

## WITNESS / TESTIMONY

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It. *Testimone/testimonianza*; Fr. *Témoin/témoignage*; Germ. *Zeuge/Zeugnis*; Span. *Testigo/testimonio*. The concepts of witness and testimony refer to the issue of remembering the past events and allowing the conservation of its records. The witness deals with *memory*, rather than *history* – the latter being either the scientific reconstruction of the past or the collection of data recovered from archives. Memory is not opposed to history, but overlaps the latter's boundaries and is open to various experiences, which are the special field of testimony. Some of these experiences also belong to the work of professional historians, such as the discovery of new archival sources (diaries, home movies or photo albums), while others seem to be a special task in the artistic elaboration of the past and may range from literature to site-specific art intervention, from montage of motion pictures to collage of photographs.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The influential French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2004, 2004a) claimed that the constitution of testimony depends on a narrative performance, which entails the sensible presentation of memory through an intentional elaboration, and so displays ethical and political claims, like forgiveness or the quest for justice. By providing original interpretations of Augustine and Aristotle, Plato and Husserl, Bergson and Freud, Heidegger and Nietzsche, Ricoeur arrives at theorizing an ontology of memory where the sense of the individual's existence is bound to its capacity of making sense of the past in the light of the present. The belongingness of memory to the past, as originally argued by Aristotle, has not only an epistemological sense but also a phenomenological meaning: by re-activating memory through records, one displays new meanings, both aesthetic and ethical and political, to our existence. From this point of view, to be a witness corresponds to be a human being.

The concept of testimony is usually referred to and concerned with certain events occurred during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reason for this preference is twofold. On the one hand, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the technologies of mechanical reproduction (photography, cinema and the others) made available a superabundance of audio, visual and audio-visual records. On the other hand, the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century

still constitutes a living memory for us, especially with regard to the tragic events occurred during its years. The event of the Shoah holds a key-position and has a key-significance here; however, the artistic elaboration of testimony has had an increasing importance also in other historical contexts. For instance, the film makers Rithy Panh and Joshua Oppenheimer realized documentaries – respectively, *L'image manquante* (2014) and *The Act of Killing* (2012) – where the memory at stake is that of other genocides and totalitarian regimes in the Far East. These works are interesting because they intermingle documents with fiction and even with other media like theatre wooden puppets: as we shall see, this is one of the major trend in contemporary testimony. In the same vein, the composer Andrea Molino, in his “multimedia staged concert” *Three Mile Island* (2012), worked on the possibility of intertwining live experience and intermediality while handling with the testimony of a tragic event.

We can distinguish two stages in process of definition of the notion of testimony. The first stage concerns literary witnesses, among which Primo Levi has doubtlessly the primacy for his novels *Se questo è uomo* (1947) and *La tregua* (1963). Levi, who survived to the Nazi extermination camps, claimed for the necessity of direct testimony of the genocide, rather than its fictional representation. Furthermore, in describing the life in the camps, he gave shape to a series of “figures”, like the Muselmann, who foreshadow the paradox of the witness theorized fifty years later, i.e. the impossibility of representing this condition as “human” in any meaning of this word and at the same time of fulfilling the duty of witnessing its reality (Agamben 2002). Another important contribution to the literary testimony of the Shoah was provided by the poet Paul Celan (2011). He insisted on the possibility of using poetry to express the “truth” of the events through an anti-representational use of language: hence language is not invoked here just as a means to communicate or describe things because what we are confronted with in this case are events that go beyond words, so to speak. Poetry can and indeed must engage a struggle with such a tragic reality, by using not words but “counter-words” (*Gegenwörter*). The reference to the Shoah became elliptical in Georges Perec’s avant-garde novel *La disparition* (1969) – the writer was a member of the OuLiPo (“Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle”) movement. He removed the letter “e”, the commonest vowel in French, in order to implicitly make reference to the victims’ “disappearance” – Perec’s mother died at Auschwitz.

The second stage has to do with the question concerning the ethical legitimacy of the representation of the Nazi genocide, especially in film (Cati 2013; Lindeperg 2007, 2013; Scarlato 2009). This debate was particularly harsh in France and engaged intellectuals, critics and film makers. Alain Resnais’ movie *Nuit et brouillard* (1956) is probably the first documentary that not only narrated the Nazi genocide but also showed the places where the extermination camps were situated. Nonetheless, the intellectual and film maker Claude Lanzmann (1985) theorized the inadmissibility of any direct representation of the extermination camps. He denied the possibility of any use of any historical visual documents, considering movies and photographs as a testimony released by the persecutors, and not by the victims, since only the former were empowered to take pictures inside the camps. So Lanzmann shot a documentary, *Shoah* (1985), where he aspired to realize a movie made only of interviews with the prisoners who survived to the extermination – although some *mise-en-scène* could not be avoided.

In *Images in Spite of All* (2012), the philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman analysed four photographs taken in Auschwitz-Birkenau during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, exposed in the exhibition *Mémoire des camps* curated at the Hôtel de Sully, Paris, in 2001. The exhibition and the book aroused a large debate and Lanzmann criticized Didi-Huberman. These pictures were not taken by the Nazis but by some members of the local Sonderkommando who could steal a camera and secretly document the prisoners' selections in the camp. Didi-Huberman was able to show that the pictures were taken from the side of the crematorium where the corpses were reduced to ashes. This aspect supported their authenticity since Sonderkommandos usually worked at the crematorium. It was possible, then, to recover the victims' point of view, even in the extermination camps: testimony was available to them too, in a certain dramatic sense "paradoxically".

#### ART AND AESTHETICS

As for the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation testimony, we must mention at least Christian Boltanski, Gerhard Richter and the couple Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci-Lucchi. With their installations, montages and collages of pictures, these artists have reconsidered the frontier between testimony and fiction and have offered a representation of the bias in the relationship between past and present, collective history and individual stories, authentic documents and fake ones. In one of the sheets used for the project *Atlas*, started in the mid-60s, Richter shows for instance a photograph entitled *Onkel Rudi* (1965). Although the picture is intentionally blurred, we recognize that "uncle Rudi" wore a Nazi uniform (Mengoni 2015). On the side of the museification of memory (Pezzini 2011), the "counter-monumentalisation" of the past seems to prevail, especially if we consider cases like the Jüdisches Museum designed by Daniel Libeskind (2001) or the Holocaust-Mahnmal designed by Peter Eisenman (2005), both in Berlin. Another step toward an aesthetics of a "counter-monumental" memory of the Holocaust was promoted by the German artist Gunter Demnig, who started in Köln in 1995 the project *Stolpersteine*, by which he aims to witness the victims of National Socialism through Europe. A case of satire against the rhetoric of testimony is Maurizio Cattelan's installation *Him* (2001), which represents Hitler mocking Willy Brandt's image kneeled in front of the Monument at the Warsaw Ghetto. In the same vein, Sergei Loznitsa denounces mass tourism in the extermination camps in his documentary *Austerlitz* (2016). Looking at the testimony of current events, Jean-Louis Comolli (2016) recovered Bazin's aesthetics of long shot, which, he argues, is able to avoid the spectacularization of slaughter, as happens in the newsreels produced by the group Abounaddara in Syria which, opposing Daesh's newsreels, promote the role of direct witnesses.

#### THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

The contemporary debate on the task of witnessing was mostly concerned with the relationship existing between testimony and document. We can distinguish in this context a "reductionist" theory stated by Maurizio Ferraris (2012) and a "hermeneutical" theory stated by Pietro Montani (2010, 2014). Partly inspired by John Searle's ontology of social reality and partly by Jacques Derrida's grammatology, Ferraris

considers documents as social objects, whose distinct feature is the result of an operation of “inscription”. It is thus possible to establish ontological criteria by which one is able to recognize a document as an index of a given inscriptional context (Feyles 2013). Montani has coined the concept of “validation” (*autenticazione*), which he distinguishes then from authenticity. Fiction narratives, in dialogue with archive pictures, even diverging from history, are able to refresh the sense of our collective memory through the work of montage, as happens in movies like *Buongiorno, notte* (Bellocchio 2003) or *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore 2004). The spread of this practice in the contemporary documentary cinema (Bertozzi 2012; Perniola 2014) has led to conceive of filmic narrations as forms of experimenting the limits and purpose in the elaboration – and even the “working through”, in Freud’s sense – of memory and testimony (Cecchi 2016), as happens in *Un’ora sola ti vorrei* (Marazzi 2002) or *Terramatta* (Quatriglio 2012). Another significant aspect in contemporary film aesthetics concerns the recovery of Aby Warburg’s concept of memory: pictures outline the survival of ancient *pathos formulae* whose sense is reconfigured through montage (Zucconi 2013), as happens in *Vincere* (Bellocchio 2009).

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