

Edited by **Griselda Pollock** and **Max Silverman**

# CONCENTRATIONARY MEMORIES

totalitarian terror and cultural resistance



I.B. TAURIS

CONCENTRATIONARY  
MEMORIES

*Concentrationary Memories* rests on a provocative, carefully theorized consideration of the nature of the ‘concentrationary’ universe, extending and reframing terms and ideas introduced by Hannah Arendt, on the one hand, and lesser known but significant figures in the French context such as David Rousset, Robert Antelme and Jean Cayrol. As its editors note, the first word of their title is unfamiliar in English, and this is perhaps a sign of the need for renewed and close attention to the phenomenon named by the French writer Rousset in 1946. The volume answers this need with care and a justly high level of critical vigilance. Without deflecting the importance attached to the term holocaust and to the issues and concerns of the racial genocides of the twentieth-century, the volume shifts attention towards the politics of deportation and internment, and pursues vital questions about the adequacy and nature of aesthetic responses, questions which bear upon the nature and concept of representation. A crucial emphasis of the volume is on the ‘permanent presence’ of the concentrationary, since its inception; the volume thus includes powerful and essential analyses of the phenomenon across examples in literature, film and photography since the liberation of the camps, and in varying global contexts. The 11 essays in the volume are supported by an extensive introduction by the editors, a contribution in its own right to ongoing debates about politics and representation, and the politics of representation. Given this focus, the meticulous attention to the presentation of the substantial number of images which feature in the volume is unsurprising, and deserves special recognition. This is a unique project, insofar as it breaks new ground in the establishment of a new object of enquiry and research, and goes some way into the exploration of this territory. The volume makes a substantial contribution to research on the legacies of the political evils of the last century and will be essential reading for anyone concerned with it and by it. The book makes a clear case that this includes all of us.

*Patrick ffrench, King's College London*

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EDITED BY

GRISELDA POLLOCK

and

MAX SILVERMAN

I.B. TAURIS

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## SERIES PREFACE

# CONCENTRATIONARY MEMORIES

## The Politics of Representation

This mini-series is part of the series *New Encounters: Arts, Cultures and Concepts*. It is the product of a collaborative research project in cultural analysis, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England, entitled *Concentrationary Memories and the Politics of Representation*. The series consists of the following titles: *Concentrationary Memories*, *Concentrationary Imaginaries*, *Concentrationary Art*. *Concentrationary Memories* and *Concentrationary Imaginaries* are collections which we have edited and introduced. *Concentrationary Art* presents the first translation into English of two essays by French writer and concentration camp survivor Jean Cayrol, who proposed a new form of art that he named concentrationary art, and two new essays that we have written to accompany them.

The aim of the series is to re-engage with the relations between aesthetics and politics in the aftermath of World War II when the images of the opened concentration camps of Germany and the testimony of their (for the most part) political prisoners/survivors dominated the world's horrified responses. This was a time when the political deportee rather than the racial deportee was the major symbol of victimhood and Buchenwald was more infamous than Auschwitz. The term 'concentrationary' was coined by David Rousset, a returning French political deportee from Buchenwald who wrote an analysis of the system of what he called 'the concentrationary universe'. In 1951 political theorist Hannah Arendt published her substantial analysis of 'evil' in the aftermath of the concentrationary universe, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt showed how the search for total domination has its roots in imperialism, racism and the development of the nation-state and is then realized in its most egregious form in Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. Arendt saw this novel form of totalitarianism as a turning point in history as it unleashed the new reality of total domination, not merely of a territory or its resources, but of 'men', and ushered in the epoch in which, in Rousset's words subsequently adopted by Arendt, 'everything is possible'.<sup>1</sup>

Since that time, the growing recognition of the racially-targeted genocide at the heart of Nazism's atrocities and the engagement with the Jewish (and to a lesser extent

Romani) experience of attempted annihilation have focused attention on the horror now known by the name ‘Holocaust’, whose historiography and commemoration raise a number of challenging philosophical and aesthetic questions. Without wishing to displace Holocaust memory and the terrifying issues it raises about the novel but repeated crime of genocide, we aimed in our project to reintroduce the parallel but eclipsed domain of the concentrationary as a prism through which to examine the relations between the politics of total domination with its systematic destruction of the human, and the self-conscious aesthetic practices which identify and resist that persistent threat.

Our purpose, then, was to consider cultural responses, not to the specific event we now know as the Holocaust but to the larger context within which the genocide occurred, namely totalitarian terror, and also to track the initial forms of response to that system of terror of which, as Arendt said, ‘the concentration camps are the most consequential institution’.<sup>2</sup> In the first part of our project, we devoted 18 months to the study of one film, *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*), made in France in 1955 by Alain Resnais in collaboration with Mauthausen survivor Jean Cayrol and the German socialist composer Hanns Eisler (1898–1962). It was made as a commemorative study of the experience of political deportation. In the process of research for the making of the film, however, the racialized genocide was apparent alongside the system of political terror, yet was not given the prominence that it later acquired. Hence, the film was criticized for insufficiently exposing the genocide of the Jewish and Romani peoples. Our argument resisted this simplification to read its aesthetic structure as the production of a different kind of memory, one which agitates the present to warn us of the continuing threat, not only of genocide but of the experimental elaboration of a system of total domination and systemic dehumanization. We argued that the film delineated a politics of aesthetic resistance to this system of total domination. In our study of the film, now published as *Concentrationary Cinema* (2011), we adopted the term ‘the concentrationary’ to frame our research and speculatively established four aspects of the concentrationary.<sup>3</sup> The first is the concentrationary universe itself, that is Rousset’s term for the political/industrial/military complex which underpins totalitarian rule; the second, concentrationary art, is the term used by Cayrol to define a new art which will register the novelty of the world and the menaced human in the wake of the camps and, consequently, be equipped to challenge its continued presence and reappearance in the future; the third term, concentrationary memory, extends Resnais and Cayrol’s understanding of the persistence of the concentrationary universe in post-war everyday life and registers cultural resistance to and vigilant anxiety around its continued threat in different contexts; the fourth term, concentrationary imaginary, examines the unprocessed and unacknowledged seepage of a totalitarian mentality into the deepest recesses of everyday popular culture.

The first book in this new series, *Concentrationary Memories*, extends the inquiry into art’s response to the concentrationary universe. It assumes that what Cayrol termed ‘the concentrationary disease’ (*la peste concentrationnaire*) which is mentioned at the end of *Night and Fog*, was not simply confined to Nazi Germany

and destroyed along with the fall of the Third Reich, but embraces other sites and times, colonialism and Stalinism being perhaps the two most obvious examples. It also assumed that, like Resnais and Cayrol in *Night and Fog*, other artists have created forms of concentrationary art by identifying and resisting radical terror. In contrast to the ethical imperative of testimonial works on the Holocaust and related questions of the representability of such an event, we believe that concentrationary art and concentrationary memory are more concerned with a political aesthetic of representing and resisting the radical presence of the concentrationary universe and its system of total domination. *Concentrationary Memories* thus has as its premise the proposition that the concentrationary plague is not simply confined to one place and one time but, now unleashed on the world, is a permanent presence shadowing modern life, and that memory (and art in general) must be invoked to show this permanent presence of the past haunting the present so that we can read its signs and counter its deformation of the human. *Concentrationary Memories* applies these ideas to different cultural responses to concentrationary terror in different sites in the post-war period.

In seeking to conjugate the diagnosis of the 'evil' of totalitarianism with modes of critical-aesthetic resistance, *Concentrationary Memories* has to negotiate Theodor Adorno's paradoxical proposition that, although it is barbarity to offer the solace of any aesthetic artefacts to the cultures that 'beat people until the bones break in their bodies' (here Adorno is quoting Sartre), it is nevertheless only in art that the enormity of such suffering can find any voice.<sup>4</sup> Our book seeks to supplement Adorno's perspective with a specific focus on the politics of representational/aesthetic practices. Straddling art, cinema, literature, political theory and philosophy, this focus places the aesthetic in an ethical relation to the political: it is the duty of art to monitor totalitarianism which, first realized in the laboratories of terror of the concentration camps and the gulag, has changed the conditions of all human life. The book includes chapters which, firstly, re-examine the responses by writers, poets, filmmakers, and others involved in the cultural production of memories of the horror of totalitarianism, and, secondly, analyse the works of those who sought to find forms/languages/image systems through which to make sense of and resist this new state which, as Hannah Arendt argued, made 'human beings as human beings superfluous'.<sup>5</sup>

The next title in the series, *Concentrationary Imaginaries*, is based on the second strand of our project. The concentrationary imaginary is the possible realization of Resnais and Cayrol's worst fear, namely that instead of being able to recognize and challenge the continued threat of the concentrationary universe in our midst, our culture has become saturated with its devices and strategies to such an extent that we are largely unaware and ignorant of its presence. In this book we are, therefore, asking whether a failure of concentrationary memory to agitate the present (which it achieved by making us aware of a past that has never passed) could produce an installation of aspects of the totalitarian in the realm of the cultural imaginary. Thus, our major research question, which is the core theme of this book, is as follows: can a concentrationary legacy be located in post-war and contemporary popular

culture in the form of an unconscious and politically unprocessed concentrationary imaginary? This book, informed by but extending the work of Giorgio Agamben and Paul Virilio, who suggest that the camp and war are now the matrices of post-war society, considers the cultural forms and subjectivities that are symptomatic of a concentrationary imaginary. What would be its indices, locations, tropes and affects? The use of the term ‘imaginary’ in the cultural field refers to two elements. The first is a repertoire of images, tropes and formulae that are, often unconsciously or spontaneously, drawn upon in representation. The second is the manner in which a cultural apparatus, relying on processes of identification and misrecognition to lure us as participant spectators and ideologically-interpellated readers, structures subjectivity through the operation of fantasy.

Our question could thus be reformulated as follows: has anything of the historical and political event of the concentrationary universe seeped into the cultural imaginary, the repertoire of images, self-understandings and cultural representations that we encounter through cultural forms? Does anything of the totalitarian mind-set inform elements of contemporary culture, without being fully acknowledged as such? Has the totalitarian mind-set been normalized by narratives, styles, images, attitudes and tropes so that, without the active work of warning performed by an agitating, ever-anxious and haunting memory of a past (one that was simply the beginning of a new terror that could and has been repeated), it has become an integrated part of our cultural repertoire? Refashioned by changing times, is this mind-set now an unmarked presence of an egregious historical event that we should remember to condemn, not use to entertain? Has the concentrationary passed from the political real into culture? Unhinged from its specific historical origins in Nazi camps and Stalinist gulags, does the concentrationary shape the contemporary cultural imaginary like a political unconscious, normalizing narratives of military superpowers enslaving and annihilating its subjected and dispensable others, and accustoming us to unspeakable violence and suffering where arbitrary extinction is no longer murder but wasting, or, worse, just business? Are its once singular images and objects now iconic tropes that glamorize what Susan Sontag called ‘fascinating fascism’? Is our cinematic culture of spectacular violence – as opposed to cultural forms which present violence politically – the iterating imprint on our cultural unconscious of what we were once shown in order to shock and warn us that this must never happen again? Is there a ‘concentrationary imaginary’ in popular cultural forms that exhibits an unconscious assimilation of totalitarian modes of violence through which, as Arendt argues, human beings qua human beings are rendered superfluous? Does this imaginary operate through fantasies of total domination via our specular identification as consumers of films, games and other cultural practices?

These are difficult questions that we wish to raise as a way of plotting a speculative field of enquiry that in turn has no clear signposts. As an imaginary, the concentrationary does not announce itself as such but, nevertheless, may inhabit other spaces. Is it, however, too labile and non-specific? Does the concept merely colonize other existing sites? How is it different from, yet related to, the colonial imaginary, the imaginaries of current urban cultures, of crime and the city, or political

wars on terror, and so forth? What are the signs of ‘concentrationariness’ that may piggyback on other formations? The book addresses these questions by exploring the *concentrationary imaginary* within the wider representation of violence, terror, and criminality. It asks whether a cultural politics of resistance to this imaginary is possible. Is the very act of identifying such a possibility as the *concentrationary imaginary* already a resistance that may reveal contradictions within it? The book investigates the legacies of the concentrationary in diverse forms of contemporary culture, from literature to cinema and video games, and explores the notion of cultural resistance to the threat they present.

The third book in the series, *Concentrationary Art*, presents the ideas of Jean Cayrol on ‘concentrationary art’ to an English-speaking audience for the first time and is accompanied by two new essays by the authors. Cayrol was a surrealist poet and political deportee to Mauthausen concentration camp. He wrote the narrated script for Resnais’s *Night and Fog*, and also collaborated with Resnais on his 1963 film *Muriel, ou le temps d’un retour*. In 1950 he published a book called *Lazare parmi nous*. It is divided into two parts, ‘Les Rêves lazaréens’ and ‘Pour un romanesque lazaréen’ (which had themselves previously been published separately). ‘Pour un romanesque lazaréen’ was then reprinted as ‘De la vie à la mort’ to accompany the publication of Cayrol’s commentary for *Night and Fog* in 1997. In 2007 a complete collection of Cayrol’s writings on the Lazarean was published by Editions du Seuil under the title *Jean Cayrol: Œuvre lazaréenne*. None of Cayrol’s work on the Lazarean has ever been translated into English. Given the importance of Cayrol’s thinking on the development of post-war culture in France, and the centrality of his ideas on concentrationary art to our own thinking about a political aesthetic relating to art and horror in the post-war period, we believe that this book will be essential reading for an English-speaking public with an interest in these areas.

Cayrol uses the Christian figure of a man resurrected miraculously from the dead, Lazarus, as the symbol of the new art after the camps. This art, that he termed both ‘concentrationary art’ and ‘Lazarean art’, will show human life shocked out of its familiar contours through revealing the ‘invisible thread’ that ties it to the presence of death, humanity haunted by its inhuman double, the known always shadowed by the unknowable. Lazarean art, for Cayrol, is therefore founded on a ‘doubling’ (and troubling) effect to cast us into a state of the ‘in-between’. Its duty is to alert us (the unbelieving, those who want to re-establish the comfort of ‘ordinary life’) to a radically altered reality in which the concentrationary cannot be confined to the past but is still present today in different forms and under different guises. Concentrationary art must be able to read the signs of the normalization of the concentrationary universe in everyday life in order to make us constantly vigilant of its ruses. This is a political aesthetic employing the techniques of defamiliarization to allow us to read the terror in our midst.

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE POLITICS OF MEMORY From Concentrationary Memory to Concentrationary Memories

*Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman*

The SS has made the camp the most totalitarian society in existence up to now.

David Rousset, *L'Univers concentrationnaire*  
[*The Concentrationary Universe*] 1946<sup>1</sup>

The term *concentrationary* is an unfamiliar neologism in English. Attached to the noun 'memory', it does not refer to the concentration of memory, focused memory work, or any mental act of concentration. 'Concentrationary', a translation from the French *concentrationnaire*, is a term freighted with a history of political terror and the need for continual vigilance. Attached to memory, the term evokes those aspects of modern history, society and politics that in this book we wish to bring back into contemporary cultural analysis in an expanded vision of intersecting sites of terror and their current legacies. Concentrationary memory is an agitated, agitating, anxious memory, heavy with fears that a terrible event initiated a repeatable possibility in human history. It recognizes that what was generated in the concentration camps in Germany and the countries Germany occupied during World War II must not be buried under the ruins of destroyed crematoria at Auschwitz or effaced from mind by the transformation of innumerable concentration camps into gardens of memory in Germany. It is a memory that purposively erodes divisions between past and present, using specific histories to become a constant probe with which to interrogate the present for any current affinities with absolute horror and aspirations towards total domination. It is a memory aimed at activating the vigilant defence of the dream of a full democracy still to come, one that attends to all the assaults on human dignity, safety and, above all, our defining human plurality. It is neither a particularized memory, nor blandly universalizing. It is attentive *and* speculative, particular *and*

general, perpetually alert to the changing configurations of that menace to the social and political foundations of plurality, spontaneity and creativity. If total domination was the ambition of those who created the horror of the concentrationary system, ‘concentrationary memory’ is the necessary counter-force to that system. It defends and promotes genuine democratic justice and freedom. We have, therefore, chosen the term ‘concentrationary’ as a theoretical framing for a series of studies that overlap with current work on Holocaust memory (our own included), while delineating a different dimension that has both political and aesthetic implications that are distinct from the ethical and commemorative imperatives of Holocaust memory, its focus on uniqueness and specificity, and its spatio-temporal particularity.

### **The concentrationary: Rousset’s take, 1945–46**

The adjective *concentrationnaire*, which we are translating as *concentrationary*, was coined by French political prisoners returning in 1945 as survivors of the *Konzentrationslager*s, the concentration camps of Germany, such as Buchenwald (David Rousset), Gandesheim and Dachau (Robert Antelme) and Mauthausen (Jean Cayrol). These camps – notorious in the immediate post-war period because of their visibility as a result of liberation by the Allies and their immediate photographic and cinematic documentation – were part of a vast system extending across Germany and some of its occupied lands.<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Sofsky calculates that there were over 10,000 concentration camps across Germany by 1945.<sup>3</sup>

In the summer of 1945, Rousset (1912–87) wrote a series of articles in the Parisian press that were published as a book in 1946 under the title *L’Univers concentrationnaire*, and then as a novel in 1947 based on his experiences in Buchenwald entitled *Les Jours de notre mort* [*The Days of our Death*]. *L’Univers concentrationnaire* was translated into English as *The Other Kingdom* in 1947, and again in 1951 as *A World Apart*. In both cases, the specific connotations of his original title were lost to the English-speaking world. Thus, when Alan Sheridan came to translate the adjective ‘concentrationnaire’, used by Jacques Lacan in his 1949 essay on the Imaginary ‘The Mirror Phase’ (which we discuss below), he invented ‘concentrational’ rather than following the logic we are using of translating a French word ending with the suffix *-aire* as the English suffix *-ary* (in the way ‘imaginaire’ becomes ‘imaginary’).<sup>4</sup> We will return to the relation between the imaginary and the concentrationary later in this chapter (see section IV).

The significance of Rousset’s writings, and hence his coining of the term *concentrationary*, lies not in personal testimony of his experience in Buchenwald, where he was sent after arrest by the Gestapo in 1943 and where he was liberated by the Americans in 1945, a man of substantial proportions reduced to a bag of bones. His post-war writings offered, instead, a political reading of the camps, not as localized sites of internment and torture but as symptoms and laboratories of an anti-political system unleashed on the world. We suggest that the term ‘concentrationary’ coined by Rousset designates precisely the novelty and continuing threat of this system. For, despite his clear desire to warn the world about what fascist Germany had done in the camps, and hence done to itself as a society, Rousset was appalled to discover

camp systems still functioning elsewhere after 1945. He was the first to denounce the ‘gulag archipelago’ of Stalin’s Soviet Union. Rousset formed the International Committee against Concentration Camps in 1949, condemning not only Russia and its satellite states but also China and Spain. That we can date the emergence of the term *concentrationary* in French literature and political thought to the period immediately after 1945 means that, in addition to being fundamentally a historically-situated term, it registered a novel historical event that necessitated a new concept to encompass (and, indeed, to resist) what had hitherto not existed, but now had happened, was still present, and could reappear in the future.

This sense that the concentrationary represented a system that was at once political – concerned with power and structural to a regime seeking total domination – and anti-political – seeking to destroy citizenship and all forms of democratically participatory political and individuated cultural life – and that the concentrationary was, thus, not merely a site of terror and murder but needed to be considered in a wider context, was first represented and documented by returning political prisoners, resistance fighters and other victims of German Occupation. They wrote not only to bear witness to the harsh regimes they had personally endured in the camps; they wanted to report on what they had discovered there through recognizing that this regime represented something more than chance sadism and localized carceral abuse. Writers like Rousset delineated a political anatomy of *l’univers concentrationnaire*, the concentrationary universe whose aim was the destruction of the human in conditions where, he argued, ‘everything is possible’.<sup>5</sup>

The concentrationary universe is not only the world of the concentration camps; it is also the total society of which the camps are a symptom, instrument and symbol. The camps are indicative of a society in which thought is deadened, action is programmed, and there is no vigilant anxiety about or active resistance to the absolute corrosion of human singularity and human rights. Rousset identified the concentrationary as an instrument of a totalitarian, anti-democratic political regime that had politically eviscerated its home country:

Here in France, in spite of the occupation, we do not even yet know what terror is, permanent and universal terror. Not only did it crush the old parties morally and physically, but also it got so that everybody was afraid to speak and finally ceased to think. Not only was opposition stamped out, but the classes were disintegrated in their component elements ... Everybody dropped the reins.

The concentration camps left Germany drained of all substance.<sup>6</sup>

He uses the metaphors of ‘gangrene’ and ‘contamination’ to suggest how the camps are a sign of the disease of the whole body politic:

The decomposition of a society and of all the classes of that society, in the fetid stench of destroyed social values, they came to know at first hand, an immediate reality like an ominous shadow threatening the entire planet with a

fate in which all men must share. The evil far outweighs any military triumph. It is the gangrene of a whole economic and social system. Its contamination spreads far beyond the ruins of cities.<sup>7</sup>

Rousset concludes that the camps are a sign not only of the demise of German society but of a deeper systemic threat that exceeds the borders of Germany itself:

The existence of the camps is a warning. German society, both because of the strength of its structure and the violence of the crisis that demolished it, underwent a decomposition that is exceptional even in the present state of affairs. But it would be easy to show that the most characteristic traits of both the SS mentality and the social conditions which gave rise to the Third Reich are to be found in many sectors of world society – less pronounced, it is true, and not developed in any such scale as in the Reich. But it is only a question of circumstances. It would be blindness – and criminal blindness, at that – to believe that, by reason of any difference of national temperament, it would be impossible for any other country to try a similar experiment. Germany interpreted with an originality in keeping with her history, the crisis that led her to the *concentrationary* universe. But the existence and the mechanism of that crisis were inherent in the economic and social foundations of capitalism and imperialism. Under a new guise, similar effects may reappear tomorrow. There remains therefore a very specific war to be waged.<sup>8</sup>

This statement is exemplary of what we are calling concentrationary memory. Rousset's argument is not about commemoration of the suffering of the concentrationees as martyrs to a foreign oppressor. He links the camps he has experienced from within – and which scar him viscerally with that extremity of experience – with the society in which they were built and the system of total domination which they have unleashed. The camps are thus to be read in particular and general terms; the domestic corruption of German society is a lesson for humanity as a whole. Rousset reveals the synergy between the inside and outside of the camp to suggest that the concentrationary universe is not simply confined behind the barbed wire and contained within the inhuman acts of the SS: "The existence of the camps is a warning' ... "There remains, therefore, a very specific war to be waged."<sup>9</sup>

Concentrationary memory derived from texts such as Rousset's is monitory and vigilant. It addresses the invisible but present infection that corrupts a polity. It refuses boundaries that enclose the past as an event of history; it speaks, instead, of leakage and contamination to which the present must become alert. This is not paranoia but an urgency born of understanding that the horror of the camps is not exclusively enclosed within those sites. Concentrationary memory generates a heightened awareness, created out of actual concentrationary experience, which is sceptical of compartmentalizing horror. It sees its presence within everyday life, and, therefore, does not necessarily bear the visible signs of the camp to mark it out. The detection of these signs is crucial to the defence of democracy and freedom.

The voices of political analysts returning from the camps, like that of Rousset, were a sign of French resistance to fascism. They should not, however, simply be assimilated into the narrative of heroic resistance by the French nation to collaboration and occupation (which was the case in the aftermath of the war), for then we fail to comprehend their true import. They were a warning to the post-war world of what lurks within our midst and has not been destroyed with the defeat of Nazi Germany. They cast a shadow over post-war, consumer-driven modernization, with its eye trained steadfastly on the future, by disturbing the new comfort zone of bourgeois society. These voices should be linked not to myths of the nation but to other political analyses, such as Eugen Kogon's *Der SS Staat* and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which define the concentrationary universe as a novel political system and continuing menace.<sup>10</sup> Our aim in this book is to re-position the concept of the concentrationary in this context. We wish to use it as a prism for the analysis of cultural responses to horror in twentieth-century political history, which fall outside, but complement, the paradigm and concerns of Holocaust Memory.

### **Concentration camps:**

#### **A historical digression with representational repercussions**

In order to fully understand the concept of the concentrationary as used by Rousset, and the way in which we are linking it here to memory, it is first necessary to clarify an important distinction between the concentration camps and the extermination camps. This will allow us to disentangle the confusion in representation that has taken place, by which an iconography and memory of the Holocaust have, in fact, been constructed on the basis of images drawn from the concentration camps.

Having been invented by the Spanish in Cuba in the late nineteenth century, and used by the British in their war against the Boers in 1899–1902 and the German colonial rulers of Namibia against the Herero between 1904–08, concentration camps were instituted on German soil immediately after the overthrow of the Weimar constitution in March 1933 by the National Socialist party.<sup>11</sup> Under the Third Reich that was then established as a dictatorship, camps were run initially by the paramilitary arm of the party, the SA; by 1935 the system was placed under the SS, directly reporting to Himmler and Hitler. The fluctuating population of these camps rose from about 4,000 in 1933, when the incoming National Socialists aimed to eradicate all domestic political opposition amongst Communists, trade unionists, and other opponents of fascism, to a peak after the persecution of German Jewish men in November 1938, to fall again by 1940 and to rise once more to over 700,000 by January 1945. During these years, the function of the camps changed due to both planned strategies and contingent necessities.<sup>12</sup> The names of a few of the major camps have become notorious: Dachau (the first to be founded on 22 March 1933), Sachsenhausen (established 1936), Ravensbrück (primarily for women), Oranienburg, Natzweiler-Struthof (1941–44), Neuengamme (1938), Flossenbürg (1938), Gross-Rosen (1940), Mittelbau-Dora (1943), Buchenwald (1937), Bergen-Belsen (1943), Vaihingen (aka Wiesengrund 1943), Mauthausen-Gusen (1938).<sup>13</sup> Some of these camps, like Ravensbrück, were the personal property of Heinrich

Himmler, who leased them back to the state in return for allowances for each prisoner (a practice which became extremely profitable to the camp proprietor). Historian Wolfgang Sofsky calculates that 1.6 million people were admitted into the *concentrationary* system between 1933 and 1945, and that 1.2 million died in the frightful conditions of starvation, overwork and brutality that characterized its regime.<sup>14</sup> Many were in forced labour camps; some, like Mauthausen, the notorious camp in Austria, formally practised the policy of *Vernichtung durch Arbeit*, annihilation by labour. This was reserved for political resisters in occupied countries deported to the camps under the rubric of *Nacht und Nebel* [Night and Fog], the decree of 7 December 1941 by which political prisoners would be made to ‘disappear’ as if into night and fog, that is, they would be removed to camps without any possibility of being traced or rescued.

Concentration camps expanded and contracted over 12 years, and were at their largest and fullest when the Allies liberated them in 1945. Their inmates had, in many cases, been abandoned by the SS weeks before, leaving massed prisoners starving, scarcely living amidst the piles of the very recent dead, and without medical or any other kind of aid. It is this image of the walking corpse and the abandoned, unburied corpses of the liberated concentration camps in Germany that were first circulated in the press and newsreels. These images – first associated with what was initially named ‘Nazi atrocities’, then with war crimes and crimes against humanity at the Nuremberg tribunals – have more recently come to represent the genocide of European Jewry that is now called the Holocaust. Yet the paradox of this post-war evolution in the naming and representing of the event is that the Holocaust as such *did not happen in concentration camps*, although it is precisely those camps that have become, in common memory, its iconic sites.

The Third Reich murdered in total about 6 million Jewish Europeans and about 300,000–500,000 Romani people. Some of the mass killings of Jews took place in parts of the Soviet Union through shooting, while attrition in the appalling conditions in the ghettos also created a vast death toll. Specialized death camps were not the single sites of the genocide. In a polemical intervention in *The New York Review of Books* in 2009, Harvard historian Timothy Snyder challenged the ways in which memory of the Holocaust uses Auschwitz as its central image or metaphor. According to Snyder, this is first of all a distortion of the full history of the genocide itself:

The very reasons that we know something about Auschwitz warp our understanding of the Holocaust: we know about Auschwitz because there were survivors, and there were survivors because Auschwitz was a labor camp as well as a death factory. These survivors were largely West European Jews, because Auschwitz is where West European Jews were usually sent. After World War II, West European Jewish survivors were free to write and publish as they liked, whereas East European Jewish survivors, if caught behind the iron curtain, could not. In the West, memoirs of the Holocaust could (although very slowly) enter into historical writing and public consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

Snyder, therefore, suggests that Auschwitz as a symbol of the Holocaust is problematic:

... [it] excludes those who were at the center of the historical event. The largest group of Holocaust victims – religiously Orthodox and Yiddish-speaking Jews of Poland, or, in the slightly contemptuous German term, *Ostjuden* – were culturally alien from West Europeans, including West European Jews. To some degree, they continue to be marginalized from the memory of the Holocaust. The death facility Auschwitz-Birkenau was constructed on territories that are today in Poland, although at the time they were part of the German Reich. Auschwitz is thus associated with today's Poland by anyone who visits, yet relatively few Polish Jews and almost no Soviet Jews died there. The two largest groups of victims are nearly missing from the memorial symbol.<sup>16</sup>

For Snyder, a different, or at least an enlarged, perspective is needed to grasp the full scale of the horror of racially-targeted genocide to incorporate the slaughter that was not connected with such a hybrid camp space as Auschwitz:

An adequate vision of the Holocaust would place Operation Reinhard, the murder of the Polish Jews in 1942, at the center of its history. Polish Jews were the largest Jewish community in the world, Warsaw the most important Jewish city. This community was exterminated at Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibor. Some 1.5 million Jews were killed at those three facilities, about 780,863 at Treblinka alone. Only a few dozen people survived these three death facilities. Belzec, though the third most important killing site of the Holocaust, after Auschwitz and Treblinka, is hardly known. Some 434,508 Jews perished at that death factory, and only two or three survived. About a million more Polish Jews were killed in other ways, some at Chelmno, Majdanek, or Auschwitz; many more shot in actions in the eastern half of the country.<sup>17</sup>

Yet even this necessary corrective concerning the much less renowned sites in which the mass murder was carried out is insufficient:

All in all, as many if not more Jews were killed by bullets as by gas, but they were killed by bullets in easterly locations that are blurred in painful remembrance. The second most important part of the Holocaust is the mass murder by bullets in eastern Poland and the Soviet Union. It began with SS *Einsatzgruppen* shootings of Jewish men in June 1941, expanded to the murder of Jewish women and children in July, and extended to the extermination of entire Jewish communities that August and September. By the end of 1941, the Germans (along with local auxiliaries and Romanian troops) had killed a million Jews in the Soviet Union and the Baltics. That is the equivalent of the total number of Jews killed at Auschwitz during the entire war. By the end of 1942, the Germans (again, with a great deal of local assistance) had shot

another 700,000 Jews, and the Soviet Jewish populations under their control had ceased to exist.<sup>18</sup>

Snyder's observations raise significant issues for forms of memory as well as for the politics of representation. The Holocaust as racially-targeted mass murder took place in the open on the Eastern front under Operation Barbarossa and in a few secret sites of mass extermination of Jewish and Romani victims in Poland. In 1941–42, the SS was charged with creating a small number of specialized extermination camps in which just over 2 million innocent people were murdered. Never having been liberated, these sites and their procedures are almost without documentation or visual representation. As Snyder points out, there were only four dedicated sites built to carry out the Final Solution of the Jewish Question; *Aktion/Operation Reinhard* would implement the minuted policy affirmed at the conference at Wannsee on 21 January 1942. The three new camps, all in Poland, were Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor, which joined Chelmno, where gassing of Jews by carbon monoxide in closed commercial trucks had begun on 7 December 1941. By mid-1943, these camps had been destroyed, forested over or farmed in order to remove all traces and evidence. These four sites were not visible in 1945 and remain much less known today as memorial sites or the locus of pilgrimage and tourism. As death factories, they yielded no more than a handful of survivors. Some were escapees from the successful revolts at Treblinka and Sobibor (closed down because of the uprising of the work details). Others survived despite being injured in the final executions of the remaining work details. Few of them wrote testimonies to the extermination camps. In contrast, the vast number of extant *concentration camps* in Germany, witnessed by the Allies and the press in 1945, were bursting with dying and dead prisoners. Only a small number of these men and women were Jewish. Their presence in the German camps was a result of being death-marched east from Auschwitz to hide them from the advancing Red Army, which discovered the Auschwitz complex in January 1945, or they had been sent to slave labour sites such as the underground munitions factory Mittlebau-Dora. The populations of the concentration camps were highly varied and international.

Thus it was that images and journalistic reportage of the final stages of the abandoned and disintegrating concentration camps on German soil came to function as the predominant iconography of the cultural memory of the clandestine genocidal event that eventually came to be known as the Holocaust. If the name 'Holocaust' denotes, apart from war crimes and general atrocity, the specific genocidal assault on European Jewry and the Roma peoples, that genocide did not take place in those camps, like Bergen-Belsen, that have acquired iconic status, however, as its image. Extermination left no corpses. The notorious and replayed images of the massed bodies of abandoned dead and dying were the residue of the *concentrationary* system. The meaning of these images needs to be re-contextualized, rather than confused and conflated with (or substituted for) a mass murder whose specificity is the absence of traces, the lack of survivors and the disappearance of the bodies.

To insist on the geographical and functional difference between a concentration and an extermination camp might seem a questionable corrective, or even a mere footnote to history, in the light of the collective horror of genocide at the heart of Europe in the mid-twentieth century. We argue, however, that there is much more at stake in this difficult attempt to distinguish the iconic images of massed corpses of diseased and starved people in Bergen-Belsen and Dachau from the terrible reality of the mass murder on an industrial scale of over 2 million men, women and children that took place out of sight, its evidence systematically erased.<sup>19</sup> For example, one of the effects arising from the representation of the victims of a hidden mass murder through abject images of humiliated corpses and walking skeletons has been the politics of ‘resistance to representation’ practised by Claude Lanzmann in the making of his nine-and-a-half-hour film *Sboab* (1985). This film returned to the secret, abandoned, sometimes planted-over, and hence now invisible, sites of Chelmno and *Aktion Reinhard* camps like Treblinka and Sobibor, to film the present-day landscapes populated with the faces of Polish bystanders, rare surviving Jewish victims (five), and German perpetrators, but resolutely refusing to use any archival footage and imagery. But what footage was he refusing to include? The archive that, predominantly, has been used to create the popular image of the Holocaust is drawn from the concentrationary universe. By distinguishing between the concentration and extermination camps, we would argue, therefore, that Lanzmann could not refuse to use material (images of the extermination camps) that did not exist. Hence, the heated debate about the representation of the Holocaust could be said to be founded on misrepresentation. Lanzmann’s refusal of the archive was, in fact, a refusal of the *concentrationary* archive above all; as such his film is a considered stand against the misuse of images that might enable viewers to envisage mass death, and indulge in sadistic voyeurism of the helpless victims. Focusing on a politics of representation grounded in the difference between concentration camps and temporary sites of mass murder moves the debate to the distinction between the politics of the representation of horror and the aesthetics of the representation of absence (the latter being what Jacques Rancière identifies in Lanzmann’s film<sup>20</sup>).

The other major reason for making this distinction is to bring back into focus the destruction of the human that is the ambition of the concentrationary universe. The conflation between the concentrationary and the exterminatory can hide from view the radical nature and long-term legacy of this experiment in ‘total domination’. The footage and imagery of the liberation of the concentration camps contain something that encompasses but goes beyond ‘Nazi atrocity’, namely, an anti-political and dehumanizing project that can only inspire the viewer with the horror of such disfigurement of fellow beings.

### **The politics of representation:**

#### **Holocaust memory and concentrationary memory**

Our insistence on the need to distinguish between the concentrationary and the exterminatory is to clarify a different politics of representation and different forms of memory appropriate to each. The specification of the concentrationary as

a novel, (anti-)political form has a particular political significance relevant to our present situation, as well as to the reading of the history and culture of the latter part of the twentieth century. The conflation of the concentrationary universe and the Holocaust can hide both these from view. Our previous volume, entitled *Concentrationary Cinema*, on the politics of representation in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955), attempted to highlight the post-war battleground of representation at play. The tensions between two different forms of memory are embedded in the film itself: the initial aim to commemorate the experience and suffering of deported political resistance fighters was complicated by the materials discovered during research for the film which disclosed the calculated planning and execution of the racially-targeted mass murder of the European Jewish communities. How should we read this tension? Some have condemned Resnais and his film for failing to see and show the Jewish tragedy; others trace subtle inscriptions in the film that indicate his full awareness of the racist assault. Our aim in *Concentrationary Cinema* was to use the prism of the concentrationary to make sense of both the tensions within the film and its relevance as a different kind of memory work from that which has become known as the memory of the Holocaust. The present discussion seeks to clarify this distinction further.

These two forms of cultural memory are not in competition but, as we suggest above, they should be distinguished from each other. Holocaust memory is about a unique event that involved the massacre of two racially-targeted European minorities and called forth from the world community the definition of a novel crime: genocide, and the subsequent definition of crimes against humanity. Holocaust memory not only commemorates the appalling destruction of European Jewry and its millennia-old civilization in Europe, but demands a new attention to the rupture in humanity's troubled histories that racist genocide represents, shattering the assumptions and foundations of every field of thought and practice from theology to aesthetics. It demands constant reflection on the repercussions for humanity hereafter.

The concentrationary as a system, however, with the camp as its locus and symbol, historically stretches back into European imperial wars and extends beyond Germany and its satellites between 1933–45 into the post-war German Democratic Republic (East Germany), Stalin's gulags, South African townships, Argentina's ESMA, Chilean secret prisons and stadia, and even beyond these politically-specific sites.

The analysis of the concentrationary gives rise to two fundamental features of the cultural memory that shapes it. The first is the deadly proximity of horror and the everyday, and the fragility of the boundaries that we imagine keep them apart. This is represented cinematically by the opening shots of *Night and Fog*, where the camera, installed inside the camp perimeter at Auschwitz-Birkenau, films the tranquil pastoral scenes of fields and roads, only to pan down or across and reveal the lines of barbed wire that both demarcate the camp from the world outside, and reveal the permeability of those demarcation lines. These are not worlds apart; as Rousset says, the camp is at once a demarcated zone and a defining feature of the society in which it functions. It is, therefore, both exception and exemplar.

The second feature of concentrationary memory is a permeability of a different order: that of time rather than space. Concentrationary memory does not isolate a single, singular, and exceptional event in the past; it draws attention, instead, to seepage and leakage of the political, or rather anti-political, menace that was once incarnated in these places at that time. The threat arises not from exceptionality but from a gesture of innovation that created a new model that becomes a future possibility: that of total domination. If, as Rousset and Arendt acknowledge, this gesture ensures that now ‘everything is possible’, the *human* being can be rendered superfluous, the body can be subjected to a process of total attrition, then this means that a new model is available which cannot be contained within one time. If genocide has rightly been defined as a crime against humanity in terms of removing whole communities, the totalitarian experiment undertaken through the system of German *Konzentrationslager* waged a total war on the human within the human person.

This does not lead to a simplistic opposition between Holocaust and concentrationary memory. Such a misreading would suggest that Holocaust memory addresses the eradication of a group on the basis of ethnocultural specificity (the Jews were killed for being Jewish, the Romani for being Romani, according to a racialized ideology), while concentrationary memory departicularizes through engagement with a universalizing notion of humanity, hence repeating the gesture of annihilation that Holocaust memory resists. Our distinction between the two forms of memory refutes crude formulations of this kind.

If Holocaust memory focuses on the exceptional and demands ‘Never again!’, concentrationary memory is monitory and says ‘Watch for the signs!’. Concentrationary memory draws attention to a political logic of *terror* and a radical threat to democratic society. The concentration camp system in Germany and in Stalin’s Gulags introduced into modernity the possibility not of liquidation of a targeted other in mass, and sometimes industrialized, genocide. According to Arendt, it experimentally pursued the destruction of the human in the living human being. The figure of the *Muselmann* – the living corpse, the body in which most signs of human life (personality, memory, language, will and identity) have been effaced<sup>21</sup> – is the key figure of concentrationary memory. The texts of concentrationary memory deal not with the systematic ‘production of corpses’ – Hannah Arendt’s term for the extermination camps – but with the horror of still living corpses. This is what Primo Levi asks the world to consider in his poem *Shemà!* of 1946: ‘If this is a Man’.<sup>22</sup> The extermination camp subjects its victims to immediate death, often within the hour of arrival at the extermination point. Its space is void of life, attended only by a small work detail and its SS guards. In the concentration camp, however, death is not the main object; terror and the enactment of the terrifying idea that humans *qua* human beings can become superfluous are its purpose and its legacy. This understanding depends on recognizing that Primo Levi is not only a writer of Holocaust literature: *If This is a Man* can also be read as an analysis of the concentrationary *qua* system, working not like the gas vans or gas chambers and the crematoria to destroy victims by immediate death, but to submit inmates to a prolonged process of psychological disintegration, reduction to bare life and, hence, to becoming a living corpse. In his

final book *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi, anguished at the failure of the society around him to honour the memory of the camps and the gas chambers, wrote:

Remember that the concentration camp system even from its origins (which coincide with the rise to power of Nazism in Germany) had as its primary purpose the shattering of the adversaries' capacity to resist.<sup>23</sup>

Here Levi registers a different kind of destruction of both the individual and the polity to that constituted by mass extermination. Our attempt to 'recover' the concentrationary is premised on registering this other form of destruction in which a space is systematically produced to maximize the assault on the inmates so that a death that would be desired as an escape from the living torture is, in fact, denied the inmate.

The legacy, not the system itself, of the experiment of total domination and the destruction of the human is still with us today. This experiment, therefore, requires a different form of memory – concentrationary memory – to register the transformed landscape of the post-war period initiated by the creation of a concentrationary universe. Let us be clear, however: the distinction between the concentrationary and the exterminatory is not absolute and, indeed, cannot be sustained in certain spaces, notably, as we have seen, in that most iconic and misunderstood of loci of horror, Auschwitz. Yet it is vital for the honour of the victims of both systems, to which Primo Levi gives particularly vivid and analytical witness, that we open up the fold which overlays the concentrationary and the exterminatory, for these have become conflated in recent years.

Intellectual fashion has turned its back on the concept of humanity and the hawks of cultural theory have outlawed the word 'human', fearing, rightly, that its former usage as a term of universalization concealed within it an oppressive politics of disowned power relations around race, class and gender. Particularity, reaching its extreme in fractious identity politics since the 1980s, has been the order of cultural analysis. Those who had to struggle hard to break open falsely universalizing terms and claim recognition of diversity, difference and specificity are justly suspicious of any 'return' to generalizing claims. Concentrationary memory, however, dares knowingly to re-engage with the question of the human as it was described, in the aftermath of the concentrationary assault upon it, in the located and politically-sensitive writings by post-war analysts of the concentrationary universe, most notably Hannah Arendt. Arendt, we know, was never really touched by the emergence of postcolonial, feminist, queer or other critiques of false universalization and generic humanism, despite being a very astute reader of Jewish cultural predicaments in European culture and of the racisms that emerged in colonial encounters. Nevertheless, her writings on camps, totalitarianism and what she came to theorize in the mid-1950s, in the wake of her work on totalitarianism, as 'the human condition' – the title of her major book published in 1958 – continue to demand a measure of critical re-reading as they courageously perceived the dangers of compensatory nationalisms and defensive particularities at the same time as forcing us to recognize Nazism's

deep roots in European imperialism. Thus, Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* re-reads the preconditions of the Third Reich's excesses in European colonialism/imperialism and nationalism (but not to explain Nazi genocide away as merely identical with, or caused by, that past) in order to reflect on the novel post-Third Reich, post-Stalinist era in which we collectively have to live with what is no longer exceptional. In *Shemà!* Levi thunders at us to know that 'this has been'. As such, the camp is not, like the death factory, exceptional; it was, in fact, a beginning, the initiation of a novel possibility, experimentally realized under Hitler and Stalin, but now available as a potential political strategy to create other concentrationary universes, for example in Chile and Argentina.

We believe that the evolution of narratives surrounding events of World War II should now be extended to encompass an understanding of overlapping but distinct histories of the concentrationary universe and the extermination of racialized communities. There is no doubt that, initially, in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of the camps in 1945 and for the following decade and more, the focus on so-called Nazi atrocities in the concentration camps did have the effect of marginalizing the specificity of Jewish and Romani suffering, and hence of not fully acknowledging the genocide that had taken place.<sup>24</sup> This is despite evidence of a huge outpouring of Jewish writing and some non-Jewish studies in the first decade after 1945.<sup>25</sup> The small publication runs in the 1940s of what later became key texts, such as those by Primo Levi or Anne Frank, indicate that publishers did not foresee a market for this material. Few films were made, fewer museums built, and it is only with certain internationally-transmitted media events like the televised Eichmann Trial in 1961 and the TV series *Holocaust* in 1979 that the cultural memory of the Holocaust, as we understand it today, was established on a general scale internationally. As scholars who have researched, published and taught for many years in the area now known as Holocaust Studies, we are intensely aware of the political stakes in the emergence of this cultural memory and are certainly not advocating either a return to a time of forgetting of the specificity of the genocide or that Holocaust memory is simply a particular instance of a generalized crime. We believe, however, that exclusive address to the exterminatory crimes of the Third Reich has caused aspects of what was valuably foregrounded in the immediate aftermath of 1945 to fall out of the frame of attention. We have, therefore, lost sight of the concentrationary presence in modern and colonial, as well as late modern and postcolonial, societies at the level of actual totalitarian political systems, and often fail to identify this continued presence in aspects of the cultural and political imaginaries and subjectivities within democratic societies.<sup>26</sup>

By the same token, we argue that the term 'Holocaust' has now become a confusing umbrella, encompassing different kinds of experience under Nazi totalitarianism. Under the rubric of Holocaust literature, for instance, writings of non-Jewish political deportees are studied alongside those confronted with the policy of extermination, thus confusing racially-targeted genocidal destruction and eradication of political opposition.<sup>27</sup> It is now common to find in the media a use of images of concentration camps as if they directly represented the places