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## **The Referent Was There. The Referent As Flesh** O Referente Esteve Lá. O Referente Como Carne

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# The Referent Was There. The Referent As Flesh

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We set out from the observation that, even though mediation involves and defines the modes of relationship between individuals and the real, reality is unavoidable. However, considering the diluting importance of the referent to legitimizing image production between the 19th and the 20th century, and despite the emergence of photography as a medium involving the referent's presence, the relationship between individuals and images is argued to be largely grounded on a connection between these two entities. These do not need the referent, and this relationship, when specific, may justify approximations such as Roland Barthes' *punctum*. Thus, the image provides a space that allows the subject to project itself beyond it. That space stands as a definition of the image as surface and depth. In contrast, the situation of the images is brought closer to the body's condition. Through this comparison, the importance and reality of the referent, as a "thing in itself", is argued to exist when the image cannot control the excess the referent is, just as the body, when it cannot control the flesh, makes it visible. The image is to the body as the referent is to the flesh. The images of loved ones or war atrocities exemplify this emergence of the referent as a symptom.

**Keywords:** image, referent, war, flesh, *punctum*

## O Referente Esteve Lá. O Referente Como Carne

Parte-se da constatação de que, apesar da mediação que implica e define os modos de relacionamento entre indivíduos e real, a realidade é incontornável. No entanto, e tendo em conta a diluição da importância do referente enquanto forma de legitimação da produção de imagens na passagem do século XIX para o século XX, e apesar da emergência da fotografia enquanto meio que implica a presença do referente, defende-se que a relação entre indivíduos e imagens se funda, em grande medida, numa relação entre estas duas entidades, que prescindem do referente, e que é esta relação, quando específica, que pode justificar aproximações como a do *punctum*, de Roland Barthes. Nesta aceção, existe um espaço, proposto pela imagem, que permite que, *para lá dela*, o sujeito se possa projetar, e que existe como definição da imagem enquanto superfície e profundidade. Como contraponto, aproxima-se a situação das imagens à situação do corpo e, através desta comparação, defende-se que a importância e realidade do referente, como "coisa em si", existe quando a imagem não consegue controlar o excesso que o referente é, tal como o corpo, quando não consegue controlar a carne, a torna visível. A imagem está para o corpo como o referente para a carne. As imagens de entes queridos, ou de atrocidades de guerra, são tidas como exemplo desta emergência do referente, como sintoma.

**Palavras-chave:** imagem, referente, guerra, carne, *punctum*

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## The Referent Was There

In Guy Debord's (1967/2005) *The Society of the Spectacle*, the world is seen as a succession of spectacles, and life is dependent on the mediation between the real and individuals made by images. Jean Baudrillard (1981/1991), in *Simulacra and Simulations*, uses Jorge Luís Borges' fable to speak of a map that covers the whole territory, whereby reality is read through the map or the code. The "metaphysical beauty of this ruined abstraction, witness to a pride tailored to the Empire and rotting like a carcass, returning to the substance of the ground, as the double ends up being confused with the real as it ages" (Baudrillard, 1981/1991, p. 7).

Thinking about the overlap of the image with the real and the latter's authority dilution upon reading the image is certainly seductive, especially when the modality of seeing through the image — reality through the screen (photographing the landscape to see it; communicating with one's neighbour through apps, monitoring the face in the selfie) — is commonplace. However, like Guy Debord's (1967/2005) thesis already announced, the difficulty is thinking of a separation between the real and the mediation of the real, as if one inverted or tainted the other, when, today, with the normalization of gadgets in daily life, life can no longer be understood dually. Indistinction is the rule (Bragança de Miranda, 1995). Sherry Turkle (in an interview with Casalegno, 1999) replaces the difference between real and virtual life and opts to speak of real-life and the rest of life, both parts of individuals' (real) life.

Although the reality is unavoidable in the case of artistic production, the 20th century has diluted the organising and legitimising role of the referent. It introduced the dynamics of valuing meaning and expression over fidelity to the portrayed. A fidelity that has been, throughout history, dependent on the idealisation of the model, as shown by the well-known indignant exclamation of Innocent X at his portrait painted by Velázquez: *troppo vero* (too true). While the referent's role gradually softened throughout the history of painting (although remnants of it persist, as in the drawing classes in the academies), it has found a new means for its appreciation in photography. The primary difference between painting and photography is this excess of the truth of the referent. Rather than the painter stating "I was here" ("Jan van Eyck was here", in Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434), or claiming to have seen what he painted, as Goya in *Disasters of War* (1810-1815), "I saw it", photography instead involves the referent. He was the one there; "the *noeme* of the photograph lies precisely in the fact that *has been*" (Barthes, 1980/2006, p. 111)<sup>1</sup>.

The truth of photography is known to go hand in hand with its falsehood, and right from its invention was it not for the fact that the *Cottingley Fairies* were a montage. In the summer of 1917, in the village of Cottingley (England), Frances Griffiths and her cousin Elsie Wright had themselves photographed with fairies. Years later, the photographs were displayed at the Theosophical Society, and Arthur Conan Doyle, in attendance, asked for the images to be analysed and concluded that they were not faked (W. Mitchell, 1992, pp. 194-95). In her work *Fotografia e Verdade* (Photography and Truth), Margarida Medeiros (2010) dwells on the analysis of spirit photography and the various expedients implicit in its production. She describes cases in which fraud is confessed and others in which, instead, the images of ghosts and spectres, which usually appear behind the portrayed individual, are believed to be true. Just as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle believed that fairies existed, so many men of science in the 18th and 19th centuries believed in spirit photography, as there was an association between photographic automatism and the truth of the images.

Phillippe Dubois (1982/1991) draws from André Bazin's statement, "photography transfers reality from the object to its reproduced form" (Bazin, 1992, p. 19). He concludes that photography stands as an *index*<sup>2</sup> more than the mimetic resemblance, as a trace of the real, as an entity that defines through the physical contiguity between image and referent. It determines a singular relation between referent and sign, for the latter always refers back to the real and witnesses to it. Dubois (1982/1991, p. 44) compares the relation between photography and referent to the one between fire and smoke, shadow and presence, scar and wound, ruin and trace, symptom and disease. These

associations, dependencies and continuities make the referent necessary in photography.

The digital paradigm has put the authority of the referent and the guarantee of photographs' truth into perspective. Still, at least commonly, a certain concession towards the referent is kept: individuals keep the conviction that, although possibly altered, the referent was there. Probably because, as Roland Barthes (1980/2006) states, photography tells the truth on principle and, to fake, it must be worked on: "they are, on the contrary, trick pictures: the photograph is laborious only when it fakes" (p. 96).

"The referent having been there", as an index, is photography's prerogative — the removal of interpretation in the production of true images, Veronica, the *vera icon* — but, beyond this assertion of truth and from a distance, knowing that Robert Capa's photograph, *The Falling Soldier* (1936) may have been staged, or knowing whether Goya actually saw the war disasters he painted, does not exclusively determine the relationship to these images. The photograph will keep its place in the history of photography and will continue to represent one truth, even if staged; the painting will be assessed as a painting in its expressive, formal, authorial and testimonial quality. The referent will maintain its captive place, given the dependence of these particular images on a context, a context of war, but the identity of the fallen soldier or the hanged individual matters little. The case is only different when the portrayed is close to us. Roland Barthes (1980/2006) does not show the *Winter Garden Photograph*, the one where he finds his mother "as she had been" (p. 81) because, to other gazes, the mother would not be the mother but a woman who had been in a situation.

Even in the photograph, the referent is a word to claim truth. The referent is the situation. Its significance depends on the violence of its appearance. For Barthes (1980/2006), finding the mother was a violent act, communicated in the concept of *punctum*: he felt "wounded", or "pricked", "stung", "mortified", "stabbed" (p. 35). Another possibility, maybe not covered (or not always covered) by *punctum*, but certainly violent is encountering images of war atrocities, one enormous violence on the gaze.

Barthes (1980/2006) distinguishes the *studium* from the *punctum*, and the *studium*, that "average affect" (p. 34), can exist in the confrontation with any image. Many images involve the referent as historical legitimation: Innocent X existed, the Spanish War of Independence existed, and the Spanish Civil War existed.

In most images, and beyond the "average affect", the image overlaps with the referent. Whether photographs, paintings or drawings, the referent rests is silent, it is not important who, how or when. The relevance lies in the image. In what it tells us, regardless of what (if anything) it initially referred to. Hans Belting (2006/2011) speaks of an "ambivalence between life and mediality" that translates into an "open border between image and corporeal world" (p. 142), or a distance between image and individual or real (as opposed to the sharp border between referent and reference in the world of signs). In this space, one finds the possibility of projection of the subject into the images from a constant exchange between what is "our part, the 'internal representation', and their part, the 'external representation'", observing a relationship that goes beyond the "perception of things" (Belting, 2006/2011, p. 143).

Throughout *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1980/2006) offers examples of images that affected him, beyond the "perception of things", of the way certain details of certain images exert, on Barthes, the spectator, the fascination of the *punctum*: "one child's bad teeth", in a portrait by William Klein, 1954 (p. 55); "the other boy's crossed arms", in a photograph by Nadar, 1882 (p. 62). The detail, not the situation of the boy or the sailor, hurts Barthes. The image, the boy-image, the sailor-image, rather than the boy in New York's Italian Quarter or the sailor escorting the explorer Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, assails Barthes. Similarly, Van Eyck's brushstroke, the painting reproduced in the mirror, and the signs scattered across the painting capture the spectator more than the marriage commitment between the Arnolfini. In this sense, the referent is irrelevant as a motive,

principle, order and even truth.

## Between the Spectator and the Image, the Void

In *Camera Lucida* Barthes (1980/2006) distinguishes the "average affect" from a strong, unexpected effect — "a certain picture happens to me, another one does not" (p. 27) — and impossible to name — "what I can give a name to cannot really hurt me" (p. 61).

*Studium* and *punctum* sum up two possibilities of accessing the image through a generalist interest, an investment kept at the limits of conscious and rational curiosity or an excess directed at emotion and touch. Jacques Rancière (2003/2011) notes that, in Barthes' work, there is room for these two forms of relation to the image. While the author of *The Rhetoric of the Image* is interested in unveiling the encrypted and sociopolitically determined messages that insinuate and hide beyond the visible, the spectator of the *Winter Garden Photograph* dwells on considering how a particular subject is touched by the photographic image unexpectedly. From these two movements, Rancière (2003/2011) notes that

the first demonstrated that the image was, in fact, the vehicle of a mute discourse that he endeavoured to translate into sentences. The second tells us that the image speaks to us at the moment it falls silent when it no longer conveys any message to us. (p. 19)

In this sense, images are "relations between a whole and parts, between a visibility and a potency of significations and affection associated with it, between expectations and that which comes to fulfil them" (Rancière, 2003/2011, p. 10).

Image and spectator share the capacity to produce the *punctum* effect: the image determines (makes possible) relations of affection and opens itself to the spectator's expectations; but the spectator, his gaze captured by the surprise of the image, his succumbing to the image, is what allows him to be touched.

This interdependent relationship is equally clear in Georges Didi-Huberman's (1992/2011, pp. 17–27) explanation of the model of belief. The author considers an individual's situation in front of a tomb, who observes the evidence of a stone volume, which is more or less geometric. However, beyond what he objectively sees, there seems to be something which, from the tomb, looks at him. He feels a "kind of emptiness", a sense of loss or mourning, starting from the emptiness left by a body similar to his own but deprived of life. Before this disturbance, there were two modes of action, tautology and belief. Faced with the same emptiness, the "man of tautology" considers that what is in sight is all that exists, there being nothing (any temporality, memory or potency) beyond it. In contrast, the "man of belief" refuses that emptiness is exhausted in itself and transforms the experience of seeing into an exercise of belief, into "something else".

The tomb summons and is not indifferent to this example: it is not the same to use the tomb or an everyday object, just as the image presented to the spectator's eyes is not indifferent. The tomb contains a historical construction around death and life (of resurrection); any image dialogues with a set of other images, narratives, and any image depends on its formal qualities. In other words, belief depends on both the qualities of the image and the spectator's succumbing, which is consistent with the statement, "what we see is not worth — does not live — in our eyes but for what looks at us" (Didi-Huberman, 1992/2011, p. 9). The image looks at the spectator, and the spectator looks at the image. However, the "parts" are not exactly the same. The images indeed determine a response on the part of the spectators. Still, the spectators return a contaminated gaze to the

images, and what is seen in the images is always tainted by each individual's particular gaze. "Last thing about the *punctum*: whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*" (Barthes, 1980/2006, p. 65). Already there but discovered and chosen by the spectator's gaze, the *punctum* is, after all, particular — "*something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock" (Barthes, 1980/2006, p. 58).

The relationship between spectators and images depends on an "open border between the image and the corporeal world" (Belting, 2006/2011, p. 142), a virtual space that can accommodate the subjects. Such a space exists in the definition of image, at least if we attend to the fact that the word image is applied to diverse realities, such as statues, maps, hallucinations, dreams, and paintings, among others (W. J. T. Mitchell, 1986, p. 9). W. J. T. Mitchell (1995, p. 4) distinguishes two basic typologies, images and pictures: an image is anything that exists without being fixed ("an image"), in contrast to the fixation on support ("a picture"); on the one hand, the deliberate act of representing and using active means on a factual matter and, on the other hand, a less determined act, often passive or automatic, which gives rise to a phenomenon of virtual appearance, where verbal, acoustic and mental images are included. However, to become visible and shareable, the image needs to materialise, becoming a picture. This relationship, present within the image and its definition, resembles another that lies at the (western) root of what defines the closeness between individuals and images and stems from the Platonic consideration connoting images as the presentation of substitutes (*eidola* or *phantasmata*) for pure ideas. The dependence between image and picture then refers to that which unites image and idea and forges the traditional understanding of the image as a surface that hides a truth<sup>3</sup>. This relationship is implicit in Didi-Huberman's (1992/2011) model of belief and points to the definition of the image as surface and depth. Beyond the surface would be access to a depth, traditionally connoted with a truth.

Alternatively, one might think that there is nothing beyond the image and that any depth is a construction. Once again, the possibility of constructing a depth is also involved in defining an image as an entity capable of representing, making present the absent, or creating fictional representations<sup>4</sup>. As a phenomenon, the image constructs; in the relationship between spectators and images, subjects can think a depth, allowing themselves to project into it.

Jacques Derrida (1993), in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, questions the function of the gaze as a source of certainties by saying that in any "point of view", there is a blind point of view, a seeing nothing. The author states that drawing and writing are blind: the draughtsman draws from what he does not fully see and, at the same time, when drawing, he refrains from looking at the model; he always resorts to blind drawing, made with memory. Perception belongs to the order of recollection; drawing implies recourse to memory and forgetfulness — "amnesia, the orphan of memory" (Derrida, 1993, p. 51) —; drawing, writing, and recording are means of dealing with the fragility of the reality of things. The blind draughtsman draws potency: he does not see, no longer sees, and still does not see, simultaneously and in these three times of memory (Derrida, 1993, pp. 5-6).

In making images, a blind spot is registered; in seeing images and accepting that there are special modes of relationship between spectators and images — as the concept of *punctum* attempts to note — there is a blind spot that looks at us. "What we see is not worth — does not live — in our eyes if not for what looks at us" (Didi-Huberman, 1992/2011, p. 9). This blind spot — hole, crack, space — can be the metaphor for the depth where the subject projects itself.

## The Referent As Symptom

Accepting the definition of the image as surface and depth and accepting that in the (special) relations between spectators and images, the subject projects his gaze, expectations and desires, it is possible to consider that, beyond the surface, it is not the referent that becomes visible, but the subject to whom the image happens — "a certain picture happens to me, another one does not" (Barthes, 1980/2006, p. 27). As a metaphor, one can use the mirror, the place where the subject is

and from where he sees himself, without leaving the real space:

the mirror is, after all, a utopia since it is a place with no place at all. In the mirror, I see myself where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that is open beyond the surface; I am beyond where I am not; I am a shadow that gives me visibility of myself, that allows me to see myself where I am absent. (Foucault, 1967)

When, from the blind spot, does the referent appear? When is it that, beyond the image, the referent does not cease to be seen? When the image behaves like the body as an image (Cordeiro, 2013) in collapse.

After noting that the word "body" is used in several contexts — the body of Greek art, gymnastics, the Christian body... —, José Gil (1997) verifies the existence of a "docility of language" which exerts violence on the body, which is not knowing what it is. Gil (1997) speaks of the body as a foreign element, of which "the more one talks about it, the less it exists by itself" (p. 13). The body is a construction, as the Christianized Caledonian tells us, "the spirit? Oh! You have not brought us the spirit. We already knew about the existence of the spirit ( ... ) What you brought us was the body" (Gil, 1997, p. 58). This particular body, the western body, had to be invented and designed, and, to this path, the Platonic metaphysics or Catholicism is not strange. According to José Gil (1997, pp. 150-153), the body is the surface, the soul is located to a depth, and the flesh is the foreign element.

The difference between soul, body and flesh emerges in several of the attempts to analyse the body: when Elizabeth Grosz (1995, pp. 33-35) distinguishes the perspective of the "inscription" from that of the "living body", she separates what she defines as a public surface, where sociopolitically determined contents are inscribed and communicated, from a "subjective interior"; Mike Featherstone (1991, p. 171), on the other hand, prefers the "public surface", where the body is inscribed and communicated, from a "subjective interior". These analyses establish the reference to the flesh (to the organs), to the soul (to the subjective interior) and to the body, which, in Grosz's reflection, is a socially and politically encoded product and, in Featherstone's text, is closer to a vehicle of a particular expression of individuals.

According to Bragança de Miranda (2008, pp. 102-103), the constitution of humanity and the task of culture is to ensure the removal of the flesh, which, when it becomes visible in wars, massacres or diseases, likens humans to beasts. In the orthodox Catholic tradition, the body assumes an intermediate place between flesh and soul: it shares materiality with the flesh but exists in God's image, it is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and in the body of Christ, the unity of the Catholic family is found. The significance of the distinction between body and flesh is evident when one speaks of the body's resurrection and makes the spirit's immortality dependent on it through its rebirth or incarnation in the body. As Deleuze (1965/1996) states, "it is by being brought back to its body that the spirit obtains immortality; the resurrection of bodies is the condition for the survival of the spirit" (p. 30). For its part, the flesh is simultaneously the source of sin and the possibility of redemption since by admonishing the flesh, salvation is obtained.

The Catholic separates soul, body and flesh, which translates into the body's autonomy. In this circumstance, the body must mirror the virtues of the soul and train and conceal the flesh, sinful matter; if, on the contrary, it allows itself to be corrupted by the lusts of the flesh, it makes certain socially condemnable behaviours visible.

As a surface, the body has what Hans Belting (2006/2011) defines as a "medial existence",

translated into the possibility of making something immaterial visible through one support (p. 94). This immaterial instance will always be connoted with the soul or interiority. José Gil (1997) also speaks of this soul when he refers to the depth lying beyond the surface of the body. Beyond the body, there may be a depth of the soul and never the opacity of the flesh, which, according to the author, is the element foreign to the subject.

History has been more a chain of violence than of pleasures. Given the constant possibility of predation and abuse, it has become necessary to protect the flesh, to surround it with all kinds of veils, placing all kinds of obstacles between it and the predators. The body is one of these veils and one of the most powerful. (Bragança de Miranda, 2003, p. 27)

Bragança de Miranda (2003) may be quoted to argue that the referent appears when its violence cannot but assault the subject; in this circumstance, the referent occupies and transposes the deep space of the image towards the spectator. The images of atrocities are an example of this tearing of the image (probably dependent on certain temporal proximity, which does not allow the referent to transform itself into history). They can prompt responses in the subjects that are also carnal, "an experience that makes one nauseous", as Susan Sontag (2003, p. 67) describes it.

## **The Images of War (Final Considerations)**

As of writing this article, Russia is invading Ukraine. The Russian invasion began on February 24, 2022. Daily, we witness images of the war in real-time. These images are here, in everyday life.

When does the referent return (itself, that thing in front of the camera, or even the brush, that truth), emerge from the image and overlap? When, as it happens when the flesh overtakes the body, "a lack of control" is evident, and the image cannot remove that excess the referent is, just as the body does not control that excess the flesh is. At that moment, the relationship between spectator and image does not depend only on the image or the spectator.

The image of loved ones is another example: for that individual, the image of those he loves will be the return of the dead, as Barthes (1980/2006) shows. However, war images also reveal one excess that matters as truth — the referent, in its flesh, appears as a symptom. That happened. If there were any doubts, the irreducibility of the real would destroy the spectacle and the simulacrum as unique reading models:

saying that reality becomes a spectacle is breathtakingly provincial. To say so is to universalise the viewing habits of the small population living in the rich part of the world, where news has become entertainment ( ... ). It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It insinuates, perversely, slightly, that there is no real suffering in the world. (Sontag, 2003, p. 115)

Contemporary war is seen live through the victims because images are shared on the internet, in real-time, and what is seen and causes nausea is the evidence of the referent. Oddly or not, this referent's shock coincides with the visibility of the flesh of those living in war.

In time, images and war images will need captions and will generate false readings and false memories (Sontag, 2003, p. 36). But how should we talk about images when war happens? Of the importance of images when the reality is so unphotogenic? In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, there is no clear answer to the question, "how is protesting against pain different from just acknowledging it" (Sontag, 2003, p.4 7), or, posing another question, how is seeing images of pain different from knowing that pain exists? Sontag (2003) underlines the provocation made to the spectator, "can you look at this?" (p. 48).

After a certain age, no one has the right to ignore that suffering exists (Sontag, 2003, p. 119). Seeing images of atrocities fulfils this intention, removing us from any degree of "innocence, of superficiality" (Sontag, 2003, p. 119). Despite this, it is common to hear about the mistrust of the effects of exposure to images of war: the spectator eventually tires, to see his or her attention diminished, to absorb the shock and integrate any representation in the diffuse set of images circulating. More than the power of the images, this criticism is directed at the medium and how images reach the spectators — uninterrupted corridors of information, simultaneously on the internet and television. Corridors that put information as disparate as that on news, advertising or sports programmes on the same level. When Ukraine's invasion began, the news channels did not provide any information other than the situation of this war. The SIC Notícias channel had a red background, and that setting was used for any broadcast. It introduced other news into the public space as time passed, and the red disappeared. Television showed that everyday life had to return and that the Russian invasion would be a topic among others, despite its prominence.

This choice likely stems from the perceived limits of the spectators who, sooner or later, will have to focus on their daily lives, in which war does not exist. However, saying that how images are disseminated is tiring is not the same as saying that the images tire or that the affection directed towards these images is lesser. On the proportionality between exposure to images and the anaesthesia of sympathy, Sontag (2003) says, "I am not so sure about that" (p. 110).

That is the argument behind the actions of protest and solidarity of citizens from various parts of the world, actions that constrain the institutions' political choices. Solidarity and protest also slow down, perhaps concurrently with the news pace. That does not mean that people stop caring.

Saying that there are individuals who pay little attention to distant geographies, saying that there are those who do not care, is true. However, saying that most stop caring is just as vague as saying that most do care. "Hundreds of millions of television spectators are far from used to what they see on television" (Sontag, 2003, p. 116). Or on the internet.

Seeing images does not solve war, but they exist, and some people risk their lives to make them. Despite arguing that there is no such thing as a "collective memory", Sontag (2003) notes in recognised images the convention that certain events should be remembered and, to remember, is, more than remembering a story, to have a memory of an image (pp. 92-95). "Images say: This is what human beings are capable of — they can volunteer to do, enthusiastically, firmly. Do not forget that" (Sontag, 2003, p. 120).

In *Images In Spite of All*, Didi-Huberman (2004/2012) introduces four photographs of Auschwitz, the only ones showing the extermination camps operating. Producing images in that context and taking the risk, besides capturing and disseminating them, is seen as an act of political resistance intended to communicate, beyond the perennality of the witnesses, that which has no possible representation is beyond representation. Producing images is "one among the last gestures of humanity" (Didi-Huberman, 2004/2012, p. 25), maintaining the image as the only form of access to reality, the image that can break the opacity of the world. Bragança de Miranda (2008) finds in the image the power to split the real, extracting "light images from the 'density' of matter" (p. 24), this operation being what allows life to become human. The real, "because it is 'impossible', does not exist except by manifesting itself in the form of pieces, remnants, partial objects", or in the "lacunar form of images" (Didi-Huberman, 2004/2012, p. 82).

The Jews prepared a plan and watched the Schutzstaffel (SS) soldiers until they managed to make a roll of film inside a tube of toothpaste and leave the field. Being that reality impossible to imagine to the end, Didi-Huberman (2004/2012, pp. 86–88) observes the possibility of having the experience of the unimaginable in the images, of imagining despite all, from the terror that looks at us from those photographs.

In time, when the images of the current war need subtitles to be contextualized, the referent will lose the strength of the flesh. It will remain as historical testimony, or it may provoke a special affection in some spectators. The image will, once again, cover the referent and let the spectator project his or her expectations onto it, or find a metaphor for the unimaginable (evil?) in the images. For those who did not live through the war, images of atrocities will never be "comforting" but will always be "images of the other" (Didi-Huberman, 2004/2012, p. 116). Seeing images in real-time, or perceiving events as contemporary, is not the same as seeing past atrocities, which can always be archived in an unrecoverable and (expectedly) unrepeatable historical past.

For certain individuals, images of atrocities will linger in time for a certain period. "We should let these atrocious images haunt us," says Sontag (2003, p. 119). The author speaks of the photograph, how it functions as a quotation and how we all "mentally store hundreds of photographs, available for instant recall" (Sontag, 2003, p. 29). Nevertheless, duration is a quality of images, whether as evidence of atrocities or because a special relationship has happened with a particular image. The image accompanies individuals, and their memory is the memory of a particular emotion because the image merges with the experience of the *punctum*.

Images operate in the double possibility of dividing the real, allowing individuals access to this opacity, and never ceasing to signal reality. In their relationship with the spectator, they move away from the real (in its carnal sense). They inaugurate a depth that depends on the relationship between the released image and the individual. In particular situations, however, they transport the real and place themselves, as a surface, on a level that lies behind, letting the referent appear in its materiality, as a thing in itself.

In this double relationship, the image persists for the spectators; it remains and accompanies the individuals in an archive of available images, ready to reappear and become vivid. Maybe the persistence of the images does not dismiss with the surprise of the encounter: encountering a certain image, as the history of art does not fail to prove, how the spectator can be touched does not fail to "take him by surprise". In the same way, seeing images of atrocities provokes another surprise — a shock, nausea, disgust — that comes both from the emergence of the flesh and, sometimes, from how the images are presented (on television, on the internet): nobody is prepared for, in the course of a sequence that unites advertising, political speeches and sports reports, encountering images of horror.

Positive or negative poles between elevation and horror may be associated with one or the other way of materialising surprise. The *punctum*, which Barthes (1980/2006, pp. 127–28) associates with "pity", once again proves useful to describe a possible consequence of the encounters between individuals and images, sad joys or saddened shocks.

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## **Biographic Note**

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## Notes

1. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes (1980/2006) pursues the goal of understanding the ontology of photography as different from other images. In this paper, and while acknowledging the particularity of photography (and film) in its dependence on capturing the referent, Barthes' analysis is extended, through *studium* and *punctum*'s interests and affections, to all images assuming that the spectator can be captivated by any image.
2. Margarida Medeiros (2010) draws on the work of Jean-Marie Schaffer, *L'Image Précaire - Du Dispositif Photographique* (*Precarious Image: From the Photographic Device*, 1987), and separates index and icon: "while the first would be the result of a physical and natural trace, the physicochemical effect of light, the second would be the result of symbolic codifications that allow us to recognise the photograph as an image of something real, with iconic value" (p. 65).
3. The concept of "truth" beyond the image migrated, through Freudian psychoanalysis, from the "truth of universal concepts" to the "truth of each individual". Understanding the image as a substitute and privileging the linguistic model (the search for the signifier) prompts W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) to observe a "structural hostility of psychoanalysis towards images and visual representations" (p. 69). It makes images a symptom, the substitute for an impossible desire and analyses the form of decoding its manifest content to find the latent content expressed in language.
4. Jacques Rancière (2003/2011) defines the representation of the image within the "dependence of the visible on the word", which is materialised through the abilities of substitution — making present what is absent — and manifestation — making visible what escapes the visible (p. 152).

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