Looking into Death: Trauma, Memory and Human Face

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Abstract
This article analyses the relationship of human faces with trauma and death, in particular focalizing on the use of snap shot and ID kinds of photos in site of memory, memorials an public art.

Keywords  Face · Memory · Art · Trauma, sites of memory · Memorials, Latin America

1 Eyes Looking at Us

As we learned from Roland Barthes’ seminal work (Barthes 1980), photos can be seen as intrinsically related to death, mute witnesses of a time that once was the living present, and now is gone forever. As Barthes argued, every photo hides within itself a special relationship with time, the broken time of ‘this has been’ (ça -a-été), a catastrophe that has already happened.

If this is a general feature characterizing photography as a semiotic device, then a stronger effect takes place when the photo is of the face of a person that we know would soon die, and is already dead when we look at the picture. In this case, the prophecy of its own fate is inscribed in the photo, and we cannot avoid seeing in it the harbinger of that death. This awareness is at the core of the particular effect that the sight of such photos produces, their punctum.

Analysing the photo of the young Lewis Payne, who, in 1865, attempted the murder of the American State Secretary, W.H. Seward, and was then sentenced to death, Barthes observes that his photo, taken in prison just before he was to be hanged, is not only remarkable because it is a beautiful photo of a handsome young man, but also for its punctum: we know that the young man would soon die. As Barthes points out, we can see at the same time what will be and what has been: the photo tells us of “la mort au future” (“death in the future”, Barthes 1980, p. 150).

Something even more powerful happens when the eyes of the person look directly into the camera: a mirroring effect is created between the person looking at the photo and the one represented in the photo. Such an effect is a form of interpellation, a visual dialogue similar to the one that takes place in verbal language between an I and a you. The issue has been widely studied and discussed within the domain of visual semiotic research. In his seminal work Meyer Shapiro (1996) pointed out the similarity between linguistic and visual enunciative strategies: while the profile parallels the grammatical form of the third linguistic person—he or she, the frontal image of a face corresponds to the role of the first person, an “I” that addresses the spectator as a “you”.

According to the theory of enunciation developed in the generative semiotics of Algirdas Greimas, the gaze that breaks the fourth wall of the image looking at the spectator is a return to the very instance of enunciation, an embrayage, a trace of the enunciation process and its subject, the enunciator.

In this way the close-up portrait is no longer only a document of the past (“what has been”) but establishes a direct and current relation with the gaze of the spectator, reactivating its own enunciation at every moment. The face staring at us not only addresses us personally in a silent dialogue, but evokes at the same time the enunciator of that image, creating a sort of enunciational solidarity with the spectator: both their gazes alight on that same face.

A particularly amazing example of camera look is the picture of Zelig and Israel Jacob, two young brothers, 9 and

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For a general exposition of the concept see the entry Enunciation in Greimas and Courtes (1979).
2 Traces of enunciation can be found even in abstract painting, (Calabrese 1987), or in nonfigurative, blurred and almost unreadable photos, as the four well known photographs taken in August 1944 by a member of the Sonderkommando inside the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp discussed in Didi-Huberman (2003). On this point see also Mengoni (2020).
11 years old, photographed by the Nazis on their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they were immediately eliminated (Fig. 1).³

While Israel, the older, appears lost and afraid and looks down, Zelig, the younger boy, looks directly into the camera, at the soldier who is taking the picture. What we see, therefore, are his eyes, serious and severe, incredibly aware and almost accusatory, looking at us. His gaze is so intense and deep that it was chosen by the Director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial museum at the logo for the museum (Fig. 2).⁴

In this image the point of view of the representation is shifted from the usual and almost stereotyped images of the camp to the very act of seeing. To represent the horror of Auschwitz, it is not an image of something visible in the camp—the barbed wires, the barracks, the crematorium—that was chosen, but rather the gaze which looks at them: not the object of the vision outside the subject, but the very essence of the subjective vision, the eyes. The reality of Auschwitz is enclosed in the gaze of the victim: Zelig saw, with his eyes, what is unimageable for anybody who was not there in presence.

It is probably the powerful performative and emotional effect of such photos that makes them so pervasive in memory sites that are meant to conserve and transmit the memory of those who lost their lives in those terrible places. In what follows, I will consider the role and function of face photos in the memorialization process and turn at the end to artists who used face images to work through traumatic experiences.

A prototypical example of the massive use of photo portraits can be seen at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes in Phnom Pen, Cambodia, a memorial to remember the genocides committed by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979.⁵ Located in what was a former centre of torture and extermination, where over 17,000 people were killed, the Museum puts on display thousands and thousands of their pictures, taken at the moment of their imprisonment. The practice of carefully document and classify all prisoners is part of that archival impulse so typical of concentration

³ For a detailed analysis of this image, see Guerra (2020).
⁴ The same image of Zelig’s eyes is also used in the Holocaust Washington Museum.
⁵ See Violi (2017).
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apparatus, and it certainly asks for a re-elaboration of the very concept of archive, as Derrida (1995) suggested more than twenty years ago. For the present purpose, I will limit myself to analyze the formal aspect of these photos, that are all in the format of a police mugshot, with prisoners looking into the camera, the place occupied by the Khmer Rouge who took the photo (Fig. 3).

In this way the position of the spectator coincides with that of the perpetrator-photographer: the spectator sees precisely what he saw, looking from exactly the same viewpoint; the perpetrator as the subject of enunciation is embedded in the vision.6

The encounter between the gazes of the victim and the spectator reopens the virtual space of the third role, that of the perpetrator, a space ambiguously occupied by the gaze of the spectator himself when he stares at the victim. The photographic device thus comes to function as an operator on an actorial level, actualizing the implicit virtuality and the traces of the enunciation embedded in the photo. Moreover, the moment of vision also re-actualizes the time of the photographic enunciation, the terrible moment in which the detainees were photographed forever. This produces a sort of temporal short circuit between the past moment in which the photograph was taken and the present moment in which it is seen. (Violi 2017, p. 164)

A similar rhetorical effect can be used to celebrate heroes, rather than to commemorate victims of slaughter and mass massacres. This is the case of the memorial located in the main central square in Bologna, where there is a sacrarium with over 2000 photos of partisans killed in that location during the liberation war against the Nazi fascist regime (Fig. 4).

This is an interesting case, since, as noted by Keith (2020), the sacrarium was not erected by the municipality or another public authority, but grew out of the spontaneous initiative of relatives and friends of partisans, who started displaying their photos, mainly in identity card format. The gesture was the transposition onto the public arena of something very intimate, generally reserved to the family sphere, as when a family photo of a dead relative is put on view in the living room. It was a way to claim a family link with the partisans, turning a public space into a common and familiar one.

Images of partisans were not displayed because they were victims, but mainly because they were heroes, positive figures to look at as examples, to be remembered because of the choice they made. This connotation might have been lost in time, transforming the thematic role of heroes into that of martyrs, as Lowe pointed out, showing how the border between victims and heroes can be blurred.

Other different and interesting instances of this phenomenon, as well as of the same rhetorical device of face portraits multiplication, are possible. During the Covid pandemic in Italy, when the number of dead reached 100,000, the Italian newspaper la Repubblica published what Gianfranco

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6 For a discussion on the three distinct thematic and narrative roles of the Torturer, the Victim, and the Spectator see Boltanski (1992).
Marrone insightfully called “a portable memorial” (Marrone 2021); pages and pages carrying the photo images of the faces of the dead (Fig. 5).

As noticed by Marrone, these small photos similar to identity-card photos have a contradictory value: on one hand they are taken to keep the memory of singular individuals; on the other, because of the multiplication effect of these images, they lose their singularity. According to Marrone the discrepancy between quality and quantity is only apparent, since the underlying message is quite obvious: many ordinary people have died because of the virus; the enormity of their number suggests that it could have happened, and still could happen, to us too. Here again these photos commemorate victims as well as martyrs, normal people that could have been us.

All these memorials, whether real or portable, are at the same time archives, and the photographs they exhibit are testimonies as much as the words of witnesses are. It is not possible to enter here in the extremely rich discussion on the role of visual archives and their relationship with memory, testimony and truth. 7 I will limit myself to some considerations on the semiotic strategies underlying the structural organization of these memorials-archives, strategies that are deeply related with the represented traumatic content.

Tuol Sleng, the sacrarium in Bologna, the portable archive of the newspapers, all these places share some common features in their organisation, and first of all in the format of the display. The overall picture is composed of a large assembly of small black and white passport photos of people looking into the camera; only faces are visible on a generally white background. There is no cut or separation between photos, they are all juxtaposed to each other’s in a symmetrical linear order.

At the plastic level (Greimas 1984), the space is structured in straight lines that compose a geometrical grid of a black and white chromatism, that are repeated in regular rows. Repetition, accumulation and seriality are the main features of these photographic archives of memory, where each singular photo becomes a small piece of a larger mosaic. But in doing so, the overall image acquires a different meaning than the single pieces. Assembling images is never a neutral action, rather is a form of reinterpretation and resemantization of the original materials: images become “hyperimages”, to quote Felix Thürlemann (2019). Although the individual faces are still recognizable, their repetition produces a different experience for the spectator, since new chromatic, eidetic, and topological similarities or contrasts may appear. But there is another even more important meaning effect due to the massive quantity of photos displayed: the change from the level of individual tokens to the one of the abstract type. The multiplication of face images, all different in themselves but similar in their combination, results in the attenuation of singular individual features: these people all become interchangeable tokens of an ideal type, the type of the Victim. Through accumulation, repetition, assembly and general display conditions, a collective subject emerges from the anonymity of individual subjects.

2 A Landscape of Traumatic Memory

Referring to the four well known photographs taken in August 1944 by a member of the Sonderkommando inside the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, Didi-Huberman (2003) defined them as “trace-images”, or “disappearance-images”. Although we are here considering completely different images, trace and disappearance seem to be words singularly suited to describe the role and use of the photographic reproduction of faces that characterize the memorialization process that took place in Argentina 8 after the terrible dictatorship that started in the seventies.

Almost everywhere in Argentina one can see faces of men and women, mainly in their twenties or even younger, painted on walls or reproduced in photographs. They exist not only in the numerous sites where the memory of victims is kept and transmitted, but also on the streets, on buildings, and public spaces. These are images of the faces of the thousands of “desaparecidos” killed during the military regime and “disappeared”, since no evidence of their arrest was traceable and their bodies were never found.

The pervasive presence of these young faces is more than a warning memento to remember the past; it is a way to transform the urban landscape in a landscape of traumatic memory. 9 The images of human faces are first of all trace images—to use Didi-Huberman words—of people who are dead, or worst, disappeared, and for relatives and friends, they function as a private memory of a loss. One of the most painful consequences of the disappearances was the impossibility of having any funerary ritual, any form of collective mourning and not knowing where the remains of the dead are. Attending a funeral ceremony and creating a tomb have a very important psychological and social function in order to express grief and share it within a community.

The impossibility of performing the usual rituals of mourning has forced alternative rituals, and these alternative...
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Forms have contributed in an essential way to the construction of an extended "community of mourning", as well as to the growth of a political function of memory, transforming private memories into a public and political fight for justice, truth and democracy.

Especially in Argentina, images of the faces of the disappeared played a central role in transforming private mourning into collective and political action. From the very beginning, their faces were a striking sign of protest. When in 1977 a small group of Mothers started their silent demonstrations, walking in a circle at Plaza de Mayo, they each carried a photo of the face of their disappeared children. At that stage, these faces were primarily indexical signs of recognition: the images represented the features of the specific people who had been abducted and could be useful to trace these missing persons if somebody might recognize them. These photos had an individualizing, singular character, to designate one individual, as a metonymic identification device.

This characteristic changed over time, with the transformations of the political situation during the post-dictatorship, a politically heterogeneous period. During the 1980s, the Madres movement opened up to the idea of socializing maternity (socializar la maternidad), which implied a generalization of the individual kinship tie into a collective shared motherhood with a strong social and political connotation. As a consequence, the use of images of individual faces during the Mothers' demonstrations changed accordingly: instead of singular photos, they held large posters without pictures, with only the name and the date of disappearance, followed by a big question mark. The use of faces was the object of a large debate among relatives' associations: "To use or not to use photos, how to use them, label them with the name and the disappearance date or not, were always issues of discussion and negotiation among the relatives of the disappeared" (da Silva Catela 2014, p. 141, my translation). Decades after the end of the dictatorship, when a site of memory and museum of Human Rights was established at the ESMA, the relatives of the persons tortured there refused to have pictures of their dead exhibited where they met their terrible fate. Instead, images of their faces were stencilled on the walls outside the building (Fig. 6).

In Argentina today, one of the most striking features of this landscape of traumatic memory is the pervasive presence of photos of the disappeared. Stencilled on the wall at the ESMA, exhibited in university spaces, covering entire walls in sites of memory and archives, the faces of these young men and women look at us from everywhere, sometimes smiling, and sometimes with the serious gaze of an ID photo.

Thus, in the course of the years, photos of faces have become different semiotic objects, changing their meaning and function. According to Peirce, index, icon and symbol are different forms of semiotic functioning, rather than rigidly separated categories of different signs. Thus, all signs are endowed with an indexical, iconic and symbolic component, but these features may play a different role. As images, photos are certainly icons; however, at the beginning, they were primarily indexes pointing to the disappeared. Over time they acquired a symbolic role evoking the whole category of the desaparecidos without losing, however, their indexical nature: their symbolic power derived precisely but their being indexes of a given person.

If at first, they were images of a specific individual and generally labelled with the name and date of disappearance, as is the case in the photos of architecture students still exhibited in the main hall of the university in Buenos Aires, later they came to allude to the generic category acquiring a strong symbolic character, as they do at ESMA, devoid of any precise indications about their referents.

Quite often, however, they function in both ways at the same time, as is the case in the Cordoba Archive. Here individual photos of young disappeared persons cover entire walls of the archive, producing a somehow choral meaning

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10 For more discussion of these data, see Ludmila da Silva Catela (2014, p. 141), e da Silva Catela (2009).

11 ESMA stands for the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (Higher School of Mechanics of the Navy) a huge compound of military buildings in Buenos Aires, used as an educational facility of the Argentine Navy and then transformed into an illegal, secret detention centre during the Dirty War of the military dictatorship.

12 On the use of photos see, among others, da Silva Catela (2009) and Longoni (2010).

13 For the indexical function of photos, see Barthes (1980).
effect. Every Thursday, large reproductions of the photos are displayed in the street where the Archive, a former police station and detention centre, is located, where they assume yet other functions: a commemoration, a way of marking the territory, and a form of street performance that addresses the community.

In all these usages we can retrace a common echo of a funerary dimension: even when photos were polemically used to reverse their funerary meaning, as when the mothers used them to claim back their children in the famous slogan *Aparicion con vida*, they still alluded to death.

In the specific situation of Argentina, and more generally in Latin America, reproductions of the faces of the disappeared are always mourning signs, and mourning signs can be seen, in turn, as transformative devices acting as semiotic shifters between different frames—private grief on the one hand, and collective forms of political action on the other—that do not exclude each other but remain in an unstable balance. Here the very images of faces acquire a pluri-dimensional configuration: they are at one and the same time conceptual and emotional devices: they embed different forms of sense and convey different affects. Signs of personal mourning but also of collective political actions, they are endowed with a performative and pragmatic power able to produce different kinds of practices.

### 3 When Art Meets Face

In the whole of Latin America, and particularly in Argentina, the high relevance and emotional impact of faces images of the disappeared gave rise to many artistic creations. Artists engaged with working through the terrible traumatic experiences of the dictatorship often concentrated on photography, and, in particular, on snapshots of faces, so pervasive in the urban Argentinian landscape. These works can be classified, in some respects, as forms of conceptual art; this is, however, only a partial perspective, since the realism of the photographic images keeps within itself the materiality of an embodied presence in an indelible way.

Marcelo Brodsky, an Argentinian visual artist and photographer, as well as a human rights activist, produced many works based on photographic images of people who disappeared during the military dictatorship. An interesting instance of these works is *Buena Memoria* (Good Memory), exhibited for the first time in 1996 at the *Collegio Nacional* in Buenos Aires (where Brodsky attended his first year of high school in 1967) and then in 2000 in Rome, at the *Palazzo delle Esposizioni* (Fig. 7).

*Buena Memoria* is a blowup of an end-of-year school photograph. Some of the faces are crossed out: those of the people who disappeared; others survived, and some information about their lives has been added on the picture. The end-of-year photograph acquires in this way a totally new meaning: it is not the usual, and somehow nostalgic memory of high school companions, but rather the dramatic testimony of young lives ended in the cruelest way, or of people forced to escape into exile. In Brodsky’s manipulation of the school photo, two enunciations coexist: one of the photographer, who took the picture in the past, when these people were young students, and one of the artist, who changed the expression plan of the image. But as we know, any change at the expression plan modifies the content plan as well: the second enunciation transforms the interpretation and the overall sense of the original photo.

The two enunciations frame two completely different textual worlds, with opposite meanings, temporalities, knowledge and emotions. While the end-of-year photo taken at school is a nice souvenir of a group of young people starting their life, the second inscribes in itself the dark fate of most of them. The second enunciator knows what happens to those young students, a future that was only embedded as virtual in the school photo and was realized in Brodsky’s manipulation of it. Two different competencies at the level of knowing are thus present in the image (from not-knowing the future to knowing it), in contrast with each other. If in the first picture the future was still open and undetermined, with all the promises of the beginning of an adult life-to-be, in the second the future has become past, and the prospective gaze of the commemorative picture turned into a retrospective

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14 See, for example, the work of Gustavo Germano, *Ausencias*, composed of pairs of photographs, the first set representing young people, friends or family members, during the years of the dictatorships. The second set portrays the same people, but with some empty spaces, for the absent persons who disappeared during the military regime.

15 On the opera Buena Memoria see also Larralde Armas (2017).
one. Such a turn implies a different temporality, not only in the obvious opposition between future and past, but also at the aspectual level, with its different pathemic and emotional tones, from an inchoative moment of the beginning, with its euphoric tonality, to the terminative one of the end, deeply dysphoric.

Sometimes face images are not of people directly involved in traumatic experiences in their own lives, as in the Brodsky’s work, but convey a more general and abstract content. Such is the case, for example, with To Be a Witness (Ser testigo), of the Argentinian artist Mirta Kupferminc, daughter of Holocaust survivors.

The work was on display in 2010 at the Hebrew Union College NYU–Jewish Institute of Religion Museum in New York as part of a 10-year retrospective exhibition of the artist, called Wanderings. It consists of a large mural of glass, paper and wood, occupying a full wall composed of over 300 images of the face of a young man covering his eyes and part of his face with his hand (Fig. 8).

At first, To Be a Witness seems to suggest someone trying to avoid the obligation of being a witness, covering his eyes and refusing to look at reality. The title reinforces such an interpretation, since it could be read as referring to the reality of the Argentinian dictatorship, and its terrible legacy. During that tragic period, a large part of the Argentinian population did not react to the military violence and after the end of the dictatorship avoided the responsibility of witnessing, metaphorically covering their eyes.

From a semiotic point of view, what is interesting in such an interpretation is the possible use, on the part of the interpreter, of a series of extra textual elements that play a relevant role in the act of reading a text: first, historical knowledge of what happened in Argentina in the 1970s and 1980s; second, the fact that the author is Argentinian; and third, and most relevant, the undeniable resemblance of this work to what I have called the landscape of memory, the thousands and thousands of faces of young people who look at us from walls and buildings, on the streets and in the schools, covering the façades of many sites of memory and memorials scattered through Argentina. As already noticed, the formal layout of To Be a Witness plays an important role in the interpretation, as Kaminsky (2021, p. 112) pointed out:

With its grid of individual images of a young man’s face, it is reminiscent of the rows of photographs of the disappeared, all enlarged to the same size, arranged in rows and columns encircling the pyramid in the Plaza de Mayo, where the mothers of the disappeared have long walked in silent protest. These faces, each an individual, each pictured in a blow-up of a school photograph or an official identity card, whatever most recent picture the family could find, each one a person, each one a life.

Thus, to look at To Be a Witness as a political denunciation of the complicity of a significant part of Argentinian population during the dictatorship is naturally the first obvious reading of the work. This is not, however, the intended interpretation of the author, who did not mean her work to be read within a historical framework, but rather as the recitation of the Schm’a, the prayer that in the Jewish religion declares the unity of God.

The covered eyes make this witness to the oneness of God possible. The subject in prayer does not refuse to see, but rather blocks out distraction. The work is about mystery and interiority, another kind of witnessing altogether. The reference to the prayer, and the abstracting of two of its letters to form the word “witness”, is recognizable to those who know the Hebrew and Talmudic tradition. (Kaminsky 2021, p. 113)

An interesting contrast emerges here between what Eco (1990) called the intentio autors and the intentio operis. According to Eco, the first is what the author intended to convey; the latter is what a text expresses independently of what the author intended to communicate. Although a poet might “intend” to write an immortal poem, such an intention does not guarantee the effectiveness of the poem. As Roland Barthes once said, literature is not a matter of intentions but of results.

The two intentions do not necessarily coincide, but, generally, they overlap. However, in this specific case the intended interpretation of Mirta Kupferminc—i.e., a reference to the Jewish religious practice and the Talmudic tradition—might not be easily accessible to the empirical readers, while the contextual experience of the face images—the core component of the work—certainly is, especially in Argentina. In other words, the intended Model Reader (1984), endowed with the necessary competence to catch the Talmudic references present in the work, is probably not
coincident with the large majority of the readers and their
cultural competence. The interpretation of a text is always
embedded in a cultural environment that forces a selection
of the encyclopaedic portions of knowledge for the cor-
rect understanding. This is a case where only a paratextual
apparatus could give the necessary background information
to properly understand the work. However, it is important
to know that Kupferminc’s work is rooted in references to
Jewish spirituality and Jewish religious practice, including
images referring to the Holocaust. As a child of Holocaust
survivors, she often goes back to those traumatic memo-
ries. Therefore, a connection between that genocide and
the Argentinian miliary dictatorship is embedded in Ser
testigo. As Rahel Musleah (2010) writes, “Kupferminc
twins the losses of the Holocaust with the disappearances
of political dissidents she herself witnessed during the era
of repression in Argentina. ‘Her art, while grounded in the
terror of the Holocaust, speaks powerfully to contemporary
concerns of human freedom, tolerance and justice’, writes
museum director Jean Bloch Rosensaft in the accompanying
catalog”.

I would like to conclude this short review with two works
related to my own town of Bologna in Italy. The first is
a work by Christian Boltanski, a contemporary artist who
worked extensively with trauma and memory. In 2017, the
city of Bologna hosted a large retrospective of his work, and
the artist set up a series of installations in various locations
in the city. Among them, immense blowup of the eyes of
some of the partisans whose photographs are exhibited in
the sacrarium described earlier on (Figs. 9, 10).

These photos are now exhibited at the Mambo, the
Museum of Modern Art in Bologna.

The meaning effect is the same of Zelig’s eyes: the eyes
in the photos look at the camera, addressing us in the vis-
ual form of an enunciation in first and second person; we
look at them as they look at us, and here too, we know that
these eyes are the eyes of dead. These eyes, addressing us
with their serious look, are asking implicitly about our own
responsibility and position facing the tragedies of our times
and they too, like the covered eye in the work of Kuper-
minc, address the question of the witness and the moral
duty to provide testimony. We are facing here another level of
repetition, or better migration of the same motif in different
contexts, artistic and not artistic, all related with traumatic
memories. The eyes looking into the camera have become a
sort of recurring visual theme, although their specific mean-
ing might vary according to their collocation: a memorial
site and a modern art museum are not the same thing.

Another example referring to the dramatic recent history
of Bologna is the work of the Italian artist and photographer
Sonia Lenzi. On August 2, 1980, a bomb was placed
in the second-class waiting room of the Bologna train sta-
tion. 85 people were killed, and over 200 wounded, among
them children, young students, families, and ordinary people
ready to start their summer holidays. The perpetrators of the
massacre were neo fascists, probably complicit with some
elements of the Italian secret services, but this has never
been completely clarified.

The work of Sonia Lenzi—‘It Could Have Been Me
(Avrei potuto essere io)’—is a public art project produced
with the support of the public administration and the asso-
ciation of the families of the victims and consists of a perfor-
mance and an artist’s book. The performance took place in
the waiting room where the bomb exploded, during Decem-
ber 2013 and January 2014, a time of year not casually
chosen, since it coincided with the Christmas holidays, in
contrast with the summer holiday time of the massacre. The

16 The underlying thread connecting Holocaust memories with other
traumatic experiences of our contemporary world has been largely
investigated within the field of Memory Studies. See Rothberg (2009)
who coined the expression of multidirectional memories.
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The artist asked various people to participate in the performance: they were given a form with information about and a picture of one of the victims of the opposite sex. They were asked to read the information and were photographed while reading and looking at the picture of the dead (Fig. 11).

The photos, framed close to one another, formed a kind of monument to the memory of the victims, which was temporarily installed for the 35th anniversary of the massacre—from the 31st of July to the 15th of September 2015—in the atrium of the high-speed trains at the station (Fig. 12).

85 copies of the artist’s book containing the photos were printed to be used as a portable monument, in a way similar to the newspaper page of la Repubblica with the pictures of Covid victims mentioned before.

An important difference, however, is the involvement of a third actor, beside the victim and the spectator, i.e., the people chosen to read, 35 years after the bomb, the life stories of each of the victims, looking at their pictures. In such a project, a complex layer of intertwining meanings takes form, moving from the performance to the installation, two complementary parts of the work. What the artist wanted to produce was a kind of identification of the people involved in the life and death of the victims, a way to give testimony of those lives through an artistic and emotional process. The 85 people who lost their lives in the attack are re-actualized and remembered through the 85 people who accepted to look at them, to be their witnesses.

In this work three actors are involved—the victim, the performer and the bystander-spectator: their gazes cross one another, multiplying the act of testimony. The bystander-spectator, who is herself a traveler, looks at the face of another traveler who, sitting in the second-class waiting room of the station, is looking at the face of yet another traveler who, 35 years earlier, died in the very same waiting room. A sort of an enunciational embedding moves through these crossing gazes, transforming the passing traveler into a witness.

Five years later, in January 2020, at an important annual art fair that takes place every year in Bologna, images of the victims’ faces were used again in a public installation by another artist, Silvia Cicconi (Memorie Di menti care).17

Fig. 11 Sonia Lenzi: It Could Have Been Me (Photo Sonia Lenzi)

Fig. 12 Installation of It Could Have Been Me (Photo Sonia Lenzi)

Fig. 13 Silvia Cicconi, Memorie Di menti care. Bus stop in front of the station (Photo of the author)

17 The title is a pun impossible to translate. Literally it means: Memories of beloved minds, but in Italian “Di menti care” (of minds beloved) is also the verb “dimenticare”, to forget.
A perforated image of every victim was superimposed on a photo of the destroyed station. Blown up versions of these posters were put on the walls of the bus shelter of the number 37 bus stop in front of the station (Fig. 13).

The choice of bus 37 was intentional, since it was the bus used after the explosion first as an ambulance to transport the injured to the hospital, and then as an improvised morgue, to collect the dead, covered in white sheets.

4 Conclusion

The representation of human faces appears to be a recurring element in the transmission of traumatic memories, both in memorials and in artistic creations. In all these different contexts the display of face images shows some common semiotic strategies; seriality, repetition, accumulation, similarity of chromatism, geometrical structuring of the grid, all reminds us of the “archival impulse” (Foster 2004) of the concentration world. In this way the human face, the highest expression of individual uniqueness, becomes at the same time the figure of our communality as human beings, our shared human destiny. Singularity dissolves into a general form, while still conserving the sign of its unique representation. No face is identical to another; each is the indexical trace of a singular human being, yet at the same time is also the symbolic figure of the generic human form; it can be simultaneously a memory of a beloved dead individual, a funerary inscription and a signifier for a political mass action.

Index, icon and symbol at the same time, the photos of human faces exhibit the full complexity of semiotic functioning; although they are the indexical reference of a unique individual, they can represent the form of a collective actor, the generic Victim. The thousands of photos of Tuol Sleng, as well as in many Holocaust memorials or in the Latin American sites of memory, dissolve into one single image, and the different features of each person disappear, blending in the multitude of their reproductions. A homogenising effect seems to lay over all these faces, either because of their similar ethnic origin, as in Tuol Sleng, or because of the anonymity of their uniforms and haircuts as in the photos of concentration camps, or because of the dated style of outfits, makeup, and beards from the seventies of the young Argentinian disappeared. Over time, these images of the dead seem to have lost their individual character to become more like each other, a single and universal image that tells us of their tragic common destiny. Maybe the real and deepest meaning of these photographic memorials is to remind us of our shared fate as human beings.

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