



# Images of the unimaginable: photography and the (re)presentation of the event

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# Images of the unimaginable: photography and the (re)presentation of the event

## Imagens do inimaginável: fotografia e a (re)apresentação do evento

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**Abstract:** *We seem to live in a time of omnipresent images. Guy Debord's diagnosis about the becoming image of reality pronounced in the late 1960s still seems to be relevant to describe our time. We have reached the point when it is not surprising to have images of the extraordinary but not having them. The connection between extraordinary events and images seems natural today. However, it could be still legitimate to ask what can images do regarding those events? What can photography do when facing the unimaginable? In this text, we would like to present three cases that could serve, and actually have been used, to reply this inquiry about the possible relation between photography and the event.*

**Keywords:** *Photography and event. Representation of the unimaginable. Dialectics. Imagination.*

**Resumo:** *Nós parecemos viver em um tempo em que a imagem é onipresente. O diagnóstico de Guy Debord, em meados de 1960, sobre a imagem vindoura da realidade, parece ser relevante para descrever a contemporaneidade. Chegamos ao ponto em que o surpreendente não é a imagem do extraordinário, mas a falta dela. Hoje, a conexão entre eventos extraordinários e imagens parece ser natural. Entretanto, ainda seria legítimo questionar o que as imagens podem fazer em relação a tais eventos? O que a fotografia pode fazer frente ao inimaginável? Neste texto, gostaríamos de apresentar três casos que poderiam servir, e, na verdade foram usados, para responder a esta questão sobre a possível relação entre a fotografia e o evento.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Fotografia e evento. Representação do inimaginável. Dialética. Imaginação.*

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## Introduction

*A group of refugee Afghan children work in the construction of a shelter in the border of Iran and Afghanistan. Some of them carry stones and bricks. Others mix the cement stepping on it. A woman interrupts them to bring them to class. "Come to class, children. You can't stop atomic bombs with bricks", the teacher says. After a while walking between the buildings calling all children, they all come together in a makeshift school inside one of the constructions. That day the class focuses on "a big incident" that took place in the world, as the teacher says. "Who knows anything about it?" she asks. Several of the children raise their hand to tell the same story: someone dug a deep well and two people fell in. "No", says the teacher, "A more important event." "They buried Auntie in the ground up to her neck in Afghanistan", one child answers. "It rained, a flood came and everyone was killed," another says. The teacher replies to them: "In America, in New York City, two airplanes hit the World Trade Center towers." She tries to explain them that it is important because it could be the beginning of the World War III and all of them could die, and ask them to keep silent for one minute in honor of those killed in New York. As children don't keep silent and seem not to understand the magnitude of the event, the teacher decides, almost like a punishment, to take them out of the "classroom" and standing in silence in front of one of the big chimneys of the brick kiln as a desperate attempt to make them imagine what a tower is. "Look at the chimney. Think of all those people in the towers who died under the rubble", is the final instruction the teacher gives.*

This is the story narrated by Samira Makhmalbaf (2002) in the first fragment of the film *11'09"01 September 11*, a collection of short films made by several filmmakers around the world after 9/11. The

attitude of the children and the effort of the teacher to explain what had just occurred across the world are the best example of the problem of the *unimaginable* raised by events like 9/11. One could think that the children do not understand because of their age or because of their state of isolation in the middle of the desert. It is impossible to imagine two planes crashing into two towers if you have never seen a tower and a city like New York. Children lack images to understand the singular nature of what their teacher is trying to explain. A single picture would be enough to make what they do not comprehend imaginable. Let us, however, play the role of the hyperbolic doubt and ask: “Does an event like this become understandable, imaginable when we have images of it?”

We seem to live in a time of omnipresent images. Guy Debord’s diagnosis about the becoming image of reality pronounced in the late 1960s still seems to be relevant to describe our time. “Spectacle” was the concept Debord (2002, p.8) used to describe the time when “the real world changes into simple images”. The problem for Debord was not simply the overproduction of images but that those images were replacing our sense of reality. Today, the multiplication of technical mediations seems to have made images a necessary condition – more than a simple representation – of experience. As Susan Sontag (1973, p.10) states regarding photography, it “has become one of the principle devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation”. Both simple daily occurrences and extraordinary events take place simultaneously as images do. We are particularly interested in the latter. Images of wars, tortures, massive rebellions, grassroots mobilizations, and accidents in general are part of a common imagery that seems to be familiar to any viewer today.

We have reached the point when it is not surprising to have images of the extraordinary but not having them. However, it could be still legitimate to ask, following Sontag (2003), what can images do regarding those events?

What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken indignation? To make us feel ‘bad’; that is, to appall and sadden? To help us mourn? Is looking at such pictures really necessary, given that these horrors lie in a past, remote enough to be beyond punishment? Are we the bests to see these images? Do they actually teach us anything? (SONTAG, 2003, p.91-92).

We would like to present two cases that could serve, and actually have been used, to reply Sontag’s inquiries about the possible relation between photography and the event.

## First case: photography as collective therapy

In the morning of September 11, 2001 television news anchors interrupted regular programming all over the world to show in real time what was happening in the World Trade Center in New York. Carey (2003) describes in detail the development of the event coverage between 8:50 a.m. and 11 a.m. and shows that during the first hours of transmission the only thing reporters could do was to narrate chronologically each of the occurrences. The images were repeated over and over again, trying to realize what was happening. In the first hours “comprehension lacks a foothold. Understanding falters. News of this event catapults the nation into the grips of a trauma, a shock without meaning”. (NICHOLS, 2007, p.2). Over the time, the repetition of the image of the planes crashing into the towers was not enough, despite having been shown from several perspectives. Television, as the other media, began to create relations and to place the images inside a broader narration. James Carey (2003, p.76) highlights this effort as a “return” of journalism to historical reality. During the 1990s, according to him, the media had been “on a vacation from reality”. The shock produced by 9/11 forced journalism to try to produce a historical

narration to apprehend the event “history, politics, and human nature were back on the agenda of the press”. (CAREY, 2003, p.77). This “return” implied an effort to understand and reduce the shock produced by the event.

This evidence of the shock can be useful to understand the concept of “event” we would like to use here. Although the term is used in daily language to name any incident, the concept of “event” highlights a difference regarding common occasions. A broad tradition, especially in the field of philosophy in the twentieth century, recovered the distinction stated by the stoicism in the third century B.C., between “the existing things,” that is daily occurrences, and events. This difference was taken up again by Christianity to name the irruption of the divinity into the human world. The twentieth century deprives this concept of its religious meanings and keeps the notion of the irruption of the absolute strange into the regular life. From this perspective, the event is the indefinable, what escapes from any common representation; what bursts in everyday life and resists being incorporated as experience. That is the difference between an event and a common occurrence. “Occurrence” is what finds a possible representation, while “event” is what bursts in the daily life and dislocates all the usual mechanisms of understanding. W. J. T. Mitchell (2011, p.748) defines it as “the place where words and images fail, where they are refused, prohibited as obscenities that violate a law of silence and invisibility, muteness and blindness”. “Event” is what cannot be told, what is beyond any attempt of representation.

The immediate effect of the event is the shock. Its irruption into daily life implies an initial impossibility of comprehension. That is the main reason for the multiplication and repetition of images. They are an attempt to understand what has broken the common comprehension of reality. Beforehand, the event is unimaginable, elusive. It seems that language is not enough to describe what happened. The complexity of the event grows every minute and lack of comprehension grows with it. The event is what resists to be incorporated in the same way we

incorporate common occurrences; what escapes from any attempt of comprehension.<sup>1</sup>

Images seem to be an attempt to oppose this unimaginable character of the event. One would be tempted to affirm, following the common sense, that technical images work as an objective window to perceive reality, and that is the reason why they successfully oppose the unimaginable. Several authors, however, have pointed out the difficulty of considering images as simple illustrations of an event, and have proposed to think about them in terms of production rather than of representation. That is the core of Debord's analysis of spectacle mentioned above: images do not depict an external reality, but they produce reality itself. Carey (2004) states a similar idea regarding the process of human communication: it is not plain transmission of pre-existed information, but "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed". (DEBORD, 2002, p.23).

We would like to use Hayden White's notion of "emplotment" to explain this symbolic process. According to White (1978, p.88), history is not a representational narrative of external events but a verbal fiction that produces the event itself: "It is wrong to think of a history as a model similar to a scale model of an airplane or ship, a map, or a photograph." History implies the active production of the event and not simply its repetition in a different scale. An event reaches a historical character when it is constructed as a metaphorical statement inside a narrative structure. That is what the concept of emplotment defines: the encoding of facts as components of a specific kind of plot structure.

If we take White's argument further it would be possible to state that what we understand as "reality" is the product of particular processes of emplotment, rather than a group of pure and objective facts. Images are crucial in this emplotment to the extent that they, on the one hand, seem to reduce the complexity of the event to a concrete fact – every image is

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<sup>1</sup> It is not our intention to provide a positive definition of "event." Precisely, it names what is beyond any conceptualization. Event "is" what opens a permanent question about its own representation, what creates a tension between the possibility of naming and depicting and a radical difference introduced in the core of experience. The event comes into view when the question "how to talk – or create images – about *this*?" emerges.

always a frame – and, on the other hand, they open the possibility of connecting different elements and composing a particular narrative. This plot has an important function: to make the strangeness of the event familiar.

The original strangeness, mystery, or exoticism of the events is dispelled, and they take on a familiar aspect, not in their details, but in their functions as elements of a familiar kind of configuration. They are rendered comprehensible by being subsumed under the categories of the plot structure. (WHITE, 1978, p.86).

From this perspective, images have a “therapeutic” function as they allow to shape what was elusive.

Zelizer (2003) states that this is exactly what photojournalism did with the trauma produced by 9/11. What was an unshaped group of occurrences became a definable event through the use of particular rhetoric and narrative strategies in the production of images. 9/11 photographs assisted society in working to reach a “post-traumatic” space understanding the initial excess of the event. This collective comprehension facilitated public reaction to support the political, humanitarian, and military actions derived from the attack. Nichols (2007, p.10) summarizes this complex process highlighting the importance of the category of “terrorism”:

Trauma converts to injury, injury requires redress; redress demands finding the subject responsible. The name ‘terrorism’ gives a face and a figure to an excess that typically escapes the categories of history, narrative and meaning.

With a name, the process seems to be completed. The excess of the event that shocked the perception during the first hours was reduced and incorporated to the popular imagery.

Zelizer (1998) believes in the “healing” power of images. She states that, despite that the pictures are not objective reproductions of reality, the common belief in their objectivity creates a useful illusion of realism that allows the comprehension of the event, and “helped the world bear witness” of it. (ZELIZER, 1998, p.86). Images have a historical value despite that they can only present a partial depiction of reality. Walter Lippman, quoted



by Zelizer (1998, p.9), condenses the problem in one sentence: with photographs, “the whole process of observing, describing, repeating, and then imagining has been accomplished”.

Thus, from this first perspective photographs would have a clear and direct connection with the event: they are a way to oppose its unimaginable character to the extent that they reduce what escapes to comprehension. Images work as certain sort of collective therapy that makes the unfamiliar character of the event imaginable. Images, not as objective windows to reality but as active producers of it, are a way to imagine the unimaginable.

## Second case: the victory of the unimaginable

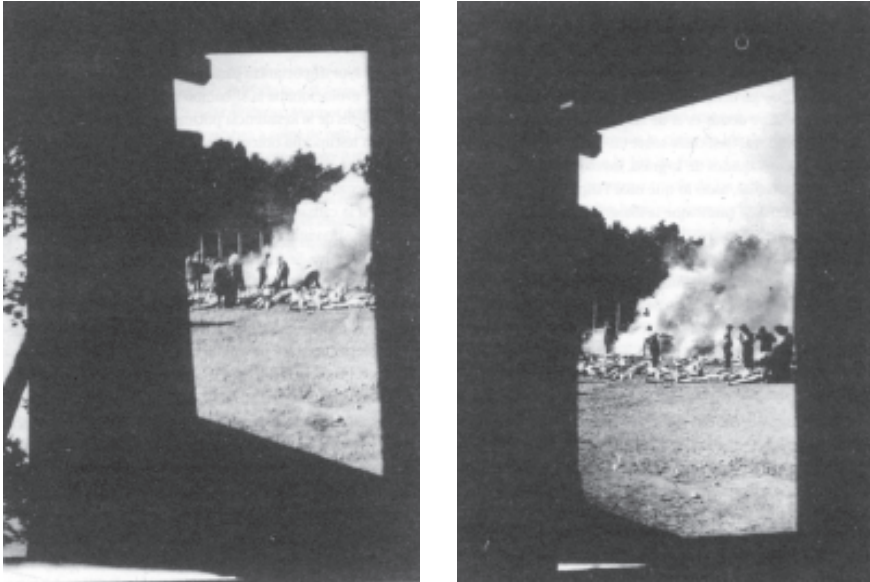
In the summer of 1944, some members of the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando*<sup>2</sup> evaded the SS control and smuggled a camera into the camp. One of them, probably supported by complex logistical arrangements, could snatch away four images from the camp that testified what was happening. They are two sets of two pictures. The first two pictures, possibly taken from the inside of one of the crematoriums, show a line of bodies burning open-air. A “black region” is visible at the edges of the picture suggesting the hidden presence of the photographer. The second pair was taken in a nearby forest. The first picture (Picture 1) of this set shows a group of naked women taken toward the gas chambers with the

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<sup>2</sup> It was a group of select Jews, all of them doomed to the gas chambers, organized to ensure the correct operation of the massive execution processes. The object of their work was the death of thousands of their fellows: they used to clean the chambers and the crematoriums, and to extract the bodies from the chambers, undress them and remove all the “valuable” elements. They used to pulverize the remains and to throw them to the rivers or to use them to level the roads close from the camps. They dug the supplementary incineration trenches, etc. Eventually, they were suppressed after a few working months and were replaced immediately by a new squad that was introduced to the job burning its predecessors. Pierre Levi called this group created in 1942 the “National Socialism’s most demonic crime”.

excuse of a shower. The second (Picture 2) one only shows the tree branches in the road. (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2008). The so-called “Polish Resistance photographs” are, probably, the only images taken by prisoners that show “directly” what happened inside the Nazi concentration camps.

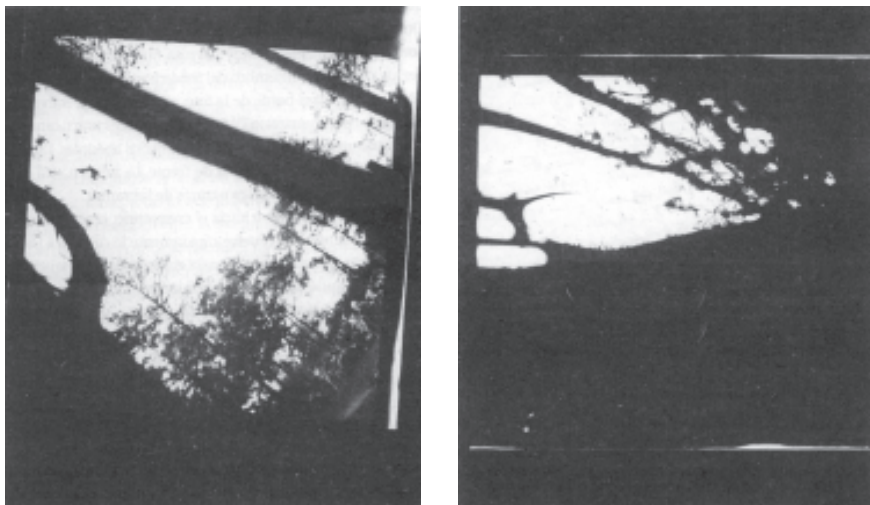
*Pictures 1 and 2 - “Polish Resistance photographs”:  
crematoriums in the Nazi concentration camps*



*Font: Didi-Huberman (2008)*

Despite being known at the time they were taken, the four pictures from Auschwitz were shown, for the first time without any modification, in Paris in the exhibition entitled *Mémoires des camps: photographies des camps de concentration et d’extermination Nazi in 2001* (Pictures 3 and 4). Only then the public seemed to have the opportunity to see what had happened inside the camps and to understand the magnitude of the event. The images seemed to make the genocide imaginable, more than the written and oral testimonies. As Barthes (2004, p.296) pointed out, “the scene is there, captured mechanically, not humanly (the mechanical is here a guarantee of objectivity)”. A confidence in the image and its contents defined the general reception of the pictures.

*Pictures 3 and 4 - Exhibition: Mémoires des camps: photographies des camps de concentration et d'extermination Nazi in 2001*



*Font: Didi-Huberman (2008)*

A significant controversy emerged together with the exhibition of the images in Paris. Some authors like Gerard Wajcman (2001a) stated that the pictures must be eliminated immediately because they represented an ethical threat. The popular perception of photography as a direct representation of reality could make viewers think that by perceiving the four photographs they had finally understood the magnitude of the genocide. Wajcman highlighted the danger of creating the illusion of finally being able to imagine what had remained unimaginable for a long time. From his perspective it was preferable to keep silence, that is, to live without any representation of the genocide, than showing images that could conduce the audience to reduce the elusive character of the event. According to Wajcman, the danger of the images is simple if we accept the unimaginable character of the genocide: they could reduce the event into a simple occurrence.

The problem of ignoring the elusive character of the event is what Wajcman (2001a) calls a “fetishistic logic” of the image. We, spectators,

commonly believe that all the real is virtually visible, and that through this visualization, we are able to understand and incorporate the world. But, Wajcman states, “the irrepresentable exists”. (WAJCMAN, 2001a, p.47). The danger of the photographs, as well as the film and television images, is to create the belief that the irrepresentable can be eliminated and the event incorporated. That precisely is Sontag’s description of photography: “Photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed.” (SONTAG, 2003, p.81). That is precisely the problem with the first perspective explained above about photographs as a way of incorporating the event.

Stephen Eisenman (2007) states a similar concern regarding the publication of the Taguba Report in 2004: a document of the United States Army Criminal Investigation Command that denounced a series of torture practices committed by US soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. This case became an international scandal probably because of the publication of several pictures that explicitly showed the tortures and homicides. However, what most strikes Eisenman is not the content of the photographs but the people’s reaction to them. President George Bush was re-elected in 2004 and his decline in popularity in 2005-2006 was attributed to Hurricane Katrina rather than to Abu Ghraib. None of the military or civilian authorities have been charged with crimes or have been dismissed.

While a Gallup Poll conducted immediately after the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs indicated that 54 per cent of Americans were ‘bothered a great deal’ by the revelations, a year later the number had declined to just 40 per cent. In December 2005 an AP/IPSOS poll revealed that 61 per cent of Americans agreed that torture was justified on some occasions. (EISENMAN, 2007, p.8).

In this case, although the pictures were the main cause of the initial shock produced in the audience, they seem to have been at the same time a means to overcome that shock and incorporate the event. This is what Eisenman calls the “Abu Ghraib effect”:

What if there is something about the pictures themselves, and past images of torture in different, that has blunted the natural human response of outrage? What if the sexualized scenarios, so frequently visible in the Abu Ghraib photographs, rather than rendering the images of abuse and torture more horrific, made them appear less so? What if the US public and the amateur photographers at Abu Ghraib share a kind of moral blindness – let us call it the ‘Abu Ghraib effect’ – that allows them to ignore, or even to justify, however partially or provisionally, the facts of degradation and brutality manifest in the pictures? (EISENMAN, 2007, p.9).

The problem is that images can be read as a reduction of the event. The spectator begins to think of it as a past occurrence. It is integrated in a chronological line. Its visual traces, if there is anyone, are included in museums and exclusive spaces specially designed to keep the memory alive – today some web sites seem to play this role. The over population of images seems to have numbed the viewer’s perception to the extent that now he/she is able to connect any photograph with a broader imagery of similar representations of close realities. As Sontag states:

The familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past [...]. Photographs that everybody recognizes are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas ‘memories’, and that is, over the long run, a fiction. (SONTAG, 2003, p.85).

In her essay *Choosing not to look: representation, repatriation, and holocaust atrocity photography*, Susan Crane (2008) suggests to remove the photographs of the Nazi Genocide from public view. She highlights the ethical decision of not looking as a kind of justice with the victims and with the new generations that will have access to the event through images:

Does pain immortalized through photography ‘communicate’ universally, and thus exempt the atrocity image from critical scrutiny? If not [...] then perhaps we should not be looking. Choosing not to look: this is a radical alternative and needs to be carefully articulated so that it remains an authentic choice, and not the last resort of the physically disgusted or the first resort of the willfully ignorant. (CRANE, 2008, p.311-312).

In order to avoid the reduction of the event images should stop showing; we should decide to look the other way instead of looking for direct representations. Images of atrocity have finally sedated our perception, and they are producing a distorted memory of certain events.

This type of memory goes against what it wants to remember. The event demands a memory of its irreducible character, of its unimaginable singular nature, not the illusion of its overcoming. “The modern event does not have a face” (WAJCMAN, 2001b, p. 224), and probably, it would be necessary to create a memory of this unshaped excess. It is only possible to talk in present about the event, but not to incorporate it as part of a past history. The memory of 9/11, of Abu Ghraib or of the Nazi camps is the memory of the present, of an event that has not been left behind: “Jews are forever being burned in Auschwitz.” (SINGER, 1972, p.30). In Sontag’s words: “Something is still crying.” (SONTAG, 1973, p.20). From this perspective, the problem is not that the reduction is not possible. As Saul Friedlander (1992, p.3) affirms “there are limits to representation which should not be but can easily be transgressed”. The representation of the unimaginable is an ethical problem.

That is the reason why images are condemned: they create the illusion of the incorporation of the event. Wittgenstein’s famous sentence makes sense: “Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent.” From this perspective, photographs are not only useless regarding the unimaginable character of the event, but they also imply an ethical dilemma to the extent that they create the illusion of the incorporation of what it is essentially irreducible.

In 1995, the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar created the installation *Real Pictures* (Pictures 5 and 6). The work consists of 100 archival photo storage boxes installed in rows and spot lit on the floor. On the top of the boxes, a text describes the images “buried” within. The photographs are part of the more than 3.000 pictures taken by Jaar in Rwanda in 1994, a few months after the end of the genocide in which over 500.000 people were killed in the space of two months.

*Pictures 5 and 6 - Real Pictures*



*Font: Alfredo Jaar (1995)*

Nicholas Mirzoeff (2005, p.87) quotes Jaar's words to describe the work: he created “a ‘cemetery of images’ because ‘he felt that the tragedy [was] unrepresentable’.” What took place in Rwanda was beyond the power of images. For that reason Jaar decided to abandon any attempt of direct representation. The name of the piece suggests his position about



the event: a real picture is a buried image; a photograph that has given up on presenting the unimaginable.

*Real Pictures* summarizes this second perspective on photography. Facing the ethical threat of the reduction of the event, images *should* desist from showing and preserve the unimaginable as such.

## A third case? Presenting the unimaginable

Reduction and incorporation or acceptance and silence seem to be the two options to define photography's role regarding the notion of event. The former implies a radical opposition to the unimaginable character of the event to the point that it is reduced and imagined through the composition of a narrative. The latter denies this possibility of incorporation pointing out the ethical consequences of reducing the event. That implies a definitive recognition of the unimaginable as such and the renunciation of any attempt to represent it through images. Is photography destined to reduction or silence when facing the unimaginable?

In 1949 Theodor Adorno wrote one of the most famous and misinterpreted sentences about the Nazi genocide during the second half of the twentieth century. In the final part of his article *An essay on cultural criticism and society* Adorno (1967, p.34) states: "Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." This sentence has been interpreted as a radical condemnation of any kind of poetic production not only the one about the Nazi genocide, but poetry in general. This interpretation was reinforced by the fact that Adorno himself ceased to work as a composer after 1945 in a probable gesture of ethical coherence with his own ideas. When the sentence is read in the context of Adorno's reflection on culture, however, it is clear that he is not defending a total negation of any poetic representation but trying to highlight the obsolescence of the traditional poetic language to present the complexity of what had happened inside the camps.



The German *Nachkriegslyrik*, the post-war lyric poetry, probably is the best example of this perspective on language. Authors like Paul Celan highlighted the need to learn to speak all over again after Auschwitz. German language, the language of Goethe and Rilke, was obsolete. It was not possible to talk about the genocide using the same language used to name and describe the world. The irruption of the unimaginable shows the inadequacy and borders of language. The event is precisely what escapes from language, what demands new terms, a new grammar to try to apprehend its singular character. That was Celan's answer: an attempt to create a new language to present the irrepresentable character of the genocide. Until this new language does not exist, any attempt of representation would be "barbaric".

Thus, Adorno's statement is not a defense of a resigned silence before the unimaginable, but the affirmation of the need of a new language. This language avoids a silent acceptance of the unimaginable, but also prevents the "barbaric" reduction of the event in the belief of its total representation. Our interest is to explore the possibility of this new language in the case of photography – language as a new way of presentation rather than as a new grammar. How to accept the unimaginable character of the event without giving up images? Why continue producing photographs of the unimaginable? We would like to present some strategies that have tried to answer this question. Our objective is not to offer a list of all the possible procedures photographers have proposed, but to use some cases to think of what photography can do when it faces an event.

In *The photograph as contemporary art* Charlotte Cotton proposes eight categories to describe the spectrum of practices and works that, according to her criterion, defines the field of contemporary photography. One of these categories, *Moments in History*, considers, in Cotton's words, "how photography can bear witness to the ways of life and events of the word". (COTTON, 2009, p.167). The main characteristic of the pictures included in this category is their "anti-reportage stance", that is an effort to avoid traditional practices of registering events used by photo journalism. Thus, according to Cotton (2009, p.167), some

contemporary photographers have found different strategies to frame the social world in a “measured and contemplative manner” opposed to the urgency and sensationalism of mass media.

One of these common strategies is to show what has left behind in the wake of some singular events. The northern irish photographer Paul Seawright used this approach in his work *Hidden*, commissioned by the Imperial War Museum of London in 2002 as a response to the war in Afghanistan. Instead of showing the chaos and suffering of the war, Seawright presents the traces of the event (Pictures 7, 8, 9 and 10), the simple evidence left in spaces that compose a new landscape.

*Pictures 7 and 8 - Camp Boundary (7) and Mounds (8)*



**Font:** Paul Seawright (2002)

*Pictures 9 and 10 - Room (9) and Valley (10)*



**Font:** Paul Seawright (2002)

The photographer seems to give up the possibility of producing a total image of the event, an iconic picture in which the whole event could be summarized. Instead of that, Seawright chooses to present an absence. The mounds of earth or the artillery shells have a paradoxical existence within the image: they are objects through which the viewer tries to apprehend something else. The spectator tries to pass through the material evidence of the objects to have an image of the event that produced them. However, the image resists this transit. Photographs impose the simplicity of a trace that, rather than operating as a window to reconstruct the event, suggests the impossibility of having an image of it.

In his *Camera lucida*, Roland Barthes (2010) insists that photography holds a referential relation to the real:

I call ‘photographic referent’ not to the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph [...]. In photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. (BARTHES, 2010, p.76).

In the case of Seawright’s photographs, or in any image that uses a similar strategy, this character of trace of a presence is duplicated. The image is a trace of a trace. Thus, it postpones the contact with the real thing that was there; it defers what Barthes (2010, p.80) calls the “radiations which ultimately touch me”. This is precisely what the photographs seem to highlight: the impossibility of showing the totality of the event.

From this perspective, photography is not simply a technical means to depict reality, but a space to reflect on how some realities permanently escape from any attempt of representation. An image that denies its own capacity of showing. That is what photography becomes when it faces an event.

Gerhard Richter’s *September* (Picture 11) highlights this principle. Although it is not a photograph, this work can be read as a deep reflection on the photographic medium and its capacity of representation. The painting, made in 2005, shows a photographic-realist reproduction of the World

Trade Center in New York at the moment when the United Airlines Flight 175 slammed into the South Tower. (STORR, 2010, p.49). The image, however, is not directly accesible for the viewer. A second layer shows a group of streaks and thick clots of oil pigments traversing the image from left to right in the upper half and from right to left in the lower half. While the first layer in the background resembles a photographic register of the event, the second layer is a pure pictorial gesture that obstructs the access to the first layer. The evidence of a manual unshaped stroke contrasts with the figurative character of the image in the background.

*Picture 11 - September*



*Font: Gerhard Richter (2005)*

The viewer's gaze moves between these two "levels": on the one hand he/she recognizes the event depicted in the painting through a resemblance of all the images of 9/11 that have shaped a common perception of it. On the other hand, the viewer faces an explicit negation of the image as a means to access reality.

Some years before, Richter had used a similar procedure in his paintings on the so-called Baader-Meinhof Group, an armed guerrilla group that operated in West Germany from 1970 to 1977. The group of fifteen canvases made in 1988 with the name *October 18, 1977* focuses on the episode of imprisonment and death of the most prominent members of the

group in the Stuttgart-Stammheim high-security prison. Similar to what he does in *September*, Richter explicitly used the photographic signifiers (Pictures 12 and 13) of the event as the basis to compose his paintings.

*Pictures 12 and 13 - Dead (Tote) (12) and Funeral (Beerdigung) (13)*



*Font: Gerhard Richter(1988)*

Although Richter explicitly used photography as main reference, the paintings are not realistic reproductions of the different occurrences. Richter blurred the images difficulting the viewer's access to them. As Rainer Usselman (2002, p.6) affirms: "Through the use of photographic signifiers, a certain facticity is palpable, yet the work remains obscured. Viewers may gaze, but they can never grasp; they may only catch a glimpse of some terrible truth from a distance."

This same distance became the main character of *September*. Unlike in the *Oktober* paintings, in this work Richter not only blurred the

depicted object, but also introduced that second layer that remarks the distance between the perceived and the perceiver. The photographic representation is radically questioned by the pictorial gesture. The image is not totally negated but *relocated*: it is always in relation to something that obscures its apparent clarity.

Robert Storr (2010, p.50) tries to state this dislocated representation when he affirms that

compared with what eyewitnesses can recall even with the passage of time and what video and photography have captured and preserved, Richter's version – or, better said, vision – of 9/11/01 is an eroded representation of a monument blown to smithereens, the ghost of a ghost.

The problem is the comparison Storr wants to propose. Richter's painting is not another version that denies what the realist photographs and videos do manage: to represent the event. Instead of being a different version of the same reality, *September* points out something common to all the images that have faced the event: there is something that is impossible to capture and preserve, using Storr terms. By creating a new *relation* between the realist image and the pictorial gesture that denies it, Richter shows the limits of the very concept of representation.

We would like to highlight that notion of "relation" as the main strategy some authors have used to create images of the unimaginable. What kind of relation can show the unimaginable as such?

Susan Sontag's reading of Jeff Wall's *Dead troops talk* may be useful to explore this point. What is interesting about this image, according to Sontag (2003), is certain inscrutability of the scene.

Sontag highlights the fact that the dead soldiers are

supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses – and in us... 'We' – this 'we' is everyone who has never experienced anything like they went through – do not understand. We do not get it. We truly cannot imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is. (SONTAG, 2003, p.125-126).



All the characters seem to be isolated from the external world. Actually there is not an outside in the image, just a series of enclosed situations we do not fully understand.

*Picture 14 - Dead troops talk*



*Fonte: Jeff Wall (1992)*

*Picture 15 and 16 - Details from Dead troops talk*



*Fonte: Jeff Wall (1992)*

Although we can presume what happened to those soldiers, we cannot imagine and understand their current situation. Wall creates a distance between the viewer and the situation within the photograph. Unlike Seawright's images that do not present the atrocities of the war,

Wall shows directly the material violence of the event (Pictures 14, 15 and 16). We are contemplating the mutilated bodies, the most explicit and stark face of the event. However, there is an irreducible distance we as external viewers cannot erase, not only because of the hermetic character of the scene, as Sontag suggests, but also because of some kind of internal dialectics that defines the image. We face dead people but they are talking, laughing, thinking. Death is confirmed by the material condition of the bodies, but at the same time it is denied by their actions. Instead of grasping the situation in which the characters are immersed, we are confronted to an irresolvable *contradiction*, one that we cannot understand and that always keeps us out of the event.

Our interest is to show that the creation of this dialectical relation is the main “strategy” – conscious or not – through which photographs can present the unimaginable character of the event without incorporating it. A short anecdote about Alfred Hitchcock narrated by Georges Didi-Huberman (2008) will show what this dialectical relation implies. In 1945, after the fall of the concentration camps established by the German National Socialism, the allied forces had at their disposal a considerable stock of images filmed inside the camps. Many filmmakers were consulted by the armed forces on the possible use of those images, as it was the case with John Ford in the U.S. In England, the military asked Sydney Bernstein who in turn consulted his friend Alfred Hitchcock on the same subject: how to edit those images.

Hitchcock understood immediately that this form needed a montage that doesn't separate anything. First, the victims must not be separated from the executioners, meaning that the corpses of the prisoners must be shown under the very eyes of the German officials [...]. The camp itself must not be separated from its social environment, even though – or because – that environment was normal, quaint, rural, and even bucolic. (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2008, p.137).



According to Hitchcock, the problem was not simply to place some images together but to do it in a particular way. Only a montage that did “not separate anything” could be fair with the event registered in those films: “According to his assistant, Peter Tanner, Hitchcock wondered throughout the editing process how to make these documents convincing, how to make them prove that these horrors really had taken place.” (LOSSON, 1999, p.27). The point is that Hitchcock was not asking to keep everything together. What must not be separated were the prisoners from the SS officers, the camps, as architectural machines created for death, from the rural and almost romantic environments. Hitchcock wanted to present the contradictions that composed what has been synthesized in the name “genocide”.

The bosnian photographer Ziyah Gafic followed a similar principle in the series *Tales from the Dark Valley* (Pictures 17, 18, 19 and 20). Since 1999 he has been documenting the war and ethnic violence in several countries with a significant Muslim community. In that particular group of images made in Bosnia, Gafic shows the disturbing presence of the war in daily life.

The striking element in those photographs is not only the direct evidence of death, but it's almost quiet coexistence with everyday objects and practices. As Cotton (2009, p.185) states, “the dissonance between the skeletons and the beautiful view across the landscape and the signs of domestic activity in the carpets hung up to dry is profoundly shocking”. The contradiction between daily life and the unexpected experience of violence empathize the immeasurability of the event. Instead of seeing how everyday life has managed to incorporate the shock of violence and death, we face a broken human scenario, the permanent presence of the trauma in daily spaces and practices.

According to Gafic (2009), those photographs aimed at producing empathy in the viewer: “If readers do not empathize with the subject in my photographs then I have failed.” If we accept his words, through these photographs we are able to go into the everyday life of the characters, to know some of their spaces, objects and manners. We can identify with

them and, therefore, to imagine the condition of the other. Was not this the risk of images identified by authors like Gerard Wajcman: to think that we, external viewers, can imagine the event and, therefore, understand it through particular images?

*Pictures 17, 18, 19 and 20 - Tales from the Dark Valley*





*Fonte: Ziyah Gafic (2009)*

Wajcman stated that it was impossible to imagine the event of the Nazi Genocide through four simple photographs taken inside the camps; *therefore*, those and all the possible images that depicted the event did not have any value. Gafic, perhaps indirectly, affirms a different statement.

It is possible to imagine the particular condition of a rural community in a small Bosnian town, of some families that had to try to recognize the bodies of their relatives following traces of personal objects or simply by forensic evidence. It is possible to empathize with them and *therefore* to perceive the limit of our imagination regarding the totality of the event. As Georges Didi-Huberman (2008, p.111) affirms, through a set of particular images it is possible to imagine *one* reality that composed the event. It does not imply to claim “that ‘all of the real is solvable in the visible’ or that *all* of the Nazi crime is found *in* four photographs”. Imagination is possible if it is not confused with the total reconstruction and comprehension of the event.

We would like to take this argument even further: there is no a division between on the one hand, the particular reality we can imagine and, on the other hand the unimaginable as an inaccessible essence. On the contrary, only because we can imagine *one* particular reality of the event, we can simultaneously perceive the irreducible character of that event as a totality. This is the result of the contradiction depicted in the photographs. The internal dialectics of the image sets a limit to imagination: we can imagine as far as the unfamiliar appears. But this unfamiliar only becomes visible in the limits of imagination. Photography presents the unimaginable character of the event *in* the failure of imagination, in the dialectical limit of what an image can show.

Hence, Didi-Huberman states that this is why Hitchcock asked not to separate, the contradictory images of the camps. He wanted to show the inner *difference* that composed the genocide: the difference between victims and victimizers, between the beautiful rural landscapes in the middle of Europe and the several brutal practices inside the camps. Those differences situate the event in a particular reality; they create continuity between “our” world – maybe the world of the beautiful landscapes – and the world in which that event was possible. However, at the same time, that difference also shows us a distance. Jacques Derrida (1997) used the concept of “difference” in two senses: as a

distance or distinction between objects, but also as the act of deferring. This notion of difference is what appears in the photographs of the event. Images present a difference we can imagine – the distance between victims and victimizers or between daily life and extraordinary occurrences – and at the same time they postpone, defer the complete meaning of the event. Difference implies continuity and a permanent distance.

From this perspective, the problem is neither to forbid the imagination, as Wajcman suggested, nor to trust blindly in its power to apprehend the totality of the event. Images do not offer a complete portrait of the event but can force an imaginative exercise in the spectator, a practice of interpretation that is important as it shows its own borders. By introducing a dialectical relation in the composition of photographs, it is possible to produce a dialectical perception of a particular event. The paradox of an incomplete trace in Seawright's images: the contradiction between a realist depiction and its pictorial negation in Richter; between the dead bodies and their own living actions in Wall; or between the unexpected death and violence of the war and the simplicity of everyday life in Gafic. All those are dialectical images that invite us to imagine but that affirm the existence of the unimaginable. Through photography we can imagine one reality and at the same time we fail in imagining and incorporating the event as a totality. This dialectic of image opposes the unimaginable and shows "what we cannot see". (DIDI-HUBERMAN, 2008, p.133).

Now it is possible to answer the question asked above: why continue producing photographs of the unimaginable? Photographs can do what we cannot in our daily life: we, as individuals and as society, need to overcome the shock of the event, to generate the illusion that it is part of the past, as if it were something "behind" us. Photographs, on the contrary, do not need that illusion. They can inhabit the trauma instead of trying to eliminate it. Photographs may be that privilege space where the unimaginable is presented as such, instead of being irrepresentable.

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