Architecture, Violence, and War: Auschwitz-Birkenau: The Architectural Ideological Fantasy Hiding the Horrible Real

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Architecture, urban design, and construction in Nazi Germany are linked by an ideological fantasy that stitches together the radical discrepancies of the horrific events of the Holocaust and the idealized German political-agrarian lifestyle. It is reductive to say that the architecture at Auschwitz-Birkenau is not-architecture because of it's diabolically uses, or to claim that architecture was derailed and controlled by evil architects. Both of these claims remove architecture from critical analysis under the rubric that its principles are pure and uncorrupted. Instead, we must confront the role of architecture in the development of Auschwitz-Birkenau, in an attempt to fully understand its historical evolution as a symbolic realm of the Third Reich.

I believe that there are two reasons to justify holding architecture accountable for its role at Auschwitz-Birkenau. First, architecture in is most beneficial and true mode is capable of informing and changing both the fabric of a society and individual understanding; thus, we cannot suddenly disassociate from this when architecture is used inappropriately. We must face the reality that architecture impacts the individual and society both positively and negatively. There are no selective ethics. Second, the presence exerted by architecture, in-itself, is located in both its image (as an apperception) and within its designed spaces.

The Impossible Real: Architecture and Auschwitz-Birkenau

To begin I will analyze the 1955 Auschwitz documentary *Night and Fog,* which shows how architecture used, in Slajov Zezek's words in his book *The Sublimed Object of Ideology*, as "fantasy as the support of reality." Alain

Fig. 1 The ideal Landscape and the Concentration Camp from *Night and Fog*

Resnais' remarkable and chilling documentary *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955) explores the impossibility of representing and understanding the horrible events at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The text for the documentary was written by Jean Cayrol, who was a member of the French resistance during the war. He was captured in 1943 and sent to the concentration camp at Mauthausen. After the war he became an influential novelist. The documentary opens with a colorful shot of a beautiful landscape consisting of lush trees, plowed fields, and a city in the distance. The camera pans from left to right showing the extent of this beautiful scene. An anonymous narrator provides a voice-over accompanying these images. He says,

> A peaceful landscape. An ordinary field with flights of crows, harvests, grass fires. An ordinary road where cars and peasants and lovers pass.[1]

As the camera pans slowly toward the right, a menacing barbed wire fence appears on screen, along with a highly stylized yet threatening guard tower [see Fig. 1]. The narrator observes,

> An ordinary village for vacationers - with a marketplace and a steeple - can lead all too easily to a concentration camp.[2]

The film quickly cuts to a series of black and white photographs of various guard towers [see Fig. 2]. Again the narrator comments,

> A concentration camp is built like a stadium or a big hotel. You need contractors, estimates, competitive bids. And no doubt a bribe or two. Any style will do. It's left to the imagination. Swiss style; garage style; Japanese style; no style at all. The architects calmly plan the gates through which no one will enter more than once.[3]

This opening montage chillingly demonstrates how everyday experiences are indelibly linked to the unimaginable. The events at the concentration camp are unimaginable however, this sequence shows how the things which have typically been seen as guiltless, such as architecture and the city, now complicate rather then explicate our understanding of the events at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It takes intrepidity to imagine that the very mundane processes of building - "contractors, estimates, competitive bids" - shifts the responsibility of the death camps (and all that occurred in it's stead) from "evil-minded" individuals to the normative and benign social -institutional forms. Consider the intentionality of the "designed" for the guard towers. Even in their simplicity, it is evident that there was a huge effort to design them, thus one must ask, who was the external imagery for? Was it for the officers and guards employed at the camp? Or was it an insidious gesture to further humiliate the inmates who are forced to view these pleasant (and ironic) façades while working to death? I believe that the answer resides in the fact that the victims had more dire concerns than contemplating the style of the guard tower.

The gate which the narrator claims the "architects calmly plan[ed]" is the infamous entry building at Birkenau [see Fig. 3]. In the photograph, the arched opening appears as a hole toward which the train tracks lead to finally pass through the middle of the building. The hole receives the *path* (not the people) taken by the victims and they never "touch" or occupy the building, whereby we must conclude that the building was not designed for them. Certainly, the photograph can be interpreted from our contemporary point of view as terrifying if we imagine traveling toward knowing what we know now, but we must keep in mind that the victims were

Fig. 2 Guard Tower Styles from *Night and Fog*

packed like cattle into windowless cars. The hole is an empty placeholder, but for what? Contrasting the hole, the intangible void, is the solid, tangible presence of the architecture in-itself. Who is this for and why?

Fig. 3 Birkenau Gate

The Birkenau gate was built after the "final solution" to kill all of the Jews was begun. This killing began at Auschwitz which was a camp located directly to the south of Birkenau. Between the time that Auschwitz began killing and the construction of the more deadly Birkenau there was ample time for the Germans to reflect on their actions and goals. This reflection was evident in the work of civilian and military architect's designs for various other buildings, in addition to the camps, such as Himmler's luxury apartment, the Commandant's lavish offices, the crematoria, and the Birkenau gate. Within this varied mix of building types, the gate stand out [Figure 4] The architectural drawing of the gate building (the final design of several variations) shows that it is composed around a mostly symmetrical facade with a central tower. The dominance of the tower acts to organize the architectural content in substantial and positive manner. However, it is supported by the void; the hole through which the victims pass, yet, the hierarchy is eerily maintained. These architectural moves possess and coalesces one's attention to a paradoxical phenomena, whereby the building is supported by a deliberate architectural moves, however, the dichotomy between the solid tower and the void seem incommensurable. What is the effect and relationship of these powerful elements? What do they mean? I will address this in detail the next section, so for now we can only

conclude that they are intended for those in power. Furthermore, upon closer inspection one can see stone lintels, coining, and tile roofing. Are these not rather extravagant design elements for a building intended for a concentration camp entrance? Even the brick wall facade passively identifies this as a "style" that is sympathetic to a mannerists rural typology, that is in line with Himmler's vision for a new German city. I will explore this later in the paper. The pattern of the windows along with their deep recesses and the shadows created by them are scaled for a person who is capable of being inside and walking freely around them. I will argue that it is self-evident that the architecture functions as a vehicle for Nazi ideology and was employed to fill the role as a symbolic support for their social, cultural, and political aspirations. I believe that the symbolic network is revealed in the German unconscious and manifested consciously in their architecture; this is Lacan's notion of the Real, the imaginary, and the symbolic.

Fantasy and Ideology

The notion of fantasy structuring reality comes from Jacque Lacan's work in psychoanalysis from the early fifties to late sixties. To say that the final thread holding reality together, as we experience it, is a fantasy-framework does not mean that we are all in dream-state. Rather, Lacan is suggesting that, contrary to "life is a dream" there is a "leftover which persists and cannot be reduced to a universal play of illusory meaning."[4] This "leftover" is what Lacan called the "Real" an idea that is one part of his tripartite explanation of human subjectivity. He defines the Real in relation to the "symbolic" and the "imaginary." The symbolic is, perhaps, the most easily understood, as it is the mediation of the world through signs. For example, names, attributes of things, and descriptions of things are not the "thing in-itself" rather they are a symbolic system that structures and describes them through language and other signs; we represent the world of objects and things to ourselves. The "imaginary" is the configuration of the ego (what one images themselves to be) such as, I am a lawyer, a father, or a man; it is the realm of images or appearances, thus Lacan sees this as how we imagine ourselves to be within the world in relation to the *other*; this does not usually coincide with how things really are. This brings us back to the Real (remember this is not reality) which is that
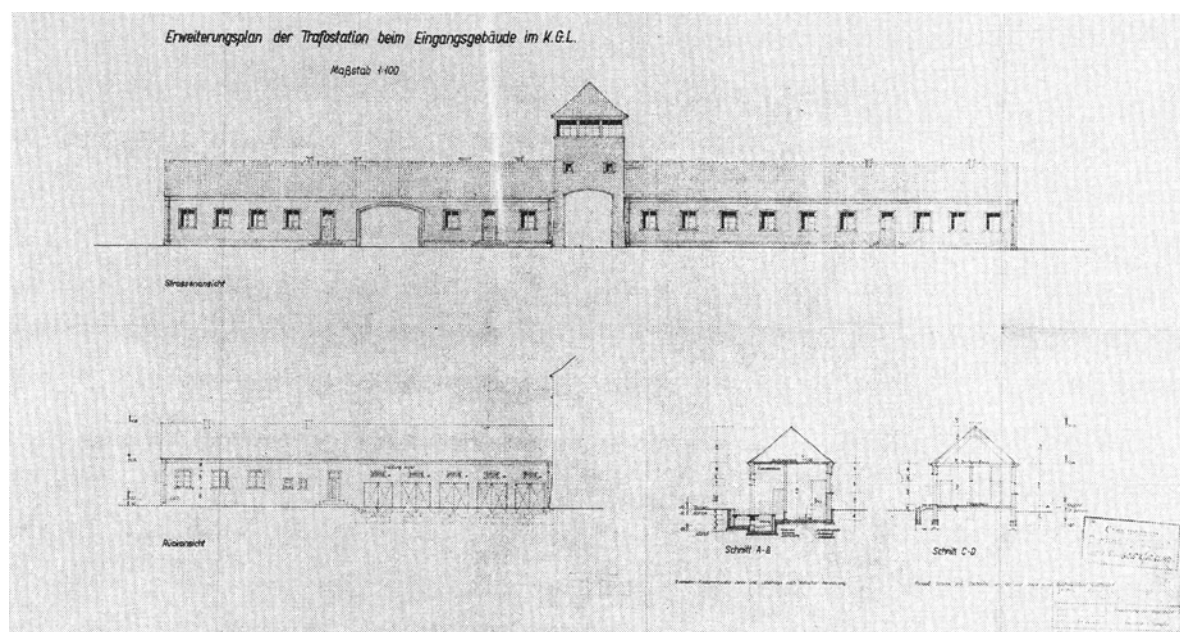
Fig. 4 Birkenau Gate Architectural Drawing

which cannot be symbolized or is left out of the symbolic network. For example, we desire to know ourselves authentically, as we really are, thus we constantly symbolize things and find their identity. However, we imagine that this process is immediate and natural. But in fact it is not. For architects this might be Langier's primitive hut or when Lou Kahn asks, "what does the brick want to be?" However, in our endeavor to find authenticity we constantly encounter symptoms that contradict it. Nature, in reality, is cold, infested with insects, and dangerous, or for Lou Kahn the brick never speaks, thus he inscribes in it its answer which is "its nature, it wants to be an arch." When this is applied to the Birkenau gate, in drawing and actuality, the need by the Germans to mask the Real, the fact that they are killing humans in mass, they imagine that their actions are serving a social-political goal of the Third Reich, hence they construct a symbolic network, and here it is the architectural properties. Remember, the Real cannot be symbolized, thus it is a leftover that continues to return and plague us. This also explains the impossibility of representing the events of Birkenau that Resnais' documentary struggled with. However, we are still in the realm of individual idiosyncrasy. We need to see how this plays out at the level of the social.

The philosopher Slavoj Zezek links Lacan's fantasy to a support to reality through Marx

and Althusser's notion of ideology, believing that it is the dream-like state of fantasy that keeps us from seeing the real conditions our existence. Zezek, Marx, and Althusser claim that one cannot step outside of ideology to make an objective judgment, thus questions such as, what is anti-Semitism? and how can one be freed from prejudice and hate? will never return answers. This applies for example, when Zezek writes that when we try to understand Nazi Germany by objective inquiry, such as, the Nazi's unfairly labeled the Jews as inferior and evil, with no real argument to support their claim. This is doomed to fail. The reason it fails is that adding "rationalizations" to confirm their unconscious prejudices is tautological. Instead, Zezek suggests that the answer to the "'anti-Semitic idea of Jew has nothing to do with Jews; the ideological figure of a Jew is a way to stitch up the inconsistency of our own [Nazi] ideological system.'"[5] His point is that the everyday pre-ideological experiences of individuals are unable to dismantle ideological-fantasy comprised of actual prejudices. Because the "ideological construction always finds its limits in the field of the everyday experience."[6] Zezek explains that anyone in Nazi Germany is inundated with hate-propaganda outlining the "official party line" on anti-Semitism. Thus, when a normal citizen encounters, say their neighbor who is nice, friendly, and whose children play with their

own, one would think that with the two conflicting "images" of a Jewish man, the one from "normal" non-ideological experience would prevail. No, this is not the case. Rather, Zezek says, the German citizen respond to this gap between lived experience and the party line in an inverse manner. Zezek writes,

> His answer would be to turn this gap, this discrepancy itself, into an argument for anti-Semitism: "You see how dangerous they really are? It is difficult to recognize their real nature. 'They hide it behind the mask of everyday life - and it is exactly this hiding of one's real nature, this duplicity, that is a basic feature of the Jewish nature.' An ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor.[7]

Zizek is following Althusser's infamous claim that ideology is only the imaginary relationships between people and the real conditions of their existence.[8] Thus the representations that are used to signify, identify, and justify (for example architecture) are distinct and radically different than how things really are. We can now understand how the Birkenau gate actually architecture works. The Jews can only pass through the void beneath the tower, on their way to be killed. Recall in the analysis of *Night and Fog*, where the gate "through which no one will enter more than once" was directed towards the Jews in relation to the citizens and the German military who saw it as a normative act. One's rational response would be that "we are killing innocent people." However, the Germans reverse this into an ideological fantasy by saying, yes they must be killed because they lack substance. Thus, the void in the wall is a symbol of their absence of substance, such as, being able to recognize the Nationalist Identity, being true Germans, and fulfilling destiny. This is reinforced by the compositional fact that the void supports the presence and solidity of the tower and the architectural façade. In other words, it is a symbolic mandate appearing the German ideological fantasy.

How Architectural History Informed Auschwitz-Birkenau

Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll Westfell explain that as early as 1930 the philosopher Martin Heidegger called for Germany to appropriate Greek social and political experiences as a way to achieve true *Being*. His idea of *being* is inspired by the Greek city-state, a notion that radically influenced how theorists during this period thought about how people existed in the world. He transformed mere time and space into dwelling and place.[9] He explained in 1935 that Germany was awakening from "the darkening of the world…the destruction of the earth, the transformation of men into mass, the hatred and suspicion of everything free and creative."[10] Heidegger thought National Socialism must grasp this opportunity to finally achieve the true Greek sensibility in being and dwelling. However, there was a price for such a historical return, particularly for architecture, as van Pelt and Westfell write,

> Heidegger's vision of National Socialism certainly applies to architecture. A comparison of the different domains of ancient Athens and the foci of architectural activity in the Third Reich offers a premonition of this awful truth.[11]

Hitler became the German dictator in 1933 and he wasted no time in destroying the constitution, institutions, and city fabric of the Weimer Republic. In its place he created a "new kind of organic community, a nationaler Rechtstaat" that was comprised of the actual experiences of *volk* as expressions of their day to day battle for (German) existence.[12] The self-authenticating *volk* evolved a population into a devote fascination with the Führer which transformed Hitler into a "latter-day version of a messianic savior who was believed to be endowed with magical powers" emanating from the collective "volk."[13] To secure this newly formed consciousness Hitler created a diabolical and dangerous "other" as was the quasi-cause of the original suffering under the Weimer Republic. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler told the German people that it was the Jews and their irresponsible and self-interested goals who stole from the German people their original life-force and true calling. van Pelt and Westfell quote Hitler in 1940, saying "I have… again and again stated my view that the hour would

come when we shall remove this people [the Jews] from the ranks of our nation."[14] van Pelt and Westfell claim that Hitler's rise to power due to the identification of the evil *other* and was fully expressed in Nazi architecture.[15] Hitler was enamored with architecture and understood its endemic political and social power it possessed. He commissioned the architect Ludwig Troost to redesign Berlin in a manner expressive of the new *volk*. However, it was the architect Albert Speer who gave Hitler (and Heidegger) the new perverse Acropolis. According to van Pelt and Westfell, Speer transformed Hitler and Heidegger's notions into a "granite mass of buildings, which were to stand for a thousand years" that "literally now became the symbolic content of Nazi architecture."[16] This idealized manifestation of German privilege and symbolic meaning in built form was, in the final analysis, a fantasy created as a symbol of the Nazi ideological power structure. From the great dramas stage by Speer for Hitler's rallies to Leni Riefenstahl's aesthetically pleasing propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1934) one can begin to see how the subjugation and subsequent annihilation of the Jews was woven into the fabric of symbolic expression, in particular architecture. However, it was to come with a great cost in human suffering. Beneath this idyllic facade was the traumatic symptom, what Jacque Lacan called "the Real." This was Auschwitz-Birkenau. Hitler championed architecture as the emblematic form for Nazi Germany, thus the "war itself was an aesthetic phenomenon, the destruction of the Jews an edifice, the whole Götterdämmerung a controlled Wagnerian process."[17] Auschwitz-Birkenau was an aesthetic-symbolic response to the Nazi fantasy unconscious. What is remarkable is the level to which architecture, building processes, and urban planning played in the concentration camps

Urban Design, Architecture, and Death Camps

By 1940 Poland was considered by Hitler and Himmler to be the "German East" and it became the site for a vast resettlement effort. Himmler was intent on designing a new place for "soldier-farmers" who would live in small "L" shaped houses embracing a small lot for farming. These homes were examples of German practicality and the social-political order requiring large propagating families. The

Reich Authority for Spatial Planning organized design competitions. One winning design was by the architects Max Halpaup and Carl Nagal whose proposal was for a living-farm complex to be owned by a newly resettled German Nationalist. Their design was praised for its proper use of "German architectural traditions"[18] The Reich Authority even produced manuals and drawings showing how to convert a Polish farmhouse into a German Farmhouse.[19] Part of the resettlement required the displacement of Polish undesirables and Jews. Although the population of political dissidents was diminishing thus, Himmler and the SS decided that the camps at Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and Mauthausen were becoming a financial liability. Yet, Himmler was unwilling to abandon the prison systems, which lead him to find a way to revamp them. There were two issues hindering the implementation of this change. One was a limited budget and the other was the fact that there was a shortage of building materials in Poland and in Germany. At this time Germany alone needed 40 million bricks a year, and to complete Albert Speer's grand projects granite was required in large amounts. The problem was solved when the SS realized that the existing camps could be used for supplying building materials and the inmates would become slave labor.[20] The camp at Auschwitz, (originally called Oswiecim) was different because it was chosen solely for the fact that it was close to a vast sand and gravel pit capable of providing building materials.

Initially, the camp at Auschwitz contained prisoners from the Russian front who were kept as slave laborers. The camp was overcrowded and inadequately designed. There are numerous documents illustrating the design process where architects and members of the Reich Authority squabbled over its details. For example, where architectural plans and calculations might show originally show 744 men, that was changed to 540 men and finally over a thousand actually arrived.[21] This new design energy coincided with the lack of a viable work force due to the war efforts while maintaining an aggressive building and infrastructure agenda. By 1941 Hitler issued the command to implement the "final solution" to the Jewish problem. This began the systematic killing of an entire group of men, women, and children.[22] Architecture and the building process played a key role in the reasons to evolve the Auschwitz concentration

camp that was "captured in the hundreds of architectural plans the Germans forgot to destroy."

The problem of disposing of the thousands of corpses was given to the architect Paul Blobel. He believed that the most economical solution was cremation in open fireplaces. Overtime this became inadequate due to the massive numbers of people arriving daily. Ultimately, it was at Auschwitz-Birkenau where a successful architectural solution first appeared. The architect Karl Bischoff oversaw the design and construction of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps for 200,000 prisoners from 1942-1943. Based on Paul Blobel's work his office designed the large-scale crematoria. Two crematoriums (these included a gas killing chamber) were built in conjunction with two large camps.[23] The largest was located in the newly created camp across from Auschwitz called Birkenau. Here crematorium III was built [Fig. 5]. The architectural drawing in Figure 5 shows rendered elevations, plan, and building section. Similar to the Birkenau gate analyzed previously one can see the incommensurable juxtaposition between its mannered and pleasant facade and its horrible killing machine contents. The architects took great care in rendering this drawing so that one could understand its architectural features which can

be interpreted as reinforcing their ideological fantasy. Remember that is it unlikely that this design was created to either add insult to injury to the victims or to provide one last pleasing visual experience before their deaths. Thus, one can only conclude that the Lacanian Real, that which cannot be symbolized, was endemic to German architects otherwise their symbolic network, their architecture, would fail. Even the terrifying presence of the chimney venting the smoke of burning flesh takes on a fetish-like metaphor of the German triumph and will.

Auschwitz-Birkenau was the result of numerous master plans and revisions. Ironically, and almost unimaginably, was that the master plans included designs, with numerous revisions, for living quarters for single and married guards, officers, and a luxury apartment for Himmler.[24] However, the most outrageous plan was the new vision for the city of Auschwitz. In 1941 Himmler and the Reich decided to redesign Auschwitz to make a new a symbolic city center for Germanic culture. The architect chosen for the urban plan was Hans Stosberg whose vision was based on heroic Medieval German cities. The goal was to merge this new city into the old city area between the concentration camps, the IG Farben plant, and the floodplains. It is
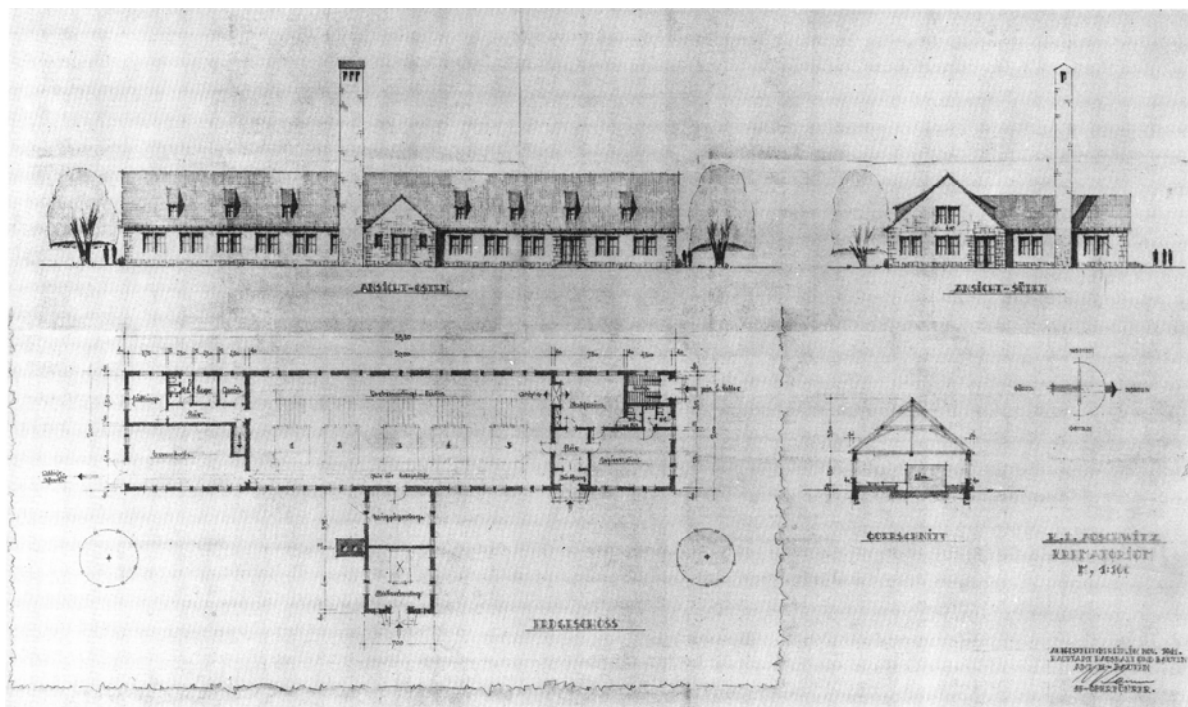

Fig. 5 Crematorium III Architectural Drawing

beyond this paper, however, it would be a remarkable analysis to investigate Wright's Broadacre City (1932), Le Corbusier's city for Three Million (1922) and the German Urban Resettlement Plans for Auschwitz (1940). It seems unimaginable that a normal urban experience, one with families, employment, and garden parks was so tightly integrated with crimes occurring at Auschwitz-Birkenau. But we must recall that if the camps were eliminated from the Nazi fantasy, the very core of their being, their *Dasein,* would disappear.

According to van Pelt and Westfell the architecture of Auschwitz-Birkenau has been mostly ignored by current architectural historians who are concerned with the "architectural and urban delusions" of the "Nazi ruse."[25] In contrast, Gillian Rose, in her essay "Architecture after Auschwitz," distances and removes "Architecture" from the camps, claiming that its rules and styles of design are independent of Nazi idolatry. For her, van Pelt and Westfell failed to set a "criterion for distinguishing between a city and a social system run by terror."[26] It was the intent of this paper to challenge notions similar to Rose's claim, by positing that Nazi architecture (all architecture for that matter), has yet to be fully evaluated in relation to its endemic symbolic support within the ideological gap between architecture as social-symbolic mask hiding the Lacanian Real, and the actual presence of architecture as a source of fascination to any culture.

Endnotes

1. Alain Resnais, *Night and Fog*, Jean Cayrol, screenwriter (The Criterion Collection, 1955).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, New York: Verso, 1989), 47.

5. Ibid., 48.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 49.

8. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, 109–10.

9. Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 318–19.

10. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, reprint, 1959 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 40.

11. Jan van Pelt and Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism*, 321.

12. Ibid., 322.

13. Ibid., 324.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 325.

16. Ibid., 335.

17. From Raul Hilberg, "The Holocaust," *Facing Evil: Light at the Core of Darkness*, ed. Paul Woodruff and Harry A. Wilmer (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1998), 107, quoted in Jan van Pelt and Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism*, 349.

18. Robert Jan van Pelt and Debórah Dwork, *Auschwitz 1270 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 134–37.

19. Ibid., 155.

20. Ibid., 169–71.

21. Ibid., 265.

22. Ibid., 298.-301.

23. Ibid., 364–66.

24. Ibid., 227–28.

25. Ibid., 369.

26. Gillian Rose, "Architecture After Auschwitz," *Assemblage* 21 (August 1993): 69.