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A Painful Labor: Photography and Responsibility

A painful labour: responsibility and photography

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This paper considers the tension between photography and responsibility despite the avalanche of objections regarding documentary's false promise to awaken social conscience. By examining the encounter with images of suffering through a psychoanalytic register, the paper tries to articulate what Barthes describes as the 'painful labour' of responding to the photographic other – an encounter that illuminates the limit of the spectator's ability to respond. Photographs provide an occasion to register this limit, which, I argue, opens up the spectator's traditional notions of responsibility from a set of moral duties towards a questioning of the ethical relation.

OVERTURE

Photography seems like an unlikely place to open an inquiry into the nature of responsibility. Since Susan Sontag's caustic criticism of photography as 'an act of non-intervention' (1977: 11), there has been an avalanche of objections regarding documentary's false promise to awaken social conscience.¹ This avalanche has perhaps only tied the question of responsibility and photography closer together, but nevertheless, Sontag's seminal work, *On Photography*, opened an unbreachable sense of doubt in the idea that photography could facilitate any kind of ethical relationship between self and other. Sontag recently revisited these claims in her second book on photography in thirty years, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. This text both extends and revises her initial claims about the impact of photography; less certain and yet more sceptical, this book argues there is no longer any innocence about the depravity of humanity – the current assault of images of atrocity has made sure of this – but also that this knowledge has done nothing to alter such horrific acts. The critical disappointment with this failure falls like a weight across the history of documentary: 'We feel we ought to be better ... because we see how much we fail; and this paradoxical but familiar fact tends to make us worse' (Susan Isaacs cited in Rose 1993: 36, emphasis added).

In fact it is precisely when photography emerged on the scene, Sontag's argument implicitly suggests, that responsibility lost something of its original meaning. Predictably, the Latin route for the word responsibility is *respond*, as in 'to answer', but as well *re-spondere*,

which means to pledge, a kind of solemn promise. This inheritance suggests responsibility turns on a fundamental relation between I and thou – one responds, after all, to an other. But the modern definition of responsibility includes something more, and perhaps here is where Sontag bristles: to be responsible is also *to take authority for a person or thing*, a kind of paternalistic overtone that suggests there is a fundamental asymmetry at the heart of these ethical relations. The power of this authority, Sontag's thesis in *On Photography* suggests, renders imaging-making a social practice that actually reverses the code of ethical conduct: 'the act of photographing is more than passive observing ... it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening' (12). For Sontag, photography is almost without exception, a site of absolute ethical failure. And the strength of this accusation has not lost any force in the last 30 years.

In spite of the strength and endurance of this claim, my aim here is to reopen – or perhaps to hold open – this ethical tension: what is the connection between photography and responsibility? Certainly the tensions present within photography have contributed to the modern sense of responsibility, as authoritative as it may be, since photographs reflect and organize personal and public structures of attention and therefore personal and public structures of concern. At the centre of this inquiry therefore is a passion to articulate how the complex medium of photography offers a unique kind of psychic encounter for the spectator – an encounter between self and a kind of otherness.²

Roland Barthes' influential text *Camera Lucida* is perhaps one of the most articulate attempts to capture the difficulty of this encounter. In the midst of the painful experience of sorting through photographs shortly after his mother's death, Barthes asks himself: 'Did I recognize her?' (1981: 65). The inescapable obligation, Barthes grieves, 'compelled me to perform a *painful labour*; straining towards the essence of identity, I was struggling among images partially true and therefore totally false' (66). While Barthes fails to hold open the question he poses in his encounter with the

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image, I think this 'painful labour' is an apt description for the work of responding to the photographic other.

TELLING STORIES: FROM THE EYE TO THE MOUTH

Much writing about photography refers to storytelling, as though telling stories explains both what is happening in the image and the complexity of psychical responses. Of course, photographs have often been used illustratively alongside text and captions, moreover, the stories made around photographs often follow the structure of the apparatus itself. They are punctuated accounts, often moving too quickly, jumping from impression to impression, all disrupted by profound silences where a surcharge of meaning remains imprisoned, unsayable. Despite the drive to narrate, at some point in the encounter with images, the viewer falls silent too, suggesting the technology demands narrative but also resists that demand. Evidenced by this rather unruly psychical response, it is clear the relationship to photography contains great affect, and so at precisely the moment when it is possible to agree that there is something to be seen in photographs, at the precise moment when it is possible to say *something*, at that very moment, Derrida says, 'the plot begins to unravel' (1998, no pagination).

Charles Simic (2003) recently offered his story. It begins with him as a child, thumbing through his grandmother's stack of magazines, some that contained engravings of battle scenes: 'They were done in the heroic manner. The soldiers charged with grim determination through smoke and carnage ... It was the kind of stuff that made me want to play war immediately' (8). Surprisingly, the year was 1944 and the location was Belgrade, where Simic reports that the Russian army was closing in and the Germans were digging in to fight, while the Americans and the English took turns bombing the city. As war raged on around him, he admits that he made no connection between the heroic engravings and what he witnessed in the streets. This observation triggers a rich set of remembrances:

Even a six-year-old has numerous opportunities to see dead people and be frightened. Still I made no connection then, that I recall, between what I saw in those magazines and the things I witnessed on the streets. That was not the kind of war I and my friends were playing. This may sound unbelievable, but it took war photographs and documentaries that I saw a few years later to

impress upon me what I had actually lived through.

One day when I was in third or fourth grade our whole class was taken to a museum to see an exhibition of photographs of atrocities ... We, of course, had no idea what we were about to see, suspecting it would be something boring, like paintings of our revolutionary heroes. What we saw instead were photographs of executions. Not just people hanged or shot by a firing squad, but others whose throats were being cut ... I recall a photograph of a man sitting on another man's chest with a knife in his hand, looking pleased to be photographed ... I could not talk about this to anybody afterward; neither did my schoolmates say anything to me. Our teachers probably lectured us afterward about what we saw, but I have no memory of what they said. All I know is that I never forgot this day. (8)

Simic's story is a typical first encounter with images of suffering: boredom, surprise, great affect, the memory of specific details, the moment of falling silent and later, afterwards at some point, the need to recount this whole experience. Perhaps his most important observation is the distinction between living through war and witnessing it via the mechanism of photography – seeing dead people on the streets is not the same as seeing them in photographs. Further, the photograph somehow enabled Simic to understand what he had 'actually lived through'. So while both these kinds of experiences seem to generate silence, the photographs enabled a return to speaking.

Walter Benjamin's long essay on Nikolai Leskov's work also gets at the question of narrating difficult experiences. The opening episode in his paper reflects on the broader relationship between war and storytelling:

Was it not noticeable at the end of the [First World] war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? ... A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn street car now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath those clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny fragile human body. (1931/1966: 84).

Benjamin seems to suggest, like Simic, that witnessing war – and in particular *mechanized* warfare – takes away the ability to speak about it. This has been a

common observation of analysts working with traumatized patients: while survivors of violence have an imperative to tell, they are also haunted by the 'impossibility of telling', where an attempt to articulate their experiences collapses in the very effort of speaking.³

In his last book, W. G. Sebald (2003) tried to probe the silence about the destruction of German cities at the close of World War II. Given the scope of urban devastation that Sebald describes, it seems surprising that these experiences remain outside of German cultural memory. Sebald pushes at the question of how people survived and why there are no records of the experience, himself not even sure how such a 'natural history of destruction should begin' (33). From a small handful of resources, he describes the great tides of people that were always on the move after the bombings. Apart from this distraught wandering, Sebald suggests, 'with remarkable speed, social life ... revived ... The population decided – out of sheer panic at first – to carry on as if nothing had happened' (41). Simic's story corroborates Sebald's thesis: 'People can get used to bombs, mass killings, and other horrors of warfare. Today I find it hard to believe that I once swiped a helmet off a dead German soldier, but I did' (Simic 2003: 9).

How people carry on during and in the immediate aftermath of horror is not at issue here, although in his descriptions of the role of music in the collapse of the Reich, Sebald suggests that Germans carried on because they carried with them a presumed metaphysical meaning of their experience: 'their breasts swelled with perverse pride to think that no one in human history had ever played such overwhelming tunes or endured such suffering as the Germans' (2003: 44). Sebald's hypothesis is perhaps sweeping but it does return us to the question of *how* the experience of devastation is narrated and how that narration secures (or not) historical memory.

Against such popular tendencies to rely on transcendent notions, Sebald picks out the few German writers who were trying to record what they actually saw as plainly as possible. And this sense of narration – storytelling that keeps the story free from justification – is the kind that Walter Benjamin also espouses: 'Actually, it is half the art of storytelling', Benjamin writes, 'to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it' (1931/1996: 89). What makes a story memorable, Benjamin argues – what commends it to memory – is a 'chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis' (91). This kind of storytelling can arouse astonishment

and thoughtfulness because unlike 'information' which is always already shot through with explanation, it is left up to the reader to interpret things the way he understands them: 'the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks' (89). This method of narration offers 'counsel', writes Benjamin, a kind of wisdom that is dying out. So to answer Sebald's question about why there is no cultural memory of the devastating bombing of German cities, Benjamin might say that mechanized war is a kind of warfare that targets, in part, the very ability to communicate and therefore to remember.

My argument here is quite simple: photographs, and in particular photographs of atrocity, work against this warfare – but not simply because of the commonly held notion that an increased public awareness will somehow engender a more democratic populous, as if simply the ability to 'see more' will mobilize a better cultural memory. Rather, the photographic medium *intrinsically* offers a trace of the same counsel Benjamin describes of the great storytellers: a compact 'description' of reality seemingly devoid of psychological analysis. In themselves, photographs of suffering generally offer no explanation; their report is the driest. This is the very pedagogy hidden within the technology itself – an indication that the wisdom that Benjamin describes as 'counsel woven into the fabric of real life' has not disappeared entirely (1931/1966: 86–87). In warfare against which we have little defence, the prevalence of photography documenting the plight of war's victims is a sign that all hope is not lost. In Simic's case, the photographs allowed for a return to speaking about his own experiences. This is possible because of the photograph's offering of 'objective evidence', which in turn makes recognition of one's own experience possible – a recognition that relies on the non-recognition of the photograph: its distance enabled Simic to see (and therefore to imagine himself) as he was never able to see before – as witness to the witness watching.

Of course images have always been used to help wage war: 'During the fighting between the Serbs and Croats at the beginning of the recent Balkan wars ... the same photographs of children killed in the shelling of a village were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings. Alter the caption, and the children's deaths could be used and reused' (Sontag 2003: 10). Sontag's account is certainly troublesome, however the increasing use of such captions only signifies the photograph's refusal to explain. Captions, as directive, explanatory tags, are *needed* to accompany particularly difficult images in order to condemn (or

celebrate) the violence depicted in them. The caption helps to generate the 'appropriate' response since the photograph itself often refuses to offer a definitive position. The photograph impassively records the 'uselessness' of suffering, and the photograph's caption or contextual use renders that uselessness *useful*.⁵ Of course the suffering of others can be socially *used* – in this way Sontag is absolutely right: 'all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions' (10). But the photograph itself makes us uncomfortably aware of this exploitation.

'The storyteller', Benjamin reminds us, 'is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself' and this, too, is how photographs counsel us (109). Perhaps like particular sounds' ability to reverberate, to be moved by the image suggests the representation has triggered a recognition with one's own memory reserves. Indeed, as Simic's story reveals, the recognition of others' suffering must be made meaningful – whether to justify a particular political end, or simply to suffer for the other's suffering. The recognition of this work might be the beginning of responsibility itself. But the real 'painfulness' of this labour is to sustain the sense of ego displacement – to *recognize* the 'not me' in the image, which means perpetually asking – but never answering – the question 'do I recognize those depicted there?'⁶ The moment of falling silent in the face of the image might be the moment when this labour is most felt. Charles Simic, in an unconscious recognition, initially fell silent in his encounter with images of suffering. In his return to speech – retelling the story some 40 years later – he betrays a thoughtfulness that the silence allowed.

One need not worry that the effect of these 'ethical reference points' will 'wear off', or that compassion, stretched to its limit in the face of all the world's suffering, will go numb. In fact one might draw a sort of desperate hope from the prevalence of such photographs. For if people can get used to bombs, mass killings and the other horrors of warfare, and yet can be halted into silence by a single image, these photographs are perhaps an indication of resistance in the ongoing war against our ability to tell stories and to remember – an indication of the possibility of wisdom.

THE PERPLEXITIES OF (VISUAL) RESPONSIBILITY

Throughout Sontag's (2003) newest set of essays on images of atrocity, she seems almost uncertain about her complaint about such photographs, and yet she

persistently circles around the same worry: protesting inhumane suffering is very distinct from simply recognizing it in pictures. She begins with a critique of the belief that one could be actively mobilized to oppose war by an image or series of images. Citing Virginia Woolf's anti-war book *Three Guineas* and Ernst Friedrich's collection of photographs *War Against War!* Sontag dryly notes that this early naiveté – that the shock of such pictures could not fail to unite people of good will against war – has long faded: 'Who believes today that war can be abolished? No one, not even the pacifists' (5). While she blames the constant and pervasive media onslaught of images of suffering for this loss of faith, Sontag briefly concedes that 'our failure is one of imagination, of empathy: we have failed to hold this reality [of the carnage of war] in mind' (8).

Sontag is a critic who has long been interested in the relationship between aesthetics and ethics and her early polemic against the image is well known: 'To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power' (1977: 4). Sontag saw a direct relation between the action (or rather inaction) of taking a photograph and the spectator's encounter with the image, the two are folded together limb by limb: interest in another's pain or suffering begins with the photographer and is promulgated by the viewer. Simply by looking, both voyeuristically encourage whatever is going on to keep happening. To look at photographs – because one *only* looks – is to become directly culpable for the erasure of the other's singularity. The photographer's crime becomes the viewer's: one watches when one should be helping.

But there is ambivalence in her argument too, and even in the early text, it circles around the issue of the impact these images of suffering may have. Reading Sontag's prose, one is never quite convinced of her dismissal of photography as simply a distant, voyeuristic relation to the world since her own painful descriptions of encountering images of suffering are of singular eloquence. Sontag presents herself and her own encounters as anything but distant; she is certainly transfixed by images, but not anaesthetized. Consider the following for example:

One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was the photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau

which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I fully understood what they were about. What good was served by seeing them? They were only photographs – of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying. (1977: 19–20)

Despite that her next sentence returns to her position that images anaesthetize, Sontag has offered perhaps the most singularly powerful description of an encounter with the photographic reproduction of another's suffering. Here seems to be the 'painful labour' of the witness.⁷ But she quickly recognizes that she is not a 'witness' to the horrors of the camps. Despite the responsibility she feels, the injury of seeing the other's suffering, she immediately retreats into questioning the significance of the moment: 'What good was served by seeing them?' She questions her power to respond adequately: 'They were only photographs – of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve'. The encounter initially reads *as if* she had encountered the horror of the camps themselves, but now, as an adult, she realizes the photograph is not a direct experience of witnessing but only the trick of a mechanical apparatus. As a naive 12-year-old, she realizes she was fooled. Part of her tightens.

In her recent text, Sontag does not change her mind much on the power of photographs to protest suffering. Her opening pages set out her familiar position: 'The photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They create the illusion of consensus' (2003: 6). And yet she has been struck again, wounded by more images, this time by a series of three colour pictures by Tyler Hicks that *The New York Times* ran in 2001:

The triptych depicted the fate of a wounded Taliban soldier in uniform who had been found in a ditch by Northern Alliance soldiers

advancing toward Kabul. First panel: being dragged on his back by two of his captors – one has grabbed an arm, the other a leg – along a rocky road. Second panel (the camera is very near): surrounded gazing up in terror as he is being pulled to his feet. Third panel: at the moment of death, supine with arms outstretched and knees bent, naked and bloodied from the waist down, being finished off by the military mob that has gathered to butcher him. An ample reservoir of stoicism is needed to get through the great newspaper of record each morning, given the likelihood of seeing photographs that could make you cry. And the pity and disgust that pictures like Hicks' inspire should not distract you from asking what pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths are *not* being shown. (13–14)

Already tightened, Sontag now perpetually prepared, opens the newspaper with stoicism, braced for the careless onslaught she imagines that awaits her. And there is no question that the shocking image is journalism's goldmine; reporters are constantly on the hunt for more dramatic images to emblazon their dailies. But obviously now, given my editing of Sontag's prose, I am resolute to recover the moment of recognition of a kind of otherness inaugurated by the image of suffering. In fact, with Sontag's help, one might make out two distinct elements to this encounter – first, the moment of recognition, the wounding paralysis, the horror and revulsion one feels when struck by an image of suffering. This experience is perhaps an intense version of a familiar yet inchoate bond to others, what Freud called 'identification', the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person. And as Sontag's initial encounter as a twelve year-old with the images of Nazi camps affirms, one almost always encounter this relationship before understanding the terms of such a duty, before understanding the responsibility of recognizing another's suffering.

The second step, the work of *responding*, can never, of course, be adequate to the initial call. The helplessness and horror of bearing witness to suffering brings with it the demand for a *response*, and yet one's response to photographs can do nothing to alleviate the suffering depicted. It is important to distinguish these two aspects in the encounter with images of atrocity – the initial recognition of an other whose suffering is represented in the image and the inability to respond to that suffering – since it is their awful duality that is perhaps what Sontag finds so painful.

As Sontag points out, it becomes immediately obvious that recognition of a stranger's suffering is not enough. She asks, 'What does it mean to protest suffering, as distinct from acknowledging it?' (Sontag 2003: 40), and in doing so implies that knowledge of suffering demands something more.

During the Vietnam War, John Berger wrote that looking at images of agony can only incite two responses: 'We are filled either with despair or indignation. Despair takes on the other's suffering to no purpose. Indignation demands action' (1991: 38). It is apparent that both (traditional) thinking and (traditional) morality are useless in the face of witnessing suffering, but additionally Sontag and Berger condemn the photograph for displacing the spectator's ability to *actually* respond. In both cases, they argue, the issue of the violence that has caused the suffering is depoliticized: 'The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition', Berger writes, 'It accuses nobody and everybody. Confrontation with a photographed moment of agony can mask a far more extensive and urgent confrontation ... Yet the double violence of the photographed moment actually works against this realization' (40). So while the photograph of suffering inaugurates a sense of responsibility, its structure is limited; it somehow prevents one from taking action, from answering the call it seems to emit.

Theodor Adorno (1973) has also written about this dilemma: the 'painful labour' of encountering knowledge of suffering. Much like Sontag who cuts her life into two parts, before she knew of the death camps and afterwards, in his seminal text, *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno speaks of the 'drastic guilt of him who was spared' (363). Of course Adorno left Europe before he faced the possibility of the Nazis camps, but in that escape he still recognized himself to have *survived*. Among other things, this survival meant living with the knowledge of others' suffering, and encountering evidence of that suffering afterwards, perhaps like Sontag, through a painful meeting with photographs. Adorno suggests there are only two routes in living with such knowledge, both wrong ways of living:

Thinking men and artists have not infrequently described a sense of being not quite there, of not playing along, a feeling as if they were not themselves at all, but a kind of spectator. Others find this repulsive; it was the basis of Kierkegaard's polemic against what he called the esthetic sphere ... [But] the inhuman part of it, the ability to keep one's distance as a spectator and to rise above

things, is in the final analysis the human part ... Spellbound, the living have a choice between involuntary ataraxy – an esthetic life due to weakness – and the bestiality of the involved. Both are wrong ways of living. But some of both would be required for the right *désinvolture* and sympathy. (363–364)

After an encounter with the knowledge of atrocity, these two routes only then: the 'esthetic life', which means living in despair as a detached spectator, endlessly reciting the line, 'what does it really matter?' or, the 'bestiality of the involved' where one might take our rank next to the activists and humanitarians who endlessly take up the experience of encountering suffering as a call to *do something*. To do nothing is unforgivably weak, but to act is barbarous since nothing can be done. I find myself echoing Sontag's plea. Since nothing can be done, what good can be made from seeing such things? Adorno's hint that the life of spectator is in fact more human leads us back into the bind for an answer.

The photograph is crucial because of the fact it reveals – devastatingly – the utter inability to prevent suffering. In the painful encounter with the image lies the responsibility to recognize that individuals are represented in photographs, to recognize their suffering, but also a second responsibility: to recognize the impossibility of that recognition. Barthes asks: 'How can we look without seeing?' (1981: 111). The question implies that in looking at photographs of strangers' suffering, one must recognize the responsibility in looking, responsibility for recognizing that suffering has happened, but also responsibility for recognizing that the suffering is not *for us*. Sontag and Berger's worry that photographs 'depoliticize' makes sense, given that in looking at images of atrocity one *must* observe suffering *without* being about to interfere.

Undoubtedly, the intensity with which photographs of suffering circulate the public realm presses the issue of responsibility into a heightened pitch. Sontag's anxiety about such images is probably warranted. And yet, *because* of her anxiety *there must be* a responsibility. To borrow from Freud: where the photograph was, there responsibility must become.⁸ While it is true that photography can never prevent the suffering it displays, this heroic wish – that one could somehow prevent suffering – has in fact been made possible by the apparatus itself. The poverty and disappointment of photographs is the ground upon which the possibility of an imagination of hope rests. Adorno quotes Benjamin: 'For the sake of the hopeless only are we

given hope' (378). The photograph of suffering presents both: hopelessness and therefore possibility of hope. In this way, the photograph is the exemplary site for encountering the painful labour of facing responsibility to others and the world.

THE COMPULSION TO REPEAT: WHAT CAN BE SEEN?

If forced to reduce the differences between Sontag's most recent position on the public presence of photographs of atrocity and her earlier view into a single sentence, it would go something like this: No longer sure of the complicity between photo-making and the manufacturing of war, Sontag has allowed doubt to creep into her thinking. Much can be gleaned from this doubt: the question of the prevalence of images of suffering spirals very close at times to the problem of war itself, but as she finally suggests, nothing is *certain* when faced with these questions; such issues demand a measure of ambivalence.

Psychoanalysis has been troubling the claim of certainty for some time and the problem of war only exacerbates the trouble. Jacqueline Rose (1993) has suggested there is a central relationship between knowledge and war; that war seems to represent a primary breakdown in knowledge, and further, thinking about the question of war somehow, paradoxically, involves an evasion of its force. She points out that while the faith in knowledge's ability to bring an end to war was broken during the modern period, war continues to precipitate a crisis in the ability to think about it. Later an even bolder claim about the tension between knowledge and war: 'the theorization of war seems finally to be taken over by its object. The attempt to theorize or master war, to subordinate it to absolute knowledge, becomes a way of perpetuating or repeating war itself' (23–24). For Rose the category of war troubles the boundaries between reality and fantasy, at the same time, exacerbating the opposition. 'How can you recognize the real enemy?' She asks: 'how can you distinguish, with any absolute certainty, between your own projections and real external danger?' (28). The problem with thinking about war, therefore, is that nothing can be known for certain, and at the moment when it is perhaps vitally important to make certain decisions, the category of reality where one might make reasonable judgments seems further out of reach than ever before. If it is not possible, as Rose suggests, to answer or even approach the question of 'why war?' directly, what then, can be known? The question has some relevance to the problem that

opened this paper: when it comes to images of suffering, *what can be seen?*

Since Plato's cave, the relationship between seeing and knowing has always found a home in the debate about representation.⁹ Most recently the debate has settled around discussions of the transmission of traumatic knowledge of the Holocaust, or to be more precise, around the *limits* of the transmission of such knowledge. Claude Lanzmann's (1996) phrase for this limit, 'the obscenity of understanding', refers here to filling in the 'gap' between the *representation* and the *reality* of the subjects depicted in photographs. There can be no explanation of the experiences of those who survived. In Lanzmann's terms: 'There is no solution of continuity between the two [the representation and the experience]; there is rather a gap, an abyss, and this abyss will never be bridged' (206). So apparently, there is *nothing* that can be seen in documentary photographs from the Holocaust; such images only offer an abyss of a *non-transmission*, a *refusal* of knowledge. According to this argument, difficult experiences trouble not only the ability to see, but also the ability to know.

Rose's assertion that the attempt to theorize war somehow repeats the violence of war itself brings more trouble: if indeed the photograph is an attempt to master or put oneself in a relation of power to the event of atrocity, could these images be regarded as a repetition of the initial suffering? Certainly many critics argue such photographs unknowingly inaugurate a recurrence of the violence depicted¹⁰ but the tension between knowledge, representation and repetition is far from straightforward.

Freud's 1914 paper 'Recollection, Repetition, and Working Through' sheds some light on the question. In this technique paper intended for analysts, Freud revises his aim in the therapeutic process, suggesting that rather than simply overcoming the patient's resistances to remember, what should be of prime interest to the analyst is recognizing the resistances themselves. What a patient forgets or represses, Freud suggests, will be expressed in *action*: 'He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without of course being aware of the fact that he is repeating it' (36). Freud's example is a patient who has forgotten that he was intensely ashamed of certain sexual activities, but during the course of his treatment, the patient 'exhibits shame regarding the treatment [psychoanalysis] that he has embarked upon, and tries to keep it secret from all and sundry ... He remains in the grip of this compulsion to repeat for as long as

he remains under treatment; and in the end we realize that this is his way of remembering' (36). So the 'compulsion to repeat' reproduces according to the conditions of the resistance.

The therapist's task, Freud suggests, is to translate these 'memories' (which are manifest in the present as disassociated behaviours) back into terms of the past. For my purpose, the essential question to keep in mind is how photographs, in their circulation and preservation, work as a means by which people 'remember': is the current prevalence of images of suffering merely a symptom of the compulsion to repeat, an *acting out* of a history of violence held in our cultural memory? Or, is the photograph a revision of this memory, a way of translating those experiences back into terms of the past?

Now, of course there are a number of problems in trying to transpose Freud's argument to a question of cultural knowledge. Since its inception, the hardest leap for psychoanalysis has perhaps been the jump from the clinical to the cultural. Sontag writes: 'Photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about. It calls these ideas "memories", and that is, over the long run, a fiction. Strictly speaking there is no such thing as collective memory – part of the same family of spurious notions as collective guilt. But there is collective instruction' (2003: 85). As an aside, Sontag is absolutely right that this transition, between the clinical and the historical, occurs across education. Because knowledge rises and expires in each individual, historical knowledge *must* be taught. But the issue more at hand is whether photographs actually represent memories or whether they are simply disassociated versions of the neurotic compulsion to repeat. The question remains: does the photograph repeat the violence it depicts or can it represent a working through?

Ulrich Baer's *Spectral Evidence: the Photography of Trauma* attempts to address this question via the tension between knowing and seeing. Rather than treating trauma as a photographic 'theme', he examines the parallel between moments arrested mechanically by the camera and those arrested experientially by the traumatized psyche. He examines a weird grouping of images: nineteenth-century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot's photographs of his patient's epiphanic seizures; Mikael Levin and Dirk Reinartz's records of 'empty' landscape and urban sites some 50 years after the atrocity occurred; and a collection of Nazi-taken colour slides from the Łódź ghetto, depicting the city

not as a site of misery but rather as a highly efficient factory town.

Baer begins with 'the first full pictorial explosion of trauma': between 1876 and 1880 at Salpêtrière, his massive hospital in Paris, Charcot employed the mechanism of photography 'to capture the experience of hysteria ... and thus to demystify it – for science, for fame, and for the "hysterics" themselves' (2002: 14). In essence, Charcot placed his patients in a pitch-black room and suddenly flooded the room with a bright flash. The women generally responded by falling into a state of 'catalepsy', their bodies actually 'freezing in complete immobility in the position in which she had been flashed' (Charcot, cited in Baer 2002: 39). Later, Charcot would use these pictures as research tools as well as show them to the patients while they were in a normal state. He seemed to believe the photograph's deferral of an experience from the occasion of its registration might allow the patient to see *herself* in a way she could not during an epiphanic seizure. This 'trace' of an experience that the patient did not seem to own fully was used correctively – to help them to *see* themselves and therefore to *understand* their illness. So almost from its inception, looking (both the physician's and the camera's gaze) was thought to have therapeutic value.

Baer notes the various criticisms of Charcot's method: from Freud's own reservations and eventual ban on a visual relationship between analyst and patient, to contemporary feminist readings that rightly argue that Charcot's gaze was proprietary and aggressively invasive. But impressively, Baer avoids the pitfall of dismissing the images as only offering evidence of systemic institutional abuse of women, eventually arguing that the hysterics were actually mimicking unconsciously the camera's operation – imitating the frozen poses of photograph's subjects. In this sense, he argues, the women 'looked back', as it were, at Charcot's medicalizing gaze.

But what does this insight mean for my discussion of the relationship between knowing and seeing? Does this example lend evidence for Sontag's thesis that the traumatic image only corroborates what it records? At first glance it would seem that this is a clear case of the compulsion to repeat since Charcot's patients 'repeat' the frozen posing of photographic subjects. At worst, the camera, in trying to register trauma, might actually *initiate* it: 'The symptom of trauma-induced hysteria, which seems to be based on a "common, popular" perception of the body in its relation to the camera, may well express a historically accurate experience of

the body in the age of mechanical reproduction' (Baer 2002: 56). So rather than offer a cure, Baer seems to say, the photograph can only re-produce itself – a reading that renders the apparatus itself rather hysterical.

Baer mobilizes Charcot's 'misuse' of traumatic photographs as evidence for the ubiquitous turn away from traumatic images as offering any knowledge of the atrocity depicted in them. And here enters the now familiar thesis: such typical, referentially stable documentary images, Baer writes, 'shelter us from the devastating truth' (2002: 77). Like Lanzmann's prohibition for the documentary image, Baer suggests photography's special relationship to the real is only a potent illusion. And because the experience of trauma itself passes through its subjects without coalescing into memories, Baer's final two chapters privilege photographs where evidence of traumatic experience is either absolutely evacuated (as with Mikael Levin and Dirk Reinartz's work), or images from a German ghetto where suffering is implied, but any direct representation remains hauntingly absent.

While his argument follows Cathy Caruth's astute observation that traumatic experience exhibits a central paradox – that the 'most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it' (cited in Baer 2002: 9–10) – Baer's argument seems to go wrong in the movement from the clinical to the historical. Charcot was perhaps mistaken to think the photograph could reveal to his patients a way to see themselves as they never could before – *as a witness to oneself*.¹¹ However, the photograph's failure to address the traumatized individual represented in the image does not negate their addressivity altogether. In fact, as Benjamin argued, the reproduced image inherently pulls away from its place of registration to be transported before the public.

Simic's (2003) story of living through war and later witnessing evidence of others' suffering in an exhibition of photographs of atrocity illustrates another possibility for encountering the image of suffering – not as a compulsion to repeat, but as a 'working through'. In this case, Simic's anxiety in the face of such images is his 'negative epiphany': the unconscious realization that in looking he is responsible for recognizing the other's pain but can do nothing to alleviate that pain – a state of dependency and, at the same time, a condition of guilt. The photograph, while placing Simic, acts as a sort of intermediary between him and those it represents. In this way, the photograph functions as a sort of medium for difficult historical

knowledge, what Freud called in the clinical setting, 'transference': 'The transference ... forms a kind of intermediary realm between sickness and a healthy life, by means of which the transition from one to the other is accomplished' (1914/2003: 41). As a piece of real life, Freud suggests, transference is the route which leads back to memories, just as Simic is led back to the awakening with his own experience of war through the image of an other's suffering. In this way, the photograph's allegiance is to the realm of the unconscious, but only in that it offers a self-portrait of estrangement.

As a close to the question of what can be seen in images of suffering, I want to return to Rose who ends her discussion on the problem of war with what she calls 'the ethics of failure' (1993: 36). She suggests that we feel we ought to do better because we see how much we fail and yet we go to war because we are not willing to fail *enough*. In this sense – and as with most psychoanalytic proposals there is a certain perverseness here – hanging on to failure pre-empts the need to go to war. Partly Rose's suggestion carries the implication that for psychoanalysis, aggression has something to do with a refusal of guilt. Looking has something to do with guilt too, and perhaps to transpose Rose's proposal, one might hold on to ambivalence, hold on to guilt, and the failure in looking. Simic offers one of the best descriptions of such a failure:

I can recall down to its minutest details Ron Haviv's close-up photograph taken in 1992 of a Muslim man begging for his life on the streets of the town of Belijina in Bosnia. I feel the horror at what is about to take place, can imagine what is being said, know well enough that these men with guns are without pity. *And yet nothing that I can imagine or say equals the palpable reality of this terrified, pleading face on the verge of tears.* (2003: 8, emphasis added)

There is no confusion here about the photograph's inability to depict the reality of those it represents. At the same time as the photograph demands Simic imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is, it reminds him of his failure to do so. In encountering this failure to imagine the other's painful experience, Simic *remembers* his own (and therefore breaks the compulsion to repeat). There *is* something to be seen and therefore known in images of suffering, but it is not the traumatic experiences of others. Rather we are asked to look and to *imagine* their terror, but in this looking, he encounters his own failure to see.

Perhaps this is reason enough to lift the prohibition on the circulation of stranger's suffering: Virginia Woolf's naïve suspicion that encountering such photographs could somehow prevent war might just have been right.

Encountering images of suffering illuminates the limit of the ability to respond. And while many critics have argued there is a relationship between the 'panoptical vision' which news agencies brings to bear on battlefields and the humanitarian intervention on such conflicts, they also argue that images cannot provide the answer (Ignatieff 1999, Keenan 2002, Virilio 2000). And it is true – the explosion of our ability to survey human pain around the world does not offer any guarantee that we will be able to better prevent such suffering. But this increasing vision does not produce a tyranny of non-action either. What the circulation of images of suffering does offer is a lens by which one might think through the problem of responsibility to others and the world. And this is no small feat. For Benjamin, this technique is the 'optical unconscious', a space in human consciousness that gives way to an unconscious recognition of others. 'We didn't trust ourselves at first', a nineteenth-century encounter with photographs reports, 'to look the pictures ... We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see us' (cited in Benjamin 1931/1966: 512). This might be the best description of the encounter with images that I have ever read: absolutely ridiculous, childish almost – a fantastic dream of the face of the other calling out, as though images could see with the eyes that see them.¹² Perhaps this is an uncanny vision we would rather avoid, but it is compelling nonetheless: in looking at others' pain we rightly wonder whether knowledge of their suffering is a restorative act, or in fact complicit with the violence witnessed. Can the tiny faces in the pictures see us doing nothing to help them? Of course not, but this painful labour of *attending* to others' suffering, might be the very beginning of responsibility itself.

NOTES

- [1] See John Berger (1991), Victor Burgin (1982), Halla Beloff (1985), John Tagg (1988), Gross, Katz and Ruby (1988), Martha Rosler (1989), Claude Lanzmann (1996), Andrea Liss (1998), Barbie Zelizer (1998), Michael Ignatieff (1999), Thomas Keenan (2002), Ulrich Baer (2002), and Susan Sontag (2003).
- [2] Photographs record a trace of the presence of the other (what has been described as an indexical trace), but this must, of course, be distinguished from the actual

presence of the other. It might be noted that the kind of otherness present in photographs could be compared to what Freud came to call the unconscious – an otherness within. Freud himself uses the metaphor of the photographic process to describe the unconscious from the beginning: in Freud's book on dreams – where the first extended discussion of the unconscious appears – the components of the mental apparatus are schematized "like a series of lenses" (1900: 685) and he returns to the metaphor of the photographic process again and again as he modifies his conceptualization of the workings of the mind. In this sense, photography becomes a key model for Freud to describe the structure and processes of the psyche. For an excellent essay on the metaphor of the photographic process in philosophy see Sarah Kofman (1999).

- [3] See psychoanalyst Dori Laub's work (1995) for example.
- [4] This is not the only such story, see also Wigoder 2001.
- [5] I draw here on Emmanuel Levinas' (1998) paper "Useless Suffering". Here Levinas makes a critical distinction: "there is a radical difference between *the suffering in the other*, where it is unforgivable to *me*, solicits me and calls me, and suffering in me, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else" (94).
- [6] Kaja Silverman has tried to distinguish a version of looking that contains an 'appetite for alterity' where the viewer's own ego is displaced, and the 'not me' can be introduced into memory reserve (1996: 181–185). In many ways, the mass media's circulation and public 'appetite' for documents of strangers' suffering suggests a movement towards this kind of looking, and in fact, the prevalence of these images might be read as a sign of hope – a way to keep close the wish to end such suffering.
- [7] Significantly there are other descriptions of the negative epiphany of similar encounters with images of suffering. E. Ann Kaplan, for example, also accidentally encountered images from the Shoah (1993: 30–31). Nor is this related only to the Holocaust: South African artist, William Kentridge also describes his encounter with photographs from the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and the subsequent 'appropriation' of them years later in an animation he created entitled *Felix in Exile*: (cited in Christov-Bakargiev 1998: no pagination).
- [8] The phrasing comes from Freud's hope for psychoanalysis: 'Where id was, there the ego shall be' but the possibility of a playfulness with this phrase, its interpretation elsewhere, comes from Deborah Britzman (2003) who makes use of its implications for education: 'Because education can make us nervous, and because education gives us such trouble, then there must be a responsibility that comes after education. Then we can think the thought that where education was, our responsibility can become' (170).

- [9] It is actually Plato's Socrates who immortalizes the philosophical allegory. Kaja Silverman (2000) describes it as follows: 'a prisoner who has been imprisoned in a dark cave since childhood, and who spends his time looking at the shadows cast on the wall in front of him by a complicated projection system, is released from his chains and delivered into sunlight outside. The cave stands for the mundane world, the region outside for the higher reality from which everything – including our world – ostensibly derives ... Socrates maintains that this turn away from the world is spiritual in nature ... The man who looks at the shadows on the cave wall is in prison, visually speaking ... He is enslaved by appearance ... True vision is what we achieve only when all representational mediation has been removed' (1–2).
- [10] Barbie Zelizer (1998) argues generally that the proliferation of Holocaust images is only a repetition of the inaugural violence. From a very different perspective, Thomas Dichmann (1997) argued that the now iconic photograph of an emaciated Fikret Alić standing behind barbed wire in Bosnia in 1992 started a storm of media attention which mobilized international opinion against the Bosnian Serbs and served as 'evidence' of a contemporary holocaust in Europe. The pictures roused international military and humanitarian action and in this case, it could be said the photograph only unknowingly allowed for the *repetition* of the inaugural trauma: 'The International Committee of the Red Cross complained that, thanks to the global excitement caused by the ITN reports, every chance had been lost to attain a solution which would allow the Muslims to remain in the region. On 1 October 1992, the first big Red Cross convoy set off from Trnopolje to ship 1560 refugees over the border into Croatia. In a sense, the exile of thousands of Muslims from their home in Bosnia Herzegovina was thus inadvertently facilitated by the international reaction to the ITN reports from Trnopolje' (59).
- [11] Jorge Semprun, a survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp, also illustrates the failure of the image's ability to address the traumatized individual when he recounts his first encounter with the Allied images of the death camps shown in a movie theatre: 'There were pictures from Buchenwald, too, which I recognized. Or rather: of which I knew for certain that they were from Buchenwald without being sure of recognizing them. Or rather without knowing for certain that I myself had seen them. Or rather: I had experienced them. The difference between what I saw and what I had experienced was confusing' (cited in Brink 2000: 148).
- [12] Jose Saramago ends his terrifying novel *Blindness* with a vision of a church where all the icons' eyes have been covered. This mimics the epidemic of blindness that has befallen the country, with the exception of

one woman who describes this site to her husband (1997: 284).

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