

THE NECESSARY LIE: A PROCESS OF MEDIATED MEMORY

by Jay Stern

Wolfgang Schirmacher, Faculty Advisor

European Graduate School

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Narrative, as a medium for experience, is a flawed process. It often relates more about the narrator than about what is being narrated. The less he or she knows of an experience, the more a narrator is compelled to surmise and impose. But this does not affect our demand for narrative. Why do we settle for flawed stories? The human urge to know "what happened" compels narrative, and a flawed story is usually the only answer we have.

Narrative, as I will use the term, is the mediated process of the formulation and expression of a story to convey an experience. In conveying any kind of experience, we rely on narrative. This narrative transforms the experience into a structure with a beginning, middle, and ending. Regardless of intent, narrative transforms the experience through its reduction to an enclosed story structure. This transformation is necessarily subject to falsehood, subjective deductions, alterations, bold omissions, dramatizations. In short, in attempting to convey a truth, one creates a lie.

This thesis will explore how this falsehood of narrative, with all of its attenuate alterations and lies, is a *necessary* lie. In order to convey trauma, to depict the past as understandable, and to serve as a witness to experience, a construction of falsehoods is the best means we have: in fact, this falsehood may be better than any idealized objective "truth,"

for it reveals more about the teller and his or her society, as well as about the subject of the tale, more than any mere listing of facts can.

This exploration will revolve around a photograph taken in 1905 and will culminate with a proposal for a narrative film project to further develop these ideas.

I. A Story

On January 17th, 1905, Simon and Johanna Friedländer gathered their eight children in the studio of a commercial photographer in the port town of Libau, Latvia. Herman, the second-oldest son, would soon emigrate to the United States, and his parents wanted a photograph to document the occasion of his nineteenth birthday, fearing it would be the last time the family was together.

It was.

Herman took a copy of the photograph to the United States, and it remained with him for the rest of his life. Meanwhile in Latvia, in the wake of the First World War and Soviet revolution, the rest of the Friedländer family was scattered: one of them was forcibly brought to Germany, others fled to Russia where the Soviet state prevented communication with the rest of the world and life for the Friedländers became increasingly difficult.

Herman would attempt to reassemble his family for the rest of his life. Between the World Wars, he returned to Latvia and found only his father's crypt. During World War II, when the Baltic region was occupied by the Soviets, the Nazis, and the Soviets again, more than 90% of the Jewish population of Latvia was destroyed. Millions of civilians in the Eastern regions of the Soviet Union were killed in the fighting. Herman, still unable to contact his family, reluctantly accepted that none were likely to have survived both Hitler and Stalin.

At 89 years of age, Herman received a letter at his home simply addressed to "Herman Friedlander, Omaha, Nebraska." The brief message, written in broken German, was from Isidor, his younger brother, who had recently emigrated to Israel. They had not seen each other for more than seventy years. When they spoke on the phone at last, one of the first things Isidor asked Herman was whether he remembered the photograph taken in Libau. Herman sent a copy to Israel, where it remains today in the home of Isidor's daughter.

Over the course of the next year, the two brothers pieced together the history of their family in the photograph: one brother was killed in an uprising in Riga, three family members were sentenced to hard labor in Siberia, one brother was executed in Moscow, others miraculously survived Stalin's purges and the

Nazi invasion. Isidor often wrote in his letters to Herman of his dream to reconstitute the family in Israel, where he hoped the few survivors and their families would live together. The photograph taken in 1905 stood as an emblem of this dream - of what was complete before the 20th century's upheavals and traumas.

Isidor's dream was never realized: he died of stomach cancer shortly after emigrating to Israel. Some of the family remained in Moscow, where they are today, and the American branch continues to spread across the country; they are only occasionally in contact with each other and with the distant members of the family. The ten people in the photograph are gradually swallowed by history, far from the memory of those who never knew them.

Yet this memory, in the form of a photograph, still exists. It is in my possession. I am the great-grandson of Herman Friedländer. The photograph, as such, reveals little. There are thousands of such pictures in existence of families long dead, long forgotten. Yet for my family it is a starting point of ten individual, and in many cases, tragic journeys. It is the source of a family narrative, woven into the stories of the descendants.

But why should this photograph be important to anyone, save for sentimental and nostalgic reasons? The photograph is important because it is a starting and ending point of a narrative that shapes and defines who my family considers ourselves to be.

It is not what is in the photograph that we cherish, but what we read into it, impose upon it. The resulting narrative is more important to us than the physical possession of the picture; it is a reminder for us not to take our freedom and relative prosperity for granted, for here is a picture of ten people, most of who found a tragic end at the wrong side of history.

II. The Photograph and the Perceived Narrative

As I examine the photograph in front of me, I find myself searching for clues to the personalities of the ten people it depicts. Hanna Friedländer, the mother, with black dress and clasped hands, is aristocratic, demanding, the unquestioned ruler of the family. Her position in the photograph is the dominant one. Her son, Julius, behind her, shielded from her gaze and watchful eye, flashes a liberated and mischievous smile. He is undoubtedly filled with the rebelliousness that will lead him to his death some 25 years later at the hands of Soviet executioners. Herman, about to depart for America, stands in the back, separated from the group, already taking his leave. Simon, the father, contentedly rests his craftsman's hands, thick with years of hard work, on his leg. Isidor, the young child in front, has the same naïve earnestness in his face which is evident in his letters over seventy years later. There is an elegance, a fragility to the

faces in this photograph which makes the tragedy to come even harsher.

Through studying body language, posture, and gaze, I could write more and more pages about the ten people in this photograph and the nature of their relationships with each other. Yet the narrative I create is external, subjective. It is superimposed onto this photograph by what it suggests to me, the viewer, and by what I know is to come. I create a story backwards. Julius was a revolutionary, therefore he is clearly the rebel of the family. Herman's distance from the family in the back of the photograph suggests his leave-taking, which I know will be permanent. And Isidor, the young child in the front, suggests to me the old man in need of his family which he is in his letters to Hermann seventy-two years later. How much of this story is my making, and how much is objective evidence to be found in the posed photograph?

The photograph itself is a screen upon which we project a story which may have little or nothing to do with the people in it, the circumstance in which the photograph was taken, and any physical "reality" the photograph may or may not reveal.

The photograph, intended as a record of the past, is instead a starting point for the construction of a narrative for the

future.¹ But how much can we trust the photographic image as a record of anything to begin with? A narrative thrusts itself upon the photographic image and is conveyed to us, not through the content of the photograph, but from our reading of it. My knowledge of what is to happen to the ten people in the photograph provides the meaning behind the image of my family.

But what did this family think they were saying when they had this photograph taken? Were they the intended viewer, or their future selves, or was I, their descendant? And if I was the intended viewer, what are they trying to convey to me by this photograph? If, as stated, the photograph as such says nothing, why go about taking it?

Of course there are reasons for a family wanting a photograph. As I stated earlier, this was the last time the family was together, and they wanted this moment of unity to be preserved.

¹ Jacques Derrida, in *Archive Fever*, states the importance of seeing records as archived not for the past or even the present, but for the future: "...the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of response, or a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come, later on or perhaps never." Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995) 36.

Yet one can argue that the photograph, as a record, reveals nothing. Ulrich Baer, in his book *Spectral Evidence*, explores the deceptive power of the photographic image. "By creating the illusion of immediacy," he writes, "photographs hide their fact that the medium itself has fundamentally shaped the habits of looking we employ to establish an event's veracity.... In spite of our knowledge, the things we see in photographs seem real to us."² In *Camera Lucida* Roland Barthes presents the photo as an anti-image: "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see."³ From the start, the "reality" posited in the photograph is questionable. What we perceive is inferred in the image as fact. A fictionalizing has begun the moment we first view the photograph.

In fact, this fictionalizing begins at the moment the shutter clicks. The physical act of capturing the image compromises the event. Baer writes: "In... photographs, the shutter's click allows certain moments to be integrated for the first time into a context (of experience, of memory, of meaning). Such images stage not a return of the real but its first appearance: an appearance of a meaning that... although it concerns the past, did not exist

² Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002) 2-3.

there."⁴ The creation of the photograph is itself an act of narrative, a creation of a story.

This has much to do with the temporal aspect of the photograph. A moment in time is "frozen," granted undue eternity. This can elevate the event to a disproportionate significance. Barthes echoes this: "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially."⁵

"In the Photograph, Time's immobilization assumes only an excessive, monstrous mode: Time is engorged,"⁶ Barthes writes. By virtue of the photograph we are time-travelers, peering into a moment in history. The split-second frame is thrust into eternity, hitting us with an urgency unwarranted by the event. Yet, contrary of the intent of those taking the photograph, this does not come from the past. Barthes writes: "Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory... but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory."⁷ The false promise of the photograph is its supposed presentation of (historical) fact. The image is viewed and blocks, replaces the experience. We see photographs of ourselves and no longer remember our perspective at

³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) 6.

⁴ Baer 12.

⁵ Barthes 4.

⁶ Barthes 91.

the moment the photograph was taken; we instead remember the image of ourselves, our expression, our gaze, our clothing. If our experience is replaced by the image, and if we cannot read the photographs of ourselves, how can we suppose to enter the world of others through their photographs?

The answer is narrative. Indeed, in looking at a photograph of an unfamiliar subject, we tend to create a story which revolves around the picture, filtered not through knowledge of the people in the image, but through our own lives and experiences. In discussing a vintage photograph of two young girls, Barthes writes: "These two little girls looking at a primitive airplane above their village (they are dressed like my mother as a child, they are playing with hoops) – how alive they are! They have their whole lives before them; but also they are dead (today), they are then already dead (yesterday)."⁸ This schism of time – there they are, young, yet they are not young, nor do they even exist – implies a narrative of their lived (yet to be lived) lives. And Barthes connects the subjects of this photograph of long-matured, long-dead children, to his life (his mother's clothing) and exposes a gap of knowledge which the viewer instinctively fills with a narrative. These two children, their lives ahead of them, have lived those lives. What happened to

⁷ Barthes 91.

them? Did the captured event of watching this primitive airplane have any effect on their lives? Did they even remember it? Did they even live past this day in the beginning of the 20th century? Our answers to these questions can never be truly accurate, and therefore the photograph does not serve as a record of any sort, but a springboard for narrative. Barthes elaborates on this tension: "Now, in the Photograph, what I posit is not only the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that the object has indeed existed and that it had been there where I see it."⁹ This double-nature of existing and non-existing torments Barthes throughout *Camera Lucida*, through historical photographs, but most importantly through photographs of his recently deceased mother, which he pores through in a desperate attempt to uncover some essence of her which still exists in the tangible, physical world, outside of memory.

This is why Barthes reaches the conclusion that a photographic image, while existing as a mere hallucination, is also a fact. "The Photograph then becomes a bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, shared hallucination (on the one hand "it is not there,"

⁸ Barthes 96.

on the other "but it has indeed been"): a mad image, chafed by reality."¹⁰

Constructing a narrative for a photograph – attempting to convey the experience viewed into a sort of story – makes us witnesses to the events we perceive as depicted through the photograph. A witness, as I will be using the term in this thesis, is one who has experienced an event, either as a participant, an observer, or a third party who has been handed knowledge of the event after the fact, and can give an account of this event.

Baer notes this event of witnessing through the photograph in describing photographs of traumatic events and how we are implicated in the photographs through our viewing of them: "The photographs... show experiences that, although immemorial, outside of memory, directly shape memory, because they are not owned by the people undergoing them. We respond to such photographs because they can make us, as viewers, responsible for the first time for a past moment that has been blasted out of time."¹¹ We use these images to tell a story of an event in order to come to terms with this dichotomy of images. We create the past in our

⁹ Barthes 115.

¹⁰ Barthes 115.

¹¹ Baer 13-14.

viewing, and thereby invent a past that did not exist, one which implicates us as witnesses.

We supply a narrative for the photograph by forcing our presence into the image. Baudrillard writes that "it the object which says: 'I shall be your mirror.'"¹² The act of imposing a narrative to the photograph is therefore traumatic in that it tears individuals out of their place and time and places them into ours, while also forcibly inserting us into their world as witnesses.

Our implication erases all pretence of objectivity, revealing a crisis of witnessing – the viewer cannot accurately observe but must extrapolate. The creation of a narrative as a response to witnessing – a photo, an event, etc. – is therefore an act of bearing false witness.

III. Bearing (False) Witness

The image of my family has made me a witness to their experience. I can view the unit they once were with the knowledge of the dismemberment of the family to come. My witnessing of this photographic image leads me to a seeing – I look into the photographed eyes of my family – and a recounting – I look back at

¹² Jean Baudrillard, Photographies 1985-1998, trans. Chris Turner, ed. Peter Weibel (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 1999) 133.

a time long past and see evidence that these people existed. It is also an endless repetition of a moment, as trauma is an internal repetition.¹³

The act of bearing witness is an act of narrative. One witnesses, one attempts to understand what happens, and then one (re)constructs what happened in the form of testimony or story.

Bertolt Brecht sees witnessing as the birth of narrative in the form of Epic Theater. In his essay *The Street Scene*, he describes the events surrounding the aftermath of a traffic accident. When an eyewitness demonstrates to a gathered crowd of passerby how a traffic accident occurred, he "acts the behavior of driver or victim or both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident."¹⁴ The "performance" as such of this narrative is not artistic but repetitive in nature, yet the eyewitness still derives characters, imitates, presents, demonstrates. Brecht urges against embellishment, yet

¹³ Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, defines trauma as "the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind." (Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and Memory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 2.) This repetition is necessary to have in mind when confronting a photographic image which by nature is the image of an endlessly repeating moment, frozen in time. It also resonates with my previous discussion about the disproportionate sense of importance imposed on a moment which has been photographed.

¹⁴ Brecht, Bertolt. "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre," trans. John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992) 121.

he acknowledges that it occurs, that even the tiniest of details can be argued and questioned. A narrative is necessary for the witness and the bystanders to describe and understand the accident, yet an embellishment and structuring is also at work here.

The very act of seeing problematically implicates the viewer in the story, compromising an objective recounting. In *Trauma TV*, Avital Ronell examines this compromise in the events surrounding the 1992 trial of LAPD officers for the savage beating of Rodney King. "Seeing itself," she writes, "without the assistance of cognition of memory, suffices to make the subject responsible. It is a responsibility that is neither alert, vigilant, particularly present, nor in-formed."¹⁵ Thus the event, separated from us by space and time, still takes hold of us, as we make ourselves part of its imaginary story. And as much as the problematic aspect of this is clear to us, we can't escape it:

In an era of constitutive opaqueness - there is no transcendental light shining upon us; we dwell in the shadows of mediation and withdrawal; there will be no revelation, can be no manifestation as such - things have to be tuned in, adjusted, subjected to double takes and are dominated by amnesia. Without recourse to any dialectic of incarnation,

¹⁵ Avital Ronell, "Trauma TV: Twelve Steps Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Finitude's Score: Essays for the End of the Millennium (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 305.

something however beams through, as though the interruption itself were the thing to watch.¹⁶

In examining the photograph of my family, I purport to be a witness to their story. I can see who they were and testify to details about them and their relationships to each other. With the knowledge of what is to come, I can describe what it was that was shattered by history, the essence of family which Herman and Isidor struggled so many years to reclaim. Yet my witnessing of my family's experience through this photograph is clearly subjective. What I know through my recounting of facts is different than objective evidence which might be found in the photograph. In discussing the videotaped images of the Rodney King beating introduced as evidence into the trial, Ronell confronts a similar situation when she contrasts the witnesses' accounts of the event with what is "revealed" in the video images:

Repeated several hundred times in court, the frame-by-frame analyses explicitly raise questions about the relation between video recording and human memory. When witness David Love relies on his own memory of the beating he feels the violence to have been entirely justified; however, when he is asked to interpret the video he finds the 'same' scene to display an excessive and altogether inexplicable use of force. Throughout the testimony it is asked of this witness 'what the video does and does not say.'¹⁷

¹⁶ Ronell 308.

¹⁷ Ronell 321.

The video images convey a narrative which is not the one the witness describes. Is the narrative implied by the videotape footage to be considered more truthful than the testimony of the human witness, a man subject to prejudices, subjective viewpoint, and alteration of memory, even though – as Barthes and Baer are clear to point out – the very capturing of an image alters what is being represented? The image of the ten people in my photograph is traumatic in this way: an imposed awareness of their experience of trauma informs a narrative which a mere photo cannot. An interiority of experience taints the posed scene with an awareness not inherent to the photograph itself. Ronell brings in the element of the interiority of the witness to discuss what cannot be conveyed by videotape:

What the video cannot in any case show... concerns an interiority which it cannot inscribe; the video is pure surface without depth, running a mystifying release precisely because it fails to record inner perceptions... . Without access to interiority, the videotape deflects the scene from its locus in truth.... [T]his explains how the videotape's excess weighs in as deficiency in court. A mere machine, simply present while at the same time devoid of presence, it originates in a place without truth. As pure surface, the videotape effaces interiority as a condition of running.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ronell 321-22.

The photograph is also all surface – figuratively as well as literally. This “pure surface” is inadequate to reveal the inner life of the experience recorded.

The experience of witnessing then requires an addition of a significant amount of perspective to the event or experience being witnessed. We insert our own interiority, our own judgment.

This judgment can be traumatic, as the witnessing camera is potentially the cause of trauma. As Ulrich Baer points out, “It is precisely the construction and encoding of a meaning that had never existed, which takes place in every photograph, that links photography, at least on a phenomenological level, to trauma.”¹⁹

This traumatic witnessing does not reveal, but bury truth. Dori Laub relates her experience as a cofounder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust testimonies as that of a problematic witness who seeks the truth but is always prevented from finding it. She notes three distinct levels of witnessing related to the Holocaust: “the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.”²⁰ When observing the testimony of survivors,

¹⁹ Baer 86.

²⁰ Dori Laub, “The Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D. (New York: Routledge, 1992) 75.

Laub notes that the traumatic experience has "been long submerged and has become distorted in its submersion." This distortion is itself a sign of trauma: "The horror is, indeed, compelling not only in its reality, but even more so, in its flagrant distortion and subversion of reality."²¹ This horror she describes exists since "it was inconceivable that any historical insider could remove herself sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness.... No observer could remain untainted... uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing."²²

The workings of the narrative expose something else behind the elements they reveal. The act of construction, of altering, covering, denying, illustrates the horror which created the need for the construction to begin with. The burying of a truth by the difficulties of witnessing is evidence itself. The lack of ability to fully witness and communicate, as François Lyotard notes in *The Differend*, is the very horror of the crime. The Nazis wanted to eradicate all witnesses to the Holocaust, and it could be said that they succeeded. "The Holocaust created a world in which one could not bear witness to oneself," Laub writes. "The loss of the capacity to be a witness to oneself... is perhaps

²¹ Laub 76.

²² Laub 81.

the true meaning of annihilation, for when one's history is abolished, one's identity ceases to exist as well."²³

As we have seen, the witness alters, distorts, and ultimately buries meaning. Yet the call to recount, to testify, to bear witness remains. In examining my family's photograph, I make myself a witness to their experience, to the faces and personalities which have been lost. The image speaks in an act of ventriloquism, and although this act conceals the interiority of the ten people pictured, it awakens one inside me which is no less meaningful an expression of their story.

This may be why individuals pictured in an old photograph often strike the viewer with an uncanny feeling; one contemplates their identities, wonders if they have been abolished by time, searches for their voice in the way they carry themselves, in their gaze and composure. As Barthes searches for the "essence" of his mother in old photographs, the image of each member of my family captured in their photograph cries out to me to be heard, to be witnessed, shouting "I was, therefore I am." And it is my task to make that voice heard.

²³ Laub 82.

IV. Constructing a Narrative of the Silenced

The blocking of communication is at the heart of the traumatic experience. As Ronell writes in *Trauma TV*, "trauma can be experienced in at least two ways, both of which block normal channels of transmission: as a memory that one cannot integrate into one's own experience, and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others."²⁴ Trauma can then be seen as an inability to speak or the loss of narrative.

A true witness of a traumatic experience, him or herself affected by the trauma, cannot speak of it. In *The Differend*, François Lyotard confronts the problem of witnessing in such a way. "You are informed that human beings endowed with language were placed in a situation that none of them is now able to tell about it," he proposes. "Most of them disappeared then, and the survivors rarely speak about it.... How can you know that the situation existed?... Either the situation did not exist as such. Or else it did exist, in which case your informant's testimony is false, either because he or she would have disappeared, or else because he or she can bear witness only to the particular experience he had, it remaining to be established whether this experience was a component of the situation in question."²⁵ The

²⁴ Ronell 312-313.

²⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 3.

witness therefore is denied narrative; a way to convey what is witnessed.

The effects of trauma then call into question its own existence. This problematic witnessing, when seen in context with the trauma of the Holocaust, seems to lend undue credibility to the position of the Holocaust denier. "To 'have really seen with his own eyes' a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say that it exists.... The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber."²⁶

As Laub also does, Lyotard sees this inability to testify as the very evidence of a horrendous crime: "A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damages and who disposes of the means to prove it. One becomes a victim if one loses these means."²⁷ This reduction to silence yet demands that the victim be heard: "In the differend, something 'asks' to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away."²⁸ This demand can itself produce a partial testimony; an incomplete one, but perhaps the closest we can get. We can never speak with a witness of the Holocaust because the total victim,

²⁶ Lyotard 8.

²⁷ Lyotard 8.

²⁸ Lyotard 13.

the one who fully experienced the Holocaust as we have come to define it, cannot have lived through it.²⁹

The photograph of my family haunts me precisely because it *cannot* speak to me directly. I can see my ancestors but not hear them, ask them questions, listen to their story directly. The photograph stands in front of me as a heirloom, a memento mori, the only tangible existence of these ten people which I possess. But what am I supposed to "remember?" To remember these vanished people I didn't know to begin with? Is it just enough to know that they once were? How can I stand as a witness to their lives when even the act of witnessing is problematic?

When those who experienced an event first-hand are unable to express their experience directly, how can one removed from the event speak for them? How can I, looking at the photograph of ten people whom I have never met and with whom I can never speak, claim to tell their story? Those who have been silenced *cannot* speak, and for another to claim to speak for them is an insult, another injustice heaped upon the injustice of their silencing.

When one cannot witness an event, either due to constraints of distance or time (not being there) or the distorting experience

²⁹ Claude Lanzmann has often spoken about this: "In a way no one was at Auschwitz. Those who were killed there within two hours of arrival never experienced it. If Auschwitz was the gas chamber, then no survivors were there." Claude Lanzmann, "Documentary Film:

of trauma, can a narrative of this come about? How can the experience be remembered and conveyed? How does one present the unrepresentable, communicate the incommunicable, display an unknown? This conflict has concerned thinkers, historians, artists, and others as a result of the great traumas of the 20th century.

How do others approach such a problem? They stage, construct, fictionalize.

The visionary architect Daniel Libeskind, for example, is an artist occupied with such issues. Critics and academics have cited his Jewish Museum in Berlin as one of the most successful structures created to present and display a sense of absence. As he writes in *The Space of Encounter*, a collection of essays and project descriptions, Libeskind is "very interested in the cultural significance of the void - the void of public space, and the void of memory."³⁰ His buildings are monuments to loss and an emptiness which can't be filled.

Libeskind describes how the indescribable is at the heart of the Jewish Museum. He writes in his catalogue for the museum that "the Jewish Museum is conceived as an emblem in which the Invisible and Visible are the structural features which have been

History and Memory," European Graduate School Workshop, EGS Campus, Saas-Fee, 23-24 August, 2002.

³⁰ Daniel Libeskind, *The Space of Encounter* (New York: Universe, 2000) 204.

gathered bare in an architecture where the unnamed remains the name which keeps still."³¹

Libeskind presents the unknown and extinguished voices of Germany's Jewish community by building an emptiness into the building itself. "The vertical hollows of the six Voids extending in a straight line from front to back of the zigzag configuration evoke the gap that evolved in German and European culture and history by the destruction of Jewish lives on every floor of the museum. The museum is pervaded by this absence."³² There is no set way to travel through the structure; one develops one's own experience on each visit. But it is the *path* through the museum, looking through the walls, into the voids, with specific gashes of the outside world forcing themselves into the building, framed by emptiness, which reveals meaning. There is no element of the building which stands by itself; one must make the connections, construct a *narrative* linking the existing city with the non-existing Jewish world inside. It is fitting that many people stated that the museum would function best as a memorial to the Jewish history of Germany if it was left empty, a sculpture of absence. The consensus was that the building itself *told the* story of the Jews in Germany through its emptiness.

³¹ Bernhard Schneider, Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum Berlin, (Munich: Presel, 1999) 6.

³² Schneider 53.

Although this doesn't directly mirror my connection to the photograph - Libeskind works in abstracts, conjuring up an emptiness through architecture - it is important to see the narrative he presents through creating a new type of architecture which allows one to see an old city in new ways.

More directly connected to my experience with the photograph is the work of Claude Lanzmann, specifically in his landmark film *Shoah*. *Shoah* deals with the subject of the Holocaust through interviews and footage of Eastern European landscapes and concentration camp sites. There is no stock footage, no old photographs, and no voice over narration. Lanzmann, in fact, does not see the film as a documentary, but as a work of fiction. "The route of *Shoah* is not one of memory," Lanzmann has said, but "the immemorial."³³ The story he tells is not of survivors or survival. It is told in the present, as first line of the film states: "The story begins in the present..."³⁴

Lanzmann places a subject at the start of the film who says that "No one can recreate what happened here... no one can understand it. Even I..."³⁵ Lanzmann thereby tells us from the beginning that there will be no understanding, no answers, no explanations. The first half hour, in fact, as Lanzmann says, is

³³ Lanzmann, "Documentary Film: History and Memory."

³⁴ Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Film*, trans. A. Whitelaw and W. Byron (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 3.

about the "complete disappearing of the traces."³⁶ He attempts to "build a memory" which does not exist. Lanzmann does not put forth his work as if it were reality: he does not claim to recreate or reconstruct events. Through staging events and recounting narratives of those who were in the camps, Lanzmann displays what he calls an "incarnation," a presentation of the essence of the indescribable. Knowledge can be found in books but his film "incarnates" the event without witnesses through interviews, landscape footage, and staged events which indirectly present something we can never experience head on of first hand. In this way, Lanzmann states that the film "expels reality."³⁷

To achieve these aims, Lanzmann staged certain scenes in the film, for which he has been criticized. One specific sequence at the center of the film features an interview with a man who served as a barber inside the gas chambers of Auschwitz. As this man tells his story to Lanzmann, he is busy at work in a barber shop cutting a man's hair. This scene is entirely staged. The man is retired and specialized in women's hairstyles, yet he is seen working and cutting a man's hair. As a matter of fact he is not even cutting the man's hair, but is merely pretending to do so. Lanzmann sees the criticism of this staging as unfounded; he is

³⁵ Lanzmann, Shoah: The Complete Text of the Film 6.

³⁶ Lanzmann, "Documentary Film: History and Memory."

³⁷ Lanzmann, "Documentary Film: History and Memory."

incarnating an event, allowing a man to physicalize an important element of his story, bringing him to the public arena, although no one in the barber shop understands English and therefore cannot comprehend the details he provides us. The staging is fabricated but the man's tears are real, "the blood of the film," as Lanzmann states.³⁸ This is what he means by the incarnation.

Shoah is a film about death, not about survival. Someone once told Lanzmann that he did not need to see the film because he had been in seven camps. Lanzmann's response was that he had never really been in any of those camps, because if he had he would be dead. The camp experience was not that of survival, but of death. "The survivors are the enemies of *Shoah*... they prefer the rosy side to a non-rosy event."³⁹

Yet although the film suggests an emptiness, a non-telling, there is still a narrative being told. A narrative of silence, absence, a happening of non-happening. In Shoshana Felman's essay on *Shoah* called *The Return of the Voice*, she writes that the question which guides the film is: "What does it mean that the testimony cannot be simply reported, or narrated by another in its role as testimony? What does it mean that a story – or a history

³⁸ Lanzmann, "Documentary Film: History and Memory."

³⁹ Lanzmann, "Documentary Film: History and Memory."

– cannot be told by someone else?”⁴⁰ Shoah displays “a historical crisis of witnessing.”⁴¹ The Holocaust is then an “event without a witness.”⁴² The essay states that Lanzmann’s construction enables a return of the voice of those who cannot speak, a testimony of Lyotard’s mute victim.

As stated, this is done through a fictionalized narrative. The barber does not really cut hair. There are other clearly staged events in the film as well. Yet as Ulrich Baer notes about the photograph, we still believe the truth in an image which we also know to be unreliable. So what is it that we are believing? And what place does truth have in any of this construction to begin with? Is narrative a device of any real effectiveness if it is always so questionable?

V. The Problematic Narrative

When I construct a narrative of my family based on their photograph, am I even talking about the people in the image? My narrative replaces an unknowable reality with an illusion I present as fact. My narrative is therefore not about what it claims to be about.

⁴⁰ Shoshana Felman, “The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D. (New York: Routledge, 1992) 205.

⁴¹ Felman 206.

Narrative is dangerous: it is unreliable, disconnected from reality. Tainted by subjectivity and the inability of witnessing, one can never convey an experience without altering, filtering, and distorting it beyond recognition. The element of fiction, of subjectivity, cannot be removed from the presentation of narrative, no matter how detailed and methodical.

And can this compromised narrative even effectively communicate anything to begin with? Is the fictionalizing of narrative its only problem? As Dori Laub writes, "the imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhabited by the impossibility of telling and, therefore, silence about the truth commonly prevails.... Some have hardly spoken of it, but even those who have talked incessantly feel that they managed to say very little that was heard."⁴³ Not only is the listener unable to hear or comprehend what is told, the accuracy of the telling is warped due to the very experience of witnessing. Discussing the testimony of a woman who was in the camps as a teenager, Laub writes that "she failed to be an authentic witness to herself. The collapse of witnessing is precisely, in my view, what is central to the Holocaust experience.... *the event produced no witnesses*" (Laub, p. 80, author's emphasis). The shortcomings of witnessing, communicating and listening also come into play.

⁴² Felman 211.

The narrative process can harm the creator as well. Dori Laub tells the story of a young boy who was separated from his parents in the Holocaust. The boy clung tightly to a photograph of his mother, which he prayed to on a regular basis, telling it all about his sufferings and experiences. "In my interpretation," Laub writes, "what this young vagabond was doing with the photograph of his mother was, precisely, creating his first witness, and the creation of that witness was what enabled him to survive his years on the streets of Krakow."⁴⁴ After the war, the mother and child were reunited, but this reunion did not bring about a return of the life the boy had prayed for. It brought about a reality much more disjoined and uncanny. The boy was unable to address his parents as Mom and Dad, but only as Mr. and Mrs.. Laub explains that "in regaining his real mother, he inevitably loses the internal witness he has found in her image. The loss of his internal witness to whom he has addressed his daily prayers causes the boy to fall apart."⁴⁵ The disconnect between the boy's narrative and the reality of his experience caused a rift which proved damaging to his emotional and mental health.

⁴³ Laub 79.

⁴⁴ Laub 87.

⁴⁵ Laub 88.

How could this happen? Fiction and a false adherence to structure are the guide for narrative, distorting its relationship to reality. To further explore this, I will examine the work of Vieda Skultans in her evocative book *The Testimony of Lives*. This book examines the narratives of Latvians who suffered under the Soviet occupation. Latvia was a site of great historical, political, and personal trauma, losing a significant percentage of its population to war, exile, and forced relocation. It was only after independence in 1991 that these narratives were gathered. Skultans studies how they were constructed, how they operate, and what they reveal in their attempt to communicate.

Skultans' narrators often force a connection between themselves and a distant, mythical past. One of the narratives she writes about links a woman's personal experience to the story of an ancient Latvian battle. The woman's narrative "draws no temporal distinctions between the deaths of husband, brother and son, and the medieval chieftain."⁴⁶ In this fictionalizing / mythologizing, a connection to reality is lost. The meaning and context of the woman's narrative is used to illustrate something else than the details of her life.

Life, of course, rarely cleanly resembles dramatic form. An alteration occurs in order to form a narrative. Skultans writes:

It is by now a commonplace that narratives bestow unity and meaning on the past. But the interesting questions relate to the precise conceptual techniques used to create that unity.... Aristotle defined three dramatic unities: time, place, and action. For Latvian narrators these unifying principles are not available. War, imprisonment and exile fragmented accepted notions of time and space. Terror and oppression undermined conventional notions of a free agent and free action. However, many Latvian narratives do possess a unity and this is achieved through metaphor which draws together what would otherwise be disjointed narrative sequences.⁴⁷

The reality behind the story is transformed in narrative, altering meaning, conflating time, place, and action. The telling moves us further from the truth which the narrator is claiming to convey. As Skultans acknowledges, "the narration could be said to constitute as opposed to reconstitute the past."⁴⁸ This has been illustrated earlier by Barthes and Baer in regard to the photographic image as a generator of an event which never was.

Narratives, however, exist to communicate some kind of meaning. This is why they are formulated. And in order to do so clearly, they often rely on pre-existing forms which the intended audience will understand. Skultans writes about Latvian narrators who rely on the local genre of the forest narrative to tell their stories. "These forest narratives draw upon established folkloric

⁴⁶ Vieda Skultans, The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia (London: Routledge, 1998) 18.

⁴⁷ Skultans 30.

and linguistic traditions. In doing so they create a universe in which there is a fusion of natural and moral worlds. However, arrest and violent death were constant threats to this safe and harmonious life. The dangers and precariousness of survival are remembered in an adventure idiom, in which chance and coincidence furnish a connecting thread for identity."⁴⁹ In this manner, the victim of Soviet oppression becomes part of an adventure story, heightening the narrative, and smoothing over the horrifying reality through a technique of rendering reality into drama. The story wins out while the facts comprising the experience suffer.

This process of constructing meaning through narrative comes out in Skultans' examination of narrative construction. "Latvian narrators are preoccupied with meaning in a quite explicit way: they complain that their lives lack meaning and purpose."⁵⁰ Most people's daily experiences must be re-imagined or interpreted to fit into a category of meaning. There needs to be meaning to convey through the narrative. As Skultans continues: "It is almost taken as axiomatic that narrative is able to yield meaning."⁵¹ When that meaning cannot be gleaned from the experience, it must be infused. Hence the narrators' use of traditional story forms or metaphors, where the meaning is

⁴⁸ Skultans 52.

⁴⁹ Skultans 101.

⁵⁰ Skultans 124.

inherent. When the narrator is not able to effectively apply meaning, however, significant difficulties arise. Skultans writes about Latvian illness narratives, which detail illness brought about by forced labor, psychological trauma, and the intense pollution caused by the Soviet regime. In discussing the nature of meaning in these narratives she writes: "it seems almost as though the inability to transform one's life into a meaningful story contributes to making people ill. Whatever the direction of causality, illness and the inability to make sense of one's life are found together."⁵² This drive for meaning through narrative, as in Laub's story of the Polish boy, can actually harm the person who tells the story.

The construction of narrative has natural ramifications for the historian. In *Founding Brothers*, the historian Joseph J. Ellis explores six seminal events behind the creation of the United States of America. In one of his chapters, Ellis discusses the long-standing friendship and political rivalry between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Jefferson and Adams were both members of the revolutionary generation, and both fought to control the official histories of the events about and around the American Revolution. Ellis writes: "In the absence of a coherent alternative with equivalently compelling appeal, [Jefferson's

⁵¹ Skultans 127.

version of the] story was destined to dominate the history books. Adams sensed that it was not the true story, even doubted whether such a thing as a true story existed... [Adams] was utterly hopeless as a grand designer of narratives, and he knew it."⁵³ This is posited by Ellis as a reason why the Jeffersonian narrative became the dominant view of this era of American history. Compelling narrative sticks, and those who fight for a multiplicity of narratives often lose to the urge for truth, fact and a "definitive" version of events. As part of the historical process, this construction of narrative can alter reality in harmful ways, as John Adams might agree. He would see Jefferson as a false witness of the revolutionary experience.

To Walter Benjamin, this approach has a negative effect on history. "A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones," he writes in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, "acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history."⁵⁴ Yet this never happens; a dominant narrative emerges and "true" history is lost.

⁵² Skultans 127.

⁵³ Ellis, Joseph J., Founding Brothers: the Revolutionary Generation (New York: Vintage Books, 2000) 232.

⁵⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn, Illuminations, ed. Hanna Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968) 254.

History cannot be truly conveyed for Benjamin since the past "can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again"⁵⁵ and narrative needs the tale to be frozen in time, capable of endless repetition, a photograph.

Narrative as such is not without enemies. The filmmaker, writer, and artist Peter Greenaway seemingly rebels against narrative. In criticizing cinema's dependence on narrative structures, he writes: "I think that the greatest art works – and I exclude those found in film – have had far greater means at their disposal [than storytelling]."⁵⁶

Narrative, to Greenaway, is a system, which as a system, is a trap. "Systems are always deeply, deeply faulted – and absurd. Like the alphabet."⁵⁷ Greenaway is constantly looking for new ways to convey meaning outside of narrative. "I have a great distrust of narrative," he says. "I do feel that we ought to look for other ways of explaining the human condition...."⁵⁸ He states that there

⁵⁵ Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" 255.

⁵⁶ Peter Greenaway, *Interviews*, ed. Vernon Gras and Marguerite Gras (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000) 52.

⁵⁷ Greenaway 97.

⁵⁸ Greenaway 152.

has never been an ending."⁵⁹ The neat bundle of narrative cannot contain the reality of experience.⁶⁰

There are clearly reasons to distrust narrative. As seen so far, when applied to the photographic image it produces falsehoods. As a technique to understand experience and trauma, narrative faces an impossible task and produces something which resembles something besides the truth – a literary form or reliance on metaphor in the case of the Latvian narratives, or Lanzmann's "incarnation," which even Lanzmann acknowledges is not a direct reflection of truth.

So why do we rely on narrative? The need for understanding trauma and experience is overpowering, and narrative can provide that meaning, even if it is illusory. Yet as I will discuss, the illusion can be itself revealing of a larger meaning.

⁵⁹ Greenaway 152.

⁶⁰ His distaste for narrative aside, it is a strong thread in all of Greenaway's work. Even when he attempts to erase it, the narrative shines through in film after film. Greenaway cannot escape narrative structures as much as he hopes to break cinema away from them. And his avowal to do so is perhaps more of a political standing than a philosophical one in an act of opposition to the over-emphasis on the Hollywood-style three act screenplay structure evident throughout nearly all global film industries. Yet whatever the motivation, it is precisely this

VI. The Need for Narrative

I have written throughout this essay that I am compelled to create a narrative of my family through examining their photograph. But why resort to the falsehoods required to construct such a narrative and not simply accept that such a process is impossible? Why must I tell this story? Narrative satisfies the need to find meaning, and allows our engagement with history and others' experience: the construction of narrative is the closest that the unspoken will come to speaking and the silenced will come to being heard.

Dori Laub describes the need for narrative among survivors of the Holocaust. In recounting testimony for the Yale archive, she writes that "one woman made the statement: 'We wanted to survive so as to live one day after Hitler, in order to tell our story.'" Laub came to believe that the opposite was equally true, that the survivors "did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive."⁶¹ This need to tell is a powerful drive, regardless of the fact that there "are never enough words or the right words...

tension of wrestling with narrative which makes Greenaway's work exciting.

⁶¹ Laub 78.

and never enough listening or the right listening...."⁶² That doesn't make it less necessary for their survival.

In *The Return of the Voice*, Shoshana Felman points out that the Holocaust has become an event without a witness, and that the testimony of the Holocaust "tells about the impossibly of telling."⁶³ It is in this context that Laub claims that the Video Archive "might, therefore, be thought of as helping to create, after the fact, the missing Holocaust witness...."⁶⁴ Narrative, with its faults and inadequacies, serves the purpose of reclaiming history by providing a missing witness.

For Skultans, trauma itself lies in the inability to tell one's story. If we don't have a narrative ability, our connection to our lives and the lives of others is lost. "If conventions of story telling influence the way we remember our lives," she writes, "then we can expect the destruction of those conventions to have an effect on the narrative coherence of remembered lives."⁶⁵

Besides restoring meaning and creating a witness, narrative helps the narrator process experience. In an example which shows how fiction in the form of a dream can serve this purpose, Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*,

⁶² Laub 78.

⁶³ Felman 224.

⁶⁴ Laub 85-86.

discusses a dream detailed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The dream can be summed up as such: a father, mourning his child who has recently died from a burning fever, falls asleep in the room adjacent to where the child's body lies. The father dreams that the child is standing by his bed and beseeches him: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" The father immediately wakes up and notices that a candle perched near the child's body has fallen and begun to light the child's clothing on fire.

The dream of the father creates a fiction which in its own way reveals a real tangible truth of a burning child. As Caruth writes, the dream illustrates the "ineradicable gap between the reality of a death and the desire that cannot overcome it except in the fiction of a dream."⁶⁶ The waking of the father is "a paradoxical attempt to respond, in awakening, to a call that can only be heard within sleep"⁶⁷ or, perhaps for our purposes, within a fictional narrative. The narrative act of the father's dream is necessary for him to understand the reality outside of the dream.

To Lacan, who also analyzes this dream, the father stands as a witness for the silent victim of illness and death. "The father's story of survival is, therefore, no longer simply his

⁶⁵ Skultans xii.

⁶⁶ Caruth 95.

⁶⁷ Caruth 99, author's emphasis.

own, but tells, as a mode of response, the story of the dead child."⁶⁸

There is a demand for narrative to arise from the trauma of the child's death, a need for understanding and a "wrapping up" of loose ends. By speaking thorough the created voice of his son in his dream, the father begins to accept and process his own trauma: "It is precisely the dead child, the child in its irreducible inaccessibility and otherness, who says to the father: *wake up, leave me, survive; survive to tell the story of my burning.*"⁶⁹

In the way an event without a witness calls for one, the father summons his son within his dream to speak to him about his suffering. And this fiction is what allows him to begin a process of acceptance.

As this may suggest, narrative, while previously noted to be an unreliable falsehood, *does* reveal quite a bit. The narrator, wittingly or unwittingly, reveals much about his or herself through the construction and telling of his or her story.

Vieda Skultans explores this in *The Testimony of Lives*. The literary alterations of the narrators she studies (connecting stories to myth, embellishment, forcing their stories into established literary forms, etc.) reveal the narrator's drive to understand. "In order to make sense of past confrontations with

⁶⁸ Caruth 102.

terror and violence," Skultans writes, "narrators draw upon both their individual creativity and any cultural or literary resources which they can bring to bear upon the narrative reconstruction."⁷⁰ Artistry is a necessary component they utilize to reach beyond the imposed silence. This does not obscure meaning but reveals it: "Narrative form reveals the cultural resources upon which people draw in order to restore meaning to lives."⁷¹

And the forms which the narrators rely on convey their own meaning. Skultans sees patterns and similarities throughout the narratives of Latvians, regardless of their experiences and backgrounds. As she compiled the narratives, "Shared devices for structuring narrative appeared. As memories are cast into a narrative mould so they must of necessity conform to the conventions of story telling. In recounting the past, narrators choose the literary strategies which best convey their experience. Thus meaning is conveyed almost as much by form as it is by content."⁷²

Along these lines, one could say that the truth can be found not in what narrative tells, but in how it is told. This can be seen in Lanzmann's *Shoah*. In much of the film, what is said by the interviewees has nothing to do directly with the truth being

⁶⁹ Caruth 105, author's emphasis.

⁷⁰ Skultans 23.

⁷¹ Skultans 22.

revealed. In fact, the falseness of a narrative can lay bare a truth about the teller of which he or she is unaware. In a central sequence of the film, several Poles gather outside a church with Srebnik, a Holocaust victim who has returned to Poland, and tell their version of history, which is quite at odds with accepted understandings of the Holocaust, and in direct contrast to that of the survivor who stands among them. As Felman writes in *Return of the Voice*, in the church sequence in Chelmno, it is "to their own fantasy, to their own (self-)mystification that the Poles bear witness, in attempting to account for historical reality. Their false witness is itself, however, an objective illustration and concretization of the radically delusional quality of the event."⁷³ This fantasy narrative reveals much more than the "facts" presented by the Poles. It reveals their complacency, their blindness, and their inability to grasp the events of the Second World War as witnesses. Felman sees this technique in Lanzmann's work throughout the film: "Lanzmann's tour de force as interviewer is to elicit from the witness... a testimony which is inadvertently no longer in the control or possession of its speaker."⁷⁴

⁷² Skultans xii.

⁷³ Felman 261.

⁷⁴ Felman 263.

The exposed fictionalization of the Poles through Lanzmann's dramatization is a powerful tool for uncovering a deeper truth above and beyond any simple statement of facts. It is through the conflicts created and uncovered by narrative creation that we begin to understand that which can not be simply conveyed. As Lyotard writes, "the narrative function is redeeming in itself. It acts as if the occurrence, with its potentially of differends, could come to completion, or as if there were a last word."⁷⁵ This falsehood redeems itself through what it reveals through lies.

The judgments and conclusions made within a narrative also reveal something other than themselves. Imposing meaning upon an event may alter an understanding of it by allowing the current perspective of the narrator to add significance to events which in context are not significant at all. But the search for meaning and how that search is accomplished reveals much about the narrator and his or her experience. Skultans writes: "I am suggesting that individuals confronted by extreme situations bring all their past experience, both textual and personal, to bear upon these events."⁷⁶ In this embellishment there is a need to use all means at one's disposal to tell one's story. Laub discusses Holocaust survivors who speak and speak and feel they are never heard. Narrative devices, as much as they alter, allow one to be

⁷⁵ Lyotard 151.

heard. This is why they are almost uniformly employed. Skultans acknowledges this: "The intention of narrators to bear witness to past events demands the right to an individual voice."⁷⁷

Meaning can be found by applying metaphor to one's experience, and vice versa. Skultans tells how a metaphorical relation to time is brought up in Latvian narratives: "A recurring memory and a formulaic component of many narratives are the first words which Latvian soldiers heard after capitulation: 'Atdavasi chasi' - the Russian for 'give me your watch.' As well as losing accustomed structures of time, they also literally lost their watches."⁷⁸

Thematic elements are also often infused into the narratives which Skultans examines. In discussing an illness narrative told to her through a series of letters, Skultans writes: "...nearly all [the letters] introduced a social and political theme which they linked to an individual medical theme. Most letters offered a conclusion which aimed to integrate these themes." This drive to thematicize events cleans up awkward loose ends and questionable causation. "Accounts of ill-health leave no untidy gaps;" Skultans continues, "symptoms are accounted for in terms of

⁷⁶ Skultans 25.

⁷⁷ Skultans 28.

⁷⁸ Skultans 32.

antecedent conditions to which they bear a meaningful relationship."⁷⁹

Why tidy things up in such a way? Why risk losing the truth in an attempt to "make sense" of an event by applying inadequate metaphors or forced thematic elements? Because narrative acts not only as a way of bearing witness, but also as a protector against loss. Loss of speech, loss of control, loss of meaning. The need to reclaim meaning and understanding can therefore be seen in the narrative act. Skultans writes that "one way of protecting against this deconstruction of the self is to embed the testimony of personal history more firmly within a literary structure or plot and to endow it with literary meanings."⁸⁰ This gives one's personal history a connection to a larger picture and tradition. One of Skultans narrators was, he told her, "steeped in the fiction of individual courage and adventure. When the execution of his own life plan is in danger of drawing to a halt he draws inspiration from the plot of a Latvian fairy tale play, *Spirîdîtis*."⁸¹ This fictive work becomes a protective filter for the narrator's experience: a way of understanding and accepting his trauma within the boundaries of a fairy tale. His suffering becomes part of his country's folklore.

⁷⁹ Skultans 45.

⁸⁰ Skultans 68.

⁸¹ Skultans 59.

The use of descriptive language within narrative can also be revealing. Skultans writes of one narrator who "recalled with evident pride his autobiographical description of exile: 'Circumstances force us to relocate to Siberia'. The bleakly bureaucratic jargon aptly pinpoints some of the tensions of their experience."⁸² In compiling my family history related to the photograph taken in 1905, I have come across this distancing as well. Terms such as "political quarantine," and "reeducation" are used without a trace of irony. This jargon acts as a protector from the horrifying facts of what exactly "quarantine" and "reeducation" entailed.

So although the "facts" of a narrative can always be called into question, once one starts to read a narrative for perspective, the narrative form becomes more revealing and accurate.

Narrative then, as a protective force and a way to understand and accept trauma within the realms of a larger historical and literary picture, becomes a necessity to get to a truth, not simply a blanket to cover it, or a means to make an experience more palatable. As Skultans elaborates: "In the process of this narrative construction, the self aligns itself with various dimensions of history and society. Narrative is thus 'not an

⁸² Skultans 68.

optional extra' it is the *only way* open to us for endowing our lives with meaning. Narrative displays the diverse ways of constructing identity."⁸³

So should we trust narrative? Skultans may answer this in referring to a quotation of Isak Dinesen that states "one can bear anything if one can put it into a story."⁸⁴

In understanding narrative and in using it as a means to witness the unwitnessable, one has to learn to read between the lines. In examining another narrative, Skultans writes about a woman named Milda who disparages the landscape, villages, and populace of the far Eastern region of Russia where she was sent to a corrective labor camp:

Milda's reply conveys more by what she leaves out than by what she says. The implied contrast between what she says and what she suppresses emphasizes the painfulness of her separation. In describing the Russian children's rudeness and feelinglessness, she is implicitly contrasting them with her own children who would not behave like that. In referring to the primitive Russian villages she is remembering the Latvian tradition of living in isolated farmsteads. In mentioning the domestic animals left outside, she is emphasizing the Latvian farmer's love of his animals and concern for their well-being.⁸⁵

This is why the narrative urge is crucial and should be trusted. One needs to read it closely, but it is still necessary

⁸³ Skultans 68, my emphasis.

⁸⁴ Skultans 128.

and perhaps the only way to convey significant meaning. As Walter Benjamin writes in *The Storyteller*: "The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time."⁸⁶ Lessons of history and experience, if there are to be any, must be preserved and concentrated in order to be conveyed. And nothing can do that as narrative can. Trauma does not expend itself and neither does the story.

What I will discover by creating a narrative of my family's photograph is the only truth I have. I am a ventriloquist, enabling the others to speak not through means of their voice but mine. This is not necessarily a disservice to them, but a direct response to my engagement with their photograph. As Baudrillard writes, "it is the object which says: 'I shall be your mirror.'"⁸⁷ In my search for their voices, I find my own. Yet I would never have found it without engaging with their elusive photograph.

⁸⁵ Skultans 138.

⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1968) 90.

⁸⁷ Baudrillard 133.

VII. The Necessary Lie and Artificial Life

The search for any kind of objective, definite "truth" to be found through narrative or other means, as attempted in this essay, can be seen as a symptom of philosophical impotence. As Friedrich Nietzsche writes, it is not "truth" that we need. Truth, as we define it, is a lie. There is no truth to be found through our simplification and imposition of invented methodology. In our reduction of life to metaphysics in the search for truth, we falsify our experience in the world.

In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes: "The world in which we are concerned is false, i.e., is not a fact but a fable and approximation on the basis of a meager sum of observations; it is 'in flux,' as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for – there is no 'truth.'"⁸⁸

Nietzsche elaborates on mankind's self-delusion in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

In what strange simplification and falsification man lives!... How we have made everything around us clear and free and easy and simple! how we have been able to give our senses a passport to everything superficial, our thoughts a divine desire for wanton leaps and wrong inferences! how from the beginning we have contrived to retain our ignorance in order to enjoy an almost inconceivable

⁸⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968) 330.

freedom, lack of scruple and caution,
heartiness, and gaiety of life – in order to
enjoy life!⁸⁹

Even language is constructed to simplify. Nietzsche writes that language “infects the words even of those of us who know better – here and there we understand it and laugh at the way in which precisely science at its best seeks most to keep us in this *simplified*, thoroughly artificial, suitably constructed and suitably falsified world....”⁹⁰

Mankind has constructed and adhered to this drive for truth as a survival mechanism. As Nietzsche writes, “Truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live.”⁹¹ Formulated through science by way of logic, simplification has been a necessary step for survival. “How did logic come into existence in man’s head?” Nietzsche asks in *The Gay Science*. “Innumerable beings who made inferences in a way different than ours perished....”⁹²

This survival mechanism, described by Nietzsche as the Will to Power, empowers us in situations where we are powerless. “At bottom, every high degree of caution in making inferences and every skeptical tendency constitute a great danger for life. No

⁸⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 35.

⁹⁰ Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil 35, author’s emphasis.

⁹¹ Nietzsche, Will to Power 272.

living beings would have survived if the opposite tendency – to affirm rather than suspend judgment, to err and *make up* things rather than wait, to assent rather than negate, to pass judgment rather than be just – had not been bred to the point where it became extraordinarily strong.”⁹³

Man, as creator, therefore doesn't need or desire "truth," but rather the aesthetic art of inventing that truth. "We have need of lies in order to conquer this reality, this 'truth,' that is, in order to live – That lies are necessary in order to live is itself part of the terrifying and questionable character of existence.”⁹⁴

This creation of lies is an artistic act: "[M]an must be a liar by nature, he must be above all an *artist*. And he *is* one: metaphysics, religion, morality, science – all of them only products of his will to art, to lie, to flight from 'truth,' to *negation* of 'truth.'"⁹⁵ If man is the creator of his world, he must by definition be an artist. "[Man] himself is after all a piece of reality, truth, nature: how should he not also be a piece of *genius in lying!*"⁹⁶

⁹² Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 171.

⁹³ Nietzsche, Will to Power 171-2, author's emphasis.

⁹⁴ Nietzsche, Will to Power 451, author's emphasis.

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, Will to Power 451-2, author's emphasis.

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, Will to Power 452, author's emphasis.

This viewpoint can be seen as an encouragement to embrace the artistic process of invention rather than to distrust it. Through creation, mankind is fulfilled. "Man has once again become a master of 'material' – master of truth! – And whenever man rejoices, he is always the same in his rejoicing: he rejoices as an artist, he enjoys himself as power, he enjoys the lie as his form of power."⁹⁷

Wolfgang Schirmacher deals with these issues in his discussion of artificial life. To Schirmacher, the term "artificial life" does not suggest a technical substitution of nature: "An understanding of artificial life as a substitution of nature promises what it can't deliver: a brave new world where technology rules supreme."⁹⁸ Rather, artificial life is the art of living as humans, a Nietzschean mediation of the world through mankind's search for control. "*We are by nature artificial beings,*" Schirmacher writes. "The human individual lives in accord with the cosmic home as a worldly-wise technician and not as a nature-happy dreamer!"⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Nietzsche, Will to Power 452, author's emphasis.

⁹⁸ Wolfgang Schirmacher, "Homo Generator: Media and Postmodern Technology," Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckrey (Seattle: Bay Press 1994) 66-7.

⁹⁹ Wolfgang Schirmacher, "Eco-Sophia," Artificial Life Group, ed. Wolfgang Schirmacher, 1989
<http://www.egs.edu/Art_Life/wolfgang/ecoso.html>.

As artificial beings, our invention of media is a liberating technique of self-realization:

In media we are confronted with the challenge of writing our own lives – with camcorders as well as with computers, with answering machines as well as with films. Mouse and remote control are only the beginning of interactive features on media that allow us to edit and cut, stop and go, break and let flow whatever situation we encounter. In media we write our autobiography – and if we don't, somebody else will do it for us. The care for self is a project, not a given fact, and its other side is neglect.¹⁰⁰

The process of mediation becomes more important than what it reveals or attempts to communicate. Mediation "is no longer a deal between partners or a communication following established rules, but an innovative process of media to which we belong. In such a mediation there is not even the goal of mutual understanding, because the flow needs breaks.... Mediation floods any content, fills the artificial lifeworld, evokes the 'fourfold' (*Geviert*), and allows us to be life's own artists."¹⁰¹

Schirmacher sees Nietzsche as a guide to the way for us to become artists of life. There is no given truth (truth is by necessity our invention) and it is up to us to become artists of life in order to generate a life-enhancing form of humanity. The Will to Power is not a political program but an artistic one.

¹⁰⁰ Schirmacher, "Homo Generator" 77.

"Nietzsche envisions a culture which is lived artistically and reveals itself in 'great works,'" ¹⁰² Schirmacher writes. "The art of perception is vital to a lived culture, a culture oriented not according to concepts, but which seeks, in an unbiased manner, to discern how the world exists as world and whether life is lived as fulfillment."¹⁰³

The aesthetic art of inventing a humane life is expressed through culture. "Culture serves the will to power, formed and articulated in artistic activity, and is the expression of the art of life as well as the capacity for the world."¹⁰⁴ This artistic will, as in Heidegger's "will to will" has no goal but its own expression.

The alterations and distortions of narrative in this context can be seen as essential products of invention, survival, and expression, and as guides to a way beyond the constraints of metaphysics. As Nietzsche writes: "art is worth more than truth."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Schirmacher, "Homo Generator" 79.

¹⁰² Wolfgang Schirmacher, "Art(ificial) Perception: Nietzsche and Culture after Nihilism," *Poiesis* 1 (1999): 4.

¹⁰³ Schirmacher, "Art(ificial) Perception" 5.

¹⁰⁴ Schirmacher, "Art(ificial) Perception" 7.

VIII. Mediated Memory as Film

François Lyotard states: "What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them."¹⁰⁶ Narrative is the way to do so.

I am in the process of creating a film project based on the photograph taken of my family in Libau in 1905. It will consist of ten narratives, each focusing on a different person in the photograph. This film will serve as a sort of mediated memory; it will attempt to reclaim what cannot be claimed. As a testimony to the lives of the Friedländers, the film will also be a story of the 20th century, a narrative which encompasses the lives of millions of others.

Some narratives will be told through interviews, existing letters, and historical evidence. Some will be told in the absence of such evidence. None will be purported to be true. By this combination of fact and fiction I am attempting to tell a story which neither fact nor fiction can tell adequately by itself.

As I have begun to research the facts related to the history of the ten people in the photograph, I am discovering that there is much that I will never know. As a result, I have begun a

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, Will to Power 453.

process of creating, of filling in the gaps with suppositions and imaginings suggested by the photograph and by what little information I do know about my family and the stories of others who went through similar experiences.

My family's misreading of the photograph taken in 1905 is the end product of the experience of the ten people who gathered together that day in 1905. What we read into the expressions of each of the people in the photograph and what we imagine they were like as individuals is all we have. Facts can be assembled, but the interiority of the witness is not revealed through facts. My engagement with the photograph will not be a search to recreate, but an act of invention. In my attempt to be life's own artist I will be involved in an act of mediation in which I invent a past through technological means. How I will do this, as how my family deals with this photograph, is how we as humans deal with history, memory, and narrative.

I have chosen to make this project as a film because we more readily accept visual images as truth. In this way film "lies" better. The film will attempt to create a prosthetic memory, not necessarily discovering or recreating my family's story (an impossible task), but incarnating the stories of their lives. The process of this mediation will allow me to further explore in a

¹⁰⁶ Lyotard, p. 13

tangible way the issues involving narrative and witnessing which I have laid out here. The resulting film will be an assertion of the impossibility of any "definitive" narrative arising, and will stand as a testimony to the invention, to an embrace of a multiplicity of narratives implied by the photograph.

The way to understand (or to view the world through "non-understanding" in the Lanzmannian mode) is to seize upon the facts while never ceasing to question them. Live outside of the trauma while trying to get inside of it. Trust your instincts as a viewer but be constantly aware that they are merely instincts and you are merely a viewer. In this manner, one can liberate oneself from presented "truths" and hope that Benjamin's history of multitudes can exist, if only for a second.

Derrida, quoting Brenner and Yerushalmi: "It is time for the historian to step aside and let the images speak."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Derrida 70.

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