent parts in order to produce a desired effect. So they faced the relationship between fiction, documentary and reality and eventually anticipated the debate on the meaning of representing the Holocaust in film from a fictional perspective, on the one hand, and from a pseudo-documentary perspective on the other that broke out after the release of *Shoah* (Pisanty, 2012). This is an asthetical, political and even sociological issue that has been recently faced in Italy by Andrea Minuz (2010) and Claudia Hassan (2012), also debating the relationship between cinema and *Shoah* at the wake of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and Lanzmann's *Shoah*, because the former emblematically represents the fictional and rhetorical American and Hollywoodian way of representing the Holocaust, the latter the European fragmented and anti-rhetorical way of visualizing the persecution – not to forget Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (*Life is Beautiful*, 1997), i.e. a fictional and ironic way of visualizing the *Shoah* (Chamla in S. Meghnagi, 2007, p. 153).

Thus, in Lanzmann's film, fragments of historical evidence take on meaning beyond that spatial time and setting from which they originate, and to those historic names, places, and events to which they bear witness (D. Meghnagi, 2005). In 1979 Lanzmann actually outlined his project for *Shoah* with these words:

«A film devoted to the Holocaust can only be a counter-myth, that is, an investigation into the presentness of the Holocaust, an investigation into a past whose wounds are so fresh and so keenly inscribed in consciousness that they are present in a haunting timelessness» (Lanzmann, 1979, p. 143).

This means that it is the nature of an artistic work, and *not* that of a documentary, that affords the recipient the opportunity to consider the true dimensions which allow room for what is an «unbelievable», «unspeakable» and even «unclaimed experience» (Caruth, 1986, 1995). Thus the works of Kluge and Lanzmann directly confront Germany's Nazi past and the Holocaust, and each of them serves as a gauge for monitoring the remembrance and reception of that past in the present, showing that the line between documentation and fiction is very thin. As Friedemann J. Weidauer writes:

«Documents are a question of power since they express who has the means to create the reality in such a way that it coincides with the documents. For those in power, the difference between fiction and document is often irrelevant since they have the ability to change fiction into documents, or to recreate the reality in such a way that it coincides with the documents» (Weidauer, 1995, p. 101).

As a matter of fact Kluge, Lanzmann and Weiss made evident that documents were *constructed* by those in power and that the more documents which are generated, the more difficult it becomes to render a complete picture of an event. Thus Kluge's *Abschied von gestern* works against the possibility that the Holocaust can be read as an organic entity. Even though many of his main source materials, too, are comprised of documentary, archival, and eyewitness testimonies, he intermingles these with his own fictionalized documents to show how very difficult it is to distinguish fact from fiction. What Kluge's literary and filmic production suggest is that things and events may only be evoked and this is why it is necessary to have many documents, many stories, which, through their interaction with one another, will eventually emerge as their true selves (Zucker, 1985). And it is not only his awareness of the impossibility to depict Holocaust in its totality that is significant for Kluge; he does not even attempt to achieve this, for such an action would collide with one of his most fundamental principles of montage: «And just as in a beautiful garden, the images do not have to form a concept. You do not have to understand it; you only need to walk through it. Narrated differences, that is our work» (Liebman, 1988, p. 54).

Weidauer, too, illustrates this point by quoting that the Holocaust cannot be reduced to that which two eyes have seen, and he posits that not even a hundred reports are capable of this (Weidauer, 1995, p. 97). But the process of «walking through» (Grass, 2003) – which is the task of the reader/spectator as Günter Grass has pointed out in *Im Krebsgang. Eine Novelle* – is a step in the right direction toward understanding an experience in its totality. Not only requires literature many stories, also the writing of history does it (Traverso, 2000; Caruth, 2013). Along with these many stories, *contradiction* is a key concept and history cannot be told in its entirety: the *stories* which emerges from the juxtaposed texts will tell a *completely different* history.

This is precisely why the montage process is an important approach to understanding large-scale events which are difficult to grasp. In order to emphasize that such stories cannot be told in their entirety, one needs a wealth of conflicting information in order to confirm this. For clarification of this concept we can turn to the words of Sergei Eisenstein: «the juxtaposition of two separate shots by splicing them together resembles not so much a simple sum of one shot plus another shot - as it does a *creation*» (Eisenstein, 1942, p. 7). In light of this thought, one can argue that even if - or in spite of the fact that - all of Kluge's, Weiss's, or Lanzmann's assembled texts were “documentary” in nature, the resulting work is still a fiction. Eisenstein continues: «It resembles a creation - rather than the sum of its parts - from the circumstance that in every such juxtaposition the result is qualitatively distinguishable from each component element viewed separately» (Eisenstein, 1942, pp. 7-8).

To illustrate the wide range of possibilities that the montage of authentic materials offered to the three artists in order to bear witness of the Holocaust, we can consider the following characterization of Kluge's works:

«He wants to enter into the breaches of consciousness, discover contradictions [...] and point out irregularities. In his films - just as in his literature - we find breaks and jumps, where the viewer's imagination can connect, in order to enrich the film with his own experiences which, in a certain way, themselves become a part of the film. The interplay, the tension, and the contradictions between the leading associations of the film and those of the spectator should trigger a learning process» (Lewandowski, 1980, pp. 52-53).

According to Rainer Lewandowski what enables Kluge to guide the work is the art of selection and juxtaposition, as a result the important is not the artistic medium, but the montage process itself and the "learning process" triggered by the confrontation between the film and its spectator. But Lewandowski's words also indicate that the thought-processes cannot be fully known by the artist in advance. That's why the individual experiences, which the recipient brings to the artistic work, become themselves an integral part of the learning process. This is true not only for Kluge, but for Weiss and Lanzmann as well, because all three authors, through their montage constructions, trigger a learning process in their recipients.

This leads to another inherent montage feature which Weiss', Kluge's, and Lanzmann's works have in common: the obligatory participation of the spectator/reader. Lanzmann, with regard to *Shoah*, affirms: «There are no commentaries. [...]. There is no voice-over that explains things. That implies work on the part of the audience» (Lanzmann, 1996, p. 25). As Kluge points out, voice-over commentary is usually associated with – but is not limited to – documentary film. This would be reason enough for Lanzmann not to have used voice-over commentary, as «it has the reputation of being "uncinematic", not only because it seems to be tied to a particular subject matter, but also because it assumes a certain autonomy in coordinating text and image» (Kluge, 1988, p. 90). Lanzmann, instead, chooses to grant the spectator this autonomy. Kluge then describes a technique dating back to silent film which involves the insertion of written titles. In the silent era these were the only way to confront image and language. When used today, however, their special effect is one of muteness.

Shoshana Felman characterizes Lanzmann in his role as narrator as the narrator who essentially «has no voice» (Felman 1992, p. 217); this in contrast to Lanzmann the film-maker and inquirer, both of whom do speak. But as Lanzmann's actions suggest, this is not a role he wishes to play. It is the job of the spectator to lend his/her voice to this silent text. This helps to explain why Lanzmann preferred the *silent* text at the outset of the film to a voice-over. Already at this point he wanted to engage the spectator in the work of art. Kluge explains how this works:

«The result [of the silent text] is the overlay of filmic events with the inner voice of the reading spectator - the spectator has to assume a more active role. The language of written titles, which does not assume any particular voice and thus cannot really be attached to characters within the diegesis, is even further removed from the filmic events than any form of voice-over. This greater distance, however, gives it an affinity with literary language. The increased participation of the spectator, in turn, creates a peculiar identification of the meaning of this language with the visually concretized events of the film» (Kluge, 1988, p. 91).

Thus it would appear that Lanzmann, by not using a voice-over, yields the power – power which would otherwise belong to him – to the spectator. Furthermore, by forcing the spectator to read, his/her voice, too, becomes an inherent feature of the film. By insisting that their respective montage creations are works of art and not documentaries, Kluge and Lanzmann place a large burden of responsibility on the recipient.

In addition Shoshana Felman elucidates how Lanzmann's *Shoah* – in as much as it is a film about eyewitnesses and what these witnesses profess to have seen – is also a testimony to the

performance of bearing witness. In essence what the film brings to light is that *what* is seen depends largely on the standpoint of the witnesses in relation to the event in question. She therefore divides Lanzmann's witnesses into three categories, the perpetrators, the bystanders, and the victims (Pezzetti, 2006): «In effect, the victims, the bystanders and the perpetrators are here differentiated not so much by what they actually see [...] as by what and how they do not see, by what and how they fail to witness» (Felman, 1992, p. 208).

She substantiates this by adding, for example, that the Jews see, but are not able to understand; the bystanders, that is to say the Poles, see, but they do not quite look – they do not want to see or understand; and the Nazis' task is to ensure that no one sees. What the film demonstrates, then, is that these three performances are incommensurable; there can be no consensus to any one truth because essentially, no two witnesses shared the same act of seeing (Hartman, 2002). This revelation calls the very act of witnessing into question. At the same time, however, the film's urgent message is that all of these stories be heard, for the act of telling serves to counteract the silence that the Nazis tried to create. Moreover, in light of the historical process, we have learned that the telling of history requires many stories. With regard to the historical process, then, the montage work assumes the task of the historian, whose responsibilities involve uncovering discrepancies and incongruities, which result from the witnesses' various performances of the act of seeing (Porat, 2008, p. 357). Thus the work of art itself, the montage, becomes an act of testimony to the witnesses' stories, but also to its own performance - a performance which is set in motion by the juxtaposition of the documents (Perniola, 2007).

Weiss, Kluge and Lanzmann recognize the power of their works' performance to bear witness. But they are also aware that the spectators/readers become not only witnesses to the performance of each respective work, but in turn they also become secondary witnesses to the events described; this obliges them not only to participate in the artistic performance, but at the same time, it also places them via their response, in the position of bearing witness: «To receive the words of a witness is to find that one has also become a witness, that one's responses are there for others to witness as well. Once the transmission begins, one cannot stand outside its address» (Brinkley, Youra, 1996, p. 123). Thus the responsibility imposed on the spectators/readers is multi-dimensional; they are not only expected to make sense of the work and draw their own conclusions; but having done so, they may also be obliged to carry this message with them and, in turn, to testify to it.

But since neither Lanzmann nor Weiss and Kluge claims to be imparting the true account of the past, and since each in his own way insists on the impossibility of knowing the full extent of this past, then bearing witness does not necessarily mean to explain things, but rather to raise questions. As Andreas Huyssen maintains in the chapter devoted to Kluge of his brilliant *Twilight memories*:

«The promises of immediacy and authenticity – whether in the form of document or the personal, the emotional, the subjective – had no appeal for him. From Kluge's perspective, the enthusiasm with which [in the sixties] the new subjectivity was embraced had to be read as yet another expression of the indomitable desire for meaning. And the learning processes initiated by his literary reaction against the objectivism of the previous years were all too often based on the same sorts of exclusions and oppositions his own writing was designed to question» (Huyssen, 1995, p. 152).

Perhaps more important than the discovery of the truth surrounding the «historically and phenomenologically unique» (Katz, 2001, p. 49) character of the *Shoah*, is to simply keep it before our eyes (Wieviorka, 1995, pp. 23-32). As a result, the theoretical perspectives of Kluge, Weiss, and Lanzmann on montage show that witness literature is «of all literary kinds most bound with notions of authenticity and referentiality, a poetry that puts in touch with raw facts of existence rather than effects produced by rhetorical technique» (Vogler, 2003, p. 174). They do not wish to produce a new content with the materials in the traditional sense, but they utilize the montage to its fullest capacity in that they demonstrates how new concepts arise out of juxtaposition in which the texts either collide with, or substantiate one another. When viewed from this perspective, it is the

montage itself, and not necessarily the arranger, which constructs the concepts. Kluge distinguishes these two very different approaches to montage as «dominating the materials and respecting the materials. The first would take materials to realize intentions. The opposed attitude would be to accept the autonomy of these materials, which are living» (Liebman, 1988, p. 57).

What a closer look at the construction process behind Kluge's and Lanzmann's monumental works reveals is that the stories which each work brings to light cannot be told - nor could they even be discovered - through traditional narrative discourse, because as Jean-François Lyotard,

«with Auschwitz, something new has happened in history (which can only be a sign and not a fact), which is that the facts, the testimonies which bore the traces of *here's* and *now's*, the documents which indicated the sense or senses of the fact, and the names, finally the possibility of various kinds of phrases whose conjunction makes reality, all this has been destroyed as much as possible» (Lyotard, 1988, p. 55).

In spite of Lyotard's famous comparison between Auschwitz and «an earthquake destroy[ing] not only lives, buildings and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly» (Lyotard, 1988, p. 55), it takes the montage with its spaces, contradictions, and gaps to provide the necessary forum for the stories' transmission. On the one hand, then, we are reminded of the construction process at work; we experience – or witness – relationships and associations which in reality never took place. Lanzmann tells us that none of the characters in his film ever actually met; but he *makes* them meet. Kluge, Weiss and Lanzmann create, in essence, a giant chorus composed of those victims who cannot speak for themselves. In other words, who speak in their works are the «*Muselmänner*», i.e. the «absolute» and «complete» witnesses of the *Shoah* (Agamben, 2002, p. 150) as Giorgio Agamben, in a telling reading of a passage of Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*, considers the «integral» testimonies who died in the camps and cannot speak, but whose presence is at the background of “the language of the heart” (D. Meghnagi, 2014, p. 4) able to render a real testimony on Auschwitz: «The common prisoner of the camps», Levi writes, «has been described, by me and others, when we speak of the *Muselman*: but the *Muselmänner* themselves have not spoken» (Levi, 2001, p. 252).

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