

The Depiction of the Worst Thing

On the Meaning and Use of Images of the Terrible

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Résumé

On argumente parfois que l'impact et la puissance d'une image sont plus grands lorsque celle-ci représente des choses terribles avec un tel réalisme que le spectateur réagit à la scène comme si elle avait lieu sous ses yeux. Selon d'autres, le fait d'être choqué par une image constitue la meilleure manière de prendre conscience d'une situation et de réagir adéquatement sur le plan politique ou moral. L'image photographique, qui capte – suivant Roland Barthes – « chimiquement » le *ça a été*, et la télévision, sont devenues les médias majeurs qui montrent « objectivement » l'horreur : la nature de ces médias est considérée comme une garantie de la « vérité » de l'image, tandis que toute représentation figurative ou toute description est considérée comme une construction qui *crée* inévitablement du « sens » et ne peut *ipso facto* rendre justice à ce qui s'est produit, ce qui est « inimaginable » ou « irréprésentable ». Cet article prend comme point de départ l'idée que la révulsion et le choc provoqués par la vision (d'une image) de l'horreur sont des réactions physiques s'accompagnant (aussi) d'une forme de refus, rendant une personne insensible et n'impliquant pas en elles-mêmes une véritable prise de conscience. À l'encontre de la théorie du *punctum* de Roland Barthes, nous argumentons que les images ne sont pas « naturelles », mais artificielles, et que des « images fortes » sont produites et composées de manière à ce qu'elles « heurtent » l'esprit et structurent la mémoire. Elles doivent être interprétées et évaluées en tant que telles.

Abstract

It is sometimes argued that images are stronger and have more impact when they depict terrible things so realistically that the viewer reacts to the scene as if it all happened before his eyes. Some people think that being shocked by an image is the best way to become aware of what happened and react politically or morally in an appropriate way. The photographic image, which – if Roland Barthes is right – is caused 'chemically' by *what-has-been*, and the television, have become the prime media to show horror 'objectively': the nature of these media itself is considered to guarantee the 'truth' of the image, whilst any figurative representation or description is seen as a construction that inevitably *makes* 'meaning' and can *ipso facto* not do justice to what happened and is 'unimaginable' and 'unrepresentable'. This article starts from the idea that revulsion or being shocked by (an image of) horror is a bodily reaction that (also) implies a form of refusal, makes one insensitive, and does not in itself entail a proper awareness at all. It is argued, against Roland Barthes' theory of the *punctum*, that images are not 'natural' but artificial things, and that 'strong images' are produced and composed to 'hurt' the mind and structure *memoria*. They have to be interpreted and judged as such.

Keywords

Photographic images, the terrible, revulsion & refusal of the Real, Roland Barthes, *punctum*

“Do not show on stage what ought to remain unseen,
keep out of sight that which can be described.
The spectator does not have to see how Medea murders
her children,
or how the cruel Atreus cooks human flesh,
how Procne changes into a bird or Cadmus into a snake.
Scenes like this on stage are not credible, they horrify.”
(Horace, *Ars Poetica*, r. 182-188)

“(What) we need is a critique of visual culture
that is alert to the power of images for good and evil
and that is capable of discriminating
the variety and historical specificity of their uses.”
(Mitchell 21)

An image is intriguing in itself, regardless of what it depicts. Nevertheless, some images are much more powerful than others. They are ‘striking’ images – and here a whole series of differing metaphors crops up – images that move, grip, shock or touch. Is this always, or only, a matter of the way something is shown, and therefore of its ‘artistic quality’? How much is the power of an image related to the theme or subject, to what it actually shows? Or, more precisely, to what happens to a certain content when it is portrayed or represented? Gripping images are often depictions of extremes: images of beauty and happiness on the one hand, and images of pain and suffering on the other. But since affliction penetrates deeper and marks a person more than prosperity and happiness, are the most powerful images those showing something *terrible*?



Piero della Francesca, Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes (Basilica of San Francesco, Arezzo) © Creative Commons – CC BY- SA 3.0 (see http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Piero,_battaglia_di_eraclioe_cosroe,_dettaglio_2.jpg#file)

Not all affliction is an evil that arouses moral outrage. There is a lot of anxiety and frustration, suffering and pain, that is sometimes very hard to bear, but which, *all in all*, is ‘normal’ and remains in proportion, meaning that it can be considered to be part of what human physical existence is actually composed of. It is what happens to everyone, without the doubts and sorrows, illness and pain making an overall endorsement of existence and well-being at other moments impossible. We all have to die. On top of the despair of personal failure, the definitive loss of a beloved person, or the painful awareness of insurmountable human isolation, there is however also the fatal evil of blind natural calamity that strikes people exceptionally and unpredictably, and above all the absolute or moral evil of the deliberate infliction of pain, the ‘imposition of suffering’. There is also pain that is not justifiable and not normal: affliction that happens to the innocent, and is not included in what are simply the facts of ordinary life. There are many religious and philosophical solutions to this great evil, each of which in its own way fits the worst things into the Whole. For example, they explain how the most terrible things nevertheless contribute to the final good and/or personal perfection, and despite appearing to be the opposite are thus actually meaningful and even essential. But these solutions can only neutralise and explain away the worst things afterwards, once we have already learned that when we have to take account of absolute evil or the worst thing, the final result is negative. After all, this pain affects the meaning of what we call ‘reality’. When *this* – one or other form of the worst case – has to be taken into account, and is to be considered as an integral part of what we call ‘Reality’, everything loses its meaning. When the price that has to be paid for existence is the worst thing, *it would have been better if there had been absolutely nothing rather than something*.¹

It is impossible to live with the worst thing there is, so we have no choice but not to take it into account, and in a certain sense to forget it. But this does not mean that, at the same time, we do not know that hell exists. We do not even have to *believe* in hell, since the most terrible things happen to some people *in reality*. And the witness, who sees and cannot avoid the worst thing, he who is confronted with it, is *horrified*.

But there are two sides even to being horrified. Being horrified is more than abhorrence or a form of avoidance. It signifies that one *rejects what one sees* – which always means rejecting what one has *already seen* – just as revulsion is the rejection of what one feels and has, thus, already experienced. Just as revulsion makes one feel that something is dangerously disturbing the order that guarantees normality, and that chaos is imminent, being horrified signals that when one tries to fit *this* into what we call ‘reality’, there is the danger of total and irreparable loss of meaning. Being horrified and revulsion are powerful physical reactions that fill a person completely and take possession of them and thereby drown out the disruptive event or situation. Revulsion or being horrified do not undo anything, because it is too late for that, but the overwhelming physical reaction means that one no longer absorbs anything, and in this way it does stop the effect of the object of the horror or revulsion. It is a sort of self-protection. Being horrified, just like revulsion, is not an instinctive and purely somatic reaction, but a complex process, a *refusal* that reveals how much the need for meaning is inscribed deep in the body. The horrific is a matter of what ‘reality’ *means*: in being horrified, seeing for oneself and establishing a fact conflicts with the judgement that what one sees for oneself – and which is therefore ‘true’ – at the same time is

1. See, among others, Kelly and Morton.

‘inconceivable’, meaning ‘*cannot* possibly be real’. After all, we can easily picture the worst thing, and we can imagine the worst thing; but we cannot imagine that the worst thing is *actually true*. So being horrified resolves the contradiction between the certainty of seeing and the judgement that what one sees *must* not be real – and is therefore not credible – by pushing it away in the form of a gut reaction. In this way the object of horror is isolated and quarantined, kept outside ‘what is real’, and neutralised. All things considered, it is a mistake to think that the experience of ‘being horrified’ as such is ‘adequate’ and supposedly ‘does justice to the worst thing’.

At the same time, the worst thing appears to be a scandalous but attractive truth, so that many want to see it, or at least imagine it. It is a popular subject for stories, and above all of images. Sinking ships, burning villages, battles and murdered children, still lifes of skulls and heaps of slaughtered animals, dances of death, the decapitated head of Holofernes and John the Baptist, all sorts of tortures, hellish scenes, suffering, dying and dead Christs and crying women, and onward to Warhol’s *Saturday Disaster* and *Electric Chair*. Half of the Western, Christian visual tradition is about calamity, suffering and death. So as to see what? So as to show what? Creating images has in the meantime become easy and cheap, and it was to be expected, with the development of mechanical means of reproduction and photography, that interests would broaden and that now everything would be considered worth an image in principle, even the most banal, ordinary things. But even mass production, virtualisation, the increase in the use of images for documentary and publicity purposes, and the acceptance of non-artistic codes for the creation of art, have changed conspicuously little in what is actually considered worth an image. It is true that pictures of small happy moments and trivial events, and portraits of ordinary people are created in huge numbers and put on the web, and are sometimes put to artistic use and legitimised as *images trouvées*, but in most cases they are looked for or used only by a few involved parties. The recurring topics in the newspapers and the hits on YouTube continue to be faithful variations on the iconography of what hangs in museums. The recurring news items are: sunken cruise ships and crashing aircraft, explosions, tsunamis and other natural disasters, civil wars and executions, urban riots and demonstrations, dead dictators and their victims, funeral processions and so on.

Why would one make images of things one does not want to see? Or at least of things which, when seen, are unable to convince one of the *reality* of what one sees? After all, when faced with the worst thing, one exclaims that what one sees ‘is *unimaginable*’. This cannot mean, though, that we do not know what it is, or cannot actually imagine it. The state of pain without end, so that life is nothing but pain and one wishes to be delivered from one’s existence – this is not unknown or mysterious. We even know very well how to bring this about. Cruelty is highly intelligent and precise. A mother who is forced to choose which of her two sons may live, after which the one she has chosen is murdered; a woman who murders her own children and serves them to their father in a stew; trainloads of children who are gassed; a lover who loses his beloved, throws away the chance to save her from the underworld and, in profound grief, arouses the fury of her rivals in love so that they pursue him and ultimately tear him to pieces. Nevertheless, in line with the critique on the ‘metaphysics of presence’, a series of late twentieth-century thinkers and theorists have turned decisively against the (pretensions of) ‘representation’, using the argument that any visual, literary and even historical-academic depiction is a construction which in

any case homogenises, totalises and excludes. Representation is, structurally, a form of denial, it is itself a form of violence, and so on...

The critique of the image is of course old and a very complex matter. It is easy to understand the critique of the image and even the iconoclastic prohibition of images in the light of theological discussions on the manifestations and possible visual depictions of the divine and invisible, on the difference between an Image and a Name, on what 'can be shown' and what 'can be said', or the depiction of feelings and ideas. But in what sense is the worst thing unimaginable? Surely showing the worst thing is not after all about making visible that which by its nature is invisible, but about showing *facts*? A surveillance camera will do the job. But, when confronted with the worst thing, one says, warding it off: 'It's not true, it's impossible to believe...!' But, actually 'unimaginable' and 'invisible' are not the worst thing, but *how bad* the worst thing is: the worst thing about the worst thing is actually that it *really happens*. The special form of 'invisibility' – inconceivability – that we are concerned with here is a matter of the impossibility of *seeing* that what is in front of you is *real*. When faced with the worst thing, 'one doesn't believe one's eyes'. Whereas in other, normal circumstances, seeing (for oneself) – as opposed to what one *hears* about – is always 'certain'. This impossibility of believing in what one sees does indeed reveal the impossibility of maintaining a vision of reality that takes account of the worst thing beforehand and accepts it as 'possible'. In other words, the matter of the representation of the worst thing concerns the way the image (that depicts the worst thing), convincingly or not, also shows the 'reality' of what it depicts in the image itself (or helps 'guarantee' it by means of the pragmatic context with which it is associated). So it is a question of how an image can *convince* us of its own degree of reality. This is not just a question of what can be seen in an image, but also of what it *shows*, meaning: what, as an image, it *tells* us about what it shows.

How can an image *confirm* that what it shows is 'real'? The most traditional ways images can acquire a degree of reality are very familiar: by pictorial realism or illusionism. By increasing the similarity to what is 'real' (or what one imagines 'real' looks like) until the 'how' seems so real that it convinces us of the 'that': *trompe-l'oeil*. When one depicts the worst thing very 'realistically', in principle one approaches the limit at which the effect of the *re*-presentation or mediation ceases – as if one forgets what one *really* looks at – and one starts reacting to an image in the same way as one would react to that which it depicts. In this instance, the depiction of the worst thing itself becomes horrific. In this way, the 'true to life' image appears to be a usable means of shock therapy that makes it fully understood that the worst thing really exists: "The photographs are a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore..." (Sontag 6). Some are indeed of the opinion that a direct confrontation with the worst thing-as-it-really-is can make people fully aware of the seriousness and significance of something, and that this complete awareness will elicit the appropriate emotional reaction or moral outrage, or the right political response. Susan Sontag quotes Jean Diaz's summons, in Abel Gance's 1938 film *J'accuse*: "*Remplissez vos yeux avec cette horreur, et les armes tomberont de vos mains!*" (15)

The 'realistic effect' has been abundantly analysed in art theory and literature studies, from Ernst Gombrich to Roland Barthes. It has been argued in different ways that a likeness is a specific effect that is constructed using miscellaneous techniques, within genre conventions and according to specific

codes, and that a likeness still does not guarantee that a depiction is *caused* in one way or another by what it depicts, and is a good portrayal. In “L’effet de Réel”, Barthes unmasks ‘realism’ (of writing, and by extension of any mimetic construction) as an artifice: the superfluous detail, a surfeit of information, an element that does not perform a narrative function, *means* ‘the real’. However, he later comes up with an exception: photography.² This is a sort of medium which, because of the way it produces the image technically and chemically, itself carries ‘reality’ in it. After all, one cannot photograph something that is not there: the ‘degree of reality’ is here not an *effet de réel*, but is based on the fact that the photo is an ‘*effet du réel*’. The photo is a certificate, a postponed seeing. The photographer is of course also a storyteller: he takes a photo for a particular reason, and ‘sees’ something that is worth creating an image of. The photographer certainly makes all sorts of choices, and there are countless factors that determine the reading and meaning of a photo, and of course one can be wrong or be deceived and make a painting look like a photo. But it remains a fact that a photo retains ‘something’ of what produces the image. When the photographer presses the shutter release, he includes a whole lot of information that he did not choose, which possibly does not fit into his ‘story’ and which he probably had not even seen or noticed. This information is not filtered by the attention of the creator and the cultural codes. According to Barthes, these elements, precisely because they are not charged with meaning and intentions, and are not coded, *are* true and *real*. It is precisely these elements that make us realise that we are looking at a photo – at ‘*reality*’, and make this looking different from looking at a painting. It is this intrinsic reality value that makes the photo the most convincing ‘realistic’ image, likeness and proof in one, and at the same time the best means of faithfully showing and making us aware of the ‘worst’ in which we find it so hard to believe. It is in any case a fact that a photo such as the one by Eddie Adams of a Vietnamese general shooting a Vietcong fighter through the head is entirely different from a painting of ‘real’ executions – Goya’s *Executions on the Third of May* or Manet’s *Execution of Maximilian*.

The tremendous importance of photography and film as documents for historical research, legal cases, and political and social issues is quite obvious. The photos are *proof* of genocide, death by starvation, and disasters: from the series of photos of the walk to the gas chamber to the photos of the rockets on Cuba, from Buñuel’s report on Spanish mountain villages to the films of today’s melting glaciers.³ It is extremely important that these images can be created, are kept and are made public. After all, they determine what we know and think about the past, about people’s guilt or acquittal, about political or military interventions (or lack of them), and so on. But does this mean that the camera is the best way of showing the ‘worst’, with the implication that it is the best way to make us realise that the worst thing is *real*?

It is in any case a fact that the camera and the informative or documentary image is now widely used to ‘inform’ us of terrible things. The visual ‘proof’ is added to the news, and if possible as showing *la mort en direct*. In this way, the basic conviction that the worst thing *cannot* be real is (or so it seems)

2. In this discussion, I keep to the theory of analogue photography and make an abstraction of the complications that emerge from the digital revolution in photography.

3. In recent theory, the issue of the appropriateness and value of images often appears in conjunction with the question of the representability of the Holocaust, and more generally with the issue of memory and trauma. One element that runs through this discussion, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, is the expectation that the representation either evokes the horror ‘truthfully’ or thematises its impossibility. See, among others, Friedländer and Didi-Huberman.

systematically overruled by a sort of image which *by its nature* definitely shows ‘reality’.

There is now a group of professional star witnesses who hunt down ‘the worst thing’ all over the world; a mass of people put amateur ‘lucky finds’ – completely chance shots, so even *more* ‘real’ recordings of the worst thing – on YouTube, and the news industry makes everyday ‘news items’ out of all sorts of accidents, natural disasters, conflicts and executions. These practices are usually legitimised by referring to the free acquisition and sharing of information. But two related problems arise here. The first is that photos or film can indeed be very informative in a specific context, and can even provide important and decisive proof, but their importance is not related to their worth as images. And the second problem is that their value as evidence is only apparent in a context in which they function as an indication or proof. In isolation, these images hardly inform at all, and usually shrivel down to trivial views that say nearly nothing: to men with guns running past or shouting, facades with holes in them, rows of people waiting on a dusty road, screaming faces, burnt-out cars. This means that the collection of ‘informative’ images that are *journalistically* useful is reduced *de facto* to those spectacular ones which, entirely independently of their informative value, attract the attention *as images* because they depict some *sort* of recognizable spectacular event: explosions, combat situations, crashing aircraft, mutilated bodies and faces, burning woods, or blood. These are images that are entirely generic: the news report on the forest fires in Greece shows exactly the same thing as last week’s report on the fires in Spain; the photos of the civil war in Syria, with their men with wild eyes and guns in front of burnt-out cars and shattered facades, are indistinguishable from those of the street-fighting in Tripoli. In the archives of all the news agencies there are thousands of completely interchangeable photos of each of the categories of the worst situations, each of which is as proof undoubtedly unique and decisive, but which in the news broadcasts for which they were made hardly ‘inform’ at all and/or almost always show *the same* again. “The image as shock and the image as cliché are two aspects of the same presence” (Sontag 20). And so the question is, what purpose do these images have, appearing day after day in the newspapers and news broadcasts.

What is it in these photos – and in photos in general – that ‘strikes’ us? The *stark* reality. Whereby the emphasis can shift between the two words. The ‘real’ with which the photo confronts us in a specific way is either the ‘real’ or the ‘visible’ that is played off against the ‘meaning’ or the ‘expressible’, or it is the ‘hidden/secret’ that hides behind the ‘apparent’ or the ‘dressed’.

What is it that strikes us? According to Barthes, in the first half of his *La Chambre Claire*, it is “*the real*”. And according to him this is entirely different from “what interests us”. Barthes writes that we are able to show interest in an image for many reasons, all of which involve values and concerns that we can share with others. So our involvement is based on the relevance of the image to what we ourselves know and are: on *studium*. But ‘showing interest’ is detached, and entirely different from ‘being affected’. Barthes uses the term *punctum* for that element in an image that affects us, and which one can only point out but cannot describe in narrative terms. So what ‘strikes’ us in the photo is not that which is construed and meaningful. It is never the ‘subject’ of the photo, but details which make no difference to the story and only appear in the picture because they are ‘real’ and impose themselves *as such*, passing through the shield of the meaning, striking the flesh through the skin. So what strikes us is an instance of ‘the real as such’, pure contingency. In the second part of *La Chambre Claire* the argument

shifts towards a second mode in which the real presents itself. What is striking in the photo – and thus in all those differently pointless details by which the photo presses upon us its guarantee of reality and the fact that the image is a *photo* – is always the same in every photo: the “*çà a été*” (this has been). A photo is proof that something *has existed*. In other words, the photo’s guarantee of reality is always expressed in the past tense. When one brings these two arguments together, the conclusion is that the element in the photo that strikes us – and which truly affects us – is the certainty of a disappearance or of a loss. And every loss confronts us with absence and death: an abstract version of the ‘worst’ provides the power by which the *punctum* ‘strikes’ us. (Terror is after all one of the traditional sources of the sublime, since Burke’s day. It is not hard to see why Barthes sought, in the sublime, a way out of the impasse of poststructuralism and deconstruction, as Lyotard also did later).

In *La Chambre Claire*, Barthes does not at any point take into consideration the second way by which a photo affects and fascinates: by showing ‘Everything’, meaning: the ‘Secret’. The second greatest subject in Western art after suffering is after all the nude, from the bathhouses of Van Eyck and Dürer to Courbet’s *L’Origine du Monde*. However, even Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, goes no further than remarking that “the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked” (36). It is true that everybody has something to hide, and in the first place hides ‘himself’. In Western culture, which attaches value to singularity and ascribes uniqueness to everyone, a person is what he says and does in the world, but even more so what he keeps for himself. In Western culture we hide our own bodies, and above all the genitals, as if it were a secret. In this way the body and the nude can symbolise what people hide, and thereby make what they hide and who they are approachable in intimacy and eroticism. In the case of voyeurism, however, this secret is viewed without intimacy, and in obscenity it is exposed without intimacy. These confrontations with the secrets of someone with whom one has no connection are a sort of short circuit. The sudden confrontation with ‘the final secret’ – the view that hides nothing at all, or ‘shows everything’ – is inevitably always a disconcerting experience. The *fascinans* – the erect male member – fascinates, and the view *into* the body – Medusa, the eyes, the orifice – captures the gaze. A painting or drawing can undoubtedly remind us of nakedness and excite us – as Leonardo da Vinci already wrote. However, a photo does not *tell* stories of sex the way erotic prints do, but fascinates because it always *truly shows* someone’s secret in a way completely different from the way a painting shows a model. A photo of the genitals is never intimate, it is always obscene. ‘The whole truth’, the publicly revealed secret is the second major subject of the news industry, after the many variants of ‘the worst thing’, and in as many variations, from the relationship problems of racing cyclists and heirs to the throne to the wealth of politicians and the sexual preferences and holiday homes of film actors.

In the end the two subjects overlap: the greatest secret the paparazzi pursue to the point where they are themselves the cause of it, is not the princess’s bare abdomen but her injured, dying body. The special thing about pain and dying is after all that it cannot be ‘acted’: these are moments when social *persona* and decorum falter or lapse, and are thus moments when the person cannot himself protect his dignity, can no longer hide, and is most dependent.

When one is at the mercy of the worst thing one cannot keep anything in reserve, one is ‘naked’. So what a person hides as a secret, which is also the place of greatest intimacy, *is* (also, among other

things) the ‘worst’: the moment when it becomes apparent that they are an animal that will die. What does it mean to look, without intimacy, ‘fascinated’, at the death of someone that one has no connection with, and with whom one gains no connection by looking? Of which one does not become a *witness*? Seeing the worst thing without involvement is simultaneously safe and attractive, and shameful. And thus, along with the attraction and fascination, the shame that accompanies the transgressive, inadmissible exposure of someone’s secret also affects the ‘proof’ of the ‘worst’. *Photos* of the worst thing never become restlessly ‘generic’. They keep the particular: they always continue to show *someone’s* suffering or death, they reveal what one wants to hide, and are therefore *structurally obscene*. “There is shame as well as shock in looking at the close-up of a real horror” (Sontag 37).

There are certainly strategies to help suppress this shame. They come down to the avoidance of the confrontation with the particular and the ‘generalisation’ of the image. This can be done by making the image anonymous and/or by making it recognisable and ‘appropriate’. Sontag discusses the fact that in war reports it is absolutely not done to show the faces of dead soldiers of one’s own side, but permissible and appropriate to show the faces of dead enemies: their suffering – Nicolae Ceaucescu, Saddam Hussein – is after all never ‘bad’ because it was truly deserved and therefore ‘right’. And Sontag reminds us that we now know that many iconic war photos were staged: the photographer selected or manipulated the situation so that the image corresponded to what his readership thought they knew or ‘generically’ imagined to be ‘appropriate’ to the occasion (cfr. Sontag, chapter 4). But even when the context and the ‘right to information’ legitimise looking at someone else’s death, there still remains an awareness that there are relatives or loved ones somewhere who might recognise this picture and cannot possibly want anyone who is not involved to see it. So do we still opt for the photo, in spite of everything? The photos of people that resistance fighters have taken while risking their own lives, and which are exceptionally important documents, show naked women on their way to the gas chamber, just before their death. This context alone implies that (apart from in very specific settings, comparable with a doctor examining a patient) one never has the right to ‘simply look’ at them.

If Barthes is right in *La Chambre Claire*, and the power of the photo lies in a somewhat painful confrontation with ‘reality’, in coming up against the raw reality of ‘this has existed’ which (only or mainly in ‘insignificant details’) is not covered up and neutralised by constructed and totalising meanings, *every* photo should be powerful in a comparable way. It is certainly the case that every photo does something that a painting does not do. But in general this does not mean that photos that *show* the ‘worst’ are therefore more powerful or right than painted images that only *represent* the worst thing. An indication of this is that Barthes himself chose not to print the photo of his mother as a child which his book is all about. The reason he gives for this is that this photo would tell readers nothing because they have nothing to do with what it shows. Everyone will understand and follow him. But, following Barthes’ argument that looking at any photo structurally implies a confrontation with the ‘this has existed’, *every* photo should be equally powerful and have an effect on everyone. We are all mortal, after all, and are always forgetting this, but is it really the case that every photo nevertheless reminds us of it?

It seems probable that what strikes Barthes in the portrait of his mother as a child is indeed linked to the confrontation with the ‘this has existed’ and with loss, but at the same time what strikes him in this photo is not the *punctum* as he describes it. And it seems also to be the case that one cannot simply

identify what one encounters in a photo with what is technically specific about photography, separate from the meaning and completely separate from the way an image is *composed*. Barthes' ontology of photography, with its emphasis on the indexical experience of time, is undoubtedly incisive and clarifying. What is disputable, however, is the way he *isolates* (from the *studium*) and essentialises what is salient (as a *punctum* and as the confrontation with the unique return 'of what has existed'), and identifies it entirely with the awareness of the specific nature of the sort of image. His argument after all implies that 'fictional' images may well arouse interest, but cannot 'affect', and that photos' 'power to affect' is separate from their visual power.

It is striking that the many authors who make use of the argument in *La Chambre Claire* and incorporate it into a theory of photography or in visual studies (Christian Metz, Martin Jay, and also Michael Fried and Jacques Rancière) have apparently not taken the trouble to check where Barthes found his concepts. The notion of the *punctum* is connected to a specific, old theory of the image and with a specific use of images. And in that tradition the 'studium' and the 'punctum', the constructed and the apposite are not opposites at all. There, the *punctum* is not the natural, as opposed to the construction of meaning; on the contrary, an image acquires appositeness, can affect someone, precisely when it is put together tellingly, and only when it is in one way or another 'understood' (or misunderstood).

In the visual culture of the West, the notion of a 'powerful' or 'striking' image developed in the context of the mediaeval culture of *memoria*, which focuses on filling, guiding and running the 'inner life' or life of the soul. After all, it is not without importance what one thinks about or what one fills one's mental life with. The good life consists not only of good actions and living virtuously, but above all of *thinking edifyingly*: one should focus one's attention and ideas on the redeemed life after death, and not let them wander frivolously. *Curiositas* is a source of evil. In order to think virtuously, the monastic and humanist culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in addition to ritual and communal prayer, preaching and reading, made use of the techniques and ideas of the ancient memory skills as developed in the classical tradition of rhetoric. This learnt that in order to remember something well, one must first shape or choose a space for memory (an architecture of rooms or places, which act as a topology) with which one is so familiar that one can in one's mind effortlessly wander around in it, and one must then put the content or words that one wishes to remember into these 'rooms' or 'places'. When one moves around in these spaces in one's thoughts, one will retrieve the thought-content that one has put there. But this presupposes that one visualises the content or 'key words' that one wants to remember, in *imagines agentes*, and that these images remain in the memory. The *imagines agentes* are images that 'hurt' (*pungere*) the mind or the heart. The word 'punctum' means a stab wound, but also 'being struck', and the 'point', meaning the punctuation one pricks into the parchment to interrupt the text and thereby divide it into units that can be memorised.⁴ Images can make an impression, they can 'hurt the attention' in many different ways, and it is part of the skills of the maker of images to know and control them. The striking likeness is one of these, but exaggeration and caricature are too. It is in any case true that the so-called 'realistic' depictions of Christ's suffering and the grief of his mother and disciples, the ugly faces of the executioners around his blood-covered face, the devils and monsters that populate Bosch's and Brueghel's scenes from hell, are not intended to illustrate Christ's suffering or

4. See Carruthers and Boulnois. See also the classic studies of the Ars Memoria by Frances Yates and Pietro Rossi.

man's damnation 'objectively'. It is not the case that late-mediaeval man thought that hell was just as depicted in Brueghel's *Mad Meg*. These pictures were created to edify, meaning that they have to make an impression and stick in the mind, thereby organising the *memoria* and thus making one *think* of the right things. *So images are a means*. "Pictures are constructions, fictions, like all ideas and thoughts. And in the same way as words, pictures are made for the work of memory: learning and meditation. *Pictura* is a cognitive instrument" (Carruthers 201). "The trope of violence in memory work plays a specifically mnemotechnical role" (Carruthers 101): the sometimes excessive violence and suffering, and the realistic, sometimes caricatural depiction of it, were introduced into the history of Western images, and have dominated it, *without any claim to truth*. In this respect they are no different from any other image. Paintings and sculptures have served, with the help of images that make a lasting impression, to guide the inner life of those believers for whom the Holy Words are not sufficient, or do not have sufficient solidity in meditation to create their own images in the mind. Their purpose is not to show the worst thing 'as it is'.

An image always captures attention, it is always an *Andachtsbild*, and must be judged on that basis. The 'appositeness' of images does not lie, as Barthes suggests, in visual content that differs from the image as a construction. The appositeness of an image is intrinsically linked to its visual power. And this visual power always results from 'visibility' *that is put forward or formulated in a convincing manner*, and which one therefore always *views in a somewhat specifically oriented manner*. Images are after all not natural things that grow or can be made naturally. This 'specific orientation' is what makes an image an image, and makes it different from other visible things. One always views an image *as an image*. Whatever it shows, and whatever sort of image it is, a moving, striking or powerful image is not an objective or raw image (of the terrible), but an image that 'hurts' the attention. An image draws its visual power in the first instance from the way it is 'oriented' (and therefore 'composed'), but also from the way it in part works predictably, but always unforeseen too, in the *memoria*. After all, each image lives and works in that cloud formed by all the images that any person has ever seen and with which he lives. That is where it becomes charged and that is where it shows its power. This applies to paintings as much as it does to photos; it applies to painted images of the 'worst thing' and also to photos and recordings of the worst thing. A photo can most certainly show the worst thing and the horrific 'as it was seen by the eye'. It can horrify. In a specific context it may turn out to be an important documentary item. But this still does not make the photo a powerful and convincing image that is striking and sticks in the mind, that brings about the realisation that 'such things' do happen and so (still) can happen. News pictures that are exceptional and powerful derive their power surreptitiously from the implicit re-use of old, tried and tested visual formulae, and/or from specific powerful images that they evoke and let resonate in the imagination, and not from the unprocessed, uncensored or objective show of 'raw reality'.

An image is not a mirror and its purpose is not to depict what there is. An image does not add some 'thing' to the World, but it does broaden life. It opens up an area where something can exist without having to be counted as part of the world; it creates a 'tempered presence' and offers the possibility of a sort of 'relationship' with what it shows. But at the same time it does indicate that there is more than what happens in what we agree to call 'the world'. What does it signify that 'the terrible' appears *there*?

Why does the image tend towards the ‘terrible’? It is possible that every terrible image resonates with what remains of the oldest, seriously eroded experience linked to the discovery of the image as such. In an interesting article Paul de Vylder evoked the first terror and horror that must have emanated from the image before man had enveloped himself in stories and fables, before monotheism desacralised nature, and the image was gradually neutralised in the form of ‘art’. The ‘first image’, and at the same time the image as such, always (also) shows *what we do not want to see*: it is truly horrific, it arouses horror, whatever it depicts. Even if the image has in the meantime been broken in and made subservient, and is thereby increasingly trivialised, even so, images were – and still are – eagerly used to show the worst. So yes, even now: to recapture the terrible and lock it up in images, and thereby defuse it? Or precisely the opposite: in order to become aware of the horrific, look it in the eyes, and then see what can be done or thought about it.

Translated by Gregory Ball

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