

THE ABSENT DOUBLE

Representations of the Disappeared

THE LAST MILITARY dictatorship in Argentina was responsible for the violent, systematic and clandestine murder of thousands of citizens between 1976 and 1983, a unique event in the country's history.* These facts have created a social need to better comprehend what really happened during those years, to search for the causes and conditions that made this horror possible. The Argentine case is a recent example of a more general phenomenon, the historical massacre, which has troubled historians since classical antiquity, because of the difficulty inherent in its narration. In what follows, we attempt to identify what we term the 'representational formulae' that have been used to portray historical massacres. First, we define what a historical massacre is and give the theoretical grounds for our arguments. Secondly, we follow the long-term evolution of three of these formulae—hunt, martyrdom, hell—up to the twentieth century. Thirdly, we provide a number of examples that point to a possible new formula: the multiplication of silhouettes and *Doppelgänger*. Finally, we discuss some of the risks of an endeavour of this kind.

I

There are several uses of the term 'massacre' in everyday language, applied to situations ranging from a murderous attack by a deranged individual to a crushing victory in sport. The term 'historical massacre' relates to a different phenomenon: the mass murder of a large group of people, who are usually unarmed and have a limited capacity to defend themselves. The origin of the word dates back to sixteenth-century

France. In the 1556 pamphlet *Histoire mémorable de la persécution et saccagement du peuple de Mérindol et Cabrières*, the term *massacre* was used to describe a campaign of religious cleansing against the local Waldensians. It soon became the word of choice for Protestants recounting the worst episodes of the French Wars of Religion, including the most spectacular of such occurrences, the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, perpetrated in August 1572. Generally, in a historical massacre a group rather than an individual is responsible, and exceptionally cruel methods are used.¹ Moreover, the victims, dead or alive, are treated with utter contempt, while the perpetrators face no great physical risks in their endeavours. Although historical massacres are difficult to explain and the chains of cause and effect appear broken as they are taking place, this type of slaughter occurs in clearly delimited spaces and time-frames, and the people responsible for them are identifiable.

During the twentieth century a new type of mass murder emerged, related to historical massacres but different in several respects: the crime of genocide. The UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, approved in 1948, defines it as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.²

* A previous version of this article was presented at the Wissenschaftskolleg and the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung in Berlin. We would like to thank the audience for their comments and suggestions.

¹ Further distinctions are proposed by the French historian Jacques Sémelin, who differentiates between the 'massacre of proximity', the 'massacre at bay' (bombing, incendiary weapons), the 'bilateral massacre' (typical of Civil Wars), the 'unilateral massacre' (implemented by a state against its own people), the 'large-scale massacre' and the 'small massacre', and the 'exhibited massacre', as opposed to the 'hidden massacre': Sémelin, 'Du massacre au processus génocidaire', *Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, 174, December 2002, pp. 483–91.

² There was much debate among specialists regarding the definition of genocide. Two issues should be mentioned. First, the omission of political groups from the list of potential victims was subject to intense discussion; several countries feared they could be accused of genocide if such groups were included. Second, one consequence of the definition agreed is that there has to be a clear and verifiable intention to destroy a group as such for a mass murder legally to be considered genocide.

Of course, the concept of genocide is closely associated with the Shoah, but there is strong evidence that Raphael Lemkin had begun to develop the notion earlier, taking account of the Armenian Genocide.³ There are obvious similarities between a historical massacre and a genocide, but also significant differences. Among them is the fact that in a genocide, there is usually a criminal state with which collective responsibility rests. Moreover, penal responsibility falls upon the individual perpetrators and those who ordered the slaughters. Several historical massacres may take place within a genocide, but the verification of a historical massacre does not mean that a genocide is taking place.

More than almost any other kind of event, historical massacres and genocides test to the utmost the relationship between fact, truth and narration. Whenever deliberate and systematic attempts to destroy a human group as such have occurred, they have been considered limit experiences that defy all available ethical, rhetorical and analytical categories. The perpetrators have attempted to hide their actions, while the survivors and defenders of the victims have stubbornly sought to bear witness to the facts. In doing so, they have faced what Saul Friedländer called 'the limits of representation'.⁴ In 1923, Aby Warburg suggested that magic, art and religion provide a *Denkraum*, a space for reflection, which allows us to approach objects that force us to confront our deepest fears and anxieties, principally our fear of death.⁵ Our contention here is that representations of massacres, and the rhetorical and aesthetic devices associated with them, similarly allow for the creation of a certain distance or *Denkraum*. These devices in turn open up the possibility of addressing events that would otherwise be unbearable.

We introduced the term 'representational formulae' above, but it demands a more precise definition. The concept owes a certain debt to Aby Warburg's *Pathosformel*—never defined explicitly, but present in

³ Raphael Lemkin, 'The Evolution of the Genocide Convention', 1, *Lemkin Papers*, New York Public Library, reel 2. The concept of 'crimes against humanity', close to but distinct from that of genocide, appeared for the first time in a joint declaration by the governments of Great Britain, France and Russia in 1915, concerning the massacres perpetrated by Ottoman troops against the Armenians: Roger S. Clark, 'Crimes against humanity at Nuremberg', in George Ginsburg and V. N. Kudriavtsev, eds, *The Nuremberg Trial and International Law*, The Hague 1990, p. 177.

⁴ Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation*, Cambridge, MA 1992.

⁵ Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America* [1923], Ithaca 1995.

most of his crucial works.⁶ *Pathosformeln* are not ahistorical, nor are they anthropological invariables. On the contrary, specific historical periods and different cultures are characterized by coherent clusters of perceptions and feelings. The expression of these demands a certain consistency of formal approach—principles of configuration that appear in different artistic domains and embody a wide variety of cultural concerns. In turn, these *Pathosformeln* are capable of change and adaptation, and are subject to appropriation and subsequent modification. Representational formulae are slightly different from *Pathosformeln*, in that they need not refer only to humanity's historically determined primal experiences; they are thus more numerous and nimbler than *Pathosformeln*. In our understanding, a representational formula is a set of cultural devices—words, images, performances—that have been historically shaped and are, at the same time, relatively stable, so that they are readily recognizable by the reader or observer. Its aim is to allude to and show objects, figures, facts, and the relationships between them, which a given society considers fundamental elements of its common life and experience. Representational formulae are also subject to change, in that they can be modified to represent new—different—phenomena and convey novel meanings, although generally these are related to the old ones. It is precisely when links between new facts and existing formulae are difficult to trace or become highly problematic that we may find ourselves facing the limits of representation.

II

On the basis of research into representations of massacres from classical antiquity, early modern and modern Europe, we have identified three main recurring formulae, of which we can give only a synthetic overview here. The first is a 'cynegetic' representational form, elaborated in Ancient Greece, which has been used to portray the behaviour and character of perpetrators and victims as hunters and hunted. In classical antiquity, for example, Appian narrated the killings of the Second Triumvirate in 43 BC and described the perpetrators of the massacre as 'hunting dogs'.⁷ The influence of Appian's text is apparent in later representations of these events. For example, in Antoine Caron's paintings

⁶ See Carlo Ginzburg, 'Le forbici di Warburg', in Maria Luisa Catoni, ed., *Tre figure. Achille, Meleagro, Cristo*, Milan 2013.

⁷ Appian, *Civil Wars*, Book IV, Ch. 3, § 14.



Figure 1: Antoine Caron, *The Massacres of the Triumvirate* (Beauvais version), 1560 (detail)



Figure 2: François Dubois, *St Bartholomew's Day Massacre*, 1573

on the subject from 1560 to 1566, the brutality of the perpetrators, the macabre accumulation of heads, the defenceless victims (all present in Appian's text) locate the animal ferocity on the side of the tyrants. In 1573, the Huguenot François Dubois painted the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre: the poses, the movements, the groupings, the urban space of Paris, are all strikingly similar to their Roman equivalents in Caron's works (see Figures 1 and 2). In both cases, the cynegetic metaphor reappears in the depiction of the perpetrators. On the other hand, in 1516, in

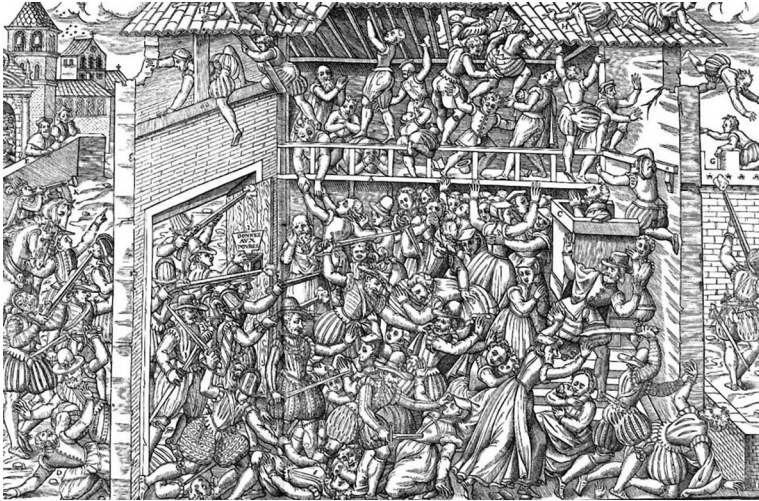


Figure 3: Jacques Tortorel and Jean Perrissin, *Massacre of Vassy*, in *Forty Tableaux*, 1569–70

at least two passages of *De Orbe Novo*, Pedro Mártir de Anglería recounted the flight of the Indians, who escaped from the Conquistadores ‘as hares chased by hunting dogs’.⁸

In the Middle Ages, a new formula of collective martyrdom appeared. By the fourteenth century, martyrdom scenes had become the quintessential depiction of desperation. Biblical mass murders, especially the massacre of the Holy Innocents, were also used as reference points in the portrayal of contemporary events, such as the horrors attributed to the Turks at Constantinople or the plundering of Otranto (for example in Matteo di Giovanni’s 1495 *Massacre of the Holy Innocents*). This formula became a model for the representation of present and past massacres, as can be seen in the series of twenty-four *tailles-douces* on the French civil wars designed by Jean Perrissin and engraved by Jacques Tortorel in 1569 (Figure 3).

⁸ Pedro Mártir de Anglería, *De Orbe Novo*, Decade I, Book I; Decade IV, Book V. Thanks to Carlos Enrique Castilla for the translation and interpretation of these passages, which we have taken from his PhD dissertation, *La versión española de De rebus oceanicis et Novo Orbe Decades de Pedro Mártir de Anglería: Estudio de las operaciones discursivas del traductor*, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, February 2010, pp. 185–87.



Figure 4: *The Massacres of the Catholic League in Paris, 1588, 1590*

Thirdly, an infernal metaphor has been deployed—in some cases to identify victims with demons, in others to describe the experience of the massacre itself. This formula emerged in the sixteenth century, and soon became one of the most powerful ways of representing mass killings. In 1572, Giorgio Vasari was asked to finish the decoration of the Sala Regia in the Vatican. He tried to depict the conflicts of his time, in which the Catholic cause was at stake; for this reason, next to a panoramic view of the Battle of Lepanto he included three frescos with scenes from the religious wars in France. In this case, the cynegetic representational form did not appear, and was replaced by an infernal one. The frescos that depict Admiral Coligny's assassination are overflowed by the exterminating angel from the Book of Samuel: the perpetrators are not animalized, but victims are turned into demons.⁹ However, there is also a different use of the infernal formula, one that condemns the perpetrators rather than the victims; it is this that finally predominated. An example can be seen in a broadsheet from 1590, held at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, depicting bestialized figures from the Catholic League slaughtering Protestants in Paris during the French Wars of Religion (see Figure 4). The genealogy of this formula can be traced back to Bartolomé de las

⁹ Angela Böck, *Die Sala Regia im Vatikan*, Zurich 1997.

Casas, who, in his 1552 *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, describes several aspects of the Conquest of Mexico and South America with references to hell. One passage on the slaughters that took place in New Spain reads: 'After numerous iniquitous attacks on the native population and infernal massacres during the course of which, and quite without provocation, he was responsible for carnage on a grand scale, [this Spanish commander] proceeded to impose throughout the area the reign of terror so beloved of Spanish butchers in the New World.'¹⁰ The metaphors used by the Dominican found their way into engravings produced by Theodore De Bry for the first illustrated edition of the *Short Account* in 1598. Las Casas seems to be the first writer systematically to describe an earthly experience as a living hell, with no moral blemish attributed to the victims. This may have been the beginning of a process, only completed in the seventeenth century, through which hell lost its supernatural qualities and became a human creation, devoid of theological and eschatological connotations.¹¹

These three formulae have not disappeared in more recent history, but they have become increasingly inadequate to represent the enormity of massive and violent crimes. As a matter of fact, it could be argued that the successive appearances of the representational formulae discussed above were triggered by limits to representation reached in each epoch. Faced with the problem of representing what was almost impossible to represent, artists, writers and historians resorted to new metaphors in an attempt to find some way to narrate and depict the massacres. But the formulae they used in turn became insufficient when confronted with further and yet more severe crimes. The genocides of the twentieth century and carnage of the World Wars once again put the existing mechanisms of representation to the test: hunt, martyrdom and hell were used, but they could not convey the true dimensions of the massacres.

Two examples can illustrate this point. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* returned to the ancient genre of the fable to recount the horror of the Shoah: animals became the collective actors of the Jewish genocide in Europe.¹²

¹⁰ Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, London 1992, pp. 68–9; translation modified.

¹¹ See Daniel Walker, *The Decline of Hell*, London 1964.

¹² Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: I. My Father Bleeds History*, and *II. And Here My Troubles Began*, New York 1986 and 1991. A first version of the strip appeared in 1972; what later became the graphic novel was serialized in 1980–91.

The Jews were transformed into mice, the Nazis into cats, the Poles into pigs, the Americans into dogs and so on. Of course, our familiarity with the fable form has led to a close identification of the emotional world of animals with that of humans; the suffering of the former is the suffering of the latter, and vice versa. In *Maus*, the assimilation of the two spills into a paradoxical arabesque (animal–human–animal) when the Jewish mouse-man dies ‘strangely’, ‘like that dog’. But there are two moments in the story where the animal fable is interrupted to include episodes with human characters: the suicide of Anja, Spiegelman’s mother, and the scene showing the spleen with which Art greets the success of the first part of his book. On both occasions, the infernal formula has come to dominate the representation. It is perhaps also worth recalling at this point that the first reaction of the Allied soldiers who liberated the concentration camps at the end of the war was to describe what they witnessed as ‘hell’. *Maus*, then, seems to oscillate between two formulae, the cynegetic—cats hunt mice—and the infernal, but this very instability suggests that neither is fully adequate to the task.

A second, more recent example is the animated film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), by Ari Folman and David Polonsky, which recounts Folman’s attempt to regain his memories of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which he took part in as a 19-year-old soldier. At one point, a psychologist he is seeing in the present tells the story of an Israeli soldier, a photographer by profession, who had managed to endure much of the war by convincing himself that he was seeing everything through the lens of the camera, creating a distance that, in Warburgian terms, prevented the facts from harming him. However, this construction collapses when he sees Arabian horses needlessly slaughtered at the Beirut racetrack. The horses have been killed by members of the Phalangist militias, allies of the Israelis, on their way towards the Palestinian refugee camps at Sabra and Shatila. The absolute innocence of the beasts lying on the ground symbolizes the innocence of the refugees who will be killed soon afterwards. Since ancient times, references to the hunt have frequently involved a deeply felt sympathy for the pain of the hunted animals, and this partly explains the attraction of the cynegetic formula. Yet although the association of human and animal suffering in *Waltz with Bashir* could still be seen as a reinforcement of the formula, the overwhelming images of death offer no *Denkraum* or possibility of stable representation. This suggests that the formula can now barely contain the crime.

It may be too much to say that a complete new representational formula has emerged. Nevertheless, there have been experiments with other aesthetic possibilities, mostly through the use of silhouettes. In Argentina, the military dictatorship established a clandestine machinery that brutally repressed social and political dissent, partly through what were soon called *desapariciones*: the kidnapping, imprisonment, torture and murder of thousands, whose destinies in many cases remain unknown. Ever since a huge demonstration known as *El Siluetazo*, which took place in the last months of the military regime, on 21 September 1983, silhouettes have become one of the major symbols of the *desaparecidos*. Three artists, Rodolfo Aguereberry, Guillermo Kexel and Julio Flores, contacted the association of mothers of the disappeared, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, and together, they organized a performance that involved passers-by posing as models for silhouettes that would symbolize the *desaparecidos*.¹³ The people of Buenos Aires lent their living bodies so that the shapes of the absent ones could be drawn on paper and distributed all over the city (Figure 5). According to the artists themselves, the idea was inspired by a poster published in the UNESCO *Courier* in October 1978, in which the Polish artist Jerzy Skapski portrayed the people who died every day in Auschwitz as a chain of silhouettes. *El Siluetazo* was the starting point of a long tradition, still alive today, in which the *desaparecidos* are represented in the same way. To give one example, the building of the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada, in the heart of Buenos Aires, served during the dictatorship as a detention, torture and murder camp. In 2005, it was turned into a *lieu de mémoire*. Since then, the fence around it has been covered with dozens of silhouettes, some filled with dark colours, others inscribed with the names of *desaparecidos*.

This visual device has also spread to neighbouring Chile. Beneath a museum dedicated to human rights and the memory of Pinochet's dictatorship, opened in Santiago in 2010, the Brazilian architects built an underground chamber in which Alfredo Jaar created an installation called *Geometry of Conscience*. After descending into a dark room, the visitor faces a wall of luminous silhouettes, representing both the victims of the military regime and the survivors. Suddenly, the lights go off, but the

¹³ For a collection of documents, testimony and debate on the legacy of the event, see Ana Longoni and Gustavo Bruzzone, eds, *El Siluetazo*, Buenos Aires 2008.



Figure 5: *El Siluetazo*, Buenos Aires, 1983

figures remain on the retinae of the viewers. The switch between light and darkness points metaphorically to the relation between presence and disappearance, between absence and memory. The multiplication of silhouettes and the alternation of light and shadow produce a sensation of something overwhelming and uncanny, indicating by implication the scale of the mass murder and the damage it wrought on Chilean society. At the same time, the location of the artwork and its inclusion of victims and survivors might lead us to interpret *Geometry of Conscience* as a funerary ritual. The very situation of the *desaparecidos* is defined by the fact that their families were not able to identify or bury the corpses of their loved ones.

Cinema provides further relevant examples. The title of the 1999 film *Garage Olimpo*, directed by Marco Bechis, refers to one of the detention and torture centres of the Argentine military regime. The main character is a political activist who is captured by the junta. At the end of the film, we see her about to be thrown from a military plane into the ocean; but we don't see her body, only a shadow, barely moving. Patricio Guzmán's 2010 film *Nostalgia de la luz* offers another instance. Near the end, we see dozens of photographs of Chilean *desaparecidos*, some bathed in sunlight and others covered by the shadows of trees moving in the wind. Guzmán

tells the story of some women who have been looking for their loved ones for decades in the Atacama desert—people who were kidnapped by Pinochet's dictatorship during the 'Caravan of Death' in 1973. All the women could find of their relatives were fragments of bones. The film ends with an image of the women's never-ending search: the silhouette of one of them against the sunset in the middle of the desert.

We have seen, then, that a particular set of events—the *desapariciones* and the killings related to them—have been systematically represented through the use of a specific aesthetic device: the multiplication of outlines of human bodies. However, the destruction of individual lives and identities which is at the heart of the phenomenon of missing persons is also one of the main characteristics of other historical massacres during the last century. Does this common ground allow us to hypothesize that the silhouette may be one of the main formulae for the representation of contemporary massacres more generally? As a matter of fact, this device has been widely used in German *lieux de mémoire* related to the Shoah. In some cases, it has been deployed directly. Józef Szajna, a Polish survivor of Buchenwald, participated in the 1970 edition of the Venice Biennale with his installation *Scenes of Reminiscence*, in which we can see full silhouettes, empty silhouettes, and others painted with the stripes of the *Lager* uniforms. At the end of the 1990s, Szajna conceived several installations to be added to the Buchenwald Memorial, in which silhouettes of different sizes, produced out of cardboard and wood, make up a crowd.¹⁴ In Berlin, at the Grunewald S-Bahn station, there is a monument that commemorates the victims who were sent to ghettos, concentration camps and extermination camps from that very same place: *Gleis Siebzehn*. In 1991, Polish sculptor Karol Broniatowski excavated the wall in front of the station and produced seven hollowed-out human forms that could very well be described as three-dimensional silhouettes.

But it is not only silhouettes, in the strict sense of the term, that have been used to this end in Berlin. The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, built by Peter Eisenman and Buro Happold in 2003–04, is a vast field of grey concrete stelae close to the Brandenburg Gate. It can produce a ghostly effect, as when visitors catch glimpses of people walking along the alleys between the blocks. They are not silhouettes, but their

¹⁴ Ingrid Scheurmann and Volkhard Knigge, eds, *Josef Szajna: Kunst und Theater*, Göttingen 2002.

fleeting shadows are reminiscent of them. We try to identify the people, to recognize their bodies, but it is impossible. This experience suggested to us a need to broaden the silhouette formula to include spectral beings and other sorts of images. One example would be *Fallen Leaves*, Menashe Kadishman's 1997 installation at the Jewish Museum in Berlin. The artist covered the floor with thousands of metal masks of different sizes; visitors walked across this sea of masks, producing anguished, jarring sounds. Again, we are not faced in this case with a multiplication of silhouettes, but with masks, replicas, ghosts, which could be considered forms of the *Doppelgänger*.

Indeed, we could perhaps describe the contemporary formula for the representation of massacres and genocides as 'the multiplication of the *Doppelgänger*'. Of course, this formula has not displaced the earlier ones altogether; but it has come to predominate. The extension of the concept allows us to articulate our arguments with representations of uncanny doubles as well as of absent shadows. It is perhaps significant here that Sigmund Freud, in his elaboration of the concept of the uncanny, quoted four times from Adelbert von Chamisso's 1814 novel *Peter Schlemihl*, in which the protagonist sells his shadow to the Devil without realizing that, by losing it, he also loses his place in this world. German Romanticism is also the source of the powerful association between shadows, silhouettes and doubles: ever since Jean-Paul Richter coined the term *Doppelgänger* in his 1796 novel *Siebenkäs*, this motif has represented a subject pathologically divided between reality and fantasy, what E. T. A. Hoffmann defined as a 'chronic dualism'.¹⁵

Might this capacity for oscillation be what gives shadows and *Doppelgänger* their force as components of a contemporary representational formula? The dualism is present, for example, in two strands of Christian Boltanski's artistic work: the shadow theatres, in which small handmade figures are lit so that they cast vast shadows on the wall, and his series of portraits of identifiable people. In these works, the subjects photographed are in some cases victims of the Shoah, but in others have no connection to genocide. Nevertheless, according to Dutch literary scholar Ernst van Alphen, the Holocaust is present in both types of picture, because they transform subjects into objects, they are suffused with a mourning atmosphere, and they impart an upsetting normality

¹⁵ E. T. A. Hoffmann, 'Chronischer Dualismus', in *Werke, Band 5: Späte Werke*, Darmstadt 1979, p. 311.

to death.¹⁶ The description could also be applied to memorials and artistic works relating to other massacres. In the Museum of Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh, a multitude of photographs and human remains, when seen from a distance, creates the illusion of being faced with unidentifiable silhouettes. In Rwanda, the *Doppelgänger* ceases to be an aesthetic creation and becomes a physical trace of life and death. In 1994, Gilles Peress photographed Rwandan victims *in situ*; in one of his images, the decay of a murdered person's body has left the floor imprinted with their shape (Figure 6). In another, a shroud conceals the individuality of a corpse, which turns into a three-dimensional silhouette.

The focus of our research is historical massacres, not war. However, in some exceptional cases, the disparity of means between two sides in a conflict is so large that the results can be considered massacres. Three identical, full-body silhouettes were used by Max Ernst in a 1920 collage entitled *Massacre of the Innocents*. They are representations of martyrs who, racked by fear, flee from a monster—half animal, half machine—that attacks them from above. In the ancient Christian massacre of Ernst's title, we hear echoes of the modern slaughter that took place in the Great War. The nuclear attacks against Hiroshima and Nagasaki are another obvious example. On the day of the detonation in Hiroshima, photojournalist Yoshito Matsushige took a picture of the shadow left on some steps by a person sitting on them. A few days later, another photographer, Eiichi Matsumoto, took similar shots of the imprint left by a person leaning against a wall in Nagasaki. Several Japanese artists and survivors have echoed these images in their work. Ogawa Sagami, who was 28 at the moment of the Hiroshima blast, painted a canvas twenty years later in which the dead appear as silhouettes; Rikuo Fukamachi, who was 13 in August 1945, drew an image of a boy becoming a silhouette with its edges illuminated by the glare of the explosion. The recurrence of the shadow device in these cases points to the broad, cross-cultural validity of the silhouette/*Doppelgänger* representational formula.

IV

What is the purpose of this research? Perhaps it can create a distance, a *Denkraum* in Warburgian terms, between traumatic facts and the person

¹⁶ Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature and Theory*, Stanford 1997, pp. 103–9.



Figure 6: Gilles Peress, *Rwanda*, 1994

attempting to narrate or explain them. This separation does not solve the problem of the limits of representation, but it allows us to avoid the risk of paralysis, silence and rejection of any sort of understanding of these horrors. The search for historical formulae used to depict massacres can also help us to comprehend two important things. First, it brings us closer to the context of the massacres—the chains of cause and effect that surround them—even if their core remains beyond our reach. Secondly, it provides tools for examining the symbolic resources of the perpetrators, who used these formulae before the defenders of the victims appropriated them to remember and understand what happened.

There is, however, also a grave danger in the search for such formulae: it implies a process of generalization that could inadvertently reproduce the uniformity which the perpetrator tried to impose upon the victims. This is the source of the imaginary collective identities which the murderers, in turn, transform into a source of legitimacy for the extermination of thousands of lives and experiences. How can we avoid such distortions? By balancing, whenever possible, the use of global categories with a search for concrete, individual people, their specific sufferings and destinies. The documentation centre under the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin offers one example. The stelae above ground are uniform, indistinguishable, and point to the enormity



Figure 7: Birkenau, Poland, May–June 1944

of the crime that was committed without giving any details. But the documentation available underground changes the scale abruptly. Visitors there have access to a collection of small testimonies—precise, deeply emotional, produced by identifiable people. We see their handwriting, we learn their names, we find out details about their lives.

The Nazi genocide was the object of several contemporaneous depictions. For instance, two professional SS photographers, Ernst Hoffmann and Bernhard Walter, captured images of Auschwitz that were meant to have been destroyed when the concentration camp was abandoned. But 193 of those photographs were fortuitously found and courageously preserved by Lilly Jacob, a survivor. Many of these images attempt to represent the victims as vermin, reversing the cynegetic metaphor that had been used to describe massacres since classical antiquity, animalizing the killed rather than the killers. Nevertheless, in other shots, the humanity of the victims resists all attempts to suppress it; the immediacy of the camera image thwarts the photographers' bid to manipulate it. Researchers at Yad Vashem have identified at least six of the people in one of these images (Figure 7). Moving from right to left, the little girl standing second from the right is Gerti Mermelstein from Mukacheve in what is now Ukraine; the girl sitting on the ground to her right is



Figure 8: Victor Basterra, portraits of Graciela Alberti and Fernando Brodsky, 1980

her sister, and the woman behind the girl is their mother; on her left, the elderly woman with the shawl over her head is Tauba Mermelstein, Gerti's grandmother; the woman in the woollen hat next to her is her daughter, Laja Mermelstein-Vogel; and the two boys standing in the foreground of the picture on the left are Reuven and Gershon, Laja's sons. All of them died in the gas chambers in Auschwitz, between May and June 1944.

Perhaps we should end where we started, with an Argentine example of the same struggle to retain one's identity. Víctor Basterra worked at a printer's in Buenos Aires. He was imprisoned at the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada, but survived. In 1980, Basterra secretly took photographs of several *desaparecidos*. He wanted to smuggle the images out of the camp and bring them to the victims' families. Graciela Alberti, who was kidnapped on March 17, 1980, looks deeply sad. Fernando Brodsky, by contrast, smiles confidently, although his face shows clear signs of the torment he has undergone (Figure 8). Graciela and Fernando's bodies were probably thrown into the sea from a plane, perhaps while they were still alive. They are still missing.