

Questioning the Images of Atrocity: An Introduction

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Abstract

The images of atrocity, either analog or digital, are always the trace of an encounter between the gaze of a photographer or a cameraman and a human being suffering from the painful effects of man-made violence. The archive images resulting from such an encounter raise some inevitable questions: who took them and for what purpose? Is it possible to retrace the process that led to these shots? What do they hide behind what the eye can see? Owing to their defective nature and the changes they have endured throughout history, these images strongly contribute to shape collective memory by becoming real sites of memory for ethnic or national communities. Therefore, the archive of human pain, encompassing a wide range of public spaces – such as museums, monuments, artworks, memorials, human rights associations and so on – is a reservoir of images to stimulate grief or fuel action for social change. This introduction has two main aims: on the one hand, it investigates the circulation of such images within the visual sphere and their social or political uses; on the other hand, it provides the paths of research and the new findings extensively analysed in the contributions included in this volume.

The images of atrocity, either photochemical or digital, are always the trace of an encounter between the gaze of the holder of any visual registering device, and a human being suffering from the effect of natural catastrophes or man-made violence. In these painful representations, two gazes are presumed to share a brief instant, even though as sometimes happens they fail to meet. Then the instant frozen by the frame dramatically poses the major questions that semiologists, philosophers and intellectuals have considered since the 1930s as the essence of photography, namely: its status as a trace and the fatal certitude that we consume it once the intense feeling of presentness has already past. This is of course not the place to insist on these well known theses that range from Walter Benjamin to Roland Barthes, from Philippe Dubois to Susan Sontag, and other prominent names that constitute the canon of photography studies. Nonetheless, we may wonder if, at least in its extreme manifestations, as in the

subgenre of *images of impending death*, it is reasonable to establish a solid historical background rather than work in the realm of general principles.¹ It seems paradoxical to claim that the *hic et nunc* is the defining point of photography and neglect immediately afterwards the analysis of the precise circumstances in which a photograph has been produced. We do not question the pertinence of the classical definitions of photography, but to articulate them with the framework in which each one of them originated. As John Tagg put it in a canonical essay, *The Burden of Representation*, we need “not an alchemy but a history, outside which the existential essence of photography is empty...”²

In reality, the vast consumption of this genre of images both in old and new media inevitably triggered a torrent of questions that are as hard to avoid as difficult to fully answer. Some of them concern the close analysis of the form and content of such visual products: frame, camera angle, static or dynamic composition, texture and quality etc., while others affect their modality, that is, *the gaze with which the camera holder addressed the object of affliction as he or she captured it*. However uncertain this second aspect may be, it should be interrogated from the images themselves, since the political, ethical or human perspective adopted towards a theme is indelibly inscribed (but sometimes concealed) in the image itself. Consequently, instead of considering the attitude from a psychological or ideological point of view, we argue that the images contain and, to a greater or lesser degree, make explicit the intention with which they were engendered. This having been established, the analysis of their ‘modality’ cannot be reduced to textual aspects, but is constrained to taking into consideration the circumstances in which the apparatus registered the human suffering or its effects. Therefore, the historian seeking a response has to interrogate both aspects (textual and contextual) that are inextricably linked. Some of these questions may be: who took them and with what purpose? Is it possible to retrace the evolving of the events captured, their precedents and consequences that escape their recording? What do they hide beyond the limits of their scope, either placed off-screen or even and more precisely in the reverse-shot? What is the precise instant captured by the photograph in the longer sequence from which this fragment has been retrieved? Space and time are, as we realize, involved in our questioning.

The kind of issues raised by the enunciation of atrocity images may be deduced from the vast arsenal originated in World War II and its aftermath, the Shoah. In such a corpus the so-called *liberator images* can be opposed to others, which, according to Marianne Hirsch, could be termed *perpetrator images*.³ The former group is represented by the photographs or footage taken by profession-

¹ Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2010.

² John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays in Photographies and Histories*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993, p. 3.

³ Marianne Hirsch in different places. See Id., *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, Columbia University Press, New York 2012.

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als attached to the Red Army on their arrival in Majdanek or by the military-attached photographers and filmmakers or freelancers who entered Bergen Belsen or Buchenwald, respectively with the Brits or with the Americans. Consciously or unconsciously, all of them were bearing witness to events that had occurred out of the reach of the cameras. In this sense, these shots provide a window through which we contemplate the effects of the atrocities committed by the Germans by means of a rhetorical figure, metonymy, which consists of inferring the deed (the mass murder) by showing its effects (the emaciated bodies and corpses, the mass graves, the human experiments made by the Nazis etc.). Inasmuch as the recordings were intended for memory and education (a sort of 'pedagogy by horror'), technical choices were implemented to make the vision plausible for the target viewers. Among these visual strategies we might cite the co-presence of reporters (usually in the foreground) and carnage (in the background), the refusal to use montage, the preference for synchronous sound and especially witnesses' voices giving credit to what they have encountered...

As far as the *perpetrator images* are concerned, the Germans took photographs and filmed in the course of their campaigns in the Eastern front. Historians have even documented how Wehrmacht units and *Einsatzgruppen* consumed those images when operating in Russia. We would like to briefly mention a particular case.

In May 1942, a propaganda team disembarked in the Warsaw ghetto with the purpose of filming both staged scenes and improvised street views. The footage falls unequivocally into the above-mentioned category since its authors, sent by the Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, were part of the machinery of destruction. It would suffice to recall that running in parallel to the filming the SS were implementing the last details to the extermination camp of Treblinka, which was soon to become the destination of a considerable number of the ghetto inhabitants. The immortalization of the Eastern Jew through the image was connected with the project of his material destruction. Two months later, on 22 July 1942, the major deportations from the ghetto started. However, a hasty interpretation of this link must be eschewed, given the gaps between the murder and the production of the image. In this sense, the historian has to take into account the personal, spatial and temporal discrepancies between the act of killing and the act of filming. Neither the protagonists of the shooting nor the filmed victims were to coincide exactly with the protagonists of the annihilation, not to mention the time-lapse and the distance between the two scenes. Accordingly, far from being a phrase that excludes further explanation, the concept of *perpetrator image* demands an accurate scrutiny of the specific circumstances surrounding both the Warsaw filming and the Warsaw deportation. The work of the historian must go deeper in the specificities.

Yet, if the production of atrocity images raises such delicate issues and demands descending to the ground to examine the details, the analysis of their circulation increases the variants and difficulties. The social meaning of each image changes inevitably as it is incorporated into different chains of discourse, and nowadays this process has achieved an unprecedented relevance. More precisely,

meaning changes, first, when moving in the diachronic level, across time, under the form of appropriation, citation, re-editing, inversion, perversion, and so on; second, while these images migrate in the synchronic level, moving through the increasingly complex media system, from photography to cinema, from television to social networks, not to mention installations and museum or commemoration spaces. In other words, instead of remaining static, these images are extremely instable and rich in meaning and malleability. From propaganda to counter-propaganda, from exemplary purposes to memory effects, from denunciation aims to artistic redemption, the circulation, remediation and instability of the enunciation in which they appear prove that repetition always implies difference.

Yet, another aspect that these images have to face is their capacity of representing trauma. In the most recent years a new interest in Trauma Studies and Memory Studies has risen among scholars and the broader intellectual community alike. This new concern, which is undeniably shaped and inspired by a multifaceted range of sociocultural, geopolitical and historical developments, is twofold. On the one hand, it shows the increased relevance of social practices provided by institutions, such as archives, museums, memorials, web sites, installations, media products focused on the cultural specificity of wars, conflicts and instances of massacre, torture, and genocide. On the other hand, it encourages the in-depth examination of the concept of trauma – in the light of the effects in the “traumatized communities” – which has led to the acknowledgment of its importance within the interdisciplinary contemporary thought.

This special issue of *Cinéma & Cie* has placed greater emphasis on the centrality of human suffering in terms of private and shared experiences. Due to the pervasiveness of mass media, many conflicts occurring in the last decades have been witnessed and represented by means of photographic and filmic devices whose products circulate in different contexts and media outlets today. As a result, the essays in this journal deal with the issues of the politics of memory and mourning as well as the collective abuses consigned to oblivion and the annihilation of the past. The images of these traumatic events offer a specific opportunity to explore the strategies which societies have developed to represent themselves at national and international level. Therefore, crucial to this is the variety of media representations and cultural embodiments of human pain. By adopting a dynamic multidisciplinary approach and focusing on different case studies, the articles collected here complement each other and deal productively with works and critical frameworks borrowed from other disciplines and fields of research.

The main question that this collection of articles takes into account concerns – in Huyssen’s words – the “universal trope for historical trauma,”⁴ that is to say the Shoah as the icon of pain and suffering, by which other instances of geno-

⁴ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, pp. 13-14. See also Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, Blackwell, Cambridge (MA) 1994.

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cide and horror are measured. By showing different aspects and effects of the mediatization of traumatic experiences in Western societies, several essays are concerned with the dark shadow of the Nazi Regime and the Holocaust.

In Barbara Grespi's essay, the concept of the ornamental and anaesthetic gaze – borrowed by Siegfried Kracauer and Ernst Jünger – is introduced in order to examine the German postwar iconography. Exploiting literature, literary criticism, media archaeology and film studies, the article proposes an analysis of the terrifying representation of the German cities, completely devastated by air raids and reduced to rubble. Insightfully connecting the filmic representations of ruins in *Trümmerfilm* with the images of damaged marble statues, X-ray pictures of human skeletons, and, finally, aerial shots previously taken by the Nazis during the War and by the Allies afterwards, the author illustrates the ways in which trauma is represented more or less explicitly in German cinema and photography. Grespi particularly notices how the motifs of mineralization, mutilation of the body and transcription of the landscape or human figure into abstract signs correspond to the unconscious “affectless reaction” of the German people – consisting in considering themselves as victims of a catastrophe – along with their desire to forget the other German actions carried out during World War II.

Within the same, well-known theoretical framework regarding the representability or non-representability of the Holocaust, a *fil-rouge* can be traced between the Postwar iconography and the contemporary figurations and patterns applied to the Shoah as a *master narrative*⁵ Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann's contribution provides a nuanced understanding of the creation of a fixed iconography and its reiterated use by which both the popular culture and the current mediated memory are deeply shaped. Bearing in mind the significant critical debate about the different stylistic and aesthetic strategies used by Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), the essay draws parallels and finds connections among three mainstream fiction movies – *X-Men*, *The Pianist*, and *Everything is Illuminated* – in order to problematize the notion of cinematic archives. Following Genette's theory of transtextuality and Derrida's concept of archive, the author shows how fiction films assemble stereotypical images from archives (e.g. pictures of concentration camps), and use them as a model for cinematic productions aiming to create a repertoire of ready-made and recyclable imagery.

If in feature films the archive of human pain is made of copies of other images (“images of images”), which have definitely lost their referential address to the past, the use or reuse of proper archival images leads to the central reflection on the relationship between history and filmic devices. Taking Jem Cohen's essay

⁵ According to Jeffrey J. Alexander, the representation of trauma depends on creating a convincing description of the traumatic event and its effects on the individual as well as the collective level. Moreover, four representations are necessary to construct a new master narrative: the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, the relation of the trauma victim with the wider audience, the attribution of responsibility, Jeffrey J. Alexander in *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*, in Id. et al., *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2004, pp. 12-15.

films – *Buried in Light* (1994), and *Empire of Tin* (2007-2008) – as an effective case study and a key example of an *anachronic* approach to historical temporality, Maria Teresa Soldani considers images as multilayered temporal phenomena, fragments of time within which present, past, and future coexist. Particularly inspired by Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history, in *Buried in Light*, Cohen first explores the connection between private memory – based on his own travel experiences in Central Eastern Europe and his family’s origins – and collective memory – shocked by the Shoah. This historical trauma is perceived as an irreversible rupture whose traces (i. e. archival material of Jewish persecution on the streets) are still present as contemporary geographical landmarks (symbolically represented by Auschwitz today) in spite of any impulse to forget. Later on by focusing on the discrepancy between the cyclic-progressive nature of the history of capitalism and the non-positivistic idea of “archive of pain,” in *Empire of Tin* the collage of past and present documentary images (e.g. WWI and Ground Zero) as well as manipulated images of contemporary politicians aims to produce a collision or a collapse, in order to reveal hidden truths and stop catastrophes from being repeated again. Undoubtedly, such a dialectical way of thinking history and the history of images itself specifically engage with broad theoretical issues around the use and re-contextualization of visual traces of human suffering. Moreover, it is clear that the memory of the Holocaust can be seen as a trans-cultural and transhistorical device⁶ because it has deeply affected the ways in which societies conceive and represent the political tragedy itself, including the most recent one: from the Argentinean Dirty War to the Rwandan Genocide, from the Bosnian war to the 9/11 attacks, just to mention a few of them.

Another area of consideration highlighted in this special issue of *Cinéma & Cie* regards the inadequacy of the visual archives to give full account of the past. Offering an in-depth analysis of Gerhard Richter’s work *18. Oktober 1977* (1988), based on the photographs of moments in the lives and the tragic and suspicious deaths of four members of the Red Army Faction (RAF) during their imprisonment in Stuttgart, Luisella Farinotti highlights that the paintings cycle not only invites the observer to reflect upon the emerging unconscious fear of totalitarianism and state violence in Germany during the Seventies, but it also suggests that inside any documentary source, something remains ungraspable and undecipherable. Through the aesthetic choice of recycling, blurring and graining the pictures of the Baader-Meinhof Group’s corpses, previously shot by the police and published in a weekly magazine, Richter transforms such images, which have imprinted themselves on the collective memory as obscene “crime scenes,” into a *Pathosformel*,⁷ an iconic formula of death and victimhood. By showing the hu-

⁶ See Angela H. Gutchess, Maya Sieglel, *Memory Specificity Across Cultures*, in Aleida Assmann, Linda Shortt (eds.), *Memory and Political Change*, Palgrave Macmillan, London-New York 2012, pp. 201-215.

⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante. Histoire de l’art et temps des fantôme selon Aby Warburg*, Editions de Minuit, Paris 2002.

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man vulnerability of the dead terrorists – as the author argues – the artistic act of rewriting the pictures aims to restore the traumatic memory linked to an event that needs to be seen as it is, far from any political mystifications.

The idea that memory – even in its visual form – always deals with something that is lost, erased, or maybe never existed because no image has been produced to document harrowing scenes of human annihilation, is at the core of Sylvie Rollet's contribution. By analyzing two films, *The Missing Picture* (2013) by Rithy Panh and *Công Binh, la longue nuit indochinoise* (2013) by Lâm Lê, the author introduces the well-known concept of “missing image,” considering not only the presence/absence dialectic, which represents the essence of the image, but also trying to find out what can be understood by the means of the image. In both films, the spectator is involved in an interesting hermeneutic work by mentally combining archive footages originally made to celebrate the totalitarian legacy (Khmer Rouge on the one hand, and colonial imperialism in Indochina, on the other) with oral testimonies, clay figures or traditional water puppets that help to explain and recreate the atrocities of the past. Such an intermedia strategy⁸ tells the viewer how limited the moving images capacity of showing is, and it underlines that the real place to unveil the truth of the past dwells in the visual variance, that is to say the reverse-shot that can just be imagined.

As it can be noticed in the abovementioned essays, this special issue draws the attention to the historical evolution of the meaning and social practice inherent in an image, from its production to its most current uses. In particular, Alice Cati and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca engage with the *presentness of the past*, adopted as the starting point and the point of view itself from which the archival image should be examined and studied in order to deconstruct potentially aberrant decodings. Through the analysis of some significant works (Marcelo Brodsky's *Buena Memoria*, 1997, Gustavo Germano's *Ausenc'as*, 2006, Silvio Caiozzi's *Fernando ha vuelto*, 1998, Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia de la luz* -2012) concerning the politics of disappearance in Argentina and Chile, Cati works on some *desaparecidos'* family pictures, symbolically and socially perceived as the last relics of the vanished bodies. While the artistic re-contextualization of private images becomes a sort of burial gesture and a restorative act of memory, it cannot be overlooked that the denial of public grief at the present time influences the interpretation of the pictures as representations of victimhood. Thus, as the author of the essay suggests, when the peaceful, ordinary everyday life turns into the representation of a tragic destiny, a “backshadowing” hermeneutic device comes into play. The challenge for the contemporary cultural and media response does not lie in pathologizing the victim's hopes, but in acknowledging that they had a future before the tragedy occurred.

The photographic act, that is to say the original gesture witnessed/immortalized in the picture, is also the core of Sánchez-Biosca's article. By looking back

⁸ Pietro Montani, *L'immaginazione intermediale. Perlustrare, rifigurare, testimoniare il mondo visibile*, Laterza, Bari 2010.

at the history of Tuol Sleng's photos, which were taken because it was imposed by the bureaucratic procedures of Khmer Rouge regime, the author argues that in the aftermath the reception of the pictures, influenced by different contexts (archives, museums, art galleries, films, editorial projects, legal scenes etc.), has transformed the social perception of the represented people from guilty subjects into innocent victims. According to the main theoretical references to the indexical nature of the analog image and visual memory as a performative act, the analysis goes beyond the re-mediation of an archive of human pain as a cultural phenomenon, in that it prominently shows the achievement of both a political and institutional scopic regime which affects the pictures within any cultural framework. Like a set of Chinese boxes, the Tuol Sleng archive has been scanned by heterogeneous gazes, in a never ending and transformative flow that is able to redefine the violent power of the images as well as the present in order to remove the oblivion of the genocide.

In conclusion, *Archives in Human Pain* does not aim to give an answer to all the questions from the past and recent debate about cultural trauma, media and painful heritage. However, we hope that the interdisciplinary approach adopted and proposed in these essays will open new research paths that can contribute to the studies about the relationship between difficult memory and images worldwide.

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