Atonement
By Kay Ferres

Atonement is a photographic installation comprising two suites of work: *The Jewish Cemetery of Lodz* and *Polska Zlota Jesien*. These monochromatic images take us into a landscape of historical memory and to a Poland of the recent past.

The works call our attention to two momentous episodes of the century just ended: the Holocaust and the disintegration of Communism. They invite us to complete the work of mourning and to imagine a just and hopeful future.

The formal arrangement of this inventory of images draws our eye to its repeated motifs. The vertical columns of buildings, gates and doorways and the dark boles of trees, punctuate horizontal expanses of gleaming streets, desolate squares and deep drifts of leaves. This classical ordering and composition of the images move us to contemplate time and eternity. The human presences and absences which mark these sites – the cemetery, the cities, the countryside – invite us to think about the possibilities of re-ordering the relationships which sustain a just order: the relationships of the soul, the city and the sacred.

Polska Zlota Jesien (A Golden Polish Autumn)

The expansiveness of the suite of images of Poland in 1992 takes in the post-war buildings in the cities of Lodz and Warsaw, Warsaw Castle (the summer palace), villages and the Jewish cemetery. These images are, in the main, un-peopled, though occasionally a family appears in a street, a group comes to life in a doorway or a child stands by a roadway. The remnants of the old city and signs of a vibrant life and prosperity are haunting presences.

Three lines of images centre on a line of portraits: human faces provide a counterpoint to the empty but not lifeless buildings and streetscapes. This arrangement calls forth for me the idea of the classical city, with its five functions. These are: the veneration of the dead, the celebration of the future, government, dwelling and commerce. These functions correspond to different spaces and architectural features. The cemetery within the city walls venerates the dead. Doorways and portals represent the future and the possibility of transformation. Squares and public spaces stand for the agora, or government. Apartment buildings are the dwellings. As we piece together the city in this way, we can also think about the functions that are in a present state of incompletion or decline. The Castle speaks of the continuities of tradition and authority; the emptiness of the streets gesture to a past when commerce and trade flourished.

The Jewish Cemetery of Lodz

Some 180,000 graves made the Jewish cemetery of Lodz, established in 1892, the largest in Europe. Before the German occupation in World War II, the large Jewish community there accounted for a third of the city's population. At the outbreak of the War, many Jews left the city, in fear of persecution, and before the ghetto was sealed in May 1940, tens of thousands had been deported. Deportations continued, as many of the inhabitants of the ghetto died of disease and starvation. Finally, the 76,000 who remained were sent to Auschwitz in September 1944. The ghetto at Lodz was the last to be destroyed in Poland. Of a population of some 230,000 only five to seven thousand Jews from Lodz survived the war.

The cemetery is the most significant remnant of Jewish culture in Lodz, and of a people who flourished there in the nineteenth century as the textile industry and associated trades prospered. The elaborate tombstones and imposing mausoleums commemorate this vibrant life as well as venerate the dead. There is another memorial in the cemetery, to the victims of the ghetto, who have no graves, "nor any sign of an existence endowed with name".

As we contemplate the ribbon of images we are invited to participate in the work of mourning. The beauty of the stone and wrought iron testifies to the earthly existence of those buried

here, and to the meaningfulness of their deaths. The dark verticals of the trees and the luminous brightness of the drifts of autumn leaves reaffirm the propriety of death in the cycles of natural existence.

But we are also moved by the memory of the thousands whose death confounds us. As Primo Levi says in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988), the only true witnesses are the sommersi, only those who were annihilated and submerged are in full possession of the truth.

“For men it is hard not to look at dead bodies”, says Plato in *The Republic*. This impulse to confront the dead, and to search for meaning, is especially strong when we are in the presence of untimely death. The cemetery of Lodz evokes an unbearable pathos as it recalls those who were not buried here.

Gillian Rose reminds us of the last wish of the victims: “know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time you will never know”. What response does this require? In Rose’s words, it requires a work, a working through, a “combination of self-knowledge and action which will not blanch before its complicities in power” (*Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation*, 1996, p. 121). This is a work of mourning, difficult but not interminable, a work whose completion gives way to a re-composition of the relations of the soul, the city and the sacred.

How do the aesthetics of the photograph help us to do this work of mourning, to confront the memories of the past and to engage with the hopes of a future?

Roland Barthes speaks of the “punctum”, the moment in time and space around which the elements of the photograph are composed and can be discomposed and refigured (*Camera Lucinda: Reflections on Photography*, 1981). In the dialogues, Plato elaborates the concept of “aporia”. This term addresses the difficulties of understanding, of clarifying or resolving philosophical investigations, by leaving gaps and silences.

I want to read these two suites of work aporetically. Their formal arrangement, and the repetition of vertical and horizontal forms within them, punctuates thought. They evoke the absences and silences which require activity: the completions of memory and self-knowledge. These works acknowledge the hauntings of the past, but they also aim to realise a gesture of atonement: not to forget, but to use what imperfect knowledge we have to transform the future. Photography is not a mute witness. Because of its silences and because of its *presentness*, it reiterates Primo Levi’s testimony: “The aims of life are the best defence against death: and not only in the Larger”.

Professor Kay Ferres is Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Griffith University Queensland.