

## From Fact to Fiction

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Review of: Anacleto Ferrer, *Facticidad y ficción: Ensayo sobre cinco secuencias fotográficas de perpetración de la Shoah* (Santander: Shangrila, 2020). 228 pp. ISBN 978-8-4122-5680-2.

In his 1998 work *War Story*, U.S. photographer Mikael Levin offers a reflection on the Holocaust by combining texts produced by his father, the war correspondent and writer Meyer Levin, and images by the French photographer Eric Schwab, with photographs taken by himself. Levin and Schwab witnessed numerous episodes and places of perpetration during World War II, including the liberation of the concentration camps. Mikael Levin, for his part, visited these same places 50 years later to photograph them. In his images there is no evidence of the historical uses of the sites. Instead of ruins, they show empty landscapes.<sup>1</sup> They intend to denounce, by rewriting space through photographic practice, the destruction of experience and memory. This inquiry into the void generated by history suggests that historical photographic evidence is not capable of apprehending the Holocaust entirely. It must be counterposed not only to more recent photographs, but also to the word of the narrative. Levin's work can be read as a critique of the iconographic status of the Holocaust, constructed from images of the liberation of the concentration camps taken by the Allied armies.<sup>2</sup> The decontextualization of these images made them lose their referential value. They became symbols that replaced the event they represented.<sup>3</sup> By contrasting Schwab's images and his father's texts with the current emptiness of those spaces of perpetration, Levin recontextualizes the original event.

The historical recontextualization of the Holocaust is precisely the objective that Anacleto Ferrer pursues in his book *Facticidad y ficción: Ensayo sobre cinco secuencias fotográficas de perpetración de la Shoah* (2020). Like Levin, Ferrer tries to fill the void of history with an

- 1 Ulrich Baer, 'To Give Memory a Place: Holocaust Photography and the Landscape Tradition', *Representations*, 69 (2000), 38–62 (p. 42).
- 2 See Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, 'Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5.1 (2002), 87–106.
- 3 See Barbie Zelizer, 'From the Image of Record to the Image of Memory: Holocaust Photography, Then and Now', in *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography*, ed. by Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 98–121 (p. 101).

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aesthetic exercise. Instead of creating new images, Ferrer advocates for a detailed scrutiny and reordering of the photographs generated during the event. To bring out their connotative and denotative potential – in the Barthesian sense – Ferrer implements both an archaeological and a montage procedure. By means of the former, the photographs are brought into relation with the temporal and spatial contexts of production, but also with the three elements that enable their emergence in the first place: photographer, technical device and photographed subject. The aim is to restore the photographs' original documentary value, which remains hidden under their reproductions and successive uses in the media, in scholarship and in cultural creations.<sup>4</sup> By means of a method of montage, the photographs are arranged according to the principles of montage in order to show their hidden content, but also to generate a new narrative. This is achieved through the interweaving of the image sequences with Ferrer's own writing. These essayistic and subjective reflections present the author's own aesthetic reading of the images. Ferrer's reading not only draws on and extensively quotes from theoretical works on photography and/or the Holocaust by authors such as Zygmunt Bauman, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Georges Didi-Huberman, Harun Farocki, Siegfried Kracauer, Susan Sontag and Jacques Rancière. It also interweaves passages from literary works dealing with the Holocaust – such as those of Primo Levi, Imre Kertész or Jorge Semprún among others. This exercise is necessary, according to Ferrer, for two reasons. First, because simple and continuous scrutiny has rendered the event incomprehensible.<sup>5</sup> And second, because literal discourse is incapable of approaching the liminal experience of the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> Following Siegfried Kracauer, Ferrer argues that it is only through subjectivity that history can be brought back.<sup>7</sup> Ferrer denies in this sense the essential inaccessibility of the event and offers the reader access to the historical trauma.

The book is structured around two different yet interconnected axes. While the prologue, the preface, the first three and the last chapters offer a reflection of a purely theoretical nature, in chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 the reflection arises from the photographic analysis. All analysed

4 See Anacleto Ferrer, *Facticidad y ficción: Ensayo sobre cinco secuencias fotográficas de perpetración de la Shoah* (Santander: Shangrila, 2020), p. 32.

5 See Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 91.

6 Ferrer, p. 65.

7 Siegfried Kracauer, 'Photography', in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 47–64 (p. 59).

photo sequences were taken during the 'Hungarian Transport', between April and August 1944: Westerbork Transit Camp Images, the Auschwitz Album (also known as the Lili Jacob Album), four snapshots taken clandestinely by members of the Birkenau *Sonderkommando*, aerial photographs of Auschwitz taken by the Allied Air Forces, and the Höcker Album. Ferrer's work is not, therefore, built on an analysis of the *post facto* images taken by the Allies during the liberation of the concentration camps that have dominated the Holocaust memorial discourse, but of images taken by different protagonists during the event itself. Ferrer considers that examining these images through a postmemory lens, many of which do not represent horror and may even seem banal, can offer a panoramic view of the crime scene and, therefore, can help illuminate some unknown aspects of the Holocaust.

The Westerbork Transit Camp Images, the Auschwitz Album and the Höcker Album fall under the category of *perpetrator images*.<sup>8</sup> Such images represent the empty gaze of the perpetrator, that turns the victim into an object.<sup>9</sup> The photographs taken clandestinely on the periphery of the gas chambers by the *Sonderkommando* of Auschwitz-Birkenau, for their part, are some of the few existing photographs that reflect a gaze coming directly from the intersectional space between victim and perpetrator: what Primo Levi calls 'the grey zone'. The third type of gaze that comes into play acts, like the gaze of the *Sonderkommando*, as a counterpoint to the rest: that of the aerial photographs taken by the Allied reconnaissance aircraft that flew over Auschwitz on the dates of greatest murderous activity.<sup>10</sup> The analysed sequences are arranged by the author according to the principle of montage: that is to say, they are organized as fragments of a puzzle whose assembly allows a critical examination of reality.<sup>11</sup> This exercise aims to reveal what Walter Benjamin defined as the 'optical unconscious of photography', that is, all the meanings that were not consciously perceived by the photographer or by the rest of the observers.<sup>12</sup> The originality of Ferrer's work thus lies both in the selection of the image corpus and in its structuring.

8 Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today*, 29.1(2008), 103-128 (p. 107).

9 Bernd Hüppauf, 'Emptying the Gaze: Framing Violence through the Viewfinder', *German Critique*, 72 (1997), 3-44 (pp. 32-34).

10 See Ferrer, p. 51.

11 Meir Wigoder, 'History Begins at Home: Photography and Memory in the Writings of Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes', *History & Memory*, 13.1(2001), 19-59 (p. 29).

12 See Walter Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', in *Classical Essays in Photography*, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980), 199-216 (p. 203).

The need to scrutinize images in relation to the gaze that produces them in order to approach the Holocaust is precisely the central theme of the prologue of the book, written by Vicente Sánchez-Biosca. In his own preface, Ferrer stresses the need to review the memory of the Shoah due to the risk of repeating what happened. He defends the value of the image as a vehicle of memory and the genre of the essay as the way to carry out its organization and presentation. In the first of the three theoretical chapters, 'Fotografía e historia' (Photography and history), Ferrer points out the role historical documents play in maintaining of the presence of the past in the present: namely, that of materially inscribing a fact in history and turning it into an event.<sup>13</sup> Photography in this sense is a privileged resource for understanding history, as it presents a spatial continuum that can complement the temporal continuum that historiography seeks to provide.<sup>14</sup> The second chapter, 'Imágenes de los campos' (Images from the camps), explains the loss of referentiality of the images of the Shoah and their conversion into symbols. After a brief history of the German concentration camps, Ferrer presents the five sequences that will be analysed and situates them in relation to the two types of images that predominate in these spaces – images of an administrative and propagandistic type, and personal and souvenir images taken by the perpetrators. In the third chapter, 'Auschwitz', Ferrer traces the genealogy of the Auschwitz camp and points out the industrial character and the deliberate opacity of the destructive process carried out in the camp as its main characteristics.<sup>15</sup> The author explains that, in order to account for what happened there, the remains left by the destructive process must be recovered, recomposed into a new meaningful order, and narrativized.

Chapter 4, 'Secuencia primera: concentración y tránsito' (First sequence: concentration and transit), analyses the first sequence of images: photographs taken at Camp Westerbork in the Netherlands. Westerbork was originally established by the Dutch government in 1939 to serve as a refugee camp. It then became a police transit camp after the Nazi occupation. Rudolf Werner Breslauer was in charge of photographing the daily life of the camp with a dispassionate yet not neutral gaze. After the conversion of the transit camp into a work camp in 1944, the commandant Albert Konrad Gemmecker commissioned a film to justify the strategic interest of the *Lager*. It features prisoners

<sup>13</sup> Ferrer, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> See Kracauer, p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> See Ferrer, p. 59–61.

at work, productivity charts, and trains arriving and departing. While the photographs have a personal character, the documentary is more pragmatic. These images were later reused by Alain Resnais in 'Nuit et Brouillard' (Night and Fog, 1956) and by Harun Farocki in 'Aufschub' (Respite, 2007).<sup>16</sup>

Chapter 5, 'Secuencia segunda: selección' (Second sequence: selection), deals with the so-called Auschwitz Album, found by Lili Jacob in Dora-Mittelbau on the day of its liberation. The photographs in it show the new Auschwitz ramp where the new arrivals were inspected by the doctors, as well as the birch grove next to crematoria IV and V. They do not depict explicit violence or chaos, but division of labor, order and ability to command.<sup>17</sup> The 193 photographs taken by SS-*Oberscharführer* Bernhard Walter and SS-*Unterscharführer* Ernst Hoffmann are permeated by National Socialist ideology and propagandistic pretensions.

Chapter 6, 'Secuencia tercera: exterminio' (Third sequence: extermination), involves a change of scopic regime: from that of the perpetrator to that of the deportee. The chapter deals with the photographs of the gas chambers taken clandestinely by members of the *Sonderkommando* and the Polish Auschwitz resistance in crematorium V in Birkenau. Their blurriness and fragmentariness require the 'archaeological work' of the observer.<sup>18</sup>

Chapter 7, 'Secuencia cuarta: mezzotinto' (Fourth sequence: mezzotint), focuses on photographs taken by allied aircraft during April 4 and August 23 and 25. These images did not arouse interest until it was discovered many years after they were taken that one of them shows prisoners before entering the gas chamber or being registered.

The last of the analysed sequences is included in chapter 8, 'Secuencia quinta: "camaradizando"' (Fifth sequence: 'comradizing')<sup>19</sup>: The Höcker Album. This private album is composed of 116 photographs showing members of the camp staff during their time of relaxation, united by camaraderie. Its importance lies in the information it provides about the private life and social structure of the perpetrators. The images depict the National Socialist prototype of community, order and decency

16 Alain Resnais, *Nuit et Brouillard* (Paris: Cocinor–Comptoir Cinématographique du Nord, Argos Films and Como-Films, 1956); Harun Farocki, *Aufschub: Dokumentarische Szenen aus einem Judendurchgangslager* (Berlin: Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, 2007).

17 Ferrer, p. 124.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

19 The title of this chapter is built on a linguistic game. Ferrer creates a verbal neologism by joining the morphologically similar words *cámara* (camera), *camarada* (comrade) and *camada* (litter).

and show spaces of recreation such as the *Solahütte*.<sup>20</sup> Throughout these five chapters, Ferrer traces the genealogy of all the photographs analysed in these five chapters, places them in their context of production, and explains how they were used after the fact. Subsequently, in order to extract new meanings from the images, Ferrer puts them in relation to each other with the aim of comparing them and close reads them with the help of his critical apparatus.

The work concludes with a chapter that functions as an epilogue, 'Representaciones pese a todo' (Representations nevertheless). In it, Ferrer justifies in it the need to fictionalize still images in order to historicize. The use of fiction in Ferrer's work has less to do with invention than with the establishment of new relationships between words and visible forms.<sup>21</sup> As Ferrer points out, the photographic sequences are organized in the work as if they were the acts of a tragedy announced in five acts.<sup>22</sup> The *facta* are the historical documents, while the *factum* is the result generated by the interactive organization of them, their connection with the critical apparatus and with fragments of literary works dealing with the Holocaust, and the author's own reading of them. The author considers that one cannot historicize without narrativizing. Hence the role played by him, in this sense, is that of a constructor of a plot based on the analysed images.

Showing the ruins or the emptiness of history, Ferrer seems to suggest, is not enough, as Mikael Levin did in his work. It is necessary to construct new constellations of meaning with the remains that survived the process of annihilation in order to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive. In other words, Ferrer emphasizes that the work should of remembrance should be carried out with those documents that were part of the historical event and not with those generated later. In this way, Ferrer acts as the Benjaminian 'ragpicker', in charge of collecting the 'historical leftovers' and juxtaposing them in order to produce unseen and unforeseen 'dialectical images' with which to write history.<sup>23</sup> To carry out this exercise, Ferrer relies on a rich theoretical corpus that ranges from aesthetics to cinematography and that helps him not only to analyse, but also, crucially, to narrativize. The result is an original work that adds to the contributions made by other researchers on images

20 Ferrer, p. 101

21 See Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2008).

22 Ferrer, p. 201.

23 Frederik Le Roy, 'Ragpickers and Leftover Performances. Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of the historical leftover', *Performance Research*, 22.8 (2017), 127-134 (p. 127).

and the Holocaust such as Tal Bruttman, Stefan Hördler, Cornelia Brink, Christophe Busch, Yasmin Doosry, Ilse About, Clément Chéroux, Robert Jan van Pelt or Detlef Hoffmann among others. Ferrer's reading, analysis and narrativization of the photographs is carried out from the perspective of the tradition of philosophical critical theory that originated in the Frankfurt School, to which Ferrer adheres, as evidenced by the critical apparatus he uses. Given its interdisciplinary nature and combination of documentary, theoretical and literary sources, this book will be of interest not only to scholars interested in the image as an object of study, but also to those working in cultural studies, art history, anthropology, sociology, history and literary studies. Ultimately, as Ferrer points out following Jorge Semprún, fiction and literary artifice are necessary to relate the authentic truth of the camps.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ferrer, p. 200.

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