

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE APPROXIMATE

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It is a big black and white photograph of boys playing on a sinister stretch of wasteland on the edge of what could be virtually any city in the world. A kid in the foreground sits amid a pile of waste objects, looking down. You don't immediately notice what he is looking at – a row of three human bodies, half-hidden by the scrap enclosure (Jones 2007).

In the above quotation Jonathan Jones, writing in the *Guardian*, describes Jeff Wall's photograph "War Game."¹ The described scenario seems to be depressingly familiar as the presence of children and dead bodies or kids as dead bodies is a staple subject in photojournalistic accounts of wars, famines and other forms of human suffering. Wall's photograph would seem to be what Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites (2003, 41) call "a picture that shouldn't be shown of an event that shouldn't have happened" – except that Wall is not a photojournalist and the "event-ness" of the depicted scene is questionable (see below). It is the combination of these two elements – an event that should not have happened; a picture that should not be shown – that explains, in Hariman and Lucaites's view, the poignancy of such photographs as Nick Ut's famous "Accidental Napalm" – one of the most iconic ingredients of the visual legacy of what Western people refer to as the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese refer to as the American War (Kwon 2008, 10) – and the viewers' inability to forget them. They have become part of people's visual memory, indelible yet – like every memory and in contrast to traumatic re-enactment – changeable.

Although such images should neither be taken nor shown, they have to be taken and they have to be shown because most of the events that should not happen do happen regardless of whether or not they are visually represented – and in a culture dominated by images a given incident comes to be regarded as an “event” mainly by means of visual representation.

Hariman and Lucaites continue to argue that the political public is nowadays primarily constituted through images. Not showing images would therefore seem to be politically problematic: only by showing images can the individual, as a viewer, be enabled to engage, as part of the public, with the images and with the conditions depicted in the images. In a culture formed by images, the public would not be a public, and the individual, being powerful only within the framework and as a part of discursive-collective action, could not exert much political influence without viewing images. The act of viewing constitutes the public only as a part of which the individual might exert political power.

Hariman and Lucaites’s approach is an important contribution to political theory. It is a kind of Habermasian discursive-communicative action approach to the construction of political space applied to images. We are living in a world dominated by images and this cannot but influence our perception of and engagement with the political. However, the analysis of images in the social sciences is often limited to the analysis of the discourses revolving around, or inspired by, images; meaning assigned to images; the social processes through which a given meaning assigned to a given image becomes the dominant one in a given situation; and the ways in which images are used in order to legitimate policies. In “a culture dominated by pictures, visual simulations, stereotypes, illusions, copies, reproductions, imitations, and fantasies” (Mitchell 1994, 2) political theory cannot afford to ignore images. The public sphere as the stage where politics and critiques of politics are performed is nowadays to a large extent constituted by images. In the era of the Internet, global communication flows in real time, and digital production and reproduction of photographs, the public sphere is, arguably, more easily accessible than ever before to an ever increasing number of people. Photography, however, can either “disclose and demystify” or “reproduce and reinforce the already-in-place ideological discourses vindicating entrenched systems of power and authority.” It can either “challenge the existing set of codes” or “recycle and reinforce them” (Shapiro 1988, 126, 150).

The individual can exert political power as a part of the visually constructed public. This, however, does not necessarily imply that the individual viewer can respond adequately to that which an image shows. It does not even imply that the viewer wants to respond to that which an image shows. Neither does it necessarily result in political action in order to deal with the depicted conditions. Hope of political action often serves to justify taking and disseminating photographs of people in pain – a deeply problematic activity infringing upon human dignity, decency, privacy, subjectivity, and so on. Yet, photography of people in pain does not automatically result in political action. In the context of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, for example, a direct connection has been established between images and political inactivity (Strauss 2003, 81). Photographs of people resorting to such primitive killing instruments as machetes and clubs allegedly supported the impression that the mass killings resulted from archaic tribal hatred. This impression was erroneous – it was a modern, state-sponsored genocide – but it helped deter the international community from intervening in Rwanda (Strauss 2006, 18-19).

Depictions of human suffering aestheticize this very suffering. They supposedly depoliticize and dull the viewers, decontextualize human pain and render a political response difficult (Berger 2003, Danto 2006, Sontag 1978). Those who want to respond to the conditions depicted in a photograph will find it very difficult to do so adequately (Edkins 2005). Knowledge produced by photographs is as limited as is photography's evidentiary and explanatory capacity. The notion that a given image shows something clearly and unmistakably and that, if it fails to do so, this "something" can be established by means of words has long been replaced by a more nuanced approach, insisting on both photography's "deeply problematic" relationship to "any prior reality" (Tagg 1988, 2)² and a given photograph's dependence on "its association with some hidden, or implicit text" in order for it to communicate meaning (Sekula 1982, 85). "Accidental Napalm," for example, is described by Hariman and Lucaites (2003, 38-39) as follows:

The naked girl is running down a road in Vietnam toward the camera, screaming from the napalm burns on her back and arm. Other Vietnamese children are moving in front of and behind her, and one boy's face is a mask of terror, but the naked girl is the focal point of the picture. Stripped

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of her clothes, her arms held out from her sides, she looks almost as if she has been flayed alive. Behind her walk soldiers, somewhat casually. Behind them, the roiling dark smoke from the napalm drop consumes the background of the scene.³

This description combines meaning derived from the image with meaning only to be found outside the image. The viewer who does not already have some background information cannot see that the picture was taken “in Vietnam”; that the screaming little girl is suffering from “napalm burns on her back”; that the burns on her arm are “napalm burns” indeed; that the other children are “Vietnamese” children; and that the dark smoke in the background emanates from “the napalm drop.” Such a viewer would contextualise this photograph differently and assign a different meaning to it. Thus, even in this seemingly obvious case there is much room for ambiguity and interpretation. The photograph thus reveals much less than it seems to reveal – and at the same time much more because it reveals different things to different viewers who, through viewing and reflecting upon it, invent its meaning over and over again. It contains a plurality of meanings and invites different assessments, directed, however, by the caption and by longer descriptions such as that provided by Hariman and Lucaites.

However, photographs such as “Accidental Napalm,” while perhaps dependent on text to communicate a specific meaning to the viewer are not dependent on text to affect and touch the viewer. In this sense, I would want to defend them against diverse appropriations and thus argue against meaning assigned to images in captions, accompanying texts or other forms of commentary. The power of images such as “Accidental Napalm” is derived, not from the caption or from the word-image connection but from the image itself, even if it is difficult or impossible to say what exactly it is that constitutes the photograph’s power: is it the screaming girl? Or is it the soldiers’ business-as-usual attitude? Is the image powerful because it “shows what is hidden by what is being said in print” (Hariman and Lucaites 2003, 41) or, relying on photography’s ostensible evidentiary potentialities, because it “brought home uncomfortable truths that people had long had reason to suspect but which did not need to be confronted as long as they remained unproven” (Hagopian 2006, 208)? Or, because children should not be involved in warfare (although they are, anywhere,

all the time, in a variety of subject positions)? Or, because they should not be targets of warfare (although they regularly are)? Or, because no photographs of naked girls should be taken and disseminated? Or because we, qua viewers, become involved in the scene to an extent that we would find uneasy and unsettling if we only were aware of it? Or, perhaps, the “or” is the problem and the answer is to be found in a combination of the above – and many other possible – explanations? In addition to the sum of all possible explanations there will, however, always be some degree of uncertainty and ambiguity as to what exactly constitutes the power of a given image to pervade the viewer’s visual memory and its stubborn refusal to leave it again. This residue of ambiguity can be seen as a reason for Western culture’s profound uneasiness about images – while at the same time being profoundly obsessed with them.

Signposts along the way

The viewer, it has been suggested above, does not have to know exactly what “Accidental Napalm” depicts in order to be touched and affected by the photograph. Thus, a photograph may not explain much but moves and haunts the viewer all the same. For example, the viewer does not have to understand the historical context of Flavio de Barros’s photographs of Brazilian troops’ crusade against crowds gathered by Antônio Vicente Mendes Maciel (Antônio Conselheiro) in Canudos, Sertão, in September 1897 in order to agree with Peter Robb (2005, 206) that these photographs are some of “the great images of the horrors of modern war” and the bulldozer mentality of the modern nation-state (da Cunha 1944). Similarly, Robert Capa’s “Fallen Soldier” is considered as one of the icons of anti-war photography regardless of the exact conditions under which it was taken and also quite irrespective of what it actually shows. The most recent interpretation is that the subject of the photograph, Federico Borrell García, was killed by a machine gun while simulating battle scenes during the afternoon siesta (Clarke 2008, 5), “[standing] to pose for Capa” (Hilton 2008) but this, although obviously complicating Capa’s involvement in the scene and increasing his responsibility for Borrell García’s death, is almost irrelevant for the photograph’s continuing power. Indeed, “the more one learns about the circumstances in which Capa

made his famous photograph, the less those circumstances matter" (Dyer 2008). Nevertheless, Western approaches to photographs are to some extent characterized by attempts to learn as much as possible about the circumstances in which a given photograph has been taken so as to determine its meaning and to regard it as evidence. Thus, a given photograph's plurality of meanings is still largely understood as a liability rather than an asset.

As early as in 1931, Walter Benjamin had elevated the inscription to the most essential ingredient of a photograph. Without captions photographic construction is bound to "remain arrested in the approximate" (Benjamin 2008a, 294). Without captions, we do not and cannot know exactly what a photograph shows, and this would seem to interfere with the communist strategy advocated by Benjamin at the end of his artwork essay as a countermeasure to fascism's aestheticization of politics, namely, the politicization of the arts. In Peter Gilgen's reading of Benjamin's artwork essay:

The combination of image and caption amounts to an intellectual stereoscopic effect: the image gains in profile through the verbal information conveyed in the caption; from the accompanying image this information gains persuasive power. [...] By means of the caption, the viewer is given 'signposts' that point to the historical place of a particular image and infuse it with the reality of history by marking it as 'evidence in the historical process' (Gilgen 2003, 56).

In the illustrated magazines which flourished in the Weimar Republic captions, according to Benjamin, have become obligatory; they give "directives" (Benjamin 2008b, 27) to those looking at pictures: "signposts [...] - whether these are right or wrong is irrelevant" (Benjamin 2008b, 27). The "intellectual stereoscopic effect" (Gilgen) would seem to enhance both the readability and the applicability of photographs in the political struggle, although they might also give "wrong" directives to the reader/viewer. What is "right" and what is "wrong" is very difficult to say; the distinction between "right" and "wrong" directives is difficult to maintain but ultimately irrelevant as long as the signposts serve their political purpose. The work of art in the age of technological reproducibility becomes the work of art in the age of political reducibility.

Such “signposts” obviously infringe upon the basic nature of photographic and other images, namely, the non-reducibility of images to one specific meaning. The surplus of meaning that images inevitably carry with them can be conveniently ignored if one is interested in the use of images for political purposes, communist or otherwise. In such cases, some degree of clarity and fixity would indeed seem to be required. A good current example is the visual articulation of security – the depiction of someone or something as a threat to a given group of people - that depends on the reduction of an image’s meanings and unambiguous threat designations that images do not deliver (Möller 2007). Captions also ignore the fact that images cannot easily be translated into words. David MacDougall argues with respect to film that “[p]ictures and writing produce two quite different accounts of human existence, however much filmmakers and writers strive to describe the same things” (1998, 246); Michel Foucault emphasizes that regarding words and images, “[n]either can be reduced to the other’s terms” (1994, 9); and W.T.J. Mitchell explains that the

‘differences’ between images and language are not merely formal matters: they are, in practice, linked to things like the difference between the (speaking) self and the (seen) other; between telling and showing; between ‘hearsay’ and ‘eyewitness’ testimony; between words (heard, quoted, inscribed) and objects or actions (seen, depicted, described); between sensory channels, traditions of representation, and modes of experience (1994, 5).

No translation of images into words is politically neutral or innocent; indeed, the very purpose of the “signposts” or “directives” recommended by Benjamin is political. The social processes through which the plurality of meanings that each and every image carries with it is reduced to one binding, mandatory meaning, to *the* meaning of an image, are eminently political processes. Images do not reduce themselves. Rather, “concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality” (Berger and Luckmann 1969, 134) – a reality that, thus constructed, usually serves them well – and the first question on encountering interpretations of images should always be, not “What?” but “Says who?” (Berger and Luckmann 1969, 134). This question should, for example, be asked when a photograph of a human being is presented as a photograph of a “terrorist” or when a

photograph of aircraft crashing into buildings is presented as a photograph of a “terrorist act” (Möller 2008b, 108-113).

Images are translated into, and reduced by means of words with recourse to the established discursive patterns regulating what can and what cannot be said in a given situation. By so doing, that which can be shown is converted into that which can be said; the seeable becomes the sayable. Translating images into words would thus mean discussing images in terms other than their own. It would mean equating the accounts of human existence produced by means of images with the accounts of human existence produced by means of words and, by so doing, reducing the former to the latter. It would also mean confirming rather than challenging the established discursive patterns and the power relations that both generate and benefit from them. And it would ultimately mean rendering images harmless and destroying them as a potential source of alternative knowledge production. Perhaps we should listen more to what photographers have to say. William Eggleston, for example, argues that a

picture is what it is. [...] It wouldn't make any sense to explain [pictures]. Kind of diminishes them. People always want to know when something was taken, where it was taken, and, God knows, why it was taken. It gets really ridiculous. I mean, they're right there, whatever they are (quoted in O'Hagan 2004).

It is somewhat ironic, then, that the obsession of Western culture with images — both still and moving — seems to be based on a profound misunderstanding of and uneasiness about visual culture. This uneasiness results in the desire to erase that which actually constitutes visual culture in the first place: we want to understand an image but we cannot; we cannot know what a given image shows; even if we knew we would not have the words to articulate it appropriately. Rather than accepting that we cannot understand an image, we translate what we believe we see into language, but in so doing we approach the image in terms other than its own and reduce it to that which can be said in language. The more we try to help the image to “gain[] in profile through the verbal information conveyed in the caption” (Gilgen 2003, 56) the more we depart from the image and increase the distance between us and the image although we (want to) believe that we are really closing the gap.

What is then apparently required is an approach to images that acknowledges their “whatever-they-are-ness” and respects their approximateness; an approach which respects the residue of uncertainty that images carry with them and does not try to transform and reduce it into something definitive. It should then be seen as an asset, not a liability that pictures, due to their surplus of meaning, cannot give the viewers the assurance that they might wish. Such an approach would not seek to reduce images to one narrow meaning – it would acknowledge rather than reduce diversity – but it would also acknowledge that there is something inherently elusive in images that we cannot grasp however much we try. It would obviously result in some degree of uncertainty and ambiguity, and also in precariousness, since it is likely to “complexify the perceptual experience of the spectator in contemporary art [...] and visual culture” (Ross 2008, 7). None of the above would make the viewers’ subject positions more comfortable or more convenient. Indeed, a sense of ambiguity and precariousness might shock and destabilize (Western) viewers. This destabilization, however, may serve to intensify their critical awareness. What kind of shock is required here? In order to understand the shock effect, we have to understand the viewer. Thus, what kind of viewer is required here? A brief recapitulation of Benjamin’s comments on distraction and expertise is appropriate here.

Distraction and expertise

Is it possible to be distracted and critical at the same time? Benjamin answers this question in the affirmative. He links the activity of the expert to the idea of distraction, separates this idea from the prevalent notion of passivity, and applies it to the viewing of film. In so doing, Benjamin develops a counter-approach to the bourgeois habit of awestruck, highly concentrated and intimidated contemplation in the presence of a work of art and thus an alternative to “the passive approach of the participant in ritual or the bourgeois cult of art” (Schwartz 2001, 401). Rather than “being absorbed and immobilized” (Schwartz 2001, 420) by the work of art, Benjamin suggests that the distracted viewer absorbs and manipulates it by, in David Simpson’s words, “assimilat[ing] art as part of ordinary life, a tool for living and living with, a familiar item that is not set aside for fetishistic contem-

plation but is simply ‘there’ for us all, all of the time” (Simpson 2006: 69). The best place for such a casual and quotidian attitude to art, emphasizing its everyday character, was the cinema — nowadays it may be the Internet, where pictures are indeed “‘there’ for us all, all of the time” (Simpson). In cinema, the viewer encounters a rapid succession of images and “kritische und genießende Haltung des Publikums [fallen] zusammen (‘the audience’s critical and enjoying attitudes coincide’)” (Benjamin 1963, 33; author’s translation). Benjamin is said to suggest that “film has the potential to school a form of active apprehension” that can grasp and act upon “the uncritically unitary effect of the work of art, one representing a false totality” (Schwartz 2001, 420). Thus

for Benjamin the relation between production and leisure has taken a dialectical swing that makes them complementary in a different, and now affirmative, way (Schwartz 2001, 420).

Regarding film, distraction, according to Benjamin, is the most appropriate state of mind because the viewer’s chain of associations when viewing films is immediately disrupted by the rapid change of images. Images are perceived as a succession of images, and this perception is possible only if the viewer does not concentrate on the single image but rather apprehends film as sequential art and grasps that understanding every single image depends on the images preceding and following it. Such an approach requires what Benjamin calls distraction, but distraction “is by no means synonymous with mindlessness” (Gilgen 2003, 55). Rather it can be defined as “attentiveness without attention” (Gilgen 2003, 55): “The viewer does not have time to contemplate individual frames, but instead – as in a dream – is carried along by a stream of images that creates something like a rebus that can only be grasped through presence of mind qua distraction” (Gilgen 2003, 56). “Presence of mind qua distraction” and “attentiveness without attention” would then seem to be adequate responses to the shock effect emanating from the permanent disruption of the viewer’s chain of associations. The shock effect resulting from film, like every shock effect, has to be absorbed by what Benjamin calls “intensified presence of mind” (Benjamin 2008b, 54 n32). The shock effect resulting from photography is different from the shock effect resulting from film — indeed, photography invites and requires “slow

looking" (Bal 2007, 113) – but, like the shock effect resulting from film, it has to be absorbed by intensified presence of mind. The kind of shock that I have in mind here is also different from the shock many viewers experience when exposed to photographs of human suffering – a shock resulting from the depiction of gruesome acts of violence and brutality. I would argue that nowadays the shock effect results from photography that treats the approximate as an asset and not as a liability.

Near documentary photography, hidden photographs and no photographs

Near documentary photography

Photographs are normally said to be powerful because they show what is not articulated in print or because of their alleged evidentiary potentialities seemingly complementing that which is stated in print or because of both. I argue that photographs nowadays shock the viewer and, as a result, potentially heighten their state of mind when they capitalize on the approximate by, first, violating the conventional professional credos of photo journalism – that the photographer should be as close as possible to the subject; that the photographer should not manipulate the image; that the photographer should objectively document a given scenario rather than emotionally and partially engaging with it; and so on. Secondly, photographs shock the viewer when they conceal from the audience what the audience expects to see and when they are more discreet than the audience expects them to be. This would mean breaking with what (combining Sontag's and Strauss's terminology) can be called prurient consumerism.⁴ Thirdly, the viewers might be shocked when what is normally depicted by means of photographs is represented in other forms of visual culture, thus explicitly challenging the alleged monopoly of photography with regard to visual testimony and evidence. The following discussion proceeds from near documentary photography (Jeff Wall) to hidden photographs (Alfredo Jaar) to no photographs (Fernando Botero).

In order to illustrate the first of the above visual strategies, it helps to return to Jonathan Jones's description of Jeff Wall's photograph

“War Game” that opened this essay. The description continues as follows: “The shock [of seeing kids looking down at dead bodies] is complicated when you notice the grin on one ‘dead’ soldier’s face” (Jones 2007). This, obviously, is a provocation. Breaking with the audience’s experience and expectation – dead kids do not grin – the photograph shocks the viewer also because it does not show what it seems to show at first sight and what the viewer expects to see – the familiar scene of juvenile victims of violence and war. Still, the photograph is depressing because it shows the extent to which war and death have entered the everyday playing routine of kids anywhere in the world. But, again, it only seems to show this: Wall is not a photojournalist and his photography is not documentary, but “near documentary” (Wall 2007a, 319). Wall’s large photographs are fabrications – “blatant artifice” (Wall, as quoted in Lederman 2008, R7) – carefully staged and designed. In part they are reproductions of scenes Wall had observed in the “real” world, re-enacted with the help of professional and non-professional actors. They emulate real-life scenes but, like every representation, they construct something new. They also violate standard forms of representing war and violence in photography by using irony; indeed, it is almost unseemly to use irony in war photography because it would seem to infringe upon the victims’ dignity and contradict war photography’s documentary and evidentiary purpose. Consider, in this connection, Wall’s digital montage “Dead Troops Talk (A vision after the ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986).”⁵ The very precise title of the montage suggests documentary authenticity but, as always in Wall’s work, things are more ambivalent, challenging what has been referred to above as the stereoscopic effect of the word-image relationship. The online room guide to the Jeff Wall exhibition at Tate Modern describes what Wall (as quoted in Lederman 2008) calls a “hallucinatory image” as follows:

The picture presents a hallucinatory scene in which soldiers who have just been killed on the battlefield are re-animated, engaging with each other in what the artist describes as a ‘dialogue of the dead’. [...] Each figure or group seems to respond differently to the experience of death and re-animation. The three soldiers clowning with their own wounds provide a note of macabre levity.⁶

As ironic, near documentary images, both “War Game” and “Dead Troops Talk (A vision after the ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)” violate the conventions of war photography. While conventional wisdom has it that photography “is strong as evidence, weak in meaning” (Dyer 2008), Wall’s photographs are weak as evidence but strong in meaning. According to the conventional credos of photojournalism war photographs ought to be taken on the spot and close to the action according to Capa’s famous dictum that “if your pictures aren’t good, you’re not close enough” (cited in Szarkowski 2007, unpaginated). Wall, however, avoids closeness to action and re-enacts scenes with the help of actors. While photojournalism aims to document what “really” happened, Wall’s work is not limited by what he calls “the documentary impulse” (Wall, quoted in Lubow 2007). “War Game” and “Dead Troops Talk (A vision after the ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)” are shocking because they show not only what could have happened or what might happen; every viewer knows that such things do happen in fact regularly on battlefields and in backyards – except that dead kids do not smile; dead soldiers do not clown with their own wounds; and they “don’t talk. Here they do” (Sontag 2003, 124) – quite understandably perhaps because, as Wall argues, black humor is a perfectly plausible reaction to the absurd circumstances they are exposed to.⁷

Hidden photographs

When Wall began working on “Dead Troops Talk (A vision after the ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)” the Afghan War – at least this particular Afghan War, the Soviet Afghan War - was over “and at that point had pretty much been forgotten about” (Wall, quoted in Lederman 2008). When Alfredo Jaar, to whom I now turn in order to illustrate the second of the above visual approaches, began working on Rwanda and the genocide of spring 1994, the war and the genocide were likewise over. Regardless of the fairly substantial body of specialist literature on the genocide that has emerged since then, this war/genocide, too, has been largely forgotten about. It is referred to often in connection with current crises such as in Kenya in December 2007 and the Congo in November

2008. As such it is referred to mainly in terms other than its own and has become “a metaphor for post-colonial political violence” in Africa (Mamdani 2002, xi). “Rwanda” has become an attention gaining signifier, a cipher indicating urgency to do something now because tomorrow it may be too late, and also an accusatory metaphor with respect to the international community’s involvement in and responsibility for mass killings through non-intervention.

Jaar, like Wall, is not a photojournalist. Journalists move on once a war is over; only a few return (Keane 1996; Keane 2004). Jaar, together with his assistant Carlos Vásquez, visited Rwanda for the first time in August 1994. Being aware of the “disjunction between experience and what can be recorded photographically” yet nevertheless taking thousands of photographs as systematically as possible so as to come “as close as possible to reality” (Jaar, quoted in Strauss 2003, 91), Jaar and Vásquez started travelling around the country, talking to people, and listening to their stories. From 1994 to 2000, Jaar produced important works of art including but not confined to photographs (Jaar 1998).

While parts of the Rwanda Project rely on the power of images, other parts of the project are characterized by a profound scepticism about the possibility of representing genocide by means of photography: indeed, it is not possible to come close to the reality of genocide by means of photography. Showing photographs of corpses after the genocide could not be expected to produce responses different from those produced by the photographic coverage of the genocide when it happened⁸ and, in any case, it was too late and impossible to undo the killings. To be “ashamed of being a human being” is, according to Jaar, a corollary of witnessing the genocide in Rwanda that cannot easily be transferred into works of art. An image may become “just another image” if it fails to communicate the story to the viewer. In order for an image to communicate a story to the audience, words are required – “a balance between information and spectacle, between content and the visuals,”⁹ a balance, however, that deviates from the photojournalistic practice of combining the photographs and captions referred to above in terms of a stereoscopic effect. Jaar’s work cannot be reduced to a standard photograph-caption relationship. Rather I want to approach it in terms of Ernst van Alphen’s distinction between architecture and landscape.

In “Real Pictures,” first exhibited in Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Photography in January 1995, selected photographs taken

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by Jaar in Rwanda in late August 1994 documenting the aftermath of the genocide were each put into black boxes. On top of these boxes, a silk-screened description of the photograph inside revealed to the viewers what they could not see. In a culture dominated by images, this procedure is obviously a provocation frustrating the viewer's expectations and challenging the Western belief in the power of images. The descriptions read like the following:

Ntarama Church, Nyamata, Rwanda
40 kilometers south of Kigali
Monday, August 29, 1994

This photograph shows Benjamin Musisi, 50, crouched low in the doorway of the church amongst scattered bodies spilling out into the daylight. Four hundred Tutsi men, women and children who had come here seeking refuge were slaughtered during Sunday mass.

Benjamin looks directly into the camera, as if recording what the camera saw. He asked to be photographed amongst the dead. He wanted to prove to his friends in Kampala, Uganda, that the atrocities were real and that he had seen the aftermath.

Real pictures, thus, are no pictures, not in the sense that the boxes are empty (perhaps they are; we don't know) and also not in the sense that the stories of the people depicted in the pictures are not real (perhaps they are not; we cannot know) but rather in that the reality captured in the pictures can become apprehensible only by hiding the photographs. Pictures cannot picture reality; no balance between the content and the visuals can be found. However, the photographs are not only out of sight; the boxes in which they are hidden are also blocking the museum's visitor's way. It is precisely this blockade that is lost when viewers encounter "Real Pictures" not in the space of a museum but on the pages of a catalogue where reproductions of "Real Pictures" indeed run the risk of becoming just another image. In the museum, however, the photographs, hidden in boxes, are placed in architectural space and this has a profound impact on the way they are perceived by the viewers, as Alphen explains:

Architectural space engages vision by raising obstacles. And obstacles encourage the desire to conquer them, to do something when it is forbidden, to try something when it is impossible, to intrude on a space that is not

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yours and has to be respected as secret or somebody else's. In contrast, the space of landscape engages vision by seducing you or inviting you (Alphen 2005, 91-92).

The latter option – the space of landscape – is not normally available when it comes to atrocity photographs which, rather than inviting or seducing the viewers, regularly appal and deter them. That the space of landscape in Alphen's sense is not normally available in the context of atrocity photographs, however, does not mean that it is totally absent from the artist's tool-box. In "Field, Road, Cloud" (1997) Jaar actually used three of his photographs taken in Rwanda: a green field of tea, a dirt road illuminated by sunlight, and a white cloud framed by blue sky. These photographs seem to resonate with both the tourist postcards used in another piece of the Rwanda Project ("Signs of Life") and the frequent reduction of Africa in visual representations to a tourist destination. At the same time, however, Jaar connects the three large photographs with the memories of the genocide by adding geographical sketches of where the photographs had been taken: the cloud, for example, is above Ntarama church, that is, the place where Gutete Emerita, the subject of another part of the project, witnessed the murder of her husband and sons (see Strauss 2003, 96-101). It is illuminating here to take a closer look at the cloud:

Which pictorial qualities and elements attract us and seduce us into looking at art? In [Hubert Damisch's] Theory of the /Cloud/ the answer is found in the /cloud/. By means of the /cloud/ we get access to those realms that are visually unrepresentable (Alphen 2005, 8).¹⁰

The /cloud/, then, would seem to be a way to deal with the unrepresentability of genocide, seducing the viewers into looking at art and confronting them with sights that they would rather not see or contemplate. The box, on the other hand, engages vision by hiding the visuals. Situated in architectural space, it "asks for respect, defines space in terms of territory, its own and yours" (Alphen 2005, 91). Both spaces – architecture and landscape – may help the viewer to engage with the art work's subject by "mak[ing] present that which withdraws from our cognitive power" (Alphen 2005, 9). This "making present" can help create space for political engagement and form a political public. Indeed, we, as viewers, have to engage with that which we cannot see just as we have to engage with that which we do see.

No photographs

Photographs are often said to be powerful because of their alleged evidentiary potentialities supporting that which is said in print and giving that which is said in print additional poignancy. The notorious Abu Ghraib photographs (Walsh 2006) seem to be a case in point: the publication of the photographs followed the publication of written accounts and triggered a public debate that the written reports failed to trigger. These photographs would also seem to show that the audience is not as visually desensitized as it is often accused of being. The public debate, however, was a peculiar one indicating, ultimately, the failure of representation. For the US administration, the Abu Ghraib scandal was primarily “a public relations problem” (Ebony 2006, 5). Regarding the general Western debate in newspapers, articles and books, the focus was largely “on ourselves” (Simpson 2006, 107) not on the victims (Möller 2008a, 33-34). The Abu Ghraib photographs thus showed the limits of photographic representation. They did not help the viewers to come closer to understanding what had actually happened in the prison. They were unable to communicate the prisoners’ pain to the viewers. They did not help the viewers to grasp how what had happened at Abu Ghraib was experienced and felt by the inmates. There always is a substantial gap between a viewer’s perception of the depiction of another’s pain and the other’s physical and mental experience of pain that no image can fill completely, a gap that no photograph can bridge, however much photographers strive to bridge it and viewers aim to empathize with the victims. The inclusion in some of the Abu Ghraib photographs of the perpetrators facilitated the self-centred approach in Western commentary focusing on selected soldiers-cum-perpetrators, the chain of command (Hersh 2005) and the extent to which what had happened at Abu Ghraib could be explained in terms of the general conditions of US culture and society. The debate did not focus on the victims and their pain. Reproductions of the photographs online, in books and magazines prolonged the victims’ suffering and confronted the viewers with rather difficult questions regarding their own involvement, qua viewer, in the scene depicted. Indeed, photographs may contribute to the extension of a person’s pain as long as the viewers, simply by looking, prolong the person’s suffering (Bal 2007, 95).

In response to the crimes committed at Abu Ghraib, the Colombian artist Fernando Botero decided to paint Abu Ghraib, a series of paintings produced during a 14-month period of immense creativity (Botero 2006). One of the most striking features of the paintings is the almost total absence of the perpetrators from most of the paintings and the strong focus on the victims and their pain. In the few paintings where the perpetrators are indeed depicted, they are neither smiling nor grinning. In other paintings, their faces are off the canvas and their heads are painted from behind or hidden behind arms raised in order to strike a prisoner. In most cases, the perpetrators are reduced to boots and hands in green gloves on the margins of the paintings so that most of the space is devoted to the victims. Botero's paintings challenge the claim of photography regarding a monopoly of visual evidence. They also challenge the credo of documentary photography according to which photographs should be taken on the spot at exactly the point in time when the events depicted actually occur. Botero, however, argues that the prerogative of the artist is exactly that "the artist don't [sic] have to be there in the moment it happen[s] but he can imagine and do a presentation." The Abu Ghraib photographs were "interesting documents to know the atmosphere of the prison" – the walls, the cells, the light and so on – "but the concentration of energy and emotion that goes into the painting says more than, of course, the click in the photo." Energy and emotion make people feel that there is something truthful in the painting (Botero and Haas 2007, 0:18:59-0:19:55).

Because the gaolers are mostly absent from the representation, the viewers cannot avoid the victims' pain by focusing their attention on the gaolers: the viewers are compelled to confront the victims and their pain; they cannot hide behind a discussion of the role of the perpetrators and the society from which they emerged and which they represent (however important such a discussion may be). The lack of colour in many paintings evokes both traditional documentary photography and such classical works of art as Francisco de Goya's "Los Desastres de la Guerra" and Jacques Callot's "Les Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre"; it increases the paintings' authenticity. By simply numbering the paintings ("Abu Ghraib 1" to "Abu Ghraib 86") Botero is closer to the tradition of documentary photography that provides "neutral, informative" (Sontag 2003, 45) captions (location, place, etc.) than he is to Goya, whose short texts both thwart the images' "invita-

tion to look” and “offer[] assurances of the image’s veracity” (Sontag 2003, 45-46). Even without the captions, there is no denying that these are paintings of events that should not have happened; because the events did happen, the paintings are necessary. By sticking to his visual trademark of representing big people, Botero assigns dignity to the victims that the perpetrators cannot destroy, however hard they try. The use of figures that are “exaggerated principally in terms of their volumetric relationships to their surroundings” (Ebony 2006, 10) also emphasizes the spatial confinement that the prisoners have to endure. As David Ebony argues, Botero’s figures

possess hearty, heroic body types. They often suggest an ability to overcome intensely adverse circumstances. This is especially evident in the Abu Ghraib pictures. The majority of the prison inmates certainly did not possess the beefy bodies that Botero depicts. The bulky forms, however, suggest a psychological and moral weightiness that commands, if it does not overwhelm, their confined spaces (Ebony 2006, 10).

In several paintings, windows – “window[s] in white” (Botero and Haas 2007, 0:35:40) – at the end of the corridors or on the cell walls indicate outside light penetrating the claustrophobic atmosphere of the cells and the corridors – metaphors of hope thwarting the hopelessness of the prison reality. Where there is hopelessness, there is also a “possibility of hope” (Sliwinski 2004, 156).

Conclusion

Similar to Jeff Wall’s photographic work, Botero’s paintings and Jaar’s projects can be said to be near documentary but the emphasis is on “near” rather than on “documentary.” These works of art do not explain much. As Botero makes clear, his intention is “to touch people without explanations” (Botero and Haas 2007, 0:13:19). The works of art discussed above are based on thorough research – written as well as visual sources – and they come as close as possible to that which they depict. But nearness to their subject also implies some degree of distance that cannot be bridged. By acknowledging the approximate these artists engage in the limits of representation and the unrepresentability of human suffering in such extreme situations as Af-

ghanistan, Rwanda, and Abu Ghraib. The audience does not need the artists' directions in order to be moved by their works. Indeed, texts provided by the artists explaining their artworks are essentially an anticlimax, often not too far away from the trivial and unintentionally testifying to the impossibility of translating images into language.

Following Hariman and Lucaites, it has been argued in this essay that the political public is nowadays primarily constructed through images. The individual can exercise political power only as part of a discursively constructed public which is to some extent constituted by images. This, it has been suggested, has important consequences for political theory in the sense that images, including photographs, can either disclose or reproduce ideological discourses and either challenge or reinforce discursive structures. While Hariman and Lucaites primarily focus on photojournalism, this essay has expanded their approach by including visual representations other than photojournalistic ones. The discussion of the work of Jeff Wall, Alfredo Jaar, and Fernando Botero has shown that art including art photography can be effective by offending against conventional photojournalistic credos, by violating the audience's expectations — especially by hiding that which the audience expects to see — and by representing that which is normally depicted by means of photographs in other forms of visual culture. Art including art photography may shock the viewers and heighten their awareness of both that which a given image shows and their own involvement in the conditions depicted in the image. It may intensify the viewer's state of mind and increase their critical awareness.

NOTES

1. Silver gelatin print, 2470x3026 mm. See also Wall 2007b, 48-51. Thoughtful and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay by two anonymous referees for *Redescriptions* are gratefully acknowledged. I would also like to thank Samu Pehkonen for encouraging comments on a pre-submission draft of the essay and Virginia Mattila for editing the language.
2. Nowadays, “capacity for pictorial manipulation” of digital photography is often emphasized and especially the lack of an original that renders difficult the verification of an image (Campbell 2003, 65). Obviously, the manipulation of photographs and film did not start with digital photography but digitization has rendered manipulation much easier and more difficult to detect.
3. Elsewhere, the authors acknowledge that “[t]he burns themselves are not visible” (Hariman and Lucaites 2003, 40).
4. Sontag (2003, 95) claims that “[m]ost depictions of tormented, mutilated bodies do arouse a prurient interest”; Strauss (2003, 81) argues that images showing horrible things nowadays “operate within a perfectly organized rhetoric of consumption.”
5. Transparency in lightbox, 2290x4170 mm.
6. Online room guide to *Jeff Wall Photographs 1978–2004*, Tate Modern, 21 October 2005–8 January 2006 <<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/jeffwall/rooms/room8.shtm>>.
7. Online room guide to *Jeff Wall Photographs*; see note 6.
8. There is, however, a marked lack of photographs of actual killings (see Thompson 2007). Survivors welcome the absence of such images (see Hatzfeld 2009, 97).
9. All quotations here are from an ART:21 interview with Jaar at <<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/jaar/clip1.html>>.
10. “Damisch puts the signifier /cloud/ between slashes to indicate that he deals with clouds as signs that have different meanings in different pictorial contexts rather than clouds as realistic elements” (Alphen 2005, 5). In Damish’s work, the unrepresentable refers to “the divine, the unknowable, the unformed” (Alphen 2005, 8).

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