

Unimaginable Silence

Interdisciplinary conference organized by Chiara Dankl, Michał Maczuga and Björn Puhr at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Vienna, November 6th to 7th 2026

Project description

This conference explores the manifold ways in which representation and expression interact to address the singularity of traumatic experiences in which meaning struggles to take hold. Central questions include: What can an image do in the face of the unimaginable? How can it account for the singularity of an event that escapes conscious expression? What does discursive silence reveal about such events, and can spaces of silence create occasions for critical engagement with the unresolved past? In an interdisciplinary approach, we want to shed light on these philosophical, aesthetic, historical, and psychological aspects of traumatic experience on the threshold of discursive integration.

Philosophically, the question of limit phenomena has been at the center of recent discussions about trauma and violence, investigating bodily vulnerability and challenging the possibilities of conscious integration of the lived experience, notably in the work of Bernhard Waldenfels.¹ An irreducible moment of passivity is thus able to challenge the capacity to represent in a straightforward manner, making silence resound as meaningful, without fully entering the realm of expression. But beyond these limit cases, silence reveals an important dimension of the problem of intersubjectivity as a whole – it marks the principal epistemological inaccessibility of the other, a problem that has first been explored by Edmund Husserl² and Edith Stein³ and that was later radicalized by Emmanuel Levinas.⁴ Observing silence can then come to mean respecting the limits of cognition and positing the necessary conditions for an ethical encounter with alterity.

In aesthetics, the problem of representation is a central element of photographic approaches to the horrors of war and genocide. In the context of the Rwandan genocide, Alfredo Jaar was one of the first to point out the uncomfortable tension between a lack of media representation and an overexposure to harrowing imagery.⁵ His installation “The Sound of Silence” makes the audience engage in a dialogue with the image and its history. Christophe Calais and Alexis Cordesse offer an account of the events that emphasizes the barely visible traces of a haunted landscape, pointing out

¹ Bernhard Waldenfels, *Bruchlinien Der Erfahrung: Phänomenologie, Psychoanalyse, Phänomenotechnik* (Suhrkamp, 2002); Bernhard Waldenfels, *Erfahrung, die zur Sprache drängt: Studien zur Psychoanalyse und Psychotherapie aus phänomenologischer Sicht* (Suhrkamp, 2019).

² Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen: Eine Einleitung in Die Phänomenologie* (Felix Meiner Verlag, 2012); Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution*, Husserliana 4 (Kluwer Academic, 1991).

³ Edith Stein, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe 5 (Herder, 2025).

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini : essai sur l'extériorité* (Kluwer Academic, 2009); Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Kluwer Academic, 1974).

⁵ Nicole Schweizer, ed., *Alfredo Jaar : La Politique Des Images* (JRP/Ringier, 2007).

the unfinished processing of a repressed memory.⁶ It is Georges Didi-Huberman, however, who directly questions the paradigm of the unimaginable. By showing how, in spite of all, photographic images of the *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz survived the attempted annihilation of traces, he insists that they are part of this reality.⁷ Far from being unimaginable, these images are what we need to contend with when facing it.

Historical debates questioning the singularity of the Holocaust are closely connected with this problematic status of discursivity. No seamless integration of what happened is possible, but integration remains necessary if we want to be able to learn our lessons. This, however, requires breaking what Dan Bar-On considers the double wall of silence⁸ without negating its cause: witnesses need to be able to speak, subsequent generations must be able to listen. Words will never be the full truth; they are a surviving trace of the past. Theoretical approaches to documentation and the role of the archive, like in Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris⁹, consider this complexity and offer an approach to history that finds resonance in critical perspectives on memory culture. Instead of commodifying remembrance, they call into active responsibility without pretending ever being able to provide a full picture.

It is only by acknowledging its part of silence that a discourse is possible that does not compress the reality of this history. By no means a symptom of forgetting¹⁰, silence becomes perceptible when it pushes against the gates of expression. Psychologically, the difficulty of speaking and imagining thus marks an unresolved experience that continues to haunt the subject. In the context of transgenerational trauma after World War II, Maria Ritter points out this transformation from what was once a protective shield to a communicational barrier.¹¹ Paradoxically, it is also a kind of silence that makes this expression possible. Freud and Lacan both insist on the importance of the analyst withholding intervention¹² and silence can effectively provide an open space allowing the subject to speak again. Free from the constraints of the unimaginable, and in a way that echoes Donald Winnicott's account of a transitional space¹³, silence can liberate the imagination.

These different, but thematically related axes motivate the conference *Unimaginable Silence*. We welcome contributions from various disciplines exploring the entanglement of some of the central notions of silence, representation, memory, expression and the unimaginable. Our goal is to provide an opportunity for an open interdisciplinary discussion investigating the configurations of silence and expression, challenging conventional boundaries and revisiting approaches to memory, representation and imagination.

⁶ Christophe Calais, *Rwanda, le pays hanté* (Éditions du Chêne, 2006); Alexis Cordesse, "Rwanda, blessures d'images," *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire. Revue pluridisciplinaire de la Fondation Auschwitz*, no. 117 (March 2014): 117.

⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003).

⁸ Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters With Children of the Third Reich* (Harvard University Press, 1989); see also Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, eds., *Schweigen* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2013).

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive : une impression freudienne* (Galilée, 1995); Maurizio Ferraris, *Documentalité : pourquoi il est nécessaire de laisser des traces*, trans. Sabine Plaud (les Éditions du Cerf, 2021).

¹⁰ Jay Winter, "Thinking about Silence," in *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Efrat Ben-Ze'ev et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Maria Ritter, "Silence as the Voice of Trauma," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 74, no. 2 (2014): 176–94; see also Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2007).

¹² Sigmund Freud, "Ratschläge für den Arzt bei der psychoanalytischen Behandlung," in *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, *Imago* (London, 1943); Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Seuil, 1966).

¹³ Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Routledge, 2010).