

Roundtable discussion of Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?*

“Not ours, this death:’ The Postanimal after the Posthuman”

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I am grateful for the opportunity to say something briefly about Cary Wolfe's courageous, searching, textured, and consequential book. *What is Posthumanism?* is one of those interventions after which there is no turning back. Its learned and varied provocations come like the wind that fills and over-fills the wings of Benjamin's fabled angel of history. With him, we look back upon the achievements and the ruins of humanism with a complex mixture of fascination, incredulity, and accusation, but discover ourselves to be irrepressibly carried forward towards an unknown future. Does this future mean that the human is at an end, or has already ended . . . or that the human has still to be determined? The interrogative of Wolfe's title keeps the question deliriously open, even if asking it in the ways that he does brings us to our senses. And if the posthuman comes--is coming, has come--then so too, I'll wager, is what I want to call “the postanimal.” More to follow.

*Not ours, this death, to take into our bones.*¹

I am standing in the dim-lit room of New York's *Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust*, surrounded by images of excruciating terror, violence, and loss. On a small monitor built into one wall, I am watching the “Liepaja footage.” This is a short film by a German soldier that records the execution of seven Latvian Jews in late July or early August of 1941.² No other motion-picture footage of this sort survives the Shoah, but this is only one reason why it is incomparable, and why, even though I have viewed these images many times, and have discussed them in various scholarly settings, I always see them as if for the first time. I stare benumbed. Like an animal of the sort that Heidegger imagined. Here in the museum, amid the other archival material documenting and contextualizing Jewish life before and after the Holocaust, the film is screened without description, as if eschewing commentary, or beyond commentary, or its own commentary. It is shown in an endless loop, repeatedly asserting itself like a system amid the welter of an atrocious world. It is an eye that never shuts. Do I look through it, seeing as the perpetrators once saw? Or I am caught in its implacable gaze? A by now old thought, always new, troubles the mind: is it possible to make the Shoah intelligible to ourselves, and in a way that is consonant with the concept of the human, *any* concept of the human? Perhaps these flickering black-and-white images are “what the world looks like when we're not there” (177). To adapt a phrase that Didi-Huberman has given us in thinking about photographs of the Holocaust, these are “images in spite of all.” The footage is a mere seventy seconds in length, an eternity without sound. In it I glimpse a fragment of what David Rousset called, as early as 1946, *L'univers concentrationnaire*: an utterly administered cosmos, almost inescapable. It is documentary evidence of the “self-poiesis”—to use Luhmann's word, so

¹ May Sarton, *The Invocation to Kali*

² This footage can be viewed at the Yad Vashem site: <http://www1.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/homepage.html>

central to Wolfe's argument--of a new world order rooted in the liquidation of Jewish difference.

What I see may not be all that is shown. Wolfe's book helps me take the measure of that immeasurability. The photographic images are more than corroboration. And yet they are undeniably evidentiary in kind, not in spite but precisely because, as Wolfe notes, citing Cavell, "'Photography maintains the presentness of the world by accepting our absence from it. The reality of a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it'" (177). I feel as never before the unexpectedly mortifying chill of Derrida's words: "We are . . . 'spectralized by the shot.'" (177).

The shot? The word tolls me back to my sole self. The Jewish men are forced out of the back of a truck, hurried through a crowd of onlookers, and into an execution trench. Many spectators have turned out on this summer day: the German officers overseeing the killing; the local Latvian militia who assist; the assembled townsfolk, including children in short-pants; and of course the camera-man, Sergeant Reinhard Wiener, who claimed accidentally to have come across this scene but whose film tells us that he consents to the horror. In the background are parked cars and bicycles, and a cluster of out-buildings with smokestacks, sheds where the people of Liepaja would socialize and don their skates during the winter months. Beyond the sheds, out of view, lies the impassive Baltic sea. These quotidian details jar with the murderous violence that we are about to witness because here, in this killing place, this violence has become one of those details.

In one continuous motion, a line of soldiers steps quickly up to the lip of the trench. They point their rifles downward toward the men, and fire. The murdered Jews fall lifelessly to the ground. The spectators stand frozen with a fascination that is impossible to know. And at the instant that the soldiers shoot their guns and kill these men a little spotted terrier bounds into the foreground of the scene, startled by the retort of the rifles that we cannot hear. We "see" that sound in the embodied form of the animal's surprise. "Who brought the dog there?" David Marwell asks in a documentary discussion of the Liepaja footage. "Did the dog go back home?," he asks: "What was the dog doing on this scene when people were being murdered. I don't know why that moves me, but it does."³

What is the *that* that works on or works over Marwell, as it does me, about which neither one of us appears to know anything? The appearance of the dog is not one ghastly quotidian detail among many, although it is also certainly that. Something like an "optical unconscious" appears to be operating, automatically and anonymously. --An invisibility, let us call it, that limns the humanist and representational distinction between the seen and the unseen. We could say that the Nazis behave like animals and treat their captives like animals if it weren't for the fact that talking this way reproduces the humanisms and anthropocentrisms that the footage's complicity in "non-criminal putting to death" of others renders at once obsolete and toxic. When Paola Cavalieri sees the footage for the first time she says to me: "I saw only animals--animal torturers, animal victims, and animal cowards. And then, there was a being who simply could not understand all that evil."⁴ For Cavalieri, the dog merely reacts, and in its obliviousness to the

³ Marwell's remarks are in Peter Hankoff's documentary, *Hitler's Hidden Holocaust*. So far as I can determine, he is the only Holocaust scholar to speak of the little dog. Marwell is Director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage.

⁴ Personal correspondence, 9 December 2010.

horror it is not only beyond good and evil but also somehow beyond animality. A complex transcendence, to be sure. But how to track that creature without falling back upon “the humanist schema of visibility,” as Wolfe says (169)? “Such an investigation does not mean trying to make visible something that is invisible,” Sliwinski suggests; “Instead this approach pursues the visual event as symptom. . . . [T]he ‘unconscious of the visible’ pursues something that is precisely *not* shown in the picture.”⁵

Because I have been parsing Wolfe’s book, many of its analytic axes and provocations inflect this sobering experience in Battery Park City, overlooking the Statue of Liberty and in the shadow of the void where the World Trade Center towers once stood. What is happening when these two things—reading this new book, watching this old footage—fall into each other’s orbit? What unforeseen event occurs, and is still occurring? In a certain way, the Holocaust, which is irreducible to the positive histories that continue necessarily to be written about it, forms a bleakly exemplary instance of an overwhelming environment amid which the Liepaja footage, and the museum in which it is screened, constitute different “systems.” But we are a long way from Scofidio + Renfro’s *Blur*, Lars von Trier’s *Dancer in the Dark*, and Eduardo Kac’s *The Eighth Day*, remarkable works that Cary Wolfe discusses with precision and with intellectual courage. But how far, exactly? I am not sure if this museum is a building that I want to “lose,” as Wolfe says of other buildings. Unless of course it is already forfeited, dissolved or spectralized under the atomic light of the Liepaja footage.

What can it mean to watch this film and bear witness to the atrocities it records as a humanist and as a post-humanist? If there was ever an image that pronounced the “death of man” and what Merleau-Ponty calls the “shameless humanism of our elders,” it would be this *film maudit*.⁶ The image of the summary execution of the Jews on this Latvian shore-line permanently over-shadows the pacific calm of Foucault’s dream of the end of “man,” washed away like “a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.” Yet to say that the film demonstrates the limits of “the political and economic projects of classical Liberalism and their subsidiary rhetoric of emancipation, progress, growth, and political ‘rights’” (Geroulanos 18) is to say too much. The Liepaja footage isn’t an example of anything, which is to say that it is irreducible to the example. How then to respond to these images? Do we have a language with which to remain answerable not only to their evidentiary status but also, and perhaps most pressingly, to their testamentary force? The question is indissociable from another: how can the living speak for the dead? And is system/environment figure robust enough to account for the relation without relation of the living and the dead, even and especially if we view “life” as Derrida (and perhaps as Luhmann) sees “life,” i.e. as constituted by a trace structure that is neither living nor dead?

It is impossible to resist Wolfe’s elegant call for an renewed opening of discourses to their *unthought*—the disturbance of “a certain passivity, a not-being-able,” (46); the “unbidden”

⁵ From Sliwinski, *Human Rights In Camera* (forthcoming).

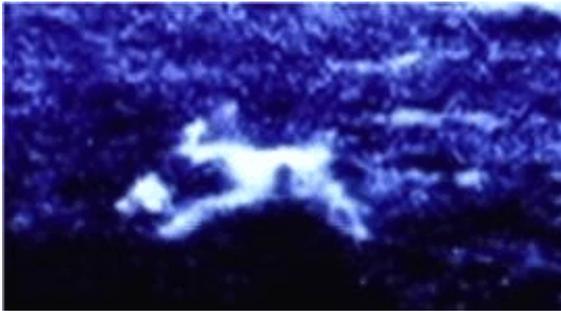
⁶ Merleau-Ponty’s remarks, from “Man and Adversity,” are cited by Geroulanos, 15. *Le film maudit* is the infamous phrase Claude Lanzmann used to describe the non-existent photographic evidence of the gas-chambers in operation at Auschwitz, evidence that Lanzmann said he would destroy if it did exist. See Didi-Huberman, 95.

arrival of the “radically inhuman” (177); “the “invisibilization that accompanies making something visible” (223), to evoke but a few examples. To which we could add, in the mindful spirit of this book, the “chaos of facts that is the Shoah” (as Hartman says), the voids and unredeemable absences left in the wake of holocaustal atrocities, both human and non-human, the “secret” or (im)possibility of the witness, the unsecured promise and being-promised-*to* that quickens testamentary acts, the relation without relation that apposes the quick and the dead and that prevents the past from simply being past. Wolfe renders himself exemplarily vulnerable to some of these posthuman negativities and alterities, while he encourages us to consider others in the luminescent wake of his book. Yet it isn’t entirely clear to me that “Luhmann”—a reiterated figure for posthumanism that, in my view, uneasily inhabits the book—is in a position to do the same. Another way of putting this would be to say that Wolfe welcomes “Luhmann.” But does “Luhmann” accept that hospitality (and “hostipitality”)? It strikes me that there are voids and occlusions that are in excess of the “blind-spots” that systems have about themselves. Insofar as one system’s blind-spot is always available to another’s sight, isn’t systems theory still answerable to a dream of transparency (let us call it “the transparency of transparency”) and communicability about which Rajan expresses considerable incredulity? More: recursive, absented, and “uncounted” experiences and phenomena (as my co-panellist, Anne-Lise François, might put it) may not occur to a theory that is calibrated towards the (virile?) assertiveness of auto-poiesis: a system whose “point . . . is to reproduce itself” in the face of its “inferiority” (221, 255); a system quickened by the “*need* to reduce” complexity (258), as if committed to a kind of evolutionary survival; a system driven irrepressibly by a demand to “buy time” (221, 225), and by the economization of difference so that it becomes “*productive* difference” (258); and a system whose elemental condition is having “no choice but to be” (258). At this point, how far are we from what Levinas calls “the normal order of things, the natural order of things, the persistence of being?” But “Is it righteous to be?” Moreover, standing in the museum of memorial memory, I worry about a posthumanism that claims that it can have done with anything, much less “philosophy,” as ““a thing of the past”” (111). *Thou art a scholar. Speak to it, Horatio*. And watching the Liepaja footage, can I be forgiven for wincing at Luhmann’s talk about the system’s automatized churn, which he names “*Selektion*,” i.e., the “subjectless event” whose exemplary instance is—for him—the anonymous winnowing of “the useful” from “the un-useful” (*Social Systems* 32)? Can a system “select” out of itself the history of a word, and not any word, but the word the signals the end of history, or the end of a certain history?

Wolfe’s work helps us gauge the importance and the radicality of Derrida’s argument that human beings—i.e., those who declare themselves to be human beings—fall indubitably under the gaze of the animal. But under what conditions could it be said that the non-human animal bears witness? Does the gaze extend to witnessing? The little dog urges me to consider the possible points of convergence between that which is unwitnessable about witnessing and that which remains unknowable about the animal. This “absence,” this impossibility, is “essential,” as Derrida says of witnessing, because testament is not a matter of truth-telling but fundamentally that which “exhibits me as being-for-the-other (and not for my self in the interiority of an encompassing Cogito)” (76). *Being-for-the-other*: that is the ripple in time and space that the dog, this dog, unexpectedly gives. That is the disturbance outside of Liepaja that haunts the Nazi present from within the present, so obsessed is it with killing the truth-tellers, and disposing of the witnesses . . . and thus missing what remains obscurely elemental to the labour of bearing

witness. *Being-for-the-other*: that which is not of the order of cognition, or of re-cognition. --A thoughtlessness, an “animal” witlessness, let us say, in honor of the dog who flinches--without reflection and without needing to reflect--at the sudden sound of the gunfire, and whose flinching proves to be otherwise than a privation. Within the frame, the dog captures--like a fantastical camera that will never be invented--the fact that the experiences and the images of those experiences “cannot simply be seen and understood,” as Ulrich Baer has said: “they require a different response; they must be *witnessed* (13), even if what witnessing *is*--to whom witnessing is addressed, and from where it arises--remains obscure and self-obscuring, held in reserve in a way that the footage relates to the beckoning reserve of the singular animal. Hence Celan’s impeccable phrasing: “Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, toward an addressable you perhaps, towards an addressable reality” (Cited by Levine 3). The obscurity of the address, the thoughtlessness and indeterminacy of its origin and destination, the uninsurable nature of its expression and arrival, are *necessary* because these are the indicia that distinguish witnessing from description, testimony from giving evidence, asking to be heard from transmitting information. What makes witnessing possible is also what renders it impossible. There is no escaping this crisis of witnessing because witnessing *is* that crisis. In case we forget this difficult knowledge, the Latvian dog remembers supplementally on our behalf, even if this knowledge, “always underway,” remains adrift, vulnerable, and open to chance. “Precarious life implies life as a conditioned process, and not as the internal feature of a monadic individual or any other anthropocentric conceit,” Judith Butler has argued (23). Perhaps it takes a non-human animal, *this* animal, darting about the blood-soaked sand-dunes on the outskirts of Liepaja, to throw into relief the limitless violence of that anthropocentric conceit, and the limitless interdependencies that await us in a more frankly ethical posthuman world. Perhaps it takes an animal speaking in a different tongue to underscore that no language is adequate to the Shoah, and that we cannot speak of it to the precise extent that we cannot *not* speak of it.

To this little, nameless dog, this postanimal, now long dead, I send blessings, for in those shocked circles that you run without end, I see. I see, even if I do not understand what I see. I see, as if for the first time, that the opposite of forgetting is not remembrance but--as Yerushalmi has said--the prospect of justice. I see, as Wolfe teaches us to see, after Derrida, what it means ““to have imploration rather than vision in sight, to address prayer, love, joy, or sadness rather than a look or a gaze”” (142).



Still from the Liepaja footage showing the startled dog.



Still from the Liepaja footage showing the Jewish men forced out of a truck, with spectators in the background.



Sill from Liepaja footage showing the dog in left foreground and the execution trench in the middle-ground.

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