The Emancipated Spectator

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The Intolerable Image

What makes an image intolerable? At first sight, the question seems merely to ask what features make us unable to view an image without experiencing pain or indignation. But a second question immediately emerges, bound up with the first: is it acceptable to make such images and exhibit them to others? We might think of one of the latest provocations by the photographer Oliviero Toscani: the poster showing an anorexic young woman naked and wasting away, put up throughout Italy during Milan Fashion Week in 2007. Some saluted it as a courageous denunciation, exposing the reality of suffering and torture concealed behind the appearances of elegance and luxury. In this exhibition of the truth of the spectacle, others condemned a yet more intolerable form of its reign since, under the guise of indignation, it offered the gaze of viewers not only the beautiful appearance but also the abject reality. To the image of the appearance the photographer counter-posed an image of the reality. But it is the image of the reality that becomes suspect in its turn. What it shows is deemed too real, too intolerably real to be offered in the form of an image. This is not a simple matter of respect for personal dignity. The image is pronounced unsuitable for criticizing reality because it pertains to the same regime of visibility as that reality, which by turns displays its aspect of brilliant appear-

ance and its other side of sordid truth, constituting a single spectacle.

This shift from the intolerable in the image to the intolerability of the image has found itself at the heart of the tensions affecting political art. We know the role played at the time of the Vietnam War by certain photographs, like that of the naked little girl screaming on the road ahead of soldiers. We know how committed artists strove to set the reality of these images of pain and death against advertising images displaying *joie de vivre* in beautiful, well-equipped modern apartments in the country that was sending its soldiers to burn Vietnamese land with napalm. In an earlier chapter, I discussed Martha Rosler's 'Bringing the War Home', particularly the collage that showed us, in the middle of a clear and spacious apartment, a Vietnamese man holding a dead child in his arms. The dead child was the intolerable reality concealed by comfortable American existence; the intolerable reality that it strove not to see and which the montage of political art threw in its face. I stressed how this clash between reality and appearance was cancelled out in contemporary exercises in collage, which make political protest an expression of youth fashion on a par with luxury goods and advertising images. Thus, there would no longer be an intolerable reality which the image could counter-pose to the prestige of appearances, but only a single flood of images, a single regime of universal exhibition; and this regime itself would constitute the intolerable today.

This reversal is not simply caused by the disenchantment of an age that no longer believes either in the means of attesting a reality or in the necessity of fighting injustice. It indicates a duplicity that was already present in the activist employment of the intolerable image. The image of the dead child was supposed to tear apart the image of the artificial happiness of

American existence; it was supposed to open the eyes of those who enjoy this happiness to the intolerability of that reality and to their own complicity, in order to engage them in the struggle. But the generation of this effect remained uncertain. The view of the dead child in the beautiful apartment, with its bright walls and vast proportions, is certainly difficult to tolerate. But there is no particular reason why it should make those who see it conscious of the reality of imperialism and desirous of opposing it. The stock reaction to such images is to close one's eyes or avert one's gaze. Or, indeed, it is to incriminate the horrors of war and the murderous folly of human beings. For the image to produce its political effect, the spectator must already be convinced that what it shows is American imperialism, not the madness of human beings in general. She must also be convinced that she is herself guilty of sharing in the prosperity rooted in imperialist exploitation of the world. And she must further feel guilty about being there and doing nothing; about viewing these images of pain and death, rather than struggling against the powers responsible for it. In short, she must already feel guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt.

Such is the dialectic inherent in the political montage of images. One of them must play the role of the reality that denounces the other's mirage. But by the same token, it denounces the mirage as the reality of our existence in which the image is included. The mere fact of viewing images that denounce the reality of a system already emerges as complicity with this system. At the time when Martha Rosler was constructing her series, Guy Debord was making the film drawn from his book *The Society of the Spectacle*. The spectacle, he said, is the inversion of life. The reality of the spectacle as the inversion of life was shown by his film to be equally embodied in any

image: that of rulers – capitalist or communist – as of cinema stars, fashion models, advertising models, starlets on the beaches of Cannes, or ordinary consumers of commodities and images. All these images were equivalent; they all spoke the same intolerable reality: that of our existence separated from ourselves, transformed by the machine of the spectacle into dead images before us, against us. Thus, it now seemed impossible to confer on any image whatsoever the power of exhibiting the intolerable and prompting us to struggle against it. The only thing to do seemed to be to counter-pose to the passivity of the image, to its alienated existence, living action. But for that, was it not necessary to abolish images, to plunge the screen into darkness so as to summon people to the action that was alone capable of opposing the lie of the spectacle?

In the event, Guy Debord did not install darkness on the screen.[1] On the contrary, he made the screen the theatre of a curious strategic game between three terms: images, action and speech. This singularity clearly emerges in the extracts from westerns and Hollywood war films inserted into *Society of the Spectacle*. When we see John Wayne or Errol Flynn, two Hollywood icons and champions of the American extreme Right, strutting about; when the former recounts his exploits at Shenandoah or the latter charges, sword unsheathed, in the role of General Custer, we are initially tempted to perceive a parodic condemnation of American imperialism and its glorification by Hollywood cinema. That is how many understand the *détournement* advocated by Guy Debord. But this is a misinterpretation. It is in all seriousness that he introduces Errol Flynn's charge, taken from Raoul Walsh's *They Died with*

1 On the other hand, we might recall that he had done so in a previous film, *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*.

Their Boots On, in order to illustrate a thesis about the historical role of the proletariat. He is not asking us to mock these proud Yankees charging with flashing blade and become aware of the complicity of Raoul Walsh or John Ford in imperialist domination. He is asking us to adopt the heroism of the battle for our own purposes; to transform this cinematographic charge, played by actors, into a real assault on the empire of the spectacle. This is the seemingly paradoxical, yet perfectly logical, conclusion of denunciation of the spectacle: if every image simply shows life inverted, rendered passive, it suffices to turn it upside down in order to unleash the active power it has appropriated. This is the lesson offered, more discreetly, by the film's first two images. In them we see two young, beautiful female bodies, jubilant in the light. The hasty spectator risks seeing them as a denunciation of the imaginary possession offered and purloined by the image, something later illustrated by other images of female bodies – strip-tease artists, models, undressed starlets. But this apparent similarity in fact conceals a radical opposition. For these initial images have not been drawn from shows, advertising or newsreels. They have been taken by the artist and represent his companion and a friend. They thus appear as active images, images of bodies involved in active relations of amorous desire, as opposed to being trapped in the passive relationship of the spectacle.

Thus, we need images of action, images of the true reality or images that can immediately be inverted into their true reality, in order to show us that the mere fact of being a spectator, the mere fact of viewing images, is a bad thing. Action is presented as the only answer to the evil of the image and the guilt of the spectator. And yet these are still images being presented to this spectator. This apparent paradox has its rationale: were

she not viewing images, the spectator would not be guilty. But the demonstration of her guilt is perhaps more important to the accuser than is her conversion to action. It is here that the voice which formulates the illusion and guilt assumes its true importance. It denounces the inversion of existence that consists in being a passive consumer of commodities which are images and images which are commodities. It tells us that the only response to this evil is activity. But it also tells us that those of us who are viewing the images it is commenting on will never act, will forever remain spectators of a life spent in the image. The inversion of the inversion thus remains a form of knowledge reserved for those who know why we shall continue not to know, not to act. The virtue of activity, counter-posed to the evil of the image, is thus absorbed by the authority of the sovereign voice that stigmatizes the false existence which it knows us to be condemned to wallow in.

Assertion of the authority of the voice thus emerges as the real content of the critique that took us from what is intolerable in the image to the intolerability of the image. This displacement is what is fully revealed by the critique of the image in the name of the unrepresentable. The paradigmatic example of it was provided by the polemic over the exhibition 'Mémoires des camps', staged a few years ago in Paris. At the centre of the exhibition were four small photographs taken of an Auschwitz gas chamber by a member of the Sonderkommando. These photographs showed a group of naked women being pushed towards the gas chamber and the burning of the corpses in the open air. In the exhibition catalogue, a long essay by Georges Didi-Huberman stressed the weight of reality represented by these 'Four pieces of film snatched from Hell'.[2]

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2 The essay is reprinted, together with commentaries and responses

In *Les Temps modernes*, the essay provoked two extremely violent responses. The first, by Élisabeth Pagnoux, used the classical argument: these images were intolerable because they were too real. By projecting into our present the horror of Auschwitz, they captured our gaze and prevented any critical distance. But the second essay, by Gérard Wajcman, inverted the argument: these images, and the commentary accompanying them, were intolerable because they lied. The four photographs did not represent the reality of the Shoah for three reasons: first of all, because they did not show the extermination of the Jews in the gas chamber; next, because reality is never entirely soluble in the visible; and finally, because at the heart of the event of the Shoah there is something unrepresentable – something that cannot structurally be fixed in an image. 'The gas chambers are an event that in itself constitutes a kind of aporia, an unshatterable reality that pierces and problematizes the status of the image and jeopardizes any thinking about images.'[3]

This line of argument would be plausible if it were simply meant to challenge the notion that the four photographs possessed the power to present the totality of the process of the extermination of the Jews, its meaning and resonance. But these photographs, in light of the conditions in which they were taken, obviously do not make this claim; and the argument is in fact directed against something else: it aims to establish a radical opposition between two kinds of representation – the visible image and spoken narrative – and two sorts of attestation – proof and testimony. The four images and the

to criticism, in Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2003.

3 Gérard Wajcman, 'De la croyance photographique', *Les Temps modernes*, March–May 2001, p. 63.

commentary are condemned because those who took them, risking their lives, and the person commenting on them regarded them as testimony to the reality of an extermination whose perpetrators did everything they could to erase any trace of it. They are criticized for having believed that the reality of the process was in need of proof and that the visible image afforded such proof. 'However,' retorts the philosopher, 'the Shoah occurred. I know it and everyone knows it. It is a known fact. Every subject is summoned to it. No one can say: "I do not know." This knowledge is based on testimony, which forms a new knowledge ... It does not require any proof.'[4] But what precisely is this 'new knowledge'? What distinguishes the virtue of testimony from the indignity of proof? He who testifies in a narrative as to what he has seen in a death camp is engaged in a work of representation, just like the person who sought to record a visible trace of it. His words do not capture the event in its uniqueness either; they are not its horror directly expressed. It will be said that that is their merit: not saying everything; showing that not everything can be said. But this grounds a radical difference from the 'image' only if one arbitrarily attributes to the latter a claim to show everything. The virtue conferred on the speech of the witness is then wholly negative: it consists not in what he says but in its very deficiency, as opposed to the sufficiency attributed to the image, to the deception of this sufficiency. But this is purely a matter of definition. If we stick to the simple definition of the image as duplicate, we can certainly draw from it the straightforward conclusion that this duplicate is opposed to the uniqueness of Reality and thus can only erase the unique horror of the extermination. The image is reassuring, Wajcman

4 Ibid., p. 53.

tells us. The proof is that we view these photographs whereas we would not tolerate the reality they reproduce. The only defect in this argument from authority is that those who saw this reality, and, in the first instance, those who took the images, did indeed have to tolerate it. But this is precisely why the philosopher criticizes the photographer: for having *wanted* to witness. The true witness is one who does not want to witness. That is the reason for the privilege accorded to his speech. But this privilege is not his. It is the privilege of the speech that obliges him to speak despite himself.

This is illustrated by an exemplary sequence in the film that Gérard Wajcman counter-poses to all visual evidence and all archival documents – namely, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a film based on the testimony of a few survivors. The sequence is the one in the hairdressing salon where the former Treblinka hairdresser Abraham Bomba recounts the arrival and shearing of the men and women who were about to enter the gas chamber. At the heart of the episode is the moment when Bomba, who is referring to the destination of the cut hair, refuses to continue and with his towel wipes away the tears he is beginning to shed. The voice of the director then urges him to continue: 'You must go on, Abe. You have to.' But if he has to, it is not in order to reveal an unknown truth with which those who deny it must be confronted. And in any event, he – he too – will not be saying what happened in the gas chamber. He has to simply because he has to. He has to because he does not want to do it; because he cannot do it. It is not the content of his testimony that matters, but the fact that his words are those of someone whom the intolerability of the event to be recounted deprives of the possibility of speaking; it is the fact that he speaks only because he is obliged to by the voice of another. This voice of the other in the film is that of the

director, but it projects behind it another voice in which the commentator will recognize either the law of the Lacanian symbolic order or the authority of the god who proscribes images, speaks to his people in a cloud and demands to be taken at his word and obeyed absolutely. The speech of the witness is made sacred for three negative reasons: first, because it is the opposite of the image, which is idolatry; next, because it is the speech of a man incapable of speaking; finally, because it is that of a man compelled to speak by a speech more powerful than his own. At the end of the day, the critique of images does not counter-pose to them either the exigencies of action or the restraint of speech. It counter-poses the authority of the voice that alternatively renders one silent and makes one speak.

But here again, the opposition is posited only to be immediately revoked. The force of the silence that translates the unrepresentability of the event exists only through its representation. The power of the voice opposed to images must be expressed in images. The refusal to speak, and the obedience to the voice that commands, must therefore be made visible. When the barber stops his narrative, when he can no longer speak and the voice asks him to go on, what comes into play, what serves as testimony, is the emotion expressed on his face; it is the tears he holds back and those he must wipe away. Wajcman comments on the filmmaker's work as follows: 'in order to summon up gas chambers, he films people and speech, witnesses in the very act of remembering, and over whose face the memories pass as on a cinema screen, in whose eyes we can detect the horror they have seen'.[5] The argument about what is unrepresentable then plays a dual role. On the one

5 Ibid., p. 55.

hand, it opposes the voice of the witness to the lie of the image. But when the voice ceases, it is the image of the suffering face that becomes visible evidence of what the witness's eyes have seen, the visible image of the horror of the extermination. And the commentator who proclaimed it impossible to distinguish in the photograph of Auschwitz between women sent to their death and a group of naturists out walking, seems to experience no difficulty distinguishing between the tearfulness that reflects the horror of the gas chambers and the tearfulness that generally expresses a painful memory for a sensitive soul. The difference, in fact, is not in the content of the image: it simply consists in the fact that the former is voluntary testimony, whereas the second is involuntary. The virtue of the (good) witness consists in the fact that he is the one who simply responds to the double blow of the Reality that horrifies and the speech of the Other which compels.

That is why the irreducible opposition between speech and image can unproblematically become an opposition between two images – one that is intended and one that is not. But the second, obviously, is itself intended by another. It is intended by the filmmaker who never stops asserting that he is first and foremost an artist and that everything we see and hear in his film is the fruit of his art. The dual role of the argument thus teaches us to question, along with the false radicalism of the opposition, the simplistic character of the ideas of representation and image that it is based on. Representation is not the act of producing a visible form, but the act of offering an equivalent – something that speech does just as much as photography. The image is not the duplicate of a thing. It is a complex set of relations between the visible and the invisible, the visible and speech, the said and the unsaid. It is not a mere reproduction of what is out there in front of the photographer

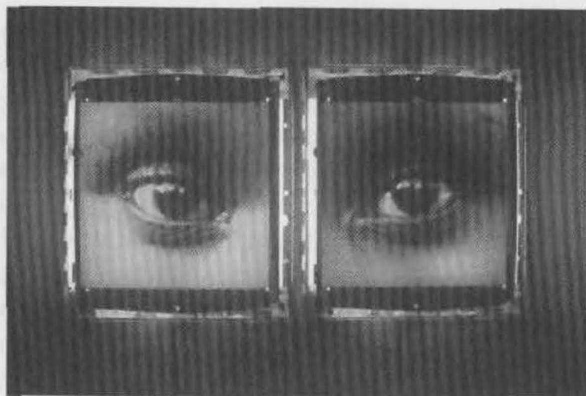
or the filmmaker. It is always an alteration that occurs in a chain of images which alter it in turn. And the voice is not the manifestation of the invisible, opposed to the visible form of the image. It is itself caught up in a process of image construction. It is the voice of a body that transforms one sensible event into another, by striving to make us 'see' what it has seen, to make us see what it tells us. Classical rhetoric and poetics have taught us this: there are images in language as well. They consist in all those figures that replace one expression by another, in order to make us experience the sensible texture of an event better than the 'proper' words would. Similarly, there are figures of rhetoric and poetics in the visible. The tears in the hairdresser's eyes are the sign of his emotion. But this emotion is itself produced by the filmmaker's system and, once he films those tears and links this shot to other shots, they can no longer be regarded as the naked presence of the recollected event. They belong to a process of figuration that is a process of condensation and displacement. They are there in place of words that were themselves in place of the visual representation of the event. They become an artistic figure, an element in a system that aims to furnish a figurative equivalence of what happened in the gas chamber. A figurative equivalence is a system of relations between similarity and dissimilarity, which itself brings into play several kinds of intolerability. The barber's tears link the intolerability of what he saw in the past to the intolerability of what he is asked to say in the present. But we know that more than one critic has deemed intolerable the very system that compels this speech, creates this suffering and offers an image of it to spectators who are likely to view it in the same way they watch the report of a catastrophe on television or episodes of a romantic fiction.

Accusing the accusers is beside the point. On the other hand, what is worthwhile is to rescue the analysis of images from the trial-like atmosphere in which it is still so often immersed. The critique of the spectacle has identified it with Plato's denunciation of the deceptiveness of appearances and the passivity of the spectator. The dogmatists of the unrepresentable have assimilated it to the religious controversy over idolatry. We must challenge these identifications of the use of image with idolatry, ignorance or passivity, if we want to take a fresh look at what images are, what they do and the effects they generate. To that end I would like to examine some works that pose the question of whether images are appropriate to the representation of monstrous events in a different way.

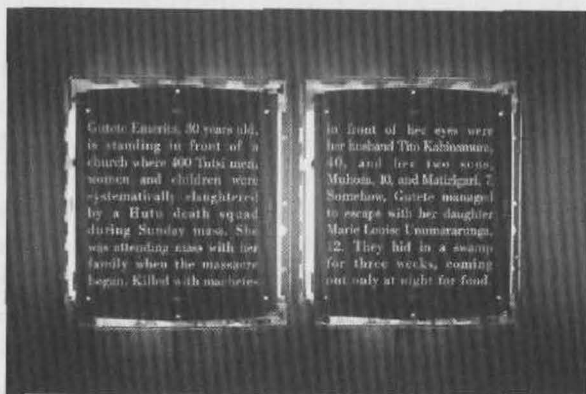
Thus, the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar has devoted several works to the Rwandan genocide of 1994. None of them displays a single visual document confirming the reality of the massacres. Thus, the installation entitled *Real Pictures* is composed of black boxes. Each of them contains an image of a murdered Tutsi, but the box is closed and the image invisible. The only thing that is visible is the text which describes the box's concealed content. At first sight, therefore, these installations likewise oppose the testimony of words to proof by means of images. But this similarity conceals an essential difference: here the words are detached from any voice; they are themselves taken as visual elements. It is therefore clear that this is not a matter of opposing them to the visible form of the image. It is a question of constructing an image – that is to say, a certain connection between the verbal and the visual. The power of this image is that it disturbs the ordinary regime of that connection, such as it is employed in the official system of information.

To understand it, we must challenge the received opinion that this system drowns us in a flood of images in general, and images of horror in particular, thereby rendering us insensitive to the banalized reality of these horrors. This opinion is widely accepted because it confirms the traditional thesis that the evil of images consists in their very number, their profusion effortlessly invading the spellbound gaze and mushy brain of the multitude of democratic consumers of commodities and images. This view is critical in intent, but it is perfectly in tune with the functioning of the system. For the dominant media by no means drown us in a torrent of images testifying to massacres, massive population transfers and the other horrors that go to make up our planet's present. Quite the reverse, they reduce their number, taking good care to select and order them. They eliminate from them anything that might exceed the simple superfluous illustration of their meaning. What we see above all in the news on our TV screens are the faces of the rulers, experts and journalists who comment on the images, who tell us what they show and what we should make of them. If horror is banalized, it is not because we see too many images of it. We do not see too many suffering bodies on the screen. But we do see too many nameless bodies, too many bodies incapable of returning the gaze that we direct at them, too many bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak. The system of information does not operate through an excess of images, but by selecting the speaking and reasoning beings who are capable of 'deciphering' the flow of information about anonymous multitudes. The politics specific to its images consists in teaching us that not just anyone is capable of seeing and speaking. This is the lesson very prosaically confirmed by those who claim to criticize the televisual flood of images.

The bogus controversy over images thus conceals a matter of counting. This is where the politics of the black boxes assumes its meaning. These boxes, closed but covered with words, give a name and a personal history to those whose massacre was tolerated not out of a surfeit or a lack of images, but because it involved nameless beings without an individual history. Words take the place of photographs because the latter would still be photographs of anonymous victims of mass violence, still in tune with what banalizes massacres and victims. The problem is not counter-posing words to visible images. It is overturning the dominant logic that makes the visual the lot of multitudes and the verbal the privilege of a few. The words do not replace the images. They are images – that is to say, forms of redistribution of the elements of representation. They are figures that substitute one image for another, words for visual forms or visual forms for words. At the same time, these figures redistribute the relations between the single and the multiple, small numbers and large numbers. That is how they are political, if politics in the first instance consists in the changing of places and the counting of bodies. In this sense, the political figure par excellence is metonymy, which gives the effect for the cause or the part for the whole. And it is precisely a politics of metonymy that is employed by another installation by Alfredo Jaar devoted to the Rwandan massacre, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (see p. 98). This is organized around a single photograph showing the eyes of a woman who has seen the massacre of her family: hence effect for cause, but also two eyes for a million massacred bodies. However, for all that they have seen, these eyes do not tell us what Gutete Emerita thinks and feels. They are the eyes of someone endowed with the same power as those who view them, but also with the same power that her brothers and sisters have



been deprived of by the murderers – that of speaking or remaining silent, of showing one's feelings or hiding them. The metonymy that puts this woman's gaze in place of the spectacle of horror thus disrupts the counting of the individual and the multiple. That is why, before seeing Gutete Emerita's eyes in a luminous box, the spectator has first of all to read a text that shares the same context and recounts the history of these eyes – the history of this woman and her family.



The issue of intolerability must then be displaced. The issue is not whether it is necessary to show the horrors suffered by the victims of some particular violence. It revolves around the construction of the victim as an element in a certain distribution of the visible. An image never stands alone. It belongs to a system of visibility that governs the status of the bodies represented and the kind of attention they merit. The issue is knowing the kind of attention prompted by some particular system. Another of Alfredo Jaar's installations can illustrate this point – one he created to reconstruct the space–time of visibility of a single image, a photograph taken in Sudan by the South African photographer Kevin Carter. The photo shows a starving little girl crawling on the ground on the brink of exhaustion, while a vulture perches behind her, awaiting his prey. The fate of the image and of the photographer illustrates the ambiguity of the dominant regime of information. The photograph earned the Pulitzer Prize for the man who had gone into the Sudanese desert and brought back such an arresting image, so apt to shatter the wall of indifference that separates the Western spectator from these distant famines. It also earned him a campaign of indignation: was it not the act of a human vulture to have waited for the moment to take the most spectacular photograph, as opposed to helping the child? Unable to bear this campaign, Kevin Carter killed himself.

Against the duplicity of the system that simultaneously solicits and declines such images, Alfredo Jaar constructed a different system of visibility in his installation *The Sound of Silence*. He set the words and silence of the party involved in order to inscribe the intolerability of the image of the little girl in a wider history of intolerance. If Kevin Carter came to a halt that day, his gaze enthralled by the aesthetic intensity of a monstrous spectacle, it is because he had previously been not

simply a spectator but an actor engaged in the struggle against apartheid in his country. It was therefore appropriate to make the temporality in which this exceptional moment was inscribed felt. But to feel it, the spectator herself had to enter into a specific space–time – a closed booth which she could only enter at the start of an eight-minute projection and only leave at the end of it. What she saw on the screen were more words, words combining to form a kind of poetic ballad recounting the life of Kevin Carter: his experience of apartheid and black uprisings in South Africa; his journey into deepest Sudan up to the moment of the encounter; and the campaign that had pushed him to suicide. It is only towards the end of the ballad that the photograph itself appeared, in a flash of time equivalent to that of the shutter which had taken it. It appeared as something that could not be forgotten, but which it was not necessary to linger over, confirming that the problem is not whether it is necessary to create and view such images, but the sensible system within which it is done.[6]

A different strategy is implemented in a film devoted to the Cambodian genocide, *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. Its director, Rithy Panh, shares at least two keys things with Claude Lanzmann. He too chose to represent the machine rather than its victims and to make a film in the present. But he dissociated these options from any controversy over word and image. And he did not oppose witnesses to archives. That would unquestionably have been to miss the specificity of a killing machine whose functioning operated

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6 I have analyzed some of the works referred to here in greater detail in my essay 'Le Théâtre des images', published in the catalogue *Alfredo Jaar. La politique des images*, Zurich and Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne: JRP/Ringier, 2007.

through a highly programmed discursive apparatus and filing system. It was therefore necessary to treat these archives as part of the system, but also to make visible the physical reality of the machine for putting discourse into action and making bodies speak. Rithy Panh therefore brought together two kinds of witnesses on site: some of the very rare survivors of camp S-21 and some former guards. And he made them react to various sorts of archive: daily reports, minutes of interrogations, photographs of dead and tortured prisoners, paintings made from memory by a former prisoner who asks former gaolers to confirm their accuracy. Thus is the logic of the machine reactivated: as the former guards go through these documents, they rediscover the attitudes, the gestures and even the intonations that were theirs when they contributed to the work of torture and death. In a hallucinatory sequence, one of them begins to relive the evening round: the return of prisoners after 'interrogation' into the communal jail; the chains that shackled these prisoners; the broth or cesspit they begged for; the finger pointed at them through the bars; the shouts, insults and threats directed at any prisoner who moved – in short, everything that was part of the guard's daily routine at the time. Seemingly without any qualms, this reconstruction is unquestionably an intolerable spectacle, as if yesterday's torturer were ready to adopt the same role tomorrow. But the whole strategy of the film is to redistribute the intolerable, to play on its various representations: reports, photographs, paintings, reconstructions. It is to shift positions by demoting those who have just expressed their power as torturers once again to the position of school pupils educated by their former victims. The film links various kinds of words, spoken and written, various forms of the visual – cinematographic, photographic, pictorial, theatrical – and several forms of temporality, in order to furnish us

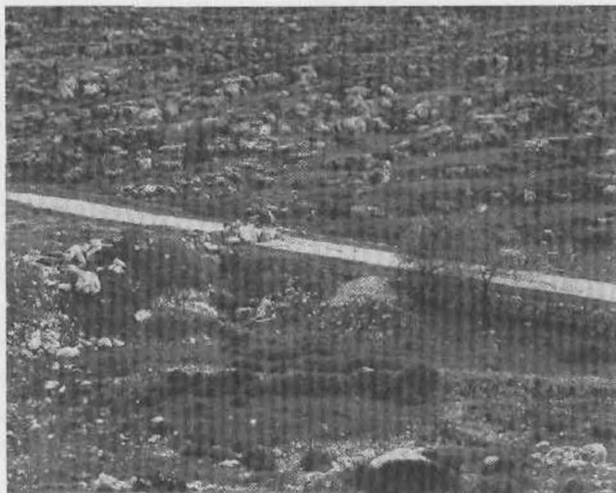
with a representation of the machine that shows us both how it could operate and how it is possible for the executioners and the victims to see it, think about it and feel about it today.

The treatment of the intolerable is thus a matter of *dispositif* of visibility. What is called an image is an element in a system that creates a certain sense of reality, a certain common sense. A 'common sense' is, in the first instance, a community of sensible data: things whose visibility is supposed to be shareable by all, modes of perception of these things, and the equally shareable meanings that are conferred on them. Next, it is the form of being together that binds individuals or groups on the basis of this initial community between words and things. The system of information is a 'common sense' of this kind: a spatiotemporal system in which words and visible forms are assembled into shared data, shared ways of perceiving, being affected and imparting meaning. The point is not to counter-pose reality to its appearances. It is to construct different realities, different forms of common sense – that is to say, different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings.

This creation is the work of fiction, which consists not in telling stories but in establishing new relations between words and visible forms, speech and writing, a here and an elsewhere, a then and a now. In this sense, *The Sound of Silence* is a fiction and *Shoah* and *S-21* are fictions. The problem is not whether the reality of these genocides can be put into images and fiction. It is how it is and what kind of common sense is woven by some particular fiction, by the construction of some particular image. It is knowing what kind of human beings the image shows us and what kind of human beings it is addressed to; what kind of gaze and consideration are created by this fiction.

This displacement in relation to the image is also a displacement in the idea of a politics of images. The classic use of the intolerable image traced a straight line from the intolerable spectacle to awareness of the reality it was expressing; and from that to the desire to act in order to change it. But this link between representation, knowledge and action was sheer presupposition. The intolerable image in fact derived its power from the obviousness of theoretical scenarios making it possible to identify its content and from the strength of political movements that translated them into practice. The undermining of these scenarios and movements has resulted in a divorce, opposing the anaesthetizing power of the image to the capacity to understand and the decision to act. The critique of the spectacle and the discourse of the unrepresentable then arrived to fill the stage, fuelling a general suspicion about the political capacity of any image. The current scepticism is the result of a surfeit of faith. It was generated by the disappointed belief in a straight line between perception, affection, comprehension and action. Renewed confidence in the political capacity of images assumes a critique of this strategic schema. The images of art do not supply weapons for battles. They help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible. But they do so on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated.

This resistance to anticipation can be seen illustrated by a photograph taken by the French artist Sophie Ristelhueber (see p. 104). In this picture, a pile of stones is harmoniously integrated into an idyllic landscape of hills covered with olive trees, a landscape similar to that photographed by Victor Bérard to display the permanence of the Mediterranean of Ulysses' voyages. But this little pile of stones in a pastoral



landscape takes on meaning in the set it belongs to. Like all the photographs in the series 'WB' (West Bank), it represents an Israeli roadblock on a Palestinian road. Sophie Ristelhueber has in fact refused to photograph the great separation wall that embodies the policy of a state and is the media icon of the 'Middle Eastern problem'. Instead, she has pointed her lens at these small roadblocks which the Israelis have built on the country roads with whatever means available. And she has invariably done so from a bird's-eye view, from a viewpoint that transforms the blocks of the barriers into elements of the landscape. She has photographed not the emblem of the war, but the wounds and scars it imprints on a territory. In this way, she perhaps effects a displacement of the exhausted affect of indignation to a more discreet affect, an affect of indeterminate effect – curiosity, the desire to see closer up. I speak here of curiosity, and above I spoke of attention. These are in fact affects that blur the false obviousness of strategic schemata;

they are dispositions of the body and the mind where the eye does not know in advance what it sees and thought does not know what it should make of it. Their tension also points towards a different politics of the sensible – a politics based on the variation of distance, the resistance of the visible and the uncertainty of effects. Images change our gaze and the landscape of the possible if they are not anticipated by their meaning and do not anticipate their effects. Such might be the suspensive conclusion of this brief inquiry into the intolerable in images.