

“Not ours, this death, to take into our bones”: The Postanimal after the Posthuman

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What do we mean when we refer to ‘Reason in history?’ It is the state secret decreed at the place where the mass extermination occurred. It is the absolute prohibition of photographing the *Einsatzgruppen*’s enormous acts of abuse in 1941.

—Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs From Auschwitz*

Cary Wolfe’s *What is Posthumanism?* is arguably one of those scholarly interventions after which there is no turning back. Its learned and varied provocations concerning the lives and afterlives of “humanism” bring to mind the gust that fills the wings of Walter Benjamin’s fabled angel of history. Through Wolfe’s discerning eyes, we look back upon both the achievements and the destitutions of humanism with a mixture of fascination, incredulity, regret, and recognition, while also discovering ourselves to be irrepressibly carried forward towards an uncertain future. What emerges in humanism’s turbulent wake changes nothing less than everything: how buildings are imagined and built, how soundscapes and visual cultures are created and experienced, how bodies are imagined and lived, how theory is thought and taught, and how nonhuman and human animals meet and greet. Jacques Derrida and Niklas Luhmann are the tutelary spirits guiding Wolfe’s exploration of these wondrous, sobering possibilities. In fact, one of the most original moves in this very original book is to read Luhmann closely and carefully *with* Derrida. As Wolfe says, his objective is “to nudge the reception of systems theory in a different direction by strategically bringing out some of its more ‘deconstructive’ characteristics.”¹ *What is Posthumanism?* makes a good case for the uncanny ways that *différance* and the trace make their inhuman presence felt in the extraordinarily un-Derridean register of Luhmann’s thought. A “deconstructive” Luhmann gives us a means with which to make founding distinctions—between life and non-life, system and environment, meaning and event—tremble and morph in counter-intuitive ways and with enormous ethical consequences. But the paradoxical result of that strong reading of the German sociologist (and those his work inflects) is to throw into relief some his writing’s telling blind-spots. Those occlusions inspire my questions here.

Although Derrida and Luhmann are treated as “fellow travellers in posthumanist thought,”² Wolfe is most engaged—especially in the first half of the book—with Luhmann, in whose texts he finds an alternative and under-read genealogy of the critique of humanism. As Wolfe says, it behoves us “to take seriously the concept of autopoiesis—that systems, including bodies, are both open *and* closed as the very condition of possibility for their existence (open on the level of structure to energy flows, environmental perturbations, and the like, but closed on the level of self-referential organization.”³ Responding to “system theory’s chilly reception in the United States,” Wolfe rejects *tout court* those who dismiss it for its supposed “grim technocratic functionalism” and its “excessive abstraction, its lack of attention to social and historical texture, and its blind ambition to assimilate everything in its purview as grist for its universalizing mill.”⁴ Without a doubt, Luhmann’s thinking is more nuanced than these caricatures can possibly suggest. After all, we’ve seen these kinds of coarsening and anxiously reiterative disavowals before. As Wolfe suggests, in the North American academy systems theory faces weird misunderstandings resembling those to which Derrida and “deconstruction in America” have long been subjected. As a figure for a certain anti-intellectualism and a fear of difficult knowledge, Luhmann is thus in exceedingly good company. Given the ferocious war on

thought that characterizes our own neoliberal age, a war waged both within and without the university, the importance of affirming these enormously searching thinkers, these exemplars of slow reading and uncommon sense, could hardly be exaggerated.

What is Posthumanism? is nothing if not an ambitious book. Its theoretical registers and cultural locations range from disability studies to cybernetics, and from critical animal studies to avant-garde architectural practices. In each case, Wolfe brings out how the distances between humanism and what is imagined, desired, or feared to lie in its wake are as incalculable as they are plural. Interminably complicating the question of what comes after the human is not only the fact that the concept of afterness is itself often up for grabs (as Gerhard Richter argues in a brilliant new study⁵), but also that it is a humanist, all too humanist worry. Paul de Man would characterize this aberrant and unavoidable situation as the imposition of anthropomorphism on trope, the ameliorative masking of a materially “linguistic” and inhuman turn that is wholly indifferent to “beforeness” and “afterness.”⁶ Under these remarkable conditions, the “post” in “posthumanism” cannot mean punctually having done with “humanism,” much less having done with the gesture of having done. Does the future then herald the end of the human or does it tell us that the human has still to be determined? Are we—those creatures who dare to call themselves “human”—stillborn or still to be born? What could it mean to have survived humanism and the human? What will it have meant to be human? Or will posthumanism function as a kind of neo-Kantian idea, unrealizable as such, but well-suited to teach us that we never *were* human? These will always have been impossible but necessary questions, but never more so than on the brink of the anthropocene. The interrogative of Wolfe’s title keeps them deliriously open, while the book’s rigorous analyses also bring us to our senses. And if the posthuman gives itself to thought, then so too, I’ll wager, is what I would want to call the “postanimal.” *À suivre*. More to follow.

*Not ours, this death, to take into our bones.*⁷

I am standing in the dim-lit room at the heart of New York’s *Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*, surrounded by images of excruciating terror, violence, and loss. On a small monitor built flush into one wall, I am watching the “Liepaja footage.” This is a short film by a German navy sergeant named Reinhard Wiener that records the execution of several Latvian Jewish men in late July or early August of 1941.⁸ No other motion-picture evidence of SS atrocities survives the Shoah, but this is only one reason why it is incomparable, and why, even though I have viewed these images many times, and have by now discussed them in various scholarly settings, I always see them as if for the first time. To adapt a phrase drawn from Georges Didi-Huberman’s account of photographs of the Holocaust, these are “images in spite of all”: “in spite of our own inability to look at them as they deserve; in spite of our own world, full, almost choked, with imaginary commodities.”⁹ I stare benumbed. Like an animal of the wholly captivated sort that Heidegger imagined. A momentary thoughtlessness, yes, but already supplanted by something else, much harder to understand. Here in the museum, amid the other archival material documenting and contextualizing Jewish life before and after the Holocaust, the film is screened without description of any kind, as if eschewing commentary, or beyond commentary, or its own commentary. Without being told in so many words, we are invited to think of the museum as a whole, its contents and its *raison d’être*, as the film’s immanent informing frame, bearing witness to these stupefying images from a location that is at once far away and intimately acquainted with its murderous *mise en scène*. How does a building and a memorial institution testify, creating an occasion for the spectator to do the same? The museum’s name says so much: as a “living memorial,” it affirms both memory and history as dynamic and developing phenomena, while also dedicating itself to what Roger Simon

calls “practices of remembrance that have a transitive function,” i.e., a commitment not only to “the acquisition of new information, but an acceptance of another’s testamentary address as a possible inheritance, a difficult ‘gift’ that in its demand for non-indifference, may open questions, interrupt conventions, and set thought to work through the inadequate character of the terms on which I grasp myself and my world.”¹⁰ The useless suffering of the murdered Jews impinges upon the living present, evacuating it of its complacencies. But “living memorial” is also a kind of prosopopoeia, the attribution of animate existence to that which can only possess it figuratively. And if the insentient bears witness, is there something insentient about bearing witness?



Figure 1. Still from the Liepaja footage showing the Jewish men forced out of a truck by local militia (in armbands), overseen by German soldiers (in uniform), with spectators in the background.

The film is shown in an endless loop, repeatedly asserting itself like a “system” whose organized complexity—*à la* Luhmann—continually negotiates with its own layered and limitless “environments”: the accidental or dedicated visitors flowing through its exquisitely constructed interiors, the people of Lower Manhattan, who dwell and work alongside the building, the Jewish lives and histories the museum celebrates and mourns. The film’s complexly absent gloss figures forth the infinitely subtle membrane separating its terrifying images from the worlds without end in which it is immersed. I struggle to find a language with which to describe its darkness, its luminosity. It is an eye that never shuts. Do I look through it, seeing as the perpetrators once saw? Or am I caught in its implacable gaze? A by now old thought, always renewed and renewable, troubles the mind: is it possible to make the Shoah intelligible to ourselves, and in a way that is consonant with the concept of the human, with *any* concept of the human? Fear of answering this question in the affirmative competes with the all but irrepressible imperative to do precisely that. The “all” in spite of which these images must be seen and against which they declare themselves includes the wish to

make the homicides that they depict unthinkable because inhuman. The footage is less than two minutes in length, an eternity without sound. In it I glimpse a fragment of what David Rousset called, as early as 1946, *L'univers concentrationnaire*: an utterly administered cosmos, a world-system that hungers most for the eradication of distance, and thus the invention of a world that is bereft of anything recognizably political or ethical. Among the footage's most revolting qualities is its sense of claustrophobia, the way it violently shrinks the planet into a distanceless place where there is nowhere to hide and where the killers can therefore inflict limitless violence and humiliation. The "Liepaja footage" is documentary evidence of the "self-poiesis"—to use a term that is so important to Luhmann's work, and central to Wolfe's argument—of a new world order rooted in the liquidation of Jewish difference.

What I see may not be all that is exhibited. Wolfe's book—especially those elements most marked by the presence of Derrida's thinking about the archival futures of photographic representation—helps me take the measure of that immeasurability, opening up unseen spaces where, by rights, none should be. The photographic images are more than corroboration. Yet they are undeniably evidentiary in kind, not in spite but precisely because, as Wolfe notes, citing Stanley Cavell, "Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it. The reality of a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it."¹¹ I feel as never before the unexpectedly mortifying chill of Derrida's words: "We are . . . 'spectralized by the shot.'"¹²

The shot? The word tolls me back to my sole self. The Jewish men are forced out of the back of a truck, hurried through a crowd of onlookers, and into an execution trench. They are commanded to face away from their executioners. There are corpses lying at their feet, the remains of the homicides that the soldiers have committed a little earlier on this bright summer day, although these bodies are obscured from our view. Many spectators have turned out: the German officers managing the killing; the local Latvian militiamen who assist; the assembled townsfolk, including children in short-pants; and of course the camera-man, Sergeant Wiener, who claimed accidentally to have come across this scene but whose film forever tells us that he consents to the horror and is instrumental in propagating it.¹³ For him, as for the SS who have demanded or invited the non-Jews of Liepaja to watch, injustice must not only be seen but also *seen* to be done. In the background are parked cars and bicycles, and a cluster of out-buildings with smokestacks, sheds where the people of Liepaja would socialize and don their skates during the winter months. Beyond the sheds, out of view, lie the sand dunes where thousands of others—Jewish men, women, and children—will subsequently be murdered looking out onto the impassive Baltic Sea. These quotidian details jar with the murderous violence that we are about to witness because here, in this killing place, violence has become one of those details.

In one continuous motion, a line of soldiers steps quickly up to the lip of the trench. The soldiers point their rifles downward toward the men, and fire. The murdered Jews fall lifelessly to the ground. The spectators stand frozen, some immobilized by boredom, others possessed by a fascination that is impossible to know. And at the instant that the soldiers shoot their guns and kill these men a little spotted terrier bounds into the foreground of the scene, startled by the retort of the rifles that we cannot hear. We "see" that sound in the embodied form of the animal's surprise. In a rare documentary discussion of the Liepaja footage, David G. Marwell, Holocaust historian and Director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage, allows himself a series of questions about the errant creature: "Who brought the dog there?" he asks, quietly, firmly: "Did the dog go back home? What was the dog doing on this scene when people were being murdered. I don't know why *that* moves me, but it does."¹⁴



Figure 2. Still from Liepaja footage showing the dog in the foreground and the execution trench in the middle-ground.

What is the *that* that works on or works over Marwell, as it does me, about which neither one of us appears to know anything? The historian asks questions of the footage for which he knows there are no answers, reminding us of the importance of occupying interrogative spaces with the intention of letting them be. An unstable constellation of hidden origins, unknown intentions, and obscure effects tease us out of thought. The dog is demonstrably *there*, in the frame, but our glimpse of the creature is strangely clouded: in this ghastly place, the nonhuman animal also turns out to be very hard to place. And yet Marwell finds himself responding to it, and feeling its affecting force. We appear to be in the indeterminate region of the unconscious and the symptom, and what is admirable is the historian's willingness to let himself tarry with the advent of the dog, registering what it pulls into the frame at the same time as gesturing towards the unapprehended that lies beyond it. The creature is present at the scene of a horrifying crime and yet speaks to Marwell in ways that are not evidentiary. Can Wolfe's "deconstructive" Luhmann help us here? Can we say that the haunting of history by something that is other-than-historical is an instance of "a system's openness to the environment"?¹⁵ Or are there forms of radical exposure that are resolutely un-ecological and un-systematic? The appearance of the dog is not one ghastly quotidian detail among many, although it is also certainly that. Something like an "optical unconscious" appears to be operating, automatically and anonymously. A non-visibility, let us call it, that limns the humanist and representational distinction between the seen and the unseen, an event looked at and unlooked at. We could say that the Nazis behave like animals and treat their captives like animals if it weren't for the fact that talking this way reproduces the humanisms and anthropocentrisms that the footage's complicity in the "non-criminal putting to death"¹⁶ of others renders at once obsolete and toxic. But how to track that creature without falling back or too quickly back upon "the humanist schema of visuality," as Wolfe says?¹⁷ "Such an investigation does not mean trying to make visible something that is invisible," Sharon Sliwinski suggests: "Instead this approach pursues the visual event as

symptom... [T]he ‘unconscious of the visible’ pursues something that is precisely *not* shown in the picture.”¹⁸

As Wolfe notes, Luhmann too speaks of the “paradox of the invisibilization that accompanies making something visible:” “a marked space emerges from the unmarked space.”¹⁹ But the unapparent frame is not the unconscious, not least because the visible foreground can always become the unseen background to another foreground, and vice versa. In systems theory nothing is radically unseen in the manner that Sliwinski suggests is important to understanding *and responding to* photographs of atrocities. In the German sociologist’s thought, the relation between the seen and the unseen is asymptomatic, and thus primarily an epistemological rather than affective matter, a question of knowledge rather than responsibility. Those who too quickly dismiss systems theory for its indifference to “social and historical texture” may therefore be responding to another absence altogether in Luhmann’s work, namely the “unconscious of the visible.” Setting aside the fact that “social and historical texture” is itself an abstraction, the more productive critical question is what sorts of resistances does systems theory encounter when faced not with history in general but with photographic evidence of historical events that are not only not one phenomenon among many but figured historically as the epitome of “not-one-among-many.” Can systems theory hope to account for the manner in which these particular traumas make a claim on the present? Specifically: what is the nature of that criminal “system” of state-sponsored violence called “Nazism,” and its rare and urgent subset, “filmed evidence of Nazi atrocities against Jews”? Does bearing witness to a particular SS atrocity from the summer of 1941 lend itself to Luhmann’s notion of “self-poiesis”? Because I have been parsing Wolfe’s book, many of its analytic axes and incitements inflect my sobering experience in Battery Park City, overlooking the Statue of Liberty and in the shadow of the void where the World Trade Center towers once stood. What is happening when these two things—reading this new book, watching this old footage—fall into each other’s orbit? What unforeseen event occurs, and is still occurring? In a certain way, the Holocaust, which is irreducible to the positive histories that continue necessarily to be written about it, forms a bleak instance of an overwhelming environment amid which the Liepaja footage, and the museum in which it is screened, constitute different “systems.” But we would appear to be a long way from the avant-garde works whose system-complexity Wolfe discusses with enormous insight: for example, Scofidio + Renfro’s *Blur*, a pavilion on Lake Neuchâtel that uses various states of water (dew, mist, fog) as the substance of its architecture ; Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau’s *Tree City*, a proposed “fabricated landscape” in north Toronto that self-consciously troubles the boundaries between nature and culture; and Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s *Wrapped Reichstag, Berlin, 1971-95*, a project that involved draping the historically over-determined German parliament building with aluminum-coated polypropylene fabric. Wolfe persuasively argues that these posthumanist fashionings, mostly recessive and self-cancelling in kind, are less assertions in space than unfoldings in time. Activated by both the “refusal of architecture” and the desire to see the “dematerialization of the architectural medium,” these fluxional projects “paradoxically epitomize the question of architectural form from a Luhmannian perspective.”²⁰ For Wolfe, “Lose the building” is the watchword for those who embrace the limits of humanism and its constructed environments.²¹

If we were to “lose the building,” where would we be? Is the notion of a post-building, so to speak, analogous to a world that lies outside or after the discourses of power/knowledge, a world that Foucault dismisses as seductively imaginary and itself the product of power and knowledge?²² More particularly, can these experiments in contemporary architecture extend to Holocaust museums and memorials? Projects in Germany, some of which predate Wolfe’s architectural examples, can be very suggestive in this regard. A new memorial vernacular is emerging, characterized by the “refusal of

architecture,” to be sure, but activated more by ethical than aesthetic concerns: namely, the unwillingness to assuage the wounds and to fill in the voids and losses of historical trauma. Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz’s “Monument Against Fascism, War and Violence,” unveiled in Hamburg in 1986, is a vivid case in point.²³ The artists created a twelve meter high pillar made of hollow aluminum and clad with a layer of lead. The citizens of Hamburg and its visitors were subsequently encouraged to carve their names and comments into the stele, which was lowered into the ground in eight successive stages as its surface filled up with inscriptions. In James Young’s memorable words, the monument “invited its own desecration.”²⁴ By the time the pillar was completely buried in 1993, some 70,000 names and remarks, the latter ranging from the mundane to the sorrowful to the profane, had been added. Gerz and Shalev-Gerz characterized their project as a *Gegen-Denkmal*, a “counter-monument.” What interests me about that exacting description is that it marks the distance between their memorial and more conventional commemorative forms without putting those forms out of reach: a counter-monument remains monumental and in a relationship with the monumental, if in a negative mode, a fact underscored by the artists’ insistence on the jointed name for their work. So much conceptual traffic runs across that hyphen, which both links and separates worlds of meaning and histories of public remembrance. The fact that visitors can still glimpse a portion of the “disappeared” pillar through a glass window underscores a residual commitment to the memorial as a positive and legible assertion, even and especially after its internment and vanishing. To be sure, much more thought is needed on the question, but let me begin by saying that I am not convinced that “living memorials” for the Shoah are practices and constructs that I want too quickly to misplace, decline, or dissolve.²⁵ Not because I cling unthinkingly to a naively recuperative notion of the memorial, but because, in a world that has seen and continues to see so many unbearable forms of holocaustal violence, I see no signs that architecture is or will ever be finished with what we confusedly call humanism and the human. “Lose the Building,” the title of the relevant chapter in Wolfe’s book, could therefore be helpfully rewritten as “Lose the Building?,” thereby underscoring the need for a processive and unfinished relationship with the aesthetics, politics, and ethics of architecture. Installations like Scofidio + Renfro’s *Blur* may share the principle of desubstantializing impermanence with Gerz and Shalev-Gerz’s Hamburg project, but there is also an important difference: the “Monument Against Fascism” remains unswervingly dedicated to the problem of public memory, and is activated by a tortured faith in the ineradicability of responsibility. Because the German perpetrators proved themselves to be murderously irresponsible, and because the obligation to remember the losses of “war and violence” is not only a shared burden but also cannot be met once and for all, does not mean that responsibility is nothing, or an impossible abstraction, or not worthy of renewed understanding and action. The need to recreate memorial practices is especially pressing if historical trauma is treated as a thing of the past, and thus someone else’s responsibility. Doing justice to those who endured useless suffering at the hands of the fascists is imprescriptible and intergenerational. Moreover, the Hamburg memorial reminds us that practices of public remembrance themselves call for revisionary labor. That is to say, we have obligations both to the dead and to the work of reconsidering forms and expressions of social memory. How to capture this powerful combination of fragility, fluidity, radical indebtedness, and indestructability in a memorial? The self-erasing nature of the Hamburg project throws into relief the perdurability and impossibility of the mortal other’s demands, unmet as they are permanent. When the memorial is gone, something extraordinary nevertheless remains: the stele’s withdrawal from sight “exhibits me as being-for-the-other.”²⁶ Hamburg’s citizens and visitors can sign the memorial but they cannot sign off on it because the counter-monument is finally not the lead-clad aluminum tower but those who bear witness to its desecration and disappearance. In other words, what is buried instantiates the self-showing of that which cannot be buried.²⁷

Is the Museum of Jewish Heritage already in some sense forfeited and spectralized under the atomic light of the Liepaja footage? Could one then risk saying, and in the very heart of a “living memorial,” that there can be no museums after the Holocaust? I do not mean to suggest that SS atrocities (which include the atrocities committed by the perpetrators who took photographs of the atrocities) are unsayable, unthinkable, or unimaginable. By screening the Liepaja footage, the museum says quite the opposite, but without thereby making the atrocities and their historical evidence coincident with the said and the thought and the seen. That is why I find the unglossed status of the film in its museum context so suggestive, so loquacious, and why I consider the question about the moving power of the little dog so urgent and telling, asked as it is by the museum’s own Director. Perhaps there is an unsayable that calls for nothing but more words and only words, and an unthinkable that does not therefore relegate SS killings to what Didi-Huberman characterizes, after Giorgio Agamben, as so much “mystical adoration, even [an] . . . unknowing repetition of the Nazi *arcanum* itself.”²⁸ The murderous inhumanity of the SS endlessly demands a return to the question of the human, a circling back that holds in abeyance the dream of what comes after or other than the human. Does the Liepaja footage become the place where the museum stands but in the mode of falling? When the museum trembles, let us insist on building museums rather than leaving them behind. Let us imagine occupying living memorials that threaten to lose *us*.

I am back in the museum, identifiable in name and in spirit *as* a museum, and thus familiar, but confronted with the filmed deaths of the Latvian Jewish men, for which there is, strictly speaking, no precedent, no antecedent. The uncanny presence of the little dog in the footage recording those murders, and the questions it prompts in Marwell’s mind, bring us into the risky territory that Robert Antelme explores in his 1947 memoir of life and death in the camps, *The Human Race*. As Maurice Blanchot saw, if long after the fact, it was in the camps that Antelme saw and lived something remarkable: namely, that “man is indestructible and that can nonetheless be destroyed.”²⁹ Looking around at the sleeping SS dogs, whose imagined carelessness and satiated life he momentarily craves, Antelme is thrown back on a terrible ethical insight: envying the dogs only affirms what Sara Guyer calls the “irreducibility of the human.”³⁰ As Blanchot subsequently saw in Antelme, bearing witness to SS atrocities meant testifying to the fact that “the human can *be* destroyed, can endure *as* destroyed, deprived of everything that might make him human, including his capacity to choose or to speak, and that being destroyed is not the end of destruction or the destruction of the human.”³¹ That is what drove the SS mad—that they were not gods disposing of animals, but men murdering men, and that they could not kill their victims before they exterminated them. “We’re still men, and we shall not end otherwise than as men,”³² Antelme says, in a sentence that I will never forget, the survivor here not naively affirming some irreducible essence of humanity, far from it, but inventing phrases with which to account for the indestructibility of responsibility even and especially at the very limit of the human. —The limit, *not* the end, for as Derrida has remarked, after Levinas, only murderers assume that death means a passage to nothingness, only murderers believe that life is elementally bare life and that death means the demise of responsibility.³³ As Lisa Guenther notes in a richly suggestive aside, “This impossibility of becoming anything but human could form the basis of a non-anthropocentric claim to humanity, one that resists defining the human in opposition to the non-human animal, while still providing the grounds for resistance against dehumanization.”³⁴

What then can it mean to watch this film and bear witness to the atrocities it records as a humanist and as a post-humanist? If there was ever an image that pronounced the “death of man” and what Merleau-Ponty calls the “shameless humanism of our elders,”³⁵ it would be this *film maudit*.³⁶ The

image of the summary execution of the Jews on this Latvian shoreline permanently over-shadows the pacific calm of Foucault's dream of the end of "man," washed away—without tears—like "a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea."³⁷ Yet to say that the film demonstrates the limits of "the political and economic projects of classical Liberalism and their subsidiary rhetoric of emancipation, progress, growth, and political 'rights'"³⁸ is to say too much, too quickly. The Liepaja footage isn't finally an example of anything, which is to say that it is irreducible to the example. How then to respond to these images? Do we have a language with which to remain answerable not only to their evidentiary status but also to their testamentary force? The question is indissociable from another: how can the living speak for the dead? And is the system/environment figure—so important to the Luhmannian elements of Wolfe's argument—subtle enough to account for the relation without relation of the living and the dead, even and especially if we view "life" as Derrida (and perhaps as Luhmann does, at least in Wolfe's handling of his work) sees "life," i.e. as constituted by a trace structure that is neither living nor dead? *Not ours, this death, to take into our bones.*

Encouraged by Luhmann's example, Wolfe calls for a renewed opening of discourses to their *unthought*: the disturbance of "a certain passivity, a not-being-able,"³⁹; the "unbidden" arrival of the "radically inhuman"⁴⁰; and "the 'invisibilization that accompanies making something visible,'"⁴¹ to evoke but a few pertinent examples. Could we add to this list the "chaos of facts that is the Shoah" (to recall Geoffrey Hartman's description), the voids, distances, and unredeemable absences left in the wake of holocaustal atrocities, both human and nonhuman, the "secret" or (im)possibility of the witness, and the unsecured promise and being-promised-*to* that quickens testamentary acts? In the luminescent wake of Wolfe's book, but standing in the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City, I am invited to consider these and many other negativities and alterities. Yet it isn't entirely clear to me that "Luhmann"—as a reiterated figure for posthumanism that, in my view, uneasily inhabits the book—is in a position to do the same. Another way of putting this would be to say that Wolfe welcomes "Luhmann;" but does "Luhmann" accept that hospitality (and "hostipitality")?

Quickly, here are some of my concerns. It strikes me that there are voids and occlusions that are in excess of the "blind-spots" that systems have about themselves. Insofar as one system's blind-spot is always available to another's sight, isn't systems theory still answerable to a dream of transparency (let us call it "the transparency of transparency") and communicability about which Tilottama Rajan expresses considerable incredulity?⁴² More: recursive, absented, and "uncounted" experiences and phenomena (as Anne-Lise François, puts it⁴³) may not be legible to a theory that is calibrated to the virile assertiveness and reproductive futurism of auto-poiesis: i.e., a system, predicated on the disavowal of *désœuvrement*, whose "point . . . is to reproduce itself" in the face of its "'inferiority'"⁴⁴; a system quickened by the "need to reduce" complexity,⁴⁵ as if blindly committed to a kind of evolutionary survival; a system so consumed by a model of consumption that it is said to "buy time"⁴⁶; a system that economizes difference, emphatically transforming it into "*productive* difference;" and a system whose elemental condition is having "no choice but to be."⁴⁷ At this point, how far are we from what Levinas scornfully calls "the normal order of things, the natural order of things, the persistence of being?"⁴⁸ Heidegger was not the last of a long line of thinkers who asked "Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?"⁴⁹ but it took Levinas's focus on absolute anteriority of "the responsibility for the other" to explode that query and ask a more fundamental question: "Is it righteous to be?" Moreover, standing in the museum of memorial memory, I worry about a posthumanism that triumphantly claims that it can dispose of "philosophy," relegating it to a "a thing of the past."⁵⁰ Of what is "philosophy" a lurid figure such that it calls for such an indefensible renunciation? What is "a thing of the past," and what is "philosophy" that it could be imagined to be reified, quarantined, and forgotten? Now and forever is the time to revivify

“philosophy,” not call for its summary rendition to the ultimate black site. Assuming that one could put “philosophy” behind us, are we to believe that there are no leavings troubling systems theory, no irreducible remainder, no ghosts or spectres: *Thou art a scholar. Speak to it, Horatio*. Let us be wary of systems and theories of systems that are activated by these extirpating and salvific gestures.⁵¹ And watching the Liepaja footage, can I be forgiven for wincing at Luhmann’s talk about the system’s automatized churn, which he names “*Selektion*.” *Selektion*: the “subjectless event” whose exemplary instance is the anonymous winnowing of “the useful” from “the un-useful”?⁵² Have I heard him right? Selection? On the basis of determining what is disposable from what is not? “It is an obvious assertion that where violence is inflicted on man,” Primo Levi remarks, “it is also inflicted on language.”⁵³ Can a system of thought “select” out of itself a history of violence and the history of a word, and not any word, but the word that signals the end of history, or the end of a certain history? Words too have an afterlife, as sovereign as it is unsystematic.

Wolfe’s work helps us gauge the importance of Derrida’s argument that human beings—i.e., those who have given themselves the right to call themselves human—fall indubitably under the gaze of the animal.⁵⁴ But under what conditions could it be said that the nonhuman animal bears witness? Does the gaze extend to the act of witnessing? The little dog urges me to consider the possible points of convergence between that which remains unwitnessed in witnessing and that which remains unknowable about the animal. This “absence,” this impossibility, is “essential,” as Derrida says of witnessing, because testament is not a matter of truth-telling but fundamentally that which “exhibits me as being-for-the-other (and not for myself in the interiority of an encompassing Cogito).”⁵⁵ *Being-for-the-other*: that is the ripple in time and space that the dog, this dog, unexpectedly gives. That is the disturbance outside of Liepaja that haunts the Nazi present from within the present, so obsessed is it with killing the truth-tellers, and disposing of the witnesses ... and thus missing what remains obscurely elemental to the labour of bearing witness. *Being-for-the-other*: that which is not of the order of cognition, or of re-cognition. A thoughtlessness, an “animal” witlessness, let us say, in honor of the dog who flinches—without reflection and without needing to reflect—at the sudden sound of the gunfire, and whose flinching proves to be otherwise than a privation. Within the frame, the dog captures the fact that the experiences and the images of those experiences “cannot simply be seen and understood,” as Ulrich Baer has said of photographic trauma: “they require a different response; they must be *witnessed*,”⁵⁶ even if what witnessing *is*—to whom witnessing is addressed, and from where it arises—remains obscure and self-obscuring, held in reserve in a way that the footage relates to the beckoning reserve of the singular animal. Hence Paul Celan’s impeccable phrasing, delivered on the occasion of receiving the Bremen Literature Prize in 1958, and in memory of his parents, murdered at the hands of the SS: “Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, toward an addressable you perhaps, towards an addressable reality.”⁵⁷ The obscurity of the address, the thoughtlessness and indeterminacy of its origin and destination, the uninsurable nature of its expression and arrival, are *necessary* because these are the indicia that distinguish witnessing from description, testimony from giving evidence, demanding to be heard from transmitting information. The fact that the two worlds are never absolutely two means that we cannot do justice to these images once and for all. What makes witnessing possible is also what renders it impossible. There is no escaping this crisis of witnessing because witnessing *is* that crisis. In case we forget this difficult knowledge, the Latvian dog remembers supplementally on our behalf, even if this knowledge, “always underway,” remains adrift, vulnerable, and open to chance. “Precarious life implies life as a conditioned process, and not as the internal feature of a monadic individual or any other anthropocentric conceit,” Judith Butler has argued.⁵⁸ Perhaps it takes a nonhuman animal, *this* animal, darting about the blood-soaked sand-dunes on the outskirts of Liepaja, to throw into relief the limitless violence of that “anthropocentric

conceit,” and the limitless interdependencies that await us in a more frankly ethical (post)human world. Perhaps it takes an animal speaking in a different tongue to underscore that no language is adequate to the Shoah, and that we cannot speak of it to the precise extent that we cannot *not* speak of it.

To this little, nameless dog, this postanimal, now long dead, I send blessings, for in those shocked circles that you run without end, I see. I see, even if I do not understand what I see, or look upon these images as they deserve. I see, as if the for first time, that the opposite of forgetting is not remembrance but—as Yerushalmi has said—the advent of justice.⁵⁹ I see, as Wolfe teaches us to see, recalling Derrida, what it means “to have imploration rather than vision in sight, to address prayer, love, joy, or sadness rather than a look or a gaze.”⁶⁰



Figure 3. Blowup of still from the Liepaja footage showing the startled dog.

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Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Roundtable Discussion on Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?* held at the meeting of the Modern Language Association in Los Angeles, 10 January 2011. That session was organized and chaired by Alastair Hunt. Portions of this work in progress have also been presented in other venues, including the Oberlin College, California State University-Fullerton, Queen's University, and Vanderbilt University. I am deeply grateful to my audiences and my hosts for giving me the opportunity to develop this project in these discerning settings. Thanks too to Rebecca Gagan, Jessica Carey, Jennifer Fisher, and to my Research Assistant, Areej Siddiqui, for assistance in preparing this essay for publication.

¹ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 6.

² *Ibid.*, xix.

³ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 4.

⁵ I refer to Gerhard Richter, *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁶ For example, in his influential essay, "Shelley Disfigured," de Man concludes that "*The Triumph of Life* warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence." See, Paul de Man "Shelley Disfigured," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 122.

⁷ I borrow this verse from May Sarton, "The Invocation to Kali," in *A Grain of Mustard Seed: New Poems* (New York: Norton, 1981), 21.

⁸ See, "Mass Murder of Jews in Liepaja, Latvia, 1941. Archival footage of JUDENEXEKUTION IN LIBAU 1941 (Mass Murder of Jews in Liepaja, Latvia, 1941). Courtesy of Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv/Transit Film GmbH. <http://www1.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/homepage.html>

⁹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs From Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Ellis. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

¹⁰ Roger Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 7.

¹¹ Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 23, quoted in Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 177.

¹² Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 117, quoted in Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 177.

¹³ Wiener makes this claim in an interview given on September 27, 1981. See, "Interview with Reinhard Wiener, German photographer of the mass murder in Liepaja," posted on the Yad Vashem website: <http://www1.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/homepage.asp>

¹⁴ Marwell makes these remarks in Peter Hankoff's documentary, *Hitler's Hidden Holocaust*. So far as I can determine, he is the only Holocaust scholar to speak of the dog's presence in the footage. We cannot know what part of Marwell's comments ended up on the cutting room floor, but what is telling is that Hankoff edits his film so that Marwell's querying marvel about the dog's arrival dominates this segment of the documentary, and in fact brings it to a close.

¹⁵ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, xxi.

¹⁶ "Noncriminal putting to death" is Derrida's description of the sacrificial fate of nonhuman animals and animalized humans. See, Jacques Derrida, "Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject," in *Points: Interviews 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Stanford

University Press, 1995), 278.

¹⁷ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 169.

¹⁸ Sharon Sliwinski, "Icarus Returned: The Falling Man and the Survival of Antiquity," in *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*, eds. Isabelle Loring Wallace and Loring Wallace (New York: Ashgate, 2011), 207.; "Optical unconscious" is Walter Benjamin's phrase from "A Small History of Photography," "It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis." See, Walter Benjamin, "A Small History of Photography," in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979), 242-3; "Unconscious of the visible" is Didi-Huberman's Benjaminian phrase from *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 29.

¹⁹ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 223.

²⁰ Ibid., 228.

²¹ "Lose the Building" is the title of Chapter Eight of *What is Posthumanism?*

²² I thank Jennifer Fisher for this question.

²³ See images and an account of the memorial: <http://memoryandjustice.org/site/monument-against-fascism/>.

²⁴ James Young's remarks are in a lecture at the University of California-Santa Cruz entitled "Berlin's Holocaust Memorial and Mine" (April 27, 2007), <http://www.uctv.tv/shows/Berlins-Holocaust-Memorial-and-Mine-14091>. See also James Young, "The Countermonument: Memory Against Itself in Germany," in *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 27-48.

²⁵ The literature on the built environments of Holocaust memorialization is significant and growing, especially in the wake of the often controversial debates around Daniel Libeskind's *Judische Museum*, Peter Eisenman's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetic of Paul Celan* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 76.

²⁷ Indeed, it is worth noting that before its burial, the lead-clad tower had uncannily anticipated and materialized this condition of dangerous exposure, open as it was to any and every kind of inscription.

²⁸ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 26.

²⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 130; Arguably the most fine-grained analysis of Blanchot's meditation on Antelme is to be found in Sara Guyer's *Romanticism After Auschwitz* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). Her discussion informs my own.

³⁰ Guyer, *Romanticism After Auschwitz*, 113.

³¹ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 110.

³² Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, trans. Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Evanston, Ill.: Marlboro Press/Northwestern University Press, 1998), 219.

³³ Citing Levinas, Derrida notes: "Death: not, first of all, annihilation, non-being, or nothingness, but a certain experience for the survivor of the 'without-response.' Already *Totality and Infinity* called into question the traditional 'philosophical and religious' interpretation of death as either 'a passage to nothingness' or 'a passage to some other existence.' It is the murderer who would like to identify death with nothingness." See, Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203.

³⁴ Lisa Guenther. "Resisting Agamben: The Biopolitics of Shame and Humiliation," *Philosophy and*

Social Criticism 38.1 (2012): 77 n14.

³⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964), 226, quoted in Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 15.

³⁶ *Le film maudit* is the infamous phrase Claude Lanzmann used to describe the non-existent photographic evidence of the gas-chambers in operation at Auschwitz, evidence that Lanzmann said he would destroy if it did exist. See, Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, 95.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Anonymous (New York: Vintage, 1973), 387.

³⁸ Geroulanos, *An Atheism That is Not Humanist*, 18.

³⁹ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 46.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴² Expanding upon remarks by Gianni Vattimo, Rajan critiques forms of cultural studies rooted in a “teleology of ‘absolute *self-transparency*’ based on total communicability.” See, Tilottama Rajan, “In the Wake of Cultural Studies: Globalization, Theory, and the University,” *diacritics* 31.1 (2001): 74.

⁴³ François explores such phenomena in *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008).

⁴⁴ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 221, 255.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 221, 255.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous To Be: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 51.

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” trans. David Farrell Krell, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 94.

⁵⁰ Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), quoted in Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 111.

⁵¹ For substantial discussions of the deleterious effects of these gestures, and of Derrida’s consideration of them, see Devorah Baum, “Respecting the Ineradicable: Religion’s Realism,” *Textual Practice* 26.3 (2012): 519-540 and Rei Terada. “Scruples, or, Faith in Derrida,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102.2 (2007): 237-264.

⁵² Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 32.

⁵³ Primo Levi. *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage, 1989), 97.

⁵⁴ Falling under the animal gaze is the central question explored by Derrida in “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

⁵⁵ Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question*, 76.

⁵⁶ Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 13.

⁵⁷ Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1986), 34.

⁵⁸ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 23.

⁵⁹ Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 117.

⁶⁰ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, 142.