

IMAGES AND POWER: SCENARIO, ERASURE AND PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the power of images in three periods of 20th century history. The use of images, particularly of photography, during these periods became omnipresent, although there are many other examples of the power of images over the relevance of words: the sight of Phryne's partially naked body, for instance, had a big impact in her trial in the 4th century. Two of the examples presented in this paper (Nazism and Stalinism) used images as an instrument of power. They aimed to present simultaneously a sense of heroism and of "normalization" in radical contrast to the brutality that left a decisive mark in history as one of the most tragic dark moments of the 20th century. On the other hand, under Stalin, photos and images were manipulated: erasing people in photos can be understood as a macabre allegory of their annihilation in real life. The efficacy in the re-construction of reality through the manipulation of photos seems to result from an illusional omnipotence, as if dictators had the power to enunciate, create and destroy "reality". The third part of this article discusses the answer open and given by painting to the increasing erosion of images witnessed nowadays. Painting, contrary to the ephemeral nature of photography, survive dark times. It resists in a stubborn way, as we can see, for instance in the example of Tuymans' paintings. You cannot erase its memory. Painting is not "programmatic". It is an attempt to depollute images. And by doing this, it tears open a space for the search for meaning.

KEYWORDS

photography; painting; power; nazism; stalinism

IMAGENS E PODER: ENCENAÇÃO, RASURA E PINTURA

RESUMO

Este artigo procura abordar o poder da presença da imagem em três períodos históricos do século XX, algo que se tornou omnipresente nestas épocas históricas, mas que não é exclusivo das mesmas: veja-se a referência ao impacto da visão de parte do corpo descoberto de Frine, levada a julgamento no século IV a.C. A imagem, em dois dos casos aqui apresentados (o nazismo e o estalinismo), constituiu um instrumento ao serviço do poder, com o objetivo de encenar simultaneamente a "heroicidade" e uma normalidade em contraste radical com uma brutalidade

que marcou decisivamente a história e constituiu um dos principais momentos de trevas vividos no século XX. Por seu turno, sob Estaline, a imagem é manipulada, tornando o processo de rasura de personagens uma alegoria macabra da sua aniquilação real. A eficácia da reconstrução da realidade, através da manipulação da imagem, passa, assim, por uma ilusão de onnipotência: como se os ditadores tivessem o poder de enunciar, construir e destruir a “realidade”. Na terceira parte, partindo da questão da acentuada erosão das imagens na atualidade, a discussão centra-se na resposta que a pintura abre e problematiza. Ao contrário do carácter efémero da fotografia, a pintura sobrevive a tempos sombrios, persiste teimosamente, como se pode ver no caso de Tuymans. A memória não pode ser apagada. E porque não é programática, porque constitui uma tentativa de despoluição da imagem, rasga o espaço para a busca de sentido.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

fotografia; pintura; poder; nazismo; estalinismo

INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to follow the trajectory of the power held by images in three different periods of history: Nazi, Stalinist and contemporary times.

The choice of these three points in time has an explanation: the two first periods present the beginning of an appropriation/manipulation of images (especially of photos) by power in order to use them in a convenient and efficient way. Contemporaneity brought saturation, indistinctiveness and even the vulgarization of images. This situation begs an obvious question: how shall images be rescued from this banality?

In fact, Heinrich Hoffmann, the official photographer of Hitler during the Nazi regime, mythicized the dictator according to the circumstances, that is, according to what was needed at specific moments. In some situations, Hitler was pictured as a warrior released from prison and ready to fight. On other occasions, the photographer presented Hitler as a kind man in a family environment. Stalin adopted a different strategy to rewrite the history of his time: he erased, through oblivion or literally, people that were seen as problematic to the regime. Trotsky is a representative example of this strategy: Stalin ordained his execution in 1940. Another strategy used by the dictator was transforming a group photograph into an iconic painting of a singular providential man: himself.

In contemporaneity there is an attempt to depollute images and pictures through painting. Paintings, in comparison with a – many times innocuous – super-exposure of pictures, cannot be manipulated. They may be destroyed, but they (re)appear as a critical hermeneutic of the current “Babel” of images. In other words, this section of the present essay is not interested in discussing the utilization of pictures nowadays. Our aim is precisely to understand how painting appears simultaneously as an answer and as a questioning of the constant volatilisation of pictures. This aim enables us to return – although with different intentions – to the horror of totalitarianism: Luc Tuymans’ (1958/2006) work, for example, evokes the Nazi concentration camps and the “final solution”.

To summarize: this essay focuses on these three moments seeking to answer the following question: how do we look to pictures and what power can they have?

THE PRESENCE OF IMAGE

Happiness consists of being able to tell the truth without hurting anyone. (Fellini, 1963)

Phryne, a *hetaira*¹ of the 4th century was taken to court on allegations of impiety. The penalty for this crime could be death, since she had profaned the mysteries of Eleusis.

The extremely beautiful Phryne, who had posed for Praxiteles and Apelles, was defended in court by Hyperides. The trial came to a point at which Hyperides, with no more resources to persuade the judges, stripped the *hetaira* to her waist:

she was lucky to have the help of Hyperides – a wise and tried speaker from Athens. When he realized that the cause was lost, he approached the client and tore her clothes to near the waist, calling on the mercy of the judges in the face of such a rare beauty. (Junior, 2008, p. 13)

Confronted with this gesture and with Phryne's beauty (she was a disciple of Aphrodite) the court dismissed the courtesan: the view of Phryne's partially uncovered body produced an effect that words were unable to reach (Dyck, 2001).

According to some classicists, this moment of Phryne's trial should not be considered real. Crain Cooper, for example, in an article written in 1995, clearly says that this episode is a fabrication. Cooper suggests that the trial was due to a dispute between Euthias (the disrespected lover) and Hyperides (the recent admirer) and asserts that only a reckless interpretation of the sources would result in the idea that the stripping of Phryne actually happened: "the evidence, then, indicates that the disrobing scene was invented by Idomeneus, perhaps to parody and ridicule the courtroom displays of Athenian demagogues" (Cooper, 1995, p. 315).

Konstantinos Kapparis, in a recent book with the title *Prostitution in the ancient greek world*, claims that there is no evidence that would prove, strictly speaking, what happened: "the colorful episodes which might or might not have secured her acquittal are impossible to verify or deny conclusively, and perhaps it is best if they are left in the sphere of the popular mythology surrounding this legendary figure" (Kapparis, 2017, p. 384).

Regardless of whether it is a legend or reality, this episode suggests the power images already had in the 4th century, and their impact when confronted with words. While it is true that the final aim of rhetoric is persuasion and the specific objective of Hyperides, in this situation, was the acquittal of Phryne, all resources are valid to achieve the goal. This was precisely what the speaker achieved with the ostensive exposure of Phryne's beauty. In fact, this was a common *topos* in the Classical World: the power of beauty explored, for instance, in the famous story of Helen (see Górgias [1993] "Encomium of Helen", and the already mentioned work of Curado [2008], especially the chapter: "O poder da beleza").

On the December 20, 1924, Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's official photographer took the picture presented below. His aim was precisely to announce the release of the future

¹ "A *hetaira* was not considered a mere prostitute. She was considered a woman that practiced free love, a woman much more independent than a legitimate wife. *Hetairai* were prestigious women" (Curado, 2008, p. 380).

dictator, after nine months in the prison of Landsberg in Bavaria. Hitler had been accused of treason.



Figure 1: Hitler leaves the prison in Landsberg on December 20, 1924

Source: Moorhouse, 2014, p. 7

The problem of this photograph, which was seen all around Germany and the world, is that, according to Moorhouse (2014), it is a fraud. The prison guard forbade Hoffmann to take the picture at the prison gate. Therefore, Hoffmann moved Hitler to the city's gothic entrance, since the atmosphere of that place was similar to the one in which the future dictator had been imprisoned. Actually, the prison did not have a medieval gate such as the one we see in the picture, from which Hitler seems to be leaving.

It was precisely with this implication that the famous photograph was published and commented upon: as if Hitler was really coming out of prison. There was even a title in the news of the time with the by-line: “the fortress gate has opened” (Moorhouse, 2014, p. 7), assuming that the gothic gate of the town of Landsberg was literally the prison's entrance.

According to Moorhouse, Hoffmann and Hitler understood from the beginning the power of images and the power images have to bend the truth: “it shows Hitler, and Hoffmann, not only as being acutely aware of the political importance of the image, but moreover willing to bend the truth in the process” (Moorhouse, 2014, p. 7).

On September 18, 1931, Angela “Geli” Maria Raubal, Hitler's step-niece, living with her uncle since 1929, was found dead in the house where both lived. There is huge speculation around Geli's death². The import for this text is that the timing could not have been worse for Hitler. Apart from the suspicion of there being a link with the death of his niece, this incident threatened the political strategy of the future dictator right in the middle of the campaign that was to bring him to power.

² There is a long article from Ron Rosenbaum (2012) published in *Vanity Fair* with the title “Hitler's doomed angel”. This article is a good source to understand the huge amount of speculation about Geli's death and about her relationship with her uncle. According to some of the hypotheses mentioned in this article, it was an unfortunate accident; Geli could not bear her uncle's paraphilias; Hitler or her Jewish teacher had got her pregnant; she was a menace to the party, and so on.

Hoffmann's 1932 photograph-album with the title *Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt* (*The Hitler no one knows*) was a fundamental piece of Hitler's ruse to escape the scandal (Görtemaker, 2012, p. 25).

As Maiken Umbach says in the documentary *The rise of the Nazi Party* (Kloska, 2014), Hoffmann's photographs and postcards had the purpose of presenting Hitler as a common man, a man of the people: Hitler was presented on a picnic, playing with his dog, enjoying moments of leisure in a family and "fatherly" environment. Hoffmann's book, a best-seller, played, naturally, a role in restoring the public life and the political career of the future dictator.

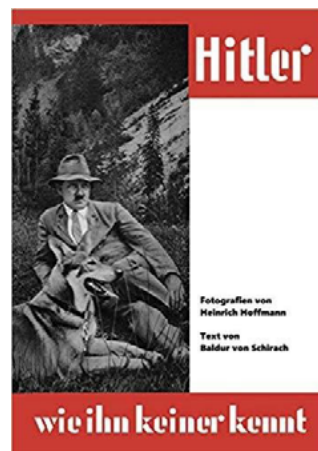


Figure 2: Book-cover of Hoffmann's work *Hitler wie ihn keiner kennt*, 1932

Source: Hoffmann, 1932

The rest of the story is well known: Hitler, with the "Geli" incident already forgotten, travelled to his campaign rallies by plane – a first – during the elections of 1932 (Görtemaker, 2012, p. 27) and appears as the saviour who would reinstate Germany's prestige. The "crowning" happens in January 30, 1933: the same year of the burning of the Reichstag, on the February 27; the elections in March and the parliamentary approval of the estate of emergency on the 23rd of the same month, events that conferred on Hitler, in a democratically and paradoxically, the dictatorial power that would come to haunt the world. To summarize: Hoffmann's pictures were decisive, among other things, to a fascist aesthetic which understood from the outset that politics had entered definitively the "era of image" and took profit from that. Images, as the Greeks said of speeches, are easy to manipulate. That is what Hoffmann did: "as Hitler's official photographer, Hoffmann's photographs were largely taken as a record of Hitler's achievements and used as propaganda, manipulating the power of photography to create a public image of the Thousand-Year Reich and the superiority of Germany" (Brett, 2016, p. 235).

THE ABSENCE OF IMAGE

Sometimes, photo doctoring meant going back to the past to change the historical record. (Blackmore, 2019, § 11)



Figure 3: Photo of Stalin carrying his daughter

Source: Montefiore, 2017, p. 25

Simon Sebag Montefiore, in his book *Stalin: the court of the red tsar* (2017, p 25) published a picture of the dictator with his daughter Svetlana, at the beginning of the 30s. The photo appears in a chapter of Montefiore's book in which the author mentions that Stalin loved his daughter dearly, an emotion that is also mentioned, for example, in Rosemary Sullivan's biography of Svetlana (2016).



Figure 4: Svetlana, Stalin's daughter sitting on the lap of Beria, chief of NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs). At the back, we can see Stalin working

Source: Sullivan, 2016, p. 83

Stalin expressed an authentic love for his daughter, particularly after the death of her mother – Nadya – in circumstances that are not completely clear. According to Sullivan (2016, p. 61), he called her “little butterfly”, “his little fly”, “his little sparrow”. He

also called her the “hostess”, saying that she was the one that ruled their home where his “beloved family” lived (Montefiore 2017, p. 20). His “beloved family” included members of the Politburo, brothers and sisters in law, people like the one Svetlana called her “Uncle Lara”, with whom she played and who sat her on his lap – Lavrenti Pavlovitch Beria (Milhazes, 2018; Overy, 2016).

If the aim of Hitler’s pictures mentioned in the previous section of this text was to create the illusion of normality, Stalin’s pictures in his “family context” seem to signal the existence of a parallel world – the world of his *dasha*, where he calmly worked, while his daughter played with the regime’s executioner, the executor of Stalin’s orders including those to eliminate members of his “beloved family”. It is a reasonable assumption that these pictures were not deliberately staged, as was the case with Hitler’s photos. The aim does not seem to be staging the family day to day life. However, the issue here seems to be even more disruptive: Stalin showing his genuine love for his daughter and Beria playing with Svetlana, apparently all one big happy family, lived in a duality between the “normality” of ordinary men and the monstrosity of elimination, of erasing their real and their imagined opponents³.

Stalin’s characteristic paranoia that resulted in a persistent feeling of being threatened led him to exterminate people whoever they were, including members of his own family, especially during the infamous times of “terror”. In fact, the majority of people posing for a family photograph in 1934 – taken on Stalin’s birthday –, including members of the politburo, wives of soldiers, but also scientists and close family members, would all be expunged from Stalin’s family entourage in the 40s. Since this picture was a “family photograph” the presence of those people was not erased, as was the case with other pictures in an official, public context. Their faces remain in the picture, but exclusion had already happened.



Figure 5: Photo of Stalin with his family on his birthday on December 21, 1934

Source: Sullivan, 2016, p. 83

³ For the period of terror and persecution of individuals or of groups (for instance, of physicians) see the already mentioned oeuvres.

This was the destiny of some of the smiling faces in this “family photo”⁴, with Stalin at the centre: in the back row, on the left, we can see Ana Redens. She was arrested in 1948 (Stanislav, her husband is not in the picture. He was executed in 1940). In the middle row there is Maria Svanidze (on the left). She was executed in 1942. Although Sashiko Svanidze (the third person from the left) survived, her sister Marijko was executed in 1942; Polina Molotov (on Stalin’s left) was arrested in 1948. Finally, Zhenya Alliluyeva, the second person on the left in the front row was arrested in 1947. The picture taken in 1934 is intact. In the following decade, most of the people posing for the photographer would be eliminated.

Real eradication including the eradication of images was an increasing element of political propaganda, of the re-construction of reality, moreover, it was used as an instrument to dissuade dissent through the “punishment” of disappearance from the historic memory – a strategy that shows the dictator’s power to re-construct history, wiping from it the names of his enemies. In the case of Hitler’s pictures mentioned in the first part, the aim was to convince people that he was a man of the people, with a normal family life – actually, this can also be seen in pictures (albeit unstaged) of Stalin with his daughter and his “beloved family”. However, in Stalinist pictures where his enemies were literally erased, there is a clear intent to manipulate history and memory. Erasing pictures reinforced an environment of fear, of submission to a version presented as the one “you should believe”, as if reality were an issue of belief dictated by the “great leader”. In the words of Leah Dickerman (2000, p. 143), “by making the violence of the imagery explicit, such marking of absence reminds the viewer of the pervasive power of the system”.

Thus, Stalin becomes omnipotent. At the same time, he makes his enemies disappear. One of the best-known cases is the disappearance of Trotsky – the arch-enemy of Stalin – from the pictures⁵. Stalinist propaganda’s aim is to wipe out the visual memory, the historical-photographic register of the existence of Trotsky and of his relevance in the Red Revolution. Propaganda positions itself as the broadcaster of the “historical truth”: manipulation replaces facts, merging ideology and mythology. Once again in the words of Leah Dickerman (2000, p. 141): “much of the manipulation aims to produce a seamless illusion of plausibility that naturalizes ideology as mythology”.

⁴ The same picture appears twice in Sullivan’s book: first with a reference to the date of the photo and then again when the author mentions the destiny of each of these persons in the 40s (Sullivan, 2016, pp. 7-131).

⁵ Although this photograph is, perhaps, the best-known picture, there are many others in which Trotsky was erased. The same thing happened with other people that stopped being considered faithful to the regime, that is, to Stalin – the one who defined the regime and had the power of life and death over other people. It is enough to recall the erasing of Nikolai Yezhov in a photograph with Stalin (Gessen, 2018).



Figure 6: Vladimir Lenin speaking to the Red Army Soldiers in Moscow before the departure to the polish front, in 1920

Source: Gessen, 2018



Figure 7: Leon Trotsky erased from the same picture

Source: Gessen, 2018

Reconstruction of history, using re-composition of images is linked to the glorification of the hero. However, suppressing the images of unwanted people was not the only strategy: this glorification also employs the erasing of a face by covering it with ink stains. Such was the case with the picture of Djakhan Abidova, member of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan.

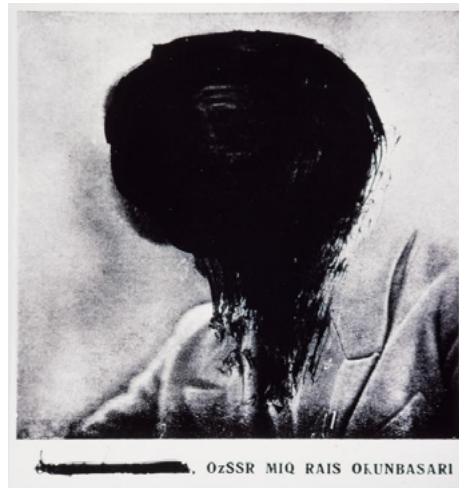


Figure 8: Djakhan Abidova, a female member of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. Her picture was damaged on purpose in the 30s
Source: Gessen, 2018

The violent eradication of someone's face in a picture that is not withdrawn but in which its shameful elimination (covering the face with black ink) is exhibited, accords with the burgeoning two-pronged process that eliminated opponents while glorifying the leader. His pictures are transformed into paintings. That was the case with a photo from 1929 where we can see Nikolai Antipov, Stalin, Sergei Kirov and Nikolai Shvernik.

The elimination of the other people present in the original photograph together with the transformation of the image of the only remaining person into a painting – since paintings live on, as dead Stalin's "heroic acts" – emphasize and appeal to a personality cult: we are no longer simply dealing with what might be an ephemeral record. We are dealing with an icon⁶.



Figure 9: The picture on the left is the original, with Nikolai Antipov, Stalin, Sergei Kirov and Nikolai Shvernik in Leningrad, 1929. The image on the right is an oil painting inspired by a photo

Source: Blackmore, 2019

⁶ For an analysis of other forms of propaganda used during the Stalin dictatorship (posters, for instance) see Pisch (2016).

THE CONTEMPORARY IMAGE: BANALITY, SACRALIZATION AND MEANING

Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men who have barbarian souls. (Heraclito, quoted in Pereira, 1971, p. 124)

As Heraclitus tells us, *the senses deceive*. The contemporary image, grounded on a wide spectrum of technological devices, spread at an impressive speed and the status of its inherent value, in its referentiality to the real, is constantly changing, a phenomenon that Benjamin unveiled in his renowned writings on technical reproducibility and its impact on aesthetic development and daily life (Benjamin, 2006). His insight that “it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye” (Benjamin, 2006, p. 246), creates the basis of an understanding centred on the difference between photography and painting, playing with conscious and unconscious dimensions of optical scales.

Sensitive to the “mechanical unconscious” of photographic innovation, but also to the fact that *plein air* painting during the same period had captured new perspectives, thanks to the work of the impressionists, Benjamin explores the concept of aura that so absorbed him, “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of something distant, however near it may be” (Benjamin, 1995, p. 254). We know that the discovery and widespread use of photography, especially from the mid-19th century (Freund, 1995), is associated with the modernist shift, with its attendant abandonment of the naturalistic/realistic approach to painting, and the advent of the more demotic bourgeois portrait⁷.

Modernism, as we know, led to the fall of the Fine Arts, of the harmonious concept of beauty, which it ultimately made paradoxical and secular. The end of all canons, instituted in the Dadaist breviary that prefers to replace the term “work” with “thing” (Duchamp, 1990), gives more weight to an aesthetic awareness of the common object. “I think the painting dies, you see? After forty or fifty years, a picture dies because its freshness disappears. Sculpture also dies. This is my own little mania, which no one accepts, but it does no matter” (Duchamp, 1990, pp. 103-104). After *the death of art* came a world of things, a reign of images made things, an apotheosis of vulgarity, amplified by screens and television programming.

⁷ “Photography, resulting from the cooperation between science and the need for new artistic expression become a field of violent controversy right from the beginning. To know whether the camera was simply a technical instrument, capable of a mere mechanically reproducing what ‘appeared’, or if it had to be considered as a true means to express an individual artistic sensation, set the spirits of artists, critics and photographers on fire”. And the question spread to the theological sphere with the Church arguing that God has created Man in His image and that no human machine could capture this image (Freund, 1995, p. 79). This quotation precisely expresses the core of the current question of photographic uses and practices, at a time when anonymous subjects using massified devices create photographic and video records of relevance and sometimes of aesthetic interest. It is precisely the individual needs and happenstances of ordinary people that bring them closer to an idea of art for all that finds its reverse, or its specular projection, in practices of intellectual and artistic elites. These occupy the social and cultural spaces of what Danto calls *the artworld* (Danto, 1961). Philosophers of analytical aesthetics (Danto, Jerome Stolnitz, Morris Weitz, George Dickie, Nelson Goodman) are all thinking along the same lines when they invite us to reflect on the answer to the question “when is there art?”, rather than focusing in questioning an understanding of art reflected in the question: “what is art?” See *inter alia*, Carmo d’Orey’s (2007) anthology. In a time when everything is merged and a photograph on an iPhone can look like a Leica shot by one of Magnum’s great photographers, deciding in which situation we are in face of art is something decisive. The photographs of the Magnum Agency (Robert Capa, Cartier Bresson, etc...) have the status of works of art.

This means that a critical response to the political, ethical, social and economic problems conveyed in the contemporary flow of images must be organised on the basis of painting defined as a concept rather than a *technique*. This implies a re-organization of the way we look at images, being grounded/anchored in the process and the imagery of painting, in a reinvented plasticity. Deleuze, Derrida, Perniola, Foster, Bourdieu, to name but a few of the thinkers – not to mention the theoretical input of countless artists – have been fuelling this debate, which also embraces the rhetorical status of the images, its mythological plane (Barthes, 1976) and its spectacle condition as commodity (Debord, 2018), together with anthropological specificities, rituals of collective memory. Such a response still allows us to find our bearings in a universe of *things*. Thus armed, we can hazard an intelligibility transformed into an open experience of what is meaningful, where infinite personal encyclopaedias are conjoined and declined (Eco, 2004).



Figure 10: Pablo Picasso “Las Meninas”, after the painting by Velazquez, 1957. Picasso *Challenging the Past Catalogue*

Source: Cowling, 2009, p. 124

Mechanical images can be manipulated, erased, reworked or staged and still be perceived and accepted as indicators of reality. They are massified heirs of a noble history that was buried, after being denied and then erased. When Picasso revisits Velasquez and “Las Meninas” (1656), or Edouard Manet and his “Le déjeuner sur l’herbe” (1863), he demonstrates how images unfold and reinvent themselves through painting and its auratic condition. But it was not only in relation to these two key works enshrined in the great classical tradition, that Picasso responded, modifying them as if offering a challenge and to some extent a modification of the past. El Greco, Goya, Jaques-Louis David, Rembrandt, Ingres, Van Gogh, and other great masters were also revisited, never “copied” or repeated. As Cowling points out:

but the notion of collaboration is revealing because it implies not only a sense of comradeship and equality, but also that history and chronology are irrelevant: for Picasso, all these “dead” artists from different eras or generations

were alive, and indeed would never die, and what is more were driven by fundamentally the same imperatives as himself. (Cowling, 2009, p. 13)⁸

This situation is a starting point to understand how images collaborate (now) with each other. This is a broad question that calls both for an analysis of the evolution of cinema and for the museological framing of the experience of moving images, and, on the other and, for hermeneutics of painting from the 1980s to the present. This historical moment is characterized by appropriations of cinema and its legends, by the politicization that aims to denounce and counter a contemporary dystopia, through a reformulation of the concept of installation, performance, and parody. A key name in this context is Richard Prince (1948), who appropriates famous advertisements from American cultural mythology such as the Marlboro cigarettes' cowboy, making this image (and others of the same nature) cohabit in the same imaginary with paintings of nurses and other icons of popular fiction.



Figure 11: Thomas Struth, Museo del Prado, Room 12, Madrid, 2005

Source: <https://www.phillips.com/detail/thomas-struth/NY030219/359?fromSearch=struth&searchPage=1>

If we dwell more exclusively on the immanence of (auteur) photography, then Cindy Sherman (1954), Wolfgang Tillmans (1968), Jeff Wall (1946), Douglas Gordon (1966) and Thomas Struth (1954) are extraordinary examples of how photography rises to a level of notoriety that bolsters its capacity for aesthetic action. The works of these artists substitute and/or negate oil or acrylic painting in an attempt to proclaim a different autonomy for the images. However, the registers and methods for artistic creation nowadays are many and varied. One only needs to consult any of the Taschen books or peruse the

⁸ Between February and June 2009, The National Gallery in London organized a very important exhibition with a title “Picasso: challenging the past”. For the first and only time, works by the Andalusian artist from various collections and museums were brought together in a dialogue with pieces of art by painters that Picasso particularly admired and who creatively intrigued him. To mark this event, the British Museum published a catalogue of essays by various experts and academics, including an essay of Elizabeth Cowling, “Competition and collaboration: Picasso and the old masters”.

programme sites of the great contemporary arts museums, not to mention the real and effective distribution in the exhibitions media, to be aware of this eloquent diversity that renders images porous, enmeshed in reciprocal contamination. In this milieu of communication, painting resurfaces and stands with a mission to interpret, decanting the chaos of senses conveyed by most other images.



Figure 12: Thomas Struth, Art Institute of Chicago II, Chicago 1990

Source: <https://www.phillips.com/detail/thomas-struth/UK040216/67?fromSearch=struth&searchPage=1>

There is an extensive chapter in the oeuvre of photographer Thomas Struth (1954) that includes series of photographs taken in major museums of the world (the Louvre, Paris, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, the National Gallery, London, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and the Art Institute of Chicago) which suggest a kind of co-protagonism⁹. In other words, a shared protagonism between the painting and the world, theatrically displayed, with all the grandeur of a ritual gesture, in line with a discursive protocol that tends to the sacralization of the image, perceived as timeless, unique and exclusive. Then we have the public. Hundreds of people, passers-by en masse perpetually wandering around the halls and galleries. Visitors give way to those waiting outside, in long lines, undifferentiated masses, as at any major airport, in railway stations or seaside resorts... People looking for an attendance certificate, with Leonardo's Gioconda in the Louvre being an absolute example, inevitably sealed nowadays with a selfie. While the canvas portrait, without truly being seen, and vested with compulsive admiration, occupies its room with sovereign indifference, the visitors seem to want to reverse the logic of perception, without suspecting that they are the ones who are being watched.

In the already mention Struth's photographic series we observe precisely the passers-by returning the gaze of the photographer's camera which attempts to find an impossible hierarchy, since the canvases of the great classical painters have been reduced

⁹ See Thomas Struth Photographs 1978 -2010 (2010), available at <http://www.thomasstruth32.com/smallsize/index.html>

to a condition of images like any others, thanks to an imaginary whirlwind, a kind of ontological disfigurement through which being, representing and seeing have become indiscernible categories. It seems fitting then to transpose to this type of socio-cultural environment the figure of the urban crowd as synonym for the modern hero, as was so well characterized by Baudelaire. In this overlapping of images and situations, the crowd ultimately replaces the sacred heroism of painting. “for the *flâneur*, the joy of watching is triumphant” (Benjamin, 1995, p. 71).

In this tangle of images, practices and possibilities, painting is a condition of plastic materiality. To all intents and purposes, establishes a binding relationship with memory, but also with the painting of the past. This was possibly the decision that inspired and animated Francis Bacon (1909-1992), whose visceral, sexual painting deconstructs and rebuilds such notions as portrait, self-portrait or still life, and Lucien Freud (1922-2011), creator of powerful representations of bodies, faces, landscape frameworks, imprisoned in a equally visceral and cruel realism¹⁰.

In these two oeuvres the materiality of the painting, its happening, as a unique aesthetic fact, has a huge impact. On the other hand, its “making” requires an ability to handle shadow and light, colour and form, which are inscribed in the field of judgement, creating a space for a critique of images that could not be achieved otherwise. Painting has become a minority, it’s true. However, this does not prevent it from being permeated by an intensity that give it the authority to judge and discuss the value and power of images in time. An impossible task for photography and cinema that construct space and time, document and comment, confront reportage and poetry. They create illusions and allusions, make-believe and suspicions, which is, after all, their task.

Recent decades have been marked by a re-evaluation of painting. The subject has been present throughout the critical, media and communications debate, following the Frankfurt School theses on the cultural industries, the post-modernist debates (Lyotard, Vattimo and others), or Bauman’s perspective in defending a liquid fluidity at a time when identities have become unstable.

There is a text by Zelizer (2010), which deals with the relations between image and memory crossing them with journalism. In this text she amplifies a reflection on the discourse about the crisis and the climate of uncertainty. From her reading of a dialogue between Bauman and Carlo Bordoni, in which the latter argues that “modernity has withdrawn its promises”, and then that post-modernity has “underestimated” them, and that appearances have triumphed at the expense of the loss of substance (Bauman & Bordoni, 2016, p. 75), she points out that the crisis presupposes the imaginary of an overcoming. Actually, it should be noticed that Bauman expressed doubts as to whether it was the promises that were withdrawn; rather, he believed that it was the strategies and “models of a society that failed” (Bauman & Bordoni, 2016, p. 80).

¹⁰ The catalogue raisonné of his Bacon’s work was published in 2016 in five volumes, edited by Martin Harrison, published by The Estate of Francis Bacon (2016). The catalogue raisonné of Lucien Freund is the product of a collaboration between David Dawson, director of the Lucien Freund Archive, who worked closely with the painter and was his model, the art critic Martin Gayford, and the editor Mark Holborn. The two-volume work was published by Phaidon, London.

A combination of risk, contingency, indetermination and liquidity by means of which Zelizer articulates key notions of Ulrich Beck, Rorty, Eisenstadt and Bauman himself, leads her to conclude that “although the crisis is a phenomenon with material dimensions”, it is also a phenomenon “shaped by discourse” (Zelizer, 2018, pp. 91, 95).

In cultural terms, painting is also inscribed in the materiality of crises in the same way as do unemployment, insecurity, death and fear, economic recession, or even the stalemates of journalism itself. Surviving its own crisis, in an act of intellectual persistence and with its own exclusive logic of image, painting restores a nexus in our questioning of what is real (and therefore in our questioning of all the mechanical images that absorb it and now become entangled with it). This is why Zelizer’s warning (2018, p. 106) acquires a worrying tone in this context: “since institutions are, necessarily, a fertile soil for a crisis, it remains to see if uncertainty will ever disappear in a landscape with outlines established institutionally”. Painting is thus an stubbornness in the contemporary art scene.

Tuymans (1958), widely considered as one of the most important painters of our time, presented an anthological exhibition in Venice (at the Palazzo Grassi) entitled “La Pelle” which brings together works produced between 1986 and 2019 as part of the Pinault collection¹¹. Tuymans dedicated himself to cinema in the 1980s and his subsequent painting reveals the importance of cinema in the reflection that leads from reality to dream and fiction. In his work, painting stems from cinema and other de-materialized images to explore ambiguity and incompleteness work. Motifs from the press, from the internet and spontaneous photographs taken by the artist with his own mobile phone are the raw material of a painting that is capable of giving significance to the images¹².

One of the main works of the exhibition is named *Schwarzheide* (2019), after a forced labour camp in Nazi Germany where some of the prisoners secretly made drawings and hid them to prevent confiscation. It is these drawings and this camp which the artist makes present in a painting that refers to the beautiful forest that cradled a horrific and hideous place at its heart, camouflaged from the gaze of the inhabitants living nearby. The visitor has to walk through the interior of the Grassi Palace and, immersed in its beautiful architecture, climb to the level of the balustrade encircling the atrium where the painting was installed in order to realize this powerful metaphor. As Caroline Bourgeois stresses, it has been proven that distance and the viewpoint are essential in the reading of a work (Bourgeois, 2019).

Germany and the holocaust are not a recent concern in Tuymans’ work. The painting explores light and twilight, the play between concealment and evidences, the submerged and the floating. “Dusk” is the title of another exhibition by this artist in which he uses photographs of Nazi concentration camps, evokes strange illnesses, abandoned and phantasmatic spaces. At the root of this exhibition was a combination of paintings,

¹¹ See <https://www.palazzograssi.it/en/about/collection/>

¹² See the guidebook with texts by Caroline Bourgeois available at https://www.palazzograssi.it/site/assets/files/7599/guidina_la_pelle_tuymans_fra.pdf. Exhibition open to the public between 24/03/2019 and 06/01/2020, curated by Caroline Bourgeois and Marc Donnadieu; the catalogue includes texts, in addition to the already mentioned artist, Jarrett Earnest and Patricia Falguières, Marsilio Editori (2019). See, *inter alia*, Nuno Crespo’s critical review, “Luc Tuymans: a persistência política da pintura”.

images and the objects. The exhibition was part of a project dear to the artist that consisted of transposing, using the time (a Heideggerian time?) of Villa Wannsee, where on January 20, 1942, “the final solution” was discussed at the highest level¹³.



Figure 13: Luc Tuymans, “Schwarzheide” in the “La Pelle” exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi, Venice

Source: Siegal, 2019

For Tuymans (1958/2006, n.p.) “the static image can be infinitely more powerful in the memory than the moving image”. Although the image is “fixed”, the mental equivalent is constantly and increasingly in movement. We are therefore, as *committed spectators*, led to unravel the intricacies of subjective (pictorial) representation, instant recording (photography) and projection (cinematography), with their Freudian resonances based on transference. To orient ourselves in such meanderings, which after all are those of history itself, we must recover their meaning. And this is, increasingly, in a process of loss: “the question of whether photography, film, television or even the internet is art by no means offsets the question of the quality of a particular communication of meaning” (Tuymans, 1958/2006, n.p.).

Painting cannot be manipulated or deleted. It ages, is restored, takes on the scars of time. Or else it can only be destroyed, in the same way that witnesses are wiped out. But still it leaves a trail, a furrow of emotional sacralization. And it is essential to the critical understanding of all images, since it enables the viewer to coexist with uncertainty, perhaps to cope with it. Its material presence and its metaphysics call for a cleansed gaze. The filmmaker Mizoguchi (1898-1956) said: the eyes must be washed between each

¹³ Luc Tuymans “Dusk/Penumbra” was shown to the public between 14/07/2006 and 14/10/2006 at Casa de Serralves, Porto, Portugal, Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art. See specifically the introductory text by the then director of the museum, João Fernandes, which highlights the confrontation between a place/space whose significance is not immediately apprehended and whose meaning is always on the verge of being betrayed, in its representation. In this respect, we should keep in mind that Tuymans intended to exhibit a set of his paintings in the space where the Nazi meeting that defined the “final solution”, chaired by Reinhard Heydrich (head of the SS), took place in the Villa am Grossen Wannensee. One of the paintings shows a photograph of Heydrich from an old Nazi propaganda magazine. As Fernandes noted, “Tuymans’ original intention was to break the chain of signifiers and establish a violent confrontation between his paintings and one of the original scenarios of a reality that challenges representation” (quoted catalogue. Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Serralves, Porto, 2006). Exhibition curated by Hans Rudolf Reust who wrote in the catalogue referred to here: “what remains is the wordless fascination of unique paintings, which leave no one at ease, because the process of thought, with its meticulously painted lacunae, can never be closed” – what was left unfinished, the History to which we are returned, to fill (other painful and tragic) gaps in memory.

look. A quote that a film historian evokes on the subject of John Ford, a director with an evident visual clarity. A technical clarity, which in the case of Ford (a man of westerns, duels and rivalries moved by a biblical sense of justice true to his Irish roots), entrenched him in the industrial pragmatism of the Hollywood system¹⁴.

In this other canvas of which paintings are made, like skin covered with “paint”, the image is cleansed of accumulation and saturation. The imaginary of the equivalences between “true” and “false” in the world of representation is now a mine-free field. Spectators can finally isolate themselves from barbarism and subjectivities in order to claim, should they so wish, the condition of true witnesses.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to technical reproducibility and the multiplication of their impact, images have gained a speed of propagation and an exchange value that rivals the word, especially the mediatized word. Images can be used precisely to expunge the words or memories of the very existence of outcasts (as is the case with the alteration of images under the Stalinist regime). And they can be manipulated, staged, to replace undesirable realities (think of the need to normalize the unformalizable as is the case with Hitler’s “family album”). However, in both cases, we have taken images from a time not yet subjected to the banalization of photography that we see nowadays. We might even ask ourselves if the images that appear here, were they contemporary to us, and went through a process of vulgarization resulting from repetition, would continue to have the same impact. Probably not, if we think of democratic contexts.

However, the answer may be different if we think of dictatorial contexts in which the repetition of images may be associated with the perpetuation of strategies of terror, as if the image itself were a kind of vigilant, ever-present “eye” and, potentially, a way of normalizing fear. Not in the sense of removing the drama, but in the sense of “getting used to” an existence under surveillance. By making it thinkable, the extreme mainstreaming of the image, in each of these situations, would have the same impact: a kind of acquiescence with the unacceptable. This would lead to indifference or, conversely, to the absence of a prospect of escape from fear. Now, it is the landscape of conformism, of banalization, of compliance, determined by irrelevance or by fear, that painting seems to want to rescue. And it assumes another power: the power of the gaze. While photography, in the cases analysed here, is manipulated by a prescriptive power of seeing, painting, and some photographs or images contextualized (Tuymans in Palazzo Grassi, for example), produced and thought out in accordance with the logic of painting, stubbornly challenge the existence of a meaning, of a questioning of what is real that does not fade

¹⁴ See John Ford catalogue, literary organized by João Bénard da Costa, published at the presentation by the Cinemateca Portuguesa and the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (Lisbon, Portugal) of the film cycle dedicated to film-maker John Ford, with the support and under the auspices of the United States Embassy in Lisbon, November/February 1984. The reference to Mizoguchi comes specifically from the text by Luís de Pina “John Ford – a luz e o olhar”, which the cinema historian, critic and ex-director of the Cinemateca Portuguesa, wrote for the event.

away: painting cannot be erased. Painting becomes etched into the real as a witness and it calls forth witnesses.

Translation: Allison Byrne

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