

New Perspectives

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New Humanities in Holocaust Studies: Bystanders in the Cadre of Visual Culture

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1. New Humanities, Visual Culture and Predicaments of Bystander Studies

“Look at him. Tell them over there. You saw it. Don’t forget.”¹ The call comes from the extended account that Jan Karski gave to Claude Lanzmann in 1978. It explains the source of the urgent obligation experienced in 1942 by someone who saw the inside of the ghetto and the camp, and was tasked to carry the message to the world. It also defines the nature of the further, postwar, efforts of the former Polish courier. The verbs “look,” “tell,” “see” and “don’t forget” are bound together into pairs of actions, inextricable and sequential. The sentence illustrates the vital importance and plurality of visual acts in the process of wartime witnessing: registering and recounting the events. Later on, the “era of the witness”²

1 A passage from Jan Karski’s account in Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah. An Oral History of the Holocaust. The Complete Text of the Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 174.

2 See Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

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linked memory to narrative and, by privileging written text and the spoken word, led to obscuring the original experience, repeatedly brought up in testimonies. Recurring references to the acts of seeing are particularly typical of accounts left by those who were part of violent events from a certain distance. I would like to take a closer look at the strategies of registering the Holocaust persecutions and deaths within the “large and heterogeneous collection of subjects who enable and benefit from traumatic violence without taking part in it directly,”³ that is “bystanders.”

Historical and critical research on the Holocaust at large and dealing with the diversity of the “third group” in particular offers little variety when it comes to specific terms, often treating “observers,” “spectators,” or “gawkers” as synonyms. Meanwhile, over the past thirty years of their development, visual culture studies have made a strong enough mark on cultural research to warrant a serious discussion of the concept of gaze and the many varieties of looking developed within that interdisciplinary field.⁴ The sublimation of terminology used to describe the eye contacts and visual relationships between individual actors might, in my view, explain many of the questions concerning the degree of subjectivity, agency, cognitive capacity, and communication capabilities of the group displaying bystanding behavior.⁵ It prompts more diverse diagnoses, increasingly necessary as knowledge of the actions of bystanders throughout Second World War grows in scope and nuance.⁶

3 See Michael Rothberg, “Trauma Theory, Implicated Subjects, and the Question of Israel/Palestine,” accessed January 20, 2018, <https://profession.mla.org/trauma-theory-implicated-subjects-and-the-question-of-israel-palestine/>. Also Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2019).

4 See for instance Chapter 4 on “The Gaze” and Part Two on “Types of Seeing” in James Elkins and Erna Fiorentini, *Visual Worlds: Looking, Images, Visual Disciplines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); for an overview see *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, ed. Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (London: Berg Publishers, 2011).

5 In this article, I reserve the term “witness” for those members of the “community complementing the scene of violence,” who undertake the effort of testifying. My reasons are explained in “Od świadków do postronnych. Kategoria bystanders i analiza ‘podmiotów uwikłanych’ [From witnesses to bystanders. The category of bystanders and the analysis of ‘entangled entities’] published in the volume *Świadek: jak się staje, czym jest?*, based on a conference that took place in Krakow on January 11–12, 2018 (Kraków: Wydział Polonistyki UJ, 2018). On “bystanding behavior” see Mary Fulbrook, “Bystanders: Catchall Concept, Alluring Alibi, or Crucial Clue,” in *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History*, ed. Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvw04hm8.5.

6 For an overview see Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs, eds., *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018).

Linking traditional historiography with the interdisciplinary cultural analysis focused on visual culture may help Holocaust studies to dissect certain under-researched or untapped issues with more precision. In this way, the transplantation of new tools fashioned within the intellectual current called sometimes “New Humanities”⁷ may substantially support the furtherment of the Holocaust, genocide and violence research.

When Raul Hilberg first turned the spotlight on the category of bystanders in the language of Holocaust studies, he identified within it helpers, beneficiaries, and, indeed, observers⁸ (some of the translations of his book followed that path and replaced the loaded “observers” with “onlookers”).⁹ Perhaps the clearest argument for the serious treatment of scopic terms came from Paul A. Levine, who in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies* described, in the section dealing with “protagonists,” this deeply problematic category, which he termed onlookers. Despite problems with the size of the group (Hilberg believed it to be the biggest of all he identified), its diversity (it was made up of individuals, social groups, and even institutions and entire states), and motivations (helpers, informers, beneficiaries, enablers, etc.), “scholars have made considerable progress in this field of Holocaust studies in recent decades,” writes Levine, continuing: “this research reveals the need for new terminology. Now that historians have demonstrated the degree to which persecution, plunder, deportation, and murder of the Jews was knowable, indeed in many respects public, the term ‘on-looker’ seems more precise than ‘bystander’ to designate those who did not prevent or intervene against those events. ‘On-looker’ underscores the act and proximity of witnessing and suggests greater responsibility for outcomes, even perhaps a greater emotional range of available responses to them and a greater implicit reinforcement to the perpetrators, than does the more neutral-sounding ‘bystander.’”¹⁰

7 See the concept of “new humanities” explained in Ryszard Nycz, *Culture as Verb: Probes into the New Humanities* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang 2023); see also Ryszard Nycz and Przemysław Czapliński, *Nowa Humanistyka: Zajmowanie pozycji, negocjowanie autonomii* [New humanities: Taking positions, negotiating autonomy] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2018). Nycz relates to Richard E. Miller and Kurt Spellmeyer, *The New Humanities Reader* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Custom Printing, 2000).

8 See Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

9 See, for example, Raul Hilberg, *Pachatelé, oběti, diváci. Židovská katastrofa 1923–1945*, trans. Margarita Troševa (Praha: Argo, 2002).

10 Paul A. Levine, “On-lookers,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*, ed. Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 158. The term “on-

2. Onlooker, Spectator, Observer, Gawker

As far as it is understandable that historical research remains indifferent to the plurality of meanings behind scopic terms, it is surprising that visual culture itself has so far failed to appreciate the potential of its own tools applied to Holocaust studies.¹¹ Conversely, quite a lot is known about the weight of vision within the sensory economy of Nazism – from its aestheticization of the body and personal dress, through the spectacle of the public performance of power, up to harnessing cutting-edge visual technologies in the service of ideology.¹² No other human sense found itself as obsessively controlled throughout the Holocaust as vision. “During the stages of concentration, deportations, and killings, the perpetrators tried to isolate the victims from public view”; “Voyeurs were not welcomed either. Such watching, especially by Germans, was considered an indecency”; “But regardless of whether the spectacles repelled or attracted the viewer, any rumors and stories [...] were an irritant”; “the German administrators would order the Polish population to stay indoors and keep the windows closed with blinds drawn”; “a German army inspector complained that soldiers had become inadvertent witnesses of an operation”; “Often enough the onlookers could not be barred”; “on the island of Corfu they gathered to watch from street corners and balconies”; in Hungary, when “Jews were marched, flanked by Hungarian gendarmes, to the train one morning in 1944, people stood in the street and laughed”; in Zhitomir, the execution of two Jews “was watched by a crowd of soldiers from rooftops.”¹³

lookers” also appears in Henrik Edgren’s 2012 analysis, inspired by Levine’s call: Henrik Edgren, ed., *Looking at the Onlookers and Bystanders: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Causes and Consequences of Passivity* (Stockholm: Forum för levande historia, 2012), 21.

11 In the introduction to *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), one of the visual culture movement’s leading theorists, Nicholas Mirzoeff, openly admits that the field has problems addressing difficult history and heritage.

12 All these topics can be found in Jan Borowicz, *Nagość i mundur. Ciało w filmie Trzeciej Rzeszy* [Nudity and uniform. The body in the film of the Third Reich] (Warszawa: Książka i Prasa, 2015) or his [to be published] Jan Borowicz, *Perverse Memory and the Holocaust: A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Polish Bystanders* (London: Routledge, 2024). The fascinations of Nazi with photography (evinced by the decision to introduce photography classes to *Hitlerjugend* school curriculums) is explored by German curator Petra Bopp. See Petra Bopp, *Fremde im Visier. Fotoalben aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2009).

13 Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*, 215–216.

One notable exception to this omission is Ernst van Alphen's 1997 book *Caught by History*,¹⁴ as well as his 2005 follow-up *Art in Mind*,¹⁵ which analyzes the depictions and visual afterimages of the Holocaust, but neither book deals with the diverse forms of subjectivity generated by alternative scopic acts. In this context, Elżbieta Janicka's *Pamięć przyswojona* [Assimilated memory], which incorporates into its analysis of the relationship between victims and bystanders some essential concepts from visual culture, including "gaze," "observer," and "panopticon," could be considered a pioneering effort,¹⁶ and the turn toward visual research it suggests is, in my opinion, worth exploring further.¹⁷ Consequently, I would like to discuss whether we can equate looking at the Holocaust and seeing its horrors. Are observers and gawkers looking in a similar manner? In other words, the following deliberations are an attempt at calibrating the terminology used to describe bystanders and a proposal for a broader application of already available cultural studies methodologies to deepen sociohistorical and Holocaust research.

14 See Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

15 Ernst van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also Bal's study: Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak. Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), in which the critic examines the work of Doris Salcedo, drawing on the concept of the witness and visual analysis tools.

16 Elżbieta Janicka, "Pamięć przyswojona. Koncepcja polskiego doświadczenia zagłady Żydów jako traumy zbiorowej w świetle rewizji kategorii świadka" [Memory acquired. The conception of the Polish experience of the Holocaust as collective trauma in the light of a revision of the concept of bystander], *Studia Litteraria Historica* 3/4 (2014–2015).

17 Janicka's analysis from the "Pamięć nieprzyswojona. Dekonstrukcja" [Memory acquired. Deconstruction] chapter warrants a discussion. The idea to examine social relations in Poland during World War II using the concept of the panopticon and the "panoptic society" theoretically conceptualizes the scenes constituting the specific Holocaust literature trope described, among other places, in Michał Głowiński's famed text: using eyes and visual metaphors to produce a sense of dread experienced by ghetto escapees (Michał Głowiński, "Oczy donosiela" [Eyes of an informer] *Zagłada Żydów* 2 (2006): 854–855). My reservations concern the extrapolation of "panoptic visual violence" into an essential attribute of wartime society, an "oppressive" interpretation of the right to look (*droit de regard*), to draw on Bourdieu (Pierre Bourdieu, *La domination masculine* (Paris: Seuil, 1998)), sans the emancipatory meanings proposed in an earlier text by Derrida, who is widely believed to have authored the term (see: Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Droit de regard* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1985); see also the comments in Mirzoeff's *The Right to Look*). Janicka exploits the violent character of the gaze (as used by Sartre, Lacan, and other early visual culture theorists), which has been repeatedly challenged since its development and replaced with more nuanced concepts.

a) Looking, Seeing

Claude Lanzmann: Ask Mr. Gawkowski why he looks so sad.

Henryk Gawkowski: Because I saw men marching to their death.¹⁸

The basic meaning of the verb “to look,”¹⁹ which first appeared in Polish dictionaries in the fifteenth century, is “to exercise the power of vision upon.” Meanwhile, “to see”²⁰ means “to perceive or detect as if by sight.” At first glance, both verbs describe the same basic function of the visual organs. But there is a significant difference between them. The saying “you’re looking, but you’re not seeing” is a clear illustration of the meanings subconsciously connoted by language users. “Looking” – or *patrzeć* in Polish, a word with a rather unclear etymology – suggests a passive, purely physiological visual perception, stripped of any cognitive disposition: with the eyes taking in a scene, noting its constituent elements, but higher cognitive functions switched off, not processing any of the input visual data. The “poor Christian looking at the ghetto” cannot be a witness – he can only, as Miłosz aptly diagnosed, dread the coming judgment and having nothing to say. And he cannot say anything, because he did not know – he did not see.

The one who sees (and in Polish, the verb for “seeing” predates “looking” by a century) perceives or detects “as if by sight.” The Polish word for “to see,” *widzieć*, is the root of the adjective *widomy*, or “visible” (and then *wiadomy*, which is “known” or “apparent” in English: like in many other languages,²¹ seeing is related to knowing). The seeing person recognizes and understands what they are looking at. The Polish words for “apparition” and “seer” – *widziadło* and *jasnowidz*, respectively; also note “the Seer of Lublin” – suggest something more: that seeing might transcend material vision, gazing into the hidden heart of things, beyond the empirical order.

18 Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 37. I am using this source of the transcript of the documentary. I am, however, critical of the omission the publication makes in relating the bystanders’ enunciations. See Roma Sendyka, “Naturellement: Speech Variants of Holocaust Bystanders in Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” *Przekładaniec* 2019: Translation and Memory (December 11, 2019): 7–25, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.4467/16891864ePC.19.009.11384>.

19 English definitions of all terms used herein come from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s. v. “Look,” accessed October 3, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/look>

20 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s. v. “See,” accessed October 3, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/see>

21 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 2.

b) Viewing, Glancing, Peeking

Claude Lanzmann: But they could work a field a hundred yards from the camp?

Barbara Janicka: They could. So occasionally he could steal a glance if the Ukrainians weren't looking.

Claude Lanzmann: He worked with his eyes lowered?

Barbara Janicka: Yes.²²

In Polish, the verb “to glance,”²³ *spoglądać*, meaning “to take a quick look at something,” emerged in the eighteenth century from the older, fifteenth-century *ogłądać* – “to view.” A person engaged in viewing looks from different angles, surveying almost; they have time and the opportunity to approach the object (they possess greater mobility than any other modes of looking we will discuss here). Their actions suggest a cognitive disposition, which comes in useful in legal contexts (where the Polish term for performing a visual examination is the phrase *dokonywać oględzin*, the latter word being a noun formed from the verb). From a person engaged in “viewing,” we might expect a detailed, methodical report or an exhaustive description – but not necessarily including any diagnoses or conclusions, as that is not their job. The verb itself comes from the pre-Slavic *ględati, a multiplicative of the stative verb *ględěti, “to look.” The sight of the viewer glides across the surface of objects in a manner similar to the eyes of a person that is looking, but not seeing. Viewing, however, at least generates some tangible data.

A person engaged in peeking, meanwhile, casting only furtive glances, wishing to remain invisible, and violating the privacy of the object of their actions, adds into the amalgam of counter-cognitive attributes a surfeit of violence (casting a glance conceived as *targeted*) and a connotation of delight, sexual satisfaction, transgression, pleasure drawn from a sight not-for-me, an image captured without permission. The thrust of the voyeur's will is beyond doubt, but his subjective existence is incomplete as he is forced to remain hidden and take care not to make his presence known.

Glancing and peeking are both brief, implying lack of time. To glance is to cast “a quick look” and its Polish version involves a suggestion of physical contact between the object and the eye, aligning with ancient beliefs in the eye's capacity for extramission (which conceived the eye as a single point able to

22 Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 26.

23 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s. v. “Glance,” accessed October 3, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glance>.

emit a quasi-ray touching reality). If those looking are subjects lacking some degree of agency, lacking higher cognitive function, resembling a non-human camera in which the shutter never snaps shut, then those viewing are akin to a mobile recording machine. Those peeking, meanwhile, are a hidden camera, registering only what it is aimed at. The images they produce are not intended to be subjected to reason – only to satisfy a libidinal urge.

c) Spectator

Claude Lanzmann: He lived at this very spot?

Czesław Borowy: Right here.

Claude Lanzmann: Then he had a front-row seat for what happened?

Czesław Borowy: Naturally.²⁴

The Polish public, sitting in “front-row seats” in the theater of the Holocaust, could be considered a combined pool of spectators. This idea organizes Grzegorz Niziołek’s discussion of Polish postwar theater – which could also be read as an original prelude to a visual analysis of the Holocaust. Niziołek builds on Hilberg’s idea of the Holocaust being fully, even “excessively,” visible,²⁵ to draw a radical conclusion that bystanders could be defined as spectators, for whom “Jewish suffering becomes nothing more than spectacle.”²⁶ In Polish, the word for “spectator,” *widz*, has the same etymology as the verb “to see,” which implies that the spectator has some capacity to recognize and understand what they are seeing. The term also has an institutional connotation – in East Slavic languages, the term appeared in legal contexts, to denote a court agent, an assessor, tasked with examining the witness. Today, however, it is predominantly used for its meanings associated with theater and performance.

The Latin *spectator* derives from the verb *spectare* and denotes a person watching a public event. All previously offered meanings linking spectators with institutions conceive the former as a person participating in undertakings designed by some higher subject. The spectator, according to the word’s nineteenth-century connotations, is passive, motivated by pleasure, concealed in the darkness of the theater auditorium (bringing him closer to the peeking), inattentive, prone to offense, and susceptible to actions directed

²⁴ Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 24.

²⁵ Grzegorz Niziołek, *The Polish Theatre of the Holocaust*, trans. Ursula Phillips (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

by others, isolated from the center of events, and stripped – again – of full agency;²⁷ in the twentieth century, Guy Debord added obedient consumerism to this sweeping set of attributes.²⁸ In Jacques Rancière's telling, "there is no theater without a spectator [...]. But according to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting."²⁹ A spectator, therefore, is incorporated into the designs of an institution that imposes upon him its own guidelines for performance, a script of action or renunciation thereof. Niziołek proves that adopting the principle of theatricality makes the witness no longer a witness, but a spectator, not under any obligation to take action.

To summarize, a spectator is not capable of providing the personal, objective testimony that a witness is morally compelled to provide: involved in actions designed by someone else, he is trained to be passive and mimic other participants, while the infusion of affects precludes objectivity (while enabling, importantly, self-identification with anyone posted on the stage). This is also the first term of all those mentioned that is a noun in Polish, rather than an active participle; an aside – while the previous terms have their proper gendered forms, the word "spectator" in Polish does not have a female variant.³⁰ Seen through that lens, a spectator becomes more of a function that cannot simply subsume a specific subject with its particular attributes. As such, a spectator is an ontological fiction insofar as it is only a construct of the institution that projects it.

d) Gawker

Abraham Bomba: maybe it's not nice to say, but I will say it. Most of the people, not only the majority, but ninety-nine percent of the Polish people

27 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 3.

28 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

29 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso Books, 2009), 2.

30 Interestingly enough, English had a female version of the noun, "spectatress," or the more correct version "spectatrix," a term that had been used since the seventeenth century. Today, however, the male "spectator" is dominant. See <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=spectator>, accessed January 20, 2018.

when they saw the train going through – really like animals in that wagon, just our eyes looked outside – they were laughing, they had a joy.³¹

“Gawker” might just be the most puzzling term for a scopic subject: its particular otherness in Polish derives from the atrophy (or at least decline) of the singular form of the noun. In other words, while the plural, *gapie*, raises no eyebrows, the singular “gap” seems artificial, especially in the nominative. Likewise acceptable is a related form, the noun “gapa,” denoting someone who absentmindedly failed to notice something. The singular was used in centuries past to denote “a fool, a dope, a naif” – a character in a comedy, and derived from a word used for “crow.” The Polish plural “gapie” first emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century as an import from German, where the verb “gaffen” means “to stare.” The negative connotation here is clear – few would ever willingly call themselves a naive dope, which means that this subjectivity is rarely ever considered for self-identification.

The inadequacy of the singular form of the noun suggests that you cannot be a gawker alone: gawking is something you do with others, when we become a part of a crowd, mindlessly staring. Gawkers assemble spontaneously, around an unexpected public event, motivated by curiosity and pleasure derived from observing a unique, often graphic incident. The affective load is at its peak here, while subjective individuation is lowest (as only a collective self-identification is possible) and the need to be understood is nominal; libidinal motivations are dominant, with pleasure-seeking as the primary objective, and the thrill of being in proximity to danger thinned only by the fact that it affects the other.

This variant of the scopic subject within the frame of the Holocaust illustrates well the ideas, developed today by Michael Rothberg and Mary Fulbrook,³² among others, about the sudden, situational, and contextual becoming of the subjects in scenes of violence. A gawker is different from a spectator, although they are both watching a public event from within a collective. The former is swept up by the incident and his agency is limited; he can be subsumed by the crowd. The latter, meanwhile, makes a sovereign decision to adopt the position of spectator. Consequently, we cannot unreservedly call societies tangled up with scenes of violence “spectators” of the Holocaust: a different noun would be more suitable. Niziołek’s analysis, while confirming the operability of theater metaphors, apparently

31 Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 31.

32 Rothberg, “Trauma Theory.” See also Mary Fulbrook, “Bystanders: Catchall Concept, Alluring Alibi or Crucial Clue?,” in *Probing the Limits of Categorization*, 15–35.

requires additional discussion over the distribution of terms defining the overall frame of the project, seeded by the author himself when he pondered whether “Polish postwar culture is a culture of ‘witnesses,’ ‘observers’ or ‘gawkers.’”³³

In the case of Holocaust violence, the crowd of gawkers is bound not by a “higher institution” (the “director,” the “scene” of the incident) as much as by the object observed by the mob: once the condition of the object no longer holds sway over the affects of the assembled, the crowd will disperse. It also differs from a traditional theater performance in that the situation has no pre-approved script and unfolds along unpredictable lines. In this sense, a gawker is potentially open to danger (if the violence focused on the object anchoring all the attention suddenly changes its vector), whereas a spectator operates in safe conditions. And while the previously discussed variants of actors at the scene of the crime suggested someone remote from the observed object, the term “gawker” connotes physical proximity and explicit visual contact. Consequently, labeling bystanders “gawkers” defines a collective subject, constituted situationally and only for a brief moment, incapable of more structured undertakings and stripped of any agency beyond taking simple actions (looking, yelling, gesturing); still capable of feeling (pleasure and fear), but not of analysis or testimony. There is no doubt that the gawker looks and absolves himself, by way of affective resonance with the crowd, of any obligation to see.

e) Observer

Abraham Bomba: On the other side of the tracks, more trains standing there. And I was watching through about eighteen, twenty, maybe more, wagons going away. And after about an hour or so the wagons coming back but without the people.³⁴

The term comes from the Latin *observare* – to watch or to note (*observātiō* – watching, observing). An observer undertakes to perceive, carefully and in granular detail, he or she watches something, for a longer time. Definitions frame them as detached, rational, with an analytical, academic disposition: a scholar investigating a given event in a highly planned manner, patiently, systematically, and over an extended period of time. They record changes, attempting to interpret the collected data. This particular position entails the highest

³³ Niziołek, *Polski teatr Zagłady*, 53.

³⁴ Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 32.

degree of subjectivization so far: an observer has agency, extensive cognitive competencies, and is trustworthy. The scientist approach precludes affective involvement. Consequently, when labeling bystanders in the Holocaust as “observers,” we mean those who saw, who understood what they were seeing, and could record and interpret these events, at the price of detaching emotionally from the objects of their observation and tempering of any notions of empathy.

It would seem that the observer is the sole variant of the scopic subject granted autonomy and the full extent of cognitive capacity. But even here, it turns out, we must tread carefully: in his exhaustive analysis of the position of the nineteenth-century observer, Jonathan Crary mentions that the Latin *observare* also “means ‘to conform one’s action, to comply with,’ as in observing rules, codes, regulations, and practices.”³⁵ The observer follows protocol, submits to imposed norms in what just might be the unwritten rule of separating oneself from the fate suffered by the Jews, of “uninvolvement,” of “disengagement,” one that ultimately enables and assists the perpetrators and their helpers. It seems that the term could potentially be applied to specific situational descriptions of bystander behaviors in wartime Poland.

“An observer,” Crary continues, “is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations,” and whose capabilities are predefined by the laboratory apparatus required for observation or, more broadly, a “heterogeneous system of discursive, social, technological, and institutional relations.”³⁶ Consequently, despite the analytical capacities, the observer might ultimately prove inadequate in the face of events transcending the norm or somehow inconceivable. If we therefore assume that the Holocaust obliterated all the “systems of relations” that preceded it, a radical interpretation could argue that, paradoxically, the Holocaust is an event “without observers,” just as Dori Laub called it “an event without a witness.”³⁷

3. Bystanders in the Critical Lenses of Visual Culture Studies

Converting labels into visual culture concepts applicable to the social field of the Holocaust permits us to define more precisely a variety of relationships: looking at the Holocaust, seeing the Holocaust, being its spectator, peeking at

35 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 5–6.

36 *Ibid.*, 6.

37 See Dori Laub, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival,” in *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1992), 75–92.

it, observing it, and gawking at it all mean something different. The semantic differences introduced by these categories are so significant that using them as synonyms can only be counterproductive, particularly if we embrace the idea of scopic overdetermination (in the sense of controlling or, on the contrary, hyperbolizing visual stimuli) of the Holocaust. A more detailed analysis of the nouns describing individual variants of the scopic subject also makes clear the functional character of the visual exchange. Here, looking can have a variety of properties, extending beyond just disciplining and objectifying its targets, and producing a rich multitude of effects (far broader than what I managed to present here; the analysis above may be continued, especially by investigating the visual strategies of both victims and perpetrators, as well as the multidirectional web of exchange between potential positions within the scene of violence and the situational transitivity of scopic subjectivities – by which I mean the fluidity of the positions themselves, which can be occupied by perpetrators, victims, and even bystanders).

In the context of further research into the scene of the Holocaust, genocide in general, and, even more broadly, any violation of the right to live, the possibility to cross-fertilize Holocaust studies with new currents in humanities opens new and promising perspectives. Using the concepts explored above may allow us to more precisely define the variants of bystander subjectivity and actions – dependent, as it is now evident, on their personal decisions, emotional identification, type of cognitive processes, ability to undertake volitional acts, and affective investment but also structured by complex external institutional, social, discursive, and technological relations, and temporal and spatial circumstances, including object proximity.

Bystanders always end up on some side. Never neutral, “even with their backs turned and their minds otherwise occupied,”³⁸ they become active actors on the scene of violence, which thus transforms into a field of visibility – the size, variants, and properties of which are still open to description. Observing scopic relations enables a different and novel interpretation of the distribution of individual roles in the area. Bystanders, as characters moving within its confines, are not fully autonomous subjects – the weakness of their sovereignty also comes in many variants and intensities, and visual analysis permits more precise estimates of its decline. Only those who saw can be witnesses. They saw people marched to their deaths. They looked at them. They told others what they saw. They did not forget.

Translated by Jan Szelaǳiewicz

³⁸ Jan T. Gross, “Sprawcy, ofiary i inni” [Perpetrator, victims, and others], *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 10 (2014): 885.

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Abstract

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New Humanities in Holocaust Studies: Bystanders in the Cadre of Visual Culture

In this essay, bystanders are analysed not through the lens of topography (i.e. geographical closeness to the events expressed in the term "by-stander"), but as visual subjects. Concerning those who witnessed the Holocaust, bystanders are linked with various types of scopic activities, especially negative ones: they are often generalized as passive onlookers, as "those who stare" with libidinal pleasure [Polish: gapie; French: badauds; German: Schaulustige]. It is surprising, however, that the frequent use of scopic vocabulary is not necessarily associated with developed theoretical concerns. The recent visual (iconic) turn, co-constitutive for newer approaches in humanities, however, has provided a refined and varied set of tools for analysing the faculty of seeing. Therefore, it is no longer plausible to discuss the processes of seeing without precise conceptualizations. Instead of employing visual terms merely as synonyms, this essay challenges and restructures available categorizations for bystanders as those acquiring knowledge through the sense of sight.

Keywords

bystander, witness, onlooker, visual subject, viewer, observer, gawker, Holocaust, bystanding behavior