Looking without Seeing
Visual Literacy in Light of Holocaust Photography

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Abstract • The Holocaust was one of the most photographed genocides of the twentieth century. Since 1945, images from the liberation of the camps were used as shaming and shocking instruments of visual denazification. Many decades later, these icons are still used in educational contexts such as school textbooks, exhibitions, and documentaries and are presented almost exclusively as mere illustrations and not as independent sources. By approaching the image as a source, this contribution reflects on the different ways of looking at and seeing Holocaust photography. By moving from a purely emotional and illustrative approach to a more integrated visual approach, the complex dynamics underlying the Holocaust and the timeless mechanisms of totalitarianism (victimization, perpetration, and implication) can be better understood.

Keywords • genocide, icons, looking/seeing, photography, rehumanization, re-pluralization

The photographic representation of the Holocaust does not give a comprehensive account of the historical events which photographic narratives generally lead us to believe; that is not possible. Photographs are fragments. They illustrate stories, they do not tell them. It has been left to curators, filmmakers, historians and propagandists to determine how they are interpreted.

—Janina Struk, Photographing the Holocaust

Instead of the truth, however, the reader will find moments of truth, and these moments are actually the only means of articulating this chaos of viciousness and evil. The moments arise unexpectedly like oases out of the desert. They are anecdotes, and they tell in utter brevity what it was all about.

—Hannah Arendt, introduction to Bernd Naumann’s Auschwitz

In this article I focus on the visual history of Holocaust photography in broader political and educational contexts. My aim is to provide an overview of how the use of Holocaust imagery has evolved and what theoretical frameworks might be useful to textbook authors, publishers, curators, and educators. Thus, I hope to arrive at more nuanced and layered perspectives (multi-perspectivity) that allow us to see the complex interplay of (f)actors that leads to the mechanisms of violence rather than just the symbolic blame and shame tactics.
Seeing Is Believing (and Shaming): The Emergence of “Icons of Destruction”

In April and May 1945 Western Allies liberated the camps in central Germany. These places were crowded with prisoners because of the many evacuations through death marches and death trains to the center of the country. What the Western Allied soldiers discovered in camps such as Dachau, Buchenwald, Nordhausen, Gardelegen, and Bergen-Belsen went beyond human imagination. In an attempt to document this gruesome reality, as much as possible would be captured on film. The longstanding narratives of terror and what had been limited visual representations were suddenly given an unprecedented visual counterpart that continues to dominate our view to this day. It is important to note that on the Soviet side, there was already a larger body of growing visual evidence of Nazi atrocities since 1942. The advancing Soviet army discovered and recorded a wide range of Nazi crimes that were used visually in war propaganda publications. These images of horror from the earlier and final phases of the Holocaust form an important visual legacy that still disrupts and dominates our perception. Seeing these atrocity images for the first time was for Susan Sontag a “negative epiphany.” For her, 1945 was the year that the power of photography transcended all possible narratives. From the liberation of the camps to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it was a year that provided images that words could not describe.

The horrific images from that liberation period and recovered perpetrator images taken earlier during ghettoization and the “Holocaust by bullets,” as well as those made by the photographic department (Erkennungsdienst) in the camps, index a reality that still has a profound effect on our perception of the destructive potential of mankind today. They also raise many questions about what we see, what effects they have, and how we should deal with these images. The images shock (especially on first viewing), they induce emotions such as guilt and shame but also attract voyeurism and sensationalism. It is clear that these images do not remain without effect. However, we can question the dominant status of some (series) of these photos and ask whether we really use them in a way that teaches something. Do we really see what there is to see or what is specifically absent from the image? To learn from images, we must ask ourselves if we have the analytical toolkits, media skills, and knowledge of historical context to be able to read them and search for additional clues to understand the complex interplay of (f)actors. We must ask ourselves if we can use these images as representations in history textbooks, documentaries, and exhibitions. How can we prevent the dehumanizing gaze of the perpetrator from spreading and harming survivors (or relatives of victims) again? And how can we use them in such a way that they provide useful insights to better judge, think, and take responsibility for the past and future? The first step in this process is bridging our intuitive
discomfort and choosing to look at these visual “moments of truth” and to focus our attention on what can be seen and what cannot.

At the time of their production, these liberation images were a means of addressing public disbelief and personal discomfort upon discovery. The feelings of “disgust and contempt” experienced by the Allied soldiers and leaders would finally translate into a widespread and forced campaign of “optical denazification.” Local populations in the vicinity of the camps were forced to look the horror directly in the eye. Other cities and towns were bombarded with guilt-inducing posters and picture reports from concentration camps in hundreds of thousands of copies. Under the not-so-veiled titles “These shameful deeds: your guilt!” or “Whose fault?” atrocity images from the camps were displayed in the streets, and collective responsibility was placed on the entire German population. Prisoners of war and the population of towns like Minden and Burgsteinfurt were forced to watch atrocity films from the camps in local cinemas. Not only was forced viewing of atrocity films part of the shame- and guilt-inducing tactics, but the inhabitants themselves were also objects of observation, and their facial expressions and reactions were photographed and filmed. “Seeing was identical to being seen.” A smile was considered “a very clever smile” that could not be trusted; radio commercials on the American soldiers’ station warned about laughing “fraternizing Nazis.” Any outward sign of indifference or aloofness was also interpreted as coming from their hateful nature. It earned the town of Burgsteinfurt the telling title of “The Village of Hate” in the British military magazine Soldier.

This attempt at visual denazification was certainly not without impact, but it did not result in what was intended. Hannah Arendt reported on this in The Aftermath of Nazi Rule—Report from Germany and described the apathy and aphasia (the impossibility of giving language to the event), characteristic of a Germany that lay in ruins and suddenly became the country of perpetrators par excellence because of the discoveries made in the camps. According to Arendt, the “gravest single error” was to lump everyone together and use rather indiscriminate horror or shock photography to kick the Germans’ conscience into gear. This was something that the Allied forces already knew some months after the first large-scale distributions of posters, pamphlets, magazines, and specific photo sets showing the gruesome imagery. In June 1945, the sociologist Morris Janowitz gauged the German reactions to the visual campaign on Nazi atrocities. Janowitz was an intelligence officer with the Psychological Warfare Division and studied the effects of one month of this visual campaign in the British and American sectors. He concluded that “although major political developments have occurred in occupied Germany, the civilian opinion on German atrocities has, in the interim, undergone no significant changes.” He discovered that the willingness
to accept the Allied atrocity imagery was linked to regional differences in Nazification and education levels, that most Germans did believe the stories of the camps, but there was still a high degree of isolation and lack of information. The blame for the crimes was mainly placed on the SS or the Nazi party. This was later reinforced by the Nuremberg trials, which labeled the SS and the Gestapo as criminal organizations and thus provided the wider German society with an alibi. This also meant that feelings of guilt were hardly ever produced. And when there was shame, it could be seen more as a personal reaction without feelings of co-responsibility. The initial lack of distinction between moral and legal guilt was undoubtedly part of the reason for this. In short, the atrocity campaign had failed. As rapid political changes ushered in a cold war, the argument grew that the Western Allies had better stop emphasizing German collective guilt if they wanted to counter the growing influence of Stalin.

In contrast to this visual campaign, Eugen Kogon wrote down his detailed analysis of the Nazi system from his years of experience as a camp prisoner in Buchenwald. He focused on the “whole system,” which he called the “Gorgon Medusa” that makes you grow pale and stiff when you look into its face. His early publication, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System behind Them* was purely textual. It was based on an initial report written in collaboration with fellow prisoners and the Psychological Warfare Division in Buchenwald, commissioned by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces. After a detailed analysis of the structures, organizational components, mechanisms, and patterns that led to the violence, Kogon also speaks clearly about the thesis of German collective guilt and the social shock due to the fact that everyone was accused of being guilty. According to him, “the ‘shock’ policy did not awaken the forces of the German conscience, but the forces of defense against the accusation that they were jointly responsible for the National Socialist outrages.” In Kogon’s words, “the outcome is a fiasco.” “Optical denazification” certainly had an impact within the emotional and relational domain, yet it contributed little to a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms and (historical-social) dynamics that had given rise to the escalation of totalitarianism and collective violence. More than seventy years later, Cornelia Brink emphasized again that the images of liberation remained largely undeciphered and therefore misunderstood. In the intervening decades, they became icons that merely symbolized the horror that the Allies discovered during the liberation. They canonized a specific moment in history in a very affective and relational way, without looking at it as an additional but limited source to map out the “whole system.” The result was that these “icons of destruction” contributed to the well-known dynamics of othering and belonging that have a sim-
plified and centrifugal effect of more clearly separating friend from foe or victor from loser. The reaction is therefore apathetic and aphasic, both then and today. Shocking without analyzing and understanding results in a numbing or shut-down effect. It prevents us from naming the mechanisms at play and contributes little to the analysis of the complex interplay of (f)actors that lead to this escalation of violence. Also, these images of atrocities often showed atrocities without perpetrators. The absence of the perpetrators and implicated persons in these atrocity images also means that many can evade responsibility. Only “die SS ist Schuld!” (the SS is guilty!). From the simplified and binary framework of perpetrators versus victims, many shades of implication are lost in understanding the complex interplay of (f)actors. Ordinary Germans cannot be seen in the photos, so they claimed that they did not commit these acts and therefore bore no responsibility. Brink is therefore quite right in saying that “the visible makes us blind.” These “icons of destruction” have enabled us to look away from the complex, highly networked, and multi-layered responsibilities, preventing Holocaust imagery from being regarded as visual sources or anecdotes that could complement decades of insights in the field of Holocaust studies. Although early studies such as Eugen Kogon’s book The Theory and Practice of Hell attempted to outline the system in detail, it was mainly the image that stuck. The Gorgon Medusa had captured the horror of twelve years of National Socialism as a limited series of frozen images taken during the liberation period. In the face of the unimaginable, these “icons of destruction” apparently speak louder than a thousand words. It is essential that we learn from the failed “optical denazification” and avoid making similar mistakes in educational contexts by not focusing on understanding the whole system that led to the collective violence, due to the affective power and dynamics these atrocity images have.

A Walk in the (Wilton) Park

Wilton Park was a unique British experiment in denazification that was diametrically opposed to the visual and guilt-inducing methodology widely adopted in the immediate aftermath of the war. Already in 1943, Winston Churchill asked several ministries to come up with a plan to promote a later democratic cooperation with Germany. The question was how such a program of “re-education” should take shape and for which target group it was intended. Thus, the German prisoners of war were divided into three categories: (a) the “Whites” or active anti-Nazis, (b) the “Grays” or followers, and (c) the “Blacks” or convinced Nazis. The largest group of followers (compliant Germans) was the main target group. The most important goal was the “eradication of the authoritarian
and militarist outlook imbued in the POWs by upbringing and propaganda.” The unique method of encouraging democratic citizenship was to open “a new school” at Wilton Park in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. With a program of six-week courses, the aim was the “opening of the windows of the mind.”

David Welch, who is critical of the (visual) denazification programs after the Second World War, attributes much of the success of Wilton Park to the first director and founder of the program, Heinz Koeppler. This “tall and energetic Oxford don of German ancestry” had himself experienced the “evils of nationalist excess” and was one of the greatest British specialists in understanding the German history that led to National Socialism.

Koeppler believed that the years of indoctrination into National Socialist and militaristic beliefs could best be addressed by moving away from “guilt mobilization” and investing in what he called “pump-priming.” Wilton Park’s mission was “to teach them how to teach themselves” or teaching them how to use their minds again and invest in multiplier effects. Presumably because of Koeppler’s background and expertise, much attention was given to analyzing how certain processes from the past had given rise to the Third Reich. From this systemic perspective, Koeppler was convinced that the conditions that made this possible were “by no means dead today.” Great importance was also attached to the way in which such a program should proceed. Principles such as equality, focusing on the past, moving away from guilt mobilization, and continually engaging in dialogue “to discuss the things that divide us” were central to the methods Koeppler advocated. The POWs were not spared or “pampered.” They lived like all other POWs in camps (the classic Nissen huts), but the courses themselves were organized “in a deliberately liberal atmosphere to encourage independent thought.” The method of “priming the pump” was stimulated by a re-pluralizing multitude of views from teachers, guest speakers, news sources, and more artistic approaches such as puppetry and poetry. Numerous news sources were made available, such as the British newspapers, the weekly newspaper for POWs, and daily newssheets made by them. Instructional films and newsreels were also used. One of these films, according to the journalist John Thompson, left a deep impression. It was the well-known atrocity film about Nazi concentration camps that was shown to every POW in the country. In the Evening Standard, Thompson recounted how some prisoners, after seeing the images from Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, tore off the decorations from their uniforms and stomped them into the ground. Since guilt induction was not a useful concept for Wilton Park, the discussion here would focus on responsibility and how, for example, international law could be enforced and what the legal implications of the Nuremberg trial were. One participant testified that “they owned their loyalty to the world..."
Looking without Seeing and not to any one country.” Others disagreed and that was OK. The essence was a focus on dialogue, argumentation, and an analysis of the wider system, not just the emotional reaction of the atrocities witnessed. The Wilton Park experiment is therefore an inspiring example of the focus, method, and level of investment we need to apply to learn from the past and help us deal with issues of responsibility and judgment. In this light, the visual sources of the Holocaust discussed here are only fragments that we can and should use in a broader understanding of the destructive system that was in place.

A System of Looking and Seeing: The Kaleidoscopic Archive and the Gaze of the Perpetrator

If we therefore want to go beyond the visual shock of these atrocity images and connect these fragments of understanding, we have to distinguish between two systems of looking/seeing. I was inspired to use here the dichotomy proposed by Daniel Kahneman for our ways of thinking: system 1, focusing on automatic impressions and feelings, versus system 2, focusing on thinking, choosing, and concentrating. In distinguishing between these two sides on a visual level, I will call the first system a system of looking that focuses more on the affective and relational component, that is, the intuitive part of what we feel when we look at atrocity pictures. To a large extent this looking at these pictures results in feelings of discomfort and an urge to empathically relate to the victim group (or distance oneself from the perpetrator group). The second system is a system of seeing that focuses more on present or absent clues that help us to understand the underlying patterns and mechanisms, that is, the rational understanding of the dynamics underlying the cascade of violent phenomena. Both approaches are necessary and complementary but result in different things. Whereas the first system impacts more on the dynamics of othering and belonging through a relational and affective process of dividing and uniting groups (victims versus perpetrators), the second system will result more in understanding the complex interplay of (f)actors that allow us to better reflect, understand, and take responsibility for these processes of victimization, perpetration, and implication. Better understanding this distinction between looking and seeing can therefore also help us transcend longstanding debates about the limits of representation of atrocity images, which led to positions such as “choosing not to look” and the prohibition of looking due to the supposed “obscenity of looking.” Intuitive looking and rational seeing from both perspectives at Holocaust imagery is therefore crucial. On the one hand, it allows us to relate to the victims and their painful experiences and makes it possible to remember and commemorate. On the other hand, it
allows us to understand the mechanisms that gave rise to these dynamics of violence and enables us to draw lessons from the past.

The Holocaust evokes narratives of horror, destruction, and death. A limited series of atrocity images were shown repeatedly and internationally to a wide audience, in the streets with posters, at tribunals with albums and films, and in many educational representations in school textbooks and exhibitions. Camp fences, barbed wire, watchtowers, and piles of corpses form a set of “icons of destruction” that have grounded our understanding of the Holocaust. However, the dominance of camp liberation photography has impoverished our visual image (and understanding) of the Holocaust. It simplifies our view and focuses mainly on the last months of the camp system, a period that is not representative of the whole evolutionary history of the concentration camp system from 1933 to 1945. Other photos of Holocaust events, such as the little boy with his hands raised during his arrest in the Warsaw Ghetto, the execution photos by the mobile execution squads (Einsatzgruppen), and the many propaganda photos of National Socialist mass demonstrations are often also used in a canonical manner. Sybil Milton was therefore right to state already in 1986 that “although more than two million photos exist in the public archives of more than 20 nations, the quality, scope, and content of the images reproduced in scholarly and popular literature has been very repetitive.” The visual sources related to the Holocaust are indeed large in volume and broad in subject matter. It is, after all, one of the first genocides to take place in an early information age in which the technical possibilities of capturing and reproducing images were widely distributed. In other words, the strategic focus on succinctly representing visual frames of an ideology and the wide use of cameras in professional and private contexts ensured that the Holocaust is one of the visually most richly documented episodes of our recent history. In addition, new visual sources have been discovered or released over the years that were locked away in previously inaccessible archives or in private hands. Moreover, new paradigmatic shifts in Holocaust research have brought with them an ongoing search for and analysis of photographic evidence. As a result, a vast kaleidoscopic visual archive is available today, not only to document, prove, or commemorate but also as its own historical source, contributing to a better understanding of the events, the actors, and the dynamics at play. This also means that the last decades have been characterized by a shift from a recycled use of symbolic images to a real archaeological analysis of this kaleidoscope of images.

This turn to (the diversification of) the image as a source naturally raises many critical questions. Who produced this image? What was its purpose in recording or indexing a particular event? For whom was the reproduction of the image intended, or who was considered a later viewer of this image? How does this image fit into a broader strategy of visual
language within National Socialism? What kind of self-representation does the image imply? What caption does this image come with, and do those captions change over time or according to the users of the image? In short, the image raises many questions. It is therefore a visual anecdote linked to many other sources and must be placed within a broader historiographical context. In doing so we must realize that most Holocaust photography, outside the Allied liberation images, was made by perpetrators during the twelve years of their reign and was not immediately intended for publication.57 Frances Guerin rightly notes that the Nazis were “masters of the image.” They “used images, both amateur and professional, unofficial and official, to incite racial prejudice and virulent anti-Semitism and to glorify German national unity.”58 The image was used as a weapon “to survey, categorize, terrorize, and mark out their victims for destruction,”59 or in other words, “they were shot before they were shot.”60 This awareness is, of course, crucial in the analysis of the image and our own dealings with it. The photographer’s lens is often an ideological lens that unconsciously exposes the perpetrator’s frame of mind and actions. Guerin therefore warns against three dangers linked to perpetrator photography.61 Firstly, she points out the problem of identification with or sympathy for the perpetrator’s perspective. This could result in a further objectification (and prolonged victimization) of the victims, an increasing fascination with the perpetrators, and possible fetishization of their images, thereby replicating the gaze of the perpetrator. A second risk posed by this photography is that of habituation and desensitization through repeated viewing of these gruesome images. The images become “banal objects” and no longer shock.62 Violence is then seen as trivial and could possibly lead to perceptions of normalization or even legitimization. Finally, one must also make sure that reusing intended propaganda images does not result in reinforcing a symbolic and dangerous reference system of exclusion and persecution. The propaganda produced by National Socialism still unconsciously affects current frames of reference and reinforces cultural frames that can lead to toxic polarization. Guerin therefore calls for an iconoclasm (image breaking) of images taken by these perpetrators. Iconoclasm not by destruction or removal of the image, but by a different attribution of meaning to the image and its placement in historiography. She emphasizes Georges Didi-Huberman’s thesis that when we fail to look at these images “all of these fears of violence, violation, and forgetting will be realized.”63 But how do you break through the perpetrator’s gaze?
Regarding the Holocaust, seeing isn’t as simple as it looks. Effort and ingenuity are called for if we are not to fall victim to photographs of degrading death. 

—Rachel E. Perry, “Remediating Death at Yad Vashem’s Holocaust History Museum”

Our memory of the Holocaust is for most people primarily a visual one. When we think of the collective violence in the killing fields and camps of the Holocaust, we automatically think of the abundance of images of horror during the months of liberation or the images produced by the perpetrators, seen directly through the original footage or indirectly through feature films. Hannah Arendt rightly observed that these Western Allied liberation images gave a wrong impression of the camps, let alone the complex and multilayered history of the Holocaust as such. The photographic record of the horror during this final phase gave no insight into the nature and development of the concentration camps and certainly not into the six extermination centers. But when we look at textbooks and exhibitions, for many decades we used the same “icons of destruction” next to the typical Heinrich Hoffmann or Leni Riefenstahl propaganda images. For Auschwitz, this is the Arbeit Macht Frei archway at Auschwitz 1, the famous gatehouse at Birkenau, and the Auschwitz album series of arrival and selection at the ramp (neue Rampe) toward the gas chambers at the end of the camp. The word “Auschwitz” inextricably evokes these images. Susan Sontag rightly observes that this remembering is based mainly on images that often cast a shadow over other forms of understanding and remembering: “To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture.” She therefore asks the question, why do we need to look at these images? What is their purpose? They shock us, they make us angry, perhaps even vengeful, but do they help us to understand? Do they teach us anything at all, or do “they rather confirm what we already know (or want to know)?”

In order to find a better balance between the intuitive feeling (system 1 of looking) and the rational understanding (system 2 of seeing) of Holocaust imagery, we must first take a closer look at its place in both historiography and pedagogy. The place that photography occupies in both domains is different. The images are intended to teach us something. But in historiography, the image has long been regarded as a secondary source with a purely illustrative character. Holocaust historiography traditionally based itself on testimonies and textual sources. Photographs were an addition, but not a source in themselves. This changed in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the publications of Sybil Milton, who approached photography as “evidence of the Holocaust” and elaborated on how his-
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Historians and social scientists could use these sources. Also in 1990, the Yad Vashem Museum published The Pictorial History of the Holocaust, an extraordinary compilation of more than four hundred photographs on the Holocaust. It is remarkable, however, that none of the photographs mentioned a source or author. Here too, in this early comprehensive visual overview of the Holocaust, the photograph occupied a purely illustrative place. In recent decades, several authors have engaged in the heated debate on representation, and researchers such as Habbo Knoch, Gerhard Paul, Ulrike Wrocklage, Janina Struk, Clément Chéroux, Georges Didi-Huberman, and others have approached the image as a source extensively within the field of Holocaust studies and more broadly. Also, with the first publications of private perpetrator albums such as the Karl Höcker Auschwitz Album, the Karl and Ilse Koch albums from Emsland, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, and finally the Johann Niemann album from Sobibór, various other private photo collections are emerging within family archives. This historiographical pictorial turn goes hand in hand with the broader pedagogical embrace of the image as an educational tool that could enhance students’ visual skills. In contrast to the ways in which the first memorials, museums, and school textbooks used the “icons of destruction,” one sees a renewed handling and broader focus on Holocaust photography in the wake of the memory boom of the 1990s. Cornelia Brink rightly states in this regard that the somewhat neglected “orphaned child of the historian” is becoming the “favorite child of educators.” While pedagogically strong images create strong affects that reinforce attention, there was also increasing criticism of the repeated use of a limited number of canonical photographs or “Schlüsselbilder” (key images) of the Holocaust. Not only do these represent a one-sided and therefore false picture of the events, but they also prevent seeing the diversity in victim communities and the available plurality of perspectives related to the history of the Holocaust. The accompanying impersonal approach, which often places the masses of victims in a degrading and subordinate position and where the perpetrator is either absent or dominant, makes it difficult to link learning processes that focus on the complex interplay of (f)actors. In recent decades, new approaches have emerged that clearly distance themselves from what has come to be called shock pedagogy or, in German, Leichenberg-Pädagogik, which used images of piles of dehumanized and anonymous corpses. Pedagogues, curators, and editors increasingly prefer to employ previously unused images, juxtapose certain visual narratives (victim, perpetrator, and bystander perspectives), give the victims a name, a voice, or, even more strongly, a face, provide the photographs with new contextualizing comments, and engage in source critique (what we see, who we see, who produced it, for what purpose it was made, etc.) and a reflection on their contemporary use.
Educators and publishers of school textbooks are now giving more consideration to preventing undesirable effects in their representation of the Holocaust, such as sensationalism, voyeurism, re-victimization, avoiding an image of helplessness, and stimulating desirable effects such as working with the plurality of available imagery, personifying the victims, breaking through the perpetrator’s gaze, and translating the understanding of the mechanisms into responsible action. There is a greater awareness that showing cruelty and death brings with it a responsibility for the effects these images have. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s “Recommendations for teaching and learning about the Holocaust” highlight the sensitivity of using such images, stating that “the perpetrators generated many photographs, films, and documents that can be useful educational resources, provided that the context is made explicit. Educators should constantly question their use of sources and ask themselves what educational outcomes are served by using particular materials.”

Ruth-Anne Lenga researched the use of atrocity images in teaching about the Holocaust. In an admittedly limited sample of seventy-two students aged between twelve and sixteen from four secondary schools, Lenga used focus groups and interviews to gauge how the students themselves thought about the use of atrocity images. These students recognized the traumatic nature of the imagery but stated that, thanks to preparation and contextualization, it was important to see and grasp the reality. One student acknowledged “that learning was not exclusively a cognitive activity but involves affective engagement.”

Holocaust and war museums also sometimes use scenographic barriers to screen out atrocities, announce that shocking images are on display, or introduce an age limit for visitors. In other words, the viewer is given the opportunity to look away, or vulnerable target groups (for example, children and victim communities) are protected from an overly grisly reality. But one also considers the saturation or numbing that occurs when repeatedly seeing gruesome scenes. The fear expressed by Susan Crane that images will be reduced to “atrocious objects of banal attention” is therefore a legitimate concern. But I disagree with her solution of “removing them from view or ‘repatriating’ them” to the archives. These images of atrocities are just one source of imagery and are “necessary but limited historical tools,” as Rachel Perry states. Today, it is generally accepted that sensationalism, voyeurism, shock as an educational strategy, habituation or numbing through overexposure, dehumanization, re-victimization, sympathy for the perpetrator’s gaze, and the like should be avoided. This is best done not by hiding images, but rather by using what I would call various re-pluralizing principles of looking and analytical methods and techniques to use horror and perpetrator photography as both a historical and pedagogical resource—that is, a visual re-pluralization that can be understood as investing into multifocality.
and multi-perspectivity. This re-pluralization of looking through analysis, signification, and deconstruction (resulting in seeing) requires some distinct shifts, such as a shift in looking from different positions of perception, a shift in looking from the principle of rehumanization, a shift in looking based on the principle of individuation or personalization, and a shift in looking based on the principle of rebalancing affective reactions and rational understanding. What these shifts therefore require is a continuous and reciprocal process of assigning meaning (through interaction and interpretation) and bridging critically the visual sources with the mass of other written sources. This process of re-pluralization requires connecting these textual and visual “anecdotes” or “moments of truth” to better understand the complex dynamics underlying the Holocaust.

These principles of re-pluralization contribute to the complexity of our understanding and are constantly evolving. Ulrich Baer called to “re-see images of victimhood from positions that break with the photographers’ perspective of mastery.” This strategy of rehumanization through individuation or personalization has found wide acceptance in museum representations and educational publications. The previously nameless mass of victims is now individually given a name, a biography, a life or, if possible, even a face. This is a trend that we can also observe in the shift away from political tokenism regarding war memorials and monuments. In the Belgian Holocaust Museum Kazerne Dossin, since the museum’s opening 2012, a gigantic wall of portraits of deported victims to Auschwitz has been supplemented year after year with newly found portrait photos from external and private archives. The perspective thus shifted from the deportation lists with names of more than twenty-five thousand deported Belgian Jews and Roma to a perspective of individual victims, each with a name, a face, a life, a career, interests, hobbies, a family, and so on. This shift from the plural to the individual and the personal is primarily and understandably initiated by the victim community, and the Yad Vashem Museum in Israel is a driving example. It is an approach that provides an enriching contrast to the rather classical representation in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, which makes greater use of the discoveries made by American soldiers during the liberation of camps such as Buchenwald and Dachau, that is, the classical barrack photographs of survivors. Other museums and memorial sites in Germany and Austria have gradually, carefully, and critically focused on the many perpetrator sources available in their archives or on recently donated visual sources that become available with the passage of time and new generations.

This growing plurality of visual sources and their representations enriches viewing the Holocaust to such an extent that entirely new meanings and insights are created. It allows double or triple exposures of the various Holocaust images. Rachel Perry, who analyzes the Klooga
installation at Yad Vashem, uses the concept of bifocals to explain two important ways of looking, “a double vision which brings objects close and far into sharp focus” and “a corrective device which improves perception.”92 This bifocal optic makes it possible to perceive two distinct layers, the image as an “empathic marker” versus the image as an “evidential marker.”93 The first belongs to the personal stratum, allows identification, and triggers an affective and emotional response. The second belongs to the general historical-behavioral stratum and provides insight into how these processes of perpetration, victimization, and implication are driven. Bifocal viewing or a double exposure is then a strategy to jointly account for the personal and the analytical. The system of looking is bi-focused with the system of seeing, thus providing a human and analytical approach to the visible and invisible. It becomes even more interesting when Perry points out that the Klooga installation in the Yad Vashem Museum uses Plexiglas, which allows the visitor to perceive his own reflection as well, thus introducing a third layer. It results in a triple exposure that allows us to “see ourselves seeing”94 and reflect on our position as acting agents in a complex society. This multi-perspectivity, of course, requires effort and visual competencies and makes us reflect on the complex relationship between looking and seeing. Research has shown that we rarely see what we are looking at, unless our attention is directed to it—a process that Arien Mack has called inattentional blindness or looking without seeing.95 The knowledge that we do not see a large part of the visual world unless our attention is focused on it is something that is centuries old. The eighteenth-century German natural scientist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–1799) summed it up expertly in his aphorism, “Very many and perhaps most people, in order to find something, first need to know that it is there.”96 Contemporary studies of dynamic events such as ball-passing games, where the viewer does not see that a person in a gorilla suit is passing by, show that we sometimes fail to see something when our attention is elsewhere.97 Looking and seeing is therefore to be understood as a complex task and requires skills for reading images, understanding them in context and placing the visual source within a broader construct of other historiographical sources. Only in this way will the meaning of an image receive the necessary attention and become an element or “moment of truth.”

Drawing lessons from the Holocaust is a complex and multi-layered undertaking. The inspiring methodology of the unique Wilton Park experiment showed us that shocking and shaming does not contribute to understanding; what does is a critical reflection on the (visual) sources that led to the cascade of mechanisms of violence. When you look at gruesome imagery of the Holocaust, it does not automatically make you understand the underlying mechanisms that led to the collective violence. Admittedly, Holocaust photography is a vast and varied source,
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a kaleidoscope of visual anecdotes that one must be able to place in a broader picture. The power of the image is something that can be addressed in a pedagogical way to crystallize our attention. But the analysis of the image is something that has to be learned in order to understand the processes that occur. Frances Guerin advocates that “to see the images means, first and foremost, to experience them visually.” And following Köpppler, this must be complemented by “priming the pump,” by reflecting on what we have or have not seen, by relating these images to a wide web of sources in a pluralized understanding of the Holocaust, and by bridging our intuitive approach (system of looking) and rational approach (system of seeing) and relating this to our own agency to act on what we have learned from these visual moments of truth.

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Notes

9. Ibid., 60.
10. Ibid., 70–78; Brink, “‘Ungläubig stehen oft Leute vor den Bildern,’” 195–206.
14. Ibid., 374. The used term was “Fraternazi(s).”
17. Ibid., 348–349.
19. Ibid., 141.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 143.
24. Ibid., 146.
26. Ibid., XI.
27. Ibid., 327–328.
28. Ibid., 328.
30. Ibid., 23.
31. Brink, “‘Ungläubig stehen oft Leute vor den Bildern,’” 205.
34. Brink, “secular Icons,” 144.
44. Ibid., 212.
45. Ibid., 218.
47. Ibid.; Welch, “The Legacy of Wilton Park,” 211.
59. Ibid., 3.
62. Ibid., 9.
63. Ibid., 9–10.
67. Ibid., 92.
74. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in spite of all*.
81. Ibid., 208–221.
84. Ibid., 211.
86. Crane, “Choosing Not to Look,” 309.
90. For a detailed analysis I refer to the Klooga installation at Yad Vashem Museum as described by Rachel Perry in “Remediating Death,” 217.
93. Ibid., 225.
94. Ibid., 226.