

HOLOCAUST STUDIES CRITICAL THEORY

Auschwitz and Afterimages: A Technical and Theoretical Analysis of Abjection, Witnessing, and Holocaust Representation

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The study of Holocaust testimony has undergone a significant paradigm shift in the 21st century, moving from purely historical documentation toward a complex synthesis of psychoanalytic theory, art history, and material forensics. Nicholas Chare's seminal work, **Auschwitz and Afterimages: Abjection, Witnessing and Representation**, stands at the forefront of this evolution. This analysis explores the technical and philosophical frameworks Chare employs to navigate the 'limit-case' of human experience. By integrating Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject with the literal and figurative 'afterimages' left by the **Sonderkommando**, Chare challenges the traditional boundaries of how we represent the unrepresentable.

Theoretical Framework: The Mechanics of Abjection in Holocaust Discourse

At the core of Chare's analysis is the concept of **abjection**, a term popularized by psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her work *Powers of Horror* (1980). To understand Chare's technical application of this theory to Auschwitz, one must first define the operational mechanics of the abject. The abject is that which 'disturbs identity, system, order,' specifically the collapse of the boundary between the self and the other, the subject and the object.

The Kristevan Model and the Corpse

Kristeva posits that the corpse is the ultimate form of the abject. It is a body without a soul, a 'memento mori' that refuses to be ignored yet cannot be integrated into the living subject's reality. In the context of the **Auschwitz-Birkenau** death camp, the industrial scale of death transformed the human body into a commodity or waste product, forcing a confrontation with the abject on a daily basis. Chare utilizes this framework to examine the writings of the Sonderkommando-the prisoners forced to work in the gas chambers and crematoria-who existed in a state of 'living death,' permanently suspended in the space of the abject.

The Afterimage as a Visual and Cognitive Construct

The term 'afterimage' refers to the optical illusion where an image continues to appear in one's vision after the exposure to the original image has ceased. In Chare's technical framework, the

afterimage serves as a metaphor for the **persistence of memory** and the involuntary nature of traumatic witnessing. Unlike a photograph, which is a static capture, an afterimage is a physiological response—a haunting presence that occurs within the body of the observer. This distinction is crucial for understanding how Holocaust testimony functions not just as data, but as a biological and psychological imprint.

The Scrolls of Auschwitz: Technical Analysis of the Sonderkommando Manuscripts

One of the most significant technical contributions of Chare's research is his focus on the **Scrolls of Auschwitz** (the *Megiles Oventsh*). These were diaries and accounts written by members of the Sonderkommando (such as Zalmen Gradowski, Zalmen Lewental, and Leib Langfus) and buried in the soil near the crematoria at Birkenau. They were discovered years after the war, often damaged by moisture, rot, and the chemical composition of the soil.

Materiality and Forensics

Chare argues that the physical state of these manuscripts—the stains, the faded ink, the torn edges—is as much a part of the testimony as the words themselves. This 'materiality of the witness' provides a visceral connection to the site of the atrocity. The technical challenge for historians and curators lies in the **preservation and digitization** of these documents without stripping away the 'abject' qualities that signify their origin.

- Chemical Degradation: The impact of acidic soil on early 1940s paper stock.
- Linguistic Hybridity: The use of Yiddish, Polish, and German, reflecting the fractured identity of the victims.
- Spatial Context: The exact coordinates of where these scrolls were buried in relation to the gas chambers, providing a 'topography of resistance.'

Comparative Analysis: Representation vs. Reality

To better understand the nuances of Chare's work, we can compare his approach to traditional methods of Holocaust representation. The following table illustrates the shift from 'Traditional Representation' to Chare's 'Abjection-Based Representation.'

Feature	Traditional Historical Representation	Chare's Abjection-Based Framework
Primary Objective	Fact-based chronological documentation.	Exploration of the psychological and material 'residue.'
View of the Subject	The victim as a coherent witness.	The witness as an 'abject' figure at the edge of erasure.
Role of Art	Illustrative or commemorative.	A technical means of processing the unrepresentable.
Material Focus	Textual content and archival data.	The physical 'afterimage' and forensic materiality.
Emotional Tone	Somber, objective, and detached.	Visceral, disturbing, and theoretically rigorous.

The Aesthetics of Witnessing: Francis Bacon and the Visual Arts

Chare extends his technical analysis into the realm of visual arts, specifically examining the works of **Francis Bacon**. While Bacon was not a 'Holocaust artist' in the traditional sense, Chare identifies a 'technical affinity' between Bacon's distorted figures and the reality of the abject body in the camps. Bacon's use of **Grisaille** (monochrome painting) and the 'scream' mirrors the silent, distorted testimony of the Sonderkommando.

Technical Workflows in Visual Analysis

When analyzing visual representations of the Holocaust through Chare's lens, a specific methodology is applied:

1. Identification of the 'Punctum': Borrowing from Roland Barthes, identifying the element in the image that pierces the viewer.
2. Spatial Deconstruction: Mapping the 'voids' in the representation where the abject resides.
3. Temporal Layering: Analyzing how the 'afterimage' of historical trauma overlays contemporary viewing experiences.
4. Formalist Evaluation: Examining the brushwork, grain, or digital noise as a signifier of trauma.

Case Study: The Four Sonderkommando Photographs of 1944

Perhaps the most famous 'afterimages' of Auschwitz are the four photographs taken secretly by a prisoner known as Alex (likely Alberto Errera) in August 1944. These images, smuggled out in a toothpaste tube, show the burning of bodies in a pit and women being driven to the gas chambers.

Technical Challenges of the Images

These photographs are technically 'poor'-they are blurred, tilted, and often obscured by the doorway from which they were taken. However, Chare argues that these technical 'failings' are precisely what makes them authentic witnesses. They represent the **impossibility of a clean view**. In modern curation, there is often a temptation to 'clean up' or crop these images to make them more legible. Chare's framework suggests that such 'technical improvement' is actually a form of erasure, as it removes the evidence of the witness's precarious position.

The Debate with Georges Didi-Huberman

Chare engages with the work of art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, who famously curated the exhibition *Images Malgré Tout* (Images In Spite of All). The technical debate centers on whether an image can truly 'show' the Holocaust. Chare's contribution is the insistence that the image does not just show a scene; it acts as a physical 'afterimage' of the event, carrying the weight of the abject

within its very pixels or grain.

Implementation: Applying the Theory to Museology and Education

For educators and curators, the principles outlined in *Auschwitz and Afterimages* provide a field guide for handling sensitive historical data. The goal is to move beyond 'passive empathy' toward 'critical witnessing.'

Operational Guidelines for Curators

- Maintain Material Context: When displaying artifacts like the Scrolls, ensure the environmental damage is visible, as it constitutes part of the testimony.
- Avoid Over-Sanitization: Technical descriptions of the 'killing process' must not become so clinical that they lose the 'human-as-waste' reality of the abject.
- Integrate Multi-Sensory Data: Use descriptions of sound, smell, and texture found in the Sonderkommando writings to create a more comprehensive (though disturbing) historical record.

Mathematical Modeling of Memory Decay

While memory is subjective, the 'decay' of Holocaust testimony can be mapped through a technical lens. If T is the time since the event, and W is the number of living witnesses, the reliance on **secondary afterimages** (art, literature, and film) increases exponentially as W approaches zero. Chare's work provides the theoretical 'constant' that allows these secondary afterimages to maintain a degree of historical and psychological accuracy.

Challenges and Troubleshooting in Holocaust Representation

Representing the Holocaust through the lens of abjection is not without technical and ethical risks. One common failure mode is the '**Aesthetization of Suffering**,' where the focus on the 'artistry' of the afterimage overshadows the moral gravity of the event.

Common Pitfalls and Solutions

Operational Challenge	Potential Failure Mode	Technical Solution
Theory Overload	Dehumanizing the victims through dense jargon.	Ground every theoretical claim in specific manuscript evidence.
Visual Desensitization	The 'abject' images lose their power through repetition.	Contextualize images with 'micro-histories' of the individuals involved.
Forensic Reductionism	Treating the Scrolls only as data points.	Combine chemical analysis with linguistic and psychoanalytic interpretation.

The Broader Implications of Afterimages

The technical frameworks established in *Auschwitz and Afterimages* extend far beyond the study of the Holocaust. They provide a blueprint for analyzing any 'limit-case' of human rights violations, from the Rwandan genocide to contemporary refugee crises. By focusing on the **object** and the **afterimage**, researchers can identify the 'ghosts in the machine' of historical documentation—the voices and images that persist despite every effort to erase them.

Nicholas Chare's synthesis of the technical and the theoretical ensures that the 'Scrolls of Auschwitz' are not merely treated as dead artifacts. Instead, they are recognized as active, vibrating 'afterimages' that continue to challenge our understanding of what it means to witness. In an era of digital reproduction and AI-generated imagery, the insistence on the **physicality of the witness** and the **uncomfortable reality of the object** remains a vital safeguard against the flattening of history. The afterimage is not a fading ghost; it is a persistent, technical demand for a truth that refuses to be forgotten.