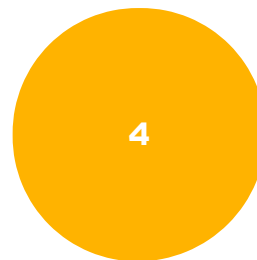




Szkoła  
Filmowa  
w Łodzi



INSTYTUT  
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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture**

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Wunderblock Warsaw: The Ruined City, Memory, and Mechanical  
Reproduction

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In my essay, I set out to posit Warsaw as a Freudian Wunderblock of sorts, inscribing the photographs of its destruction as its ruins proper, as the memory-images that permit it to be read as a spectral city. At the same time, I try to show how one could think of photography – defined as an extension, or supplement of memory – in terms of ruin in its own right.

**Krzysztof Pijarski** – Artist working mainly with photography, Assistant Professor at the Lodz Film School, art historian. Director of the Visual Narratives Laboratory. Recipient of a Fulbright Junior Research Grant at Johns Hopkins University (2009-2010), and grants, among others, from the Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, and the Shpilman Institute of Photography. Headed and participated in grants from the Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education, the National Science Centre, and the National Programme for the Development of Humanities. Interested in developing convincing visual forms of thinking, as an artist he focuses primarily on the aesthetic – that is, sensual – dimension of the epistemological, political, and ethical, creating visual archeologies of institutions and discourses, biographies of people and things. Authored a monograph on modernism as seen through the dual prism of the figure of Michael Fried and photography as a technology that changed our understanding of art (*Archeologia modernizmu. Michael Fried i nowoczesne doświadczenie sztuki* [An Archeology of Modernism. Michael Fried, Photography, and the Modern Experience of Art], 2017), as well as *(Post)Modern Fate of Images: Allan Sekula / Thomas Struth* (2013). Edited the volumes *Object Lessons: Zofia Rydet's „Sociological Record”* (2017) and *The Archive as Project* (2011). A collection of his translations of essays by Allan Sekula was published by the Warsaw University Press in 2010. Participant of PLAT(T)FORM 2012 at the Fotomuseum Winterthur. His project, *Lives of the Unholy* (2009-2012), was presented at C/O Berlin.

## Wunderblock Warsaw: The Ruined City, Memory, and Mechanical Reproduction

Photographs are not hand-made; they are manufactured. And what is manufactured is an image of the world. The inescapable fact of mechanism or automatism in the making of these images is the feature Bazin points to as “[satisfying], once and for all and in its very essence, our obsession with realism.” It is essential to get to the right depth of this fact of automatism.

Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*<sup>1</sup>

There can be no image that is not about destruction and survival, and this is especially the case in the image of ruin. We might even say that the image of ruin tells us what is true of every image: that it bears witness to the enigmatic relation between death and survival, loss and life, destruction and preservation, mourning and memory. It also tells us, if it can tell us anything at all, that what dies, is lost, and mourned within the image –even as it survives, lives on, and struggles to exist – is the image itself.

Eduardo Cadava, *‘Lapsus Imaginis’: The Image in Ruin*<sup>2</sup>

### I. seeing ruins

Facing away from the viewer, she stands at a panoramic window in a high-rise hotel, looking out at the city. While she takes in the view, an agitated discussion is running its course. Apparently she has been invited to Lebanon to take part in a film that would lead her into the war-ravaged south of the country, and her manager keeps insisting that it is too dangerous.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Je veux voir* (2008)

“They will go through the post-war region and we will film, it’s

as simple as that", we hear a voice saying.

"I thought she was just coming to attend a charity gala", another voice responds.

"I want to see", she suddenly says.

"I don't understand. What do you want to see? They are already rebuilding. I don't think you'll see what you imagine."

"What do you want to see?" the other voice asks insistently, having produced a litany of reasons not to go.

"I want to see", she repeats, looking out on Beirut and the Corniche that separates the city from the Mediterranean.

What does it mean to want to see? What is it that one wants to see when setting out to witness ruin? In what way does ruin speak to us? And finally – what do we actually see when facing ruin? These are the main questions broached by *Je veux voir* (2008), a film by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige set in the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanon War. And because it is Catherine Deneuve who is taken on the trip by the Lebanese actor, playwright, and visual artist Rabih Mroué, the question of who is looking imposes itself with full force, at the same time questioning the relationship between seeing and understanding, between what sight offers and the kind of insight it may provide.

Needless to say, the couple in this peculiar road movie experience a series of vicissitudes during their day trip south. First – apparently people do mind onlookers, clearly outsiders, particularly those equipped with cameras – they are driven away from ruined buildings in the suburbs, a part of town that was hit especially hard during the fighting. Later, when they go south and arrive in the village where Rabih used to spend every summer, he is unable find his grandmother's house that he wanted to show to Catherine. They wander among the ruins until Rabih finally gives up. "The road seems to have disappeared", he complains, "I don't know where the house is any more. I don't know any more. Everything has changed. I spent my childhood here, and I can't recognize anything." The village has

changed beyond recognition. It is no longer his village. Or, to put it differently, it has become unintelligible to him. Strangely enough, it was the unintelligibility that made Catherine embark on this trip in the first place. "You know, we only saw images on TV", she confides to Rabih, "And it always seems... It always seems unreal."

This motif is repeated over and over in the course of the film. "I'm not sure I'll understand much", Catherine says having acknowledged her feeling of unreality, "but I want to see", and:

"There are so many things I'd love to understand, my dear" – a monologue of Catherine's from *Belle de jour* (dir. Luis Buñuel, 1967), spoken by Rabih. Then on their way back they pass a site by the sea shore, where the debris of the ruined buildings of Beirut is brought. The long panning shot of the recycling site is accompanied by Rabih's monologue:

"You wanted to see. I also want to see but I can't seem to. Do you see that? I told you they are moving the rubble from the suburbs. They dismantle all the bombed-out buildings and destroy them completely. They stack the rubble in trucks and empty it here, on the seashore. They extract the iron scrap, then grind the stones and throw them into the sea. Do you see? We can't recognize anything. We can't distinguish the hall from the dining room, the kitchen from the entrance, the bedrooms from the bathroom. Just stones, all mixed up. It's like a town that had to be discarded, hidden, buried under the sea. It's strange. It reminds me of an image... A town washed up on the seashore, like a whale. A dismantled monster that can no longer move, a body decaying far from the eyes of people. In a short time, the town will rest under water, silent, mute. And we have already begun to forget it."

Indeed, it is the question of intelligibility – and that of memory



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige,  
*Je veux voir* (2008)

– that seems central here, not only to the film itself, but to any attempt at seeing ruin, and also photographic images – not only of ruin. What I will be trying to do in the pages to come is look at a specific convention in representations of the ruin of Warsaw during and after World War II, as a theoretical object, and try to fathom to what extent it can tell us more about ruin, photography, and memory.

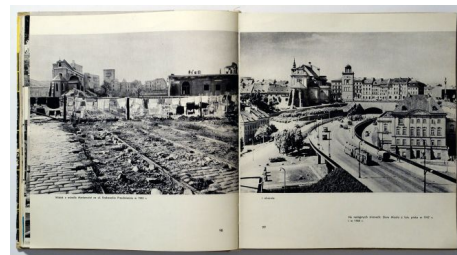
## II. the inscription of ruin

What are ruins, then, and why is it so difficult to “see” them?

According to Hartmut Böhme, the ruin is always “a sign of what used to be an undamaged structure, yet a certain beauty was bestowed on it, a surplus of meaning that cannot be entirely appropriated by the

semantics of what has been.”<sup>3</sup> Being a sign, the ruin cannot be abstracted from meaning, nor can it be thought of apart from the aesthetic. Ruins are “sentimental par excellence – objects of belated (*nachträglich*) reflection, signifiers of an absence, of a lack of ideality, insofar as it is measured by the wholeness, functional totality and integrity of the work.”<sup>4</sup> There is nothing to see in ruins as such, they first have to be endowed with meaning, abstracted from their surroundings by acts of signification and aestheticization they have to become monuments, or are left to wither away, until nature takes over.<sup>5</sup> A ruin needs to be inscribed to become a ruin proper.

What is more, ruins seem to benefit the self-understanding of the vanquished rather than the victors, whose aim is rather to lift themselves above time. As Böhme, again, points out, the history of *Roma aeterna* as a city devoid of ruins was a history of the ruination of others – of other cities and other people, a history we would today be inclined to call colonial. It was only after the Sack

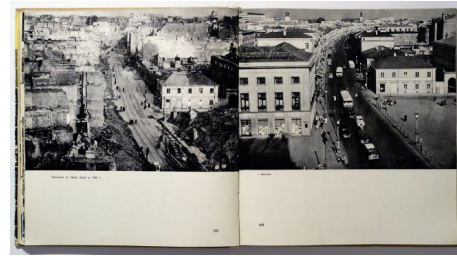


Adolf Ciborowski, *Warszawa: o zniszczeniu i odbudowie miasta* (Warszawa: Polonia, 1964), 98-99

of Rome in 410 that Rome, "as ruin city par excellence", became the emblem of European history; a reminder, and eternal model, of empire. Yet what is most important in this formulation of the question of ruin is Böhme insisting on the claim that the fall of European cities, and especially that of Rome, "did not inscribe itself into the consciousness of European societies because their architectural structures were invalidated as material bearers of signs, but because – through the demise of these structures – they experienced the ruin of meaning and with it the discontinuity of history."<sup>6</sup>

This experience of discontinuity had to be undone through a great expenditure of energy, because it eroded the basis of social and religious formations of meaning, positing destruction at the heart of history. At first this was done through theological means (the demise of the great cities seen as signifiers of heavenly Jerusalem), then, since Petrarch, through the secular strategies of the revival of Antiquity, of the restoration and preservation of monuments. It is also then that archeology was instituted as model for the "reconstructive memory work of the humanities, down to psychoanalysis."<sup>7</sup> This is a very important point, as it pins down the crucial juncture of ruin, memory, and writing (or inscription) that Böhme tries to make. And indeed, Freud made the map of Rome, with all its superimposed layers of ruin, another model of memory, analogous to his "mystic writing pad",<sup>8</sup> something that I will return to later.

However, Böhme insists that the discourses that gave meaning to ruins – the gesture of a saving translation into writing (*rettende Verschriftlichung*) – started unraveling in the aftermath of Romanticism, leaving us with a tendency to universalize the ruin emblem, in which “the uncanniness of an enigmatically present sense changes into the uncanniness of its disappearance.”<sup>9</sup> Finally, he wonders whether today, in post-historical times, the truth of ruins is not that of history turning out to have been driven by the impulse to transform the world into ruin all along, producing at the same time an encompassing archive as a trace of this history of ruination.<sup>10</sup>



Adolf Ciborowski, *Warszawa: o zniszczeniu i odbudowie miasta* (Warszawa: Polonia, 1964), 108-109

What place does the destruction of European cities during World War II take in this account? Why doesn't Böhme take up this topic in his essay at all? It is as if this story is not one of ruination, or rather, as if it already were part of this universalizing drive for the substitution of archive for ruin:

Is it not so that history wanted to be no more than a handing down of permanent memory traces, from which all libidinal excitation has been withdrawn? Ruins have always been such an archive of memory. If Freud is right by saying that memory and consciousness cannot occupy the same place in the psychic apparatus; furthermore, if he is right by saying that “consciousness [arises] in the place of the memory trace”, then ruins are in the history of the obsessional emphasis on consciousness a sort of *externalized memory space*.<sup>11</sup>

In this context it seems interesting to ask where is the place for, or of, the ruin of European cities, if there is any? And why are there virtually no ruins left as markers of the destruction of these cities? (The only notable exception being the Gedächtniskirche in Berlin.) Ruins are often connected with nostalgia, a nostalgia

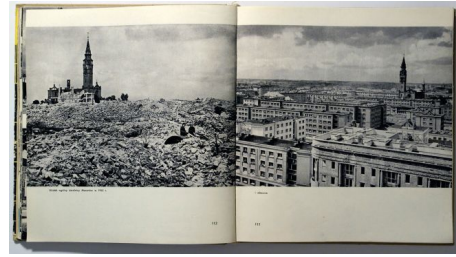


for a grand, lost past – the central example being Rome again – but as Andreas Huyssen asks himself: “how can we speak of a nostalgia for ruins as we remember the bombed out cities of World War II (Rotterdam and Coventry, Hamburg and Dresden, Warsaw, Stalingrad, and Leningrad)”? “Bombings, after all, are not about producing ruins. They produce rubble. But then the market has recently been saturated with stunning picture books and films (documentary and fictional; e.g., *The Downfall*, 2004) of the ruins of World War II. In them, rubble is indeed transformed, even aestheticized, into ruin.”<sup>12</sup> For Huyssen, as for Böhme, the age of ruins – authentic ruins, as he calls them – is over. He defines the present as an “age of preservation, restoration, and authentic remakes”, all of which render the ruin as emblem of pastness obsolete.

But maybe those “stunning picture books and films” are not entirely markers of a purely, or merely, aesthetic, objectless nostalgia. What if they signal a certain readiness to confront those spectral ruins, by now all but invisible, yet still exerting a certain power over who we are now and the decisions we make; a receptivity towards the specters these ruins evoke and that still come haunting us? What if it is exactly these photographs that are our contemporary ruins, and that tell us something about the way we gain access to the world through photographs? And not exactly in the sense, as Böhme would have it, that their encompassing archive will at some point reach a level of completeness that will find its correlate in the ruination of the world<sup>13</sup>, but in the sense of an archive of external memory traces that allow us to recognize echoes of the past in the writing of the present so as to better understand the future towards which we are headed.

### III. the ruins of Warsaw

If one was tempted to call the destruction of Warsaw during World War II unprecedented or mythological, it would not only be due to the fact that it was indeed the most destroyed European city – comparable in scope to the destruction of Hiroshima – but that its destruction was systematic, and carried out in a planned manner over an extended period. “All inhabitants are to be killed, no prisoners taken. Warsaw is to be leveled, thereby establishing an intimidating example for the whole of Europe” – this is how SS general Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski described Heinrich Himmler’s order regarding Poland’s capital during the Nuremberg Trials.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as a consequence of the 1939 invasion of Poland, the occupation, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943, and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, the city was destroyed to such an extent that it didn’t seem obvious at the time whether Warsaw would remain the capital of Poland, and Łódź was seriously considered as an alternate option. After the decision of January 3rd 1945 to rebuild Warsaw, the new government and the city’s inhabitants faced a reality hard to describe, although shared by many Europeans and Japanese of the time: the city lost 90% of its historic buildings, which had to be reconstructed, many from the ground up; 75% of housing and industry, schools, theaters and hospitals, government offices etc., were reduced to rubble and had to be built anew; and 60% of the remaining structures had to be rebuilt at the same time. In addition to that, during the first 15 years after the war all bridges and 80% of communication routes, two-thirds of the water and sewage system, as well as the whole heating infrastructure were rebuilt.<sup>15</sup> In a recent report, commissioned by Lech Kaczyński, the mayor of Warsaw at the time, as a part of his historical politics,<sup>16</sup>



Adolf Ciborowski, *Warszawa: o zniszczeniu i odbudowie miasta* (Warszawa: Polonia, 1964), 112-113

material losses were estimated at 54,6 billion contemporary US dollars.<sup>17</sup> What might speak more to the imagination of the reader is the fact that during the war the city's population shrank from 1.3 million in 1939 to 160.000 in January 1945 (with only 22.000 on the left riverbank, where the major part of Warsaw, the city center included, is located). With nearly 700.000 people dead (400.000 among them Polish Jews) and the rest driven out, the landscape was truly horrific, and often described in terms of natural disaster. Take, for example, this telling description by literary critic Kazimierz Wyka:

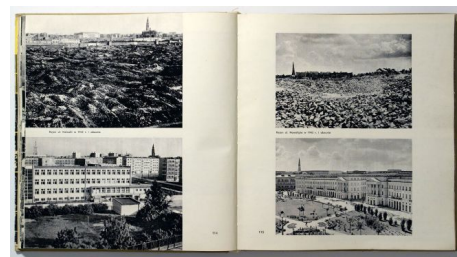
Each city, when seen from a distance, has a landscape of its own. The walls, towers and churches do not change places in the course of centuries and for those who wanted to view the best cityscape of Warsaw from the side of the Vistula river, it sufficed to evoke in their memory the panorama of the capital painted by Canaletto. At least this is what I always did. I walk down Nowy Zjazd Street, close my eyes and see it still with the memory of sight, saturated with the same precise light as today. I do not want to raise my eyelids, because the landscape that hits my eyes is foreign to me. This city is foreign to me, so utterly foreign and other, like a mountain range that sprang up in a place altogether unexpected. It is in vain that one searches its jagged silhouette for any resemblance to Warsaw's landscape of old. I was under the impression – and it is the strongest sense I have ever had in Warsaw – that I was facing a new and hitherto unseen phenomenon of nature. He who tries to interpret the destruction wrought in Warsaw as a work of man will not get to the heart of the matter. Warsaw stands on a threshold where the sheer expanse of ravage and evil at the disposal of human kind shades into actions equal to the powers of nature.<sup>18</sup>

For the reconstruction to begin and the people to be able to in fact construct a new city on the ruins of the old, this apocalyptic landscape had to be transfigured: first, aestheticized, then

mythologized. Let us take as an example a fragment from Juliusz Starzyński, one of the most important art-historians of the post-war period, and professed communist:

Today's Warsaw in ruins is beautiful! And let us not take that beauty in the metaphorical, moral, or social sense. Warsaw is beautiful as it is. We sometimes experience this beauty in categories that can be compared to the aesthetic agency of natural phenomena, at other times we experience it as a work of art, most probably still as both – directly with our senses, animal-like. [...] This is the most authentic beauty, absolutely unique. A fleeting beauty whose fate it is to perish in an instant, because such is the will and resolution of the nation.<sup>19</sup>

First, the ruins had to be re-discovered or re-appropriated as *ours* again, to be then mythologized as a foundation for the new Warsaw – a new capital for a new state. No one could phrase it more succinctly than the writer and classical scholar Jan Parandowski:



Adolf Ciborowski, *Warszawa: o zniszczeniu i odbudowie miasta* (Warszawa: Polonia, 1964), 114-115

Whatever their architecture, however the new streets will be marked out, the thought, memory, and imagination of generations to come will be searching underneath them for the old map – the topography of glory. Warsaw will have what Rome has: underneath the surface of everyday life *a city of phantoms and apparitions*, full of authority and pathos. [...] And when the ruins are gone, and in their place a Warsaw unlike the old will rise, it is him – the immortal genius loci – who will adorn it with its irresistible charm.<sup>20</sup>

Warsaw is thus compared to Rome, its ruins like those of the eternal city, pointing toward lost grandeur and simultaneously

putting forward its future ambition. But note the language of phantoms and apparitions that already haunts the vision of the reborn city, the uncanny *charm* of the old. This image is as ambivalent as it is grand, and I mean to explore this very ambivalence in relationship to photography. What seems equally important is the question of how it is possible for those who do not remember Warsaw in ruins to keep in mind this spectral, “underground city”, as art historian Waldemar Baraniewski calls it, “which for the most part is hidden from view:”<sup>21</sup>

We are above it, treading that which was covered up after historical catastrophe. New construction sites and street excavations provide moments of contact with this city. Then one can spot the stratigraphy, ground rubble, the black layer of ashes; at times foundations or cellars appear. Who inhabits this parallel city?<sup>22</sup>

Today, Warsaw’s past as ruined city is all but invisible in its urban structure, and one has to know where – and how – to look in order to see the seams containing that hidden past. More so, as Hartmut Böhme pointed out, where there are no ruins left to be inscribed as such, there “memory will not adhere, or must have already been transferred into writing altogether, as in the famous phrase «campus ubi Troia fuit.» Because Troy did not have any emblematic cipher as its counterpart, the city’s ruins could only be remembered in writing, in the Homeric epic.”<sup>23</sup>

While something analogous can be said of Warsaw – there are many written accounts, be it literary, journalistic or personal, that have certainly contributed to the inscription of the image of the ruined city in the collective imaginary – I would like to claim that it is photography that can be seen as having already become a new model for the inscription of ruin and, more broadly, of historical event; as a new, parallel model for cultural memory. More so, a model that fundamentally changed the way this memory is inscribed or imagined, shifting the emphasis

from narrative – the establishing of relationships between events and facts – to description, the accumulation of traces.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the crucial question remains: how do we endow these traces with meaning?

#### IV. side-by-side palimpsests

If we are to look at photographs as both witness to and memory of the ruin of Warsaw, at their role in constructing both the myth of the city's reconstruction and that of its haunting (and haunted)



Dobrosław Kobielski, *Warszawa* (Warszawa: 1956)

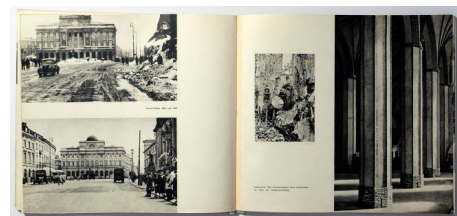
counterpart – if we are to see them as the ruins of Warsaw proper – it seems best to concentrate on the many photo books that were published since the very commencement of (re)construction work. What they have in common is above all an emphasis on the heroism of the reconstruction, whose meaning rapidly shifted in official accounts: instead of the idea of an (at least partial) return to what existed before the war, the construction of a new, socialist order quickly became the main focus, epitomized by the slogan “the whole nation builds its capital”, which was promoted throughout the country. The less traces of the city's recent past that one could see, the more optimistic the tone of these publications became. To take as an example a book published already in 1957 by the editorial board of *Stolica. Warszawski tygodnik ilustrowany* (The Capital. Warsaw Illustrated Weekly):<sup>25</sup>

This book is dedicated to the first dozen years of the reconstruction of Warsaw. The photographs reproduced in it show the whole of the city. It has to be noted, though, that not one palace, not one street, not one house or monument shown on the pages of this publication, survived the calamity of war. [...] The whole of Warsaw, as shown on the pages of this book, is a new city, a dozen years of age.

The only pictures of a construction site are those from housing projects, palpable proof of the growth of the city's population, and hence its general development. A brand new capital. This was one of the established conventions of picturing Warsaw. A different approach can be identified in *Stolica's* earlier publication, *Nowa Warszawa w ilustracjach* (*New Warsaw in Illustrations*) from 1955, exemplary for the kind of visual narrative that was used to construct the myth of Warsaw as a reborn city.<sup>27</sup> The first part of the book is dedicated to the history of the capital, using photographs, etchings and paintings as illustrative material. Having established this historical base, the book goes on to present the city as a contemporary, modern capital, with the 1955 socialist realist Palace of Culture and Science as an embodiment of its new values.

Right after this, the first images of ruins make their appearance, but always in "dialectical" constellations, juxtaposed with corresponding pictures taken from the very same vantage point, but showing the city rebuilt – a very peculiar kind of re-photography. It is these juxtapositions that are the most characteristic element of the majority of publications of the time (they were also a staple of the *Stolica* weekly itself).<sup>28</sup> They show us views of the catastrophe among the polished facades of the new capital, at the same time establishing the ultimate point of reference: there is where we started – from scratch – and here is where we are now.

The rubble that was once Warsaw was inscribed as ruin at the very moment the decision to reconstruct the city was made. According to Iwona Kurz, they weren't even perceived as "'ruins of the city', but as a city of ruins; not as the ruins of Warsaw (or in Warsaw), but 'Warsaw'. [...] The



Dobrosław Kobielski, *Warszawa* (Warszawa: 1956)



ruins became identified with the city, and the city itself became a metaphor for the ruined country.”<sup>29</sup>

It is difficult to confer documentary status on exhibitions such as Leonard Sempoliński’s *Warszawa 1945*, presented at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art in 1969 on the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of World War II (and the 25th anniversary of the Polish People’s Republic). On the one hand, the photographs are without doubt testimonies, on the other, they are influenced by the exhibition’s rhetoric, the occasion of their publication, and not least by Sempoliński’s attempts at capturing the “atmosphere” of the place and the “glory of death.” In the end, he refrains from showing any signs of the city’s coming back to life.<sup>30</sup> From a post-war perspective these photographs define the “ground zero:”

The emptiness of the photographs serves here to drive home the argument that something was built on top of nothing, a city on rubble. [...] The photographs of ruins cease to be documents of history, but become testimony to the necessity of the reconstruction that in the propaganda discourse of the era shades into construction. It is only the future tense that truly exists.<sup>31</sup>

What is thus being constructed from scratch is not only a new city, but along with it, a new memory and a new identity. However, what seems most interesting in this motif is the way that the “dialectical pairings” work. I call them dialectical because they do not lend themselves to an easy discursive appropriation. Shown next to each other, the images start to contaminate one another, creating a strange, palimpsest-like composite that starts distorting, imploding teleological time.

In Adam Ważyk’s famous *A Poem For Adults* from 1955 – credited as a harbinger of the post-Stalin “thaw” – there are two memorable lines that read “Oh, all are so young here / Their memories don’t reach past the ruins.”<sup>32</sup> Obviously, in post-war Poland the memories of many *did* reach past the ruins, what is



more, the juxtapositions in question make clear that the new Warsaw was very much *not* like the old one. The ideological work performed by the above mentioned books consisted in proving that the new was better than the old. It doesn't seem probable that those in power managed to convince everybody, although, at the time, there was no place in the public sphere for the unconvinced. And so these dialectical pairs could function in two greatly polarized worlds of meaning. For some the image of ruin was one of new beginnings, for others it was an image of annihilation; for some it was *tabula rasa*, for others a memory-image, animated by narration. What I am trying to do here is to shed light on a certain mechanism of the workings of these images, on how they establish a fluctuation or relay – between past and future, between the object and its ruin, between life and death.

These photographs show with great explicitness that images of ruin require a certain relationality. The dialectical pairs make clear that images of a city in ruin cannot simply exist by themselves. As such, they are too abstract, they seem “unreal”, like the ruin of Beirut that Catherine Deneuve witnessed on television. A photograph of a cityscape in ruins is an image without an object – the “object” spreading all over the frame, filling it to the point of bursting (if the picture is taken from an elevated enough viewpoint), never quite becoming a landscape; a proliferating accumulation of detail, drowning the image in noise, ruining any attempt at signification. According to Eduardo Cadava, “the ruin, the image of ruin, is therefore without image. It can never be presented.”<sup>33</sup>

What such an image needs is its other, an afterimage that would be able to “activate” it, to make it imaginable, project it into “real” space. This is exactly what re-photographs of ruined



Dobrosław Kobielski, *Warszawa*  
(Warszawa: 1956)

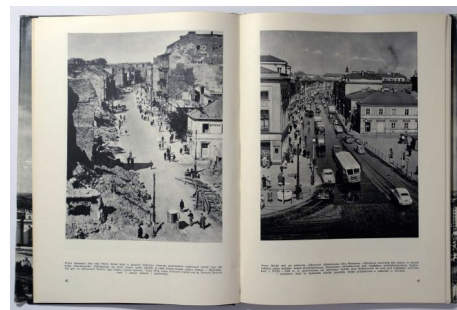
spaces make explicit. The moment the pair is assembled they both begin to transform each other: the ruin inscribes itself in the cityscape, and one suddenly sees it projected onto, or through, the intact buildings.

However, such re-photographs – as dull as they often seem (and are!) – also tell us something about photography in general, namely that a photograph is an object inhabited by a peculiar temporality. Generally speaking, photographs develop as meaningful images by deferred action alone. Not only in the sense that there is always a stage of latency in the creation of the image (even in digital imaging), but especially in the sense that their meaning always comes to us belatedly, only in hindsight so to say. It is this very trait, connected with their status as indexes of a momentary state of the world that makes them uncanny, haunted objects, and it is in this sense that, I believe, Eduardo Cadava has claimed for the photograph the status of ruin, defining it as a *lapsus imaginis*.<sup>34</sup>

## V. the photograph as ruin

In what way could we think of the photograph as a contemporary ruin, and of the ruin as a cipher for photography – these are the questions I would like to explore a little further now, especially in light of doubling, deferred action, and a certain hauntedness implied by the dialectical pairings discussed above.

Laura Mulvey broaches exactly these questions, starting from the recognition that it is precisely the indexical – that is “objective” or automatic – character of the photographic image as described by André Bazin and Roland Barthes that at the same time brings it close to the uncanny and



*Nowa Warszawa w ilustracjach*  
(Warszawa: Warszawski tygodnik  
ilustrowany „Stolica”, 1955), 40–41

– through that – to death:

It is the photograph as index, located as it is in an 'embalmed' moment, that enables these exchanges across the boundaries between the material and the spiritual, reality and magic, and between life and death. Its most material aspect, the physical, 'existential,' link between object and image, gives rise to the most elusive and ineffable properties of this particular sign.<sup>35</sup>

The reason for the uncanniness of the photographic image is its ability to implode our sense of being able to distinguish between reality and imagination. This establishes a fundamental uncertainty at the heart of our experience of the photographic image – between the objective and the subjective, "leaving the spectator with a slightly giddy feeling, reminiscent of the effect caused by *trompe-l'œil*":<sup>36</sup>

The human imagination engages with the mechanical integrity of photographic registration, its place on the side of the index, its indiscriminate recording of everything in front of the lens, leaving on one side the photographer's intervention and organization. It is the mechanical and indexical nature of the image that leads to the slippage of language demanded by a past that persists into the present.<sup>37</sup>

It is the automaticity of the camera, its indifference and totality in recording "everything" that causes this *trompe-l'œil* effect, confusing the distinction between image and reality, or – to be more precise – between trace and sign.<sup>38</sup> Mulvey defines this confusion above all in temporal terms, as a recording of absence and presence at the same time, the crucial relation being "between the instant photographed and the delayed viewer, between the camera's time and its address to the future."<sup>39</sup>

Hartmut Böhme seems to have something similar to say about the temporality of the ruin. For him, the aesthetics of ruin is "a special way of experiencing time: the gaze that synthesizes a field of rubble into a landscape of ruins arrests a moment

between a past that is not yet past and an already present future.”<sup>40</sup> Isn't it precisely the same kind of experience Laura Mulvey is talking about? And wouldn't – in this understanding – photography be the modern site of the inscription of ruin? The ruinous pairs of Warsaw (as well as any other photographs of this kind) allegorize this very insight. They make it palpable by extrapolating this inherent characteristic of the photographic image into two “moments” that normally coexist in every single image: the object itself and its ruin, at once present and absent, real and haunting.

This also brings us back to the central motif of inscription and the distinction between trace and sign that comes to the fore in the photographic image. According to Rosalind Krauss the early photographers were very conscious of this. For them,



*Nowa Warszawa w ilustracjach*  
(Warszawa: Warszawski tygodnik  
ilustrowany „Stolica”, 1955), 46–47

the trace was not simply an effigy,  
a fetish, a layer that had been magically peeled off a material  
object and deposited elsewhere. It was that material object  
become intelligible. The activity of the trace was understood  
as the manifest presence of meaning. Standing rather  
peculiarly at the crossroads between science and spiritualism,  
the trace seemed to share equally in the positivist's  
absolutism of matter and the metaphysician's order of pure  
intelligibility, itself resistant to a materialist analysis.<sup>41</sup>

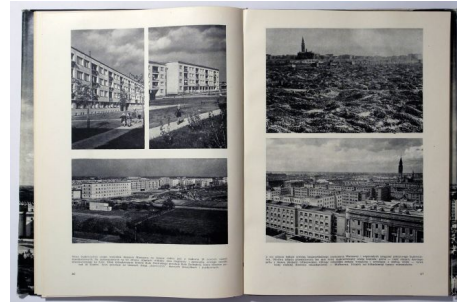
Of course, not every trace becomes *automatically* meaningful,  
but because of the automaticity of inscription any trace is  
*potentially* meaningful. To finally come back to Sigmund Freud  
and his Mystic Writing Pad as the model for human memory,  
photography – defined not as individual images, but as  
a composite apparatus that cannot be understood apart  
from the photographic archive<sup>42</sup> – seems to serve much better as

such an analogy and supplement, and above all a model, for memory. Of course, it is less eloquent because it is not a simple object. However, it seems much more fruitful to work with this example today, especially if the insertion of photography into Böhme's figure connecting inscription, memory and ruin seems convincing enough. This is what Freud has to say regarding the intelligibility of the trace in his metaphor: "[w]e need not be disturbed by the fact that in the Mystic Pad no use is made of the permanent traces of the notes that have been received; *it is enough that they are present.*"<sup>43</sup> It is hard not to recognize that today's emphasis on the archive as depository of cultural memory is based on this very logic: the accumulation of traces in place of translation into discourse. Hence Böhme's revulsion against it, and his pitting of the archive as a history "for nobody" against cultural recall as history's livelihood. With the universal archive completed, "there would be no need for consciousness, for the libidinal play of production, embodiment, and renunciation. It is then that the ruins would become silent."<sup>44</sup>

Yet, if we are to acknowledge the automaticity inherent within the psyche that we hear Freud already hinting at, it seems impossible to uphold such a sharp distinction between cultural recall and archival apparatus, between the spontaneity of memory and the death inherent in its supplements. (The distinction between trace and sign is but a reflection of the above distinctions.) The photograph, in "its own constitutive process as a luminous trace and its own condition as a field of physically displaced signs",<sup>45</sup> proceeds by a certain doubling, and it is only when this doubling is effectuated – sometimes within the photograph itself, but most often in the act of reading, understood as putting the photograph into relationships with other images, one's own affective response, memory, knowledge, sense data, etc. – that it becomes meaningful. This is what I take Rosalind Krauss to be implying when she talks

about "the photograph itself as a complex sort of mirror."<sup>46</sup> And when she later reads a mirror in the famous photograph of the mime Charles Debureau by Nadar as a "metaphor for that reflexive seeing which is consciousness", she at the same time posits the camera obscura as a "metaphor for both recording mechanism and mind."<sup>47</sup> As Craig Owens has so persuasively argued when speaking about photography,

If repeatability is a necessary condition of those units out of which language constructs sense, then reduplication is, at its most fundamental level, the very sign of that repeatability. It signifies that an utterance is not simply a "wild sound", but that it is emitted according to a code, and thus conveys an intention to signify. Although repetition does not guarantee semiosis, it does suggest its presence and thus becomes, for Lévi-Strauss at least, the "signifier of signification".<sup>48</sup>



*Nowa Warszawa w ilustracjach*  
(Warszawa: Warszawski tygodnik  
ilustrowany „Stolica”, 1955), 60–61

Again, if we are to treat the double images of the ruins of Warsaw as theoretical objects, they become allegories of the moment of the transformation of trace into sign, of photographic semiosis that can be only defined in terms of a constant haunting of the photograph by its other – by other images, as well as memory-images, and the subsequent inscriptions and re-inscriptions of meaning. It is this relationality, and constant deferral (in and through re-duplication) that can be the only model of meaning for the photograph. If we are to accept this model as convincing, there is no way we can uphold the view of photography as simply, or merely, external to the human



psyche.

## VI. memory in/of ruin

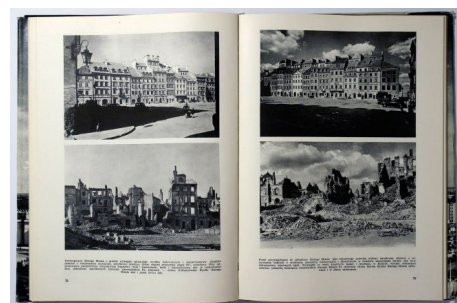
If to Walter Benjamin “[a]llegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things”,<sup>49</sup> couldn’t we say that photography is to memory what the ruin is to the landscape? At the same time this train of thought establishes an inherent connection of photography with the allegorical, something Craig Owens had a lot to say about, stating, first, that “allegory occurs whenever one text is doubled by another”, and second, stressing “its capacity to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear.”<sup>50</sup> Is it not the case that photography is inherently allegorical, even before it is indexical? Not in a strictly chronological sense but because it was first and foremost created as a supplement for memory, as external memory apparatus? Nobody put this problem as succinctly as Jacques Derrida, in his interpretation of Freud’s reflections on the Mystic Writing Pad:

Far from the machine being a pure absence of spontaneity, its *resemblance* to the psychical apparatus, its existence and its necessity bear witness to the finitude of the mnemonic spontaneity which is thus supplemented. The machine – and, consequently,

representation – is death and finitude *within* the psyche. [...]

This resemblance – i.e., necessarily a certain Being-in-the-world of the psyche – did not happen to memory from without, any more than death surprises life. It founds memory.

Metaphor – in this case the analogy between two apparatuses and the possibility of this representational relation – raises a question which, despite his premises, and for reasons which are no doubt essential, Freud failed to make



*Nowa Warszawa w ilustracjach*  
(Warszawa: Warszawski tygodnik  
ilustrowany „Stolica”, 1955), 78–79

explicit, at the very moment when he had brought this question to the threshold of being thematic and urgent. Metaphor as a rhetorical or didactic device is possible here only through the solid metaphor, the “unnatural”, historical production of a *supplementary* machine, *added* to the psychical organisation in order to supplement its finitude. The very idea of finitude is derived from the movement of this supplementarity. The historico-technical production of this metaphor which survives individual (that is, generic) psychical organization, is of an entirely different order than the production of an intrapsychological metaphor, assuming that the latter exists (to speak about it is not enough for that), and whatever bond the two metaphors may maintain between themselves. Here the question of *technology* (a new name must perhaps be found in order to remove it from its traditional problematic) may not be derived from an assumed opposition between the psychical and the nonpsychical, life and death.<sup>51</sup>

If we try to imagine photography as the “machine” Derrida is thinking about, I think we might come close to the significance of photography in the last century, but this exercise might also help us to imagine the role it is starting to play as part of digital culture.<sup>52</sup> The analogy between photography and memory, or the understanding of photography as an extension, or rather, as a supplement of memory, is ultimately based on photography’s inherent relationality. What I mean is not that photography is to be weighed against reality as such, but that it enters into relationships with other photographs and other memory-images, since the “moments” of photographic images that become meaningful to us are always those which enter into such relationships. At the same time this is why there can be no such thing as purely spontaneous memory, nor a merely literal trace. As Derrida put it,

the ruin does not supervene like an accident



upon a monument that was intact only yesterday. In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. [...] The ruin is in front of us; it is neither a spectacle nor a love object. It is experience itself.<sup>53</sup>

For an image to become less than a trace, a memory image, it first has to be inscribed as ruin. It is in this sense that I tried to posit Warsaw as a *Wunderblock* of sorts, inscribing the photographs of its destruction as its ruins proper, as the memory-images that permit it to be read as a spectral city, or even the spectral city.

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- 1 Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge, MA. – London: Harvard University Press, 1979), 21-22.
- 2 Eduardo Cadava, "'Lapsus Imaginis': The Image in Ruins", *October* 96 (2001): 35-60.
- 3 Hartmut Böhme, "Die Ästhetik der Ruinen", in *Der Schein des Schönen*, ed. Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf (Göttingen: Gerhard Steidl Verlag, 1989), 287. He uses the phrase "Semantik der Gewesenheit." Translation author's own.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 There have been interesting attempts at using exactly this moment to inscribe ruin, as in the project for the Auschwitz memorial by Oskar Hansen. Of course, it remained unrealized. (See Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, "Oskar Hansen and the Auschwitz 'Counter Memorial,' 1958-59", *ARTMargins*, 2002, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/2-articles/311-oskar-hansen-and-the-auschwitz-qcountermemorialq-1958-59>).
- 6 Ibid., 293.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York:

- W. W. Norton & Company, 1962), 16–18. On February 7<sup>th</sup> 1931 he writes to Stefan Zweig that he has “actually read more archeology than psychology, so that until the war and then once after I simply *had to be* in Rome for days or weeks at least once a year” (See Böhme, 302).
- 9 Böhme, 288.
- 10 Ibid. He is hinting at catastrophe-proof repositories of the heritage of human kind, build in advance of nuclear – or other – catastrophe. Böhme’s example is that of the Barbarastollen near Freiburg (see <http://www.bbk.bund.de/DE/AufgabenundAusstattung/Kulturgutschutz/ZentralerBergungsort/zentr>, or Birger Menke, “Gigantisches Archiv im Stollen: Bombensicheres Gedächtnis”, *Spiegel Online*, March 13, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/unispiegel/studium/gigantisches-archiv-im-stollen-bombensicheres-gedaechtnis-a-611647.html>), but one could also think of the Corbis archive at Iron Mountain (see <http://www.ironmountain.com/Knowledge-Center/Reference-Library/View-by-Document-Type/Demonstrations-Videos/Tours/Corbis.aspx>, or Estelle Blaschke, “Corbis, ou la démesure de l’archive”, *Post-photographic archive.*, March 22, 2010, <http://culturevisuelle.org/postphoto/2010/03/22/corbis-ou-la-demesure-de-larchive-2/>).
- 11 Ibid., 301 (emphasis mine). Now, after the philosophy of consciousness, we do not need the artificial staging of ruins any more, since they are everywhere and we live among them: “Our ruins are no longer markers of the past, they are signatures of the present” (ibid.).
- 12 Andreas Huyssen, “Nostalgia for Ruins”, *Grey Room* 23 (June 2006): 8.
- 13 Such an attitude would be but a pessimist variation of the views of Oliver Wendell Holmes, expressed in his classic essay, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph”, *Atlantic Monthly* 111, no. 20 (June 1859), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361/>.
- 14 Wojciech Fałkowski, “O mieście, które miało zginąć. Prace nad opisaniem i oszacowaniem strat Warszawy i jej mieszkańców”, in *Straty Warszawy 1939-1945: raport*, ed. Wojciech Fałkowski (Warszawa: Miasto Stołeczne Warszawa, 2005), 7.
- 15 Adolf Ciborowski, *Warszawa: o zniszczeniu i odbudowie miasta* (Warszawa: Polonia, 1964), 27.
- 16 This politics, as a part of which the Warsaw Uprising Museum was opened in 2004, is to

a large degree aimed at a (re)awakening of patriotic, not to say nationalist, attitudes, and at instilling an identification with pre-war Poland among young Poles. See Fałkowski, *Straty Warszawy 1939-1945: raport*. This is just another use of the "ruins" of Warsaw for political purposes, in a way opposed to that which was prevalent during socialist times. My aim here is not to identify with either of them, but to show to what extent photography embodies and projects this history of ruination for us today.

- 17 Zespół d.s. ustalenia wartości strat, jakie Warszawa poniosła w wyniku II Wojny Światowej, *Raport o stratach wojennych Warszawy* (Warszawa: Urząd Miasta Stołecznego Warszawa, 2004), [http://www.um.warszawa.pl/sites/default/files/Raport\\_o\\_stratach\\_wojennych\\_Warszawy.pdf](http://www.um.warszawa.pl/sites/default/files/Raport_o_stratach_wojennych_Warszawy.pdf).
- 18 Kazimierz Wyka, "Miecz Syreny", *Odrodzenie* 22, April 29, 1945, after: Leonard Sempoliński, *Warszawa 1945* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1985), 76.
- 19 Juliusz Starzyński, "Piękno dzisiejszej Warszawy w rysunkach Kulisiewicza", *Odrodzenie* 12 (30.03.1947), after: Sempoliński, *Warszawa 1945*, 114.
- 20 Jan Parandowski, "Dlaczego właśnie Warszawa. Ankieta", *Kalendarz Warszawski 1948* (Warszawa 1948), after: Sempoliński, *Warszawa 1945*, 242 (emphasis mine).
- 21 Waldemar Baraniewski, "The Spectral City", in: Krzysztof Pijarski, *Lives of the Unholy* (Salzburg – Warsaw: Fotohof – FAF 2013), np.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Böhme, 291.
- 24 This ongoing development can be seen as one of the main reasons for the current centrality of the archive as metaphor of historical inquiry, cultural memory, and also critical counter-narratives.
- 25 Published by the Naczelna Rada Odbudowy Warszawy (Chief Council For the Reconstruction of Warsaw), *Stolica* was entirely dedicated to matters related to Warsaw, and especially to the city's reconstruction.
- 26 Dobrosław Kobielski, Teodor Hermańczyk, *Warszawa* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Warszawskiego Tygodnika Ilustrowanego „Stolica”, 1957), 5.
- 27 *Nowa Warszawa w ilustracjach* (Warszawa: Warszawski tygodnik ilustrowany „Stolica”, 1955). One will find an analogous structure in a book published in the very same year: Stanisław Jankowski, *MDM. Marszałkowska 1730-1954* (Warszawa:

Czytelnik 1955. Jankowski also designed Bolesław Bierut's *The Six-Year Plan For the Reconstruction of Warsaw* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1951), where one can find a film-like editing of photos.

- 28 See Dobrosław Kobielski, *Warszawa* (Warszawa: 1956); *Trakt starej Warszawy*, ed. Dobrosław Kobielski (Warszawa: Stołeczny Komitet Frontu Narodowego, 1953); Kobielski, Teodor Hermańczyk, *Warszawa* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Warszawskiego Tygodnika Ilustrowanego „Stolica”, 1957); Adolf Ciborowski, Stanisław Jankowski, *Warszawa odbudowana* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo „Polonia”, 1962); Ciborowski, *Warszawa. O zniszczeniu i odbudowie miasta* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo „Polonia”, 1964); *Problemy i wydarzenia, nr. 27: Zniszczenie i odbudowa Warszawy* (Warszawa: Komitet Warszawski PZPR, Wydział Propagandy i Agitacji, 1967); *Warszawa 1945 – 1970*, ed. Irena Lange (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo „Sport i Turystyka”, 1970); Ciborowski, Jankowski, *Warszawa 1945 i dziś* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Interpress, 1971); and also *Warszawa z perspektywy 30-lecia* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo MON, Zarząd Propagandy i Agitacji Głównego Zarządu Politycznego WP, 1974). The reason I deem these books so important is the simple fact that they were extremely carefully designed, and well-distributed, especially those listed above, their editions at times reaching tens of thousands of copies. Needless to say, *Stolica* was an extremely popular magazine.

29 Iwona Kurz, “Obraz ruin – obraz świata w ruinach. O tym, co mogą znaczyć gruzowiska”, in *Polska fotografia dokumentalna na skrzyżowaniu dyskursów. Materiały z sesji zorganizowanej w dniu 2 IV 2005 z okazji wystawy Leonarda Sempolińskiego* (Warszawa: Zachęta Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2006), 41.

- 30 See Kurz, 41.

- 31 Ibid., 42.

- 32 Adam Ważyk, *Poemat dla dorosłych i inne wiersze* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1956).

- 33 Cadava, 44.

- 34 “This is also why, simultaneously constructed and effaced, every image is a ruin, a *lapsus imaginis*. The space of ruin is itself exposed to the movement of ruin. The ruin stands in the image that stands in ruin: a *mise en abyme*, for which there are only ever further ruins of ruins.” (Cadava, 43).

- 35 Laura Mulvey, “The Index and the Uncanny: Life and Death in Photography”, in *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006),

65.

36 Ibid., 60.

37 Ibid.

38 Interestingly, Mulvey goes on to say that “because the photograph captures the presence of life stilled, the instantaneous nature of human movement and the fragility of human life, it confuses time more thoroughly than, for instance, *the presence of a ruin or a landscape in which traces of the past are preserved*” (Ibid., 59, emphasis mine).

39 Ibid., 63.

40 Böhme, 287.

41 Rosalind Krauss, “Tracing Nadar”, *October* 5 (1978): 34–35. She goes on to say: “When Barbey d'Aurevilly sneered that Balzac had made description ‘a skin disease’ of the realists,» he was complaining about the very technique in which Balzac took the greatest pride and which allowed him to boast that he had foreshadowed the Daguerreotype. If written description was intended to skim the surface off a subject and transfer it to the novel's page, this was because of Balzac's belief that this surface was itself articulate, the utterly faithful representation of the inner man.” This is an incredibly interesting passage that opens the whole problematic of appearance – or surface – and meaning, or the surface meaning of photography, but there is no place to develop this motif further here. What is even more important, Krauss's essay is dedicated to the memoir of Nadar, who felt the need to report on his experience of the advent of photography, “like the *survivor of some natural cataclysm*.” (Ibid., 29, emphasis mine).

42 As Allan Sekula and John Tagg have persuasively claimed. See Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”, *October* 39 (1986): 3–64, and John Tagg, “The Archiving Machine, Or, the Camera and the Filing Cabinet”, in *The Archive as Project*, ed. Krzysztof Pijarski (Warszawa: The Archeology of Photography Foundation, 2011), 24–36.

43 Sigmund Freud, “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad,’” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. XIX (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 230 (emphasis mine).

44 Böhme, 302. Interestingly, this idea of an automatic inscription of memory traces in the human mind is brought out in the Proustian concept of involuntary memory. As Michael Fried points out, its logic is spelled out explicitly in Proust's introduction to *Contre Saint-Beuve*: “any deliberate attempt on the part of a subject to imprint a contemporary

scene on his memory will not only fail to capture its reality, it will actually render the latter irrecoverable in the future by the action of involuntary recall." Michael Fried, "Barthes's Punctum", *Critical Inquiry* 31 (March 2005): 557.

45 Krauss, 19.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Craig Owens, "Photography 'en abyme,'" *October* 5 (1978): 82. By reduplication he means an internal duplication that he takes as the model for the emergence of meaning in photography: "In classical rhetoric, reduplication was a species of repetition, distinguished by the reiteration of a word or phrase within the same part of a sentence or clause. Its function, like all forms of rhetorical repetition, was emphatic." (Ibid., 81).

49 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York and London: Verso, 1998), 178.

50 Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse : Toward a Theory of Postmodernism Part I", *October* 12, no. Spring (1980): 68. Given the prominent place photographic practices took among critical postmodernism's "allegorical procedures", Craig Owens in fact confirms the stress on repetition as the basis of meaning and the centrality of a certain "archival" mode of inquiry, but this is too broad a topic to be broached here. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art", in *Art after Conceptual Art*, ed. by Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 27–52.

51 Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing", in: idem, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 228 (original emphasis).

52 Susan Buck-Morss has reflected on this in a beautiful and compelling essay entitled "Visual Studies and Global Imagination", *Papers of Surrealism*, no. 2 (2004): 1–29. This is to acknowledge my indebtedness to what she has to say in these matters.

53 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: the Self-portrait and other Ruins* (Chicago – London: University Of Chicago Press, 1993), 68–69.

