

**Invisible Atrocity Images:
Issues of the Spectatorship of Atrocities Between
Contemporary Art and Photography**

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Abstract

By taking as starting point 9/11, this thesis examines the spectatorship of invisible atrocity images, namely contemporary artworks that render atrocity photographs invisible or stress their absence. It asks: what happens when the relation between the spectator and the photographed sufferer or dead other is visually disturbed? The analysis explores the potential of artworks in assisting one to rethink the process of looking at images of atrocities in a manner that will allow the spectator to acknowledge the invisible photographed other ethically. The argument is structured around three types of “encounter”: “the frame” (Judith Butler), “the face” (Emmanuel Levinas), and “the contract” (Ariella Aïsha Azoulay). Through the application to invisible atrocity images, these three lenses are pushed towards new directions and further expanded in a critical manner. Each chapter starts from an issue of contemporary visual culture – iconism, partial and full censorship – which is problematised by the artworks in different ways. The case studies of this thesis are artworks created after 2001 by the artists Dinh Q. Lê, Alfredo Jaar, Ina Louguine, Thomas Hirschhorn, belit sağ, Khaled Barakeh, David Birkin, Broomberg and Chanarin, and Banu Cennetoğlu. Through the examination of the ethics of spectatorship regarding these works, the thesis provides a renewed reading also of the ethics of looking at photographs of atrocities between iconism and censorship, which are perceived as equally troublesome in terms of visibility and ethics. Finally, a recurrent visual example of this thesis is Nilüfer Demir’s viral photograph of the dead Alan Kurdi (2015). By placing this photograph in dialogue with the aforementioned theoretical frameworks and some of the artworks, the reader is asked to reconsider in what terms did they look at this contemporary atrocity image.

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<https://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/the-day-nobody-died-1-1/>.
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<https://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/the-day-nobody-died-1-1/>.
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<https://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/the-day-nobody-died-1-1/>.
- Fig. 96. Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died*, 2008. Colour video, sound, 23:06 min. Video Still, 00:17 min. Reproduced from YouTube. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020. <https://youtu.be/HHLtElcCkZ8>.
- Fig. 97. Broomberg & Chanarin, *The Day Nobody Died*, 2008. Colour video, sound, 23:06 min. Video Still, 14:45 min. Reproduced from YouTube. Accessed 15 Nov. 2020.
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Preface

In a neoliberal academic environment where the results and outcomes of research are valued most, this study aims to adopt a questioning position and leave readers with their own questions about what they would do as potential spectators. In a Socratic manner, only through constant questioning can one retrain oneself in looking. For me, that is especially true when speaking about ethics. Ethics is one of those fields that is discovered through verbs that begin with the prefix “re”: reconsider, rethink, re-examine, etc. How can one be certain of how an ethical relationship is formulated, especially when the latter is created from the nuanced stimuli of contemporary artworks, hence essentially from the mediated experience of an event?

While there are certain positions examined and my personal point of view comes into the discussion at points in the text, to my mind the contemporary complexity of the world with constant technological advancements of visual culture indicate that we are far beyond any sense of universal ethical rules, and hence “results”. Having said that I by no means want to imply that the world has not been enormously complex in previous chronological eras. However, what I believe is different nowadays is the access to information and the immediacy of sharing it. As Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum aptly suggest,

In many ways the Internet has succeeded in remaking us as inhabitants of a small village. No one is a stranger either in the village or on the Internet; in both settings the savvy citizen knows how to process information.¹

This notion of the “village” gives us the false understanding that we have the ability to perceive in a comprehensive way a world of far greater geographical distances. In this sense, one might believe that we can judge and formulate ethical views for different spatial, political and social

¹ Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum, “Introduction”, in *The Offensive Internet: Speech, Privacy, and Reputation*, ed. Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum (Cambridge, Ma.; London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1.

contexts. When one does so – namely to attempt to formulate catholic views – one cannot do it without falling into at least one intellectual trap: neo-colonialism, Westernised perception, engendered fallacies and so on and so forth. This study asks one to reflect on one’s way of looking, on one’s way of speaking about one’s visual experiences, on one’s way of behaving as a “visual citizen”, as one could call us all. Essentially, one is asked to look to the visible through what is considered invisible. Hence this thesis offers an homage to the importance and the power of invisibility in the intersection between art and photography.

Yet, this study also had a more personal starting point. In the life of every political being there is a moment when someone starts really seeing almost for the first time. According to Sontag, “one’s first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany”.² For Sontag this moment was when she was twelve and saw images from Bergen-Belsen and Dachau.³ Yet, as she rightly explains, “it was several years before I understood fully what they were about”.⁴ I do not agree with the temporality with which Sontag defines the “negative epiphany”, as the real “epiphany” comes not when you encounter some difficult visual material, but when you start questioning them.

That moment for me came eight years ago, despite the fact that before then I had seen numerous other images of atrocities through the media, my studies, or history books. While working as a research assistant on an academic program related to humanitarian interventions in the 19th century, I encountered a very poor quality black and white photograph of a man in the last stages of malnourishment. The man was one of the victims of Weyler’s reconcentration

² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2008), 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

policy in Cuba.⁵ The photographic frame, probably captured in 1897, shows a man wearing only shoes and underwear, allowing his starved body to be exposed. The quality of the image (and even worse its digitised version), does not assist close visual analysis. I never found out who took this image. I never found the man's name. Yet, the moment I saw this photograph, Pandora's Box opened. And the hope that remained trapped inside the box was only to understand why people would choose to take such photographs and most importantly: Did I have the right to look at it?

In 2015, whilst an MA student, I wrote my dissertation by using the theoretical framework of the "civil contract of photography" by Ariella Azoulay, in order to examine the ethics of three different artistic examples of representing atrocities. Two of my case studies were figurative, with the one being explicitly graphic (Thomas Hirschhorn, *Touching Reality*, 2012) and the other aestheticised but with some parts being also graphic (Richard Mosse, *The Enclave*, 2013). In the course of the six months from the primary research till the submission of my dissertation, I kept looking at these same material very closely. I counted how many violated bodies Hirschhorn's video included. I saw photographs of disfigured bodies from the Democratic Republic of Congo in Mosse's work, with the most shocking image of a baby that was killed by a spear in his face in an attack in a village, an image included only in the limited-edition catalogue for Venice Biennial. By the end of my research work, I realised that I had become completely cold – used to looking at these images with a medical gaze in order to cope with the emotional impact that such material can have on one. I was convinced that I had a political responsibility regarding the spectatorship and analysis of material that indicate the state of contemporary politics. But while doing that I had closed off completely any emotions, which for me could only

⁵ For a brief definition, see "Reconcentration Policy", *The World of 1898: The Hispanic – American War*, Hispanic Division, Library of Congress, 22 June 2011, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic/1898/reconcentration.html>.

be a sign of methodological weakness. In other words, I had been completely desensitised. Or at least that is what I thought at that point.

This remained the case until a couple of months after submitting my dissertation, when I found myself frantically searching the web in order to collect case studies for my PhD proposal, while encountering once again the fear of death in my close family. That was when I experienced my second “negative epiphany”.⁶ I was no longer examining these images through Azoulay’s “professional gaze”; they had left this sphere, and were haunting me.⁷ They made me realise that I was feeling my human vulnerability in front of all this suffering and death. I felt frail. Yet, was I the only one that could potentially shut off when exposed to such gruesome material? That was when the idea of invisibility came along, especially as the conclusion of my master’s research indicated that could be a very fruitful visual mode for engaging spectators with violent situations.

Of course, the challenging aspects of this kind of research reoccurred over the last four years. Every doctoral student has to improve and learn new research and working skills. Yet, when the primary material is essentially asking one to confront day after day the worst parts of humanity, one needs to create very specific research techniques, such as when, how, for how long and in what environment they are looking at their primary sources.⁸ One is asked in other words to create their small personal research methods “bible”. To my mind, such potential “limitations” allow one to develop a very close engagement with their research material and become a more

⁶ Sontag, *On Photography*, 19.

⁷ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Reli Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 95–96; Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, trans. Louise Bethlehem (London: Verso, 2012), 44–45.

⁸ On a same tone, the editors of an anthology regarding “images of pain”, comment: “When faced with images of pain, the critic is exposed to a double confrontation: there is *both* the general hermeneutic phenomenology—the encounter with a mute object of interpretation—and the additional challenge of confronting something unpleasant and emotionally devastating.” Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson, “Introduction”, in *Ethics and Images of Pain*, ed. Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson (New York: Routledge, 2016), xv; italics in the original.

conscious researcher, who will not “use” the material to create an emotional response in an audience but will guide them to rethink their ethical position.

In April 2003, my 13-years-old self wrote a text for the invasion in Iraq by the Bush administration. There I was making a naïve call for people to react and not remain passive viewers:

War in Iraq. For many of you might be just part of the news. But I don't want to believe that. Even if it was like that up to this point, it is high time that you realised its real dimensions. This war has caused until now and will continue to cause, great catastrophes. Think of all those kids that you see on the television. What might they feel? Why can it be that a human being is acceptable to die like that? Why so many people to be killed – young, old, children – without having been their responsibility at all? Why this bitter and unfair war is happening? [...] Do the bare minimum. Don't sit inactive on your sofa in front of your TV with a bowl of popcorn while you are watching the bombs that drop - and you say: “Wow look how big this explosion was.” “What a spectacle. It is like fireworks.” Because it might look such an impressive spectacle. But it is horrible and awful. The moment that this bomb explodes, thousands of innocent people are being killed. People that did not have any responsibility. And then, when you see a heavily wounded body on your screen, you are just changing the channel. Enough is enough. Don't get stuck on the “I” and shrug off for everything that happens around you. This is not a solution. If you don't want to look and hear about this war, then think for a moment the people that have to suffer because of this war.

Eighteen years later, although I can still not ethically justify to my younger self all these “whys”, I am able to reassure her that for the last four years I have tried to understand how one can stop being a passive spectator. And I can have the hope that, through visual literacy, contemporary citizens are capable of making great difference.

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experience allowed me to get a different insight for a core case study of this thesis. I would also like to thank William James for his helpful guidance with processing the data from *Refuse/Refuge* exhibition and advising me for the creation of the graphs.

I am also grateful to White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities (WRoCAH) for the financial support for research costs. Thanks to the Small and Large Awards schemes I was enabled to attend and speak to multiple conferences, symposia and workshops, and of course to visit exhibitions in order to see in person my case studies. Owing to the Awards Scheme of WRoCAH, I was able to visit, among others, the exhibitions: “Forensic Architecture: Towards an Investigative Aesthetics” at MACBA, Barcelona (2017); “The Image of War”, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm (2018); “The Last Image: Photography and Death”, at C/O, Berlin and “The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes”, at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2018); “The Blue Hour – Khaled Barakeh”, at The Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, and “Class Relations – Phantoms of Perception”, at Kunstverein, Hamburg (2019); “Andy Warhol— From A to B and Back Again”, at The Whitney Museum, “Martha Rosler: Irrespective”, at the Jewish Museum, and “Your Mirror: Portraits from the ICP Collection”, at the International Center of Photography, New York (2019). The opportunity to conduct primary research by visiting these exhibitions was of key importance for the analysis of contemporary artworks. In addition, being part of the WRoCAH community – very well organised and supported by Caryn Douglas and Clare Meadley – allowed me to take part in many helpful trainings and discussions with people from all three Universities (York, Leeds, Sheffield). I want to also thank Prof. Dr. Nils Büttner for giving me the opportunity to be a visiting doctoral student in the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart in the summer of 2019.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis entitled “Invisible Atrocity Images: Issues of the Spectatorship of Atrocities Between Contemporary Art and Photography” is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

We always knew about the gap
between knowledge and acknowledgment,
the split between what you know and what you do.
Those who remind us of this message now
are just seen as irritating.

Stanley Cohen⁹

London, November 2014. The exhibition *Conflict, Time, Photography* is on display at Tate Modern.¹⁰ The first image one encounters when entering the first room is Don McCullin's iconic black and white photograph *Shell-shocked US Marine, Vietnam, Hue* (1968) (Fig. 1). The photograph is large (152.4 x 102 cm). On the opposite wall are hanging two photographs by Luc Delahaye, the photographer of the iconic and controversial *Taliban Soldier* (2001) (Fig. 2). In this case the spectator stands before two other colour photographs entitled *US Bombing on Taliban Positions* (2001) (Fig. 3) and *Ambush Ramadi* (2006) (Fig. 4). Next to that, one sees two photographs of *The Mushroom Cloud – Less than twenty minutes after the explosion*, taken by Toshio Fukada in 1945. As the title also highlights, one is sure by now that the exhibition will be focusing on representations of one thing: war.

Yet, next to Delahaye's images, one sees a very long rectangular "canvas" with beautiful shades of red, blue, and yellow. The photograph – which in reality is a photogram – has no figural features of war participants, dead people, violent actions or the aftermath; just abstract colours. However, the title on the caption reveals – or perhaps conceals – something about the meaning of this image: Broomberg and Chanarin, *The Press Conference, June 9, 2008, The Day Nobody Died* (Fig. 5). Visitors come and go; almost all of them stop in front of this long rectangular piece of exposed paper. What is it that they are they looking at? Why one cannot see

⁹ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), 279.

¹⁰ "Conflict, Time, Photography", *Tate Modern Exhibition*, Tate, accessed 8 Nov 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/conflict-time-photography>.

a room full of photojournalists in a military base? What if the image is essentially representing something in the middle of a violent incident, hence creating horror for the spectator? In this case horror is the only feeling that could not be experienced. While passing by the piece, one could only be curious due to seeing essentially nothing. Yet! An atrocity image exists in the invisible.

The aim of this thesis is to examine what I define as *invisible atrocity images*: namely contemporary artistic examples that render atrocity images invisible, in a manner that allows one to reconsider issues of spectatorship. In contemporary art, and particularly since 2001, there has been a tendency to appropriate photographs of atrocities and make them invisible or stress their absence.¹¹ At the basis of this argument lies the belief that when one encounters such visual material, one has an ethical responsibility towards the photographed dead or sufferer. However, in these cases this relation could be seen as disrupted because of the invisible character of the works. Hence, this study examines this new ethical relation created between the spectator and the photographed other, when the latter is obscured intentionally. This relationship is built upon the theoretical foundation provided by Ariella Azoulay's inclusion of the spectator in this complex photographic equation, which will be subsequently further analysed.¹²

Can such acts of “artistic censorship” be perceived as having a positive connotation, as well as an impact on the spectator's mind?¹³ At the core of the choice of the case studies analysed in this thesis can be found their ontological relation with a photograph (journalistic or “orphan”)

¹¹ The genealogy of appropriating violent visual material – although not through invisibility – can be found much earlier in Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* Series from the 1960s; for more see Ingrid Mössinger, ed., *Andy Warhol: Death and Disaster* (Bielefeld; Berlin: Kerber, 2015). Although beyond the scope of this thesis, I believe that this contemporary tendency needs further examination, as it might indicate a link between political crises and artistic abstraction (e.g. Picasso and Spanish Civil War; Abstract Expressionism and Cold War).

¹² Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Reli Mazali and Ruvik Danieli (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

¹³ Here I write “artistic censorship” in quotation marks as what the artists are doing in this thesis very much challenges systems of contemporary censorship that structure the way people are accustomed in consuming atrocity images.

of atrocity that represents a violent political event.¹⁴ In other words, these artworks – although they could not be defined as photography themselves – have an ontological relation with photography: a publicised or an untaken atrocity image. That is of particular importance because, as will be explained later regarding the methodological framework, through the examination of the spectatorship of these artistic examples one is equipped to reconsider also the ethics of looking at photographs of atrocities.

This suggestion can be considered controversial if one takes into account how in a political, as well as visual sphere, invisibility most often has very negative connotations. One of the most prominent English proverbs is “seeing is believing” – or “believing is seeing” as the title of Errol Morris’ book playfully suggests.¹⁵ So invisibility is at least to be approached with scepticism. Another adage with which most people are familiar is that “a picture is worth a thousand words”.¹⁶ So why remove it from one’s sight? And what will their response be? Of course, one can rightly question now: Why would one need to have a response when looking at an image, as if the image poses an unequivocal question? Yet, there is a certain group of photographs that pose an unequivocal question to the spectator: atrocity images. Such are the photographs that even conceptually lie behind or under the invisible atrocity images of this thesis. In this case the questioning is very clear and loud: Why did a violent act take place? How did someone end up suffering or dying a gruesome death? Why did someone capture their image? And, most importantly, do I have the right to look at it? This last question has been my personal

¹⁴ I borrow the term “orphan image” from Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 328.

¹⁵ Merriam–Webster Dictionary, s.v. “seeing is believing”, accessed 15 Sept. 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/seeing%20is%20believing>; Errol Morris, *Believing Is Seeing: (Observations on the Mysteries of Photography)* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Merriam–Webster Dictionary, s.v. “a picture is worth a thousand words”, accessed 30 Sept. 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/a%20picture%20is%20worth%20a%20thousand%20words>.

concern as a researcher and art historian for the last eight years. This question lies at the heart of this thesis, which is tackling these issues through a very different angle: contemporary art.

This thesis maps a tendency in contemporary art practise, while positioning itself at the intersection of contemporary art and documentary/journalistic photography. However, as already mentioned, the relationship of the two in the context of this analysis has been crafted with very specific criteria that can allow one to rethink, not only the spectatorship of the artwork, but also how spectators look at photographs of atrocities more broadly. The case studies that I have chosen to demonstrate this artistic tendency are related in at least one of the three following manners to a photograph of atrocity: i) they obscure or erase an existing image in different ways (appropriation, even conceptually); ii) through appropriation they stress the fact that an image has not been seen widely because of contemporary censorship systems; iii) they create a conceptual atrocity image. At the same time, invisible atrocity images question also the visibility of images that have been widely seen, and often considered iconic, or nowadays have become viral.

Invisibility is a very topical concept for many different reasons.¹⁷ In any initial bibliographical research, it becomes clear that this term has been mainly linked with neuroscience in relation to vision. Of course, in feminist or queer studies as well as postcolonial studies, invisibility is rightly so perceived as a sociopolitical exclusion of groups of people, carrying

¹⁷ Important references for different aspects of invisibility are: Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology", *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005): 302–19, <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1086/430962>; Gil Z. Hochberg, *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2015); Hagi Kenaan, *The Ethics of Visuality: Levinas and the Contemporary Gaze* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2013); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Johanne Lamoureux, Christine Ross, and Olivier Asselin, ed., *Precarious Visualities: New Perspectives on Identification in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008); Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, "Unshowable Photographs", in *Many Ways Not to Say Deportation*, in *Errata Exhibition Booklets*, trans. Tal Haran, n.p. (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2019); Niels Van Tomme, ed., *Visibility Machines: Harun Farocki and Trevor Paglen* (Baltimore: Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland, 2014); Willem Popelier and Katja Muller-Helle, *This is Willem Popelier*, Exhibition Catalogue (Berlin: C/O, 2012).

therefore a negative connotation.¹⁸ The relation of this term to warfare is due to the different systems that control the visible, with the main, being the system of embedded photojournalism, which started at the beginning of 1990s, but was efficiently utilised by the US and UK armies from the 21st century Iraq war onwards. Therefore, many case studies that comment on such issues deal with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The research hypothesis of this thesis is that intentionally induced invisibility in an artistic context, namely when it is used in an artwork that allows a further questioning of socio-politically induced invisibility, can have a very positive effect during the spectatorship, as it supports an ethical and political acknowledgment of the depicted sufferer or dead other.

Invisibility, visual absence, unseen, defacement, obliteration, censorship: there are all terms related also to political events. Indicative of this are two quotes used in US political speeches. The first was made from the US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld in 6 June 2002, when he said in a NATO speech on the “Global War on Terrorism” and the alleged weapons of mass destruction that, “the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence”.¹⁹ The second interesting verbal example is from US President, Barack Obama’s speech regarding Bin Laden’s death, on 1 May 2011: “And yet we know that the worst images are those that were unseen to the world”.²⁰ Of course the image of the White House Situation Room in 2011 is a core example of contemporary “unshowable” or “missing” images, analysed in the first chapter.²¹ Of course, the spectators never saw what the photographed subjects were looking at.

¹⁸ For an analysis of such issues see Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and The Visual Arts* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁹ “Press Conference, by US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld”, *NATO Speeches*, NATO, 07 Jun 2002, accessed 08 Nov 2020, <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020606g.htm>.

²⁰ “Full transcript; Barack Obama; Speech on Osama Bin Laden’s death; White House; 1 May 2011”, *New Statesman*, 02 May 2011, accessed 08 Nov 2020, <http://www.newstatesman.com/2011/05/bin-laden-qaeda-pakistan-war>.

²¹ Here I use these two terms in Azoulay’s reading. For more see Azoulay, “Unshowable Photographs”, n.p.

What do people actually see of contemporary conflicts or other violent events?²² This project is based on a contemporary paradox: People have access to unlimited visual material (especially through the web), but at the same time the majority of violent events are highly censored by many different systems of image distribution. Images of atrocities became quite prevalent in the public sphere for the first time following the Second World War. As Barbie Zelizer explains regarding imagery from the Holocaust:

The images' display was so unusual that it required a lifting of censorship restrictions, changed expectations about how photography was thought to function in news, and facilitated the photographic depiction of atrocity. [...] The liberation of the camps can therefore be looked at as a critical incident in the tentative but evolving status of news photography.²³

It seems that the reversed process has taken place in the contemporary world. Yet, even if images are not censored, does spectatorship allow one to have an ethical position? Ariella Azoulay's critical position against the claim that "[t]he public has the right to know", is linked to the fact that the majority of citizens are running the danger of not being able "to see as spectators", which is not due to the censorship of atrocity images.²⁴

Simultaneously, it is important to take into account examples such as the images from the Abu Ghraib, which created a shift in our visual culture, because the spectators saw things that one was not supposed to see. This indicated the power of photographic images as evidence of an event (although in the case of Abu Ghraib the initial purpose for these photographs can be seen as "trophy images"). Yet, there might also exist a personal aspect, related to the limits of what

²² The "spectator" in this context – as well as for the whole thesis – is quite unidentifiable. Therefore, I aim to talk especially for these "spectators" who have access to the web and to other forms of media (TV or newspapers), who cannot be conceived anymore by the older theoretical binaries of "East/West", or the definition of the "Western" world, especially in the contemporary globalised and turbulent world that we live and think in.

²³ Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 12.

²⁴ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 343.

people want and can emotionally accept to view, experiencing thus a potential “state of denial”, as Stanley Cohen has described it.²⁵

This paradoxical context of creation becomes even more troubling if one considers the most recent wave of photographic theories on atrocity images and visual ethics. This second wave of theorists defends the existence of atrocity images, as for example Ariella Azoulay, Susie Linfield, Jay Prosser, Geoffrey Batchen, Fred Ritchin et.al.²⁶ For all these theorists, the discussion regarding photography and the accompanied ethical issues has moved away from older concepts of the ethical failure of the photographer, voyeurism, or the interpretation of atrocity images as related to “pornography”.²⁷ These contemporary approaches have linked the importance of atrocity images to exist within the sphere of political claims, functioning as evidence for violent events, and for contemporary human rights movements. All these new functions can be successfully described under the term “visual politics”.²⁸

This thesis, although it is indebted to the lenses of photography theory and philosophy, maps a tendency in contemporary art and provides an art historical account for a group of artworks created in the last fifteen years. These are examined for the first time all together within the same framework, namely as invisible atrocity images, that can assist a thorough discussion of

²⁵ Cohen, *States of Denial*.

²⁶ Second in relation to the previously formulated between ‘80s and ‘90s, e.g., Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, John Berger. Indicative examples of most recent approaches are: Azoulay, *The Civil Contract*; Geoffrey Batchen et al., ed., *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012); Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Fred Ritchin, *Bending the Frame: Photojournalism, Documentary, and the Citizen* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2013); John Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Robert Harriman, and John Louis Lucaites, *The Public Image: Photography and Civic Spectatorship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016).

²⁷ For more see Jean Baudrillard, “War Porn”, in *The Conspiracy of Art*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 205–209; Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*, 40–42; Allan Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)”, in *Photography Against the Grain* (London: Mack, 2016), 62.

²⁸ This term is consistently used in the recent anthology Grønstad and Gustafsson, ed., *Ethics and the Images of Pain* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

the ethics of spectatorship of atrocity photographs by examining the effect that their artistic erasure or concealment can have on the spectator.

Close visual analysis, one of the main methodological tools of art history, lies at the heart of this thesis. Nevertheless, it does not follow a formalistic analysis, which would aim to trace historiographical genealogies in older artworks or photographs, or material of a different genre, as for example religious images. The latter is a very common theme, to which photojournalism often looks for inspiration (as briefly discussed in Chapter 2), and which art history and theory utilise in need of (less politically challenging) analytical lenses for violent material.²⁹

Finally, although this thesis looks at the ethics of spectatorship, it does not take a sociological or ethnographic point of view but rather a theoretical/philosophical one. A very different disciplinary approach would have been to base the analysis on quantitative research, which in this thesis comprises only a small part (discussed in the Coda of Chapter 1). Such sociological, data-led approaches, could potentially shed light on issues of class in museum audiences, and on whom the spectator is in each context of spectatorship.³⁰ Of course, this would highlight the fact that the spectators of contemporary art, even when the latter is displayed in a free access space, are most often of very specific demographic backgrounds, as art institutions are often not very inclusive. This, however, is beyond the scope of this thesis. Of course, it is important to bear in mind the institutionalised constructive context in terms of spectatorship that

²⁹ Interestingly Laura Brandon mentions that “war” and “religion” are two major “themes of art”, that “are inevitably intertwined, often in the interests of political gain”; Laura Brandon, *Art & War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 131. Two indicative examples that raise such parallels can be found in Berger’s analysis of the photograph of the dead Guevara, and Sontag’s analysis of “iconography of suffering”, which she traces in “Christian art”. For more, see John Berger, “Image of Imperialism”, in *Understanding a Photograph*, ed. Geoff Dyer (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 3–16; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), 36–37.

³⁰ For more on such questions see Laurie Hanquinet, “Visitors to Modern and Contemporary Art Museums: Towards a New Sociology of ‘cultural profiles’”, *The Sociological Review (Keele)* 61, no. 4 (2013): 790–813, <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1111/1467-954X.12072>; Laurie Hanquinet and Mike Savage, ed., *Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Art and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2015), <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.4324/9780203740248>.

museums and galleries offer. In these spaces, spectatorship becomes the sole activity for a dedicated period of time, something that is usually not the case when one encounters atrocity photographs online.

Chronological Framework

The chronological framework from which these artworks have been selected takes as a starting point 9/11, creating thus an analysis of incidents of recent contemporary history, without however providing a linear historical narrative, as will be explained later. 9/11 was one of the most widely seen events of the beginning of the 21st century. Of course, the fact that it functions as some kind of conceptual threshold is not novel. It builds on the well commented idea that this event, and how it was globally experienced, created a shift in contemporary visual culture. Here I would like to trace four reasons in approaching 9/11 as a threshold for visual culture.

First, Jacques Derrida has aptly made a link between visual politics and politics, by suggesting that 9/11 would not had been the same without the existence of television. Yet, what was of particular importance for him was the fact “that maximum media coverage was in the *common* interest of the perpetrators of ‘September 11,’ the terrorists, and those who, in the name of the victims, wanted to declare ‘war on terrorism’”.³¹ A second reasoning of how 9/11 can be perceived as a turning point can be found in the history of technology and the dissemination of images. According to Zeynep Devrim Gürsel:

Not only are the War on Terror and its representations inseparable, but September 11, 2001, is a key, if controversial, originary moment for both the United States’s military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the professional transition to digital photography. [...] [T]he first digital camera system marketed to professional photojournalists was introduced by Kodak in 1991, but even a decade later, many in the professional

³¹ Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 108, italics in the original.

world of photography still resisted using digital images because of what they perceived as inferior image quality. However, when the Federal Aviation Administration grounded all flights for three days following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the photojournalism industry was obliged to accept digital transmission regardless of whether the photographs being transmitted were analog or digitally produced images; images could *move* only digitally. The pace and scale of the digital circulation of news images changed dramatically.³²

Here it is seen how physical limitations, which were the immediate result of the attacks, pushed the medium towards its digital future very fast. Third, on a more theoretical level, Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg, while approaching the notion of “documentary” and what is perceived as real in mediation, explain that,

[f]or some, the events of September 11, 2001 serve as an important periodizing marker of this changed cultural logic, a date after which the intractable real would make itself felt even through the most highly mediated forms of experience: in televised visions of collapsing towers, digital photographs of theatrical scenes of torture, and the operational images of drone strikes.³³

In this sense, the Twin Towers attacks created also a manner of what is perceived as real and how. The fact that the 9/11 events were televised – hence seen – in such speed and in real time, could be seen as a reminder of the Situationist’s notion of the “spectacle”.³⁴ This televised attack shifted how people started apprehending that they could see instantaneous events in real time. The temporality of this event was of key importance here, as “due to the delay between the two crashes, millions of spectators drawn to their screens to view the aftermath of one attack witnessed the second attack and eventually the crumbling of the towers on live television.”³⁵

³² Zeynep Devrim Gürsel, *Image Brokers: Visualizing World News in the Age of Digital Circulation* (California: University of California Press, 2016), 5, italics in the original.

³³ Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg, “Introduction: The Documentary Attitude”, in *Documentary Across Disciplines*, ed. E. Balsom and H. Peleg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 15.

³⁴ For one of the first suggestions on this link between Situationist “spectacle”, the 9/11 and visual culture, see Iain Boal, et al., *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005), 16–37.

³⁵ Gürsel, *Image Brokers*, 6. For the “live” character of 9/11, see Gwyn Symonds, *The Aesthetics of Violence in Contemporary Media* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 19–44.

The fourth and final reasoning for taking 9/11 as a starting point here is one of great importance regarding the topic of this thesis and has to do with the relationship between the spectator and the photographed dead or sufferer. Following Chomsky's rationale, Lillie Chouliaraki, whose thinking focuses on the relationship between spectator and sufferer, stresses the fact that with 9/11, "the roles are reversed and the West suddenly becomes the sufferer".³⁶ This is a crucial moment of shaking the East-West power dynamics, as well as the presumption of whose suffering it is mostly consumed on the news, something that is touched upon in Chapter 1 with the analysis of Alfredo Jaar's work on Kevin Carter's iconic photograph.

Apart from the importance of 9/11 regarding visual culture, in this thesis the case studies are referring to events for which the Twin Towers attacks could be seen as a chronological starting point. These events are the War on Terror, with the invasion in Iraq and Afghanistan; the Syrian War; and the contemporary refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. Of course, I do not aim to imply a cause and effect relationship between 9/11 and the latter events. Yet from a macro scale one cannot fail to observe that there are links of how the power dynamics were transformed in a way that created a historical chain of events, or "a domino effect", as I will call it.

The analysis I offer in this thesis is also linked to my historical placement as a researcher. Theorists such as Susan Sontag or Roland Barthes have offered great insights on issues of how we are to approach photography. Yet, my chronological position is in a completely different visual environment saturated by the existence of the web, the instantaneity of (a democratised?) culture of sharing on social media and the ability for everyone that has a smartphone to have the ability to photograph something and share it immediately, thus shifting the imperative monopoly

³⁶ Lillie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: SAGE, 2006), 22.

that journalism had in the past and the ways it functioned.³⁷ For example, I for one have not bought a newspaper since *The List*, that is analysed in the final chapter, was published in *The Guardian* on the 20th of June 2018. My personal position would be a very arbitrary criterion if it were used to make broader claims, which is the opposite of my aim here. Yet, as a young researcher who analyses contemporary art and visual culture, I am admittedly influenced by my visual cultural environment. Hence if someone from my parents' generation were to write the same thesis, probably their visual environment would be influenced by different elements, such as reading a newspaper, or watching the news at eight.

Chouliaraki has offered a very thorough analysis regarding the “spectatorship of suffering” through television.³⁸ This type of mediation creates a very specific framing of information. Yet, visual culture is constantly evolving due to technological advancements that render previous framing at least partially obsolete. For example, on the 17th of October 2016, a battle in Mosul, in which Iraqi and Kurdish forces were heading towards the city that was under the power of the Islamic State, was livestreamed on the Facebook page of Channel 4.³⁹ The imagery was not shocking as one would expect. What could be perceived as particularly shocking was the moving emoticons – reactions of spectators – on the moving images. A new framing was immediately created in the visual frame: one of instantaneity, of digitised interaction, of the possibility of sharing your reaction to what you are looking at. Although the demographics of the people that follow Channel 4 could indicate certain limitations, social media platforms have created a visual environment in which potentially everyone can be a spectator.⁴⁰

³⁷ For issues of online reporting, see Daniel Bennett, *Digital Media and Reporting Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2013); for citizen journalism, see Stuart Allan, ed., *Photojournalism and Citizen Journalism* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

³⁸ Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship of Suffering*.

³⁹ For more see Orit Gat, “Modern Warfare: Watching the battle for Mosul live on Facebook”, *frieze*, 20 Oct. 2016, accessed 25 Sep. 2020, <https://www.frieze.com/article/modern-warfare>.

⁴⁰ Here I am saying “potentially everyone” as one needs to not forget cases of “shadow banning” or how often different nations permit access only to certain platforms. More information on these issues can be found in the

The important impact that technological developments have on the way that photography functions is central to many contemporary discussions on new media, digital photography and distribution of such images. A good example in this direction is the anthology *Digital Snaps: The New Face of Photography* (2014) where the editors aim to record the changes that digital photography has brought, while they create “‘a new photographic media ecology’ in a series of studies on the specific practices and uses of digital snapshot photography.”⁴¹ As they explain, “[t]he digitization of images thus implies media convergence and new performances of sociality reflecting broader shifts towards real-time, collaborative, networked ‘sociality at a distance’.”⁴² However, the enormous speed of technological developments tends to render such books already “obsolete”, if one considers for example the “live” effect on photographs that the latest iPhones provide their users with.

The environment of the dissemination of images changes rapidly, and most probably will be already different in five years from the moment that this thesis is written. To my mind, this constant evolution of visual culture makes such ethical questions as the ones examined in this thesis even more topical. Today we are all spectators in many different contexts: printed material, television, online media, social media platforms. Therefore, when we look at still and moving images of the death and suffering of others, this ethical responsibility towards them is even more pressing. Hence, although this thesis does not focus on the “networked image”, it is being written in an era that is saturated by them.⁴³ And this is a big difference from environments such as the ones described almost fifteen years ago by Chouliaraki.

comprehensive documentary *The Cleaners*, directed by Hans Block and Moritz Riesewieck (Germany: gebrueder beetz, 2018), DVD.

⁴¹ Jonas Larsen and Mette Sandbye, “Introduction: The New Face of Snapshot Photography”, in *Digital Snaps* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), xxii.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁴³ For the development of the photographic medium until “snapshot” and “networked” images, see Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, “A Life More Photographic”, *Photographies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 9–28,

On the Literature

As the topic of this thesis lies at a crossroad of intellectual/academic fields, the literature regarding atrocity images can be traced in many different academic fields too: art history, visual culture, media studies, politics, philosophy, human rights, journalism, military history – to name just a few. Yet, this literature creates certain methodological typologies, which are linked directly to the conceptual difficulties that such images pose: namely ethical questions.

A first category can be found in a vast array of anthologies. The anthology structure allows one to examine many different examples, quite often from very different chronological frameworks, without sacrificing the needed attention when approaching photographs of death and suffering. This, therefore, highlights the importance of thinking of historical differences. As Gil. Z. Hochberg very rightly points out:

How much one can see, what one can see, and in what one can see or be seen are all outcomes of specific visual arrangements that are created and sustained through particular configurations of space and various processes of *differentiations* along national, ethnic, racial, religious, gender, and sexual lines.⁴⁴

Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis (2012), edited by Geoffrey Batchen, M. Gidley, Nancy K. Miller and Jay Prosser, is one of the most important contemporary anthologies in the fields of war-photography, representation of violence and atrocity images.⁴⁵ It includes input by many prominent scholars of these fields, such as Ariella Azoulay, David Campbell, Robert Hariman, Fred Ritchin et al. An innovative feature of this book is the photo-essays that are included. Established artists, such as Alfredo Jaar and Lorie Novak, provide the reader with a

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17540760701785842>; Martin Lister, ed., *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁴⁴ Hochberg, *Visual Occupations*, 5, italics in the original.

⁴⁵ Batchen et al., ed., *Picturing Atrocity*.

different way to think through the troubling questions that these images are posing, while they refer to many different chronological and geographical case studies.⁴⁶

This book belongs in the “second wave” of theorists, as John Roberts has characterised some of the above-mentioned experts.⁴⁷ Having said that, the importance of this book is that, on the whole, it supports the contemporary opinion that atrocity images should definitely exist, and that the viewers have the responsibility to look at them. This stance becomes apparent from the first sentence of the book, when Prosser writes: “Why look at pictures of atrocity? We don’t have a choice. We can’t help but see them anyway.” And goes on only to finish the first paragraph by saying: “To not picture atrocity is therefore to omit what’s there, to fail the truth of a situation, to withhold that proof. Equally, not to look at pictures of atrocity is to deny its existence [...]”.⁴⁸

Of course, in this book the relation of such images with human rights is notably underlined – a topic that can be related to the vast interdisciplinary literature on philanthropy. As Prosser explains, “[d]ocumentary humanitarian photographs of atrocity underlie many important social principles, such as human rights. [...] Atrocity photographs are used [...] also by charities and non-governmental organizations and campaigns of all kinds.”⁴⁹ This is the reason why many different people, with somehow different professional identities have contributed to this book, thus creating a well-rounded perspective on the topic.

A parameter of particular importance that is highlighted, is the question of how we ought to react to such images – hence the issue of spectatorship.

One reason why atrocity photographs immediately grab us is because the representation of the atrocity – let alone how to respond to it – is not in any way obvious. [...] In images of atrocity, as in other images – but with

⁴⁶ For more see, Jay Prosser, “Introduction”, in *Picturing Atrocity*, ed. G. Batchen et al. (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 11.

⁴⁷ John Roberts, *Photography and its Violations*, 26.

⁴⁸ Jay Prosser, “Introduction”, 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.

far greater repercussions for the subjects and for our understanding and conscience – the meaning is not obvious.⁵⁰

This aspect is also underlined by the subtitle of the book: *Photography in Crisis*. Although, “picturing atrocity is inevitable”, as Prosser explains, the “crisis” in photographic practice is related to its proliferation and the new technologies of visual distribution, which make the discussion even more complicated – especially when talking about the representations of atrocities.⁵¹

A step in the direction of emphasising the importance of photography for the understanding and support of human rights, can be found in the anthology *The Violence of the Image: Photography and International Conflict*, published in 2014 and edited by Liam Kennedy and Caitlin Patrick.⁵² The two editors put photojournalism and its function in the contemporary globalised world at the core of their book. This is a quite an important publication, as the media and technology keep changing the way we perceive the world and the news and therefore the discussion around media and atrocities has to be continuously updated. As the two editors explain: “Photojournalism has a complex relationship with the visual production of national identities and their international extensions. It is intrinsically transnational, both as a medium of representation and as a political economy of image production”, although they continue by admitting that photojournalism is produced by and reinforces “Western’ values and worldviews”.⁵³

⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁵¹ Ibid., 13.

⁵² Liam Kennedy and Caitlin Patrick, ed., *The Violence of the Image: Photography and International Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).

⁵³ Ibid., 1.

Another example of such format can be found in the anthology *Ethics and the Images of Pain*.⁵⁴ As the editors explain in the introduction, the texts in this book are organised around “the ‘visual’, the ‘iconic’, of the ‘pictorial’ turn”.⁵⁵ At the same time, they follow a theoretical tendency “from representation to presentation, from interpretation to encounter, and from semiotics to sensation”, and they create an examination across media that leads to what they call “ethical phenomenology”.⁵⁶ Although the questions of this thesis can be seen as overlapping with those posed in this book – namely “Do we look away to protect the integrity of the subject photographed, or to protect ourselves? Does not looking absolve us from complicity, or is the ostensibly respectful act of averting ones eyes in fact to deny responsibility and foreclose knowledge?”⁵⁷ – the approach is significantly different, due to the fact that the majority of the photographed others in the invisible atrocity images are dead, thus rendering the terminology of pain ineffective. Also, the criteria I have chosen for the case studies, as will be explained subsequently, allow a theorisation that enables a deeper understanding of atrocity photography through this material.

A different account that cuts again across disciplines can be found in the very recent book *Unwatchable*, which, as the title reveals, engages with material that are defined as such, “whether for ethical, political, or sensory and affective reasons. [...] [M]any of the images in our media culture might strike us as unsuitable for viewing”.⁵⁸ This book is directly linked to the theme of this thesis. However, its structure – comprising more than fifty short essays – does not provide any concrete proposition for the issues at stake. Although such collaging of voices offers many

⁵⁴ Grønstad and Gustafsson, ed., *Ethics and Images of Pain* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁵⁵ Grønstad and Gustafsson, “Introduction”, xvi.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁵⁸ Nicholas Baer et al., “Introduction”, in *Unwatchable*, ed. Nicholas Baer et al. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 3.

different viewpoints, at the same time, to my mind ethical questions cannot be a matter of brief discussions, a point that I will elaborate further subsequently.

A different format of books in this field is the monograph, which is most often divided into chapters that each examine one case study or are chronologically organised. In addition, there are many monographs structured around one historical event, as typically happens with the literature regarding images and the Holocaust.⁵⁹ Here I will mention a few monographs that have significantly shaped my thinking.

In her initial book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag suggests that photographs have an educational role: “[i]n teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe”. This function is what she describes as “ethics of seeing”.⁶⁰ At this point, Sontag’s conclusion was that “citizens” have been transformed into “image-junkies”, as the proliferation of photographs has created “an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted”.⁶¹ In other words, in 1977 she proposes that viewers are desensitised. However, in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, published in 2003 – and after having experienced 9/11 – Sontag harshly criticises and revises her previous views.

In the first of the six essays in *On Photography* (1977), I argued that while an event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been had one never seen the photographs, after repeated exposure it also becomes less real. As much as they create sympathy, I wrote, photographs shrivel sympathy. Is this true? I thought it was when I wrote it. I’m not so sure now.⁶²

⁵⁹ Indicative examples are Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*; Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*; Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Barbie Zelizer, ed., *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (London: The Athlone Press, 2001); Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁶⁰ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2008), 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶² Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 94.

In her latest book, Sontag analyses all the related parameters on viewing atrocity images: censorship, ethics, emotions, mediation of spectatorship, and so forth. Interestingly, she also suggests the openness of the photographs to different interpretations, thus underlying the fact that the photographer is not the only one who determines the visible. Yet, even though Sontag changes her view regarding what is widely referred to as “compassion fatigue” syndrome, she still seems unsure about the ability of images to have a political impact.

Another important addition in the field of documentary photography is the book *Photography and Its Violations* (2014) by John Roberts.⁶³ This book’s importance lies mainly in the fact that it produces a thorough mapping of the field of photographic theories, especially the most recent additions on it. For Roberts, photography has a “productive capacity for violation”, which can be explained as the “capacity for ‘pointing at’ as an act of disclosure”.⁶⁴ Violation in this context is seen as incorporated in the ontological character of photography: “photography is the very act of making visible and, therefore, is conceptually entangled with what is unconscious, half-hidden, implicit.”⁶⁵ These kinds of ideas bring to mind the first wave of photographic critique, as well as Sontag’s suggestions at *On Photography* (1977), although Roberts clearly takes the responsibility away from the photographer’s intentions.⁶⁶ For him it is of particular importance that photography’s “*primary and globalizing* function rests on its infinite reproduction of social appearances and relations as a making visible of some part of the world.”⁶⁷ This reference to the “social” character of photography indicates Roberts’ influence by Azoulay’s *The Civil Contract of Photography*, published in 2008.⁶⁸

⁶³ Roberts, *Photography and its Violations*.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 2; Sontag, *On Photography*.

⁶⁷ Roberts, *Photography and its Violations*, 4, italics in the original.

⁶⁸ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*.

Azoulay, whose work lies at the foundation of this thesis, has created a shift in the literature by introducing political terms in the analysis of the visual – the photograph. In the aforementioned book, as well as in *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (2012) (where she examines more artistic photographic practices), Azoulay provides the readers with a new theoretical language for the analysis of documentary photographs, which will be elaborated in the following section regarding the three theoretical frameworks of this thesis.⁶⁹ Both her books are compelling, though challenging, for the reader.

In my point of view, Azoulay's theory is a rare example of creating a concrete new way of photographic interpretation, unlike most books in this field. Books on the field of documentary photography, and especially that of atrocity images, are usually either anthologies compiled under a central theme or end up being fragmented in the study of the different facets of these – mainly ethical – issues. This observation highlights the potentially troubling aspects and dangers of writing about atrocity images and the ethical questions of their production and spectatorship. These aspects are linked with the fact that it is almost impossible to provide a single answer regarding ethics. Therefore, most writers – especially in the case of texts in anthologies – tend to focus on a specific case study. For example in John Berger's *Understanding a Photograph* (1967), or Sontag's seminal books *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), the troubling aspect is that the reader ends up wandering through pages of beautifully written, essay-style text without receiving a clear framework with which to analyse atrocity images.⁷⁰ Despite the usefulness of these analyses, I believe that they have certain limitations in their theoretical engagement, which is highlighted by the fact that the majority of artists and

⁶⁹ Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, trans. Louise Bethlehem (London: Verso, 2012).

⁷⁰ Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*; Sontag, *On Photography*; Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*.

curators that work with atrocity images quote Sontag's book, as it is easily adaptable in many different contexts.

Another theorist, influenced by Azoulay's rationale, is Susie Linfield in her book *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, published in 2010.⁷¹ Linfield, who also works in the direction of a new ontology of photography, tries to tackle two central parameters. First, she believes that "we need to respond to and learn from photographs, rather than simply dissemble them [...] we need to look at, and look *into*, what James Agee called 'the cruel radiance of what is'."⁷² Second, Linfield writes her photographic critique "against the progressive view of history", and the belief that "the arc of modern history bends toward freedom and justice".⁷³ On the contrary, this book suggests that "it is the experience of degradation, immiseration, violence, and defeat that defines the lives of millions, and that in large part defines history".⁷⁴ Being influenced by three philosophers – Jean Amery, Hannah Arendt and Primo Levi – who have explored the traumatic nature of Holocaust, she is very much interested in the notion of "empathy", which she places in the core of an apt understanding of contemporary human rights.⁷⁵

This thesis is an endeavour in art theory, hence it is mostly ingrained and set in dialogue with the field marked by the aforementioned literature: namely theory of photography and representations of violence. As will be explained afterwards, here the term "atrocity" is explicitly chosen instead of "war", which is perceived as quite restrictive in this context. However, as this thesis also sits in the field of contemporary art historical research, it is important to mention some key literary examples that examine three overlapping areas: art and war, war photography, and aftermath photography.

⁷¹ Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*.

⁷² Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*, xv, italics in the original.

⁷³ Ibid., xv.

⁷⁴ Ibid., xv.

⁷⁵ Ibid., xv.

Art & War by the historian Laura Brandon examines the genre of “war art”, which according to the author can be defined as

art shaped by war. Within this model, as this study shows, war inspires permanent and impermanent art that may be propaganda, memorial, protest, and/or record.⁷⁶

As Brandon proclaims, their study is the first that looks at this subject matter “internationally through time as more than battle pictures, an aspect of national history, or military illustration”.⁷⁷ By starting from 1600 and with a survey style based on chronological order, this book tries to define the genre of war art by expanding it to contemporary examples of visual representations. Although it serves its purpose, as is the case with many survey books, it sacrifices a more nuanced analysis, which in this particular case would require discussion of the ethical ramifications of producing and looking at such artworks.

Another recent example is the rich anthology *War and Art: A Visual History of Modern Conflict*, edited by the historian Joanna Bourke.⁷⁸ This book’s essays are divided into four themes – “histories”, “genres”, “artists” and “contexts” – and provide “a visual, cultural and historical analysis of the ways armed conflict has been represented in a range of artistic forms” from the mid-19th century to the 21st century.⁷⁹ On the contrary to Brandon’s approach, Bourke very cautiously underlines that the term “war art”, by including very heterogeneous examples within it, “is intrinsically contested”.⁸⁰ Interestingly enough, although Bourke’s closing remarks in the introduction mention that “[a]udiences as well as artists celebrate an aesthetic of responsibility”,

⁷⁶ Brandon, *Art & War*, 3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁸ Joanna Bourke, “Introduction”, in *War and Art: A Visual History of Modern Conflict*, ed. Joanna Bourke (London: Reaktion Books, 2017).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

the anthology does not devote a distinct section to the visual ethics of the vast array of examples that it discusses.⁸¹

A final example that falls under the theme of art and war is the Imperial War Museum's (IWM) publication *Art From Contemporary Conflict* by the curator Sara Bevan.⁸² This book focuses solely on examples of contemporary artworks in the IWM collections, and functions almost as a contextualised inventory, with an introduction and caption-like texts for each example. Of course, the nature of this book does not lend itself to a more thorough analysis of the usually accompanying theoretical questions. What all these aforementioned books have in common is their aim to provide a historicisation of art production that is related to war. This approach is distinctly different to the one offered in this thesis, as here the analysis focuses on the specific (artwork/atrocities photograph) as a means to expand on a theoretical discussion about the ethics of the spectatorship.

Regarding war and photography, an excellent contribution has been made by the exhibition catalogue *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath*.⁸³ This rich volume investigates photographs from the period 1846 to 2011.⁸⁴ Despite the wide chronological span, Anne Wilkes Tucker, curator and one of the editors, explains that the book follows a thematic approach instead of a chronological one.⁸⁵ According to her, “[f]or too long, discussions about this genre [war photography] have existed primarily in texts on specific photographers, news agencies, and wars, or have been claimed as the exclusive domain of theorists”.⁸⁶ To my mind, this comment underlines issues of interdisciplinarity and how they might shape each analytical

⁸¹ Ibid., 41.

⁸² Sara Bevan, *Art From Contemporary Art* (London: Imperial War Museum, 2015).

⁸³ Anne Wilkes Tucker, Will Michels, and Natalie Zelt, ed., *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath*, Exhibition Catalogue (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2012).

⁸⁴ Anne Wilkes Tucker, “Introduction”, in *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath*, ed. Anne Wilkes Tucker, Will Michels, and Natalie Zelt, Exhibition Catalogue (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), 2.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 7.

approach. This thesis works in parallel to books such as *War/Photography* by examining issues around photographs that on most occasions could fall under the broader umbrella of war photography. Yet, the distinct difference is that it also aims to provide a theoretical analysis of the ethics of photography by taking as main focal point contemporary artworks that cannot be defined as photography themselves.

A final mention of the field of aftermath photography is needed. A whole section of the aforementioned volume is devoted to the aftermath, including a variety of photographs showing what happens after the combat, including the mundane reality of soldiers, the battlefields, the dead and wounded, and destroyed spaces and buildings.⁸⁷ This is also the subject matter of *Afterwards: Contemporary Photography Confronting the Past*, by the curator Nathalie Herschdorfer.⁸⁸ She aptly argues that “[b]eyond what it actually depicts, a photograph retains the capacity to evoke reactions and associations in those who look at it”.⁸⁹ This point about an image not including its meaning in what is rendered visible, lies also at the heart of this thesis. The aesthetics of landscapes of the aftermath, could be seen as very similar to those examined under the umbrella of invisible atrocity images – the aesthetics of absence. Yet, the two key differences between them reside in how and why this absence exists in the visual, as well as the ethics involved. This thesis, although is set in dialogue with photographs – the appropriated or censored material – has as its main case studies artworks that use different visual modes to achieve such an aesthetic. Simultaneously, the terminology of the aftermath could be seen as carrying certain

⁸⁷ Anne Wilkes Tucker, “Aftermath”, in *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and Its Aftermath*, ed. Anne Wilkes Tucker, Will Michels, and Natalie Zelt, Exhibition Catalogue (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), 199-204. For an interesting account on the aftermath photography in the context of the genocide in Rwanda, see Frank Möller, *Visual Peace: Images, Spectatorship, and the Politics of Violence* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 77-98.

⁸⁸ Nathalie Herschdorfer, ed., *Afterwards: Contemporary Photography Confronting the Past* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011).

⁸⁹ Nathalie Herschdorfer, “Introduction”, in *Afterwards: Contemporary Photography Confronting the Past*, ed. Nathalie Herschdorfer (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 14.

limitations. By focusing on the temporality – a post-violent act moment – instead of the effect on the dead or sufferer, one immediately places the focus on the context – the war/disaster zone – instead of the human experience. The acknowledgment of the latter is key for any ethical discussion around the spectatorship.

These aforementioned examples on war art and war photography, apart from placing conflicts at their core, also take a historical approach, not only by following a chronological order, but also by tracing aesthetic similarities between older photographic or artistic examples and their case studies. Although this allows one to trace a genealogy for certain aesthetics, at the same time it detracts from the specificity of each individual case of suffering or death, which is one of the key demands when analysing the ethics of spectatorship.

On the Artworks' Literature

The case studies of this thesis are works of art created in the 21st century by the artists Dinh Q. Lê, Alfredo Jaar, Ina Louguine, Thomas Hirschhorn, belit sağ, Khaled Barakeh, David Birkin, Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, and Banu Cennetoğlu. In this text they are frequently set in a comparative analysis with the photographs they appropriate (or other relevant photographs) and with artworks by Edmund Clark, Ken Gonzales-Day, Hito Steyerl and Stan Brakhage, to name a few. The analysis of the case studies is deliberately not based on the artists' intentions, since during the spectatorship one is left with only the artwork and the accompanying information for contextualisation.

This thesis creates a new framework, namely that of the invisible atrocity images, within which all these artworks are discussed together for the first time. The literature on these artists, sometimes included in exhibition catalogues, falls under four broad categories: i) texts written by them; ii) interviews; iii) reviews of exhibitions; and iv) critical approaches and theorisation of

their work. These are referenced at different points of the thesis. Of course, for each category the existing literature on the artists or the selected artworks is quite uneven due to two factors: i) the stage of the artist's career; and ii) the date that each artwork was created.

The first category of texts, those written by the artists, is quite prevalent among the examined cases, something that is justified by the conceptual nature of these works.⁹⁰ The most iconic example of this practice comes from Hirschhorn who writes statements or theoretical texts for each of his projects.⁹¹ As will be seen in the three chapters, these are often intersected in the analysis not as mere descriptors of the artist's intentions but as an important contextualisation of the work. The latter is essential for most of the analysed artworks, and even more so for the case studies of Chapter 3, in which the spectator usually sees nothing in visual terms.

As was anticipated for artists like Alfredo Jaar, Thomas Hirschhorn and Broomberg and Chanarin much more has been written, as they are already well established and have participated in many exhibitions. Jaar is the most extensively analysed artist in the literature of those whose work is examined in this thesis. Apart from a large number of interviews and exhibition reviews, which are thoroughly utilised in Chapter 1, it is interesting to note that most of these publications analyse Jaar's earlier works regarding the Rwanda Genocide.⁹² This body of work lies also at the

⁹⁰ Indicative examples are David Birkin, "The Law, War, and Some Terms of Art", in *David Birkin: Mouths at the Invisible Event*, Exhibition Catalogue (London: Mosaic Rooms, 2015), 13–21; Khaled Barakeh, "Focus Box 6: Images of war or war of images?", in *Global Photography: A Critical History*, ed. Erina Duganne, Heather Diack, and Terri Weissman (London: Routledge, 2020), 151–154; Khaled Barakeh, "The Untitled Images (2014)", *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 4 (2018): 142+, *Gale Literature Resource Center*, accessed 6 May 2021, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A551651652/LitRC?u=univork&sid=LitRC&xid=744b2e7d>; Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, "The Day Nobody Died: Presented at the Barbican Art Gallery, 4th December 2008", Broomberg & Chanarin, accessed 15 Nov. 2020, <http://www.broombergchanarin.com/new-page-4>.

⁹¹ For Hirschhorn's texts see Lisa Lee and Hal Forster, ed., *Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); "Texts – Thomas Hirschhorn", Thomas Hirschhorn (website), accessed 4 May 2021, <http://www.thomashirschhorn.com/texts/>.

⁹² For some indicative examples see Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and Ethics of Testimony* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 51–60; Debra Bricker Balken, ed., *Alfredo Jaar: Lament of the Images*, Exhibition Catalogue (Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1999); Michael Levan, "Folding Trauma: On Alfredo Jaar's installations and interventions", *Performance Research*, 16:1 (2011): 80–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2011.561678>.

heart of the exhibition catalogue *Alfredo Jaar: La Politique Des Images*, published in 2007. This includes texts by the philosopher Jacques Ranciere, the art historian Griselda Pollock and the philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman.⁹³ In the volume's introduction, Nicole Schweizer maps Jaar's work in his thirty year career prior to the publication.⁹⁴ Regarding the same period of works, Ranciere's analysis examines issues around the power of images in a world that is saturated by them.⁹⁵ Pollock, on the other hand, builds her exploration of issues around viewing Jaar's work in relation to a painting by Pieter Bruegel.⁹⁶ This line of thought is also referenced in another analysis of Jaar's *The Sound of Silence*, in which Pollock focuses closely on the appropriated photograph by Kevin Carter.⁹⁷ Interestingly, also the late curator Okwui Enwezor wrote an exhibition essay on this body of Jaar's work.⁹⁸

These references indicate how Jaar's work has been one of the most thoroughly examined, although his work *May 1, 2011*, analysed in Chapter 1, has not yet received such attention.⁹⁹ Similarly, Hirschhorn's *Self-Pixel* (2016), examined in Chapter 2, has not received any critical engagement. This is the case for most of the case studies that were created in the last five years, for which the sparse examples of critical engagement are referenced in the respective subchapters.

⁹³ Nicole Schweizer, ed., *Alfredo Jaar: La Politique Des Images*, Exhibition Catalogue (Zurich: Jrp/Ringier, 2007).

⁹⁴ Nicole Schweizer, "The Politics of Images: An Introduction", in *Alfredo Jaar: La Politique Des Images*, ed. Nicole Schweizer, Exhibition Catalogue (Zurich: Jrp/Ringier, 2007), 7–16.

⁹⁵ Jacques Ranciere, "Theatre of Images", in *Alfredo Jaar: La Politique Des Images*, ed. Nicole Schweizer, Exhibition Catalogue (Zurich: Jrp/Ringier, 2007), 71–80.

⁹⁶ Griselda Pollock, "Not-Forgetting Africa: The Dialectics of Attention/Inattention, Seeing/Denying, And Knowing/Understanding in the Positioning of the Viewer by the Work of Alfredo Jaar", in *Alfredo Jaar: La Politique Des Images*, ed. Nicole Schweizer, Exhibition Catalogue (Zurich: Jrp/Ringier, 2007), 113–135.

⁹⁷ Griselda Pollock, "Photographing Atrocity: Becoming Iconic?", in *Picturing Atrocity*, ed. G. Batchen et al. (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 65–78.

⁹⁸ Okwui Enwezor, "Alfredo Jaar's Art of Illumination", in *Alfredo Jaar: The Sound of Silence*, Exhibition Catalogue (Paris: Kamel Mennour Gallery, 2011), 18–29.

⁹⁹ An exception to this is Mafalda Dâmaso, "On May 1, 2011 (Alfredo Jaar, 2011) – Expanding the Frame of the Original Photograph", in *Museums and Photography: Displaying Death*, ed. Elena Stylianou and Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert (New York: Routledge, 2018), 275–292.

Three “Encounters” with Invisible Atrocity Images

The interdisciplinary character of this thesis meant that the need to make certain theoretical and methodological choices was of even greater importance. In this thesis the invisible atrocity images are being examined through three different theoretical lenses: the “frame”, the “face”, and the “contract”.¹⁰⁰ I comprehend these three lenses as three ways of approaching what I call an “encounter”, exactly because all these three frameworks are structured between two subjects.¹⁰¹ In this thesis the one is the spectator, while the other is the photographed dead or sufferer other.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the verb to “encounter” has as the first meaning “unexpectedly be faced with or experience (something hostile or difficult)”, while the noun means “an unexpected or casual meeting with someone or something” or “a confrontation or unpleasant struggle”.¹⁰² To my mind, the introduction of this word in a context for the spectatorship of atrocity images seems appropriate for two reasons. First, due to the “difficult” nature of these images, even when one is expected to formulate an ethical understanding of them, will most probably need to overcome other negative emotions that will arise at least at the first glance. This is something that is further questioned in Chapter 3, where negative emotions are set in dialogue with a sociopolitical understanding of the ethical responsibility of the spectator. Second, the analysis of this thesis is based on the notion that someone has to look at an atrocity

¹⁰⁰ N.B.: Throughout the thesis, when I refer to the “face” in Levinas’ conceptualisation of the ethical relationship, I put it in quotation marks, while in every other case I do not (i.e., when I refer to the visual body part). Also, although the word “other” in most English translations of Levinas is capitalised, I choose not to capitalise it here, as I approach the other not as something remote but recognise that we are all “others” from another point of view. In addition, this usage is consistent with Butler’s and Azoulay’s frameworks.

¹⁰¹ The notion of the encounter with regards to visual ethics has been also brought to the surface in an anthology by Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, entitled *Film and Ethics*, where they propose that “ethics can be thought of as the encounter that occurs between a reader or viewer and a text or work of visual art, as much as a moral or political code in daily life.” Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton, *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

¹⁰² *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. “encounter”, ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed 9 Nov. 2020, https://www-oxfordreference-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0264680.

image, not in a passive manner, but in a way that will develop a deeper involvement with what they are confronted with: namely the dead or sufferer photographed other. A spectator encounters the photographed other that exists in the invisible atrocity image. Hence in this thesis I utilise three different theoretical lenses in approaching these “encounters”; the latter is a term that to different extents has been incorporated by all three frameworks.

In the first chapter, the exploration takes as a starting point Judith Butler’s utilisation of the “frame” in her book *Frames of War*.¹⁰³ There she explains:

Although framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalizing certain versions of reality. This means that the frame is always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version.¹⁰⁴

In this thesis, I utilise Butler’s notion of the frame in a rather unexpected way: by its application to invisible atrocity images that appropriate or comment upon iconic images. The latter could be seen as the photographic frames with the most fixed meaning, something that would potentially allow one to instantly develop a relationship with the dead or sufferer other. Yet, as I will question, is this really the case? And if that was the case does it allow one to comprehend the existence of the other in an ethical manner? The answer is negative. When such iconic frames – which in Butler’s framework could be read as “normative schemes”¹⁰⁵ – are unpacked through the conceptual frames that invisible atrocity images underline, then it becomes obvious that the spectator needs to rethink their positioning towards them in order to develop what can be seen as “recognition” of a life.¹⁰⁶ For Butler, there is a distinction to be made between “recognition” and

¹⁰³ Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

“apprehension”, with the first being “strongest term”, while the second is “less precise, since it can imply marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition”.¹⁰⁷ The bare minimum that one can do is to “apprehend” another’s life, an act that will allow them to develop an ethical response towards their loss or suffering. By rendering invisible the most often seen – the iconic – one is assisted in examining the different “frames” that once they are unpacked, the spectator would be able to perceive the “precariousness” of the photographed dead or sufferer other. This would be a very specific type of “encounter”, if one is to follow Butler’s rationale.

To perceive a life is not quite the same as encountering a life as precarious. Encountering a life as precarious is not a raw encounter, one in which life is stripped bare of all its usual interpretations, appearing to us outside all relations of power. An ethical attitude does not spontaneously arrive as soon as the usual interpretive frameworks are destroyed, and no pure moral conscience emerges once the shackles of everyday interpretation have been thrown off. On the contrary, it is only by challenging the dominant media that certain kinds of lives may become visible or knowable in their precariousness. It is not only or exclusively the visual apprehension of a life that forms a necessary precondition for an understanding of the precariousness of life. Another life is taken in through all the senses, if it is taken in at all. [...] To encounter the precariousness of another life, the senses have to be operative, which means that a struggle must be waged against those forces that seek to regulate affect in differential ways.¹⁰⁸

Invisible atrocity images that appropriate iconic photographs are a very effective way of “challenging the dominant media” which allow only certain lives to be perceived as “precarious”.

A different type of “encounter” can be found in the notion of the “face”, about which interestingly enough Butler has been one of the most famous contemporary commentators.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 4–5.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 51–52.

¹⁰⁹ Butler formulates her notion of a “precarious life” in dialogue with Levinas’ philosophy, although she does not focus only on the “face”. For more see, Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 128–151. For more on the link between Butler’s thinking and Levinas, see Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). Other examples of conceptual dialogues that have been based upon or challenged and expanded the Levinasian philosophy can be found in Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Simon Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999); Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans.

“When I speak of first philosophy, I am referring to a philosophy of dialogue that cannot not be an ethics. Even the philosophy that questions the meaning of being does so on the basis of the encounter with the other” suggests Emmanuel Levinas, one of the most prominent continental philosophers of the 20th century ¹¹⁰ The “face” of the other– for which Levinas has written many different texts, without ever giving a singular definition – is to be conceptualised as the basis of any ethical relationship in this framework. According to him: “The face in which the other – the absolutely other – presents himself does not negate the same. [...] It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is preeminently nonviolence [...]”.¹¹¹ So, the framework for the understanding of the “face” is one of “nonviolence”, where I – the spectator in this case – am never experiencing “sameness”. Yet, what one is to experience is responsibility, a key element that makes this framework very important in a discussion regarding the spectatorship of images of atrocities:

In the relation to the other, the other appears to me as one to whom I owe something, toward whom I have a responsibility. Hence the asymmetry of the I-You relation and the radical inequality between the I and the you, for all relation to the other is a relation to a being toward whom I have obligations. [...] The “for the other” arises within the *I*, like a command heard by him, as if obedience were already being listening for the dictate. Alterity’s plot is born before knowledge.¹¹²

The latter is a point that will be further reiterated in Chapter 2, as it highlights the primary character that ethics play in Levinas’ philosophy. Through a biographical lens, his work on ethics can be linked with the fact that he was a survivor of the Holocaust, a link that is visible in the

A. Martinez and C. Morkovsky (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2003); Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2012), 18–29.

¹¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 97. For Levinas’ work, see Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Bettina Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2019 Edition), accessed 9 Nov. 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/levinas/>.

¹¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 203.

¹¹² Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 101, italics in the original.

work of many philosophers of his generation.¹¹³ At the same time, Levinas' ethics are linked to the perception of God, as he suggests that "[p]hilosophy – or phenomenology – is necessary to recognize His voice. I have thought that it is in the face of the other that he speaks to me for 'the first time'".¹¹⁴ Although Levinasian thinking is highly influenced by theology, in this thesis I remove this structure from a theological context by focusing on a different issue of his framework.¹¹⁵ That is an issue of invisibility, which lies at the core of Levinas' notion of the "face", as Hagi Kenaan aptly explains,

[t]he Other is what is present and revealed, according to Levinas, through the tension between the visible and the invisible, the phenomenal and the transcendent, the conceptual and what cannot be conceptualized – a strong tension that is very hard to live with.¹¹⁶

A core question that problematises Levinas' theory is whether the "face" is something that should be traced in the visible, or not. In this thesis I suggest how the "face" as an ethical entity can be more successfully traced in the invisible atrocity image than its visible version. However, I do not link invisibility with a Levinasian exploration of metaphysics.¹¹⁷ On the contrary, I trace this link to the face in Levinas' proposition that "speech" is important for this "face-to-face" relationship: "[s]peech cuts across vision".¹¹⁸ This relation between the "face" and "discourse" is further explored in Chapter 2, through the examination of still images. There, as the "face" of the

¹¹³ For more on Levinas' biography see "1. Life and Career", in Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas". Other examples of thinkers whose work was influenced by their survival of the Holocaust are Hannah Arendt and Primo Levi. Having experienced the cruelty of the Holocaust, these thinkers have developed significant understandings of ethics.

¹¹⁴ Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 175.

¹¹⁵ This is not something that I expand upon in this thesis, as lies beyond the scope of the argument. However, I believe that an interesting link that should be explored further in the future is how in such frameworks, as the Levinasian, a contemporary understanding could perceive the control mechanisms that the Web places upon its users, as a substitute of how the fear of a God had in the past.

¹¹⁶ Kenaan, *Ethics of Visuality*, 10–11.

¹¹⁷ For more on Levinas and the invisible, see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33–35.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 195. To my mind this relationship is accidentally visualised in a drawing by Claire Fontaine, entitled *subject / voice / other*, which is comprised by two overlapping circles. This work is part of a series of five drawings, which touch on issues of otherness, as well as refugees. See the work here "*subject / voice / other*", Claire Fontaine, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.clairefontaine.ws/item/2700/2700>.

photographed is a dead person, I include in the equation also the captioning or other photographed participants, whose “speech” can be perceived as formulating the spectator’s relationship with the “face”, echoing again Levinas:

But that apparent simplicity of the relation between the I and the You, in its very asymmetry, is yet again disturbed by the arrival of the third person, who stands next to the other, the you. The third party is also a neighbour, a face, an unattainable alterity.¹¹⁹

The Levinasian ethical framework is being utilised in a part of the thesis where I examine artworks that highlight issues of censorship through partial concealment – or methods of content moderation – with the use of pixelation, cut-outs, blurring and so on. Of course, the invisible atrocity images that are examined in this case are commenting in a critical manner on these practices, allowing the space for a reconsideration of the ethical question: Do we have the right to look at atrocity images? And if so, how can we recognise the other’s “face” in the visible or the invisible? These questions are being tackled in a context where no visual faces are to be seen.¹²⁰

A challenge that one might confront when applying the notion of the “face” to the analysis of images, is that Levinas was never really concerned with art and visual representations, while he suggests that “in the presence of exteriority the face never becomes an image or an

¹¹⁹ Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 101.

¹²⁰ As probably expected, the notion of the “face” is frequently used in cases of portraiture. For such examples see Renée van de Vall, “Touching the Face: The Ethics of Visuality between Levinas and a Rembrandt Self-Portrait”, in *Compelling Visuality: The Work of Art in and out of History*, ed. Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 93–111; Alex Danchev, *On Art and War and Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 33–57. The Levinasian “face” and his theory regarding the “other” seem to be popular in contemporary humanities; yet, as Mieke Bal aptly warns: “Levinas, like Adorno, is invoked too frequently with a simple slogan.” Mieke Bal, “The Commitment to Look”, *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 2 (2005): 160, Note 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412905054671>. For a successful example resisting such tendencies, see David W. Hill, “Bearing Witness, Moral Responsibility and Distant Suffering”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 36, no. 1 (January 2019): 27–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276418776366>. Levinas has been also an influential figure in the field of film studies, as can be seen in Downing and Saxton, *Film and Ethics*; Kristin Lené Hole, *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics: Claire Denis, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), muse.jhu.edu/book/66757; Sam B. Girgus, “Beyond Ontology: Levinas and the Ethical Frame in Film”, *Film-philosophy* 11, no. 2 (2007): 88–107, <https://doi.org/10.3366/film.2007.0012>.

intuition”.¹²¹ This tension is something that is further explored in the analysis of invisible atrocity images, but the question of whether one is to perceive the “face” as a visible trace or not, is what allows such a lens to be at the heart of this analysis.

The third lens utilised in this thesis is Ariella Azoulay’s notion of the “civil contract of photography”.¹²² According to her, if one is to understand “the ethics of the spectator”,

I propose to understand the photograph’s unique status as a product of the encounter between a photographer, a photographed person and a tool, in the course of which none of these three can treat the other as a sovereign such that even when one of them seems for a moment to possess the meaning of production, he or she is in fact no less operated than capable of operating.¹²³

The three participants – photographer, photographed person and spectator – create a “civil contract”, which does not belong to the photographer, and therefore the photograph should not be considered as “property”.¹²⁴ The photograph equally belongs to and is determined by all of its participants, as it is an “unintentional effect”.¹²⁵ These participants create the “citizenry of photography”, in the “collective” of which everyone can be included, as no sovereign power rules it.¹²⁶ Hence, it includes both “citizens” and “noncitizens”.¹²⁷

Azoulay has created a completely new framework, by providing the readers with a set of terms that one can apply to many different cases of atrocity images, in order to move away both from the photographer and from emotional describing notions, such as empathy.¹²⁸ Influenced by Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben, Azoulay uses a vocabulary of political and legal terminology for the description of the photographic event, in a manner that sets the spectator as

¹²¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 297.

¹²² Azoulay, *Civil Contract*.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 98–99.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 13 and 17.

an equally important participant to this event. She is interested in analysing and renewing the ontology of photography and is also trying to map the existence of violence in the photographic act.

For Azoulay the photographic act is inscribed by violence, but the level of violence is the same even if the photographed is equally interested in the photograph.¹²⁹ Therefore, the spectator is always responsible to “reconstruct” the conditions inside which the event of photography took place.¹³⁰ To my mind, this parameter is very important and must be underlined, as it could be the basis for any contemporary ethical examination of methodologies utilised by visual anthropology.

Azoulay’s rationale of political analysis intentionally wants to be detached from notions of empathy and compassion, although these have prevailed in such discussions for many decades. Therefore, I want to examine whether the correlation of a political terminology with such a notion (e.g., compassion), can enrich this discussion. Azoulay in her framework utilizes quite a lot the notion of “horror”, as for her such images are produced in relation to “*énoncé* of horror”, meaning “textual or visual expression that describes the catastrophe as it occurs”.¹³¹ Here I differentiate from Azoulay, and push further her framework by including the notion of “anxiety” as a descriptor of the spectator, instead of that of “horror”, which refers to the photographed situation.

An important input in this direction – on a level of political analysis – can be found in George Marcus’ conceptualisation of the “sentimental citizen”.¹³² Marcus contests the Western perception of politics, that is based only on reason following the Kantian philosophical genealogy. Therefore, he proposes the re-introduction of emotions in the act of citizenship.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 390.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 312.

¹³¹ Ibid., 67.

¹³² George E. Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

According to him, “anxiety” is an important negative emotion for the democratic political action, as it “opens up new possibilities by inhibiting the ongoing course of action and by creating a willingness to learn, a willingness to question, and a willingness to consider new alternatives.”¹³³

To my mind, the connection of Azoulay’s theory with this of Marcus, and especially the importance that he places on the emotion of “anxiety”, can help me tackle certain limitations of Azoulay’s framework, especially when applied to invisible atrocity images. For Azoulay all the participants of the “civil contract of photography” belong to the “citizenry of photography”, as already mentioned.¹³⁴ The proposition in this context will be that when the negative emotion of anxiety is experienced in the spectatorship of invisible atrocity images, this allows one to partake in the “civil contract of photography” despite invisibility.

Although all these three theoretical lenses, in their initial framework, are not referring to cases of death, the fact that this thesis apart from only a couple of cases refers to photographs of dead others, creates an interesting challenge if one, for example brings to mind the importance of “discourse” for the Levinasian “face”, or the participation of the photographed person in the Azoulean “contract”. Yet, to my mind that depends on the semantic importance one is giving to a dead body. At the foundation of my thinking regarding the dead other lies what Azoulay suggests once again:

The description “the addressee is dead . . . yet he continues to exist” characterizes the type of address performed by photography in general. Photography is an encounter of a very special kind between a photographer who is holding a camera, and a person who knowingly or not, becomes the photographed person. The violence inherent in their encounter is due to the instrumentalization of the photographed person in order to produce an image. This violence is there even if the photographed person is interested by the photograph no less than the photographer. In most of its occurrences, the encounter between the photographer and the person photographed is not intended to bring them

¹³³ Ibid., 146.

¹³⁴ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 128.

together. Each takes part in the encounter or happens into it in order to actually address someone else who is not present at the encounter.¹³⁵

So, even if the photographed person is dead, all three frameworks shed light onto how an other is to be perceived in a manner that allows the non-represented to be included in the discussion: this who otherwise is non-worthy to be “grievable” or the “noncitizen”, depending on the prism.

At the same time, all these three types of “encounter” that I explore in this thesis, need to be placed in the broader framework of two important debates in this field: i) the aestheticisation of suffering, and ii) compassion fatigue. For the first the answer will be found on what I call “over(t)-aestheticisation of atrocity”, which is explained in Chapter 1. In regard to the second, what I call “images *for* agony”, which can be seen as such through the use of the Azoulean “civil imagination” and what I call “slow spectatorship”, can function as a way to alleviate such issues, something that is examined in Chapter 3. Although here I will not proceed in explaining the theorisation of my suggested terminology as this will be elaborated in the respective chapters, it is useful to briefly mention what these two debates are about.

In the scholarship of atrocity images, there is a debate about the ethical limits of aestheticisation, an issue that can be seen as being at the heart of the visual characteristics of invisible atrocity images. According to David Levi Strauss, by the end of the 1980s the discussions around documentary photography were dominated by the argument of the “aestheticisation of suffering”: “it became virtually impossible to defend documentary practice. Any such defence was regarded as at best naïve and at worst ideologically suspect.”¹³⁶

However, this literature had certain limitations. As Roberts explains, “the history of photography has of necessity – given photography’s embeddedness in relations of production and

¹³⁵ Ibid., 389–390.

¹³⁶ David Levi Strauss, *Words Not Spent Today Buy Smaller Images Tomorrow* (New York: Aperture, 2014), 130.

relations of power and truth – had to be thoroughly *deaestheticized*”.¹³⁷ Therefore, the literature of the first wave of theorists – such as Susan Sontag, Rosalind Krauss and John Tagg – regarding the “deaestheticisation” of photography has highlighted photography’s function as a medium to produce “reified things”, instead of underlining its importance in the “production of knowledge”.¹³⁸

In many cases, “turning the suffering of another human being into a beautiful or formally elegant image seems somehow indecent”, explains Mark Reinhardt.¹³⁹ Together with Holly Edwards and Erina Duganne, Reinhardt has edited one of the most thorough examinations of these issues in the catalogue of the exhibition *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* in 2007.¹⁴⁰ Of course, regardless of the fact that this debate has continued already for three decades, nowadays it is more obvious than ever that the practice of making violence a spectacle through its aesthetical representation is prominent in our everyday life. A publication stressing this fact is the 2015 book *War Is Beautiful: The New York Times Pictorial Guide to the Glamour of Armed Conflict*, by David Shields.¹⁴¹ In the very beginning of the book the author explains:

For decades, upon opening *The New York Times* every morning and contemplating the front page, I was entranced by the war photographs. My attraction to the photographs evolved into a mixture of rapture, bafflement, and repulsion. Over time I realized that these photos glorified war through an unrelenting parade of beautiful images whose function is to sanctify the accompanying descriptions of battle, death, destruction, and displacement. I didn’t completely trust my intuition, so over the last year I went back and reviewed *New York Times* front pages from the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 until the present. When I gathered together hundreds and hundreds of images, I found my original take

¹³⁷ Roberts, *Photography and its Violations*, 26, italics in the original.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³⁹ Mark Reinhardt, “Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique”, in *Beautiful Suffering*, ed. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards and Erina Duganne, Exhibition Catalogue (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 15.

¹⁴⁰ Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards and Erina Duganne, ed., *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, Exhibition Catalogue (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2007).

¹⁴¹ David Shields, *War Is Beautiful: The New York Times Pictorial Guide to the Glamour of Armed Conflict** (New York: PowerHouse Books, 2015).

corroborated: the governing ethos was unmistakably one that glamorized war and the sacrifices made in the service of war.¹⁴²

This quotation opens also questions of how immunised spectators have been to the spectacle of contemporary warfare – questions related to the “compassion fatigue” debate.

A critical voice in the debate around the “aestheticisation of suffering” has been raised by Azoulay, who suggests that it is a “trap” that does not lead to a critical analysis, as it basically “opposes the aesthetic to the political”.¹⁴³ Azoulay provides a contemporary theory that questions the validity of this debate. More importantly, she questions Benjamin’s dichotomy of “the aesthetic” and “the political”.¹⁴⁴ For her, if one makes a judgement of taste that stresses the aesthetic aspect of an image at the expense of its political character, one renders the whole existence of the image “into a single one – its existence as a work of art exclusively in the aesthetic plane”.¹⁴⁵ At the same time, when a spectator suggests that an image is “(too) aesthetic”, they make a “non-political gesture in relation to the photographed”.¹⁴⁶ Hence, the claim of “aestheticisation of the suffering” simply creates bigger issues, because it makes the spectators see “above and beyond the photographed persons – that is, ignor[e] them”.¹⁴⁷ In these terms, it can be argued that the spectator is “de-politicising” the image, in contrast to “aestheticisation” accusation.

A more moderate opinion on the same issues has been given by Prosser, who suggests that, “[a]esthetics are part of picturing atrocity. [...] *Atrocity can indeed be beautiful*, as in iconic images of the atomic bomb, or of a dead woman in colourful clothes whose body has been

¹⁴² Ibid., 7.

¹⁴³ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴⁵ Ariella Azoulay, “Getting Rid of the Distinction between the Aesthetic and the Political”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 7–8 (2010): 248, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1177/0263276410384750>.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 251.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 246.

washed onto a white beach after a tsunami. *But what kind of beauty is this?*¹⁴⁸ This last question is what needs to be constantly at the back of a spectator's mind. A simple accusation towards a photograph or an artwork that is aestheticizing suffering does not offer anything new into a critical discussion. Or as Shohini Chaudhuri accurately suggests, “[w]hat most debates about the aestheticization of violence miss, however, is that *all* images aestheticize, mediate, transform. A non-aestheticising alternative does not exist; rather the question is *how* images transform.”¹⁴⁹

The next important debate which lies at the background of many of the theoretical propositions of this thesis is “compassion fatigue”. This discussion is very successfully encapsulated in a quote by Susan D. Moeller from 1999, who has provided one of the most thorough accounts on that matter until today.

It all started with an advertising campaign. We have all been cued by that famous series of ads by Save the Children. You can help this child or you can turn the page. The first time a reader sees the advertisement he is arrested by guilt. He may come close to actually sending money to the organization. The second time the reader sees the ad he may linger over the photograph, read the short paragraphs of copy and only then turn the page. The third time the reader sees the ad he typically turns the page without hesitation. The fourth time the reader sees the ad he may pause again over the photo and text, not to wallow in guilt, but to acknowledge with cynicism how the advertisement is crafted to manipulate readers like him—even if it is in a “good” cause.¹⁵⁰

This quote, apart from the fact that it resonates with a recurrent discussion that is pervasive throughout this thesis regarding the theme of “children” in atrocity images, it also summarizes the whole issue of how this “fatigue” should be understood. Of course, one needs to bear in mind that, as Moeller writes in the 1990s and examines material from the beginning of that decade,

¹⁴⁸ Prosser, “Introduction”, 12; italics added in order to highlight a potentially problematic aspect that the case studies of this thesis create by not (aesthetically) showing the atrocity. Thus, a potential issue might be the non-acknowledgment of the atrocious event.

¹⁴⁹ Shohini Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 9, italics in the original.

¹⁵⁰ Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 9.

refers to a technologically different environment. Yet, as it will become prominent from the following chapters, the foundational bricks of this problem, although expressed in different ways, remain vastly the same: media commercialise death and suffering.

Interestingly enough, there are also deniers of “compassion fatigue”. The first prominent figure who offers this opinion is Stanley Cohen, whose ideas are being utilised throughout this thesis. According to him,

[t]he sheer repetition of images of suffering, their easy accessibility, or even their intrusiveness need not cause a state of exhaustion. There is, after all, no such thing as love fatigue. [...] The problem with multiple images of distant suffering is not their multiplicity but their psychological and moral *distance*.¹⁵¹

A much more recent voice on the “myth of compassion fatigue”, as he calls it, is David Campbell, who in a chapter published in 2014, places himself in a dialogue with both aforementioned theorists as well as Sontag. His argumentation concludes in a sarcastic manner towards the self-referentiality of photojournalism:

Photojournalism’s dream has been that its pictures of crisis move viewers to respond. Given the persistence and scale of disease, famine, war and death in the late modern world, it is not difficult to conclude that somehow visual representation has failed [...] In many ways, this is the great achievement of the myth of compassion fatigue: it has provided an answer to a question posed in its own terms.¹⁵²

However, a middle ground among those opposing opinions can be found; and probably this is where a certain contemporary reality exists. I definitely believe that contemporary spectators are bombarded with too much visual material, not only violent, something that makes them less attentive. Hence, although to a certain extent people experience this “fatigue”, the term

¹⁵¹ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 194, italics in the original. Although in this thesis the notion of “distance” is not examined, the different types of distance implied through the case studies would make an interesting future analysis.

¹⁵² David Campbell, “The Myth of Compassion Fatigue”, in *The Violence of the Image*, ed. Liam Kennedy and Caitlin Patrick (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 118.

per se is not so useful anymore as it almost pathologises the lack of ethical responsibility from the side of the spectator. Nowadays everyone is or has the potential to be a spectator of visual culture material in the one way or the other. What is still needed is to give more attention to training people with skills of visual analysis, and this is something that the invisible atrocity images analysed in this thesis have the potential of doing.

Griselda Pollock notes that there is a tendency of “[p]athologizing as individual suffering what needs to be grasped as a collective wounding from political violence displaces the political causation and response.”¹⁵³ Although I agree with her to that end, in this thesis I am not utilizing the notion of “trauma” theory.¹⁵⁴ Pollock, one of the most prominent commentators of a tendency that underlines the importance of a psychoanalytical lens, explains that,

[p]sychoanalysis is a theory of subjectivity, that is, of the process of becoming an “I” that is revealed by this theory to be itself an illusion; the ego is a fiction. Not only is the ego but one precarious agency within a subjectivity that is also formed by an unconscious and a super-ego, but the unconscious is neither individual nor entirely personalized.¹⁵⁵

To my mind, individuals need to be offered the possibility on a personal level to experience such development through processes of psychoanalysis, which might create in the long run a more conscious contemporary spectator. Yet, my issue with theories of trauma when it comes to images of atrocities is that it pushes us back to an older understanding of what these photographs do, and how one might feel as a spectator. As Julian Stallabrass aptly suggests,

¹⁵³ Griselda Pollock, “Editor’s Introduction”, in *Visual Politics of Psychoanalysis: Art and the Image in Post-Traumatic Cultures*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 8. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁵⁴ The field regarding representations of violence keeps seeing an undiminished interest for theories of trauma and psychoanalytical approaches. For some good examples, see Margaret Iversen, *Photography, Trace, and Trauma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005); Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

¹⁵⁵ Pollock, “Editor’s Introduction”, 18.

[i]n much art writing, a reflex Freudianism governs what passes for the analysis of memory. It is ignorant of or wishes away the thorough theoretical and scientific discrediting of psychoanalysis, and the 20 years or so of extraordinary research on the brain that has not merely proven its faults but has offered a complex, unexpected and fertile alternative.¹⁵⁶

I am of the opinion that the political injustices of contemporary life are so complicated and imperative, that one's sensibilities do not have a place in such an analysis. Atrocities happen and as contemporary citizens we have a responsibility, even if we are incapable to immediately intervene and stop them, to look at them in an ethical manner.

Also, the terminology of trauma “means a piercing wound in Greek”.¹⁵⁷ Hence it would make sense to use it in an analysis that would focus on the photographed other's experience, while the aim here is to focus on the spectatorship. In addition, as Margaret Iversen explains regarding Freud's theory, “traumatic impressions, mainly formed in infancy and childhood” are usually “not integrated into experience until, perhaps, much later”.¹⁵⁸ Hence, in the case of the atrocious events discussed in this thesis, there has not been sufficient time since the traumatic events that would allow such consideration.

Issues of Terminology

In this section I am framing some key terms that are used with consistency throughout this thesis. The questions that formulate this discussion are: i) What is an atrocity image? ii) Why invisible? iii) Who is the spectator? iv) Is there really a refugee and migrant “crisis” in the Mediterranean?

¹⁵⁶ Julian Stallabrass, “Not in Our Name”, *Art Monthly* 293 (February 2006), accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/article/not-in-our-name-by-julian-stallabrass-2006>.

¹⁵⁷ Pollock, “Editor's Introduction”, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Iversen, *Photography, Trace and Trauma*, 2.

i. Redefining atrocity images

This thesis uses the term “atrocity image” instead of “war photograph”, despite the fact that most of the case studies refer to the context of war, something that will be explained subsequently. The boundaries of what is usually perceived as an atrocity image are deliberately pushed further. To begin, I build the understanding of what an atrocity is based on the definitions that Jay Prosser and Susie Linfield have provided. According to the first,

[d]eath; massacre; torture; amputation; burning; desecration of a corpse. We see an act of atrocity as it happens, or after, or even just before. The etymology or root of the word of atrocity has the sense of “cruel”, “fierce” (*atrox*; Latin). Atrocity therefore suggests an extreme violation. It implies an agent, and we thus look for a victim, so as to identify, name and condemn an inhumane act – in order to make sense of what we have seen. Photography of atrocity challenges the integrity of the human.¹⁵⁹

Along the same lines, Linfield, explains that “[p]hotographs present us, in short, with physical cruelty and our vulnerability to it”.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, to my mind, the term “war photography”, while focusing on the context that produces death or suffering, is far less descriptive of the process of the violent act, which is of key importance for the formulation of an ethical understanding on the part of the spectator. At the same time, what I earlier called a “domino effect” from 9/11, means that many of the examined atrocious events in this thesis have not been produced in the context of a warzone or are not a direct result of a violent act in a battlefield.

So, a significant challenge emerges with these literal definitions: What if the atrocity is not visible in the photograph? As Prosser explains, “[i]f atrocity is not necessarily visible in the atrocity photograph, what we see can be quite ordinary – until we know the full story.”¹⁶¹ This suggestion has been further conceptualised by Azoulay, who proposes that,

¹⁵⁹ Prosser, “Introduction”, 10-11.

¹⁶⁰ Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*, 39.

¹⁶¹ Prosser, “Introduction”, 11.

[p]hotographs picture atrocity by their mere coming into being in disaster conditions, but the atrocity that they picture is not reducible to that which has been established as its visual attributes. The presence – or absence – of such attributes in the photograph does not change the ontological fact that when a photograph is produced in an atrocity, it is part of the picture of atrocity.¹⁶²

This is something that is further problematised with the recurrent examination of the photograph of the dead Alan Kurdi at the conclusion (Coda) of every chapter, as well as with the inclusion in the analysis of other images from the 21st century refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. In these cases, the cause of death is drowning, so it is not a direct violent human act. As Forensic Oceanography poetically state, “the murder weapon is the water itself”.¹⁶³ Yet, of course, as the aforementioned group has also highlighted throughout their work, the sea is not the murderer. What causes these deaths is a complex system of human trafficking and political inaction/irresponsibility. Hence, although a forensic examination would have to state as the cause of death: drowning, this is not an accidental or voluntary act, conceptually transforming it therefore into an atrocious act. Therefore, the images of dead refugees and migrants must be perceived as atrocity images.

ii. Why invisible?

It becomes obvious even from the title of this thesis that the key term for the theorisation of the selected artworks is the word “invisible”. According to Oxford English Dictionary, “invisible” is something “[t]hat cannot be seen; that by its nature is not an object of sight”.¹⁶⁴ Invisibility is a term with very different connotations for different fields. For example, it is often linked with

¹⁶² Ariella Azoulay, “The Execution Portrait”, in *Picturing Atrocity*, ed. G. Batchen et al. (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 251.

¹⁶³ “The Left-To-Die Boat”, Forensic Architecture, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat>, at 00:39 of the video.

¹⁶⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “invisible”, accessed 27 March 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/99129?redirectedFrom=invisible>.

spirituality, metaphysics, religion, sciences or even an “ideal”, as for example in Hans Belting’s analysis of the “invisible masterpiece”, in which he uses “the term [invisible] as a metaphor for the idea of a work that comprises art in the absolute”.¹⁶⁵ Yet, none of this reflects the use and meaning of the term in this thesis.

In this context, one could suggest that a variety of other terms might replace the word invisibility: absence, unseen, defacement, obliteration, opacity, censorship. However, none of these terms incorporates the two distinct modes in the life of images – visibility and invisibility – which I aim to underline. This fortuitously aligns to the rationale of the anthology *Invisibility in Visual and Material Culture*, published three years after the research for this thesis began.¹⁶⁶ As the two editors aptly state in their introduction:

Invisibility means the absence of visibility. [...] [O]ur subject matter is invisibility as the flipside of the visible, as its inextricable counterpart. The visible produces the invisible, in the sense that for something to be optically discernible to us within any given temporal frame, something else has to recede from observability.¹⁶⁷

This idea that in order for something to be visible other parts have to remain invisible is thoroughly examined in the context of iconic and viral images in Chapter 1 through the lens of the “frame”.

In this thesis, there are three levels in which in/visibility is considered: i) the violent political event, which is photographically captured or not; ii) the photograph of atrocity and the different contexts in which this could or can be seen in the broader context of visual culture; and

¹⁶⁵ Hans Belting, *The Invisible Masterpiece* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 11. For a (historical) account of invisibility between science, mythology and spirituality, see Philip Ball, *Invisible: The History Of The Unseen From Plato to Particle Physics* (London: Vintage, 2015).

¹⁶⁶ Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes, ed., *Invisibility in Visual and Material Culture* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

¹⁶⁷ Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes, “Invisibility Matters”, in *Invisibility in Visual and Material Culture*, ed. Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.

iii) the invisible atrocity image, namely the artworks that appropriate the atrocity photograph. Of course, the main use of the notion of invisibility in this thesis is in reference to the works of art, something that underlines the art historical nature of this research.

In both the first and second levels, in/visibility is linked to different (political and ethical) issues: i) the permission or not for a photograph of a violent event to be taken; ii) not every atrocity photograph will be seen, due to censorship, or seen widely as an iconic or viral image, due to different systems of image distribution; and iii) some of the captured atrocity images will only be disseminated after they have been partially moderated in order to comply with visual moderation. The artworks of this thesis utilise what I call artistically induced invisibility in order to stress and comment on one or more of those levels of image visibility. Yet, as the analysis will highlight, sometimes invisibility could refer also to the missing dead, as seen in Chapter 3 regarding deaths of Iraqi civilians, prisons in Syria or refugees and migrants drowned in the Mediterranean. So, although throughout the thesis the term invisibility is contextualised on a case-by-case basis, it is important to stress that it maps a variety of issues.

iii. The “unknown” spectator

The case studies of this thesis are what I have called invisible atrocity images: namely artworks, which in the vast majority are mixed media installations, and in many cases their production has utilised digital technologies. Only two of the examined artworks, created by Ina Louguine and belit sağ respectively, are videos. However, again in their analysis I focus on the still atrocity images that are (even conceptually) incorporated in them. At the same time, as has already been stressed, in this thesis I focus on the intersection between contemporary art and photography, as the latter is appropriated in most of the case studies, in a manner that allows one to reconsider both the process of looking at the artwork as well as the atrocity photograph. In other words, the

corpus of works here fall in the category of “still images”. So, why do I use the terms spectator and spectatorship instead of viewer and viewing, which are conventionally used for art?

In this thesis, I follow pedantically the terminology provided by Azoulay in regard to the “civil contract of photography”. There she suggests, “[p]hotography is much more than what is printed on photographic paper. The photograph bears the seal of the photographic event, and reconstructing this event requires more than just identifying what is shown in the photograph”.¹⁶⁸ As one can imagine this is further reiterated in the cases of invisible atrocity images, where the aforementioned “event” lies behind the invisible. According to the dictionary, a spectator is “[a] person who watches at a show, game, or other event”.¹⁶⁹ In Azoulay’s framework, photography is an “event”, that is “made up of an infinite series of encounters”.¹⁷⁰

This is also linked with the differentiation that Azoulay underlines between the verbs “to look” and “to watch”, with the latter being what one needs to do when encountering atrocity images. “The verb ‘to watch’ [...] entails dimensions of time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the interpretation of the still photographic image.”¹⁷¹ Interestingly enough, the old English root of the verb “to watch” was *wæcce*, which means “watchfulness”.¹⁷² This idea of “watchfulness”, that implies being vigilant, is a needed prerequisite for an ethical spectatorship of invisible (and their appropriated visible) atrocity images, and is what can allow one to resist issues such as the aforementioned debate over “compassion fatigue”. The idea of a spectatorship

¹⁶⁸ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 14.

¹⁶⁹ Lexico, s.v. “spectator”, accessed 15 Nov. 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/spectator>.

¹⁷⁰ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 26. Interestingly, the term “spectator” is also used consistently by Möller, although he moves towards a different direction by suggesting also the term “participant witness”. For more see Frank Möller, *Visual Peace: Images, Spectatorship, and the Politics of Violence* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 36–55.

¹⁷¹ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 14.

¹⁷² *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. “watch”, ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed 9 Nov. 2020, https://www.oxfordreference-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0939470?rskey=2kikhG&result=1. For a different approach to these definitions, see Meghan Sutherland, “Pro Forma”, in *Unwatchable*, ed. Nicholas Baer et al. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 52–56.

that demands time is further conceptualised in Chapter 3, where I propose the term “slow spectatorship”.

Now that the choice of terminology has been clarified, a question that remains open is who is this spectator in the context of this thesis? Apart from an extremely small sample of quantitative data regarding iconic images of the Mediterranean refugee and migrant crisis, which I collected in the context of an exhibition and I analyse in the Coda of Chapter 1, the rest of the analysis is based on qualitative research in a manner that aims to create a critical theoretical discourse for such issues. Here I echo Butler’s suggestion that,

there is something paradoxical here, since we are used to hearing, for instance, that quantitative methods reign in the social sciences, and that qualitative approaches do not “count” for very much at all. And yet, in other domains of life, numbers are remarkably powerless. This suggests that certain implicit schemes of conceptualization operate quite powerfully to orchestrate what we can admit as reality [...].¹⁷³

Hence, in this thesis I make certain presumptions regarding this “unknown” spectator that I am referring to. First, although I do not usually stress it in the analysis, I recognise that the spectator of the invisible atrocity images is not always the same as that of the atrocity images in general. In reality, to my mind, although the first is most probably involved also in the spectatorship of the latter, this does not mean that every person that sees images of atrocities on the web, on traditional or social media, will be also a spectator of art. That is because most of the artworks examined in this thesis are large installations that require a certain space in order to be displayed, thus the artworld will be their first and expected audience. On the other hand, iconic (and not only) images, as those examined in Chapter 1, have been seen by millions of people, many of whom might have never visited an art institution. Either way, I am of the belief that nowadays

¹⁷³ Butler, *Frames of War*, xx–xxi.

everyone with access to the web should be considered a “spectator”. The different contexts of spectatorship, although of particular importance, do not make a theoretical examination of the issues that invisible atrocity images raise less valuable, or informative for the experience of atrocity images in mass visual culture. And as aptly Michael Warner proposes, when it comes to “publics”: “[y]ou cannot point to them, count them, or look them in the eye”.¹⁷⁴

iv. A “crisis” in the Mediterranean

Throughout this thesis, the word “crisis” in the context of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean is used for reasons of common understanding. However, I, as many other contemporary thinkers, consider it a very problematic term. As Charles Heller et al. very aptly explain,

[l]abeling a complex situation (such as that of the contemporary dynamics of mass migration and refugee movements) as a “crisis” and therefore as “exceptional” tends to conceal the violence and permanent exception that are the norm under global capitalism and our global geo-politics, and may serve to perpetuate the conditions that have led to the purported “emergency” in the first place.¹⁷⁵

For example, in the specific sociopolitical context of the Mediterranean this can be understood also in terms of the temporal dimension. As an investigative work on the so-called “left-to-die-boat” case of 2011 from Forensic Oceanography underlines, this “crisis” is not a recent phenomenon, as it represents almost a decade of fatalities.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 7.

¹⁷⁵ Charles Heller, et al., “Crisis”, *Near Futures Online* No. 1 (Zone Books, March 2016), accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://nearfuturesonline.org/europecrisis-new-keywords-of-crisis-in-and-of-europe-part-2/>.

¹⁷⁶ For more information on this project, see “The Left-To-Die Boat”, Forensic Architecture.

If we are to use the terminology of “crisis”, we must always bear in mind that the actual “crisis” for the majority of these people takes place back home: in war zones and places of extreme poverty and environmental disaster. Otherwise, we are considering this crisis as something that has happened to us as European citizens. “What ‘crisis’? Whose ‘crisis’? Who gains, and who loses, from the labelling of the present conjuncture as ‘crisis’? These are the urgent and critical questions that we must ask every time we encounter the word ‘crisis.’”¹⁷⁷ Having said that, one should also be careful of considering these “crises” as something that happens elsewhere, far from Europe, as then it takes away any responsibility from Europe’s involvement in foreign politics.

The situation in the Mediterranean is a complex and non-homogenous humanitarian disaster. There is not a uniform referent for the word “migrant” or “refugee”, and of course it is important that not everyone who decides to embark on a journey towards Europe can be legally defined as a “refugee”.¹⁷⁸ There is not one cause for these human waves of movement, as Ai Weiwei’s film *The Human Flow* (2017) successfully highlighted.¹⁷⁹

Methodological Framework

Part of my methodological framework regarding quantitative and qualitative research was already analysed in the previous section on terminology, in relation also to the different contexts of spectatorship. This thesis is mainly utilising close visual analysis, which is being done in a comparative manner also with the analysis of the appropriated atrocity images, while in some cases, I create a dialectical reading also with other artworks that bear formalistic or conceptual

¹⁷⁷ Heller, et al., “Crisis”.

¹⁷⁸ Amnesty International, “A Perfect Storm: The Failure of European Policies in the Central Mediterranean”, Amnesty International (2017), p.4, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR0366552017ENGLISH.PDF>.

¹⁷⁹ For more see “Human Flow”, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.humanflow.com>.

similarities and assist in furthering the critical engagement with the primary material: the artwork.

Three important points need to be addressed here. On the one hand what are the criteria for the choice of the case studies. On the other, why have I grouped them in the respective chapters. And finally, three important notes regarding the structure and writing tone of the thesis will need to be made.

First and foremost, the artworks of this thesis were chosen by following three criteria: i) to have a direct relationship with a taken or untaken photograph in one of the three manners mentioned at the beginning of the introduction; ii) to be created post-9/11; and iii) to utilise some kind of artistically induced invisibility in a way that comments on politically induced invisibility. The way that these artworks have been grouped in the respective chapters has two explanations. First each chapter starts from an issue linked to visual culture and politics, namely iconism, partial and full censorship.¹⁸⁰ Second, the chapters create a visual crescendo in regards again to the material that have been appropriated: starting from Chapter 1 with the appropriation of iconic images, moving to Chapter 2 with the appropriation of material that can be found and seen, but never reached the dissemination of iconic or viral images, and finally, in Chapter 3, examining artworks that comment on photographs that were either never captured or were not supposed to be seen, for political purposes. Hence, the crescendo is one from hyper-visibility to full-invisibility, without however meaning that the atrocity images that were seen were the ones that a spectator can apprehend in a deeper manner. In other words, Chapter 3 can be seen as a homage

¹⁸⁰ Throughout this thesis, I use the word “iconism” as a noun by following Thomas Hirschhorn’s text “Why Is It Important – Today – To Show And Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?”. There he defines it as “the habit of ‘selecting’, ‘choosing’, or ‘finding’ the image that ‘stands out’, the image that is ‘the important one’, the image that ‘says more’, the image that ‘counts more’ than the others”. For more see Thomas Hirschhorn, “Why Is It Important – Today – To Show And Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?”, in *Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn*, ed. Lisa Lee and Hal Forster (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 100–101.

to the ethics of looking at unseen and untaken photos. So, the structure of the thesis does not follow the chronological order of the production of either the invisible atrocity image or the atrocity photograph.

Another important point needs to be raised regarding the chosen artworks. Does the thesis function as an analysis of them or does it utilise them for the purposes of theorising about a set of issues? An interesting answer can be found in the proposition of Hubert Damisch:

A theoretical object is one that is called on to function according to norms that are not historical. It is not sufficient to write a history of this object. It's what I said before: it's not enough to write a history of a problem for that problem to be resolved. A theoretical object is something that obliges one to do theory; we could start there. Second, it's an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself.¹⁸¹

The invisible atrocity images analysed in each chapter need to be seen as such: “theoretical objects”. To my mind, each of those artworks, while commenting on a certain socio-political context, offers itself for an exploration of a set of ethical issues. Hence, the work itself, while being the carrier of the question, guides one towards a potential answer. Having said that, I do not imply that the analysis focuses or follows the artists’ intentions, although these are mentioned in some cases.

An important methodological point lies in the choice of including at the end of every chapter what I have called a “coda”. I borrow this term from music where it is defined as “a concluding section (typically at the end of a sonata movement) that is based, as a general rule, on extensions or re-elaborations of thematic material previously heard”.¹⁸² In a similar manner, each

¹⁸¹ Yve-Alain Bois et al., “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch”, *October* 85 (1998): 8, doi:10.2307/779179. Bal in her analysis of Doris Salcedo’s work uses this term and further elaborates a comparative reading with the term “case study”. For more see Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3–9, accessed 12 Nov. 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁸² *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Coda”, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/coda-music>.

“coda” of the chapters uses the theoretical material explored in that chapter, though by adopting a different methodological approach that can extend the discussion. Every chapter is divided into three or four subchapters, in each of which one invisible atrocity image (artwork) is analysed. In these cases, I take as starting point the artwork, then move to an examination of the appropriated atrocity image, in order to return back to the artwork.

Contrary to this, in every Coda I start from an atrocity image (documentary/journalistic photograph), which I place in dialogue with an invisible atrocity image (artwork) which, however, does not appropriate that particular atrocity image. Thus, the focal point between the different contexts of spectatorship is re-adjusted. At the same time, although the thesis does not examine only one historical case, these Codas are all focusing on one case: the 21st century refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. All of them take as a starting point the same atrocity images: the photographs of the dead Alan Kurdi. In this manner, all the different types of “encounter” are applied also to the same image, creating thus an additional conceptual thread between the three chapters.

The reason behind choosing this particular image, while I chose not to focus the whole thesis on it, lies on the fact that it was one of the most significant contemporary examples of an image of atrocity that became viral. At the time, I was an active user of social media, while I had been researching already for two years images of atrocities. This led me to immediately start paying attention to how this image was shared time and again – how from a simple photograph it was being transformed to a viral image. And the dilemma as a spectator appeared at that point: would I share this image myself? Sharing it would enhance its increased visibility, and vice versa. Yet, was that really the case regarding its visibility? Back then I had my unconfirmed doubts; after writing this thesis I realised that my scepticism was justified. What one sees in a contemporary context of mass production, reproduction and distribution of images, does not

mean that it actually becomes visible in an ethical manner: visible by having been ethically acknowledged by the spectator. Neither being iconic or viral, means that an image has been really “watched”. The spectatorship of photography needs to be learned, as for example a musician trains their “ear”. This can be seen as a reminder of Azoulay’s suggestion that looking is a “civic skill”.¹⁸³

A final clarification is needed regarding the tone of this thesis. As it is already apparent in this introduction, throughout this work I intersect my personal voice and standpoint. This choice directly results from the subject matter at hand: the ethics of spectatorship. In ethics one must distinguish between “good” and “bad”, and this needs to be justified as much as possible in an objective manner. The ethics of spectatorship should be considered as a subcategory of “applied ethics”, which can be defined as

a branch of ethics devoted to the treatment of moral problems, practices, and policies in personal life, professions, technology, and government. In contrast to traditional ethical theory—concerned with purely theoretical problems such as, for example, the development of a general criterion of rightness—applied ethics takes its point of departure in practical normative challenges.¹⁸⁴

Bearing this in mind, and in considering whom the spectator of these works is, as well as their unidentified nature, I believe that intersecting one’s personal positioning is of great importance. At the same time, it stresses the need an author to take the responsibility of their views. Or, as Paul Martin Lester states in the foreword of the book *Visual Ethics*, when justifying the “bit more informal” tone of the writing:

[I]t should be clear that the study of ethics is a highly personal exercise. Thinking about what others did wrong and determining alternatives that

¹⁸³ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 14.

¹⁸⁴ “Applied Ethics”, in *obo* in Philosophy, accessed 6 May 2021, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195396577/obo-9780195396577-0006.xml>.

should be taken inevitably leads to you questioning and considering your own past actions both positive and negative.¹⁸⁵

Synopsis of Chapters

As already described, each of the chapters of this thesis is organised simultaneously by taking into account three parameters: i) the use of a theoretical lens, an “encounter”, which is either challenged or further expanded with its application to the case study (the invisible atrocity image); ii) a visual culture issue, namely iconism, partial or full censorship; and, iii) a decreasing degree of visibility of the appropriated material (the atrocity photograph): starting from hyper-visibility of iconic material, moving to potential visibility due to the fact that the appropriated material had been published somewhere but were never as widely disseminated as iconic, and finishing with material that were either never created at a first place or were never meant to be seen by the wider public.

At the same time, most of the artworks analysed in the following chapters, as they have been created very recently, not many things had been written about them at the time of this research. An exception to this was Alfredo Jaar’s work, mainly *The Sound of Silence* (2006), which is analysed in Chapter 1, and Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin’s *The Day Nobody Died* (2008), examined in Chapter 3. Yet, even regarding these artworks, their placement in the theoretical context of the respective chapter, as well as their analysis in relation to more recent artworks by other artists, provides the opportunity for a renewed reading of them.

Chapter 1 focuses on an exploration of the ethical issues that emerge from the spectatorship of invisible atrocity images that appropriate iconic images; in other words, photographs that have been widely disseminated and seen. The analysis of the “encounters” here

¹⁸⁵ Paul Martin Lester, *Visual Ethics: A Guide For Photographers, Journalists, and Filmmakers* (New York: Routledge, 2018), ix.

embarks from the basis that Butler provides with her theory of the “frame”, which is conceptually expanded through the application to the four case studies: i) Dinh Q. Lê’s *The Scroll of Thich Quang Duc* (2013); ii) Alfredo Jaar’s *Sound of Silence* (2006); iii) Alfredo Jaar’s *May 1, 2011* (2011); iv) the Coda starts from the viral photographs of the dead Alan Kurdi from 2015, which is then discussed dialectically with Ina Louguine’s *Staring Quietly at the Backwash* (2016). Here the analysis by exploring the different visual and conceptual frames created by each artwork, allows the spectator to challenge the way that they have been accustomed to look at an iconic photograph. Hence, the question that is underlined is whether the dead or sufferer other of the iconic photographs, through their appropriation in these artworks, is being perceived as “grievable”, in Butler’s term.

Chapter 2 examines artworks that appropriate atrocity images that have been seen and published. The stress here lies in the way that they appropriate them, which creates partial concealment, with the use of aesthetic/visual modes that are used or remind those used by the media for partial censorship: pixelation, cutting or covering of the most atrocious part of the photograph. Here, by utilising the lens of the “face” as a locus of an ethical relationship as suggested by Levinas, I examine what the ethical relation that can be found in cases that the spectator cannot see the visual face of the dead or sufferer other anymore is. Most usually, partial censorship is used in order to protect the spectator’s eyes. However, the analysis of the invisible atrocity images asks one whether the “face” is to be found in the invisible. This question is being approached through five artworks: i) Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Self Pixel* (2016); ii) belit sağ’s *what remains / geriye kalanlar* (2018); iii) Khaled Barakeh’s *The Untitled Images* (2014); iv) David Birkin’s *Pietà* (2012); and v) finally in the Coda through a dialectical analysis of Kurdi’s image with Barakeh’s *Untitled Images – Repetitive Patterns* (2015).

In the third chapter, the “encounter” created between the spectator and the dead other that lies behind/under the invisible atrocity image is approached through Azoulay’s notion of the “civil contract of photography”. Yet, in the case of this chapter’s case studies, the appropriated material were either never captured or never captured with the intention to be seen by the wider public. Hence, the artistic invisibility in this case creates a comment on a political level of different systems that fully censor certain photographs. This creates an extra difficulty for the spectatorship and the creation of what Azoulay calls the “civil contract of photography”. Hence, I propose, that invisibility leads the spectator to experience the negative emotion of anxiety, which, as Marcus explains regarding politics, can activate one’s cognitive functions. By experiencing anxiety, the spectator is enabled to partake in these “civil contracts” of untaken or missing photographs. Here the analysis focuses on four case studies: Broomberg and Chanarin’s *The Day Nobody Died* (2008), David Birkin’s *Profiles* (2012), Khaled Barakeh’s *Relentless Images* (2018), and finally Banu Cennetoğlu’s *The List*.

Chapter 1: Invisible Atrocity Images and the “Frame”

Introduction

It is always the image that someone chose;
to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude.

Susan Sontag¹⁸⁶

[T]he frame functions not only as a boundary to the image,
but as structuring the image itself.

Judith Butler¹⁸⁷

2010; Port-au-Prince, Haiti: a lifeless girl lies on the earth; two men are passing by in the background carrying large objects. The bloodied face of the girl lies on a framed image with a glass front and wooden back, with two others under her left arm. The image exists in a few slightly different versions, distinguishable by the number of people passing in the background, indicating thus that they were taken at different times. The casual manner of the people in the background who go about their everyday lives gives a sense of violence to the spectator (Fig. 6).

2010; Port-au-Prince, Haiti: a lifeless girl lies on the earth; one passer-by stares at her, while eight photographers shoot her photograph. The girl's contorted body is seen from her left side and from behind; her bloodied head lies on a framed image, while her left arm lies on the wooden back of another frame. The view of the highly focused photographers pointing their cameras at the lifeless body give a different sense of violence to the spectator (Fig. 7).

2010; Port-au-Prince, Haiti;

I remember looking down on the street [from a roof] and there was a lone officer pointing his pistol up into the air in my general direction. I don't remember hearing a gunshot but out of the corner of my eye probably 15 to 20 feet away I saw a girl fall. [...] Within a couple of minutes several

¹⁸⁶ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 41.

¹⁸⁷ Butler, *Frames of War*, 71.

photographers were upon the rooftop and shooting the scene of Fabienne's body.¹⁸⁸

2010; Port-au-Prince, Haiti;

Our fixer then yelled to us that someone had been shot where we had just been. We ran maybe 50 yards back and climbed back up on the roof to see Nathan in almost the exact same spot where I last saw him, except he was looking at a girl who was lying face down on the slanting concrete roof. As best as I can recall, Nathan spoke in short sentences, "I saw her fall. I thought she tripped and knocked herself out. She's dead. Fuck. She got shot. I was right here." The decision to continue making photographs was instinctual. More photographers showed up and we were all making pictures, composing the dead girl in the foreground as the looters continued to walk past her, almost over her, carrying whatever they could. Several men stopped to turn her over, seemingly to identify the body. They gently took her arms and almost had to twist her just a little to face her upward. They looked at her with little emotion and left. She had been shot in the head.¹⁸⁹

2010; Port-au-Prince, Haiti;

"[p]eople ran past saying a little girl was shot. My girl," said her father. He ran to the scene. His daughter was dead. Someone had gone through her pockets. The chairs she had carried had disappeared.¹⁹⁰

All the aforementioned descriptions and quotes refer to one incident: the violent killing by police of a 15 year old girl in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti.¹⁹¹ The name of the girl was Fabienne Cherisma, and she was shot by police when she allegedly stole from the ruins two plastic chairs and three framed paintings.¹⁹² Many photographers took photos of her dead body,

¹⁸⁸ Nathan Weber, "Photographing Fabienne: Part Nine – Interview with Nathan Weber", interview by Pete Brook, Prison Photography, 18 March 2010, accessed 8 Nov. 2020,

<https://prisonphotography.org/2010/03/18/photographing-fabienne-part-nine-interview-with-nathan-weber/>

¹⁸⁹ Edward Linsmier, "Photographing Fabienne: Part Five – Interview with Edward Linsmier", interview by Pete Brook, Prison Photography, 14 March 2010, accessed 8 Nov. 2020,

<https://prisonphotography.org/2010/03/14/photographing-fabienne-part-five-interview-with-edward-linsmier/>

¹⁹⁰ Rory Carroll, "Haiti earthquake: He had not picked her up since she was a toddler. Last week he carried her home", *Guardian*, 26 Jan. 2010, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jan/26/haiti-earthquake-shooting-girl-story>.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

mostly framed according to the first description.¹⁹³ One of these images was captured by Paul Hansen and was awarded the “International News Image” prize for the *Swedish Picture of the Year Awards* (Fig. 8).¹⁹⁴ A similar frame was taken by another photographer, named Lucas Oleniuk, and won the National Newspaper Award in Canada (Fig. 6).¹⁹⁵ Different frames from the same angle of a dead girl were rewarded, while lots of images of her were widely disseminated. One very important question that needs to be continually problematised is why such photographs are being so widely disseminated and/or rewarded. These two parameters raise somewhat different issues, but are based on the same core questioning which will be examined in this chapter: iconism.

Of course, I do not aim to suggest that this photograph reached an iconic status comparable to some of the photographs which were appropriated in the artworks analysed in this chapter. Yet, the fact that this image was rewarded on multiple occasions indicates that it was a photograph that was widely seen. Did its frame allow one to perceive what it means for the spectator to see such a photograph and does their perception depend on other information that one might receive or not? I think a very interesting disruption of one’s potentially fixed perception of a photographic frame, and of the accompanying questions, becomes immediately apparent when seeing the image to which the second description refers. This image was taken by Nathan Weber to whom the third description/quote belongs to (Fig. 7).

The reason why I start this chapter with this example is not because it will be the main focus here, but because it is a striking visual example of how many different visual and verbal

¹⁹³ For more on the different photographs, see Sanjiv Bhattacharya, “Shot To Death”, sanjivb, 17 May 2011, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <http://sanjivb.com/blog/shot-to-death/>.

¹⁹⁴ Michael Zhang, “Debate Over Fabienne Cherisma Photos Rekindled After Award Given”, PetaPixel, 29 March 2011, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://petapixel.com/2011/03/29/debate-over-fabienne-cherisma-photo-rekindled-after-award-given/>.

¹⁹⁵ Pete Brook, “A Photo of Fabienne Cherisma by Another Photographer Wins Another Award”, Prison Photography, 14 May 2011, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://prisonphotography.org/2011/05/14/a-photo-of-fabienne-cherisma-by-another-photographer-wins-another-award/>.

contextualisations can be given to an image, and how these can change one's perception of the dead or sufferer other. This chapter examines the encounter that is produced between a spectator and the photographed dead or sufferer other of the invisible atrocity image through the lens of the "frame". The methodology of frame analysis is widely used in the field of sociology, while the treatment of this concept by the sociologist Erving Goffman, in his book *Frame Analysis*, expands this framework beyond his field.¹⁹⁶ Essentially what Goffman proposes is a "microsociological lens on how we make sense of the encounters around us".¹⁹⁷

The following analysis is informed by Judith Butler's theoretical proposition of the "frame".¹⁹⁸ Although Butler does not set herself in direct dialogue with Goffman, she writes in a footnote in her book that her reading of the "frame" is based on the former's theory as well as Derrida's *The Truth of Painting*.¹⁹⁹ In the context of this chapter, the aim is to expand this discussion to an artistic context that further utilises invisibility in order to problematise the parts of the visible that have been rendered the most worthy to be seen: namely, iconic and viral images of violent deaths. By examining different facets of the frames produced by a series of selected artworks that appropriate iconic atrocity images, the exploration will unpack how the spectator has been accustomed to perceive the existence of the dead or sufferer other. As Butler explains,

[t]he thesis of *Frames of War*, my most recent book, is that the frames by which we come to understand the violence of war themselves participate in the making and re-making of war. By "frames" I do not mean only the borders of a picture, but also, the limits of the thinkable. When a life

¹⁹⁶ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (London: Northeastern University Press, 1986).

¹⁹⁷ Piia Lepistö-Johansson, "Frame Analysis", in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos, and Elden Wiebe, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), <https://dx-doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.4135/9781412957397.n150>.

¹⁹⁸ Butler, *Frames of War*.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 8, footnote 4; Jacques Derrida, *The Truth of Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 37–83.

becomes unthinkable, or when an entire population becomes unthinkable, waging war is clearly made easier. The frames that present and foreground grievable lives work to exclude other lives as worthy of grief. And how can any life be valued if it is not grievable, if it is not lose-able? Such frames are operative in imprisonment and torture, but also in the politics of immigration, according to which certain lives are perceived as lives, while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as living beings.²⁰⁰

Although the following analysis is based on Butler's framework, it will be expanded through its application to artworks that challenge different systems of censorship, and hence visual inclusion/exclusion. The artworks that are analysed in this chapter are commenting on censorship by tackling the other side of the same coin; namely, fully imposed visibility. The latter can be found in cases of iconic or prize-winning images, which function as the established visual accounts for different political incidents. What is also directly or indirectly questioned are the contemporary systems of visual censorship that control what becomes publicly available in the visual realm. Simultaneously, with all the examined artworks, what seems to be at stake is the visual nature of the news, and therefore the image-text relation that is re-represented in such a way that will make the spectator question their perception and thus the "encounter" with such photojournalistic material. In these cases, the artists are appropriating images from the news in order to stress either the visual or the textual material.

The case studies in this chapter are grouped according to the primary source that they are appropriating; namely, iconic or rewarded photojournalistic images, which – as will become apparent throughout the analysis – are significantly overlapping categories. As will be shown, the aesthetic and formal characteristics of what is included in the photographic frames of both categories are very similar. To my mind, the main difference is that an iconic image is quite often

²⁰⁰ Judith Butler, "On the Relationship Between Precarity and State Power", transform!, 20 Apr. 2010, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://www.transform-network.net/es/publications/anuario/overview/article/journal-062010/on-the-relationship-between-precariety-and-state-power/>.

rewarded, while not all winning images reach iconism. However, it is often the case that the winning of a prize is the crucial factor that establishes images in people's visual memory. But this does not mean that this is the only way that it happens, as an iconic image can win a prize after its initial establishment, as will be seen with the case of Kevin Carter's photograph appropriated by Alfredo Jaar. Yet, again, this is also not always the case, as will be seen in the Coda of the chapter which examines a viral image of the recent period that was never rewarded: the photograph of a Syrian refugee boy who drowned in 2015. In this context, the nature of iconic images will be expanded to include the terminology of the viral image. In other words, this chapter's case studies examine images that in different ways have been the most visible in recent history. What will be challenged here is to what extent an image that becomes iconic or viral, is actually looked at in a manner that makes it visible in ethical terms.

So, what does it mean to become iconic? What are the features that characterise an iconic image? As the professors of communication Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites suggest,

we define photojournalistic icons as those photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media genres, or topics. A few images meet these criteria.²⁰¹

The question that naturally follows is why some images become iconic while others remain invisible forever? Of course, this is a very difficult question that is related to different visual systems of different eras. Thus, in this case, I will try to unpack iconism in the visual context of the 21st century, while acknowledging that the selective criteria regarding the Vietnam War, for example, would have been very different.

²⁰¹ Robert Hariman, and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27.

One might suggest that the selection of this chapter's case studies in this context is problematic in terms of the different chronologies of the appropriated atrocity images. While this could be true, in this case I include these specific case studies by considering the production dates, which in all cases are after 2010. Hence, the contemporaneity in terms of production is what allows me to set them in this dialogical relation. The contemporaneity of these artists underlines also the common presumptions that exist behind these case studies in terms of the photographs' iconic character.

As Julian Stallabrass mentioned in his lecture "Remembering Terror" on 14 March 2017, iconic images usually collect understanding of certain events around them.²⁰² According to Hariman and Lucaites,

[p]erhaps they are important precisely because they are accessible undemanding images suited to mass-mediated collective memory. Visual commonplaces, these familiar images operate like the stock figures in memorial statuary, ceremonial oratory, and other representational practices that have been used to construct a community's sense of the past.²⁰³

However, in the context of this chapter, it becomes pivotal to question whether we have the right to perceive an iconic photograph of a dead other as an "undemanding" sort of image. That is something that will be approached from a few different angles in the following analysis.

As already mentioned, iconic images have certain common characteristics which are described by the two aforementioned theorists in the book *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. These can be summarised in five parameters. First, their easy recognisability by many different viewers from different

²⁰² Julian Stallabrass, "Remembering Terror" (Oral Presentation), *Art and Terror* lecture series, 14 Mar. 2017, The Courtauld Institute of Art, <http://courtauld.ac.uk/event/remembering-terror>.

²⁰³ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 2.

“backgrounds”; this means that the images “work in several registers of ritual and response”.²⁰⁴

Second, they cause reverence in the spectators, as well as “other complex emotional responses”.²⁰⁵ Third comes the fact that they are reproduced in many different contexts and to a large extent, and most importantly, “are used to orient the individual within a context of collective identity, obligation, and power”.²⁰⁶ Fourth is the fact that they can become representatives of “historical experiences”, while at the same time they are widely appropriated in different contexts of narration.²⁰⁷ The fifth characteristic might be the most crucial, as iconic images “have more than documentary value, for they bear witness to something that exceeds words”.²⁰⁸ In other words, what underlines the spectatorship of iconic images is the feeling of collective belonging that is inscribed in them and shared by their viewers. Having said that, it is important to clearly state that this does not mean that the footprint of these images will be the same in all viewers’ minds, as there are many different cultural – and not only – factors that are involved in this process.

However, this footprint seems to be accompanied by a common fact: “people don’t know a great many circumstantial details regarding any iconic photograph such as its date, specific location, names of the participants, original medium of representation, photographer, and so forth”.²⁰⁹ That is usually easily recognisable during any talk that one might give about an iconic image; although most often people above a certain age visually recognise the photograph, they are not able to identify it.²¹⁰

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 1.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 1.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 1.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 1.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 6.

²¹⁰ In the last five years, I have also empirically reached this conclusion by starting various public lectures (either to photographers, or “art-world” audiences) and undergraduate classes by showing an iconic photograph without any further contextualisation, and asking them to raise their hand in response to several questions if their answer is positive: i. have you ever seen this photograph?; ii. do you know what this image is about / the event that it

The most important question that is triggered, however, is: under which criteria could a photograph be defined as iconic? In addition to the earlier parameters, Hariman and Lucaites have developed five “assumptions” that explain the “rhetorical power” of such images.²¹¹ First comes the “aesthetic familiarity”, which means that its “artistic design” is linked with an aesthetic form that already exists in one’s cultural memory, as one could call it.²¹² Second is the “civic performance”: “[a]ll people are social actors, and photography recreates recognizable moments of social performance”, as the two theorists explain.²¹³ The third “assumption” is the “semiotic transcription” of iconic images. Here they use Umberto Eco’s concept of “transcription” in order to suggest that a key factor for an image to become iconic is its “strong economy of transcription”; these images organically encompass many “different patterns of identification”, which guide “audience response” and help one to digest “potentially unmanageable events”.²¹⁴ Fourth is the “emotional scenario”, which means that the photographs trigger “available structures of feeling within the audience”, orchestrate “emotional dimensions of an event” and bring together in affective ways “audience, artistic practice, representational object, and social context”.²¹⁵ The fifth, and last, “assumption” is “contradictions and crises”, which mainly indicates that “the visual icon becomes an aesthetic resource for performative mediation of conflicts”.²¹⁶

However clear and potentially canonical these criteria might seem, it is interesting to observe that when writing about iconic images there is a specific norm in the structure of the

captures?; iii. do you know who the depicted person is and/or the photographer? In almost all of the cases, nearly everyone responds positively to the first question, less than half respond to the second, while close to none respond to the third.

²¹¹ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 29.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 34–5.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35–6.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36–7.

analysis. So, for example, Hariman and Lucaites in the aforementioned book, and John Tulloch and R. Warwick Blood in their 2012 book *Icons of War and Terror: Media Images in an Age of International Risk* start with a general theoretical introduction and follow it with different chapters for different images.²¹⁷ In my view this indicates a certain uneasiness of these contemporary authors when dealing with such broad categories as “iconism”. That is accurately explained by Hariman and Lucaites,

[b]ut what is an icon? Any definition is restrictive; the issue is why particular restrictions are selected. “Icon” obviously is applied to a wide range of images ranging from smiley buttons to the crucifix, which in turn articulate varied yet overlapping cultures. No theory we know of can account adequately for the generation, circulation, and uses of the full range of visual icons.²¹⁸

The roots of the “icon” go as far back as early Christianity and the Greek word *eikon*, which means a religious and holy picture.²¹⁹ Yet, the discussion around “iconism” has a different connotation when speaking about iconic photographs of atrocious events. In this exploration, one useful aid can be found in thinking about photographic awards given to atrocity images. Marta Zarzycka and Martijn Kleppe, in order to unpack the criteria of awarded images of war and disaster in the World Press Photo contest in the period 2009-2011, introduce “tropes”, a parallel notion to “icon”. According to them,

while icons can be seen as commemorating decisive moments of history, tropes can be compared to a frame that holds visually homogeneous content. [...] Whereas photographic icons witness historical moments, reproduce ideology, and model political identity and citizenship, the all-encompassing quality of the photographic trope tends to increasingly

²¹⁷ John Tulloch and R. Warwick Blood, ed., *Icons of War and Terror: Media Images in an Age of International Risk* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

²¹⁸ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 27.

²¹⁹ Marta Zarzycka and Martijn Kleppe, “Awards, archives and affects: tropes in the World Press Photo contest 2009-11”, *Media, Culture & Society* 35, no. 8 (November 2013): 979, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443713501933>.

crowd out the politicized and the activist dimension, appealing to a broader cultural consensus of meaning.²²⁰

These concepts bring to mind Erwin Panofsky's "iconography" and "iconology", with the first being defined as "that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form",²²¹ while the latter can be understood as the "discovery and interpretation of these "symbolical" values (which are often unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express)".²²² According to Zarzycka and Kleppe, a photographic "trope" can be conceived as being parallel to the "iconological" practice.²²³ However, a line needs drawing here, as the boundaries between "icon" and "trope" can be easily blurred. As the two theorists explain, "many iconic photographs represent a certain trope (a dying soldier, a poverty-stricken mother with her children, charred human remains), but not every picture relying on a trope gains the status of an icon".²²⁴ In the case of the three analysed examples in this chapter, it will become obvious that the iconic images that are being artistically obscured fall under both "concepts" – "icon" and "trope" – which potentially changes the spectatorship of these conceptual artworks.

In parallel to the previously mentioned parameters that could help in defining an image as iconic, Zarzycka and Kleppe propose four "features" that characterise "tropes" and are easily discernible in awarded atrocity photographs. These are: i) "presence of the body", ii) "recognizability", iii) "affective powers" and iv) "symbolic accessibility".²²⁵ Of course, these four "features" are almost identical to the five parameters of iconic images that were mentioned

²²⁰ Ibid., 979

²²¹ Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and iconology: an introduction to the study of Renaissance art", in *Meaning in the visual arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 26.

²²² Ibid., 31.

²²³ Zarzycka and Kleppe, "Awards, archives and affects", 980.

²²⁴ Ibid., 979.

²²⁵ Ibid., 981.

before. At this point, an important question emerges: how does invisibility work in different terms if iconism is not part of the visual? This will be answered in the analysis of the next group of case studies, which challenge the visibility of the news without always referring to iconic photographs.

These basic remarks about iconism are a prerequisite in order to guide one's understanding in the opposite direction: the deconstruction of an iconic image. An apt description of this process can be found in Bruno Latour's writings about the exhibition *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Center for New Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, Germany, 2002).²²⁶ In this context Latour has given a definition of the two different notions of "iconoclasm" – which is a deconstructive process of which the historical roots can be traced in ancient times with its highest point in the Byzantine age – and "iconoclasm":

Iconoclasm is when we know what is happening in the act of breaking and what the motivations for what appears as a clear project of destruction are; iconoclasm, on the other hand, is when one does not know, one hesitates, one is troubled by an action for which there is no way to know, without further enquiry, whether it is destructive or constructive.²²⁷

It could be said that, in the case of the artistic examples analysed in this section, the boundaries between "iconoclasm" and "iconoclasm" are blurred.

The case studies of this chapter refer to three different images from three different periods: the Vietnam War, the famine in Sudan in the 1990s and the "War on Terror". The first case study by Dinh Q. Lê refers to the iconic image of the burning monk. Here the analysis examines the different frames and aestheticisation of the initial image as well as the appropriated

²²⁶ "Iconoclasm", Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe, accessed 14 Sept. 2020, <http://www.iconoclasm.de>.

²²⁷ Bruno Latour, "What is Iconoclasm? Or is there a World beyond the Image Wars?", in *Iconoclasm, Beyond the Image-Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, ed. Peter Weibel and Bruno Latour (Karlsruhe: ZKM; Cambridge MA: MIT, 2002), 14, italics in the original.

version. The second and third case studies are both from Alfredo Jaar. The first refers to the appropriation of the girl and the vulture in Sudan, and through a close analysis of the artistic frame as well as the iconic frame I examine to what extent this appropriation really offers something to the spectator in terms of their perception and acknowledgment of the photographed other. The second work by Jaar refers to the un-taken photograph of the dead Osama bin Laden, which, as I will show through the analysis of the artistic installation and the multiple frames, successfully guides one to question why certain images are considered worth seeing and being “grieved”, echoing Butler’s framework. Finally, the chapter concludes with a Coda which examines the viral image of Alan Kurdi, where a link between the viral and iconic is created through framing methodology, which is further implemented in the dialectical analysis of a work by Ina Louguine.

Throughout this chapter I am employing an understanding of the “frame” in Butler’s terms. According to her, “[m]y point is that such visual and conceptual frames are ways of building and destroying populations as objects of knowledge and targets of war, and that such frames are the means through which social norms are relayed and made effective.”²²⁸ By drawing from this division of the “visual and conceptual frame”, in the following analysis I will refer to the visual frame as being the photographic frame or the image produced from the artwork, and to the conceptual, which is the discursive, textual or aural frames, which contextualise in different ways either the appropriated photograph or the artwork. The use of this terminology will allow me to examine how the analysed artworks are allowing the spectator to acknowledge the dead or sufferer photographed other ethically.

In Dinh Q. Lê’s work, I examine how the appropriated photographic frame is deconstructed in visual terms in order to question iconism. In Alfredo Jaar’s appropriation of

²²⁸ Butler, *Frames of War*, xix.

Carter's iconic photograph, the analysis shifts towards an examination of the different visual and conceptual/textual frames the photograph were to be seen both in its initial appearance in the newspaper and on Jaar's installation. Here I aim to question whether the textual frame that Jaar provides does justice to the suffering child in a manner that allows the spectator to acknowledge them. In the next work by Jaar, the analysis will again examine the conceptual frame in which the only visual substitute that was created for the death of Osama bin Laden, namely the iconic photograph of the Situation Room, in Jaar's placement permits the spectator to acknowledge the dead other, who was never seen.

1.1. Deconstructing the Rewarded Frame: Dinh Q. Lê's *The Scroll of Thich Quang Duc* (2013)

The following analysis examines an aestheticised approach of appropriation of an iconic photograph, namely Dinh Q. Lê's *The Scroll of Thich Quang Duc* (2013) (Fig. 9). This artwork is a digital appropriation of the photojournalistic image that was taken by Malcolm Browne in 1963 and is remembered to this day as the *Burning Monk* (Fig. 10).²²⁹ The aim of this analysis is to unpack the relation between the initial photograph and the artwork in terms of construction/deconstruction of the visual/photographic and conceptual/discursive frame. Therefore, although this artwork has a very interesting and important materiality, this will have to be examined in a different context. In this case, the concept of the frame allows an exploration of this difficult aesthetic manipulation of a historical image, and how that can bring to the surface issues regarding the aestheticisation of suffering which can affect the spectatorship.

In 2013, 50 years after the appropriated photograph was taken, the Vietnamese artist Dinh Q. Lê created four scrolls, one of which is *The Scroll of Thich Quang Duc*. It is a C-print scroll, 50 meters length. The iconic image was digitally stretched to fill the entire scroll. Although the initial image was black and white, Q. Lê uses the colourised version of it, a fact which is not commented on in any accompanying text or caption to the piece. Yet, the colour in this case works as a useful guide for the spectator's perception, as the dominance of orange in the deconstructed frame leads our understanding instantly to the presence of the Buddhist robes.

This piece was displayed for the first time in 2014, in Dinh Q. Lê's exhibition *Warp, Woof, Zero, One* in the P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York. As Q. Lê states on his website, "[t]hese

²²⁹ For a concise historical analysis of this photograph see Diane Winston, "Burning Monk, Saigon, 1963", in *Getting the Picture: The Visual Culture of the News*, ed. Jason E. Hill, and Vanessa R. Schwartz (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 82–84.

iconic images of the Vietnam War that were transmitted around the world have been turned into data”.²³⁰ Interestingly enough, on Q. Lê’s website, and in all of the press releases and relevant articles/reviews, the name of the photographer Malcolm Browne is never mentioned, indicating that the iconic photographic frame is conceived as existing beyond its “author”. The death of the photographer, as I call it, is here and the image is ontologically charged with a fixed meaning; or perhaps not? In order to examine this question, it will be useful to analyse Browne’s photograph more closely.

On 11 June 1963, at 9:17am in Saigon, the elder monk Thich Quang Duc, along with two other monks, gets out of a car at the intersection of two roads. Duc sits down and pulls his feet over his thighs cross-legged in the Buddhist position. One of the two other monks pours five gallons of aviation fuel (which burns slower than gasoline) over Duc’s head (Fig. 11). At 9:22am, Duc strikes a match and touches his robe. Ten minutes later, Duc’s dead body falls backwards, still burning, while the monks pray over his corpse (Fig. 12 / Fig. 13). At 10:00am, the monks wrap the dead body in their robes and begin the procession to the pagoda. The atrocious event – although without perplexing ethical issues, as Duc has willingly undertaken an act of peaceful protest – has finished (Fig. 14).²³¹

Malcolm Browne, a 30-year-old American photographer, had arrived in Saigon on 7 November 1961 as the first Associated Press (AP) permanent correspondent there.²³² During the night of 10 June 1963, Browne received a phone call from a monk, who advised him to go to the pagoda the next morning, as something very important would take place.²³³ This indicates how highly conscious the monks were regarding the power of photography – a reminder of Azoulay’s

²³⁰ “Works in 2013”, Dinhqle, accessed 10 May 2017, <http://www.dinhqle.com/dql.php?mod=work&y=2013>. (The site ceased to exist by 8 Nov. 2020.)

²³¹ All the historical facts can be found here: “The Burning Monk: A defining moment photographed by AP’s Malcolm Browne”, AP, accessed 13 Nov. 2020, <https://www.ap.org/explore/the-burning-monk/>.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

suggestion that an image can work as an “emergency claim” on the side of the photographed, here the burning monk.²³⁴

During the particular event of the immolation, Browne mentions that he “was standing about 20 feet to the right and a little in front of Quang Duc”.²³⁵ What is to be traced in his words? The practicalities of the photographic frame, and thus how its aesthetic aspects were created: the time of the day, the light, the angle of the frame and the distance from the event. Another shot of the monk, already burning, won the prize of World Press Photo of the Year in 1963 (Fig. 15).²³⁶ The fact that it won this award is an important factor in the other image (the burning monk) obtaining its iconic status. It would be interesting to examine the parameters that established this particular image as iconic, and not another from Browne’s shots of the event. One obvious reason is that this image created the best spectacle, without actual realisation of the horror. Browne also won in 1964 the Pulitzer Prize in International Reporting – a prize of 1000 dollars – which he shared with David Halberstam from the *New York Times*.²³⁷ So in this case what was rewarded was not Browne’s photograph but his reporting.

It is important now to understand that – with reference or not to the photographer – the “frame” is constructed: both the photographic and the conceptual. Here, the application of a terminology of the frame can guide our understanding of how fragile the meaning of this iconic photographic frame is, and how Lê’s “deconstructed”, as I want to call it, artistic frame finds its own importance in underlying this constructed nature of the iconic image. In other words, the conceptual frame can be defined as the context in which an image is represented, and through

²³⁴ For a definition of what an “emergency claim” is, see Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 198–199.

²³⁵ “The Burning Monk”, AP.

²³⁶ “1963 Photo Contest; Malcolm W. Browne”, World Press Photo, accessed 13 Nov. 2020, <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/1963/36275/1/1963-Malcolm-W-Browne-WY>.

²³⁷ “Malcolm W. Browne and David Halberstam of Associated Press and The New York Times, (respectively)”, Pulitzer.org, accessed 13 Nov. 2020, <http://www.pulitzer.org/winners/malcolm-w-browne-and-david-halberstam>

which our view of the photographic frame is transformed. The importance of these two “frames” is explored by Butler, according to whom:

When a picture is framed, any number of ways of commenting on or extending the picture may be at stake. But the frame tends to function, even in a minimalist form, as an editorial embellishment of the image, if not a self-commentary on the history of the frame itself. This sense that the frame implicitly guides the interpretation has some resonance with the idea of the frame as a false accusation.²³⁸

Butler approaches the “frame” as a perplexing but simultaneously powerful tool of understanding, as that “through which we apprehend, or indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured”; while of course, for her, it is obvious that these “frames” are “politically saturated”.²³⁹

Regarding the politics of the self-immolation image, it is important to very briefly explain what led to that event. After years of increased tension between the Buddhists in South Vietnam and the repressive regime of Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem, on 8 May 1963, in the ancient imperial capital of Hue, South Vietnamese soldiers opened fire on a group of Buddhists who were flying the Buddhist flag in direct violation of a government ban. The event led to the death of nine people. So, the self-immolation of 11 June was a reaction and an act of protest for the events of 8 May.²⁴⁰

In addition to the actual political events, there are also the visual politics that make Browne’s frame “politically saturated”. These can be found in the visual system that controls, disseminates, and establishes certain images through iconism and photographic prizes. In other words, the system that constructs the conceptual/discursive framing of this photograph. The initial image took different meanings depending on the discursive frames in which it was

²³⁸ Butler, *Frames of War*, 8.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁴⁰ “The Burning Monk”, AP.

presented, as has been proposed very rightly by two professors of communication studies, Lisa M. Skow and George N. Dionisopoulos. As they explain,

while the visual power of these photographs was undeniable, elements of the print media competed with each other to provide the “correct” interpretation of them. These efforts to interpret Browne's photographs were also attempts to prescribe for an engaged American public a frame through which to interpret the news about the unfolding political upheaval in South Vietnam during this time period. How this frame was constructed depended largely upon whether it situated the images - and thus the events they represented - against a backdrop of religious oppression or a war for freedom against the communists.²⁴¹

This is of course directly relevant to the dialectical debate that Butler creates in one of the chapters of the *Frames of War*, in which she sets herself in dialogue with Sontag's suggestions about the division between the different effects of prose and photography. This dialectic was very persistent for Sontag, who seemed to believe that the verbal frame is the only one that can make one think and not only be affected; but Butler is not convinced.²⁴² As she explains,

[w]e do not need to be supplied with a caption or a narrative in order to understand that a political background is being explicitly formulated and renewed through and by the frame, that the frame functions not only as a boundary to the image, but as structuring the image itself.²⁴³

Although I think that Butler's point is important, I believe that in the spectatorship of Lê's deconstructed frame can be found traces of Sontag's rationale, due to the importance of the caption. Yet, this can be approached only if one thinks more closely on the methodology of the frame: what does the appropriated photographic frame represent? According to Butler,

²⁴¹ Lisa M. Skow, and George N. Dionisopoulos, “A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images: American Print Media and the ‘Burning Monk’”, *Communication Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1997): 394, <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1080/01463379709370073>.

²⁴² Butler, *Frames of War*, 70.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 71.

[t]o call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable.²⁴⁴

Let's call the "frame" of the burning monk "into question". As Browne has stated: "[j]ournalistic photographs certainly have no point of view in them because there is no time or energy for point of view in this kind of photography".²⁴⁵ According to Liam Kennedy, this was a very common point of view among the photographers that covered the war in Vietnam.²⁴⁶ Especially regarding Browne, if one takes into account the fact that he was using a cheap analogue Japanese camera, called "Petri", and that in one hour he used ten rolls of film, it becomes obvious that neither the visual nor the conceptual frame of this iconic image was controlled by him.²⁴⁷

Having said that, apart from the fact that the visual frame is aesthetically constructed, the framing of its meaning is also constructed. But if not by the photographer, then by whom? As Kennedy claims, "[t]hey [the photographers] knew the expectations of their editors and beyond that of media executives and owners and of the public, all of which contributed to the framing of the war in broader terms".²⁴⁸ So it becomes apparent that the iconic image is just one of the frames that was chosen to be identified with the event, and to cause the social outrage for the Vietnam War.²⁴⁹ This reminds Clive Scott's proposition that, "[t]he photograph very quickly ceases to be the property of the photographer, and becomes subject to the often competing choices of other people; it is 'put to use'".²⁵⁰ Iconic images are used and misused in a many different contexts, as they tend to be perceived as orphans of the visual culture: most people

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 9.

²⁴⁵ Susan D. Moeller, *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience in Combat* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 355.

²⁴⁶ Liam Kennedy, *Afterimages: Photography and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 19.

²⁴⁷ Patrick Witty, "Malcolm Browne: The Story Behind The Burning Monk", *TIME*, 28 Aug. 2012, accessed 12 Nov. 2020, <http://time.com/3791176/malcolm-browne-the-story-behind-the-burning-monk/>.

²⁴⁸ Kennedy, *Afterimages*, 19.

²⁴⁹ "The Burning Monk", AP.

²⁵⁰ Clive Scott, *The Spoken Image: Photography and Language* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 10.

despite recognizing them, will not remember information regarding the photographer; hence the ownership is not an issue anymore.

Browne's photograph that was appropriated by Q. Lê, as already mentioned, is not the photograph that actually won the World Press Photo Award, which is the one that shows the monk already burned (Fig. 15).²⁵¹ As the World Press Photo Website mentions,

[t]he image we conjure up when we think of Browne's picture is not the one that was published in American newspapers on June 12, 1963. The one the papers chose shows Thich Quang Duc as a black mass surrounded by flames. It had been sent by radio from Manila to New York. It was used widely, but not universally. And when it was used, it did not always appear on Page One.

Nevertheless, it was that picture which shocked President John F. Kennedy, who immediately ordered a review of his administration's Vietnam policy. The review led to more troops, not fewer.²⁵²

This fascinating passage testifies to the fact that the image that has been registered in our collective memory as Malcolm's iconic frame is not the one that was reproduced in the newspapers at the time, nor the one that caused people's reactions. The latter is also obvious from the fact that the call for protest, written by American clergymen and included in the *New York Times* on 27 June 1963, featured the rewarded image (Fig. 16).²⁵³ This latter image, while aestheticised, is simultaneously of a more horrific nature, something that becomes apparent especially from the fact that this frame captures the body of the monk when it had started burning and parts of his scalp had peeled off and created patches.

Therefore, an important question is why, even though the rewarded image was different, did this photograph become iconic. Apart from the horrifying nature of the rewarded frame, I think that it is interesting that in today's visual ecology the photograph that became iconic can be

²⁵¹ "1963 Photo Contest; Malcolm W. Browne", World Press Photo.

²⁵² "The Burning Monk", AP.

²⁵³ "We, Too, Protest", *New York Times*, 27 June 1963, p. 21, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1963/06/27/issue.html>.

considered as non-horrific because of the fact that one sees the monk's peaceful face. A similar discussion will follow in the Coda of Chapter 2 regarding the photograph of the dead Alan Kurdi and his brother.

One could say that one main reason why Q. Lê's deconstructed photographic frame functions effectively, is because it uses the iconic version of the image of the burning monk, instead of the rewarded. This can be put at test if it is thought comparatively to another scroll that Q. Lê did in 2017 in response to the refugee crisis (Fig. 17).²⁵⁴ To my mind, as the photographic frame that is appropriated and deconstructed has not been present in people's minds for a long time, it seems that it cannot really function in the same terms. Of course, the even more troubling ethical aspect in this case is the fact that the appropriated image is one of suffering refugees, people that have been transformed to Agamben's "bare life" by floating in the sea of highly chaotic sovereign power.²⁵⁵ This event contrasts with the conscious act of protest that the monk decided to perform.

The image of the burning monk is distorted in Q. Lê's artwork and its place is taken by invisibility. Yet, what I call the conceptual frame still exists due to two parameters: iconism and the textual material, namely the caption/title. And although iconism is usually something with a negative connotation, in this case it is one of the two parameters that guide the spectator to acknowledge the suffering of the monk and the political importance of this event.

It could be argued that the iconic status of the image in such cases of invisibility is a prerequisite for the creation of the ethical relation between the spectator and sufferer. These ethics find their purpose when they can guide the spectator to acknowledge an atrocious event.

²⁵⁴ Caroline Ha Thuc, "The Deep Blue Sea – Dihn Q. Lê's installation at Art Basel Hong Kong 2017", CoBo Social, 4 Apr. 2017, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/the-deep-blue-sea/>.

²⁵⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (California: Stanford UP, 1998).

Yet, here it is useful to refer to Butler's distinction between "apprehending" and "recognizing": the first (apprehension) has a much more general sense, "since it can imply marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition";²⁵⁶ while the second (recognition) has as a prerequisite "recognizability", which in Butler's words "characterizes the more general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition".²⁵⁷ The stage of "apprehension" is what can be traced in the iconic image, and it is a needed stage in this case in order to achieve "recognition" through the spectatorship of the invisible atrocity image. The latter of course demands the memory of the iconic frame, as well as the textual information of the exhibition.

However, certain analysis of this artwork, ignore the importance of such "recognition". For example this become apparent in the morphological comparison between the scroll and the format of Chinese landscape painting.²⁵⁸ To my mind it is ethically troubling to compare a person's suffering with a textile artwork or landscape painting, while at the same time it ignores the political reasoning for the choice of the "scroll". As Q. Lê explains, "to scroll" means you can always only observe one section of the scroll as you roll it up and move to the next section, seeing thus always a "certain part of the image".²⁵⁹ The reason for this, he suggests, is that that the story behind every image can be rather complicated and people might not have all the facts to really create an opinion.²⁶⁰ Therefore, "[t]he question [is] what do you do with it now?"²⁶¹ Q. Lê seems to provide his tacit answer by appropriating the most aestheticised, iconic frame of the two photographs, which is the one that would also be the most recognisable.

²⁵⁶ Butler, *Frames of War*, 4–5.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁵⁸ Alain.R.Truong, "Exhibition of new work by Dinh Q. Lê opens at P.P.O.W in New York", Alain.R.Truong, 28 April 2014, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://www.alaintruong.com/archives/2014/04/28/29754597.html>.

²⁵⁹ Blouin Artinfo, "Dinh Q. Lê's 'Memory for Tomorrow' at the Mori Art Museum", 24 Aug. 2015, YouTube video, at 01:59, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://youtu.be/nDiPpn8qYM4>.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, at 02:22.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, at 02:45.

However, one could accuse Q. Lê that it is somehow unethical to deconstruct in such an aestheticised way an atrocity image that shows the death of another person. In the Introduction I presented the debate around the aestheticisation of suffering, where I quoted Prosser as questioning “what kind of beauty is that?”²⁶² In the case of Q. Lê’s scroll the answer could be found in what I call “over(t)-aestheticised” beauty, which here is expressed with the digital, colourful manipulation of the image. The excess in this case is helpful for allowing one to be aware of the aestheticised nature of every/any photographic frame, and to then hopefully question the aestheticised nature of Malcom’s initial iconic photographic frame.

Maybe the most important question that remains to be approached regarding the spectatorship is how Q. Lê’s deconstructed frame can actually trigger the spectator’s attention. In my opinion this happens due to curiosity for the unrecognisable visible. As Thomas Keenan suggests regarding the blurring in Trevor Paglen’s artworks,

[t]he English word “blur” seems to come from the same root as “blear”. It signifies that something has happened to our vision: we see, but as if through tears. [...] The blur challenges our habits of looking. We blink or squint, try again to see something that is somehow out of alignment with itself. We always look twice, more than twice, when things are blurry.²⁶³

So, the invisible deconstructed frame can be conceived as a compass to guide our understanding of what we have unquestioningly learnt to see as a visible frame, ignoring thus its constructed character. Invisibility can be proved to be a highly effective element, as it urges the viewer to look and think again. Therefore, it can lead to the inclusion of the “in” of the [in]visibility, in brackets. And in Keenan’s words: “[w]e always look twice, more than twice, when things are

²⁶² Prosser, “Introduction”, 12.

²⁶³ Thomas Keenan, “Disappearances: On the Photographs of Trevor Paglen”, in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism*, ed. Meg McLagan and Yates McKee (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 44 and 46.

blurry”.²⁶⁴ By looking twice, and ideally on each separate section of the image, we might take the necessary time to think over the visible. And by thinking we might be able to apprehend not only the atrocious nature of the iconic image, but also what we take for granted while looking at images. The frame has limits; as well as the framing methodology. Therefore, the least we can do is to look twice.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 46.

1.2 From Iconic to Prize-Winning, but Always Invisible: Alfredo Jaar's *Sound of Silence* (2006)

In 2006, the Chilean and New York-based artist Alfredo Jaar finished one of his most seminal works the *Sound of Silence*, the first piece of “a trilogy about the power of iconic images” (Fig. 18 / Fig. 19 / Fig. 20).²⁶⁵ In this case, the artist appropriated one of the most iconic photojournalistic images to date: namely, Kevin Carter’s photo of a starving girl and a vulture in Sudan, 1993 (Fig. 21). This image was initially published in the *New York Times* on 26 March 1993 in the article “Sudan Is Described as Trying to Placate the West”, by the journalist Donatella Lorch (Fig. 22).²⁶⁶ In 1994, Carter won a Pulitzer Prize in the “Feature Photography” category, which was “[f]or a distinguished example of feature photography in black and white or color, which may consist of a photograph or photographs, a sequence or an album, Three thousand dollars (\$3,000)”.²⁶⁷ This analysis will examine how the “frame” can allow one to look critically at the power that iconic images might have, while questioning what the artistic frame Jaar creates with the video installation has to offer in this examination. To do so, the analysis will explore one by one the different visual and discursive frames that have been produced for and around this image, and to what extent these are disrupted or further problematised in Jaar’s artwork.

In Jaar’s installation the image has become an almost instantaneous part of an eight-minute silent video.²⁶⁸ The video is projected in a rectangular cubicle (Fig. 23). As T.J. Demos

²⁶⁵ “Shadows: Alfredo Jaar”, Nederlands Fotomuseum, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nederlandsfotomuseum.nl/en/exhibition/shadows-alfredo-jaar/>.

²⁶⁶ Donatella Lorch, “Sudan Is Described as Trying to Placate the West”, *New York Times*, 26 March 1993, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/26/world/sudan-is-described-as-trying-to-placate-the-west.html>.

²⁶⁷ “The 1994 Pulitzer Prize Winner in Feature Photography”, Pulitzer Prize, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/kevin-carter-free-lance-photographer>.

²⁶⁸ “Alfredo Jaar”, Galerie Lelong, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.galerielelong.com/exhibitions/alfredo-jaar2/installation-views>.

very aptly suggests, “[t]he spatial arrangement choreographs a carefully controlled experience”.²⁶⁹

The considered architectural structure of the installation reflects Jaar’s background in architecture and theatre and the importance that he places on directing the situation. In the artist’s words:

With my background in film and theatre and architecture, it is natural for me to create what Godard called the *mise-en-scène*, or the articulation of a scene. I incorporate these elements to facilitate the reading of the work. They are an integral part of the structure of the work, and they are there, designed by me as the architect, in order to transmit certain information about the issues we are dealing with, and also to force the audience to act within a space, within certain rules that have been set up for them. And, of course, all this is related to the work itself. It is not arbitrary. It is designed as part of the work.²⁷⁰

This long quote highlights how there is a strong sense of authorship from Jaar’s side. A very carefully planned structure as a “frame of spectatorship”, as one might call it. This frame can be further illuminated from a more detailed description of the artwork.

The container is positioned in an exhibition room. At the “east” end (Fig. 23), the exterior wall is covered with white fluorescent lights that blind the spectator as they pass by or look at them. At the “west” end of the container (Fig. 23) is the entrance to the dark interior. The video although looped has a specific start and end point, of which the spectator is notified by two alternating light tubes arranged in a cross on the entrance wall – one red and one green (Fig. 19). When the green light turns on, then the spectator is allowed to enter the screening cubicle.

The projection room is black and has three benches against three walls (Fig. 23). In the two corners of the projection wall there are two stage lights on tripods. The video is a projection of white text on a black background which describes the story of Kevin Carter and the

²⁶⁹ T.J. Demos, “Poverty Pornography, Humanitarianism, and Neoliberal Globalization: Notes on Some Paradoxes in Contemporary Art,” *Stedelijk Bureau Newsletter* 121 (April 2011), accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <http://www.smba.nl/static/en/newsletters/n-121-the-marx-lounge/smba-newsletter-121.pdf>.

²⁷⁰ Alfredo Jaar, “Ways of Seeing”, interview by Andrew Maerkle, *Art It*, 24 July 2013, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://alfredojaar.net/wp-content/uploads/aj-art-it-2013.pdf>.

photograph of the Sudanese girl. At a certain point of the projection the corner lights beside the projected frame flash, while the loud sound of a camera shutter, similar to a gunshot, is heard. The spectators are blinded, and immediately after Carter's photograph is projected for a second on the screen, allowing the spectators to get only a glimpse of the image. After the photograph is shown, the projection of the text continues in the same format.²⁷¹

This description explains what I call the frame of spectatorship that Jaar creates with this work. On the other hand, the artistic frame in its whole is highly dependent on the text of the video installation. However, before the textual analysis, it is crucial to start from the previous layers of meanings that exist around the image: namely, the conceptual frames in which Carter's photograph entered the visual world. This is because, as I will later argue, Jaar's appropriation is in direct dialogue – even if sometimes critical – with these different frames of the image. As Butler states in *Frames of War*,

I want to understand how the frames that allocate the recognizability of certain figures of the human are themselves linked with broader norms that determine what will and will not be a grievable life. My point, which is hardly new but bears repeating, is that whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established.²⁷²

I strongly agree with Butler that, although this way of perceiving reality has already been pointed out, it “bears repeating”.²⁷³ Hence, with this analysis, I will provide an examination of all the different layers by focusing on one image in order to unpick the threads of this complex network.

²⁷¹ I saw this piece installed in the exhibition *Alfredo Jaar: The Garden of Good and Evil*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 14 Oct. 2017 – 8 April 2018. The description here follows the display in this context. Unfortunately, in this case the lighting of the installation did not have the needed effect, which had as a result Carter's photograph to be much more visible.

²⁷² Butler, *Frames of War*, 63–64.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 64.

This exploration should begin from the actual photograph. What can be seen within Carter's visual frame? A girl, fallen on the floor – which is dried soil – in the foreground, while a black vulture stands behind her. The posture of the child shows her struggle to stand up. That is especially visible in the way her right arm bends and fist tenses. The background of the image reveals that it was captured in a rural area of South Sudan. These are the main parts that comprise the visible elements of the photographic frame.

Yet, this photograph did not appear in the world independently of the journalistic context of dissemination. Firstly, one should bear in mind that the photographic frame, when published in a newspaper, is positioned within a broader visual frame. In this case, Carter's image was positioned on page three of the *New York Times* and appeared precisely next to a "Tiffany & Co" advertisement of elephant figurines (Fig. 22).²⁷⁴ Advertisements of the renowned jewellers was, in that period, typically placed on exactly the same page and in the same position. So, there was no intentionality in its placement next to Carter's photograph.²⁷⁵ Yet, the contradiction of the two frames creates a strong sense of irony and a polarised world with vast financial differences.

As already mentioned, the photograph was published in March 1993 in the *New York Times* as the visual accompaniment to an article about the conditions in Sudan. While describing the difficult political situation in the region with incidents of violence and famine, the article had on the whole a positive tone, something that was stated already from the first paragraph: "[t]he Sudanese Government has made a series of gestures that are meant to placate the West but are also emblematic of the country's need to become more flexible and pragmatic, relief officials say".²⁷⁶ Hence, interestingly enough, the initial discursive frame of the publication was aiming to highlight a potential end to the depicted socio-political situation.

²⁷⁴ Lorch, "Sudan Is Described".

²⁷⁵ According to my observations from the newspaper's digitised archive.

²⁷⁶ Lorch, "Sudan Is Described".

The second discursive frame in this case is the one constructed by the caption of the photograph, which reads:

In a move meant to placate the West, the Sudanese Government is opening parts of the country's famine-stricken south to relief operation, but for some, it could be too late. A little girl, weakened from hunger, collapsed recently along the trail to a feeding center in Ayod. Nearby the vulture waited.²⁷⁷

As can be seen from the caption, not much information was given regarding the identity of the girl, her age, her background or her health condition. She was treated as the perfect anonymised victim of a crisis, as are today, for example, many refugees and migrants. Yet, to my mind, a striking difference between this case and an equivalent one today lies in the fact that the Internet and the use of social media have provided a different sense of connectivity and real time information, which would have been almost unimaginable in the 1990s. This can be seen in the case of Alan Kurdi and the amount of information that people could access after the image of his dead body went viral.

In addition, one can find an equivalent case to the “Sudanese girl”, in terms of cause of death, in a contemporary viral image of famine: the “Yemeni girl”, 7-year-old Amal Hussain, whose portrait was published in the *New York Times* on 26 October 2018 (Fig. 24).²⁷⁸ In this case, the world first of all saw the face of the girl, and secondly was informed that she had passed away in a camp on 1 November 2018.²⁷⁹ I for one feel rather unsure of how this piece of information changed my or anyone else's perception, as the suffering and helplessness was already captured

²⁷⁷ For the caption see the digitised version of the newspaper that can be found on their digital archive, *New York Times*, 26 March 1993, p. 3, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1993/03/26/issue.html>.

²⁷⁸ Declan Walsh, “The Tragedy of Saudi Arabia's War”, *New York Times*, 29 Oct. 2018, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-war-yemen.html>.

²⁷⁹ Declan Walsh, “Yemen Girl Who Turned World's Eyes to Famine is Dead”, *New York Times*, 1 Nov. 2018, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/01/world/middleeast/yemen-starvation-amal-hussain.html>. For the digital censorship of this image see the introduction of Chapter 2 of this thesis.

and seen in the photograph. The only element that could potentially change one's understanding is the description of her mother's words: "[m]y heart is broken", said her mother, Mariam Ali, who wept during a phone interview. 'Amal was always smiling. Now I'm worried for my other children'."²⁸⁰ Despite how shocking the mother's words are in this case, the child is dead, and no one can do anything to reverse a potential death of her siblings. As the Nobel Prize winner Tawakkol Karman wrote in a text about the influence of this photo in 2018,

[t]he international community is wholly responsible, yet seems unconcerned. This is because Yemen does not produce adequate amounts of oil and is therefore of no interest to the very outsiders whose neglect and inaction fuels the war.²⁸¹

The fact that the Yemeni girl had a mother and a family to grieve her rehumanises her even with her unfair loss. At the same time, one of the most shocking elements of Carter's photograph was the fact that the audience did not get any specific information about the Sudanese girl, as even in the article the only information that was given was general.

In some areas there are no children under 5 years of age. In Bahr el Ghazal Province, 530 miles southwest of Khartoum, more than 200,000 people are surviving by gathering wild food, relief officials say. In the same region, United Nations officials estimate that since 1989, a wasting disease carried by a sand fly has killed more than 60,000 people hemmed in by fighting. The disease, Kala-Azar or visceral leishmaniasis, can be cured in 30 days with proper medical attention.²⁸²

Maybe this is indicative that the death of one person is seen as commensurable when placed next to the numbers of deaths in total, something that is further explored in Chapter 3 regarding the

²⁸⁰ Walsh, "The Tragedy of Saudi Arabia's War".

²⁸¹ Tawakkol Karman, "Why This Picture of a Girl Starving in Yemen Was One of the Most Important Photos of 2018", *TIME*, 20 Dec. 2018, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://time.com/5482864/time-top-10-photos-2018-yemen-amal-war-starvation/>.

²⁸² Lorch, "Sudan Is Described".

numerical perception of deaths. This kind of discursive frame brings again to mind Butler's "dialogue" with Sontag. There she mentions,

[i]n this last book, Sontag still faults photography for not being writing: it lacks narrative continuity and remains fatally linked to the momentary. Photographs cannot produce ethical pathos in us, she remarks; or if they do, it is only momentarily—we see something atrocious and move on at a moment's notice. The pathos conveyed by narrative forms, by contrast, "does not wear out". "Narratives can make us understand: photographs do something else. They haunt us."

Is she right? Is she correct to suggest that narratives do not haunt, and that photographs fail to make us understand? To the extent that photographs convey affect, they seem to invoke a kind of responsiveness that threatens the only model of understanding Sontag trusts.²⁸³

Butler is very sceptical towards Sontag's focus on the importance of "narrative", and she is right in the sense that Butler tries to explore what and how non-textual means can convey a message through the apprehension of their framing. That can be linked with Jaar's view that "art is communication" and "communication does not mean to 'transmit a message'. [...] In the technical definition of communication, it says clearly that you have to receive an answer. If there is no answer, there is no communication."²⁸⁴ Yet, what is the answer that one is able to give to the "message" that such photographs convey, or even such artworks as Jaar's *Sound of Silence*? Although the latter will be discussed subsequently, let us focus for now on the image-text relation in the purely photographic context. In the case of Carter's photograph, the only answer that one is able to give is that political power relations push certain people to the edge of death. This answer cannot be sufficient in ethical terms. Yet, probably for Butler this would be at least a valid point in favour of photography's power. As she explains, Sontag's belief is wrong for "at least two reasons",

²⁸³ Butler, *Frames of War*, 69; Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 80 and 110.

²⁸⁴ Jaar, "Ways of Seeing", interview by Maerkele.

first, the photograph builds the evidence and, so, the claim; second, Sontag's position misunderstands the way that non-verbal or non-linguistic media make their "arguments." Even the most transparent of documentary images is framed, and framed for a purpose, carrying that purpose within its frame and implementing it through the frame. If we take such a purpose to be interpretive, then it would appear that the photograph still interprets the reality it registers, and this dual function is preserved even when it is offered as "evidence" for another interpretation presented in written or verbal form. After all, rather than merely referring to acts of atrocity, the photograph builds and confirms these acts for those who would name them as such.²⁸⁵

Although Butler is very right to stress the fact that each documentary image is always "framed", and hence constructed from a specific point of view, to my mind images like Carter's always push the discussion back to the dependence on textual information. Without some extra information, the act of the photograph cannot be ethically justifiable towards the sufferer or dead other, especially when the photographic representation of the latter is transformed to an iconic image.

The first, most useful discursive/textual frame for the ethical apprehension of an image is the title. However, in the case of Carter's image the different titles with which the photograph has been circulating in the last three decades do not add much information to one's understanding, apart from giving a nationality to the girl: "Sudanese girl", "The girl and the vulture", etc. Yet, this is not always the case. A contrasting example can be found in a photograph by Sir Don McCullin in 1971 from Bangladesh (Fig. 25). When one sees this photo without having read the title, one encounters a naked child lying on their side, on soil and crying. There is no hint of the gender of the child, as the image is black and white, and the child is profoundly malnourished. When one reads the title – "A child abandoned, Bangladesh" – the sadness that a spectator might feel heightens. Yet, in my opinion it is an unproductive sadness, mixed with guilt and possibly

²⁸⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, 70.

anger. It is caused by the photograph of the child, but it does not focus on the child – it is about the perpetrator that has caused this pain by abandoning the child. Thus, it is about the second perpetrator that is equally invisible in this “frame”: namely, the photographer. In these terms, the most harrowing element of the image lies on what remains invisible.

To my mind, all the aforementioned examples of photographs of children create complicated ethical relationships between the photographer, the photographed subject and the spectator. The most troubling are those of Carter and McCullin, precisely because in both cases the focus of the discursive frames lies with the photographer instead of the sufferer. Although, as many contemporary theorists, I am of the opinion that atrocity images should be taken and seen for political purposes, it should always be considered whether sufficient information on the photographed subject is provided, both through the photographic frame and the discursive frame. Otherwise, there cannot be any kind of “frame” that will allow the acknowledgment of the photographed other, and therefore the spectator will remain prey to their voyeurism. In other words, I think that behind every kind of framing should lie the dictum: even if I cannot or I am not willing to reverse the photographed situation, I should have enough information to do so if I choose to.

The next level should be when one can identify with the photographed sufferer or dead person and imagine the violence that their bodies have gone through. Though with different terminology, Jaar believes in a similar distinction regarding the ethical apprehension of his work. As he proposes,

I think it's two things. It's awareness and empathy. And between awareness and empathy there is a huge gap. And not everyone can jump from one to the other. What's in between these two things is life itself. [...] But then, there are a lot of people who are aware, but who create a psychological barrier between this awareness and the next step that would

move you to...express your empathy and actually try to change things.
And that barrier is, of course, life itself.²⁸⁶

In the case of Carter's photograph, I think that people became aware but they were unable to have an empathetic reaction. Probably the lack of information regarding the girl was what triggered such strong reactions from the readers of the newspaper. The image, apart from the *New York Times*, appeared on the same day in the *Johannesburg Mail & Guardian*, and "released an avalanche of responses".²⁸⁷ As the *New York Times* editor's note on 30 March 1993 states,

[a] picture last Friday with an article about the Sudan showed a little Sudanese girl who had collapsed from hunger on the trail to a feeding center in Ayod. A vulture lurked behind her.

Many readers have asked about the fate of the girl. The photographer reports that she recovered enough to resume her trek after the vulture was chased away. It is not known whether she reached the center.²⁸⁸

This discursive frame once again provides information about the reactions of the spectators and people's concern, without however revealing more information about the girl. The girl remains anonymous, emotionless and falls into a generalised category of African malnourished children, as any attempt for an imaginative empathetic exercise could prove unbearable for the spectator. This could also be an explanation why people's outrage focused on the fact that the photographer took the image, and hence the editor's note implies that Carter assisted the girl.²⁸⁹ Yet, the focus

²⁸⁶ Alfredo Jaar, "Q&A: Alfredo Jaar, SCAD speaker and global gadfly, on 'recuperating the power of images'", interview by Faith McClure, ArtsAtl, 17 Feb. 2014, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://alfredojaar.net/wp-content/uploads/aj-arts-atl-2014.pdf>.

²⁸⁷ Griselda Pollock, "Photographing Atrocity: Becoming Iconic?", in *Picturing Atrocity*, ed. G. Batchen et al. (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 74.

²⁸⁸ "Editor's Note", *New York Times*, 30 March 1993, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/30/nyregion/editors-note-513893.html>.

²⁸⁹ For an analysis of contemporary reactions of the general public and journalists to this image, see Yung Soo Kim, and James D. Kelly, "Photojournalist on the Edge: Reactions to Kevin Carter's Sudan Famine Photo", *Visual Communication Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (2013): 205–19, <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1080/15551393.2013.849980>.

in this case remains on the photographer who lies outside of the photographic frame, something that is further perpetuated by Jaar's installation, as will be shown.

Another explanation for people's intense reactions can be found in the fact that the photograph depicts something that has not happened yet; or, as Pollock aptly puts it, "[t]his is not the image of death; it captures, in modern times, in the African bush, something that is worse than dying, the still-living corpse".²⁹⁰ This "still-living" condition has been at the core of another theorist's thinking, Barbie Zelizer. As she explains, "[t]he most prevalent use of about-to-die images in the news verbally and explicitly marks individuals as having died after their picture was taken".²⁹¹ This "about to die" trope leaves the image steeped in ambivalence, and heightens the curiosity of the spectator. Zelizer's view regarding images lies close to Butler's, as she suggests,

[m]ost important, images are expected to offer only fragments of understanding, and thus direct their viewers elsewhere to understand what is shown—to the purposes, processes, and formulations at work beyond a camera's frame.²⁹²

Frame analysis can assist against this fragmentation. The final necessary discursive frame regarding this image can be found in the prize-winning aspect, which has also contributed to Carter's legend and the iconism of this image. The image follows some of the aforementioned characteristics that most probably allowed it to be rewarded. As mentioned above, Zarzycka and Kleppe propose four "features" that characterise "tropes": i) "presence of the body", ii) "recognizability", iii) "affective powers" and iv) "symbolic accessibility".²⁹³ Carter's image follows all of them, as people can easily recognise an unconscious child, which is always directly

²⁹⁰ Pollock, "Photographing Atrocity", 74.

²⁹¹ Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 173.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹³ Zarzycka and Kleppe, "Awards, archives and affects", 981.

identifiable with innocence and ideas about the future, provoking sympathy. Yet, what does it mean in ethical terms to give a monetary prize to a photographer that captured the expected death of another person? Although with reference to the World Press Photo Award, instead of the Pulitzer Prize, the artistic duo Broomberg and Chanarin have published their experience as judges of the panel. In this context they mention,

[j]udging the World Press Awards feels a bit like ingesting a highly concentrated version of the years' news in a single sitting. The effect is numbing. When you see hundreds of pictures, many of them describing human pain, and all seamlessly stuck together in a power point presentation, each individual image becomes less demanding. One person's suffering is instantly cancelled out by the next.²⁹⁴

The suffering in such contexts becomes commensurable, without appreciating either the uniqueness of every human experience or any sense of ethical responsibility from the side of the spectator. So, to my mind, such prize-giving processes contribute to intensifying the invisibility of the photographed other, as the singularity of the person is overlooked in order to create an icon that can alleviate guilt for many distant spectators.

All the aforementioned “frames” partake in the textual frame that Jaar provides through the text in his video installation. According to Butler,

Sontag argued that although photographs have the capacity momentarily to move us, they do not allow the building up of an interpretation. If a photograph becomes effective in informing or moving us politically, it is, in her view, only because the image is received within the context of a relevant political consciousness. For Sontag, photographs render truths in a dissociated moment; they “flash up” in a Benjaminian sense, and so provide only fragmented or dissociated imprints of reality. As a result, they are always atomic, punctual, and discrete. What photographs lack is narrative coherence, and it is such coherence alone, in her view, that satisfies the needs of the understanding [...].²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, “Unconcerned but not Indifferent”, Foto8, 4 Mar. 2008, accessed 10 Oct. 2020, <http://www.foto8.com/live/unconcerned-but-not-indifferent/>.

²⁹⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, 67.

In a way Jaar, by structuring his installation around a text, abides Sontag's position regarding the importance of the narrative.²⁹⁶ Yet, he disrupts the narrative by flashing the lights at the spectators in a literal way, displacing them to the position of the photographed girl, while at the same time shocking them.²⁹⁷ In other words, Jaar attempts to create a situation of empathy. Yet, empathy with whom? According to Olivier Chow, through a psychoanalytic lens,

[t]hrough the “document”, Alfredo Jaar has staged the “atrocities triangle” and trapped the post-traumatic gaze. He has re-created and re-orchestrated the missed encounter of the traumatic event which can now be experienced by the viewer in the re-organised and specific time/space of the “document” tailored for the traumatic narrative, which always exceeds and violates the frame of the image and therefore can only fail in representation. Through the “document”, Jaar has managed to reprogramme the very mechanisms which sustain the shock dynamics of trauma.²⁹⁸

The trauma on which this installation focuses is that of Kevin Carter. The whole text is based on Carter's life – where he was born, how he started photographing and how he ended up in Sudan where he took this photo. So the text follows the “photographic event”, which according to Azoulay “is, the event that took place in front of the camera, constituted by the meeting of photographer and photographed object that leaves traces on a visual support”.²⁹⁹ Yet, the whole “event” is described from an imaginary personal tone of Carter, as the text even says “talked to god / and cried / kevin / kevin”.³⁰⁰ It is essential that this moving story is told, and Jaar knows its

²⁹⁶ For the text of the video installation, see Alfredo Jaar, “Alfredo Jaar: The Sound of Silence, 1995”, Installation Script, accessed 9 Nov. 2020, https://alfredojaar.net/sos/images/downloads/the_sound_of_silence.pdf.

²⁹⁷ In the case of the installation of the work in the *Alfredo Jaar: The Garden of Good and Evil*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, the element of surprise was destroyed by the multiple warnings from museum staff regarding the graphic nature of the image.

²⁹⁸ Olivier Chow, “Alfredo Jaar and the Post-Traumatic Gaze”, *Tate Papers*, no.9 (Spring 2008), accessed 9 Nov. 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/09/alfredo-jaar-and-the-post-traumatic-gaze>. The term “atrocities triangle” is by Cohen; for more see Cohen, *States of Denial*, 14.

²⁹⁹ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 166.

³⁰⁰ Jaar, “Alfredo Jaar: The Sound of Silence, 1995”.

importance as well as no one after his experience in Rwanda as a photojournalist.³⁰¹ Yet, what is still missing from this narrative is the little girl. Who was she? How was she? Of course, these questions would be too difficult for Jaar to answer. However, in my opinion the flashing of the light towards the spectator has two contradictory functions. Firstly, on a positive note, it makes one realise that the narrative of accusing Carter for taking the image is unproductive and does not change one's own ethical responsibility. It is an instantaneous shock that makes one feel perplexed regarding their positioning on Cohen's "atrocities triangle" or Azoulay's "civil contract of photography".³⁰² The second, more ethically troubling reading of the flashing light and the loud sound lies in the temporality of this instance: namely, at which point in the text the lights flash and blind the spectator, or, in other words, at which point the spectator encounters the photograph. The text preceding the flashing of the lights and the instantaneous appearance of the image says,

in april 1994, kevin carter received
the pulitzer prize for this photograph

kevin carter committed suicide
in the month of july 1994

--- FLASH ---

--- IMAGE ---

he connected a green hose to
the exhaust pipe of his red pickup truck

³⁰¹ As Levi Strauss explains, "When Jaar returned to New York, he found that he could not look at the photographs he had taken in Rwanda. It would be almost two years before he found a way to bring them into his work". David Levi Strauss, "A Sea of Grievs is not a Proscenium: On the Rwanda Projects of Alfredo Jaar", Alfredo Jaar (website), accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/2019/the-rwanda-project/a-sea-of-grievs-is-not-a-proscenium-on-the-rwanda-projects-of-alfredo-jaar/>.

³⁰² Both Cohen and Azoulay create tripartite relationships. The second is regarding photography *per se*, as it is thoroughly examined in Chapter 3 of the thesis. Cohen, on the other hand, suggests that there is an "atrocities triangle", which involves "victims", "perpetrators" and "observers". Cohen, *States of Denial*, 14.

and gassed himself to death³⁰³

The moment that Jaar chooses to show the photograph is crucial, as it implies to the spectators that Carter was just another victim. And from a biographical point of view he might have been. As the order of the text implies, Carter was just another chess-piece in a mega-scale, corporate game of image distribution.³⁰⁴ Yet, this does not allow one to apprehend their responsibility towards the “about to die” girl.

Both she and Carter became victims of different power relations. The difference is that he had an option and he died while trying for what he believed in. She did not have the option to survive. He has become one of the most renowned photojournalists, almost a legendary figure. She has remained unknown in her semi-visible presence. And unfortunately, Jaar’s piece perpetuates a narrative of orchestrated evoking of emotions. Yet, Mieke Bal’s words regarding the temporality of a flashing image in another work by Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, which seem relevant here, allow one to reconsider the responsibility of the artist and the limitations of art.

The temporal abstraction that Jaar’s work [*The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*] stages for us is, ultimately, also a statement on how little political art can really do. Just a flash. But, for want of anything better, in the face of the indifference that actively produces the disasters of war and famine that underly so much of the suffering which the show [*Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*] and its photographs reflect, a flash is all we have.³⁰⁵

³⁰³ Jaar, “Alfredo Jaar: The Sound of Silence, 1995”, Installation Script.

³⁰⁴ Comment based on the rest of the installation script.

³⁰⁵ Mieke Bal, “The Pain of Images”, in *Beautiful Suffering*, ed. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards and Erina Duganne, Exhibition Catalogue (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 115.

The little girl remains invisible in her anonymity, and the spectator is left without any ethical “demand” towards her. The spectator is left to wonder what happened to the child – as if that is what changes one’s ethical responsibility when looking at her photograph:

no one knows what happened to the child
the end³⁰⁶

³⁰⁶ Jaar, “Alfredo Jaar: The Sound of Silence, 1995”, Installation Script.

1.3 A Visible and an Invisible Iconic Frame: Alfredo Jaar's *May 1, 2011* (2011)

In 2011, Alfredo Jaar created a two screen, two caption installation, entitled *May 1, 2011* (Fig. 26). The left screen is blank white, while the right screen projects a photograph of the Situation Room in the White House, taken by the official photographer Pete Souza on 1 May 2011 (Fig. 27).³⁰⁷ The two screens are slightly tilted towards each other, reminiscent of the traditional religious diptych.³⁰⁸ Next to each screen there is a frame with a caption: blank white for the blank screen, and an outline identification diagram for the photograph, where each of the silhouettes has a number corresponding with their name (Fig. 28). As Mafalda Dâmaso explains in her analysis of the installation,

[t]he group, we are told by the description of the photograph, stares at a screen that lies outside the frame of the image, which allows the photographed individuals to watch live footage of Operation Neptune Spear, aimed at the capture of Bin Laden.³⁰⁹

My proposition in this context is that Jaar, by utilising invisibility in its own right, recalls a question Butler poses for the reading of the images of Abu Ghraib: “But when one does see the framing of the frame, what is it that is going on?”³¹⁰ I will examine how the juxtaposition of the two visual frames by Jaar may lead one’s understanding in acknowledging the dead other, in this

³⁰⁷ “The Situation Room; Pete Souza, 2011”, 100 Photos TIME, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://100photos.time.com/photos/pete-souza-situation-room>.

³⁰⁸ “Altarpieces, paintings placed on or behind the altar of a Christian church as a focus for worship, are often in diptych (or triptych) form”. “Diptych; Art Term”, TATE, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/d/diptych>.

³⁰⁹ Dâmaso, “*On May 1, 2011* (Alfredo Jaar, 2011) – Expanding the Frame of the Original Photograph”, 279. By drawing from Butler’s theory, Dâmaso’s text touches similar aspects to the one’s I examine here. However, she predominantly focuses on the context of the political events, while I aim to expand the discussion towards an ethical reconsideration of the dead other.

³¹⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, 74.

case Osama bin Laden, by creating a conceptual frame that allows the “grievability” of the other. Hence, I explore how there is a shift in the structural power frames of “representability”.³¹¹

At the same time, although Jaar is taking an iconoclastic approach, in order to deal with contemporary political censorship, his installation does the opposite: it makes one reconsider the representation of suffering and death, and thus it gives visibility to an invisible atrocity photograph from the “War on Terror”. As Gürsel proposes, “[t]he “War on Terror” is not a single event or an actual war, then, but a war that was actualized, made real, in part by news coverage of it. [...] The War on Terror is inseparable from its representations; it is always also a war of images”.³¹² So the “War on Terror” was persistently and successfully structured around a very careful use of images, as well as language. As explained in an academic theory dictionary, with a particular case used as a helpful example for how the discursive frame can be perceived:

The *discursive frame* can be looked at as “framing discourse,” as in the case of the response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Within the already particular and limited discourse of American political rhetoric, a specific choice was made to frame the response in a certain way.³¹³

The invisible atrocity image in Jaar’s installation, which exists through its absence and is confined by the boundaries of the left screen’s frame, has a very specific purpose of non-existence: the dead other, according to the “War on Terror” narrative, should not be perceived as a “grievable life”, to use Butler’s term again. In a way, the invisibility of this particular image could be seen as the culmination of the embedded system of reporting at the “War on Terror” in

³¹¹ Here I follow Butler’s terminology, who proposes “‘representability’ here, rather than ‘representation,’ because this field is structured by state permission (or, rather, the state seeks to establish control over it, if always with only partial success).” Butler, *Frames of War*, 73.

³¹² Gürsel, *Image Brokers*, 5.

³¹³ Lee Bartel, “Discursive Frame”, in *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*, ed. Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos, and Elden Wiebe, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010), <https://dx-doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.4135/9781412957397.n117>.

Iraq and Afghanistan, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. “I propose to consider the way in which suffering is presented to us”, says Butler,

and how that presentation affects our responsiveness. In particular, I want to understand how the frames that allocate the recognizability of certain figures of the human are themselves linked with broader norms that determine what will and will not be a grievable life.³¹⁴

The conceptual frame of the non-grievable character was precisely stated as such by President Obama in his speech of 2 May 2012:

Good evening. Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama Bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, and a terrorist who’s responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women, and children.³¹⁵

In this context, Osama bin Laden is qualified as ungrievable in the sense that he is an enemy of the American nation. Interestingly, in an interview, Derrida mentions that he uses the name “bin Laden” as “a synecdoche”, a gesture that in my opinion highlights how this particular figure has been used by contemporary culture as both the most specific and most abstract enemy.³¹⁶ At the same time, the discursive frame created in this case by Obama could be perceived as an application of utilitarian ethics, according to which the ethical action is judged by the greatest good that is produced.³¹⁷ This discursive frame justifies that the action that Jaar’s piece implies exists in synchronicity between the two monitors. Yet, as Stephen Knudsen aptly suggests regarding the temporality of the two images (the seen and the unseen),

[i]t is worth noting that a sensible account of what the group was watching came from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton when she explained her experience during the bin Laden raid. Clinton remarked,

³¹⁴ Butler, *Frames of War*, 64–65.

³¹⁵ “Full transcript; Barack Obama”.

³¹⁶ Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 111.

³¹⁷ For more on utilitarianism, see Julia Driver, “The History of Utilitarianism”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2014 Edition), accessed 9 Nov. 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/utilitarianism-history/>

“Those were 38 of the most intense minutes. I have no idea what any of us were looking at the particular millisecond when the picture was taken.”

We, of course, want to read the picture as the precise moment that bin Laden received the two deadly shots, though that seems unlikely after Clinton explained her apparent gasp as simply a hand to her mouth to suppress a cough.³¹⁸

So “we” – namely the spectators – have the option to think of it either as the photographic event that captured the action of killing, or the aftermath image; in either case, the photograph of a dead body. Interestingly, as Jaar has noted, a few weeks later it was found out that Souza’s photograph was captured almost 24 hours later from the particular event.³¹⁹

Despite that, so great was the fascination with this particular atrocity image that many shared a fake photograph of the dead Osama bin Laden that was initially falsely circulated by the Middle East online newspaper themedialine.org (Fig. 29).³²⁰ In fact, the photograph that supposedly shows the brutally beaten face of bin Laden is nothing more than the photoshopped version of one of his renowned portraits with the image of another person’s violated face.³²¹ In my opinion, the fake nature of this image could be recognised for two further reasons. Firstly, if the image was real, and if one considers its graphic nature, then it would be difficult to find it on the web without any visual reduction (e.g., pixelation). The second reason is that this image is not in agreement with the accounts on how bin Laden was killed. An extensive first-hand account of the killing mission has been given by Matt Bissonnette, a former member of Navy SEAL Team 6, under the pen name Mark Owen.

The man’s face was mangled from at least one bullet wound and covered in blood. A hole in his forehead collapsed the right side of his skull. His

³¹⁸ Stephen Knudsen, “Alfredo Jaar: SCAD Museum of Art – Savannah, Georgia”, review of exhibition, Artpulse, n.d., p. 78, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://alfredojaar.net/wp-content/uploads/aj-artpulse-2011-2012.pdf>.

³¹⁹ Alfredo Jaar, “Image Decomposed: Alfredo Jaar’s May 1, 2011”, interview by Matthew Schum, Warscapes, 25 Feb. 2015, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://www.warscapes.com/conversations/image-decomposed-alfredo-jaar-s-may-1-2011>.

³²⁰ Amelia Hill, “Osama bin Laden corpse photo is fake”, *Guardian*, 2 May 2011, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/02/osama-bin-laden-photo-fake>.

³²¹ Ibid.

chest was torn up from where the bullets had entered his body. He was lying in an ever-growing pool of blood.³²²

In a similar tone, CNN mentions that Osama bin Laden “reportedly dies of a gunshot wound to the head”.³²³ In other words, these accounts do not conform with the image, as in Owen’s account the face of bin Laden was very much disfigured.

After having tackled the potentially existent atrocity image from this death, the analysis should return to Jaar’s juxtaposition of the two visual frames. In this case the spectator does not have any confirmation that the blank screen captures a death in its visual absence. Yet, the spectator’s perception is guided by the iconic nature of the image, which in the public realm has been seen as the visual substitute of an iconic killing. For example, CNN, in an article with the “facts” about Osama bin Laden, includes this image from the Situation Room with the caption: “The death of Osama bin Laden”.³²⁴ One’s understanding is led to read in this image the photograph of a dead other. This is of course assisted by certain visual features of the frame. In this image, one sees the faces of eleven men and two women looking in the same direction towards a screen out of shot, which we are not allowed to view. Arguably, the most important element of this photograph is Hillary Clinton’s (then Secretary of State) facial expression and hand gesture. Clinton is captured covering her mouth with her hand, which can easily be read as an expression of shock or horror. However, as mentioned, she herself has stated that: “I am somewhat sheepishly concerned that it was my preventing one of my early spring allergic coughs. So, it may have no great meaning whatsoever.”³²⁵ From this quote it becomes rather

³²² Mark Owen, *No Easy Day* (London: Penguin, 2012), 239–240.

³²³ “Osama bin Laden Fast Facts”, CNN, 13 Nov. 2019, accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/30/world/osama-bin-laden-fast-facts/index.html>.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

³²⁵ Joe Coscarelli, “Hillary Clinton Flip-Flopping on Bin Laden Raid ‘Cough’”, *New York*, 20 June 2014, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2014/06/hillary-clinton-bin-laden-raid-cough-or-gasp.html>. For an analysis of how this specific gesture has been interpreted differently depending to different political moments see Dâmaso, “*On May 1, 2011*”, 281.

prominent that, in reality, the iconic status of this image has been based on a potentially false interpretation. We do not have information of when that image was captured, which moment of the mission they were observing, or even if the absent “atrocious image” had already been taken. But such questions lie beyond the iconic status of the frame, recalling thus what Butler suggests in relation to war photography:

The question for war photography thus concerns not only what it shows, but also how it shows what it shows. The “how” not only organizes the image, but works to organize our perception and thinking as well.³²⁶

Although this photograph cannot be considered a war photograph in the traditional sense, the “how” is a key element of what one might read in the visual frame. In this case, the image shows what it shows by underlining the invisible (in this case censored) nature of the photograph/footage of the dead bin Laden. No one in the public sphere saw the latter, but everyone is convinced that they saw it through Souza’s frame. This absence was directly justified on a political level, as, according to Obama,

[g]iven the graphic nature of these photos, it would create a national security risk. We don’t want this floating around as incitement to additional violence or a propaganda tool. That is not who we are. We don’t trot out this stuff as trophies.³²⁷

This statement returns to the long-standing “looking/not looking dilemma”, as Frank Möller has called it, which is further examined in Chapter 2.³²⁸ Following Obama’s statement, one cannot fail to bring to mind the Abu Ghraib photos, which were leaked against the wishes of the

³²⁶ Butler, *Frames of War*, 71.

³²⁷ Toby Harnden, Gordonrayner and Steven Swinford, “Osama bin Laden dead: growing row over release of pictures from al-Qaeda leader’s compound”, *Telegraph*, 5 May 2011, 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/8494247/Osama-bin-Laden-dead-growing-row-over-release-of-pictures-from-al-Qaeda-leaders-compound.html>.

³²⁸ Frank Möller, “The Looking/not Looking Dilemma”, *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 4 (2009): 781-94, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990180>.

authorities.³²⁹ Yet, what becomes very obvious from this discursive frame is that the images exist.

That is something to which Mark Owen has also testified in his book, where he says,

[t]ossing the blanket away, I pulled out the camera that I'd used to shoot hundreds of pictures over the last few years and started snapping photos. We'd all gotten real good taking these kinds of photos. We'd been playing CSI Afghanistan for years. The first shots were of his full body. Then I knelt down near his head and shot a few of just his face. Pulling his beard to the right and then the left, I shot several profile pictures. I really wanted to focus on the nose. Because the beard was so dark, the profile shot was the one that really stood out in my mind.³³⁰

Of course, most of the contemporary spectators will never read this description. Yet, in Jaar's installation one's imagination will be guided to read the blank screen as what lies beyond the frame of Souza's photograph. This is achieved with the clever positioning of the two screens in a way that they slightly lean towards each other, as already mentioned.

Souza's frame in its iconic status appears to have a fixed meaning, while, to my mind, at the same time is empty of meaning. We look at something that we imagine stands in for something else that we cannot see, without even knowing if the latter is captured within the boundaries of the frame. Probably this can be explained with the fact that this photograph bears all the characteristics that Hariman and Lucaites give to "iconic images". It is recognisable by a wide audience, as it includes figures such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. It is an image that has been reproduced millions of times and could be seen as capturing an historical event. Importantly, it is also an image that is "used to orient the individual within a context of collective identity, obligation, and power", to adapt Harriman and Lucaites words.³³¹ This sense of collectiveness can be seen in other photographs that capture people's reactions after President

³²⁹ Anjani Trivedi, "The Abu Ghraib Prison Pictures – Joe Darby (2004)", *TIME*, 10 June 2013, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://world.time.com/2013/06/10/10-notorious-leakers-and-how-they-fared/slide/abu-ghraib-photo-leak/>.

³³⁰ Owen, *No Easy Day*, 241–242.

³³¹ Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed*, 1.

Obama's announcement regarding the killing of bin Laden. However, to my mind the most important factor that established this image as iconic is the absence of bin Laden's death photograph, which otherwise would have been the iconic frame, though posing another series of ethical ramifications. On those lines, Jaar creates an iconoclastic statement by giving more power to the absent image, which is signified by a blank screen that attracts one's eyes before anything else.

The fact that this image functions as a "visual trope" and is iconic can also be traced in two different genealogies that it has created. Firstly, this image was – perhaps accidentally – re-invented in 2017 by a very different end of the political spectrum. On 6 April 2017, US President Donald Trump approved the launching of Tomahawk missiles at one of Bashar al-Assad's airbases in Syria.³³² This incident followed the chemical attack in the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib Province, Syria, leading to casualties, for which Assad regime has been accused.³³³ Of course, the actual politics involved in this case are beyond the scope of this thesis. What is of interest, however, is how a lot of social media users as well as the news media commented on the visual similarities of the two frames' composition, with many wondering if this link was intentional.³³⁴ Yet, even if the composition of Trump's situation room photo was not intentionally following that of Souza's photograph from 2011, what becomes apparent is that this image has been established as a point of reference for many citizens of the 21st century.³³⁵

³³² Bonnie Malkin, "Who's who in Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago situation room?", *Guardian*, 8 April 2017, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/apr/08/trumps-mar-a-lago-situation-room-syria-bannon-kuschner>.

³³³ Jonathan Marcus, "Syria 'chemical attack': What now?", BBC, 5 April 2017, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39496149>.

³³⁴ Malkin, "Who's who in Donald Trump's".

³³⁵ For an analysis on the genre that Souza's photograph follows see Ronan McKinney "Picturing 9/11: Trauma, Technics, Mediation" (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2013), 35–43, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/47167/1/McKinney%2C_Ronan.pdf.

Another element that highlights the importance of Souza's photograph can be found in the artistic realm, as Jaar has not been the only one to appropriate it (although he was probably the first to do so). These examples, apart from justifying the iconic status of Souza's image, simultaneously create different conceptual frames for the reconsideration of this particular photograph.

The first example is by Broomberg and Chanarin in *War Primer 2*, 2011 (Fig. 30). *War Primer 2* is the appropriation of Bertolt Brecht's *War Primer*, published in 1955. According to the two artists is "a practical manual, demonstrating how to 'read' or 'translate' press photographs. Brecht was profoundly uneasy about the affirmative role played by the medium within the political economy of capitalism and referred to press photographs as hieroglyphics in need of decoding."³³⁶ This quote highlights how this uneasiness towards photography and its use by the news media is something that developed hand in hand with the photographic medium. In his book, Brecht collected and annotated press photographs from the Second World War.³³⁷ In their appropriation, Broomberg and Chanarin collected and attached onto Brecht's book images that were created by all sides involved in the 21st century "War on Terror".³³⁸ The new framing that they create allows the edges of Brecht's appropriated black and white press photos as well as his caption to still be visible. The tenth plate of *War Primer 2* shows a cropped version of Souza's photograph, in which Barack Obama as well as Hillary Clinton are still included. The photograph is positioned on top of a vertically rectangular black and white image, the upper and lower part of which are still visible and reveal parts of foliage, flowers and soil. Brecht's caption is positioned on the lower part of the image in its usual format. The caption reads:

³³⁶ "War Primer 2", Broomberg & Chanarin, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <http://www.broombergchanarin.com/hometest#/war-primer/>. For a comparative analysis of the two books see David Evans, "War Primers", in *Photography Reframed*, ed. Ben Burbridge and Annebella Pollen (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 157–163.

³³⁷ Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Verso, 2017).

³³⁸ "War Primer 2".

May he die like a dog. That's my last wish.
 He was the archenemy. Believe me, I speak true.
 And I am free to speak: where I am now.
 Only the Loire and one lone cricket know.³³⁹

In the context of *War Primer 2*, this inscription creates a very provocative framing – one based on national hatred towards the “archenemy”, who may “die like a dog”. Although this phrase can be interpreted as referring to Osama bin Laden, the latter is not acknowledged in his absence as a “grievable” human being but as part of a political discourse. Interestingly enough, the photograph that Brecht included in his publication shows a grave with a cross on which can be read the word “inconnu”: so, the place where an unknown person has been buried (Fig. 31). If one considers that the initial image refers to the Second World War, then the one that the dead other might wish to “die like a dog” most probably would have been Hitler, a connotation that when placed next to the contemporary historical context of the “War on Terror” seems troubling.

A second artistic example that provides a completely different framing on Souza's image is Edmund Clark's *Orange Screen*, which was first displayed in the artist's solo exhibition *War of Terror* at the Imperial War Museum London (July 28, 2016 – August 28, 2017) (Fig. 32).³⁴⁰

There, among the description of other images, appears this:

2011 Small crowded room semi circle of seated figures around laptop covered table people standing behind all eyes fixed to the left except one man in blue uniform with multi-coloured medal ribbons looking down as a man in white polo shirt and black open jacket leans forward and a woman folder on lap covers mouth with right hand.³⁴¹ (Fig. 33)

³³⁹ Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, *War Primer 2* (London: MACK, 2018), Plate 10; Brecht, *War Primer*, 10.

³⁴⁰ “War of Terror: Imperial War Museum”, Edmund Clark, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.edmundclark.com/war-terror-imperial-war-museum/>. Clark's *Orange Screen* was developed in collaboration with Max Houghton.

³⁴¹ “Orange Screen”, Edmund Clark, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.edmundclark.com/works/orange-screen/>.

The textual description is part of a looped video with many different texts. Each text is the description of one image from the “War on Terror”, written on top of an orange background. The choice of the colour is a memento of two ideologically contrasting political situations. As the artist explains,

[t]he colour orange became iconic through media images of the first detainees at Guantanamo Bay in 2002 wearing orange jumpsuits, standard US prison issue. Since 2014 this imagery has been referenced and inverted by ISIS propaganda videos showing their captives also wearing orange.³⁴²

For the artist in the editing process, it became very important to position the text in a way that would create a rectangle, in reference to the shape of the screen and the 35 mm photographic image.³⁴³ At the same time, the orange border around the text bears a striking resemblance to how photography is traditionally framed with white mounting cards, something that will also be discussed in relation to Khaled Barakeh’s *Relentless Images* in Chapter 3.

This textual frame provides a precise description. To my mind, it does not have the function that a caption might have as a discursive frame. It is a description of the purely visual, without implying that which lies beyond the boundaries of the visible visual frame of Souza’s photograph. This pierces this image’s iconic status by excluding the existence of the dead other. Or, as the description of this video suggests, “[t]he absence of the image removes it from its ideological context”.³⁴⁴ In its ideological context, the image was the referent for a gruesome death.

³⁴² “Orange Screen”.

³⁴³ Edmund Clark, interview by the author, 4 June 2019, at 00:05:40 of “Edmund Clark interview #1.m4a.”. This comment reveals also Clark’s acute understanding of the photographic medium, as his initial career was as a photographer.

³⁴⁴ “Orange Screen”.

As the artist explains, in reality when you write about an image you start “interrogating how we remember; how we remember images; what we believe in images”.³⁴⁵ As he realised after starting to work on these descriptions, what one can actually write about is “shape and colour and things that are absolutely readily identifiable”.³⁴⁶ In this sense he “stripped away all the implicit understanding that we have when we see those images flash up on our screens”.³⁴⁷ In reality, in these textual frames, as I call them, all that has been excluded is “what was there”, as Clark puts it.³⁴⁸ As the description of the video on the artist’s website states, “Orange Screen examines the visual language of the conflict [...] The short texts are ekphrastic readings of images”.³⁴⁹ The term “ekphrasis” links with ancient Greek culture, where,

ekphrasis was a rhetorical term like many others taught to Greek students. Teachers of rhetoric taught ekphrasis as a way of bringing the experience of an object to a listener or reader through highly detailed descriptive writing. Ekphrasis was one of the last rhetorical exercises students were taught and the challenge was to bring the experience of a person, a place, or a thing to an audience.³⁵⁰

Of course, this connection with the use of language reminds J. L. Austin’s notion of the “performative sentence”.³⁵¹ However, a significant difference between these two modes of literary expression is how, in the first case of the Greek rhetorical exercise, one has to convey a meaning via a description only; while, in Austin’s conception the sentence is followed by an act.

³⁴⁵ Edmund Clark, interview by the author, 4 June 2019, at 00:04:20 of “Edmund Clark interview #1.m4a.”.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., at 00:04:57 of “Edmund Clark interview #1.m4a.”.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., at 00:05:10 of “Edmund Clark interview #1.m4a.”.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., at 00:05:25 of “Edmund Clark interview #1.m4a.”. Although the comment “what was there” is very tempting for a further elaboration on what it means to say about a photograph that something was there – referring thus to the indexicality of photography and a discussion around Barthes’ exploration of the photographic medium – in the context that Clark mentions it, it is meant in its most literal sense of describing the purely visual features of an image.

³⁴⁹ “Orange Screen”.

³⁵⁰ Ryan Welsh, “ekphrasis”, The University of Chicago; Theories of Media; Keywords Glossary, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://csm.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/ekphrasis.htm>.

³⁵¹ J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.

In Clark's *Orange Screen*, the most important parameter is how, through the use of the empty language of pure description, one is confronted with all of the assumptions that were following their perception of the image. In other words, Clark creates a conceptual textual frame which is not the same as the textual frame of a caption which Butler discusses in "dialogue" with Sontag. And, by creating this frame, he causes the spectator to move in the opposite direction to that which Jaar's piece requires, where what is beyond the visual frame is transcribed as the actual iconic image in its absence. On the contrary, Clark returns one's attention to the strict boundaries of the visual frame of Souza's photograph, in order to strip away any imposed meaning – an act that reminds us how the image was never meant as a recognition of the dead other. Hence, Jaar's corrective act and Clark's deconstructive attitude can lead one to reconsider one and the same thing: who is allowed to be considered "grievable" in the 21st century?

Coda: A Viral “Frame” of the 21st century Mediterranean Refugee and Migrant Crisis

Incidents of self-immolation of refugees, such as the monk’s with which this chapter began, have occurred since 2016 in Greece. In a Google search at least two such events can be found immediately. First is the case of a 29-year-old Syrian asylum seeker in a refugee camp on the island of Chios (Fig. 34).³⁵² In this case there was video footage captured with a mobile phone camera, which I remember clearly having seen on the day of the incident on solidarity groups on Facebook. Notably, Al Jazeera, although it reported the event, did not include any stills from the video.³⁵³ The second case of self-immolation was captured by the Greek photographer Kostas Tsironis for Reuters in Idomeni, on the Northern border of Greece on 22 March 2016 (Fig. 35).³⁵⁴ In this case, the visual frame shows a middle-aged refugee man with his hands up, on fire from the waist down, while some men next to him try to stop the fire with pieces of clothing and another man looks on with an expression of despair. The frame was captured from a low angle. This event took place as an act of protest by the refugees.

Such an image of self-immolation was also used in an artwork included in the contemporary art exhibition *The Sea Is The Limit*, displayed initially in the Patrick Heide Gallery in London (24 November 2016 – 14 January 2017), and then in the York Art Gallery (4 May – 5 September 2018).³⁵⁵ The aforementioned artwork was Nidhal Chamekh’s *Studying Circles*

³⁵² “Video: Desperate Syrian asylum seeker self-immolates in Greece”, Al Arabiya English, 31 Mar. 2017, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/03/31/VIDEO-Horrifying-moment-desperate-Syrian-asylum-seeker-in-Greece-self-immolates.html>.

³⁵³ Teo Kermeliotis, “Chios: Syrian refugee critical after ‘self-immolation’”, Al Jazeera, 30 Mar. 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/syrian-refugee-critical-immolation-chios-170330142455924.html>.

³⁵⁴ “Self-immolation in Idomeni”, Reuters, 22 Mar. 2016, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/news/picture/self-immolation-in-idomeni-idUSRTSBNPM>.

³⁵⁵ “The Sea is The Limit”, PHCA, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.patrickheide.com/exhibitions/sea-limit>; “The Sea is The Limit”, York Art Gallery, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.yorkartgallery.org.uk/exhibition/the-sea-is-the-limit/>.

(2015), a large scale drawing (240 x 300cm) in graphite on wood-free paper (Fig. 36).³⁵⁶ The black and white drawing shows five male standing figures surrounding a young man who is sat down in the centre. The body of the young man is split into half from the waist down in a way that indicates two different moments, one superimposed on the other. Some of the surrounding figures hold mobile phones, one of them with a selfie stick. This painting is based on a photograph from a real incident in which the 27-year-old Adel Khedhri set himself on fire on 12 March 2013 in Tunis, Tunisia (Fig. 37).³⁵⁷ Interestingly, what was not explained in the caption that accompanied the drawing in the York Art Gallery is how this incident did not have anything to do with the refugee and migrant crisis. This could be seen as echoing how the news quite often uses archive or stock images – highlighted in a caption – to visualise a violent incident with a different visual frame. As if violence and death can function as a mere visualisation that can be equated between different events, displaced from its specificity. Having said that, one might of course consider how iconic and viral images function in similar ways in terms of the interchangeability of the visual.

It is worth noting that even the frames that captured self-immolation that actually took place during this crisis were never widely seen, nor became viral or iconic. So, one might question why a photograph of the burning monk has become an integral part of visual history while none of these have? Firstly, one might claim that it is too soon to know that. This could be a valid claim, but in contemporary visually saturated era with the prevalence of social media, iconism seems to be reached quickly through the status of the viral, as will be explained subsequently. Secondly, in formalistic terms one might consider that none of these frames were

³⁵⁶ “Drawing as Graphic Witness: Nidhal Chamekh in conversation with Kate Macfarlane”, Drawing Room, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://drawingroom.org.uk/events/drawing-as-graphic-witness>.

³⁵⁷ AFP, “Tunisian vendor who set self alight dies: Medic”, Ahrām online, 13 Mar. 2013, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/66751.aspx>.

so spectacular as Browne's iconic image, as in the case of the video the quality is very poor while Tsironis' photograph is non-aestheticised in typical photojournalistic terms. Of course, a third claim that would explain why especially the latter did not become iconic might also be traced in actual politics, as this protest was against the European Union's agreement to shut the Greek borders.³⁵⁸ In these terms, and to echo Butler's terminology, it might be a matter of who is and should be permitted by the discursive frames to be considered "grievable".

However, there was one dead person from the European refugee and migrant crisis that was considered "grievable" by thousands of people. On 2 September 2015, the photograph of a 2 year old dead boy was shared on social media (Fig. 38). That frame captured the dead body of Alan Kurdi, or Aylan as he became known initially. Alan was 2 years old and a Syrian refugee that drowned, and he was photographed in Bodrum, Turkey, by the female photographer Nilüfer Demir of the Dogan News Agency.³⁵⁹ The cropped version of the image went viral in less than 24 hours.³⁶⁰ Hence, one image created the prevalent visual narrative for this incomprehensible humanitarian crisis. By using the word incomprehensible here, I aim to draw attention to the fact that it is not a homogeneous situation. A non-uniform body of people and one viral image. Yet, what could be the evidence that dead Alan's photograph became a viral?

A small but indicative suggestion of this came in the outcome of the questionnaires from the exhibition *Refuse/Refuge*, which I co-curated at the York Art Gallery (20 July - 16 September 2018). The responses to the question "can you describe in two-three sentences one of these images [from the crisis]?", which followed a quantitative question about the number of photos

³⁵⁸ "Self-immolation in Idomeni".

³⁵⁹ "Alan Kurdi; Nilüfer Demir, 2015", 100 Photos TIME, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://100photos.time.com/photos/nilufer-demir-alan-kurdi>. Although most news or academic articles, as well as social media posts mention that Alan was 3 years old, his actual age was 2 years old, as he was born on 6 June 2013. For more see Tima Kurdi, *The Boy On The Beach* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019), 64.

³⁶⁰ "Death of Alan Kurdi", Wikipedia, last edited 15 Nov. 2020, accessed 16 Nov. 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alan_Kurdi.

that people clearly recalled, indicated that a significant proportion of people remember the image of Alan. There were 95 responses. From these, 40% stated that the image that they could recall is that of Alan (Fig. 39), while of those 51% said they could clearly remember 1-3 images from the crisis (Fig. 40). Although this sample is not very large or representative, it supports a trend that has been noted by many others: that Alan's image is iconic in its viral status. However, it is of particular importance to note that when speaking of Alan's photograph we do not talk about one but five different frames, which in most responses were referred to interchangeably. However, all five frames had certain common characteristics – reminding the criteria for iconic status – which are linked with how a viral image is understood.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the noun *virus* is defined as “the action or process of transmitting something or the state of being transmitted: *the transmission of the HIV virus*”.³⁶¹ The noun *virus* is linked to the adjective *viral*, which has two meanings: i. “of the nature of, caused by, or relating to a virus or viruses”; ii. (of an image, video, piece of information, etc.) “circulated rapidly and widely from one Internet user to another: *the video went viral and was seen by millions*”.³⁶² This recalls the main characteristic of an iconic image, with the significant difference of the speed of the spread. As noted by Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley,

[v]iral events are not new. What is new is that a viral video, a news story, or a photo can reach 40,000 people in hours, or even minutes, instead of days. And it isn't just the speed and reach of these information flows that makes them worth understanding; it is their frequency. We would be hard pressed to find more than a handful of viral events from the 1950s, but today viral events are ubiquitous.³⁶³

³⁶¹ *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. “transmission”, ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed 9 Nov. 2020, https://www-oxfordreference-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0877910.

³⁶² *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. “viral”, ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed 9 Nov. 2020, https://www-oxfordreference-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0929700?rskey=mx2EFY&result=1.

³⁶³ Karine Nahon, and Jeff Hemsley, *Going Viral*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 1–2.

Alan's image is a unique example of a viral image from the 21st century refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean. In my opinion, by now the image also exists alone – outside of any discursive frame regarding the crisis, allowing it thus to be perceived as an iconic image. An interesting example hinting in this direction is the inclusion of Alan's photograph in the exhibition *The Last Image: Photography and Death* (8 December 2018 – 9 March 2019), in C/O Berlin. In this show, in seven spaces, one could see at least 300 images and artworks linked to death: post-mortem photographs, forensic examination photographs as well as photographic documentation of atrocious events. In the final room – without any warning – one sees a TV screen playing a video by CNN. The caption reads, "CNN recording over the media distribution of the image of Alan Kurdi by Nilüfer Demir on September 2nd, 2015". This video, by being included in such a big exhibition of photography and art, indicates how the viral status of the image has created a rupture in people's consciences. "An image of suffering, that now has a face and a name for the world to see", concludes the video.³⁶⁴

The photograph gave a face to a crisis and became viral by being digitally "transmitted" time and time again. The word transmission is of course linked to the root of the word "viral": namely, "virus". According to medical studies there are two types of transmissions:

Vertical transmission: mother-to-child transmission of an infection, such as HIV, hepatitis B, or hepatitis C, from mother to fetus via the placental circulation.

Horizontal transmission: the spread of an infectious agent from one person or group to another, usually through contact with contaminated material, such as sputum or faeces.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁴ CNN, "Image shows 3-year-old who washed ashore", 3 Sept. 2015, YouTube video, 02:08, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://youtu.be/2uA4v9up3KY>.

³⁶⁵ *Concise Medical Dictionary*, s.v. "vertical transmission", ed. Elizabeth Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), accessed 9 Nov. 2020, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199687817.001.0001/acref-9780199687817-e-14433?rskey=0bttel&result=1>.

On a metaphorical level, the dissemination of images through the web and the creation of viral images represents “horizontal transmission”. As Nahon explains, “a typical viral spread” could be understood as “one where each person who sends a link out sends it to many others, each of whom might again send it to many others so that each time the link is forwarded an ever-increasing audience is exposed to the video, often in a very short time frame”.³⁶⁶ It demands the participation of millions of people, but at the same time stresses how the viral is linked with the temporality of sharing. “Speed and reach are nearly always cited as qualities of virality”.³⁶⁷

Yet, what does it mean to “horizontally transmit” the image of another person’s death: to share an atrocity image? And how different would it be if we share an image in the metaphorical terms of a “vertical transmission”? The consideration of ethics can assist one to move towards what I call “digital vertical transmission”, which in a sense connects the spectator and the photographed sufferer with a conceptual “umbilical cord”, which will highlight the inescapable and imperative nature of this ethical demand. I think that, in order for one to achieve a “vertical transmission”, one would have to gain a real understanding both of the visual frame of the dead other and of any textual frames accompanying it; so to acknowledge them as a “grievable” existence in a sustainable way, and not momentarily for as long as a digital share lasts. And in this sense maybe the time frame in which the sharing would be performed and re-performed would not be so short, because understanding demands time during the spectatorship.

Does this temporality of the spectatorship, sharing and creating of a viral image match the temporality of the effect it might have? Many rushed to say how this was one of the images that changed the course of history, and the course of this crisis. According to the Visual Social Media

³⁶⁶ Nahon, and Hemsley, *Going viral*, 5.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

Lab at the University of Sheffield, this was at least partially true, as the dissemination of this photograph shifted the terms that were used by web users when referring to this crisis (Fig. 41).³⁶⁸ Specifically, whereas up to the point that this image became viral the majority of people were referring to the victims of this crisis as “migrants” (which in legal terms is a person that is not forced to leave their home), after this image most people started talking about “refugees”.³⁶⁹ This is a very important fact which indicates a shift in the terminology used in the discursive frames of the crisis.

Another impact of this image can be traced in the fact that it moved people, which had as a secondary impact the effect of increasing donations for the humanitarian crisis in Syria.³⁷⁰ According to a study, an increase was also noticed regarding the Swedish Red Cross.

The mean number of daily donations during the week after publication of the photo was more than 100-fold greater compared with the week before. This effect was sustained until 5 wk after the photo’s appearance, when the number declined to a level no different from that in the week before publication.³⁷¹

Yet, in reality Alan’s frame did not manage to reverse the discursive frame on an EU political level and actions. This is suggested by the fact that after Alan’s death, there were 2,510 deaths between January and May, making 2016 one of the deadliest ever for the refugee crisis thus far.³⁷² As another study explains,

5700 people have died on refugee and migrant routes around the world since the body of the little Syrian boy washed up on a beach after his

³⁶⁸ Farida Vis, and Olga Goriunova, ed., *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi** (Visual Social Media Lab: December 2015), 11. The report is open access and can be downloaded from here <http://visualsocialmedialab.org/projects/the-iconic-image-on-social-media>.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Diane Cole, “Study: What Was The Impact Of The Iconic Photo Of The Syrian Boy?”, NPR, 13 Jan. 2017, accessed 5 Oct. 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/01/13/509650251/study-what-was-the-impact-of-the-iconic-photo-of-the-syrian-boy>.

³⁷¹ Paul Slovic et al., “Iconic Photographs and the Ebb and Flow of Empathic Response to Humanitarian Disasters”, *PNAS* 114, no. 4 (2017): 641, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1613977114.

³⁷² Ibid., 641.

family tried to cross to Europe from Turkey. In the year before he died, 4664 deaths were recorded.

The numbers of people who have died on refugee and migrant routes since the start of 2016 equates to one almost every 80 minutes.³⁷³

In other words, Alan's photograph seemingly did not manage to reverse this crisis or even minimise the number of deaths, which suggests that this image did not change people's consciences in a way that would create a demand to change policy-making. Of course, this issue lies at the core of the literature regarding documentary images. To my mind, images are unable to change history. Yet, what photographs of atrocities and violence can do in their artistic use, as examined in this thesis, is that they can create a difference in how people look at such frames, creating thus a deeper understanding of the ethical and political responsibilities they as spectators have. Consequently, if the spectatorship becomes more conscious, then there is an increased chance that more people will demand a shift in policy-making regarding the migrant and refugee crisis in the Mediterranean.

In the context of frame analysis, a good example that challenges how such viral frames are being consumed can be found in Ina Louguine's 2016 video *Staring Quietly at the Backwash* (Fig. 42).³⁷⁴ This work combines a visible and an invisible frame, with a superimposed aural (audio) frame. According to Louguine, in this video,

[t]here is no use of archive images, documents about the refugees, or any clear indication regarding what the subject matter is: it is all suggested and appeals to the subconscious. Willingly non-journalistic, this approach highlights the lack of concrete action being taken in this [...] Europe

³⁷³ "Global refugee and migrant deaths up more than a fifth in year since 3-year-old Alan Kurdi died", Oxfam, 2 Sep. 2016, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <http://oxfamapps.org/media/42xxv>.

³⁷⁴ Ina Louguine is a fictitious character, part of the fictitious collective The Live Wild, create by the artist Camille Lévêque. For more see Maisie Skidmore, "Meet the Photographic Artist with Seven Different Identities", AnOther, 1 Dec. 2017, accessed 13 Nov. 2020, <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/10407/meet-the-photographic-artist-with-seven-different-identities>.

deemed too passive, where this crisis was experienced as if it was abstract, almost unreal.³⁷⁵

How, why and to what extent European politicians made mistakes while handling this humanitarian crisis is not the focus here, although a minimum consensus can be found for the fact that multiple political failures to save these people's lives were performed. Here I aim to highlight that by subverting what would be expected to be seen in the frame, the spectators are expected to think about their way of looking. In the context of the exhibition *Refuse/Refuge*, this was called “visual refusal”; in this thesis, it is called an invisible atrocity image. These two terms describe the same situation which can assist one to rethink the “political refusals” of taking responsibility to save one's life. As explained in the exhibition essay,

Refuse/Refuge asks you to reconsider the political failures that partook in the European refugee and migrant crisis, not by seeing another reproduction of the photograph of Aylan, nor any other documentary style imagery. In this context, the concept of the “refusal” takes an intentional and more positive connotation. What does it mean to refuse to show something in an exhibition, not for purposes of censorship, but in order to think about what you have been accustomed to looking at?³⁷⁶

These two types of “refusals” can be examined in Loungue's video, in which the focus on the frame is already profound regarding the aesthetics. Yet, what comprises this artwork in its entirety? The project is composed of three parts, which are all made with appropriated, ready-made and found visual material. Of course, the fact that the material is appropriated could be seen as opening another set of ethical questions, which are however beyond the scope of this analysis. So, *Staring Quietly at the Backwash* is comprised of: i) vernacular family photographs of holidays (Fig. 43); ii) a grid of smiles by politicians (Fig. 44); and iii) most importantly, a video

³⁷⁵ “Staring Quietly at the Backwash”, The Live Wild Collective, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.thelivewildcollective.com/staringquietlyatthebackwash>.

³⁷⁶ Kyveli Lignou-Tsamantani, “On Political and Visual Refusals”, Refuse Refuge Project, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.refuserefugeproject.co.uk/exhibition-essay>.

of two frames from appropriated videos and appropriated sound from a media video of a crisis scene from an arrival of refugees in land (Fig. 45).

Here the analysis evolves around the video, which was also included in the exhibition *Refuse/Refuge* (Fig. 46). Louinguine's video, with the juxtaposition of the two frames, creates a minimalistic poetical response to a very complex political situation (Fig. 45).³⁷⁷ These two frames are: one visible – the front frame of the handshakes – and one invisible – the background of the sea. These create a sense of calmness, until they clash with the third frame, which is included by the free choice of the spectator who decides to wear the headphones. The “aural” is the third frame, which comes in the place of the text to function as a conceptual frame. The audio includes people talking loudly and screaming, as well as a mechanic noise, giving a sense of havoc.

The front frame of the video comprises 27 shots of handshakes of politicians which, as some of the images indicate with the inclusion of the EU flag, belong to European politicians (Fig. 45). This is the most common way that in contemporary visual culture, politics and political decisions are represented in the media. A handshake can be read as a gesture of recognition, good will towards another or even an agreement. Yet, agreement on what? On perpetuating a humanitarian crisis? According to the artist, “[t]his image of the hands shaking shows a spiritual aspect when floating in the sea, comparable perhaps to a god-like hand sealing our fate; it also stands for the hand we are incapable to offer to our neighbors”.³⁷⁸ In this context – when the spectators have not put the headphones on – all these handshakes have a soothing effect, which is also underlined by the use of the sea in the background frame. “Staring Quietly At The Backwash

³⁷⁷ I first saw it in the Athens Photo Festival in Summer 2017. “Ina Louinguine”, APhF, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.photofestival.gr/exhibitions/ina-louinguine>.

³⁷⁸ “Staring Quietly at the Backwash”.

is a metaphorical immersion into the sea: although seemingly calm, it turns out to be a resourceless habitat.”³⁷⁹

As already mentioned, according to Butler “frames” are “politically saturated”.³⁸⁰ The political aspect of the frames in the case of the video, apart from the profound visual hint of the handshakes, comes through the use of the sound, the only part that implies the meaning of the artwork. Yet, it could also be proposed that the stressful nature of this sound functions as the mourning of all these invisible “precarious lives”, to use Butler’s term.³⁸¹

This video has a mathematical simplicity: a frame of the most prevailing representation of European politics, plus the frame of a sea, plus the sound of a turbulent event equals an audio-visual comment on the refugee crisis. Of course, the premise for the successful understanding of this piece is that the spectators, even if still imprisoned in Plato’s “cave”, have been exposed to the “shadows” of contemporary media – traditional or social. Thus, Alan’s photographic/visual frame is almost a prerequisite for one’s understanding. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that it is not the specificity of this child’s death which makes it thus; on the contrary, the importance lies in its viral identity.

Of course, this work, as most of the works in this thesis, underline an important difference between photojournalism and art: namely, the physical distance at which one must be in order to create each of the two. Or, in other words, the indexicality of photography with what is captured in the frame is not a prerequisite for the artistic creation and appropriation. The aspect of distance is directly linked with the frame analysis. Butler, while examining the images from Abu Ghraib, approaches the troubling parts of the framing methodology in relation to spatial position: “The critique of the frame is, of course, beset by the problem that the presumptive viewer is ‘outside’

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Butler, *Frames of War*, 1.

³⁸¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*.

the frame, over ‘here’ in a first-world context, and those who are depicted remain nameless and unknown.”³⁸²

This stance of being on the one side of the political divide is also the position that Louinguine is taking in this video by appropriating existing material, and which – even unintentionally – she invites the spectators to take. The latter’s responsibility is directed by the discursive frame, which is created by the combination of the three frames, especially the co-existence of the politicians and the sound of the crisis. One could say that witnessing from a distance is problematic. Yet, when you do so you start to become aware also of the political responsibility and the “political refusals” that partake in a situation, something that the visible frame of the politicians’ handshakes in Louinguine’s video very strongly highlight.

What remains incomprehensible after the spectatorship of this piece though is the specificity of the represented events, a specificity that is only implied by the invisible visual frame of the sea. As already mentioned, the artist’s website explains, “[t]here is no [...] clear indication regarding what the subject matter is”.³⁸³ So the work functions in a confusing manner – there is no need or point in knowing the sources of these moving images. Their generic nature functions exactly as it should, namely as a reminder of something commonly visible in contemporary visual culture. This culture is saturated by images that go viral, as Alan’s image did. To be exact, the background frame could have even been that of Alan.³⁸⁴ Yet, by rendering visually invisible the photographic frame of what could have been an atrocity, what becomes visible is the “political refusal”. Therefore, as the artists explains, this piece could be seen as “a forced encounter between imagination and reality”.³⁸⁵ The reality, to my mind, does not come

³⁸² Butler, *Frames of War*, 93.

³⁸³ “Staring Quietly at the Backwash”.

³⁸⁴ See for example this video: 45 News - World News, “Exclusively: Tragic moment for the death of the boy Aylan Kurdi (Video)”, 3 Sept. 2015, YouTube video, 00:16, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://youtu.be/Uk1HEf9kSGE>.

³⁸⁵ “Staring Quietly at the Backwash”.

from the visible frame of the politicians, but from the “aural frame”. The aural frame is what allows one’s imagination to comprehend the invisible and create another visible frame that could be very similar to that of any other “Alan” who remained un-viral and invisible.

Before concluding, it is important to highlight a final parameter regarding the function of this aural frame. The sound in this case takes the place that traditionally in documentary photography was that of the text of the caption, or the role that the text had in conceptual artistic practices since the 1960s.³⁸⁶ The image-text relation was at the centre of Butler’s reading of Sontag, as already explained. For Butler, the “photographic frame” has its own power and therefore is not in direct need of a textual caption. She explains,

[i]n my view, it does not make sense to accept Sontag’s claim, made repeatedly throughout her writings, that the photograph cannot by itself offer an interpretation, that we need captions and written analysis to supplement the discrete and punctual image. In her view, the image can only affect us, not provide us with an understanding of what we see.³⁸⁷

Whichever route we follow, either Butler’s or Sontag’s regarding the importance or not of the text, in Louguine’s video the cognitive “bridging” between the visible and the invisible visual frames comes through the distressing sound. On an ethical level, the sound is based on the free will of the spectator, who needs to have the curiosity to understand why the piece is called *Staring Quietly at the Backwash*. In my view, the conceptual/aural frame, in relation to the textual frame provided by the title, allows one to grasp the historical context – namely the refugee crisis – and highlights the powerful impact that sound can have on one’s understanding. This of course brings to mind Laszlo Nemes choice in the 2015 film *Son of Saul* to not show the executions in the Holocaust death camps, but to allow the viewers to be haunted by the sound.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁶ Eve Kalyva, *Image and Text in Conceptual Art : Critical Operations in Context* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.

³⁸⁷ Butler, *Frames of War*, 66.

³⁸⁸ “Son of Saul (2015)”, IMDb, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3808342/>.

In Louguine's piece we have the same relationship between invisibility and sound: invisibility functions successfully because of the sound, and the sound gets meaning through the existence of the invisible visual frame that gives the specificity – namely, of contemporary deaths at marine borders.

To conclude, I believe that through the analysis of the “frames” of this video one manages to understand how invisibility and sound can function much more successfully – in comparison with a documentary, iconic image of a dead refugee – in highlighting the fact that many deaths remain invisible, thus un-grievable. The refugee crisis is ongoing. Its incomprehensible nature still prevails. And we – the witnesses at a distance – have to feel helpless and *Stare Quietly at the Backwash*, at least until we will decide to take our own political responsibility.

Chapter 2: Invisible Atrocity Images and the “Face”

Introduction

[T]he face is not “seen”.
It is what cannot become a content,
which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable.

Emmanuel Levinas³⁸⁹

[Levinas] gives us a way of thinking about the relationship
between representation and humanization,
a relationship that is not as straightforward
as we might like to think.

Judith Butler³⁹⁰

In September 2018, the British charity “Save the Children” released a new video advertisement for the support of their work. The video was included in the advertisements that precede many movies in cinemas. The same video can be found on the YouTube channel of the charity with the title *Censored / Save the Children*.³⁹¹

The one-minute video begins by showing two children – a brother and a sister – getting ready for school. They pack and wear their bags, and a woman – the mother – whose dress code indicates Muslim origins says goodbye to them while they depart from their house. The second scene shows the children walking happily and with the innocence of their age in an urban space destroyed by bombs. This moment of everyday life is disrupted by the sound of helicopters flying towards them and the consequent turmoil of everyone around them, including the children, shouting and running to find refuge. In the following scene, a bomb is dropped, and a deafening sound covers everything. Yet, the spectator does not see the building on which the bomb has been

³⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 86.

³⁹⁰ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 140.

³⁹¹ SaveTheChildren, “Censored; Save the Children”, 7 Sept. 2018, YouTube video, 01:00, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://youtu.be/oBI5l6d993M>.

dropped; they see only a pixelated, blurred image. This is followed by the pixelated surroundings of the boy who has fallen on the ground while protecting his head with his hands. The moment of the disaster has passed. The boy stands up and in the following scenes parts of the screen are pixelated and other parts blurred from the dust that followed the bombing. Many adult figures are trying to save the traumatised people, which are the pixelated parts of the image. The little boy is looking frantically for his sister, whom he finds under the debris of a building, and with the help of some adults, takes her out of there. Crying, the little boy follows a man that carries the little girl in his hands. The spectator sees the body of the girl being pixelated while her face indicates her unconscious state. The camera follows the transfer of the little girl in the hospital, with her brother standing next to her pixelated body. The first words of the advertisement appear on the screen: “Children in war zones see things nobody should” (Fig. 47); and “Help show them a better future.” The little girl recovers and walks happily to school with her brother in a camp full of tents with the “Save the Children” logo.³⁹²

As the title of the video underlines – “Censored” – there are specific modes of visual existence for different situations in the contemporary world. “Children in war zones see things nobody should”, states the advertisement. With this phrase, the charity stresses the trauma of the observer, the little boy, that has to see his sister being hit by the bomb. Yet, the end addressee of the video is the cinema goer or the YouTube user. In this case, the pixelation functions as a protective filter for the gaze of any UK-based spectator who will be exposed to these moving images. Interestingly enough, in the same manner of caring about the spectator’s emotional relief,

³⁹² This reminds the scene from Renzo Marten’s film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* (2008), in which he asks with an ironic and persistent tone a representative from an NGO in the Congo if the people of a refugee camp, in order to have a tent to sleep in, need to accept that this tent will bear the logo of the NGO. In other words, it is as if there is an intrinsic link between the alleviation of extreme poverty and suffering, and the capital that is created from the use of logos. For Marten’s film see “Episode III: Enjoy Poverty”, Institute For Human Activities, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.humanactivities.org/en/product/episode-iii-enjoy-poverty/>.

the YouTube video has the following disclaimer in the description box: “NOTE: This is a dramatisation.”³⁹³

The choice to start this chapter with the example of an advertisement does not mean to imply that the focus of the thesis is shifted towards mass culture. However, as with all the invisible atrocity images analysed throughout the thesis, also here the artworks appropriate photojournalistic images; in this way they comment on issues of censorship in visual culture more broadly, and the circulation of photographs through different online, but not only, streams of information. The artworks comment on different aspects of contemporary visual censorship, or visual content moderation as I think is a more appropriate term here. There is an interesting lineage of covering, blurring or, most often recently, pixelating the face of a person in images of violence or distress. Yet, for whom is this content moderated, and partially censored? Is it only in order to respect the other’s privacy and wishes?

The analysis will start with issues of partial censorship in mass culture, before moving on to the examination of such modes in an artistic context through the four case studies. In this context, it will be underlined how pixelation, blurring, covering, cut outs and so on should be perceived as aesthetic modes that do not exist in a neutral manner in contemporary visual culture. On the contrary, one should observe and problematise them in a way that would allow the spectator to revisit their encounter with the depicted other. In order to examine the different parameters of these aesthetic modes, it is useful to refer to a few different examples, starting from pixelation and then moving on to different types of visual censorship mainly in cases of the networked image. But first the examination can start from the conventional understanding of visual editing and redaction in the media.

³⁹³ “SaveTheChildren, “Censored”.

The article “Images of Horror From Fallujah” examines the decision in 2004 of different editors of newspapers and TV shows to publicise or not the images from the brutal killing and lynching of four contractors in the Iraqi village of Fallujah.³⁹⁴ Many editors showed some long shots of images in which the burned dead bodies of the people were hanged from a bridge while a crowd of civilians was cheering, while others blurred and pixelated the most gruesome parts of the images.³⁹⁵ At this point, it is crucial to consider the core questions that frame any journalistic ethical code. As the two authors suggest, these are:

What pictures should we use, where and why?

Which ones should we not use and why not?

Should we digitally edit those we use to reduce their “horror” quotient?

For print editors, should pictures go on an inside page or the front page?

How should we caption and contextualize what we are showing?³⁹⁶

According to the authors of this article, this whole debate about the Fallujah photographs was a positive moment that showed to the general public the struggles of reporters’ jobs. Yet, what is striking is how the discussion is framed around the existential anxieties of people from the media in relation to spectators. What about the dead people of those images? Or the people in suffering and anguish in so many others?

Let us follow the thread that can be pulled from the third question: can one decide if something will be digitally edited in order to reduce its horrific aspects? This cannot fail to bring in mind Judith Butler’s words, when she questions,

³⁹⁴ David D. Perlmutter and Lesa Hatley Major, “Images of Horror From Fallujah”, *Nieman Reports* 58, No. 2 (Summer 2004): 71–74, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://niemanreports.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/04summer.pdf>.

³⁹⁵ At this point, I choose to not analyse further or show any of the photographs related to this case, as I do not believe that these images are in any way useful for the argumentation of this chapter.

³⁹⁶ Perlmutter and Major, “Images of Horror”, 71.

[i]s this regulation of violence also violent in some way? And if it is, how do we describe that violence? It seems we are talking about two kinds of efforts. The first seeks to suppress the public understanding of violence, which verges on the denial that violence exists; the second seeks to structure the appearance of violence in such a way that violence is always already interpreted, rationalised, and justified.³⁹⁷

To my mind, when thinking about censorship one should always keep in mind these questions.

Yet, it is important to not fall back on a long genealogy of literature that does not stress the responsibility of the spectator in the photographic equation, even when the photograph is visually moderated, and hence partially censored. As has already been stated from the Introduction, this thesis is based on the foundation of the shift that Azoulay created with the “civil contract of photography”, in which photographer, photographed subject and spectator are equally participating in the “contract”.³⁹⁸ However, in order for one to take the responsibility of the other, then sometimes the spectator has to bear what I will call “the responsibility of not looking”.³⁹⁹ Not looking here should be perceived as a political decision of protecting the other from one’s gaze, rather than protecting one’s own personal sentiment.

Pixelation, which lies at the core of the aforementioned advertisement, is one of the newest modes of censorship that have been deployed to assist the spectator’s protection and in some cases the rights of the represented. Two previous forms that functioned as a “corrective for this photographic dislocation of the subject”, were “cropping” and “superimposition”.⁴⁰⁰ According to Rebecca Adelman, the first “claims editorial power over the scene and the narrative it generates, manipulating the frame and the details”.⁴⁰¹ On the other hand, “superimposition”

³⁹⁷ Butler, “On the Relationship Between Precarity and State Power”.

³⁹⁸ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*.

³⁹⁹ Here I am influenced by Möller’s idea regarding the “looking/not looking dilemma”, which however I shift towards a different direction. For more see Möller, “The Looking/not Looking Dilemma”.

⁴⁰⁰ Rebecca A. Adelman, “Pixelizing atrocity”, *Philosophy of Photography* 4, no 1 (2013): 26, doi: 10.1386/pop.4.1.25_1.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 26. One such example that has already been discussed in Chapter 1 is the image of Alan Kurdi.

describes the use of “black rectangles” in order to cover people’s eyes, as a way of protecting their identity.⁴⁰²

One of the most prominent visual methods of protecting one’s identity that is used in documentary films is for the camera to crop out the face of the person speaking or blur the face after the filming. One such successful example can be found in the Greek documentary *Ruins* (2013), directed by Zoi Mavroudi. This documentary follows the prosecution of HIV positive female sex workers by the Greek government in 2012. Shockingly in this case, the mug shots of those women were circulated in the media, especially on the news programs of TV, without the employment of any visual technique to conceal their faces. This orchestrated exposure of their identities aimed to inform and hence protect the men that had had sexual intercourse with them. The images kept circulating for a long time after their initial appearance, while their partial concealment came a long time after the consequences for these women and their families were already felt (e.g., some women committed suicide).⁴⁰³ In a conscious and significant aesthetic manner that indicated the need for a corrective gesture for this unwilling exposure, the director conducted interviews with a few of the HIV positive women not by pixelating or obscuring their faces, but by filming them from the neck and underneath, or from their back (Fig. 48).⁴⁰⁴

Pixelation can also be used for similar purposes of protecting one’s identity. An indicative artistic example, which lies on the borderline with documentary imagery, is the use of a “mosaic” by the artist Edmund Clark in the video he created with prisoners for the exhibition *In Place of Hate* (2015 – 2017) (Fig. 49).⁴⁰⁵ In this case, the artist, in order to be allowed to display the video by the British Ministry of Justice, was asked to redact any potential visual traces that would allow

⁴⁰² Ibid., 26.

⁴⁰³ “Woman Outed in Greece’s Sex Worker Crackdown Has Committed Suicide”, NSWP, 3 Dec. 2014, accessed 3 November 2020, <https://www.nswp.org/news/woman-outed-greece-s-sex-worker-crackdown-has-committed-suicide>.

⁴⁰⁴ For more see “The documentary”, RUINS, accessed 10 Oct. 2020, <https://ruins-documentary.com/#>.

⁴⁰⁵ For more on this project see “In Place of Hate at IKON Gallery”, Edmund Clark, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.edmundclark.com/installations/in-place-of-hate/#1>.

a victim or anyone else to recognise the identity of these criminals. For Clark, the use of pixelation is a way to make very obvious those power relations, while for him blurring is a trope of traditional documentary redaction which he did not want as it links with old-fashioned practices.⁴⁰⁶

In a negative tone on how pixelation functions as censorship, Adelman explains that “[p]ixelization shrouds the corporeal truth of war” by concealing the parts in which the results of the war can be most easily traced.⁴⁰⁷ In these terms, as she continues, “[i]t is the mechanism by which news outlets balance graphicness and tolerability, showing as much of the images as possible without offending anyone”.⁴⁰⁸ What can be seen as problematic is that in order to offend someone, this someone needs to have a voice, hence to not be completely unprivileged – e.g. being in a disaster or war zone – and of course to not be dead. Therefore, this approach to ethics stresses pixelation as a tool used for those with “voice”, namely the spectators. Yet, ethical codes should be in place also to protect the other’s face even when the latter is not in a position of power, so in a position to choose, due to their geographical and/or socio-political status, or because they are dead.

A newer set of censorship criteria has been created for social media, and especially for Facebook. In a very thorough analysis on internet censorship, Nanna Bonde Thulstrup explains, “[u]nderstanding how digital practices work, and how they differ from traditional forms of censorship necessitates an examination of the infrastructures of digital censorship”.⁴⁰⁹ Hence, although censorship is something that differs between cultural and religious contexts, in this case

⁴⁰⁶ Edmund Clark (Oral Presentation), *Visible Justice* Symposium, Saturday 27 Oct. 2018, London College of Communication, <https://www.visible-justice.org/oct-2018>.

⁴⁰⁷ Adelman, “Pixelizing atrocity”, 26.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰⁹ Nanna Bonde Thulstrup, “The Invisibility of Internet Censorship”, in *Invisibility Studies: Surveillance, Transparency and the Hidden in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Henriette Steiner and Kristin Veel (Bern: Peter Lang, 2015), 302.

it refers to a globalised digital world that is informed to a large extent through social media. Pixelation, as being partial concealment, can be understood as a mild version of censorship especially because it is visually explicit, whilst proper censorship still takes place on both types of media. Yet, what needs to be considered is whether this total, in visual terms, censorship takes place for the sake of the spectator or the sufferer or dead other.

A very interesting manifestation of the latter was the 2016 controversy over Facebook censoring an iconic image of war: Nick Ut's *The Terror of War*, as the 1972 image is remembered in the public sphere (Fig. 50). The image was captured on 8 June 1972 near a village that had just been bombed with Napalm by South Vietnamese planes.⁴¹⁰ The photograph shows four soldiers in the background and five children screaming and crying while running in the foreground. One of the children, Kim Phuc, is naked. The controversy took place in September 2016 when the Norwegian writer Tom Egeland published a post about seven photographs that changed history of which one was Nick Ut's.⁴¹¹ The post was deleted by Facebook for censoring purposes of this particular image, with the justification that "while we recognize that this photo is iconic, it's difficult to create a distinction between allowing a photograph of a nude child in one instance and not others".⁴¹²

A similar practice was performed by Facebook on 26 October 2018 in the case of a *New York Times* article with the title "The Tragedy of Saudi Arabia's War".⁴¹³ The particular article included a series of photographs from the famine in Yemen, and a few of the images show malnourished babies and children. The first image, which captures Amal Hussain, a 7-year-old

⁴¹⁰ "Nick Ut", World Press Photo, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/people/nick-ut>.

⁴¹¹ Sam Levin, Julia Carrie Wong, and Luke Harding, "Facebook backs down from 'napalm girl' censorship and reinstates photo", *Guardian*, 9 Sep. 2016, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/sep/09/facebook-reinstates-napalm-girl-photo>.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Walsh, "The Tragedy of Saudi Arabia's War". It is interesting to note that although the famine has been taking place for a very long time, the *New York Times* published the article only after Khashoggi's murder by Saudi Arabia.

Yemeni girl, was why Facebook deleted the reposting of the article from many users' accounts (Fig. 24).⁴¹⁴ The main reason for this censorship was children's protection from sexual offences, which does not allow the appearance of naked children on the social media platform, as Facebook stated:

“As our community standards explain, we don't allow nude images of children on Facebook, but we know this is an important image of global significance,” a spokeswoman said in an emailed statement. “We're restoring the posts we removed on this basis.”⁴¹⁵

To my mind, paradoxically, this kind of severe and total, in visual terms, censorship is there in order to protect the photographed victim.⁴¹⁶ And although it creates cultural and historical mistakes, its end addressee is the photographed other, not the spectator.⁴¹⁷

All the above-mentioned examples evolve around one key question: for whose sake do these forms of redaction take place? Consequently, does one (e.g., an artist) have the right to show another person's death and suffering, and does a spectator have the right to look at it? In this chapter I approach these complicated questions by examining four artistic examples through the lens of a different type of “encounter”: namely that of the “face” as it was proposed as an ethical entity by the Lithuanian-French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, one of the key figures of

⁴¹⁴ Jacey Fortin, “Photo of a Starving Girl in Yemen Prompts Facebook to Remove Posts of Article”, *New York Times*, 26 Oct. 2018, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/business/facebook-blocks-nyt-yemen.html>. Interestingly enough, on the same day, the newspaper published also the article Eric Nagourney and Michael Slackman, “Why We Are Publishing Haunting Photos of Emaciated Yemeni Children”, *New York Times*, 26 Oct. 2018, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/reader-center/yemen-photos-starvation.html>.

⁴¹⁵ Fortin, “Photo of a Starving Girl”.

⁴¹⁶ Here it is important to stress that although I mention examples of total censorship, these images have been visible or even iconic in the public realm. Hence the content moderation is put in place after the production, while in chapter 3, I will examine cases of censorship which is implemented in advance of any image production, creating thus a visual absence.

⁴¹⁷ Maybe these incidents can be considered as cultural gaffes if one thinks about the shocking reality that in order for the Western users to have a non-violent Facebook News Feed, there are people “cleaning” it manually. A documentary traces the impact that these jobs have been having for many people who choose such jobs due to poverty. For more see *Cleaners*, dir. Block and Riesewieck, DVD.

20th century continental philosophy. Levinas' goal was to culminate a "first philosophy" as ethics, something that could happen through the encounter with the other for whom the "I" has responsibility.⁴¹⁸ Although this chapter does not aim to provide a survey or detailed analysis of the vast literature that exists regarding the Levinasian "face", the choice of this theoretical lens here dives into the recurring question: is the Levinasian "face" purely a visual face? Does one have to look at the visual face of the other in order to ethically acknowledge them? I highlight how the answers should be negative, by exploring this notion through a close look of the encounter between a spectator and the depicted and obscured sufferer or dead other, which should be based on an ethical understanding.

Censorship is a contemporary plague. Yet, the utilisation of its visual modes in an artistic context can assist one to reconsider how they have been accustomed to consuming atrocity images in a manner that does not recognise the other as a "face" both in censored and uncensored images. The analysis starts with two artworks that raise issues regarding the contemporary use of pixelation in visual culture and politics. The first work is Thomas Hirschhorn's *Self-Pixel* (2016), which provides a digital example that can allow one to rethink how their positioning as spectator can change the way the dead or sufferer other is perceived. This work highlights two different modes of censorship – pixelation and complete blanking out (or cut out) – which will also be examined in one of the following artworks. Does the existence of pixelation function as a protective layer for one's emotions, or does it allow the spectator to recognise their responsibility towards the "face" of the other? This question will be further reiterated in the analysis of belit sağ's *what remains* (2018), which gives space for contemplation on the relation between death and pixelation, as well as the historical relationship between photography and death. Hence, this

⁴¹⁸ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 77. For an introduction to Levinas' philosophy, see Bergo, "Emmanuel Levinas".

section will highlight how the artistic use of pixelation can allow one to establish their ethical relationship with the Levinasian “face” of the other in atrocity images.

Following this, two other artworks will be explored: Khaled Barakeh’s *The Untitled Images* (2014) and David Birkin’s *Pietà* (2012). Both of these pieces render invisible an existing image of a dead person, either by physical erasure or by material concealment, which remind the conventional censorship techniques of cropping and covering. At the same time, these two artworks have an iconographic relevance between them, as they both draw from the Christian iconological trope of *pietà*, which comprises two figures. The latter is a crucial part for the visual ethics in both examples, as will be suggested in this analysis. Yet, the spectator’s ethical responsibility towards the invisible dead other in each case is created due to different features. In the case of Barakeh’s piece, I will suggest that the spectator’s responsibility is constructed via the visible expression – the silent language – of the living (second) figure of the photographic frame; while, in Birkin’s artwork, the ethical relationship is based on the visible caption.

The artworks analysed in this chapter, through different aesthetic modes otherwise used as means of partial censorship, render completely invisible the visible faces of the depicted others – both the ones suffering due to a condition of mourning for their loved ones, as well as the dead other. Of course, as will be seen, the latter, which preoccupy this thesis, cannot be perceived as others in a straightforward manner in a Levinasian context.

While the first two case studies of this chapter underline the ethical meaning of a conscious refusal to look at an image of atrocity for the other’s sake, the next two artworks will examine how this ethical relationship can be established in cases where the other’s “face” is already obscured from the spectator’s sight. In other words, what happens when the atrocity image has already been concealed by the artist. Here, the analysis will draw on the Levinasian “face” and its links with language, and will simultaneously examine what it means for the “face

to face” to be established due to the existence of a third “face” that functions as the carrier of the language of the dead or unconscious other of the image. In this way, the limitations of one’s otherness when that other is dead or unconscious and therefore unable to partake in the “face to face” relation will be examined under a new light.

2.1 The Pixelated “Face” and the Responsibility to Not Look: Thomas Hirschhorn’s *Self Pixel* (2016)

In the Summer of 2017, the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn declared in his usual provocative tone:

7. THE WORST IS CENSORED: I am interested in pixelation because what is pixelated is considered as the worst. The worst is not shown, the worst is censored. Pixelation is used as a MORALISTIC arbitration between what to see and what is too IMPROPER to look at. Nothing is UNSHOWABLE. What cannot be shown is what has no form. (sic.)⁴¹⁹

This quote is part of a “manifesto” type of text entitled “DE-PIXELATION” in which the artist explains the nine parameters that trigger his interest in pixelation. These ideas were visually expressed in his series of collages entitled *Pixel-Collage* (2015-2017) (Fig. 51) and the web-commission *Self-Pixel* (2016) (Fig. 52), the latter of which was featured on the website of the Canadian museum Remai Modern.⁴²⁰ These two bodies of work create two significantly different modes of spectatorship, and subsequently different kinds of ethical relations between the spectator and the photographed subjects. That is because *Self-Pixel* demands the personal ethics of the spectator to become activated. While bearing in mind the much-needed comparative understanding of the two, for the purposes of this chapter the analysis will focus on his digital artwork.

The analysis of Hirschhorn’s artwork is based on the long-standing debate on looking or not looking at an image of atrocity and what the ethical ramifications are in each case. Hence, the

⁴¹⁹ Thomas Hirschhorn, “DE-PIXELATION”, *Artreview Asia* (Summer 2017), 56–57, as reproduced in Gladstone Gallery website, accessed 10 Nov. 2020,

https://gladstonegallery.com/sites/default/files/20170800_TH_Artreviewasia_Feature.pdf.

⁴²⁰ “Web commission: Thomas Hirschhorn *Self-Pixel*”, Remai Modern, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://remainmodern.org/field/web-commissions/thomas-hirschhorn-self-pixel>; for more on *Pixel-Collage* see st

argumentation in this section will examine how the refusal to look at the photograph of the violently killed dead, which is performed by the conscious pixelation, is what can establish the responsibility towards the other's "face". But the "face" should not be perceived as a mere visual feature but as a complicated "otherness" which demands something from one – namely the spectator. For Levinas, the "face-to-face" relationship is the foundation of ethics, while he has stated multiple times that "[f]irst philosophy is an ethics".⁴²¹ In other words, for Levinas the ethical demand pre-exists the "being".⁴²² If one is to follow this belief, then it is obvious that everyone has an ethical responsibility towards a dead or sufferer captured in a photograph. Therefore, the following analysis will indicate how a conscious and intentional concealment through pixelating the other's "face" in such images is what will allow the spectator to acknowledge the dead other as a "face" and fulfil their ethical responsibility towards them.

The spectator enters the website of Remai Modern through a section with the title "Web Commission: Thomas Hirschhorn". There is the option to press the name of the artist on the heading, and a window pops up on the left-hand side of the screen in which the title of the work and the artist's statement is revealed as well as the dates of this digital "exhibition" (1-30 September 2016). The main window shows a digital sketch of an asymmetrical, rectangular white background on which two figures lie. All three components – the background and the two figures – are in white, and the shapes are outlined by black lines and have a number within them: 1, 2, and 3 (Fig. 52). On the right-hand side margin of the window there are three lines with three circles each. Every line refers to one of the numbered components of the image, while each column indicates a different visual feature: total white (erasure?), pixelation or colour (Fig. 53). The 21st century spectator, who in order to have accessed this website can be considered as IT-

⁴²¹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 77.

⁴²² Ibid.

literate, understands fairly quickly that they can interact with the three elements of the image, or more precisely the digital collage.

When one decides to reveal all three parts of the collage, there is a dark background with a wooden frame from a sofa bed and a bench with a green velvet cover (Fig. 54). On that bench, which is placed in the centre of the frame, lies a female model posing as in a fashion photo shoot. Parts of the image of the model reveal that the image is based on a physical collage, that has been digitised after the composition. The most problematic part of the collage, which also resonates with Hirschhorn's previous bodies of work, such as the *Touching Reality* (2012) video installation, lies on the right-hand side. That is the figure of a dead man with blooded and dirty underwear and a t-shirt. The man lies on a tarpaulin or piece of black bag. Do I have the right as a spectator to look at him?

To my mind, this key question, although relevant to a lot of Hirschhorn's work as well as his *Pixel-Collage* series, becomes more crucial and conceptually stimulating in this piece. That is because in this piece the spectator has the option to not look at the dead body. One can conceal it instantly after its initial revealing, in order to respect their instinctive fear (Fig. 55). As Theodor Adorno suggested in his seminal text "After Auschwitz", part of *Negative Dialectics* (1966), "[t]he 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, the very part resisted by its ideologists".⁴²³ This idea of "keeping one's distance" as being one of the most human characteristics can be put into action here by choosing one of the two aesthetic modes: total erasure or pixelation. In this point I aim to examine how this induced invisibility of a difficult visual document can be recognised as a way of respecting the dead other.

⁴²³ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2004), 363.

In order for this distinction between the two artworks to be fully perceived, a brief analysis of the *Pixel-Collage* series is a prerequisite (Fig. 51). This body of work follows Hirschhorn's thinking around the responsibility of looking at images of destroyed bodies, which he has examined in nine artworks prior to 2014. As he explained in a 2012 text entitled "Why Is It Important – Today – To Show and Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?",⁴²⁴ for him, showing and looking at dismantled bodies is a contemporary responsibility that he justifies in eight points. First, the "provenance" of these photographs is unknown, a common issue of the majority of images that exist on the Internet. A second parameter is the "redundancy" of such images; nevertheless, many people contest this fact, as they do not want "to accept the redundancy of cruelty toward human being".⁴²⁵ Third is "invisibility", which is also the core notion of this thesis. According to Hirschhorn, such images are not displayed in public, with the justification that they would "hurt" the sensitive spectator, or they will turn the spectatorship into a voyeuristic experience. However, for him to make such photographs visible is the only way "to engage against war and against its justification and propaganda".⁴²⁶ The fourth parameter is to resist "iconism" (already discussed in the first chapter), a practice that excludes some photographs and promotes others as more "acceptable".⁴²⁷ The fifth point concerns the "reduction to facts", a common characteristic of journalism. Yet, Hirschhorn is not interested in facts, but in "truth", which "resists factuality" as such images also do.⁴²⁸ The sixth reason lies in the core of the present analysis. That is to disavow the "victim-syndrome", a kind of classification of dismantled bodies into "victims" and "not-victims", in order to make them "commensurable". However, for Hirschhorn, as we live in "incommensurable worlds", a person that dies cannot be

⁴²⁴ Hirschhorn, "Why Is It Important – Today – To Show And Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?", 98–104.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 99–100.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 100–101.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 101.

equated with a “victim”.⁴²⁹ The last two points are the “irrelevance of quality” and the “distancing through ‘hypersensitivity’”. The first has to do with the quality of these amateur photographs, an insignificant factor for their evaluation. An important idea is that of “witnessing”, which leads to the last parameter of this contemporary responsibility: the need for a distinction between “sensitivity”, which makes the spectator “awake and attentive”, and “hypersensitivity”, which suggests only a “self-enclosure and exclusion” by not looking.⁴³⁰ These eight parameters have provided a framework for the understanding of many of Hirschhorn’s works, and to my mind lie in the background of one’s reading of *Pixel-Collage* too, as in the latter he uses again images of “destroyed bodies”.

Pixel-Collage uses the technique of collage, as the title indicates. That is of great importance for the artist, because, as he explains:

A collage means pasting together at least two existing elements to create something new, a new world, a new image, a new light. Doing this means giving a response - through Form: Form is not just an idea, Form is the core. I want to give Form, and in giving Form I must show what I see, what I understand, what comes from myself without explanation or argumentation.⁴³¹

In terms of form, the series of physical collages have the same structure as *Self-Pixel* which is a digitised version of them. Yet, there are two significant differences. Firstly, they are physical, material collages of a very large scale. The second more important difference is that in the case of *Pixel-Collage*, the spectator has to encounter images in which the usually glossy fashion image is pixelated while the dead body is visible (Fig. 51). In this case, the spectatorship tests the

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 102.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 103–104.

⁴³¹ “Press Release: Thomas Hirschhorn: DE-PIXELATION”, Gladstone Gallery, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.gladstonegallery.com/exhibition/283/de-pixelation/info>.

emotional limits of the visitor, though without allowing them to establish an ethical relation with the sufferer or dead other through an actual emancipatory spectatorship.

Regarding his *Pixel-Collage*, Hirschhorn claims that, “I want, I can, I need and I must use my own eyes to see everything in our world, as act of emancipation”, while he goes on to suggest that contemporary world has been “de-emancipated” through pixelation: “[w]hat interests me is that pixelating – as an aesthetic – meets the demand for authority, for protection, for de-responsibilisation and for de-emancipation”.⁴³² This idea of emancipation cannot fail to bring to mind Jacques Ranciere’s term regarding the “emancipated spectator”.⁴³³ According to Ranciere,

[e]mancipation starts from the opposite principle, the principle of equality. It begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection.⁴³⁴

With “de-pixelation”, Hirschhorn tries to create a context in which the spectator will have an emancipatory experience; namely, to be activated and not just look. That is because pixelation is recognised in this context as a type of censorship, which is performing certain power relations and therefore perpetuates invisible structures of violence. But as Ellen Mara De Wachter rightly suggested sometimes to make something visible “can also be an act of violence”. In her opinion, what is rather problematic in this case is not only the fact that the spectator might see something that they do not want to see, but also the fact that there is not always consent from the photographed subject, hence their privacy is being jeopardised.⁴³⁵ I believe that this is a valid point, especially if one considers the fact that most of the photographed others are dead, hence unable to give their consent. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the images were

⁴³² “Press Release: Thomas Hirschhorn”.

⁴³³ Jacques Ranciere, “The Emancipated Spectator. (Speech)”, *Artforum International* 45, no 7 (March 2007), *Shakespeare Collection*, Gale Document Number: A160874380.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ellen Mara De Wachter (Oral Presentation), *Visible Justice* Symposium, Saturday 27 Oct. 2018, London College of Communication, <https://www.visible-justice.org/oct-2018>.

found on the Web by the artist and appropriated, which means a double infringement of their privacy.⁴³⁶

To my mind, this “emancipatory experience” is created only in *Self-Pixel*. And that is because it gives to the spectator the choice to decide, by clicking one of the options, how to view the dead body; or, in other words, to bear the responsibility of not looking for the sake of the recognition of the other’s “face”, as will be shown later through a Levinasian lens. In these terms, the analysis will create a reading of the issues that emerge from Hirschhorn’s need to “de-pixelate”. Ultimately, what will be examined is how this need can and should be reversed in *Self-Pixel*, which can be recognised as an ethical exercise in free will: a free will to not look for the other’s sake. However, before delving into these parameters in relation to Hirschhorn’s work, I will start with the exploration of the actual visual issue that is at stake here: namely pixelation.

An interesting tension between theory and the everyday world can be observed. The most contemporary discourse on issues of ethics and photographic representations of atrocities highlights the importance of producing and viewing photographs from violent events.⁴³⁷ This importance lies on a level of ethical obligation towards the sufferer others and the responsibility towards History: we have the responsibility to know. As Sharon Sliwinski argues, “[i]n 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”.⁴³⁸ This thought can be linked with the idea that witnessing can have a political and humanitarian impact, but most importantly, with the use of

⁴³⁶ Hirschhorn has explained that, for all the previous artworks with “destroyed bodies” that he has produced, he found the images online. For more see Mediapart, “Thomas Hirschhorn, Insoutenables Destructures du Corps”, 29 July 2012, Dailymotion video, 11:26, accessed 18 Oct. 2020, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xshfl0>.

⁴³⁷ Indicative examples of this direction are: Azoulay, *Civil Contract*; Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*; Batchen, et.al., *Picturing Atrocity*.

⁴³⁸ Sharon Sliwinski, “A Painful Labour: Responsibility and Photography”, *Visual Studies* 19, no. 2 (2004): 152, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1080/1472586042000301656>.

photography, it can be a document of human rights abuses.⁴³⁹ A contemporary example of this link can be found in the mobile application *eyeWitness (to Atrocities)*, which allows users to record audio, film or photographs. The key feature of the app is the ability “to authenticate and securely store footage of gross human rights abuses, while maintaining the anonymity of the user”.⁴⁴⁰ Such technological progress, while moving away from the visual consumption of horrific images, underlies the political significance of witnessing and documenting human rights violations.⁴⁴¹ As Fred Ritchin explains,

[d]igital-image capture is being used to subvert and transform power balances in the producer/viewer/subject triad, and to examine issues in ways that were previously impossible to accomplish, using a combination of sources – imagery by people holding cameras is only one of them.⁴⁴²

However, in reality, there is an instinctive human tendency of the spectator to cover their eyes in front of a difficult visual representation of someone’s physical or mental anguish, as well as a cultural norm of censorship or visual protection regarding the viewing of photographs of extreme and graphic violence. Regarding the personal tendency, Mark Ledbetter eloquently wonders:

Who taught us to cover our eyes? As children we looked at everything. Then we learned to put a hand over our eyes and peek out. Finally, we learned to cover our eyes; visibly to choose in the eyes of others not to see; that is, can you see that I am not seeing. The sad irony, if not the pernicious fact, is that as adults we choose to look and not see with our eyes open. Perhaps we need a child’s naiveté and courage to see all things again.⁴⁴³

⁴³⁹ This link between photography and human rights is examined by Linfield in the text “Photojournalism and Human Rights: The Calamity of the Kodak”, in *Cruel Radiancy*, 32–62.

⁴⁴⁰ “What we do”, *eyeWitness*, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.eyewitness.global/our-work>.

⁴⁴¹ In a very different context and with opposite aesthetic means, Thomas Hirschhorn aimed to bridge in a series of works the significance of amateur witness photographic documents of horrific events and the nonexistence of those in the public visual sphere. Such artworks were the *Superficial Engagement* (2006), *Concretion* (2006), *The Incommensurable Banner* (2008), *Ur-Collage* (2008), *Crystal of Resistance* (2011), *Touching Reality* (2012) and *Collage- Truth* (2012).

⁴⁴² Ritchin, *Bending the Frame*, 118.

⁴⁴³ Mark Ledbetter, “Do Not Look At Y/Our Own Peril”, in *Ethics and Images of Pain*, ed. Asbjørn Grønstad and Henrik Gustafsson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

Yet, in terms of cultural norms of censorship in the digital sphere, pixelation is one of the best established modes of concealment. Pixelation is the partial concealment for ethical purposes or censorship. The characterisation as the one or the other depends on the intentions of the person that operates the visual editing.⁴⁴⁴ An interesting example, which in this context can function as a contemplation on being visible or invisible especially in relation to surveillance techniques, is the video *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013) by Hito Steyerl (Fig. 56).⁴⁴⁵ This video captures different performative gestures performed by the artist in a humorous manner combined with documentary footage (e.g., from images of the earth), while the spectator listens to a male and a female computer generated voiceover that gives instructions. The video is structured around five lessons on how not to be seen, while many of the lessons evolve around the materiality of the pixels as part of the digital. Yet, what is more interesting is Steyerl's comment about this work that "people might want to escape from this inordinate amount of constant surveillance; on the other hand, being invisible can be deadly".⁴⁴⁶ This statement, although simple, indicates the different functions that visibility and invisibility can have on a political level. This chapter examines in a very specific light how invisibility in the specific context of viewing atrocity images, and especially images of dead people, can have a positive impact on one's ethical understanding. In other words, I do not deny that invisibility can have a very negative impact in other contexts, as for example the use of visual material for legal cases or human right cases.

⁴⁴⁴ "Pixelization by private actors like news agencies stands in complex and sometimes contradictory relation to state practices of censorship, confounding the seemingly stable opposition between censorship and transparency", explains Adelman regarding issues of pixelating images in the context of the War on Terror. Adelman, "Pixelizing atrocity", 29.

⁴⁴⁵ To watch the video, see "Hito Steyerl, *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*, 2013", Artforum, Video, 15:52, accessed 12 Oct. 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/video/hito-steyerl-how-not-to-be-seen-a-fucking-didactic-educational-mov-file-2013-51651>.

⁴⁴⁶ Tate, "Hito Steyerl – 'Being Invisible Can Be Deadly': TateShots", 17 May 2016, YouTube video, at 00:14, accessed 12 Oct. 2020, https://youtu.be/kKAKgrZZ_wv.

In technical terms, pixelation is related to digital photography as a medium. A pixel is a tiny compartment of a digital image, which comprises millions of pixels. Hence, pixelation is the concealment of an image with rectangular monochromatic parts that follow the main colours that appear in each part of a photograph, creating a mosaic. Interestingly enough, on that note, Fred Ritchin claims that,

[i]f “the medium is the message,” as Marshall McLuhan famously argued, then digital media are preparing us for a considerably more profound revolution in consciousness than would be indicated by thinking of pixelated photography as simply a more efficient version of the analog medium.⁴⁴⁷

Yet, what is the “revolution in consciousness” that we could or should trace in pixelation? To my mind, pixelation, while it can be considered as a contemporary problem that is linked with censorship, can also be visual manifestation that can make us think of the troubling aspects of seeing the suffering and death of others. In an analysis of Levinas’ “face” and Butler’s reading of it, Roy Brand and Amit Pinchevski suggest that,

according to Butler, for representation to carry and convey the ethical mark of the face, it must somehow undo itself, not simply by failing to capture its referent but by performing that failure. Put differently, for the face to appear as what exceeds any representation, it must somehow display how it destroys its representation.⁴⁴⁸

Brand and Pinchevski call the visual manner that Butler seeks a “performative iconoclasm”.⁴⁴⁹ To my mind, if there is to be traced a “revolution of consciousness”, in Ritchin’s terms, to the practice of pixelation then this is through an understanding of the latter as “performative iconoclasm”. That means that pixelation can be seen as a way to make the spectator rethink that

⁴⁴⁷ Ritchin, *Bending the Frame*, 115.

⁴⁴⁸ Roy Brand and Amit Pinchevski, “Facing the Image: Towards an Ethics of Seeing”, in *Ethics of Media*, ed. Nick Couldry, Mirca Madianou, and Amit Pinchevski (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 108.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 107–108.

which has been rendered invisible to their eyes; and hence, rethink the other. That lies to the contrary of pixelation's function as censorship, as the introduction of this chapter showed.

As already mentioned, in Summer 2017, Hirschhorn wrote a text with the nine reasons why he questions pixelation as a way that can assist him to rethink abstraction today and the "aesthetics of facelessness", and how "pixelation" takes the place of the face. In this sense, he aims to highlight the importance of "de-pixelating" the world.⁴⁵⁰ The first aspect for Hirschhorn is "decision", by which he means that pixelation is a "political decision". The second is "authority", which he recognises as what "motivates pixelation". For this reason, he states that, "[t]oday, more than ever, I need to see everything with my own eyes in our one world, and no one can tell me what my eyes should see or not". To my mind, with this statement, he makes a call for the importance of free will in relation to visual culture consumption. As a third reason, Hirschhorn proposes "abstraction", because he thinks of pixelation as a form of abstraction that can engage us in the contemporary complex world. According to him,

[p]ixels in their abstraction build up a new form, opening towards a dynamic and DESIRE OF TRUTH. The political thinking is the BELIEF in truth – truth not as a verification of facts – truth as a form, a form as such, truth as an ASSERTION, truth as RESISTANCE, truth as abstraction. (sic.)⁴⁵¹

The link between abstraction and truth is a key point in a post-truth era. Nowadays everything tends to be abstracted to generic notions, while at the same time citizens – at least in Western societies – have access to an enormous amount of information which could be thought as able to help one reach truth.

The fourth reason why Hirschhorn is interested to pixelation is "facelessness", which in the context of this chapter has a direct resonance. He is interested in "facelessness" as an

⁴⁵⁰ Hirschhorn, "DE-PIXELATION".

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

“aesthetic” form which finds “its formal embodiment through pixelation”. To my mind, the word “face” is used in a different manner from Hirschhorn, although linked to both manners of its conception by Levinas: visual and “address”.⁴⁵² Yet, I believe that “facelessness” in Hirschhorn’s understanding is to be perceived as related to dehumanisation of the other that is usually pixelated.

The fifth reason is what the artist calls “pushed to the edges”. In this case, for him, through pixelation one is asked to look “away from the central focus to find information or indications of what has been concealed”.⁴⁵³ In other words, when something is obscured, the spectator, who to my mind is probably driven by curiosity, employs their research skills for the reading of the visual; a reading that is triggered by an emotion and accomplished by rationality. The sixth reason to undertake work on pixelation is “aesthetics”, which in Hirschhorn’s understanding can be traced firstly in the “opposition between beauty of the pixelated part and the nonpixelated part”, and secondly in “the nonsystemic logic of pixelation”.⁴⁵⁴ Of course, this statement can be considered very provocative, especially when one brings to mind the literature on the aestheticisation of suffering, which has already been discussed in the introduction.

I think that one of the most interesting points that Hirschhorn makes is the seventh, with which this analysis started and in which he suggests that:

7. THE WORST IS CENSORED: I am interested in pixelation because what is pixelated is considered as the worst. The worst is not shown, the worst is censored. Pixelation is used as a MORALISTIC arbitration between what to see and what is too IMPROPER to look at. Nothing is UNSHOWABLE. What cannot be shown is what has no form.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵² Brand and Pinchevski, “Facing the Image”, 109–112.

⁴⁵³ Hirschhorn, “DE-PIXELATION”.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

In his *Pixel-Collage*, Hirschhorn formally reversed the belief that the pixelated is always the worse part by exposing the dismantled bodies. “Nothing is unshowable. What cannot be shown is what has no form”. And maybe Hirschhorn is correct on that – everything that has a form can be shown. Yet should it be shown and seen? That is a worrying parameter, that in my view he does not problematise for the sake of highlighting the troubling aspects of censorship.

The last two parameters are “hypocrisy” and “authenticity”. The first is referring to the “one using it”, because as Hirschhorn claims, “I don’t accept pixelation in my place ‘to protect me’, when the one pixelating claims the opposite, and is in fact protecting himself”.⁴⁵⁶ This is a useful statement, which returns attention to the ethical purpose of pixelation’s existence. The final reason why Hirschhorn is interested in pixelation is “authenticity”, which he believes has been substituted by pixelation exactly because anything pixelated is perceived as “more authentic”. In these terms he suggests that “pixels”: “stand for authentication: authentication through authority”.⁴⁵⁷

I believe that through his statement Hirschhorn touches many crucial aspects of contemporary systems of visual censorship. However, he speaks for the spectator as the recipient of an action, without considering that they ought to have an ethical recognition of the image of the dead. Although “de-pixelation”, as an aesthetic mode, aims to provide full visibility and break (invisible) power relations, as it is treated by the artist, it does not provide any consideration of the ethics of the “de-pixelated” image. In these terms, I propose that in *Self-Pixel* one should perceive the act of clicking the pixelation button as a manifestation of the responsibility towards the dead other.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

Yet, how is one to understand the ethical responsibility of not looking for the other's sake in this paradoxical context provided by Hirschhorn's claims against "pixelation" and especially while bearing in mind that culturally one is brought up with the dictum "seeing is knowing"? In the essay "Violence", Simone Weil writes:

War. To keep the love of life intact within us; never to inflict death without accepting it for ourselves.

Supposing the life of X ...were linked with our own so that the two deaths had to be simultaneous, should we still wish him to die? If with our whole body and soul we desire life and if nevertheless without lying, we can reply "yes", then we have the right to kill.⁴⁵⁸

If one adapts this passage to a level of visual ethics, this can instantly be recognised as a call for empathetic exercise: if you would be willing to be photographically captured on your death, no matter how violent it will be, then you can capture the deaths of others too. This analogy probably sounds very simplistic, but it reiterates the unstable ground on which the right and responsibility to see or not see is based. And that is something that *Self-Pixel* reminds the spectator of, even just with reference to its title.

Self-Pixel returns the question of the right to show and to see to one's self. "'Self-Pixel' means acting with your own eyes", writes Hirschhorn in his statement.⁴⁵⁹ This way of "acting", though, requires understanding of how a free will to pixelate might operate in this context and how that could be connected with bearing the responsibility of the "face". As Hagi Kenaan explains,

[a]ccording to Levinas, the face is testimony to the Other's absolute alterity, a transcendent alterity that establishes, beyond any perception, the moral imperative. As such, the face does not essentially belong to the visual. Indeed, Levinas claims that the face is not at all a visual phenomenon, a claim not easily reconcilable with its obvious visibility.⁴⁶⁰

⁴⁵⁸ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 78.

⁴⁵⁹ "Web commission: Thomas Hirschhorn *Self-Pixel*", Remail Modern.

⁴⁶⁰ Kenaan, *Ethics of Visuality*, 10.

I think that Levinas' scepticism towards representations and the visual manifestation of the "face" is very fruitful ground that allows us to examine how in intentional invisibility (through the act of pixelating in *Self-Pixel*) can be found a useful space which allows the recognition of the "face" of the photographed sufferer or dead person. For Levinas, artistic representations are problematic in the relation that they produce with truth.⁴⁶¹ In photography, the indexical relationship with the photographed subject or object alleviates this troubling aspect. Yet, the "face" is not only visual.⁴⁶² Despite Levinas arguing that "ethics is optics", as Keenan suggests,⁴⁶³ throughout his reading of the "face" he suggests that it manifests itself through the use of language and speech, as will be discussed afterwards in relation to David Birkin's *Pietà*.⁴⁶⁴ As Levinas explains, "[t]he image neutralizes this real relationship, this primary conceiving through action";⁴⁶⁵ or, as he says elsewhere:

[n]ow, in the image, thought reaches the face of the other reduced to its plastic forms, exalted, fascinating, and proceeding from an exacerbated imagination though they may be. Though they may be a work of art!⁴⁶⁶

In this sense, every photograph is bound by its very representational nature to limit the apprehension of the other to a superficial level. Hence, the ethical relationship between the "I" and the other through the "face-to-face" encounter will always fail in the spectatorship of any photographic image. So, the question is where does that leave us when the photographed other is a person in a state of anguish, pain, suffering or even death (which for Levinas, as will be shown, is different from any other state of "Being"). A visual document of violence, or more briefly an atrocity image, by its very creation demands a response from the spectator. And although many

⁴⁶¹ Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 132.

⁴⁶² For an analysis of the "face" both in visual and non-visual terms, see Kenaan, *Ethics of Visuality*; Brand and Pinchevski, "Facing the Image", 109–115.

⁴⁶³ Kenaan, *Ethics of Visuality*, 31.

⁴⁶⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 66.

⁴⁶⁵ Levinas, *Levinas Reader*, 132.

⁴⁶⁶ Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 123.

decades of scholarly debates have highlighted that the viewing of an image cannot reverse the actual event it captures, the bare minimum that it demands from the spectator is an ethical response.

But if the image is bound to its representational state, then the spectator is left with the impossibility of having an ethical encounter with the other's "face". At this point, intentional artistic invisibility, as seen in the case of *Self-Pixel*, provides a solution to the problem at hand. As the artworks that will be analysed in this chapter highlight, invisibility can be seen as the aid that allows the contemporary visually literate spectator to apprehend the "face". But how should this positive connotation of invisibility be understood in relation to pixelation?

In a text on verbal and written censorship, where the latter can be understood as a manifestation of power, Butler suggests,

[i]f power is understood in juridical terms, it limits and constrains the object on which it operates; if power is, however, also productive, then it contributes to making the object that it also constrains. Although somewhat paradoxical, this view maintains its own kind of sense: the power that acts of an object also constructs it in and through the operation of that constraint. The relevance of this notion of making or constitution for the question of censorship becomes clear when we realize that the subject who is censored as well as the subject who censors are constituted in part by a restrictive and productive power. This paradoxical process of constitution is occluded by the conventional view of censorship which restricts the agency of its operation to an imposition performed by a pregiven subject on another pregiven subject.⁴⁶⁷

If one reads this passage in the context of pixelation and especially of *Self-Pixel*, there is opened an interesting, although "paradoxical", understanding of this kind of digital censorship. In its visual manifestation in *Self-Pixel*, that stresses its aesthetic function, pixelation can assist in the formulation of a more conscious spectator: "the subject who censors". Pixelation in this case

⁴⁶⁷ Judith Butler, "Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor", in *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation*, ed. Robert C. Post (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1998), 247.

ought to be understood as having the kind of “restrictive and productive power” that Butler describes above. Yet, in the case of this artwork, the pixelation has “productive power” in terms of formulating a spectator who will bear the responsibility of the other before their desire of looking. In these terms, the spectator will take the ethical responsibility for the “face”, the dead man, explicitly by choosing not to see it. As Sliwinski explains,

the Latin route of 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.⁴⁶⁸

In the case of *Self-Pixel* one can consciously choose to not look at the collage, or at least to not look at the dead body of the man (Fig. 55). This can be seen as a “response”, an ethical response, towards the concealment of the other. In order for this concealment to take place, the spectator needs to either have seen previous works by Hirschhorn, so to be aware of the incorporation of dismantled bodies in his work, or to have read about this specific digital piece. Otherwise, the spectator will be prey to their curiosity or ignorance and will eventually expose the dead other.

However, an important question that needs to be asked is whether a dead person can be conceived as a “face” in Levinas’ perception. As he suggests, “[t]he object that I encounter is understood and, on the whole, constructed by me, even though death announces an event over which the subject is not master, an event in relation to which the subject is no longer a subject”.⁴⁶⁹ For Levinas, as already mentioned, the “face” is manifested through speech. Therefore, the claim that a dead person is not a “subject” anymore does not come as a surprise. Yet, what needs to be considered is that either way this whole analysis is based on a representational level, where the

⁴⁶⁸ Sliwinski, “A Painful Labour”, 150.

⁴⁶⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 70.

“face-to-face” cannot take place. This will be further explored in the analysis of Barakeh’s work subsequently.

A visual component of *Self-Pixel* that has remained unexamined so far is the existence of the body of the woman in the collage. To my mind, the appropriation of this photograph is far less problematic than that of the dead body, as a fashion photo shoot is a commercial practice based on the participation and hence consent from the side of the model. However, what is the responsibility of the spectator towards this part of the image, that “face”? At this point, I want to suggest that the photograph of the model cannot be recognised as a “face”, as the dead man. That can be linked with the fact that is a fictitious visual construction, and hence should be recognised as a “representation”, while the image of the dead other is a real event – even though it is captured in a photograph that is always a construction. Levinas, in his commonly suspicious attitude towards visuality, suggests that,

[r]epresentation comes down to a thinking of this or that, to an intentionality, a thematization of what puts itself forward or gives itself in presence or representation, of what lets itself be designated – ultimately or immediately – by a demonstrative, and in a word concretely, with the index finger. Thus, a thought thinking the thing prevails. The latter is not a real part of that thought, but, in presence, it is given to that thought.⁴⁷⁰

Of course, it should be recognised that if *Self-Pixel* were not a collage it would have then created a completely different set of ethical questions, also for the model. In a dystopic world, if the female model had been asked to pose next to a fictionally dead person, then she would also have been a “face” towards whom the spectator would have had an ethical responsibility, and whom they could have chosen to potentially conceal. But in this case, there are two levels that take the body of this female model to a purely representational level – a “representation” – while the man

⁴⁷⁰ Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 123.

whose image is an amateur documentary photograph is a “face”: firstly, the commercial aspect of the fashion photography as something fully staged; secondly, and maybe most importantly, the homage that Hirschhorn seems to pay to two previous bodies of work made by Martha Rosler, which takes this part of the visible to an art historical realm of secondary references.⁴⁷¹ The question that remains open regarding *Self-Pixel* is how pixelation for ethical purposes can function in a different manner from blanking out in this context. This will be further conceptualised in the following section, through a comparative reading with a work by belit sağ.

⁴⁷¹ Here I refer to Martha Rosler’s two series of collages entitled *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967-1972) and *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series* (2004-2008), which were created as responses to the Vietnam and Iraq Wars respectively. For more see “Photographs and Photomontages”, Martha Rosler, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://www.martharosler.net/photo>.

2.2 The Pixelated “Face” and a Digital Burial: belit sağ’s *what remains* / *geriye kalanlar* (2018)⁴⁷²

In 2018, the Turkish and Amsterdam-based artist belit sağ created *what remains* / *geriye kalanlar*, which consists of a seven-minute video (video essay) and three printed textiles.⁴⁷³ This piece was part of the exhibition *belit sağ: the image unseen, the image invisible, the image not shown* at PEER, London (14 November 2018–26 January 2019) (Fig. 57).⁴⁷⁴ In the video, the artist used footage and images that she created in Cizre, a town on the Turkish-Syrian border she visited in 2015, as well as a post-mortem photograph found in an online archive.⁴⁷⁵ Apart from the video, *what remains* is also comprised by three printed textiles, which in the exhibition at PEER were displayed in the same space. Two of them consist of big pixels, which hide existing photographs. On top of the images, a phrase appears with white letters, which in two of the cases (ii. and iii.) are quotes. These read:

- i. “şiddeti nasıl anlatmalı... hangi imajlarıyla?” [English translation: How to tell about a case of violence... with which images?] (Fig. 58)
- ii. “video, imajları onları verenlere iade edebilme sanatıdır” [English translation: Video is the art of giving the images back to the ones who gave them to us]⁴⁷⁶ (Fig. 59)
- iii. “cinema is the art of allowing ghosts to come back” (Fig. 60)

⁴⁷² A different, earlier version of this subchapter has been published as an article. For more see Kyveli Lignou-Tsamantani, “Contemplating Pixels and Death: belit sağ’s *what remains* / *geriye kalanlar* (2019)”, in *RESOLUTION magazine #0: The Pixel*, edited by Laurens Otto (Oct. 2019): 17–23.

⁴⁷³ The video can be seen here belit, “*what remains* / *geriye kalanlar*”, 6 Nov. 2018, Vimeo video, 07:05, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://vimeo.com/299253924>.

⁴⁷⁴ “belit sağ. the image unseen, the image invisible, the image not shown.”, PEER, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.peeruk.org/archive#/belit-sag>.

⁴⁷⁵ The artist found the post-mortem image of the child here: Thanatos Archive: Early Post-Mortem & Mourning Photography (website), accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://thanatos.net>. This information was provided by sağ via email correspondence on 5 March 2019.

⁴⁷⁶ Translations provided by sağ via email correspondence on 28 Feb. 2019.

The first phrase is imposed on a cropped photograph, which allows the spectator to see only the lower part of the image; namely seven female figures sitting on the floor holding in front of them portraits. The same frame appears fully in the video as a moving image.⁴⁷⁷ The portraits belong to people who had violent deaths in Cizre. Although this fact is not stated in the exhibition texts, the choice to display *what remains* in the same exhibition room as an earlier video by the artist, entitled *Sept – Oct 2015, Cizre* (2015), allows the spectator to make this connection.⁴⁷⁸ Via the latter work, due to its socio-political and temporal specificity which comes across even from the title, the spectator is able to contextualise the *what remains* project.

The video of *what remains* provides a different type of collage from the one discussed previously with Hirschhorn. It is a digital collage of still and moving images, which become a coherent whole through the use of the voice-over. The idea of the collage, as used here and by Hirschhorn in the aforementioned works, can allow one to further problematise partial censorship or content moderation in visual terms. This recalls Lisa Oppenheim's words that,

[collage] disrupts the assumption of photography's indexical relationship to a thing or things in the world, because the collaged image is an image marked by rupture. These ruptures or breaks in the narrative or visual peace open up questions beyond the representational capacity of photography and point to the instability and mechanisms of how images are viewed, produced, and received.⁴⁷⁹

Artistic use of partial censorship, this visual "rupture", as seen in the case studies of this chapter, allows the spectator to problematise how they have been accustomed to look or not at images of death and suffering. sağ's video lends itself to such an analysis, as many parts of the video are

⁴⁷⁷ belit, "what remains", Vimeo, at 05:46.

⁴⁷⁸ For more, see "Sept. – Oct. 2015, Cizre", bit.contrast.org, accessed 27 Feb. 2019, http://bit.contrast.org/?page_id=3187

⁴⁷⁹ Florence Derieux, Krist Gruijthuijsen and Bettina Steinbrügge, ed., *Lisa Oppenheim: Works 2003-2013* (Berlin: Sternberg; Reima: FRAC Champagne-Ardenne; Graz: Grazer Kunstverein; Hamburg: Kunstverein in Hamburg, 2014), 54.

either blurred or pixelated (Fig. 61). The spectator can hear the voice of the artist speaking in Turkish, while they read the English translation in subtitles.

The video starts with a graveyard, which is being filmed from behind a fenced wall, highlighting how “Turkey is locked into territorial violence, wrought by ethnic division”, as George Vasey explains.⁴⁸⁰ Of course, this work has a significant socio-political specificity, like Barakeh’s which will also be analysed in the next section. However, here the analysis will focus on what it means to pixelate a dead body, and the potential link with post-mortem imagery. Do these two visual modes bear any similarities regarding how another is perceived as a “face” in Levinas’ terms? These questions will be examined also in relation to the pixelated body in Hirschhorn’s work.

In one part of sağ’s video, the pixelated part of the image has been reduced in size and a black and white photograph of a dead, very young child appears. This found image is placed in a golden frame and follows the aesthetic characteristics of post-mortem photography (Fig. 62). It is not a shocking image, but a visual memento of one’s lost existence. “The dead leave their image and leave this world. The living take that image and continue living”, says the voice.⁴⁸¹ Post-mortem photography started almost simultaneously with the invention of photography. As Felix Hoffmann and Friedrich Tietjen explain in the introductory exhibition essay for *The Last Image: Photography and Death*,

[s]ince its very early days in the first half of the nineteenth century, photography was a central medium that accompanied changing ways of dealing with death from around 1800. [...] And in the nineteenth century in particular, if a person had not been photographed while alive, he would very likely be photographed after death, albeit not discernibly as a corpse.

⁴⁸⁰ George Vasey, “Profile: belit sağ”, *Art Monthly* 423 (February 2019): 22–23, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, http://bit.contrast.org/?page_id=5277.

⁴⁸¹ belit, “what remains”, Vimeo, at 03:08.

Instead, the body was typically prepared so that the individual appeared to be asleep in the photograph.⁴⁸²

Hence, post-mortem photography was a respectful mode of commemoration. Yet, what is the case when a death is violent, and thus the image that is created could be described as an atrocity image? To my mind, saĝ's *what remains* allows one to rethink this distinction between post-mortem photography and atrocity images by highlighting the use of pixelation in our contemporary world. What do we see and why? And maybe most importantly, should one look or not to look at an atrocity image? This final question was already tackled in the context of the refusal to look at the dead man in *Self-Pixel*. In my opinion, post-mortem photography, due to its very specific aesthetic construction, allows the spectator to have a "face-to-face" relation with the dead. That is because the context of creation is guided by the people who could have been the mourner, as the analysis of the next two case studies will show; whereas, in atrocity images, when the dead other is exposed in their gruesome death, they do not allow the spectator to perceive them as a Levinasian "face". Therefore, the invisibility is needed for the recognition of the alterity from the spectator. As Chapter 3 will highlight, this has to do also with negative emotions, and how people react in different ways to different levels of graphic representations. In a way, these different modes of partial censorship, or modes to moderate visual content, can allow one to have a positive sense of detachment from the other which creates the needed distance to think with the dead other, instead of them.

"Grains / pixels / grounds / sounds / nonexistent graves", says saĝ's voice-over in the video, while pixelated parts appear on the screen (Fig. 63).⁴⁸³ After that a pixelated grid can be

⁴⁸² Felix Hoffmann and Friedrich Tietjen, "The Last Image: Photography and Death. An Introduction", in *Das Letzte Bild: Fotografie und Tod*, ed. F. Hoffmann and F. Tietjen, Exhibition Catalogue from C/O Berlin (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2018), 19. For more on death and photography, Geoffrey Batchen, *Suspending Time: Life—Photography—Death* (Shizuoka: Izu Photo Museum, 2010); Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion, 2011).

⁴⁸³ belit, "what remains", Vimeo, at 02:13.

seen at the lower part of the frame. It is a rectangular shape of flickering pixels (Fig. 64). As the artist has explained, this pixelated rectangular shape is reminiscent of the dead body of a female guerilla Kevser Eltürk (Ekin Wan), whose image – that had the characteristics of trophy-photograph – was circulated everywhere in the Turkish media.⁴⁸⁴ This rectangular shape, apart from bringing to mind the shape of a dead body, can also be linked with the shape of a coffin. A coffin that hosts the dead body in its final destination. For saĝ this pixelated box is a way to “dignify” the woman.⁴⁸⁵ That is the ultimate respect for the dead in many traditions, and it is something that saĝ refers to in the video when she quotes:

In Latin the word *humanitas*, which means human, comes from the root *humando*, which means to bury. Humans are beings that bury their dead.

The word *mirin* and *mirov* in the Kurdish dialect *Kurmanci*, and the words *merde* and *merdim/mordem* in the Kurdish dialect *Dimilki* are, possibly, etymologically and semantically similarly linked.⁴⁸⁶

Therefore, on a metaphorical level, by concealing the violated dead body with pixels, one is just performing their human identity. In this sense, pixelation in this artistic context can be performed as an alleviation of the violation of looking at someone’s dead body in an atrocity image, and at the same time as a way of burying the dead. This is something that could bring one back to *Self-Pixel*. There, the demand on the spectator to refuse to look, and the induced invisibility of the dead that should be performed through the covering of the image of the body, can also be understood metaphorically in ancient terms of the moral demand of burying the dead. The

⁴⁸⁴ York Ideas, “Off Limits? Art, social media and censorship”, 9 June 2020, YouTube video, at 30:32, accessed 15 Nov. 2020, <https://youtu.be/2dJxUwl8dKA>; For more information on the image of the woman see John Hall, “Naked and bloodied corpse of a female Kurdish militant killed by Turkey’s special forces is leaked online, sparking fury among activists”, *Mail Online*, 18 Aug. 2015, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3202317/Kurdish-activists-condemn-Turkish-police-naked-bloodied-corpse-female-militant-killed-country-s-special-forces-leaked-online.html>.

⁴⁸⁵ York Ideas, “Off Limits?”, at 31:12.

⁴⁸⁶ belit, “what remains”, Vimeo, at 01:28.

rationale of this obligation can be linked with a fulfilment of Antigone's claim. In the ancient tragedy *Antigone* (c. 441 B.C.), she says,

Him I will bury. Death, so met, were honour;
 And for that capital crime of piety,
 Loving and loved, I will lie by his side.
 Far longer is there need I satisfy
 Those nether Powers, than powers on earth; for there
 For ever must I lie. You, if you will,
 Hold up what is approved of Heaven!⁴⁸⁷

In this passage, through the voice of this tragedy's main character, Sophocles underlines how great a moral offence it is not to bury a dead person. Of course, in this socio-political context, the offence was against the rule of the God ("Heaven!"). Yet, nowadays, the laws regarding the burial of the dead are not much different. According to the English legal system, "[i]t is an indictable offence at common law to prevent the lawful and decent burial of a dead body".⁴⁸⁸ More precisely: "[t]he offence is not limited to disposing of a dead body in order to conceal the aftermath of the commission of an offence or in the aftermath of misadventure; it can cover disposing of a body for other reasons without observing the correct formalities".⁴⁸⁹

Both sağ, by leaving only the pixelated shape of the body in the video of *what remains*, and the spectator of *Self-Pixel*, by obscuring the body of the dead man, perform Antigone's claim. They are transformed on what Azoulay calls the "bearer of the grievance",

[t]his grievance is not that of the photographed person, but of the photographed scene of event: the dispossession of citizenship, which the photographic act has posited itself against, in the manner of Antigone

⁴⁸⁷ Sophocles, *Antigone* (New York: Dover, 1993), 3.

⁴⁸⁸ *Halsbury's Laws of England (5th Edition)*, s.v. "Unlawful disposal of a dead body", Criminal Law Volume 26 (2020), paras 999, accessed 15 Nov. 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Hogy10>.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Footnote 1.

demanding that society allow the dead to be covered, and it has recognised as deserving such a minimum of respect.⁴⁹⁰

Yet, an interesting question is whether the choice to pixelate or to totally blank out and thus erase the figure of the dead body has any semantical difference. Totally blanking out through a cut-out, as a mode of partial censorship, is used in *Untitled Images* (2014) by Khaled Barakeh, which will be discussed afterwards. These semantical differences emerge from the aesthetic mode in which the partial censorship has been performed: Does it highlight the existence of the other? Does it allow one to think further about what they look at and if they have the right to look at it? To my mind, the artworks discussed in this chapter allow one to explore and further problematise their position as spectators, while they provide the context for the understanding of the other as a Levinasian “face”.

This argument could be further understood from the comparative analysis of another work that creates a complete erasure, which does not have the same effect on the spectatorship: *Erased Lynching Series* (2006–present), by Ken Gonzales-Day (Fig. 65). He claims, “[b]y erasing the victim’s bodies, I sought to create a visual experience that would force the viewer to focus on the crowd and in doing so, to address the underlying racism and bias that was foundational to these acts of collective violence, which have increasingly come to be seen as central to understanding of race and difference in America”.⁴⁹¹ This work has a different end goal, which is to highlight issues of race in the US, and especially in California. And if one is to focus only on the element of how the other’s death and suffering has historically been treated as a spectacle, the work is indeed successful. Yet, the very problematic element of this work is the total absence of the other

⁴⁹⁰ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 121.

⁴⁹¹ “Erased Lynchings”, Ken Gonzales-Day, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://kengonzalesday.com/projects/erased-lynchings/>. For an analysis on this work, see Reilley Bishop-Stall, “Double Exposure: Absence and Evidence in Ken Gonzales-Day’s *Erased Lynching*”, in *Museums and Photography: Displaying Death*, ed. Elena Stylianou and Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert (New York: Routledge, 2018), 257-276.

and the means that were used to kill him, namely the rope. If the latter had remained visible, one would be guided to imagine the dead other, and read them as an other that demands an ethical acknowledgment in their encounter with the spectator.

“How to tell about a case of violence... with which images?”, asks one of the textiles of *what remains*. This quote could bring the focus back to pixelation in relation to a violent death. So, what images, and/or visual modes, should one use to represent and comment on violent events? Relevant to this is the artist’s explanation of the video *Sept.-Oct. 2015, Cizre*, in which she used images taken by people with their mobile phones. In this case, she included everything that the locals showed her, apart from two images which were of extreme violence. The first was of “the leg of a child” after it was mutilated by an explosion, and the second was a photo of “an open fridge” that had “something inside”, which she “knew that it was the body of a nine-year-old girl killed by Turkish forces”.⁴⁹² The family of the child had placed the body in the fridge so to preserve it “until the curfew ended and they could go out and bury the body”.⁴⁹³

When you look at this image, and don’t know the story behind it, it’s just an image of a fridge with something inside. But if you know the story the image is extremely violent, a lot more violent than seeing blood. Because it is in your imagination that you start understanding the situation wherein someone has had to put the body of his or her child in a fridge. *It’s the “invisible” violence that becomes a lot bigger in your imagination as you think about it—you grasp a lot more through that image.* The video I was making was about daily life images from a domestic environment in a warzone, and the violence of that suspension. The image of the body in the fridge is something that keeps coming back to me, and talks about another part of war, and its images. It is a very powerful image.⁴⁹⁴

This long quote indicates the artist’s discomfort to show certain images, which on another level is linked with the responsibility of what it means to show something for others to look at. Could one

⁴⁹² Cana Bilir-Meier and belit sağ, “Documentaristics – Documentation and their Characteristics”, *VERSION* No 3 (May 2017): 21, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, http://bit.contrast.org/wp-content/uploads/bit/Versions3_Magazine_interview-with-Cana-Bilir-Meier_belit_final_.pdf.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., italics added.

in any way perceive the violated dead body of the guerrilla woman as a “face”, if one had already forgotten their ethical responsibility and had disobeyed the “non-violence” command of the Levinasian framework? To my mind, the answer is negative. As the analysis of Barakeh’s work will highlight in the next section, there is a thin line between perceiving a dead body as pure flesh, and in allowing one to apprehend the transcendence of the “face”. Pixelation allows *what remains* from a violent event to be perceived as such: a “face”.

2.3 The Erased Face and the “Face” of the Mourner: Khaled Barakeh’s *The Untitled Images* (2014)

“Can an [act] of erasure be protective; the absence of a body highlight its presence?”⁴⁹⁵ That is one of the opening remarks on the artwork *The Untitled Images* (2014) on the artist Khaled Barakeh’s website (Fig. 66). This piece consists of five C-print images, 21 x 30 cm each, from the contemporary conflict in Syria. Each photograph shows a male figure carrying or holding on the floor another person in a war-torn urban environment.⁴⁹⁶ Yet, the spectator cannot see the carried person, exactly because the only thing that is visible is “his own practice in the violence of this conflict, Barakeh has cut and peeled away the photographic skin and identity of the deceased”.⁴⁹⁷

The artist’s act is that of erasure through physical removal of the materiality of photography.⁴⁹⁸ That violence is applied on top of two other levels of violence: “the regime’s murder of Syrian citizens” and “the brutality of the media’s choosing which images to disseminate”.⁴⁹⁹ The coexistence of these layers of violence exist for the majority of the case studies that this thesis analyses. However, to my mind, these layers are four: the violent act, the photographic act, the system(s) of dissemination and potential censorship of the image, and the artistic concealment or erasure with the creation of the artwork. So, Barakeh through an artistic

⁴⁹⁵ “The Untitled Images”, Khaled Barakeh, accessed 5 Nov. 2020, <https://www.khaledbarakeh.com/sp/the-untitled-images>.

⁴⁹⁶ As Barakeh has stated the images are “[m]ostly portraying adults holding their children's bodies”. For more see Barakeh, “The Untitled Images (2014)”, *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 4 (2018): 142+.

⁴⁹⁷ “The Untitled Images”.

⁴⁹⁸ Asbjørn Grønstad calls this the “ethics of erasure” (119). Although his analysis of this work touches similar points in regards to ethics, invisibility and the importance of the mourning figure, his argument is justified with the eclectic use of a variety of theoretical frameworks, as for example Ranciere, Butler and Kenaan. On the contrary to this, this subchapter offers a reading of Barakeh’s work through a close reading with the use of the lens of the Levinasian “face” and its links to discourse. For Grønstad’s analysis see Asbjørn Grønstad, “Invisibility and the Ethics of Erasure: Khaled Barakeh’s *The Untitled Images*”, in *Invisibility in Visual and Material Culture*, ed. Asbjørn Grønstad and Øyvind Vågnes (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 111-125.

⁴⁹⁹ “The Untitled Images”.

erasure finds an additional way to the modes of aesthetic concealment discussed in the previous section, in order to comment upon contemporary visual censorship.

The analysis of this piece should begin from the cut-out part that leaves a physical white gap of another person's misery.⁵⁰⁰ This action can be seen as a potentially unethical exclusion; an imposed invisibility that dehumanises the other. Or does it do exactly the opposite? The work was created "cut and peeled away the photographic skin [...] in an almost surgical act".⁵⁰¹ This process, if it is to be imagined literally, could bring to mind Stan Brakhage's 1971 experimental film *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (Fig. 67). This link could make the violence of the artistic process almost unbearable. In this 32-minute piece, Brakhage filmed in 16mm silent film the surgical processes of forensic pathologists in a morgue in Pittsburgh.⁵⁰²

What one sees in Brakhage's work is the reality of the flesh through a medical gaze, but also an abstracted view of this reality. Everything is filmed from specific angles and never from the ceiling down, as the majority of Hollywood-framing methods would have done. One needs to see with their own eyes, says the title of the film, recalling Hirschhorn's words for de-pixelation. Yet, interestingly enough, although in this film one sees a lot of skin being peeled off from skulls, at the same time no physical face is captured by the camera in the whole duration of the film. Both the visual face and the Levinasian "face" are absent, following in a sense the nothingness that death signifies in the philosopher's framework. As the philosopher Drew Dalton explains,

⁵⁰⁰ A similar visual example to Barakeh's work became one of the most circulated images regarding Black Lives Matter. This was the painting *Analogous Colors* (2020) by the American artist Titus Kaphar, a work that commented on the brutal killing of George Floyd; in this case the artist after finishing the portrait of Floyd's mother holding him as a baby, he cut out the body of the baby in order "to show a mother's loss", a relationship that is further discussed in the next subchapter regarding the iconographical mode of the pietà and the mourning of the mother. For more on Kaphar's work, which was published on the cover of TIME magazine, see D.W. Pine, "The Story Behind TIME's George Floyd Cover", *TIME*, 4 June 2020, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://time.com/5847667/the-story-behind-times-george-floyd-cover/>.

⁵⁰¹ "The Untitled Images".

⁵⁰² "The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes. Curated by Ed Atkins", Schinkel Pavillon, accessed 28 Oct. 2020, <https://www.schinkelpavillon.de/exhibition/stan-brakhage-david-kamp-curated-by-ed-atkins>.

“the corpse must be understood, conversely [to the face], as an *object of anxiety*, to express a rupture within the phenomenal realm wherein Being in general, as detailed by Heidegger, manifests”.⁵⁰³ On the contrary of that and what one sees in the gory film of Brakhage, here I aim to suggest that this erasure of the dead or suffering body in Barakeh’s work, which leaves a visible trace while leaving intact the mourning figure, can allow one to establish an ethical relation with the absent figure as a “face” through its invisibility.

In an interview with the title “Face” (in the transcribed version) that Emmanuel Levinas gave between February and March of 1981 to Philippe Nemo, broadcast by Radio France-Culture, he said,⁵⁰⁴

I do not know if one can speak for a “phenomenology” of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that.⁵⁰⁵

As already discussed in the previous section with the analysis of Hirschhorn’s piece, in the Levinasian context it is always a challenge to define whether the “face” is visual or abstract. To my mind, the case of Barakeh’s artwork can highlight different levels of interpreting the “face” of the redacted other. The first level of analysis is through the “face” of the person that carries them: the mourning or screaming figure. This point will be usefully highlighted if one of the five images is analysed more closely. For example, the fourth image starting from the left shows a

⁵⁰³ Drew Dalton, “The Object of Anxiety: Heidegger and Levinas and the Phenomenology of the Dead”, *Janus Head* 12, No. 2 (October 2011): 80, accessed 17 Oct. 2020, <http://janushead.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Dalton.pdf>.

⁵⁰⁴ Philippe Nemo, “Interviewer’s Preface”, in Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), vi.

⁵⁰⁵ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 85–86.

young man with longish hair carrying in his hands a person, which if not dead is unconscious, as indicated by the contortion of the upper part of the body with the hand hanging (Fig. 68). In this case, the face of the bearer is what structures an ethical demand to the spectator in relation to the other who has been rendered invisible. In a sense, there are two “faces” in this image, the one reinforcing the demand of the other. The man’s visual facial features and his screaming expression indicate the ethical demand towards the person that is being carried. One could think that, for Levinas, the most important ethical command of the “face” of the other is that “thou shall not kill me”, and as he suggests, “[t]he face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face forbids us to kill.”⁵⁰⁶ Of course, we do not know if the cut-out figure is dead; but what we know is that someone has already trespassed their ethical obligation and tried to kill that person.

The visual face of the young man, the carrier, can be read in this context as the creation of a “discourse”. According to Levinas,

[f]ace and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse. I have just refused the notion of vision to describe the authentic relationship with the Other; it is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship.⁵⁰⁷

Yet, one might say that when speaking of visual material – appropriated photographs – how can one refer to the notion of “discourse”? Judith Butler explains in relation to Levinasian “face”,

the “face” does not speak in the sense that the mouth does; the face is neither reducible to the mouth nor, indeed, to anything the mouth has to utter. [...] [I]t is a speech that does not come from a mouth or, if it does, has no ultimate origin or meaning there.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 89 and 86.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 87–88.

⁵⁰⁸ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 132–133.

This quote can assist one's understanding of how the idea of "discourse" in Levinas' context is perceived in the context of this analysis, where the voiceless character of the visual nature of the artwork is prominent. Here, the discourse is expressed not by words but by the imaginary sounds that are assumed to be coming out of the visible face of the image: the mouth of the young man. The mourning and distress that this "face" expresses indicates the ethical command that exists also towards the redacted figure, namely the dead or sufferer other. According to Hagi Keenan,

[f]or Levinas, discourse opens up what the gaze closes. "Speech refuses vision, because the speaker does not deliver images of himself only, but is personally present in his speech, absolutely exterior to any image he would leave." Hence, unlike the gaze, speech always leaves a trace, always points to an exteriority that cannot be brought in.⁵⁰⁹

Therefore, if "discourse" is something that can leave a trace for the spectator, then one could suggest that Barakeh's invisible atrocity image is succeeding in making the spectator apprehend this "exteriority"; this would not be possible in the visible atrocity images.

A second level of ethical recognition of the redacted other can also be read by the actual shape of the figure in its absence. One of the most well-known passages by Levinas is when he mentions that the "face" can even be seen from someone's back,

[f]ace that thus is not exclusively the face of man. In Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (Part Three, Chapter 23), there is mention of a visit to the Lubianka in Moscow by the families or wives or relatives of political prisoners, to get news of them. A line is formed in front of the windows, in which they can only see each other's backs. A woman waits for her turn: "Never had she thought the human back could be so expressive and transmit states of mind so penetratingly. The people who approached the window had a special way of stretching the neck and back; the raised shoulders had shoulder-blades tensed as if by springs, and they seemed to shout, to cry, to sob." Face as the extreme precariousness of the other. Peace as awakening to the precariousness of the other.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁹ Kenaan, *Ethics of Visuality*, 132. For the secondary reference, see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 296.

⁵¹⁰ Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 140.

The absent figures in Barakeh's work indicate this "extreme precariousness"; the fact that someone has already not respected the "thou shall not kill" command, which however should not be seen as a reason for the spectator to not recognise the "face". Of course, the shapes of the bodies remind one of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Self-Pixel* when the website is initially visited and the collage is purely blank, as was described in the previous section. According to Hans Belting, "[i]conic presence still maintains a body's absence and turns it into what must be called *visible absence*. Images live from the paradox that they perform *the presence of an absence* or vice versa."⁵¹¹ A similar point was raised also by Roland Barthes when he suggested that,

[t]he image, says phenomenology, is an object-as-nothing. Now, in the Photograph, what I posit is not only the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has indeed existed and that it has been there where I see it.⁵¹²

Adapting Barthes' words, the dead other in Barakeh's images "indeed existed" and "has been there where" one cannot see them anymore. The "visible absence" has been transformed to an "invisible absence". To my mind, this absence of the dead or sufferer's body can allow one to apprehend the existence of the "face" in its absence, in the negative or empty space. In this visible absence is where one can find "transcendence", which preoccupies Levinas' writing. In Keenan's words,

[a]ccording to Levinas, the fact that the transcendent is unattainable or incapable of conceptualization does not imply that it is located far beyond the horizons of thought, so that we can altogether ignore it and live without it. Quite the contrary: the transcendent is revealed in the "here and now" – the invisible shows itself as such. And yet, the transcendent is not what belongs, as in Merleau-Ponty, for example, to the inner – even if concealed – pulse of everydayness. The invisible does not hide between the lines, as raindrops that remain hanging on a treetop or as the depth of a pool seen through the water. Rather, for Levinas, the invisible is what disturbs the harmony of the visible. It ruptures the visible, thus creating a surprising effect, often troubling and difficult and at times painful and

⁵¹¹ Belting, "Image, Medium, Body", 312, italics in the original.

⁵¹² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 115.

uncomfortable, like a smashed window, or the unfamiliar sound of steps in the house.⁵¹³

The Untitled Images do exactly that: they “disturb the harmony of the visible”.⁵¹⁴ What might allow one to think of Levinasian transcendence, which is expressed in the existence of the other, is that the absence in this case is done in an obvious, aesthetic manner. “The term ‘transcendence’ signifies precisely the fact that one cannot think God and being together. So too in the interpersonal relationship it is not a matter of thinking the ego and the other together, but to be facing”, suggests Levinas.⁵¹⁵ By concealing the actual visual features of the face, Barakeh creates an “invisible absence”, as I call it, which assists in overcoming the obstacle of this “togetherness”. In other words, *The Untitled Images* are creating a “performative iconoclasm”, to return to what was already mentioned in the previous section regarding Butler’s reading of Levinas.⁵¹⁶ According to her,

[f]or Levinas, then, the human is not *represented* by the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give.⁵¹⁷

It could be suggested that this visible “failure” in Butler’s representational terms is something incorporated in this artwork. Yet, Barakeh, by creating this piece, is also making a comment on the dissemination and choice of whose pain and misery is the most worthwhile to be seen, in a

⁵¹³ Kenaan, *Ethics of Visuality*, 11–12.

⁵¹⁴ Grønstad, while referring to Kenaan’s point, calls this “rupturing of the visible”. Grønstad, “Invisibility and the Ethics of Erasure”, 121.

⁵¹⁵ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 77.

⁵¹⁶ Brand and Pinchevski, “Facing the Image”, 108.

⁵¹⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 144, italics in the original.

parallel line of thought with saĝ's work which was analysed in the previous section. Hence, by erasing the visual face, he creates an openness to make one think about all those "faces" that one has not encountered in a photographically mediated "face-to-face" situation. This is a recurrent theme that the case studies of this thesis are commenting on in many different ways, as the analysis of Birkin's *Profiles* will indicate in Chapter 3.

A final important parameter of *The Untitled Images* is the way in which they are exhibited. As mentioned by Miriam Wilhelm, in one of the very few texts that have been written about this installation,

[i]n the exhibition space the work is hung in particularly low height – about 60cm from the floor – in order to enforce a respectful and humble, bend-down position amongst the audience. This action does not only call for an altered reception of the photographs in physical terms, but also echoes the discomfort one might experience due to their visual content.⁵¹⁸

When I encountered this piece in the exhibition *The Blue Hour* in Hamburg,⁵¹⁹ the installation was displayed in exactly this way (Fig. 69). Yet, I do not agree with Wilhelm's suggestion that this way of seeing in a lower level from the expected one should be linked with the "discomfort" one feels during the spectatorship of atrocity images. To my mind, the lower height is what encourages one to think of the "alterity" of the other's "face" which, as already mentioned, Levinas insists that it should not be perceived through observing the other's eye colour. Hence, through this physical displacement of one's gaze towards a lower level, one moves away from the automatic, habitual manner of looking at things, and is forced to engage in a more critical and ethical relationship with the visibly absent other.

⁵¹⁸ Miriam Wilhelm, "Absent Atrocities: On Khaled Barakeh's Works 'The Untitled Images'", Khaled Barakeh, accessed 5 Oct. 2020, <https://www.khaledbarakeh.com/pt/absent-atrocities>.

⁵¹⁹ I saw this piece at the exhibition *The Blue Hour*, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg, Germany, 2018. Curated by Tobias Mörike. For more see "The Blue Hour", Khaled Barakeh, accessed 18 Oct. 2020, <https://www.khaledbarakeh.com/se/the-blue-hour>.

2.4 The Covered “Face” and The Pietà: David Birkin’s *Pietà* (2012)

The layers of violence that were described for Barakeh’s images also apply to David Birkin’s *Pietà* (2012) (Fig. 70). However, here the artist’s violence manifests through the erasure of the photograph with a layer of blue ultramarine colour applied to leave a tactile surface. Birkin obscures the whole image, which if visible would reveal a mother mourning at her infant child’s funeral. This information comes from the only visible part of the “image”; namely, the description at the top of the Associated Press wirephoto from 1992. The caption reads:

(ISL-1)KABUL, Afghanistan, July 9 -- FUNERAL – An Afghan woman burst into tears Wednesday during the funeral for her infant child who was killed by rocket attacks fired by rebel Mujahedeen from mountains surrounding Kabul city. More than 50 civilians were killed in rocket attacks from Hezb-e-Islami bases. <AP PHOTO>c<bk5.1600str/Caroline Cremo>1992. \\lib⁵²⁰ (Fig. 71)

As the caption reveals, the photograph was taken by the Associated Press photographer Caroline Cremo. The image would most probably show a woman crying on top of a baby’s coffin, which might be open or closed. That would be inscribed in the visible part. Yet, what would remain invisible is how violent the death of this child was, which is what the textual description is hinting towards: “killed by rocket attacks”. As the analysis will show, Birkin’s work comments on issues of Islamic iconoclasm, beliefs that are highly problematised nowadays with the rise of the Islamic State violence.

How is one to perceive the dead other as a “face” in this case, when even the accompanying figure of the *Pietà*, the mourning mother, is not visible? It could be suggested that it is achieved through the use of language, in this case via the caption which remains visible. As

⁵²⁰ David Birkin, *David Birkin: Mouths at the Invisible Event*, Exhibition Catalogue (London: Mosaic Rooms, 2015), 47.

Sonja Fessel proposes for the analysis of Bart Michiels' photographs of landscapes (which bear hidden traces of horrific atrocities),

[w]hile the combination of text and photography seems to be a natural one in the context of news coverage and the use of captions is a premise in publishing, these have only recently become a favoured narrative strategy in art photography.⁵²¹

Birkin's *Pietà* seems to follow such "narrative strategies". At the same time, it creates an artistic approach that raises similar issues to Anne Ferran's work, which according to Batchen, makes one to "look askance". For Batchen this can be a very productive way of looking: "[d]isputing the effectiveness of the single iconic grandiloquent image, it proposes that a productive engagement with atrocity is possible only if one looks at it askance."⁵²² Although with the use of a different aesthetic manner and medium, Birkin seems to ask the same thing from the spectator. What I aim to suggest here is that this kind of "looking askance" can be the way to allow one to approach the (obscured in this case) "face" of the other through the use of one's imagination and memory.

As will be further elaborated in the next chapter in relation to Azoulay's "civil imagination", imagination can be a very useful tool to help the spectator apprehend the other that exists in the invisible atrocity image.⁵²³ The verb "to imagine" derives from the Latin root *imaginare* ("form an image of, represent") and *imaginari* ("picture to oneself"), which has the same Latin root as the word "image": *imago, imagin-* "image".⁵²⁴ So the words imagine and image etymologically have a strong relation. That is something that Bal also highlights in her essay "Imaging Pain", when in the first footnote she states that, "[t]hroughout this article I use the

⁵²¹ Sonja Fessel, "The Absence of Atrocity: Bart Michiels's The Course of History Photographs", *History of Photography* 36, no. 3 (2012): 324, <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1080/03087298.2012.669934>.

⁵²² Geoffrey Batchen, "Looking Askance", in *Picturing Atrocity*, ed. G. Batchen et al. (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 227.

⁵²³ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*.

⁵²⁴ Lexico, s.v. "imagine", accessed 15 Nov. 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/imagine>.

verb “to image” for the act of making images of, as well as imagining, pain”.⁵²⁵ In Birkin’s artwork, where “the image” is fully absent, one is left only with their imagination.

Levinas is not really preoccupied with the notion of imagination. Yet, when he does mention it, it is in the context of “metaphysics”.

It is from moral relationships that every metaphysical affirmation takes on a “spiritual” meaning, is purified of everything with which an imagination captive of things and victim of participation charges our concepts. The ethical relation is defined, in contrast with every relation with the sacred, by excluding every signification it would take on *unbeknown* to him who maintains that relation. When I maintain an ethical relation I refuse to recognize the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me; I refuse to figure in a drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted in spite of me and that would make game of me. [...] Everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion.⁵²⁶

As this passage indicates, for Levinas “imagination” can be a troubling parameter, which however is linked to “metaphysics” and hence to spirituality. As John Llewellyn explains in relation to the aforementioned quote,

[t]his is a warning, in the “spirit” of the Mosaic prohibition of graven images, against the dangers of allowing imagination to have its head: the imagination is an unruly horse. [...] Maybe there the ethicality of face-to-face saying would be that moment of imagination when it is surprised by its own radical exteriority. “Maybe” may be the mark of an imagination that is not punctually imagist, but is unpunctually stretched by something like what Levinas here calls moral relationships, so stretched that it is thanks to the imagination that these relationships are lent to our concepts.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁵ Mieke Bal, “Imaging Pain”, in *Ethics and the Images of Pain*, ed. Grønstad, Asbjørn and Henrik Gustafsson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 138, Footnote 1.

⁵²⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 79.

⁵²⁷ John Llewellyn, *The Hypocritical Imagination: Between Kant and Levinas* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7.

So Levinas shows an ambivalence regarding the position of imagination in his “face-to-face” ethics. But as the final quote shows, imagination in this context can potentially be used in a manner “not punctually imagist”, but as a link to Levinasian moral relationships.

Birkin’s *Pietà*, in its iconoclastic approach, could be seen as bearing traces of what was mentioned in the last quote as the “Mosaic prohibition of graven images”, which for the Jewish Levinas was of great importance. Although the cultural context differs – as Birkin comments on an Afghan territory (Islamic) and Levinas was a devoted Jew (Judaism) – both these religious frameworks were established in aniconic beliefs. Of course, the Qur’ān does not mention *per se* anything about prohibiting representation. However, the justification of this applied prohibition – as in most iconoclastic traditions – was “that any representation of a living thing was an act of competition with God, for he alone can create something that is alive”.⁵²⁸ As Birkin’s website mentions:

In keeping with artistic traditions of aniconism in Islam, the work gestures away from Western photojournalism’s reliance on a repertoire of Christian iconographic tropes and eschews an easy consumption of the spectacle of other people’s suffering.⁵²⁹

So, what happens with the spectatorship of this iconoclastic example? The spectatorship of Birkin’s invisible atrocity image depends on the use of the caption and the imaginative process that one can perform in their mind. Yet, in order for this process to be established, one should have the memory of the same visual trope – a mourning mother (or father in some cases) with the dead or suffering child; a *pietà*. This iconographical model of Christian origin has for many decades been well received and praised in the context of photographic awards, as mentioned in Chapter 1. Such examples from the World Press Photo of the Year Award are: i) 1984 – Mustafa

⁵²⁸ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Islamic arts: Visual Arts”, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islamic-arts/Visual-arts#ref316739>.

⁵²⁹ “*Pietà*, 2012”, David Birkin, accessed 24 Nov. 2020, <https://www.davidbirkin.net/art#/pieta/>.

Bozdemir's photo of a mother in Turkey that found her five children dead after they were buried alive following an earthquake⁵³⁰ (Fig. 72); ii) 1989 – David Turnley's photo of a father in Armenia mourning on top of his seventeen year old's coffin who died in an earthquake⁵³¹ (Fig. 73); iii) 1993 – James Nachtwey's photo of a mother in Somalia, carrying the body of her dead child, "wrapped in a shroud according to Muslim custom, to a mass grave for famine victims"⁵³² (Fig. 74). These images are only indicative examples of photographs that morphologically construct the same frame. In some the dead are uncovered, and hence visible. In others only the face of the mourning figure/family member is visible. Such awarded images usually gain an iconic status, as already discussed, which allows one to bring them to mind and imagine a similar photograph, even when the latter is obscured.

However, one of the most important parameters of such photographic compositions is their link to Christian iconology. Here I reference such visual tropes, also discussed in the literature on iconic or rewarded images, without however wanting to follow an "art-historical" reading of atrocity images in the sense that Stephen Eisenman described in *The Abu Ghraib Effect*. There he stated that,

I too was appalled, but as an art historian, my anger was accompanied by a shock of recognition: even though these brutal images from a prison in occupied Iraq are not works of art – indeed, were never intended to be seen by more than a handful of people – they nevertheless insistently recalled to mind treasured sculptures and paintings from a distant past.⁵³³

To my mind, when the task in hand is for one to analyse and approach images of human suffering and violent death, there cannot be an "even though" in one's understanding and personal stance.

⁵³⁰ "1984 Photo Contest; Mustafa Bozdemir", World Press Photo, accessed 13 Nov. 2020, <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/1984/34817/1/1984-Mustafa-Bozdemir-WY>.

⁵³¹ "1989 Photo Contest; David Turnley", World Press Photo, accessed 13 Nov. 2020, <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/1989/33909/1/1989-David-Turnley-WY>.

⁵³² "1993 Photo Contest; James Nachtwey", World Press Photo, accessed 13 Nov. 2020, <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/1993/33189/1/1993-James-Nachtwey-WY>.

⁵³³ Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion, 2007), 11.

Although in the following analysis of Birkin's work I propose a comparative, "mnemonic" reading of the piece with the aim of comprehending Levinas' ethics, I strongly believe that if one is to compare such photographs then one can only do so with material of similar nature. Hence, when one discusses the installation that appropriates the atrocity image, a comparative analysis with other artworks might be helpful and reasonable. But when one is to ethically approach the atrocity image *per se*, then such formalistic methodologies bear the danger of de-politicising people's understanding of issues that are by default political and ethical.

When I saw Birkin's *Pietà*, I linked the hidden image to a photograph from Greek modern history that bears the same morphological characteristics. That was a photograph showing a mother weeping over the dead body of her son, Tasos Tousis, a 25 year old tobacco-factory worker who was shot dead by police on 9 May 1936 during a strike in Thessaloniki (Fig. 75).⁵³⁴ One might wonder at this point why that was the image that came to mind, especially as it was of an event from before my parents birth or even the invention of the Internet, the medium that could have assisted the post-mortem dissemination of the image. The answer to that can be found in what Marianne Hirsch has called "postmemory" in the context of Holocaust studies.

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.⁵³⁵

My postmemory's "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" in relation to this image comes from my cultural, religious and artistic context, filtered also through my family life. This

⁵³⁴ "Tasos Tousis" [Τάσος Τούσης], Wikipedia, last edited 27 July 2020, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, https://el.wikipedia.org/wiki/Τάσος_Τούσης.

⁵³⁵ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5.

particular photograph was first published in a newspaper the day after the strike and the young man's killing.⁵³⁶ The Greek poet Yiannis Ritsos saw it on the cover of the newspaper, and wrote his pivotal work *Epitaphios*, which was published three days after the incident (12 May) in the Greek communist newspaper, *O Rizospastis* (The Radical) (Fig. 76).⁵³⁷ Initially the poem had only 44 verses and it was entitled *Moiroloi* (Dirge); later, he reworked it twice and the final version has 324 lines and is entitled *Epitaphios* (Lamentation).⁵³⁸ Following Ritsos' poem, the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis composed a series of songs, giving thus to the early loss of this young man and to this photograph a position in Greek culture and memory, and thereof to my memory too.

Yet, lamentation in the Greek context has always had a very strong religious character and is part of an annual tradition.⁵³⁹ That is something that the title of this poem tries also to bring to the reader's mind, as in the Greek Orthodox church a part of the Good Friday's ceremony is called *Epitaphios Thrinos* (Lamentation at the Tomb), which is "a dirge attributed to the Virgin Mary and other mourning women at the tomb of the crucified Christ".⁵⁴⁰ This lament is based on 6th century forms and on that particular day is sung by the congregation.⁵⁴¹

In Birkin's *Pietà*, this religious character of lamentation finds another layer of connotation based on the actual materiality of the work. As the artist explains, in this work he uses ultramarine pigment, which is "sourced from lapis lazuli mines in Afghanistan, near to where the original photograph was taken".⁵⁴² This pigment was used by "Renaissance artists for

⁵³⁶ Rick M. Newton, "Translator's Introduction", in Yannis Ritsos, *Epitaphios* (Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, n.d.), 9.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵³⁹ Of course, *Epitaphios* (*Pericles' Funeral Oration*) is also the title of speech that Pericles gave in ancient Athens, and which the Greek historian Thucydides included in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (431–404 BC).

⁵⁴⁰ Newton, "Translator's Introduction", 9.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁴² "Pietà, 2012".

painting the robes of the Virgin Mary in depictions of the Madonna and Child”.⁵⁴³ Birkin seems to want to underline the specificity of this photograph, while also to subvert the religious tropes often used by photojournalism. Hence, the spectatorship of the artwork becomes demanding. The loss is not a spectacle anymore, but an absence which one needs to find a way of acknowledging, through their own “postmemory” and “imaginative investment, projection, and creation”.⁵⁴⁴

Of course, such observations move beyond the specificity of one’s suffering. That was also a challenging parameter for the spectatorship of Barakeh’s work, which even in its title, *The Untitled Images*, hints that these should not be seen as a medium to gaining a witnessing status, but as an imagining exercise on the consumption of another’s loss. According to Bal,

[w]hy would it be helpful, culturally, hence, socially, to “image” pain? Generally speaking, it is my view that representing pain entails tenacious problems—of voyeurism, of facile equations, of caricature, of the potential for sadistic viewing and masochistic identification, and an erasing generalization. Becoming inured to the shocking effect of such images through their frequent display in the media entails perhaps the worst of these ills: indifference. The problems are so damaging that I can only condone images with a clear and politically powerful potential of cultural change—and those are not easy to find, or to make. Yet, endorsing this caution also risks collusion with censorship and forgetting what needs to be remembered in order to keep present the horror of inflicting horror. Between the Scylla of particularity and its underlying individualism, voyeurism, and anecdotal irrelevance, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of generality, with its erasure of specificity on the other, I propose the term “singularity.”⁵⁴⁵

To my mind Birkin manages to bring this “singularity” in one’s understanding, creating thus a context in which one ought to have an imaginative “face-to-face” recognition of the dead other

⁵⁴³ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁴ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 5.

⁵⁴⁵ Bal, “Imaging Pain”, 115.

and the suffering/mourning figure. This is something that is further highlighted from the way this piece is exhibited: on an empty white wall by itself, despite its small dimensions (Fig. 77).⁵⁴⁶

The interpretation of lamentation in this context can be linked with another idea. That is the link to the iconoclastic approach that Birkin takes in this case in order to critique the imposition of Christian iconographic visual tropes for the photographic documentation of a predominantly Muslim population. In this sense, one could be called to actually “lament the images” and mourn their absence. This brings to mind Alfredo Jaar’s artwork, entitled *The Lament of Images*, an installation for which the artist has commented that “we have lost the ability to see and be moved by images”.⁵⁴⁷ In this sense one could think that the lament should be for us – the contemporary spectators – who cannot see anymore. But what about the cases where the lament is “of” the mother/the father/the family member/the loved one, as in the case of Birkin’s work? How can lamentation and visual absence guide one’s understanding in this case?

As already mentioned in relation to Ritsos’ title, the Greek word for Lamentation is *Epitaphios*, which in Greek means something that takes place on the tomb; in other words, the mourning. Such photographs of lament have been for many decades a visual trope, as was already mentioned and as Birkin’s skepticism indicates. So, where can the significance of this iconological composition be found? Apart from its religious connotations, does it perhaps allow one to come closer to apprehending the other’s “face”? To my mind the answer should be positive, based on what was already mentioned in the analysis of Barakeh’s work about the relation between the Levinasian notion of the “face” and “discourse”, through Butler’s prism of analysis. This that takes place on the tomb – the epitaph – allows one as a spectator to

⁵⁴⁶ I saw this artwork in the exhibition *Abstracted Mythologies*, Beton7, 7 – 15 July 2017, accessed 15 Nov. 2020, https://www.beton7.com/index.php/en/program/exhibitions/item/1153-abstracted_mythologies-en.html.

⁵⁴⁷ Pat Binder and Gerhard Haupt, “Alfredo Jaar: Interview, Details”, trans. Holly Austin, *Universes in Universe*, 2002, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/documenta/11/frid/e-jaar-2.htm>.

acknowledge the loss and engage with the other's "face". In its invisibility, Birkin's *Pietà* provides one with the opportunity to rethink their ethical responsibility as the primary demand. By allowing one to think of the "singularity", in Bal's terms, it can assist one to realise how "[f]irst philosophy is an ethics".⁵⁴⁸ Not every pain or death is the same. However, one's ethical self will always have equal responsibility for the other's "face" in every of those cases.

⁵⁴⁸ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 77.

Coda: Obliterated “Faces” of the 21st century Mediterranean Refugee and Migrant Crisis

During the migrant and refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, as already discussed in Chapter 1, a dead body was widely seen: Demir’s photos of Alan Kurdi (Fig. 38). A face that was not censored, or self-censored by social media users who rushed to share it. Following the line of thought of this chapter, an important question to ask oneself is whether Alan, despite being seen, was recognised as a “face” in Levinasian terms. However, before delving into this exploration, a different group of images should be examined in order to allow the discussion of Alan’s photo to be further contextualised through a sheer juxtaposition.

Just a few days before the images of Alan appeared and became viral on traditional and social media, another set of photographs from the same socio-political territory were posted on Facebook and subsequently censored. On 28 August 2015, the artist Khaled Barakeh, whose work has already been examined in this chapter, “stumbled upon a collection of amateur photographs, posted anonymously on Facebook”.⁵⁴⁹ He reposted these seven photographs on a public post on Facebook, which he titled “Multicultural Graveyard”, with location “at Mediterranean Sea”. They were accompanied by the description, “[l]ast night more than 80 Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian asylum seekers [...] drowned in the Mediterranean close to the Libyan shores trying to reach Europe”.⁵⁵⁰

According to Nicholas D. Mirzoeff, the album was taken down from the artist’s wall on 31 August, while most of the shares were deleted. He continues: “[n]o explanation was offered to

⁵⁴⁹ Barakeh, “Focus Box 6: Images of war or war of images?”, 153.

⁵⁵⁰ Khaled Barakeh, “Multicultural graveyard”, Facebook, 28 August 2015, accessed 7 Nov. 2020, https://www.facebook.com/khaledbarakeh/media_set?set=a.10156480825160525&type=3. Nicholas D. Mirzoeff has aptly noted that the title of the post can be read in two ways: “I think we’re supposed to hear this both ways. There are many people from many cultures drowned. And the European banality of multiculturalism, that too has died”. Nicholas D. Mirzoeff, “The Drowned and the Sacred: To See the Unspeakable”, *How to See the World* (blog), 29 Aug. 2015, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://wp.nyu.edu/howtoseetheworld/2015/08/29/auto-draft-73/>.

any user. When Barakeh objected to Facebook, his album was restored, at first without its title, about a day later.”⁵⁵¹ The photographs on this post – which in Mirzoeff’s words can be characterised as “elegiac, mournful and devastating” – included five photos of drowned children, who look close to Alan Kurdi’s age, one of a slightly older drowned person and one of “a pile of orange body bags”.⁵⁵² The post does not include a source for the images.⁵⁵³

This incident of online censorship was not widely published, as the debates mentioned in the beginning of this chapter indicate. Interestingly enough, Alan’s photograph was distributed in the following week. This time the photo was not censored on social media platforms. According to Mirzoeff’s explanation, “[w]hen the pictures of Alan followed, they had the authority of the Reuters news agency and were not deleted”.⁵⁵⁴ Yet, to my mind the explanation comes from a different parameter, which for him does not seem to be the main reasoning: “[i]n fact, nothing violent can be seen. Even in the terrible picture of Aylan Kurdi lying on the beach, less often reproduced, the boy is fully clothed and no injury can be seen. Perhaps his very wholeness is what is so upsetting.”⁵⁵⁵ Of course, this image had something very important, that would not make the social media algorithms go off – Alan’s body did not look dead, neither was the child naked – which would be the two main reasons that would make the algorithm go off according to the examples discussed at the beginning of the chapter.

In this photograph one can see a dead child; yet, it is a dead child that for a lot of users of the web resembles a sleeping child – or “their” sleeping child, as many said. That was a common theme that was brought up both on internet comments and “artistic” interpretations, that were in

⁵⁵¹ Nicholas D. Mirzoeff, “Don’t look away from Aylan Kurdi’s image”, *Conversation*, 8 Sept. 2015, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://theconversation.com/dont-look-away-from-aylan-kurdis-image-47069>.

⁵⁵² Nicholas D. Mirzoeff, “Facebook Censors Refugee Photographs”, *How to See the World* (blog), 1 Sept. 2015, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://wp.nyu.edu/howtoseetheworld/2015/09/01/auto-draft-78/>.

⁵⁵³ Barakeh, “Multicultural graveyard”, Facebook.

⁵⁵⁴ Mirzoeff, “Don’t look away”.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

their own right transmitted endlessly.⁵⁵⁶ Such interpretations could be seen as a result of the contemporary trends around “cute” cultures, which are highly problematic and ethically troubling when considered in the context of a death.⁵⁵⁷ Hence, such comments just highlight what Cohen calls “the state of denial”.⁵⁵⁸ According to Cohen,

[o]ne common thread runs through the many different stories of denial: people, organizations, governments or whole societies are presented with information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged. The information is therefore somehow repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted. Or else the information “registers” well enough, but its implications – cognitive, emotional or moral – are evaded, neutralized or rationalised.⁵⁵⁹

In the case of Alan’s image, the information was definitely “registered”, as its immediate viral status indicates. However, interpretations of a dead child as a peaceful, sleeping creature highlight how “its implications – cognitive, emotional or moral – are evaded, neutralized or rationalised”. People tried to comprehend the most incomprehensible and unknown condition – death. So, the “face” of a deadly crisis was found in a child that could be seen as not dead. In a way this urge to interpret the photograph as of a sleeping child should only lead to the opposite effect, namely the hard realisation of death. In an analysis of a poem about a dead child by Emily Dickinson, in the context of contemporary culture of “cuteness”, May Simon mentions,

[w]e feel a moment of consolation—or if not consolation, of humanization of the darkness and decay of the grave. We imagine the plucky survivability of the cute infant who lies in it. [...] But this fleeting consolation makes the letdown all the greater; for in disarming our resistance to the reality of death, it quickly brings us closer to that very reality.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁶ “Heartbreaking cartoons inspired by images of Aylan Kurdi”, ITV, 3 Sept. 2015, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.itv.com/news/2015-09-03/cartoons-inspired-by-aylan-shared-on-social-media>.

⁵⁵⁷ For cultures of “cute” see Simon May, *The Power of Cute* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁵⁵⁸ Cohen, *States of Denial*.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁶⁰ May, *Power of Cute*, 116–117.

This passage seems weirdly applicable to the photographs of the dead Alan.

Children have always been a recurrent, favourable and rewarded visual trope. Yet, are viral images such as Alan's being treated as a "face" in Levinasian terms? If one is to follow the Levinasian terms of the ethical relationship in the encounter of two people as I have been outlining them in this chapter, then it becomes obvious that the fact that Alan's visual face was not visible means he could be recognised as a "face" in ethical terms. Yet, to my mind that is not the case – not because of what is being seen in the photograph, but from what the conceptual frame of the viral has imposed on the spectatorship of this photograph, to echo the analysis from Chapter 1. The non-recognition of the "face" does not rely on the fact of the mediated nature (through photography) of the other's suffering, nor on the issue of there being a dead other. The reasoning can be traced in the reasons why this particular image became viral instead of another, and in the fact that we see only a very small part of this child's face – we therefore do not have to encounter the full shocking reality of a violent death that has been caused by drowning. We don't exactly see an atrocity image.

A similar example can be found in the context of the Syrian war, where again only certain images have been seen, shared and made viral. Such was the photograph of the five year old Syrian boy, Omran Daqneesh, captured by the photojournalist Mahmoud Raslan on 17 August 2016 in Aleppo, Syria (Fig. 78).⁵⁶¹ As the photographer said the next day,

[t]he tears started to drop as I took the photo. It is not the first time I've cried. I have cried many times while filming traumatised children. I always cry. We war photographers always cry [...] [I] thought of my seven-day-old baby girl. I thought to myself it could be her. It could be any child in Aleppo or Syria.⁵⁶²

⁵⁶¹ Anne Barnard, "How Omran Daqneesh, 5, Became a Symbol of Aleppo's Suffering", *New York Times*, 18 Aug. 2016, accessed 9 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/19/world/middleeast/omran-daqneesh-syria-aleppo.html>.

⁵⁶² Mahmoud Raslan, "I took the picture of little Omran in Aleppo", *Telegraph*, 19 Aug. 2019, accessed 3 Mar. 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/08/19/i-took-the-picture-of-little-omran-in-aleppo/>.

These words sound very similar to those mentioned in the first chapter regarding the iconic and award-winning image of the Sudanese girl captured by Kevin Carter.⁵⁶³ As I examined there, children have always been a recurrent and favourable visual trope, which can be directly linked with the concerns that Barakeh is trying to raise through his work. Yet, are these viral images of children being treated as a “face” in Levinasian terms? The answer should be negative, as viral images do not provide the space of a spectatorship that could highlight the vulnerability of the “face” – the “thou shalt not kill” that exists before one’s life.⁵⁶⁴ The spectatorship of such viral images is so heavily inscribed with different meanings that one is not easily able to look beyond that and recognise their responsibility towards the photographed other.

Another important reason for the fact that the most visible images have been of children is that it is difficult to perceive “alterity” in them; in this sense the Levinasian “face” is abandoned and, hence, one’s responsibility towards them is not fulfilled. According to Keenan,

[t]his unique mode of vision, Levinas’ optics, requires an opening of the gaze to what it cannot contain, that is, to what can never become a visual content and can never be framed as an image-object: this is the absolute alterity or exteriority of the Other.⁵⁶⁵

For example, that Omran Daqneesh’s image became viral, could be traced to the fact that it follows the iconographic trope of the child. “Through sight, touch, sympathy and common work”, says Levinas, “we are *with* others. All these relations are transitive. I touch an object, I see the other; but I *am* not the other.”⁵⁶⁶ This “I am not the other” is what signifies the other’s alterity, as well as my singularity and solitude. I need to exist for the other, but in a way that respects the other’s difference from me.

⁵⁶³ For more see subchapter 1.2. of this thesis.

⁵⁶⁴ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 77.

⁵⁶⁵ Kenaan, *Ethics of Visuality*, 132.

⁵⁶⁶ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 58

Alan's image became viral because it follows the iconographic trope of the child. Childhood represents a conventional Western perspective of the future. If one accepts that "[c]hildren signify our pasts and (whether in evolutionary, ecological or genealogical ways) also our futures", then the photo of the dead boy manifests a recognisable violent disruption of the future.⁵⁶⁷ Yet, if one follows this rationale, then the child is not recognised as other, but as a projection of our "sameness" remembered in a different temporal moment. This "sameness" was what caused the instant outcry of so many people, instead of the responsibility towards the "face". If instead the latter had been the case, then the spectator would have been able to realise that part of this "alterity" is not only images of dead or suffering children, nor is it represented by an image resembling sleep.

As well as Alan, his mother and four-year-old brother also drowned. The photograph of his dead brother was also captured by Demir (Fig. 79). Yet, why did Alan's brother – also a child – not become the "face" of this crisis?⁵⁶⁸ Because he is immediately recognised as a dead child, without having any of the "cute" characteristics that is associated with childhood in the culture of viral production.⁵⁶⁹ At the same time, this photograph shows what I will call "alterity", following Levinasian terms. In a sense, unfortunately, the photograph of Alan's brother would demand from the spectator to exist "for" the other, while one would not be able to identify with the other, who is visibly dead. If one were to decide to share the image of Alan's brother, then they would have to perform a "vertical transmission", to echo the terminology used in the Coda of Chapter 1: a transmission in the digital realm that would highlight how this ethical demand of the other is

⁵⁶⁷ Erica Burman, "Innocents Abroad: Western Fantasies of Childhood and the Iconography of Emergencies", *Disasters* 18, No 3 (1994): 240, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7717.1994.tb00310.x>.

⁵⁶⁸ An interesting close visual analysis, through semiotics, can be found in the following article, where the answer to this question is that: "Alan Kurdi became famous after his death [...] also due to some coincidental circumstances related to age, location, framing, position and name". (p. 63) in Maria Mattus, "Too Dead? Image Analyses of Humanitarian Photos of the Kurdi Brothers", *Visual Studies (Abingdon, England)* 35, no. 1 (2020): 51–64, <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1080/1472586X.2020.1731325>

⁵⁶⁹ For the link between "cute" and childhood, see May, *Power of Cute*, 137–150.

something that functions on a metaphorical level as an umbilical cord between the spectator (as a mother) and the depicted other (as the baby). On a metaphorical level, the mother exists in order for the baby to exist; in parallel, the responsibility of the spectator, in a Levinasian context, is that they should exist through the recognition of the other.

To my mind, a similar situation applies to Barakeh's censored "Multicultural Graveyard" Facebook post, in which the children are dead and the loss of life is visible with the first glimpse. The "otherness" is truly apparent. Hence, in theory, such images would allow one to recognise the "face" of the other in them. However, the fact that they are images of a harrowing nature would make some spectators shut off and not pay the needed attention in recognising the ethical demand that each and every one of these people claims. Although the "thou shalt not kill" has already been contravened, what can and should be read in these images is the "political refusal" to prevent further losses, to recall the term from the previous Coda. So, how could that be activated in the spectatorship of these images, namely Alan's brother and the photographs shared by Barakeh?

Barakeh provided an alternative for this, which follows the format of *The Untitled Images* examined earlier in this chapter. In 2015, the artist showed *Untitled Images – Repetitive Patterns* on the FALL 2015 | ARTEZINE of *ArteEast: The Global Platform for Middle East Arts*. The work was included in a post with the title *Act of Excision* (Fig. 80 – 84).⁵⁷⁰ The artwork includes five of the photos from Barakeh's Facebook post; interestingly enough the images he included here were the photos of the young children. Essentially, as the title of the work indicates, the format follows his already analysed work; yet, in this case the title is followed by the words "repetitive patterns", which could be read a reference to its sequential character. However,

⁵⁷⁰ Khaled Barakeh, "Act of Excision", *ARTEZINE*, ArteEast, Fall 2015, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://arteeast.org/quarterly/act-of-excision-2/>.

although on first glimpse the repetitive character could be read as referential to his work from 2014, the appropriation of the five images should be seen as what has made them repetitive. For this work, Barakeh has again peeled off the photographic surface of the captured dead bodies, leaving a blank space washed ashore, a “ghostly emptiness in the sea”.⁵⁷¹ As the editorial of FALL 2015 | ARTEZINE mentions, the work “refers to turning a blind eye to something that exists “far away” and that these bodies are no longer alive” – an issue that recalls what was discussed in relation to Louguine’s work in the Coda of Chapter 1.⁵⁷² Yet to my mind, it refers to much more than just that.

Barakeh, in a very precise manner, makes a comment about which lives are considered as capable of being seen and which will be censored.⁵⁷³ These images nowadays, when seen on the artist’s Facebook post, are hidden behind a blurred surface and a warning banner, which is applied automatically by the social media platform on content that, although not censored, is of a difficult nature. The artist’s comment refers to the total erasure of the material. In its own right, the artist’s comment is created from a different type of erasure: the *Act of Excision*. Excision is a term with a very specific medical connotation, one which can be linked with the clip of Barakeh in the documentary *The Cleaners* removing the “indexicality” of the body with a “scalpel”, as a surgeon would excise the unhealthy part from a sick body.⁵⁷⁴ Through such a reading, and if the censorship of these images is placed next to the viral images of Alan, the artistic act becomes

⁵⁷¹ Didem Yazıcı, “Freedom is a State of Mind: Editorial Note”, *ARTEZINE*, ArteEast, Fall 2015, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://arteeast.org/quarterly/freedom-is-a-state-of-mind-editorial-note/>.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ Censorship on social media depends both on the algorithm that each company creates and third party companies of human content moderators. For more information on this topic, and for Barakeh’s view in relation to this particular case of censorship in this context, see the documentary *Cleaners*, dir. Block and Riesewieck, DVD. For more on content moderation see Adrian Chen, “The Labors Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed”, *WIRED*, 23 Oct. 2014, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/>.

⁵⁷⁴ *Cleaners*, dir. Block and Riesewieck, DVD, 36:57–40:20.

almost a sarcastic comment on what needs to be excised for the society to remain as it is. A society that should aim to refuse anything that could be upsetting.

Yet, even if the images were not censored, how can one resist perpetuating voyeurism? The answer lies in the importance of witnessing, crucial part of Levinasian thinking. I think that Johannes Bennke's words, in relation to Levinas' examination of "obliteration" in Sacha Sosno's sculptural work, are of particular interest here.

When Levinas writes at several points in *Totality and Infinity* a variation of "ethics is an optics", he is orienting himself not towards the standard of objective vision but to the act of witnessing. Seeing a face means witnessing it. From the point of view of this ethical demand, obliteration provides faces to see which were not previously there. It is not just *anything* that is being erased; it is rather something unable to be integrated, something inaccessible. An act of showing plays itself out in obstruction.⁵⁷⁵

This extract could find a literal application in the situation of the censored images and the excision performed by the artist. Yet, do these two types of invisibility function in the same manner? The answer is negative. Barakeh's act guides one to recognise the blank spaces of the dead bodies as the demand for ethical recognition of the "face". As Levinas suggests, "[o]f course to cover over is to hide. But in some of Sosno's works there is a way of hiding which is suggestive, paradoxically, of a meaning."⁵⁷⁶ In my view, what allows one to recognise the "face" of the other in these negative spaces of the otherwise depicted dead is a combination of two parameters: the existence of the sea surrounding the excised bodies; and the virality of Alan's image, which has created visual precedence in people's visual memories – a lifeless body lying at the seashore. Hence, once again it seems that, although Alan could not be recognised as a "face"

⁵⁷⁵ Johannes Bennke, "Foreword", in Emmanuel Levinas, *On Obliteration: An Interview with Françoise Armengaud Concerning the Work of Sacha Sosno*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2019), 25.

⁵⁷⁶ Levinas, *On Obliteration*, 34.

due to the endless digital transmission of his images, he functioned in a way that could enable the dead people in other invisible atrocity images to be recognised as such.

Chapter 3: Invisible Atrocity Images and The Photographic “Contract”

Introduction

In these cases, photographs are “missing”.
This fact must be neither ignored nor forgotten –
rather, it should be studied and further elaborated upon.

Ariella Azoulay⁵⁷⁷

But anxious citizens are well informed
because the emotional incentives
have caused them to grasp the importance
of issues in these uncertain times.

George E. Marcus⁵⁷⁸

In May 2014, the *9/11 Memorial Museum* in New York opens its doors. According to the museum’s website,

[t]he 9/11 Memorial Museum invites visitors to learn about the history of the 9/11 attacks and 1993 World Trade Center bombing at the site where the Twin Towers once stood. The Museum’s dynamic blend of architecture, archaeology, and history creates an unforgettable encounter with the story of the attacks, their aftermath, and the people who experienced these events.⁵⁷⁹

The exhibitions expand across 110,000 square feet, and comprise many different sections that include objects, oral histories, ruins, photographs and artworks.⁵⁸⁰ One of the museum’s sections, entitled *In Memoriam*, is displayed in a separate cubicle (with another square space in its centre) in the middle of one of the spaces.⁵⁸¹ What is very interesting here, in this contemporary example of the commemoration of the violent deaths of citizens of a state, is that visitors are banned from

⁵⁷⁷ Azoulay, “Unshowable Photographs”, n.p.

⁵⁷⁸ Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen*, 103–104.

⁵⁷⁹ “The Museum”, 9/11 Memorial and Museum, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.911memorial.org/visit/museum>.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ “In Memoriam”, 9/11 Memorial and Museum, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.911memorial.org/visit/museum/exhibitions/in-memoriam>.

photographing this particular installation, despite the fact that photography is allowed in most other spaces of the museum. A quote from the museum's website indicates a careful verbal framing of this particular exhibition, which invites visitors to "remember people for how they lived their lives rather than how they died".

Immediately conveying the enormity of loss, a floor-to-ceiling presentation of 2,983 portrait photographs surrounds visitors as they enter the gallery. These four walls present a true cross-section of humanity, ages 2 and a half to 85, from more than 90 nations, spanning the spectrum of ethnicities, socioeconomic sectors, and faith traditions.⁵⁸²

These deaths were documented in a respectful manner, similar to the one described in Chapter 2 with post-mortem photography. Of course, one should bear in mind that these photographs were portraits capturing the victims of the 9/11 attacks while they were alive. No photos of corpses or people that tried to escape the towers by jumping into the void, as Richard Drew's iconic *Falling Man* documented, are to be seen in the space of the museum.⁵⁸³ In any case, most probably, not all the deaths will have been visually recorded due to the disastrous scale of the attacks. This is the case with many other tragic events of mass death. Yet, what is different is that many such events are never captured in a respectful manner. Hence, the invisibility of the dead is further perpetuated by never allowing them to be registered in peoples' memories.

As mentioned in the Introduction, in 2008, Ariella Azoulay shifted the focus from the photographer to the spectator regarding the ethical responsibility of the creation and spectatorship of documentary images. By participating in the "civil contract of photography", one is partaking in the "citizenry of photography".⁵⁸⁴ This legal-political terminology allowed Azoulay to move

⁵⁸² Ibid.

⁵⁸³ "Falling Man; Richard Drew, 2001", 100 Photos TIME, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://100photos.time.com/photos/richard-drew-falling-man>.

⁵⁸⁴ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 128.

away from notions of pity and sympathy towards a vocabulary that underlines the political responsibility that people have as spectators: the responsibility of being part of a “civil contract of photography”.⁵⁸⁵

By utilising the type of “encounter” created with the “photographic contract”, in this chapter, I examine artistic examples that challenge this perpetuated and, for different reasons, politically induced invisibility. As will be shown, the latter is due to censorship systems, political inaction or even the inability to capture certain events due to their nature, as will be seen in the Coda regarding refugees and migrants drowning in the Mediterranean.

In these cases, the photographs were either not captured, or they were not supposed to be seen. Therefore what lies behind the artworks of this chapter are the unseen or untaken photographs, which can be seen as echoing Azoulay’s idea of inaccessible or non-photographed, and hence “missing”, material in photographic archives.⁵⁸⁶ According to her, there should be a “distinction between the *photograph as a product of the act of photographing and photography as an event of a special kind*”.⁵⁸⁷ And she continues that one category, which essentially could be seen as complicating her theorisation of the “civil contract of photography”, is that of the “untaken photograph”.

[A] photographic event [that] took place in the real or imagined presence of a camera, but no trace of that event was recorded on a photographic support. My assumption is that the presumed presence of a camera suffices to create a photographic event. [...] Some photographs are known to have existed but for some reason have become inaccessible. Other photographs may be accessible but unshowable – that is, those who have access to photographs may view them without showing them to others, in public. In these cases, photographs are “missing”, creating a hole in our ability to reconstruct that of which we ourselves are a part.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁸⁶ Azoulay, “Unshowable Photographs”, n.p.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., italics in the original.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

What can be further reiterated in this context is also a potential personal limitation of showing a photograph of death or suffering due to a sense of personal ethical responsibility. Who has the right to see and to show an atrocity image, even if the latter exists, and in what context? This question has been a recurrent theme in the whole thesis and has already been approached through the lens of the “encounter” of the “frame” in Chapter 1 and the “face” in Chapter 2.

On a theoretical level, this chapter is based on Azoulay’s notion of the “civil contract of photography”. As has already been stated from the Introduction, this concept lies at the foundation of this thesis’ approach towards the ethics and politics of spectatorship. However, in the following analysis I provide an expansion of this framework to include a political understanding of negative emotions, especially anxiety. This expansion is based on two thorny issues that to my mind come up in applications of this framework both to photographs and to artworks that deal with atrocities. First, atrocity images undeniably cause negative feelings such as horror or fear, to different extents depending on the gruesome nature of what is visible. Second, in cases where the atrocity is no longer visible within the frame, there is a question of how one can become part of the photographic “contract”. As I will explain, the examination of anxiety is one of the main shifts that the invisible atrocity image can introduce to this discussion. Therefore, this chapter will explore how anxiety can be linked with the “citizenship of photography” in a way that creates an “anxious citizen” who will be able to acknowledge the atrocity in a constructive way through a “slow spectatorship”, as I call it. At the same time, this new spectatorship of such “over(t)-aestheticised” invisible atrocity images, as I called them in Chapter 1, will allow the spectator to overcome their desensitised condition, as examined in previous chapters.

In this analysis, one of the core issues that lies at the centre of the spectatorship is how visual censorship has been used in the 21st century. Visual censorship was examined in Chapter 2, where a link was made between types of censorship that create partial concealment, especially in social media. In this chapter, I will examine types of censorship that have rendered whole parts of contemporary gruesome histories – namely contemporary cases of deaths resulting from wars and the “9/11 domino effect”, as I call it – fully invisible. In this sense, the questions posed here recall those explored in Chapter 1 regarding Butler’s questioning of whose lives are considered “grievable”. The facets of moderation of visual production that these case studies touch echo Hariman and Lucaites’ suggestion that:

Government “embedding” requirements to control photographic access to the war zone are thought to be a significant restriction on what can be shown, while some regimes skip the niceties and censor, bludgeon, imprison, rape, or kill journalists who refuse to comply with the party line. In any contest between vision and violence, violence seems to have the upper hand.⁵⁸⁹

The artworks in this chapter challenge exactly this: the dominance of violence over vision. The way they achieve this is by utilising invisibility in order to stress the lack of visibility due to political reasons. And, although none of the following case studies deal with the violent treatment of photojournalists, Khaled Barakeh’s work, which will be analysed at the end of the chapter, is linked to the violence of authoritarian powers in the production of the visible in the context of contemporary Syria.

Although contemporary to the aforementioned case study, the first two artworks of this chapter touch on a different kind of violence: namely, the censorship that is created by the system of embedded journalism. The union of war and censorship is not a contemporary story; what has changed is the manner in which they are orchestrated. As Sontag notes,

⁵⁸⁹ Hariman and Lucaites, *The Public Image*, 172.

[t]here ha[s] always been censorship, but for a long time it remained desultory, at the pleasure of generals and heads of state. The first organized ban on press photography at the front came during the First World War; both the German and French high commands allowed only a few selected military photographers near the fighting.⁵⁹⁰

Later in the Gulf War of the 1990s, as the historian Steven Casey explains, “[a]s in World War I, the media was grouped into pools”.⁵⁹¹ These “pools” regulated the number of journalists that could get in the war-zone, while of course the content that they would publish was regulated by a series of “rules” set by the US Department of Defense.⁵⁹² Although these rules imposed censorship, for a lot of the journalists on the ground this was not the main issue; more important was the lack of “access to real people and events [which] was greatly limited by the pool system”.⁵⁹³ Hence the view of the war was highly selective.

Although with different terminology, a very similar system was implemented for the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions which followed 9/11. In these cases, the US army introduced the system of “embedded journalists”, who “travel with the soldiers and share their experiences”.⁵⁹⁴ Of course, this meant that it was very plausible that the outcome would be from “a very limited perspective”.⁵⁹⁵ And this was indeed the case, as will be further elaborated in the analysis of the first case study.

The following analysis is as an elaboration of my previous writing, where, through the prism of Azoulay’s “civil contract of photography”, I explored Broomberg and Chanarin’s *The*

⁵⁹⁰ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 58.

⁵⁹¹ Steven Casey, *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 207. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁵⁹² Loup Langton, *Photojournalism and Today’s News: Creating Visual Reality* (Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 196. For a history of the media coverage of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, see Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media At War* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 131–145.

⁵⁹³ Langton, *Photojournalism and Today’s New*, 196.

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

Day Nobody Died (2008), a series of photograms and a video installation.⁵⁹⁶ There I proposed that the “civil contracts”, despite the invisible character of the work, could still be read because of the supportive existence of the text in the descriptive captions. At the same time, I explained how in these cases the Azoulean “civil imagination” was a very important part of the spectatorship in order to activate the contracts. Yet, what I was dismissing in this analysis was the fact that the invisibility of these pieces can also create emotions to the spectator; especially anxiety. Hence the experience of anxiety is the main factor that includes the spectator in this “photographic civil contract”, as I will explain in this chapter. At the same time, the “civil imagination” is linked to memory and iconism.

Yet, why anxiety? To my mind, anxiety is the vehicle for the creation of curiosity, which can guide one to engage on a deeper level with the photographs, as will propose by utilising George E. Marcus’ political theory. Hence, in this context, emotions should not be perceived via the psychoanalytical lens of trauma, but as an invocation to further our understanding of a political terminology while describing the spectatorship of atrocity images. The research hypothesis of this chapter is that anxiety can be used as a productive negative experience that can allow the spectators to re-activate the “civil contract of photography”. Anxiety functions as a bridge between rationality – the prerequisite of a visual analysis with legal-political terms, as Azoulay proposes – and the emotional aspect that the majority of people experience when encountering a difficult (i.e., atrocity) image.

In this chapter, facets of this theoretical proposition will be drawn from and simultaneously examined through three contemporary artistic examples. The works belong in the era of the “9/11 domino effect”, as I called it in the introduction. Therefore, the first case study

⁵⁹⁶ Here I refer to my MA dissertation, with the title *Artistic Representations of Atrocity and Azoulay’s “Civil Contract of Photography”: Three Contemporary Examples*, that was submitted to the Department of History of Art, University of York in the Academic Year of 2014–2015 and was supervised by Dr James Boaden.

refers to the war in Afghanistan, the second to the war in Iraq, the third to the war in Syria and the fourth (in the Coda) to the refugee and migrant crisis in the Mediterranean (which to a large extent has been a result of all these aforementioned wars).

The analysis will begin with Broomberg and Chanarin's aforementioned series of photograms, *The Day Nobody Died* (2008), and particularly *The Fixer's Execution, June 7, 2008*. The photograms of this series bear many formal similarities with Dihn Q. Lê's series of *Scrolls* (2014 – 2017), and in particular *The Scroll of Thich Quang Duc* (2014) that was analysed in Chapter 1. Broomberg and Chanarin's artwork will be approached through the lens of the "civil contract of photography", and it will be discussed how invisibility in this case may trigger the spectatorship of an "image *for* agony". Here, a system of censorship, namely the embedded photojournalism of the 21st century Afghanistan war, was rejected through the creation of a "refusal" – both political and visual.⁵⁹⁷

The second artwork, which will also be examined as a set of invisible atrocity images that demand an "anxious spectator", is David Birkin's *Profiles* (2012). The latter approaches the same issue of systems of censorship, such as embedded photojournalism in the 21st century Iraq war, but from a different angle and at a different physical distance at the point of creation. Hence, while Broomberg and Chanarin created their photograms in the war zone, Birkin utilised an online database that keeps a record of the Iraqi civilian casualties, touching therefore upon another type of violence and politically induced censorship: the lack of registering of deaths. In this case, the spectators would be capable of understanding the artwork and having an ethical reaction by utilising their "civil imagination", which could allow them to experience anxiety and have a more comprehensive acknowledgment of the dead others.

⁵⁹⁷ For more see Coda of Chapter 1,

The third artwork that is discussed in this chapter is Khaled Barakeh's *Relentless Images* (2018), putting these two artists' work in dialogue as in Chapter 2. This is an installation of many different gruesome "portraits", as is Birkin's *Profiles*. In this case, the images that are conceptually appropriated represent the violent deaths by torture in a Syrian prison. The ethical apprehension here demands an extra step during the spectatorship, as some of the images of this "archive" exist on the web but are often pixelated for legal purposes. In this context, I will discuss how a "slow spectatorship", as I call it, is necessary to create an "anxious spectator" that will be capable of having an ethical reaction towards the dead other who is no longer even identifiable. This slow spectatorship does not depend on the temporality of the artwork, but should be seen as linked to the process of viewing in an Azoulean framework, in which citizenship is regained through the reconstruction of the encounter with the "event", as explained throughout this chapter: both the photographed and the photographic.

According to Azoulay, one can even conceptually regain their citizenship through the use of photography, which creates a "citizenry" that does not exclude anyone.⁵⁹⁸ Yet, what happens when no photograph exists of the other who suffered a violent death, and in particular an other who had already lost their civilian rights in their country, rendering them – in different ways and for different reasons – a "non-citizen"? How is the spectator expected to recognise the other in order to give them back their citizenship through an ethical recognition that can happen through the existence of the photographic contract?

In this chapter, I chose to analyse these three artworks together as they bear certain similarities. First, all three of them allow one to consider issues that emerge from the purely invisible and visually absent. What does it mean for a political system to render certain parts of the populace (i.e., citizens, to echo Azoulay's terminology), or more specifically their loss,

⁵⁹⁸ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 128.

invisible? Can an artwork that utilises invisibility in its own right highlight this political invisibility? Second, these works function as visualisation of what has remained invisible due to total censorship.

Concluding the chapter, the Coda will examine similar issues through the opposite methodological structure, as in previous chapters. By taking as a starting point the image of Alan Kurdi, I will examine how other refugees and migrants that also lost their lives in the Mediterranean were mostly not seen in a photograph; or, if they were, their image never reached a viral, hence iconic, status. In other words, these people did not even become citizens of the “citizenry of photography”.⁵⁹⁹ The only amendment of this situation is found through *The List* which has been disseminated through the artistic installations of Banu Cennetoğlu. Like Birkin’s and Barakeh’s works, this installation functions as a means of making visible the invisible. Yet, the two other works utilise a specific number of “portraits” in every installation and try to create a visualisation of the invisible. Cennetoğlu’s work, on the contrary, is nothing more than a very long list of data. In this case, I will propose that, on the one hand, “slow spectatorship” is again needed for one to be able to engage in the “civil contracts” of all these “untaken” photographs; on the other hand, the spectator in this case is transformed into an “anxious spectator” due to the vast number of losses that *The List* highlights. The repetition of losses demands one to comprehend the incomprehensible in a contemporary political crisis.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid.

3.1 The “Civil Contract” of an Image *for Agony*: Broomberg and Chanarin’s *The Day Nobody Died* (2008)

The Day Nobody Died was created in June 2008, by the London-based artistic duo Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin.⁶⁰⁰ The project comprised of twelve abstract, colourful photograms, and a looped video installation (Fig. 85 / Fig. 86).⁶⁰¹ The photograms were created in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, with the use of light-sensitive paper and without the use of a camera. This project was actualised in the conflict zone, while the two artists were embedded with the British Army in the “deadliest” week of the war since 2001.⁶⁰² They managed to get access to the war zone by faking a journalistic profession, using letters from *The Guardian* and *The Observer* as evidence of their identity.⁶⁰³ Their stay there had a strong performative element – “the whole thing became a performance”, as Broomberg explains.⁶⁰⁴ After ten days, the army discovered their actual identities and started “demoting” them in order to send them back to London.⁶⁰⁵

For context, it would be useful to explain what the artists’ intentions were, and what triggered the idea for the whole project. With *The Day Nobody Died*, the artistic duo wanted to criticise the censorship produced by the system of embedded photojournalism, which creates a sanitised version of warfare and perpetuates invisibility. Yet, they also wanted to highlight the

⁶⁰⁰ The project was displayed for the first time in the Paradise Row Gallery in London (12 September – 26 October 2008).

⁶⁰¹ The video can be seen here: Broomberg & Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died (2008)”, 18 May 2017, YouTube video, 23:06, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://youtu.be/HHLtElcCkZ8>.

⁶⁰² Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died: Presented at the Barbican Art Gallery, 4th December 2008”.

⁶⁰³ Broomberg and Chanarin, “Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin”, interview by Sabine Mirlesse, *BOMB Magazine* 130 (Winter 2015), accessed 8 Nov. 2020, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2000048/adam-broomberg-and-oliver-chanarin>.

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

fact that photography has a “one-way flow of power”.⁶⁰⁶ In these terms, they also questioned if and how photojournalism can capture human suffering, though they did not undermine the importance of its existence: “[w]e do believe that suffering demands a witness”.⁶⁰⁷ To echo Butler’s words:

“Embedded” reporting implies that reporters working under such conditions agree not to make the mandating of perspective *itself* into a topic to be reported or discussed; hence these reporters offered access to the war only on the condition that their gaze remain restricted to the established parameters of designated action.⁶⁰⁸

Broomberg and Chanarin make a comment on that “restricted” gaze by creating “a performative act of resistance”.⁶⁰⁹ It is a “deal with the devil”, as Broomberg calls it, as all these photographers exchange “access to the battlefield, for self-censorship and outside scrutiny”.⁶¹⁰ This means that every embedded photographer has to sign a form that they will not capture any dead or wounded people.⁶¹¹ This visual suppression is a kind of politically organised “invisibility”, which also lies behind David Birkin’s *Profiles* (2012), which is discussed below.

Recalling what was mentioned in this chapter’s introduction regarding the first Gulf War and the “pools system”, David Campbell explains that this kind of embedded imagery in Afghanistan “focused on the military struggles of international forces as they combat an ‘elusive’

⁶⁰⁶ Broomberg and Chanarin, “Be Furious You’re Going to Die”, interview by Adam Carr, *Mousse* 45 (2014): 145, accessed 13 Nov. 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56e1e3e24d088e6834d4fbf4/t/57a1fc1b8419c2447ee618fd/1494939641446/T-EXT+-+Be+Furious+Your+Going+To+Die>.

⁶⁰⁷ Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died”.

⁶⁰⁸ Butler, *Frames of War*, 64, italics in the original.

⁶⁰⁹ Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, “A Conversation with Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin”, interview by Joerg Colberg, *Conscientius*, 22 July 2013, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://cphmag.com/convo-broomberg-chanarin/>.

⁶¹⁰ Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, interview by Ashraf Qizilbash, *Under the Influence Magazine* (May 2014), accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56e1e3e24d088e6834d4fbf4/t/591c2d40be6594a480f4cbae/1495018818687/ARTICLE+34+-+Under+The+Influence.pdf>; Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died”.

⁶¹¹ Broomberg and Chanarin, interview by Qizilbash.

opponent, with soldiers and their weaponry front and center”.⁶¹² This kind of image production has its own political purpose. Butler, in a nuanced manner, discusses the relationship of spectatorship with the perpetuation of war.

Can there be the continuation of war or, indeed, the escalation of war, as we are now witnessing in Afghanistan, without first preparing and structuring the public understanding of what war is, and without suppressing any visual, audible, or narrative accounts of war that might break open a popular resistance to war?⁶¹³

The Day Nobody Died emerged from two previous events that the two artists experienced. First, a visit to a military hospital with amputated and psychologically damaged soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan made them rethink how one can capture and represent trauma.⁶¹⁴ According to them, if images make the spectators feel compassion, “the act of looking” although “cathartic”, will always be “passive” and “worthless”.⁶¹⁵ This to my view recalls Azoulay’s shift in the theoretical field. The second experience relates to what was discussed in Chapter 1 regarding Carter’s photo of the Sudanese girl and Jaar’s appropriation. In March 2008, the artistic duo participated in the judging panel of the World Press Photo Award and wrote a text for the judging process.⁶¹⁶ There they encountered many images by embedded photographers which made them reconsider the limits of this system. Therefore, this project would function as a “post-mortem of photojournalistic representation of conflict”.⁶¹⁷ Finally, a blurred image of the murder of Benazir

⁶¹² David Campbell, “How Photojournalism Has Framed the War in Afghanistan”, in *In/visible War: The Culture of War in Twenty-first-Century America*, ed. Jon Simons and John Louis Lucaites (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 28–29. Kindle Edition.

⁶¹³ Butler, “On the Relationship Between Precarity and State Power”.

⁶¹⁴ Broomberg and Chanarin, “Interview with Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin”, interview by Julian Stallabrass, in *Memory of Fire: Images of War and the War of Images* (Brighton: Photoworks, 2013), 132.

⁶¹⁵ Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died”.

⁶¹⁶ Broomberg and Chanarin, “Unconcerned but not Indifferent”.

⁶¹⁷ Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died”.

Bhutto, rewarded in that year's contest, functioned as a stimulus for the idea of the photogram (Fig. 87).⁶¹⁸

In the context of this analysis, only the photograms will be examined under the light of the “civil contract of photography” in order to show if and how the “contract” can be applied successfully to invisible atrocity images. As explained in the thesis' Introduction, in Azoulay's framework these photograms by being in a war zone were produced in the “disaster conditions”.⁶¹⁹ During the week the artistic duo was embedded the number of dead reached 100. On the first day, a fixer and nine Afghan soldiers were killed; on the second, three British soldiers died; on the third, eight more people, etc. The only day that “nobody was reported to have been killed” was the fifth day of their embedding, from which the whole project took its title.⁶²⁰ These deadly events were “captured” only in a conceptual manner, as no actual photographic “encounter” took place.⁶²¹ The only proof of what the photograms aim to represent lies on their literal titles: *The Fixer's Execution, June 7, 2008* (Fig. 88); *The Brothers' Suicide, June 7, 2008* (Fig. 89); *The Day of One Hundred Dead, June 8, 2008* (Fig. 90); *The Press Conference, June 9, 2008* (Fig. 91); *The Duke of York, June 10, 2008* (Fig. 92); *The Day Nobody Died (I–V), June 10, 2008* (Fig. 93); *The Jail Break, June 12, 2008* (Fig. 94); and *The Repatriation, June 16, 2008* (Fig. 95).

The extreme abstractness of the photograms and the way this artwork was created (in the war zone) has not failed to give this project the status of one of the most provocative and widely mentioned artworks in the field of art, photography and war. As the two artists summarise, many

⁶¹⁸ Ibid. The World Press Photo of the Year for 2016, which was a tribute to the European refugee and migrant crisis. Richardson's photograph, entitled *Hope For a New Life*, bears very similar characteristics to Bhutto's image, making thus one question if blurriness is perceived as authenticity. For the image, see: “2016 Photo Contest; Spot News; Warren Richardson”, World Press Photo, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2016/28728/1/2016-Warren-Richardson-SN1>.

⁶¹⁹ Azoulay, “The Execution Portrait”, 251.

⁶²⁰ Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died”.

⁶²¹ For “encounter”, see Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 395.

people considered it as “a waste of money and time” that risked “soldiers’ lives”.⁶²² It is true that this practice raises a whole series of very troubling ethical questions, such as if an artist has the right to create a conceptual artwork in the middle of a conflict zone. In a rather harsh critique, Sean O’Hagan calls it “patronising” and “arrogant”, some kind of a “conceptual joke”.⁶²³ However, this “conceptual joke” creates a very specific type of photographic “civil contract”.

One could suggest that the problematic nature of the “contracts” – which are conceptually produced for every photogram between the two artists, the invisible sufferer or dead other, and the spectators – is to be found in the concealment of the artists’ identity. Yet, that is not the case, as the duo explained what they were doing to every soldier that asked them, because, as Broomberg says, that was “part of the work”.⁶²⁴ Their concept was to lie to the system that controls the visible, not to the “photographed” or conceptual – as one could call them – participants of these “contracts”: “[y]ou can lie up until the point when you have access”, Broomberg explains.⁶²⁵

Despite the fact that no camera apparatus is involved in the production of these images, the existence of a photographic “contract” is highlighted by the very literal and informative titles. Although the “event of photography” in this case is not mediated by a camera, the performative existence of the photosensitive paper in the middle of the war zone allows one to examine the “contracts” produced in this “event”. The “reconstruction” of this “event” can take place with the aid of three parameters: i) the literal titles, ii) the video that shows the context of production of the photograms and iii) the exhibition texts that are provided in every case. Of course, one’s “civil imagination” is a prerequisite, as will be shown subsequently.

⁶²² Broomberg and Chanarin, interview by Qizilbash.

⁶²³ SOURCE Photographic Review, “What is Conceptual Photography? (part 3)”, 18 Sept. 2012, YouTube video, at 13:59, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://youtu.be/9TvpXG9fLqo>.

⁶²⁴ Broomberg and Chanarin, interview by Mirlesse.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

One of the most crucial parts of this work, in terms of contextualisation, is the video, as it indicates the context of creation and gives meaning to this artistic statement.⁶²⁶ This looped video – with sounds only from the surroundings, but not specific dialogue – lasts 23:06 minutes and shows the transport of a “sealed, lightproof box” from the artists’ studio in London (Fig. 96) towards the “theatre of war” in Helmand Province.⁶²⁷ The spectators watch this box – carried mostly by soldiers – as it changes environments: a taxi, a civilian and a military airport, armoured vehicles, helicopters, military bases, etc. (Fig. 97). In other words, “The Box” became a kind of a “proxy”, or even a representation of “a coffin on its repatriation journey”.⁶²⁸ As Broomberg explains, the video has a double role: to shed light on “the banal ecosystem of a conflict zone” and to indicate “how art can lie to and expose power”.⁶²⁹ The moving images of the box’s journey became a peculiar performance, with the British Army being an unsuspected participant, thus raising ethical questions for the conscious role of the artists.⁶³⁰

Yet, what is the link to the particular box? This box contained a 50 m. long and 76.2 cm. tall roll of photographic paper from which the photograms were made. For each photogram, six metres of photographic paper were exposed to the sun for 20 seconds in the middle of a conflict zone, hence in the space where, conventionally, a photojournalist would have raised their camera. The processing of the photographic paper took place also in situ, as the two artists used the back part of an armoured vehicle as a darkroom.⁶³¹ Hence, these photograms gain their importance because they were “physically in that place, bearing witness”.⁶³²

⁶²⁶ Broomberg and Chanarin, interview by Stallabrass, 137.

⁶²⁷ Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died”.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Broomberg and Chanarin, interview by Carr, 145.

⁶³⁰ Broomberg and Chanarin, “Points of Memory: Broomberg and Chanarin”, Tate, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/points-memory-broomberg-and-chanarin>.

⁶³¹ Broomberg and Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died”.

⁶³² Broomberg and Chanarin, “Points of memory”.

An illuminating example to further explain this construction of the “contract”, is *The Fixer’s Execution, June 7, 2008* (Fig. 88). As the artists mention, this image was created in the first day of being embedded when a “BBC fixer was dragged from his car and executed”.⁶³³ Here the conceptual “contract” is created between the artistic duo, the dead fixer and the spectator, who are not able to see anything of the actual event, apart from red, white and black shades on a paper. However, as Anna Altman suggests, “[w]e see it in our mind’s eye: a man performing his job, suddenly desperate when he’s pulled from his car”.⁶³⁴ This despair is something that the spectator can only imagine if they use their “civil gazes” and if they have had encountered in the past such “*énoncés* of horror”, which are usually linked with “apparatuses of memory”, that certify their “commemoration”.⁶³⁵ The most easily commemorated images are usually iconic or viral photographs, as has already been discussed. So, how could a spectator engage in this “civil contract of photography” and recognise the other in their invisible existence here, while the actual war did not create any similar icons/virals?

In 1972, the art critic John Berger wrote the essay “Photographs of Agony”.⁶³⁶ In this text he explains the two rationales (especially in the case of the Vietnam War) that supported the publication of images of “agony”.⁶³⁷ The one reason for showing horror is to show the “truth” that the readers were craving. The second reason, however, aligns more closely with Sontag’s initial beliefs on the desensitisation of the spectators, meaning that the newspapers had to compete to show the most “violent sensationalism”.⁶³⁸ However, ultimately, for the Marxist Berger, the “contradicting” nature of “war photography” was based on the assumption that its “purpose is to

⁶³³ Ibid., 1.

⁶³⁴ Anna Altman, “Reframing War”, *Conveyor Magazine* (August 2012): 108, accessed 17 Nov. 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56e1e3e24d088e6834d4fbf4/t/591c2b3844024368be650b52/1495018305439/ARTICLE+24+-+Reframing.pdf>.

⁶³⁵ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 68.

⁶³⁶ Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 30–33.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 31.

awaken concern”.⁶³⁹ And, even when the spectator is not fully desensitised, the outcome of the process of spectatorship is causing a feeling of “moral inadequacy” to the spectator. As Berger explains,

[e]ither he [the viewer] shrugs off this sense of inadequacy as being only too familiar, or else he thinks of performing a kind of penance – of which the purest example would be to make a contribution to OXFAM or to UNICEF. In both cases, the issue of the war which has caused that moment is effectively depoliticized. The picture becomes evidence of the general human condition. It accuses nobody and everybody.⁶⁴⁰

However, as Cohen, who comments on Berger, aptly suggests “[w]e worry about our own moral inadequacy or our psychic tendency to deny – *instead* of turning to a political critique of the atrocities”.⁶⁴¹ This critique was the main reason why photojournalistic atrocity images were reconsidered in the context of human right campaigns.⁶⁴² Yet, I think that there is a middle space between these two views, which demands anyone that looks at a photograph of an atrocity to consider the depicted (and rendered invisible in this context) other. In my opinion, without this step, one is incapable of thinking a step further and providing any real political critique. So, how can we acknowledge the “agony” of the photographed other in a way that will function as “a political critique” of the actual photographed event, in other words to reverse the potential “political atrophy”?⁶⁴³ The proposition in this context will be: through agony.

Agony derives from the ancient Greek word *αγωνία* [agonia], noun from the root *αγών*, which means contest.⁶⁴⁴ According to the Oxford Dictionary, agony means “pain, hurt, suffering,

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁴¹ Cohen, *States of Denial*, 301, italics in the original.

⁶⁴² For more see Linfield, *Cruel Radiancy*, 33–62.

⁶⁴³ Here I use the term “political atrophy” in the way that Cohen proposes it as being the one of the two forms of “persistent denial”, while the other is “personal pathology”. For more see, Cohen, *States of Denial*, 278.

⁶⁴⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “agony”, accessed 16 May 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/4114?redirectedFrom=agony>.

torture, torment, anguish, affliction, trauma”.⁶⁴⁵ In Berger’s title this word indicates a synonymous terminology of “atrocities image”. As already explained in the Introduction of the thesis, according to the most straightforward definition, atrocities image is a photograph that shows extreme violence, and usually involves someone’s body.⁶⁴⁶ Of course, such photographic representations are indicative of the “atrocities” or “agony” in which the sufferer’s / the photographed other’s body is or was before dying. Therefore, they could be called “photographs of agony”, with the “agony” being descriptive of the other’s situation. Yet, what happens when the otherwise visually depicted “agony” of a (most probably) graphic image is concealed or withheld from one’s eyes, and thus rendered invisible?

The “agony” in this case is being created from the invisible, instead of the visible. Hence, in such artistic practices the “photographs of agony” are being transformed into “images *for* agony”, with the word “agony” having the Greek meaning of the word *αγωνία*, that in English could be translated as anguish or anxiety. Thus, the pressing factor is being moved from the sufferer to the spectator who has to acknowledge and cope with the agony of the sufferer other, who cannot be seen anymore, but the title and the memory of similar gruesome material – potentially iconic – forces the spectator to recognise. The invisibility therefore, in this case, creates a situation of anxiety. Of course, this situation has different levels of effectiveness depending on the iconic (or not status) of photography, as it has been discussed throughout the thesis, especially in the Codas.

The research hypothesis here is that, if the concept of the “civil contract of photography” is placed next to this idea of the “images *for* agony”, then it will be possible to consider how the

⁶⁴⁵ *Oxford Paperback Thesaurus*, s.v. “agony”, ed. Maurice Waite (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), accessed 8 Nov. 2020, https://www-oxfordreference-com.libproxy.york.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199640959.001.0001/t-en_gb-msthes-00019-0000361.

⁶⁴⁶ Jay Prosser, “Introduction”, 10; Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*, 39.

spectatorship of artistic practises that conceal atrocity images – namely of invisible atrocity images – can create a spectator that will combine the political responsibility with their emotional reaction in order to experience their place in the “photographic civil contract” in an effective manner.

Of course, effectiveness can be a very thorny issue, and probably quite subjective. In this context, regarding images of atrocities, my suggestion is that it has to do with a process of acknowledgment. In other words, one must overcome what Cohen calls “state of denial”.⁶⁴⁷ Visual culture lies at the core of this discussion, as Cohen seems to admit when suggesting that “[t]he subject of this book [*States of Denial*] is only conceivable within images generated by the mass media”.⁶⁴⁸ Of course, the most difficult part emerges in the proposition of how this acknowledgment can happen. In my view, this is only possible through learning. In other words, through a rational appreciation of the visible, which as it is proposed here, can happen with “invisibility”, and the accompanying “anxiety” that exists during the spectatorship of the invisible atrocity images. Learning, in this context, however, can be taken for praising a kind of didacticism. But, as the artist David Birkin puts it very nicely:

In their most reductive form, debates around art and activism speak to a prevailing art world snobbery that deems “didactic” a dirty word, and polemics as tantamount to agitprop. Despite the success of socially and politically engaged public art organizations [...] many art consumers have internalized a set of biases which privilege oblique strategies in place of more explicit critique, retaining a veneer of neutrality and Postmodern ironic distance while dealing with even the most urgent and emotive political issues.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁷ Cohen, *States of Denial*.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁴⁹ David Birkin, “Sous les Pavés, la Plage: On Assumption and Authority”, IBRAAZ, 6 May 2016, accessed 10 Sept. 2020, <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/150>.

In my view, one can find a more “explicit critique” of contemporary politics in Broomberg and Chanarin’s photograms. However, even when the visual artwork moves away from “oblique strategies” or “neutrality”, a caveat always exists in the sense that learning always depends on the engagement of the spectator, and their close “reading” of the (visual) information provided.

Hence, it is important to state clearly at this point that the theoretical proposition made here is a spectatorship that, as will be explained throughout this chapter, can be successful under specific premises. The most important premise in this context is one that underpins this whole thesis: invisibility can function in the proposed ways when the spectator is ready to experience it. In other words, if the spectator is still captive in Plato’s cave, then the invisibility in itself will not be enough to trigger an ethical response to the person.

The political theorist, George Marcus, recognises these slippery aspects of learning, and for that reason he proposes the importance of anxiety, which will be closely examined subsequently.

One of the results of this shift to conscious awareness is an incentive for learning. Learned knowledge has suddenly and unexpectedly proved inadequate. So learning, taking place here and now, paying attention to what the contemporary situation can tell us, is warranted. Anxiety promotes immediate learning while at the same time it diminishes reliance on the previously learned.⁶⁵⁰

In this sense, learning can be linked with a deep understanding, and therefore acknowledging, a situation that is linked with “paying attention”, and therefore with the economy of attention. That is the bottom line when one talks about ethics and responsibility towards the depicted sufferer or dead person – at least to acknowledge the other’s situation. Here my view implies that, when the discussion evolves around visual material, expecting in a non-idealist world that one could act in

⁶⁵⁰ Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen*, 102.

a way that could stop the depicted atrocious situation in a straightforward manner is a contemporary fallacy: the fallacy of an acting/re-acting political spectator.

In order to return to the concept of a “photograph *for* agony”, it is important to recognise how the situation of the spectatorship can be seen to be influenced by the situation of “agony” into which the spectator is introduced. By taking as a main focus one of the photograms, one can examine at this point how it can be perceived as an “image *for* agony” during the spectatorship. The photogram, *The Press Conference, June 9, 2008*, (Fig. 91) like all the photograms of this series, has very large size (72.6 x 600 cm) and is an abstract image with different colours. The colours fade in from the left-hand side, where there is almost black shadowing, towards the right-hand side, where the paper is overtaken by white, with some parts in blue and dark red. In other words, one can only see different colours of abstract imprints. No army personnel, microphones, cameras nor a room packed with photojournalists, as one would have anticipated from the title.⁶⁵¹ However, in the case of the Tate exhibition with which this thesis began, the spectator had two aids for understanding that what was displayed was made in the middle of an actual conflict zone: the caption with the title and the brief description, and the curatorial context. The image-text relation – which has been questioned through different contexts in both previous chapters – is particularly important in this case, because as Broomberg admits, without some extra information such projects might be “meaningless”.⁶⁵²

The caption at the Tate exhibition, apart from the title *The Press Conference, June 9, 2008, The Day Nobody Died 2008*, which was placing the specific photogram under the whole project that has a direct verbal reference to a space of death, also provided a written description of Broomberg and Chanarin’s practice for the creation of these photograms. Through the

⁶⁵¹ The press conference room, although empty, exists in the video too, Broomberg & Chanarin, “The Day Nobody Died (2008)”, YouTube, at 12:14.

⁶⁵² Broomberg and Chanarin, interview by Mirlesse.

contextual information of the caption, the spectator is able to realise that the visual is a reference to a very deadly war. This realisation is the main reason that the spectator becomes an “anxious citizen” of photography, in other words it puts them in a position of feeling anxiety during the spectatorship.

However, the most important aid for this realisation is the exhibition context. At Tate, the photogram was placed in the first room of the exhibition, entitled “Moments Later”.⁶⁵³ As was already mentioned in the Introduction of this thesis, in the same room, the visitor could see an image of a soldier and four aftermath (though only by a few seconds) photographs of disasters – wars, explosions, bombardments.⁶⁵⁴ Of course, every image captures a different historical event, something that indicates a curatorial ethics that highlights an historical relativism. But the context made the spectator inclined to think that what they were looking at was something purely abstract on the one hand, but with a direct reference to an atrocious event, namely a war, on the other. Hence, the photogram functions as an “image *for* agony”, in which the spectator is inclined to experience the “anxiety” of not being able to see what is otherwise rationally imagined as existent – namely the atrocity. In this particular case, though, it is even more interesting that the spectators are inclined to imagine something that a whole system of censorship never allowed them to visually experience.

The anxiety is caused by the lack of a visible image, which reverses one of the rules of “how to engineer an international event” that Rony Brauman, key member of Médecins Sans Frontières, suggests: “[p]ictures, not words, turn an incident into an event; they should be

⁶⁵³ The rationale of the exhibition was as follows, “Rather than offering a history of conflict told through photographs, CONFLICT-TIME-PHOTOGRAPHY is ordered through the act of looking backwards. First come images made moments after the events they depict, then those made days later, then weeks and months later, and finally years later [...]” (sic). Simon Baker and Shoair Mavlian, ed., *Conflict-Time-Photography*, Exhibition Catalogue (London: Tate, 2014), 1.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., 2–5 and 8–11.

available as a continuous flow to be tapped several times a day for cumulative effect”.⁶⁵⁵ Yet, if the words are there in a way that highlights the invisibility of the once conceptually (as in the case of the photograms) or indexically (as in many other of the previously analysed case studies) visible, anxiety can conquer the spectatorship, triggering then the imagination of the spectator.

Although emotions here should be involved, the effect that this photographic “encounter” has on the spectator will be much more rational in terms of acknowledging – and part-taking in the “civil contract of photography”, in comparison with “encounters” of photojournalistic images. Why is that? It is pending to be seen in the analysis of the following example, regarding the creation of an “anxious spectator”.

⁶⁵⁵ Rory Brauman, “When Suffering Makes a Good Story”, in *Life, Death and Aid*, ed., Francois Jean (London: Routledge, 1993). For a critical discussion of this text see Cohen, *States of Denial*, 173–177.

3.2 Towards the Creation of an Anxious Spectator: David Birkin's *Profiles* (2012)

In 2012, the British artist David Birkin created *Profiles* (Fig. 98), a series of monochromatic portraits of Iraqi civilians who died since the invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁶⁵⁶ By utilizing invisibility in its own right, this piece underlines multiple aspects of issues of induced invisibility in war, both on a political and a visual level. The spectator of *Profiles* encounters an installation of white hospital X-Ray light boxes positioned along a wall in a placement that creates evenly spaced gaps between them. On each box is displayed one monochromatic photographic transparency, in a spectrum of red colours. On the left-hand side of the black border line of each transparency, appears a unique digital inscription in the format of a filename – which to my mind provides an indexical relationship between a traumatic loss and its abstract representation (Fig. 99). These read, for example:

alaa_afar_ahmed__daughter_of_afar_ahmed_zeidan__age_6__killed_by_us_air_strike__iraq_body_count_number_bc1212__=__HEX_color_value__#bc1212__=__RGB_equivalent_188_18_18__.jpg

ahmad_amer_ibrahim__furniture_shopkeeper__age_19__drive_by_shooting__iraq_body_count_number__eb1801__=__HEX_colour_value__#eb1801__=__RGB_equivalent_235_16_1__.jpg⁶⁵⁷

Every inscription has a name, occupation, age, cause of death and identification number. The latter is because for the creation of this piece, the artist used identification numbers from *Iraq Body Count*, an NGO with an open access database that records the violent deaths of Iraqi civilians.⁶⁵⁸ As the artist explains, “[t]he process involved inserting identification numbers from

⁶⁵⁶ “Profiles, 2012”, David Birkin, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.davidbirkin.net/art/#/profiles/>.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁸ “About the Iraq Body Count project”, Iraq Body Count, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/about/>.

the Iraqi civilian casualty database into photographic software to generate a chromatic ‘value’ for each person.”⁶⁵⁹ These colours were exposed onto 8 x 10 inch transparencies, which are then positioned on X-Ray light boxes that the artist collected from British and American hospitals.⁶⁶⁰

To my view, when encountering the image of a dead person who suffered a violent death, one has an ethical responsibility on two levels: firstly, for looking at it, and secondly, more idealistically, for not having been able to prevent this death. This can be traced also to the rationale of *Iraq Body Count*, which states that “US and UK citizens bear particular responsibility for events in Iraq”, exactly because the invasion was made by their armies.⁶⁶¹ This phrase stresses one’s responsibility as a citizen of countries that either caused these deaths or allowed them to take place, a position in which many people find themselves. How can we think both about the ethical responsibility of citizenship and spectatorship in *Profiles*? And how can one bear their responsibility for the “dead” people in *Profiles* through the spectatorship of this highly abstract artwork? In this context, I will propose that in order for spectators to be able to perform their Azoulean “civil gaze” in regard to the *Profiles*, they will have to be transformed into “anxious spectators”.

As already explained, Azoulay’s reading of documentary images is based on an examination of the three participants in the photographic act: the photographer, the photographed person and the spectator.⁶⁶² These three participants create the “citizenry of photography”, which does not exclude anybody from its “collective”.⁶⁶³ It includes both “citizens” and “noncitizens”.⁶⁶⁴ Therefore it could be argued that with *Profiles*, Birkin tries to bring back the inclusivity that “the

⁶⁵⁹ “Profiles, 2012”.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ “3. US and UK citizens bear particular responsibility for events in Iraq”, *Iraq Body Count*, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/about/rationale/2>.

⁶⁶² Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 23.

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 128.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid., 37.

citizenry of photography” should have according to Azoulay, as it is “borderless and open” citizenry.⁶⁶⁵ Birkin’s corrective action is moving against systems of censorship and visual exclusion, or in the artist’s words, “[a]s a series of failed photographs, these monochrome portraits point to blanks in the visual record”.⁶⁶⁶ For these “blanks in the visual record” can be traced two political explanations. According to W.T.J. Mitchell, regarding images of the “War on Terror”:

Until Spring 2004, the war of images was mainly running in favour of the United States. Inconvenient images of Iraqi civilian casualties had been successfully censored. The American army had made it clear that the Powell doctrine of “no body counts” (either of “enemies” or “innocent bystanders”) would be continued. The only bodies counted, the only bodies that *counted*, were those of American troops.⁶⁶⁷

Mitchell’s quote can help us unpack the two parallel and equally important aspects of the invisibility that *Profiles* is commenting upon. First is that of censoring “inconvenient images”. In this context, even if a spectator had wanted to perform their civic responsibility by looking at the images of dead Iraqi civilians, this would have proved rather difficult, as these images were either not taken or not widely disseminated. The second parameter is that of not keeping an official record of civilian deaths. As Julian Stallabrass has explained,

[i]n violation of the Geneva Convention, the bodies of enemy soldiers were bulldozed into the sand, uncounted and unidentified, and the US refused to identify the burial sites [...]. The Empire, then, can and must produce corpses but should as far as possible avoid the production of their images.⁶⁶⁸

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁶⁶ “Profiles, 2012”.

⁶⁶⁷ W.J.T. Mitchell, “Cloning Terror: The War of Images 2001-04”, in *The Life and Death of Images*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon (New York: Cornell University Press, 2008), 193–4.

⁶⁶⁸ Stallabrass, “Not in Our Name”. For a discussion between Mitchell’s and Stallabrass’ quotes and Birkin’s work, see Birkin, *David Birkin: Mouths at the Invisible Event*, 20–21.

Certain deaths, therefore, had to remain “ungrievable”, to use Butler’s terminology; “ungrievable” for political purposes – a situation that unfortunately still takes place in a different context in the Mediterranean refugee crisis and elsewhere.⁶⁶⁹ As the open access website of the NGO explains, still today there has been “no official public mechanism” for the recording of these deaths; and of course, one could not “identify” the deaths of individuals.⁶⁷⁰ The latter could be seen as relegated to “non-citizens”, whose situation, according to Azoulay, is both “temporary and conditional” and is always “at the mercy of the sovereign power”.⁶⁷¹ In these terms, through these monochromatic portraits, Birkin includes the “non-citizens” in the “citizenry of photography”, with the hope that this action will eventually include them also in the socio-political realm. This lack of information is further stressed by the physical gaps between the X-Ray boxes, which demand that the spectator contemplate on those deaths that were never traced and will remain invisible even in the *Profiles*.⁶⁷²

Yet, a different level of invisibility creates a troublesome spectatorship of the *Profiles*. That is the induced artistic invisibility of these monochromatic portraits – in other words the fact that Birkin, in order to highlight the aforementioned political aspects of invisibility, creates another type of artistic invisibility. The “contract of photography” in this case is purely conceptual, as the actual photograph is absent. However, according to Azoulay, even if certain photographs were taken, they would be “insufficient to reconstruct what actually took place or what we might see in the photograph.”⁶⁷³ In these cases one would “need not only other visual and textual material, we would also have to practice *civil imagination* in order to reconstruct what

⁶⁶⁹ Butler, *Frames of War*. On the link between Butler’s thinking and Birkin’s work, see Birkin, *David Birkin: Mouths at the Invisible Event*, 20–21.

⁶⁷⁰ “3. US and UK citizens bear particular responsibility for events in Iraq”.

⁶⁷¹ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 68.

⁶⁷² I had the opportunity to install this piece for the 2018 Aesthetica Art Prize, York Art Gallery, when I worked as Birkin’s assistant and hence, I was able to get a close understanding of how this work needs to be displayed.

⁶⁷³ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 232.

went on at the moment the photograph was taken – to understand the relation between the *event of photography* and the *photographed event* [...]”.⁶⁷⁴ That is what Azoulay proposes regarding photographs of rape, and the fact that they were never taken.⁶⁷⁵

In the same manner, in order to not fail to apprehend the actual meaning of *Profiles*, the spectators need to use their imagination in order to “reconstruct” what they would be looking at if the photograph had been taken. In this case, the “event of photography” would have been between a photographer and a person who died from a violent death, a realisation that could make one feel anxious. Hence it is important at this stage to examine how invisible atrocity images could be viewed in a way that will allow the spectators to perform their “civil gaze” in order to acknowledge their ethical responsibility towards the dead others.

According to Azoulay, the “civil gaze” is a gaze that follows the characteristics of what Hannah Arendt called “action”. “To act”, explains Arendt, “means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, ‘to begin,’ ‘to lead,’ and eventually ‘to rule,’ indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*).”⁶⁷⁶ At the same time, it is particularly interesting how Arendt links “action” with the existence of others: “to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act. Action and speech need the surrounding presence of others”.⁶⁷⁷ This seems to resonate directly with Azoulay’s proposition for a “civil gaze”:

The spectator activating this [civil] gaze views the photograph and recognizes instantly that what is inscribed in it and discernible in it are products of plurality – the plural participants in the act of photography (the photographer, the photographed person, and the spectator).⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid., 232, italics in the original.

⁶⁷⁵ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 217–287.

⁶⁷⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 177.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁶⁷⁸ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 97.

In this sense, a spectator that uses their “civil gaze” will act in order to trace the “plurality” of the contract and to have an ethical response towards what is photographed, and therefore visible.

Following the Arendtian line of thought, in order to be able to “act” one needs the “surrounding presence of the others”. And in cases of visual absence, such as this of the censorship in the Iraq war, artworks such as Birkin’s can allow one to feel this presence of others. This cannot fail to bring to mind Hans Belting’s analysis regarding the presence and absence in the visual realm:

Images traditionally live from the *body’s absence*, which is either temporary (that is, spatial) or, in the case of death, final. This absence does not mean that images revoke absent bodies and make them return. Rather, they replace the body’s absence with a different kind of presence. *Iconic presence* still maintains a body’s absence and turns it into what must be called *visible absence*. Images live from the paradox that they perform *the presence of an absence* or vice versa.⁶⁷⁹

Yet in this case one has to almost experience a further paradox to the one that Belting proposes regarding images being an “iconic presence”. This further perplexity that one faces in Birkin’s artwork, is that the “iconic presence” is absent, creating thus a “visible absence” through artistically induced invisibility. So, how can the “civil gaze” of the spectator/“citizen” turn into action in order to understand “the plurality” of photography in the case of *Profiles*, where one part of the contract – the photographed other – is rendered invisible? If the “civil gaze” for Azoulay is a translation of Arendtian “action”, then the spectator needs to be able to “act” in order to apprehend the loss that they observe when looking at *Profiles*. To my mind, the only spectator who will be able to “act” in front of this artwork, and therefore fulfil their ethical duty as a “citizen” that partakes in these “civil contracts of photography”, is the spectator who will experience the negative emotion of anxiety, which can be the force that will allow one to “act” and re-“act”.

⁶⁷⁹ Belting, “Image, Medium, Body”, 312, italics in the original.

Of course, a thorny aspect arises at this stage of the argument: if Azoulay's proposition for the "civil contract of photography" and the political understanding of the spectator's responsibility aims to exclude any emotional reactions, how can emotions be included in this framework without failing to achieve the primary goal of a political reading of *Profiles*? How can this inclusion take place, without hence failing to transform the spectator into a "citizen" of the "photographic contract"?

George Marcus in his book *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* analyses how politics have been detached from emotions in favour of pure rationality, through a case study of US politics and elections. As Marcus aptly explains, there is

a common and widely accepted claim: Political conflicts, if not immediately settled by "constructive" emotions, are thereafter, if emotion persists, certain to lead to violence and injustice. Since the search for justice must rest on reason, and since reason is presumed to require the absence of its longtime antagonist, emotion, then a discussion of justice need not engage emotion except to demand its exclusion.⁶⁸⁰

Marcus objects to this long standing negative belief that the consideration of emotions, or even so-called "constructive emotions", will just prolong political injustice, on the basis that "emotions engage biases".⁶⁸¹ Emotions can have a positive impact on the creation of political judgements as, in his view, "[t]hough citizens are free to use reason, they do not appear to do so, at least not sufficiently to satisfy democracy's critics and friends."⁶⁸² To support his argument in favour of the use of emotions by citizens for the formulation of their political judgments, Marcus draws from neuroscientific data on rational function. He explains therefore,

[r]ationality is not an autonomous faculty of the mind, independent of emotion; rather, rationality is a special set of abilities that are recruited by emotion systems in the brain to enable us to adapt to the challenges that

⁶⁸⁰ Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen*, 6.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 6, footnote 9.

⁶⁸² *Ibid.*, 6.

daily confront us. The practice of citizenship must acknowledge the role emotion plays in the development of rationality: if emotionality enables rationality, then the effort to exclude passion will also undermine our capacity to reason.⁶⁸³

Yet, one might ask at this point, how this theoretical perspective relates to the ethics of spectatorship of invisible atrocity images? My proposition is that the spectator of the “civil contracts” of these invisible atrocity images, who is also a “citizen” of photography, is subjected to a spectatorship that causes anxiety. Anxiety, as already mentioned, is a “constructive emotion” according to Marcus.⁶⁸⁴ As Cheryl Hall aptly writes in a review of the *Sentimental Citizen*, this idea of anxiety is the most prominent, key aspect of Marcus’ book which could have been titled “*The Anxious Citizen*”.⁶⁸⁵ For Marcus, anxiety is the main way to change “habits”, so to process something through reason. According to him:

If habits are to be altered, or at least disputed, then anxiety is the principal device to arrest further reliance on accepted sensibilities, to initiate a willingness to learn about and consider alternatives, and to initiate the process of deliberate explicit judgment about the relative merits of the considered alternatives.⁶⁸⁶

This indicates that a “negative emotion” such as anxiety can take a positive connotation and move away from what Sara Ahmed describes as the “hierarchy between emotions”, in which “some emotions are ‘elevated’ as signs of cultivation, whilst others remain ‘lower’ as signs of weakness”.⁶⁸⁷

In my view, the consideration of such an emotional condition in the context of spectatorship can be linked to Azoulay’s “civil contract of photography” and its political

⁶⁸³ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁸⁴ See Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen*, 99–118.

⁶⁸⁵ Cheryl Hall, review of *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics*, by George E. Marcus, *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 3 (2003): 592, <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1017/S153759270335042X>.

⁶⁸⁶ Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen*, 136.

⁶⁸⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g09x4q>.

terminology, without the analysis falling back to psychoanalytical theories. In this sense, the intentions of Azoulay's framework to conceptualise an understanding of the responsibility of the spectator in political terms, and the importance of this shift in the theoretical field of photographic ethics, will not be rejected, but expanded towards a balanced inclusion of emotions. In many different "experiments" of applying Azoulay's framework to different visual examples, on an abstract philosophical level this proves to be a very fruitful process. Yet, when applied to real life situations of spectatorship, the problem of the idealistic nature of this framework always arises.⁶⁸⁸ Azoulay can be accused of creating a rather idealised concept regarding the responsibilities of the spectator.

At the same time, when talking about photographic (thus visual) ethics, these belong in the category of applied ethics, which would be expected to have an applicable way of touching the issues raised from the spectatorship of atrocity images, which admittedly can cause the spectator to have an emotional experience. Yet, the "photographic" citizenship that Azoulay proposes is a citizenship based solely on human reason, thus excluding completely the emotional aspects of the citizen. Azoulay is not the only theorist that could be seen to have fallen into this line of argument. As Ahmed suggests, emotions are evaluated as very "primitive" in regard to the human evolution, and she explains that,

the evolutionary thinking has been crucial to how emotions are understood: emotions get narrated as a sign of "our" prehistory, and as a sign of how the primitive persists in the present. The Darwinian model of emotions suggests that emotions are not only "beneath" but "behind" the man/human, as sign of an earlier and more primitive time.⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁸ Examples in which I have encountered this difficulty of the idealised spectator in people's reactions was in the lecture "Approaching representations of atrocity in contemporary art through the 'civil contract of photography'" (SEMINart) that I gave in TWIXTlab, Athens, 1/04/2016, or in a meeting that I led on Azoulay's theory for the reading group *Politics-Power-Pictures*, in the University of Leeds, 9/03/2017.

⁶⁸⁹ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 3.

Of course, here I do not claim that Azoulay follows such a Darwinian model. But in a need to shift the discourse of the field of how documentary photographs of violent events are viewed, one might observe that her framework demands a significant exclusion of the emotional side of the spectators.

In contrast to the commonly accepted tradition regarding the exclusion of emotions from a discourse of political terminology, Marcus proposes that contemporary democracies should take a step backwards, namely before Kant, and appreciate the importance of emotions in the shaping of citizenship.

Yet since Kant, the belief that in reason we find the most elevating quality of our species and that in reason we can find progress, truth, and justice is deep and enduring. Of course, often accompanying this view is denigration of the polluting impact of emotion. Emotion, it is thought, degrades reason, confuses reason's clear vision with the distortions of partiality, impulse, and desire. The portrait continues with the presumption that if reason is not solely in charge, the responsibilities of citizenship cannot be satisfactorily executed. Or even worse, that when reason is not in charge we are left abandoned to the destructive ordeal of passion unconstrained. Which in turns reinforces the premise that if only reason could act alone, if emotion could be kept at a safe remove if not fully partitioned away from politics, citizenship and democracy would be well served.⁶⁹⁰

This long quotation highlights how emotion has been excluded from contemporary political theories.⁶⁹¹ Yet, as Marcus explains, “people are motivated to be rational not by rational imperatives but by emotional appraisals”.⁶⁹² In this sense, anyone applying such a belief when looking at atrocity images, would need to consider how a person could behave rationally when encountering a gruesome image, that most probably would cause them shock or aversion, and

⁶⁹⁰ Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen*, 134.

⁶⁹¹ It is important to mention that political psychology is a field that gradually gains ground. According to Marcus, “[w]e can date the formal launch of political psychology as a recognised discipline in its own right with the founding of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP) in 1978.” For more, see George E. Marcus, *Political Psychology: Neuroscience, Genetics, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

⁶⁹² Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen*, 136, footnote 6.

sometimes fear, or an image following a canonical visual “trope”, that in most cases would attract their attention very briefly – in the time taken to share, write a post, or flick through the newspaper.

Marcus suggests that, “[w]e are, or so it seems, designed to be creatures of habit but with the ability to become creatures that reason, if only under duress.”⁶⁹³ In a visual culture realm, the simple social media sharing can be seen also as a symptom of a contemporary “compassion fatigue” or desensitised condition – in other words a condition that should be seen as resulting from what Marcus calls “habit”.⁶⁹⁴ The two potential ways to overcome this is by depicting everything, the atrocity in its very gruesome detail, or nothing, namely an invisible atrocity image. These two visual cases create a situation of spectatorship that link with two distinct psychological categories of negative emotions.

Seeing everything, could be linked with “aversive affectivity”. As Tereza Capelos explains, “[a]ccording to appraisal theory, distinct emotional reactions of disgust, hostility and anger generate aversive affectivity, which signifies an internal negative reaction”.⁶⁹⁵ On the other hand, seeing nothing while knowing that something violent exists behind the “nothingness” of the image could be linked with “anxious affectivity”. The latter, in Capelos’ words, can be understood as:

Uneasiness, discomfort and fear fit the general category of anxious affectivity, and they are often identified with the label “anxiety”. Studies in psychology further distinguish “anxiety” from “fear”, which is considered “its first cousin”. Whereas anxiety is a vague unpleasant and objectless emotional state, captured by uneasiness and worry, which often originates from indefinite sources and leaves the person in suspense, fear

⁶⁹³ Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen*, 136.

⁶⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁶⁹⁵ Tereza Capelos, “Understanding Anxiety and Aversion: The Origins and Consequences of Affectivity in Political Campaigns”, in *Emotions in Politics: The Affect Dimension in Political Tension*, ed. Nicolas Demertzis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 41.

is discrete emotional reaction which in most cases assumes a tangible and more or less realistic danger.⁶⁹⁶

Thus, in order to create an effective spectatorship – that is a spectatorship that will allow the spectator to practice their “civic” responsibility of the “contract” – the visual must create a situation in which the spectator, one of the “citizens” of the “civil contract of photography”, will feel “uneasy”, and be left “in suspense”. Therefore, “the civil contract of photography” must create anxiety in the spectator, for its own empowerment. As Marcus suggests,

[a]nxiety does not produce any specific judgment, but it does change the way people go about deciding. When people are complaisant, their surveillance systems signaling (sic) that nothing unusual is going on, they rely on their familiar habits. When people are anxious, however, they are more willing to consider alternatives outside the range of the familiar and comfortable.⁶⁹⁷

In *Profiles*, invisibility with the inscription/description of what one could have seen photographed in these transparencies can make the spectator feel anxiety. Of course, the existence of the text on the margins of these transparencies is the first prerequisite for a spectatorship that could allow one to perform their “civic” duties by being “anxious spectators”. In Chapter 1, through Butler’s lens, I examined Sontag’s scepticism towards the power that photography has in comparison to narratives. Yet, in this context any potential understanding depends directly on the existence of text. But how could one describe this text? Does the text on the margins of each *Profile* function as a title or as a caption? In a thorough analysis of the purpose of titles and captions in photography, Clive Scott, drawing from Baudelaire’s writing on titles of paintings, suggests that,

[w]e might immediately distinguish three roles for picture titles: (a) as destination, as that which explains and synthesizes the image, gives it its coherence – this is particularly the function of allegorical or descriptive

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁹⁷ Marcus, *Sentimental Citizen*, 105.

titles; (b) as point of departure, something minimal and non-interfering, which orientates the spectator and then leaves the image to do its work; (c) as parallel but displaced commentary, set at a distance from the picture, so that the meaning is neither in the picture nor in the title, but in their point of convergence. Image and title are the two terms of a metaphor [...].⁶⁹⁸

According to him, the second type of titles that function as “a point of departure” is mostly related to photography: “the indexical; these titles merely tell us where and when the image was ‘taken’”.⁶⁹⁹ Yet, what happens with examples of invisible atrocity images such as the ones examined in this chapter? One could easily claim that in the aforementioned work by Broomberg and Chanarin, the existence of the text out of the pictorial plane functions directly as a title of “displaced commentary”. But in *Profiles*, although the inscription/description on the margin can be a “point of departure” that will expand one’s understanding, at the same time this description substitutes directly for what would have been visible. Does that indicate that this text functions more as a caption? According to Scott, “the caption, as mediation, offers the promise of a contact between the viewer and the viewed.”⁷⁰⁰ As he explains elsewhere:

The distinguishing characteristic of the caption is that it is already a step away from the image towards its assimilation by, and interpretation through, language. While a title does not belong to discourse, is no more than an identifying tag, the caption is spoken; it is an intervention, a response forestalling the response of the viewer. There are basically two kinds of caption: (1) the rebus, which makes the photograph dependent on its purveyor (usually the photographer, or a newspaper editor) to achieve its very meaning [...]; and (2) the quotational or direct-speech caption, which creates meaning by address, or by a spoken complicity between purveyor and viewer.⁷⁰¹

⁶⁹⁸ Clive Scott, *Spoken Image*, 47.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 49 and 52.

In the case of *Profiles*, the text on the margin of each photographic transparency does function as a “rebus caption”, as it can make one be puzzled regarding what it is that they are looking at. When one unpacks this direct link between invisibility and inscription, that is the moment that one can feel anxiety for what they cannot visually experience, but which they should have been able to. In other words, *Profiles* could be seen as belonging in the category of “pictures without photographs” to use the phrase by Lyle Rexer from the introduction of the *Photographs Not Taken*.⁷⁰² And through this anxiety the spectator can perform their “civic” duties in these “contracts of photography”. An “anxious spectator” or citizen of the photographic contract of invisibility, therefore, will be able to see beyond their habitual way of looking in a desensitised manner and who therefore will be able to acknowledge these “blanks in the visual record”, to use Birkin’s words.⁷⁰³

⁷⁰² Lyle Rexer, “Introduction: The Art of Missing Information”, in *Photographs Not Taken: A Collection of Photographer’s Essays*, ed. Will Steacy (USA: Daylight, 2012), 1.

⁷⁰³ “Profiles, 2012”.

3.3 Imagination and Slowness for Images *for* Agony: Khaled Barakeh's *Relentless Images* (2018)

An equivalent case to Birkin's artwork of "ungrievable" deaths lies behind the artwork that will be examined in the following analysis. Here the exploration will begin from the actual artwork and its political context of creation. Following that, the analysis in this final section will mainly focus on the second prerequisite for one to be transform into an "anxious spectator" in front of such artworks: the temporality of the spectatorship. Through a comparative lens with Birkin's previously examined artwork, the main question at stake here will be what the needed temporality of the spectatorship is.

In 2018, Khaled Barakeh created the installation *Relentless Images* (Fig. 100). This piece is comprised of a series of frames, which in the exhibition *Blue Hour* in Hamburg Germany, was four columns of 24 frames each, so 96 frames in total. Each frame has a photograph of three or four pieces of masking tape with the following information handwritten on it:

Name & Extension:

Kind:

Created:

Dimensions:

Focal Length:

F number:

Exposure time:

For a photographer, all these are nothing more than the features of a digital image file – that is the digital metadata (Fig. 101). All these differ in every frame and they are written with ink on three pieces of masking tape. Following that, Barakeh's photographed every image, printed it out and framed each of those photographs in a very traditional format of framing documentary

photographs by including the white mountcard.⁷⁰⁴ Each frame represents the five photographs of a person that died by torture in Assad's regime prisons; the deaths captured in this format numbered 11.000.⁷⁰⁵ As the artist's website mentions:

In August 2013, a military photographer defector code-named Caesar smuggled nearly 55,000 photographs out of Syria. The images show the bodies of people who were tortured and died in Syrian government detention facilities. In each of these images, the bodies and faces of the deceased are unceremoniously labelled with strips of masking tape. These labels are scrawled with numbers pertaining to the detainees [...].⁷⁰⁶

The different numbers were indicative of a series of different things: i) "the institute or department" where the dead person "was last detained"; ii) "the detainee number" which was given by the "intelligence services department"; iii) a number inscribed "on a piece of cardboard", which on the photos appears to be held next to a dead body; this number was given by the "forensic doctor".⁷⁰⁷ According to the artist's website description, these numbers were referring also to: iv) "the date of their death"; v) the security branch that detained them (Fig. 102).⁷⁰⁸ Barakeh followed the same visual format of using the masking tape, though in this case he included the technical information of the digital file of the photograph.⁷⁰⁹

⁷⁰⁴ "Relentless Images", Khaled Barakeh, accessed 5 Nov. 2020, <https://www.khaledbarakeh.com/sp/relentless-images>.

⁷⁰⁵ One can find different versions regarding the exact number both of the deaths or the images that were smuggled out of Syria. According to a Human Rights Watch report, "[t]he largest category of photographs, 28,707 images, are photographs of people Human Rights Watch understands to have died in government custody, either in one of several detention facilities or after being transferred to a military hospital." "If the Dead Could Speak: Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities", HRW, 16 Dec. 2015, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/16/if-dead-could-speak/mass-deaths-and-torture-syrias-detention-facilities>. Yet, in the context of this chapter the exact number will not be the focus, as Barakeh's work – as Birkin's previously examined work – provides a means of thinking about these images, instead of giving a detailed and literal account for each death.

⁷⁰⁶ "Relentless Images".

⁷⁰⁷ "Photographs and data from the Caesar-File Group", ECCHR, September 2017, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, https://www.ecchr.eu/fileadmin/Hintergrundberichte/Background_Syria_Torture_CaesarFiles_GermanyCriminalComplaint_ECCHR_August_2019.pdf.

⁷⁰⁸ "Relentless Images".

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

A better contextualisation for these images can be drawn from in a legal case report, which was put together by the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR). In this it is explained how the images were produced during the period May 2011 – August 2013 and “more than half of the total 26,948 files show the bodies of detainees who died in Syrian government detention facilities”.⁷¹⁰ The report continues:

The photographs were taken as part of the Syrian military police’s internal procedures. According to Caesar, new corpses were brought to the military hospitals almost every day. He says that forensic doctors, without carrying out any examination, would then arbitrarily note down a cause of death: either “cardiac failure” or “breathing difficulties.”⁷¹¹

This indicates the systemic violence that takes place in this type of context, and how this violence is established and registered through the process of visual recording. Compared to *Profiles*, where Birkin utilised the Iraq Body Count archive which tries to recover the political invisibility of the deaths caused by the invasion in Iraq, *Relentless Images* touches upon a different type of politically enforced invisibility. Interestingly enough in the Syrian war the system of embedded journalism has not taken place, meaning on the one hand that more fatalities have been caused among the journalistic profession, while on the other hand a different view of the war was potentially achieved.⁷¹²

A core obstacle here could be found in the oppressive power which is able to control the visual on a different realm. Hence, Barakeh’s work could be seen as making a comment on an archive that was created by the “sovereign power”, as we could call it in Azoulay’s terms, highlighting how anyone who opposes their rule is considered and treated as a “non-citizen”.⁷¹³ In

⁷¹⁰ “Photographs and data from the Caesar-File Group”.

⁷¹¹ Ibid.

⁷¹² Stephen Farrell, “Conflict Reporting in the Post-Embed Era”, At War (blog), 27 Feb. 2012, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/27/conflict-reporting-in-the-post-embed-era/>.

⁷¹³ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 68.

addition, it indicates how this power relation can be captured through visual means: by photographing the results of its brutality, the regime marks its power on the lifeless, violated human body. Because that is what can be seen on those photographs – which interestingly enough can be mostly found with pixelated faces on the web:

The vast majority of the photographs show the corpses of young men between the ages of 20 and 40. They are also said to include images of corpses of elderly people as well as of at least one woman and at least 100 children under the age of 18.⁷¹⁴

Barakeh's artwork bears certain formal similarities to *Profiles*. We have again seriality, sequence of images of singular violent death and the use of formally collated and organised information, namely a database or an archive, although the creation of the latter was made for the exact opposite reasons: the "Caesar" archive for a state that records its brutality, while the *Iraq Body Count* as a reaction to the violent invisibility that was produced by the US/UK states by not recording the numbers of deaths. And that is a huge conceptual difference.

Another difference can be found in the fact that, although both artworks fall under the criteria that this thesis has set for what an invisible atrocity image is, the reasoning for the artistic use of invisibility functions in two opposite manners if one is to compare these two works. Birkin utilises invisibility in a process of visualising an unseen – or not photographed – violent death, while Barakeh makes invisible something visible but largely unseen. However, to my mind both artists are directing attention towards the same thing: to make the spectators think of what they should or should not be looking at, how and why.

So, Barakeh through this work underlines another pressing question which comes before the spectatorship but is directly linked with it: Who has the right to show those images, and in this context does an artist has the right to expose them in an artistic environment? That is a

⁷¹⁴ "Photographs and data from the Caesar-File Group".

reminer of belit sağ's similar set of questions in Chapter 2. As the art historian Peter Geimer explains regarding the visibility of gruesome images,

[i]n each individual case, the subject of the image, the circumstances of its emergence, and the site of its subsequent presentation must be taken into consideration: Why was it taken, by whom, and for which prospective viewers? Why and in which context should it be shown or not? Yet my objective here is not to take a principled stance for or against the exhibition of such images. Instead, I am interested in which understanding of photographic images finds expression in the reactions outlined above.⁷¹⁵

In this piece, as with *Profiles*, we can speak about censorship of information, which in completely different ways involves the power relations, both of armies and the media. In the case of *Relentless Images*, the invisibility can first be traced to the physical process of violating the deceased human rights, as those detention centres were created in a way that would remain invisible, hidden away from the public eye, with the events that took place in them remaining unknown. A case like that was very interestingly challenged by Forensic Architecture in their investigation regarding the Saydnaya prison.⁷¹⁶

The invisibility was enforced also on a level of image production at a systemic level by the state authorities and the army, who did not want these images to be seen by the public. They were only seen because they were smuggled out of Syria by the code-named army photographer “Caesar”.⁷¹⁷ Barakeh is also highlighting something that remained largely unseen in the public sphere – as the news media did not include many of those images, and even when they did, they always pixelated or blurred them in order to protect the identity of the dead person (Fig. 102).⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁵ Peter Geimer, “The Incommensurable”, in *Unwatchable*, ed. Nicholas Baer et al. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 84.

⁷¹⁶ “Torture in Saydnaya Prison”, Forensic Architecture, 16 Aug. 2016, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/saydnaya>.

⁷¹⁷ Garance Le Caisne, *Operation Caesar*, trans. David Watson (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), xvii.

⁷¹⁸ Although in Chapter 2 I suggested how pixelation functions as a process of censoring information, I also mentioned cases such as its use by artists as Edmund Clark who utilise it for legal reasons. In this case, again, pixelation can be seen as having a positive connotation for its use by the media, as apart from a reasonable legal

Then the question of how widely the images used by Barakeh were distributed in the media imposes an extra burden on the shoulders of the spectator – if one shows them, they potentially dehumanise further the brutally killed person, but if they do not show them, they perpetuate a circle of imposed invisibility due to censorship. And this complexity is further applied to the spectatorship of the actual photographs, as many of them can be found even online, but someone needs to intentionally search for them and bear the responsibility for this choice.

Following the invisibility caused by various political mechanisms that I have already mentioned, a different level of invisibility creates the troublesome spectatorship of the *Profiles* and that of the *Relentless Images*. That is, the induced artistic invisibility: in the first case with the monochromatic portraits; in the second case with the descriptive “digital metadata”, with which Barakeh aims to make “a protective act which shields the identifying characteristics of the vulnerable victims”.⁷¹⁹ Of course, in the case of *Relentless Images* this act can simultaneously be considered rather troubling as Barakeh with his practice takes away the specificity and singularity of each death, and makes them look commensurable. For example, if this piece was created in Birkin’s format, the spectator would be able to read at least something like:

Ahmad al-Musalmani (Child), 14 years old, “disappeared” on August 2, 2012 when the minibus with which he was travelling from Lebanon to Syria was stopped at a checkpoint and an officer took the passengers’ phones and found an anti-Assad song on Ahmad’s.⁷²⁰ [With information from the Human Rights Watch report published in 2015]

In other words, the specificity of the death in Barakeh’s treatment of the images, becomes absent.

The “contract of photography” here is purely conceptual, as the identification of the actual

function to protect the identity of the deceased, this can be further reiterated from the fact that this archive of images refers to a contemporary, very geographically and chronologically specific case. Hence, one would also need to consider the wishes of the relatives who could be potentially identifiable too.

⁷¹⁹ “Relentless Images”.

⁷²⁰ “Syria: Stories Behind Photos of Killed Detainees”, HRW, 16 Dec. 2015, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/16/syria-stories-behind-photos-killed-detainees>.

photograph is impossible for a spectator, and the treatment of the photograph renders its specificity absent. Hence, the spectator is requested to use their “civil imagination” in order to reconstruct both the “photographed event” and the “event of photography”.

Yet, does this treatment make the image actually more invisible? Or does it perhaps highlight a question of “hyper-visibility” – as I want to call it – which follows the technological progress and the digital nature of contemporary photography? In this case, the visibility of the photographic document seems to be the outcome of the invisible side of it, namely of the digital metadata. These metadata could be seen as an equivalent to what negatives were for analogue photography.⁷²¹ In this particular case, these metadata were of particular legal value in a case of human rights violation, according to the ECCHR report that was already mentioned:

Metadata attached to image files generally contains information on the camera model used to take the photograph. In many cases it also indicates the serial number of the device. This information is highly valuable for the verification of the photos. Metadata record often also reveals the “hash number” which can be used to verify that the images are genuine photos and not forgeries.

In many cases metadata also contains further information that goes beyond the content of the image itself. If the camera’s GPS system was on at the time the picture was taken, the metadata can be used to help determine where the photo was taken. Metadata also includes information on the exact time the photo was taken and the time the picture was saved on another device. In cases where the photographer is registered as the camera’s user, the metadata will also help identify the photographer.⁷²²

Barakeh’s work makes visually coexistent the two sides of the same digital document: the formal visible traces of dehumanisation which one would be able to see on the photos (the different

⁷²¹ In an earlier version of this thesis, the inclusion of artworks that utilise negatives of images of violence, as for example Rula Halawani or Akram Zaatari, were considered to be in dialogue with issues of pixelation or reduction in Chapter 2. Yet, as the categorisation in that case would have been based purely on formalistic issues instead also of conceptual (e.g., content moderation), these examples were excluded and will be examined at a future occasion.

⁷²² “Photographs and data from the Caesar-File Group”.

handwritten masking tapes and pieces of mountcard) as well as the invisible technical qualifying traces of the document (metadata).

Caesar's photographs are direct examples of what was called by Berger "images of agony". The agony can be read everywhere on the brutally violated bodies of the dead detainees. Yet, in Barakeh's work, why and how invisibility transforms them to "images *for* agony"? What are the premises under which this artwork – as also the ones analysed in the previous subchapters – can be seen as an "image *for* agony" that will create an "anxious spectator", able to partake in the "civil contract of photography" of these absent images?

To my mind the first premise is the function of memory in this context, and mainly its link to iconism, which was explored in Chapter 1. An interesting starting point for questions around the use of photography and its links with memory can be found in Sontag's and Berger's beliefs about memory and photography. In his text on Sontag, Berger says:

What served in place of the photograph, before the camera's invention? The expected answer is the engraving, the drawing, the painting. The more revealing answer might be: memory. What photographs do out there in space was previously done within reflection. [Here he quotes Sontag] "Proust somewhat misconstrues what photographs are: not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or replacement".⁷²³

For Sontag and Berger, photography took the place of memory, while, according to the latter, memory is also not linear but "works radially, that is to say with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event".⁷²⁴ Of course, apart from the chronological axis of memory function, there is also a question of personal and collective remembering. As Stallabrass puts it, photography's "connection to individual remembering also extends to the collective".⁷²⁵

⁷²³ Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 51; Sontag, *On Photography*, 164–165.

⁷²⁴ Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 59.

⁷²⁵ Julian Stallabrass, "Memory and Icons: Photography in the War on Terror", *New Left Review* 105, (May–June 2017): 29.

Memory – especially collective memory – is occupied by images. “We have to situate the printed photograph so that it acquires something of the conclusiveness of that which *was and is*”, says Berger.⁷²⁶ In my view, when it comes to iconic images, this “situation” of the image is not so important anymore, as they are registered in a collective visual memory, without that meaning that they carry with them a historical understanding of the captured event. However, the visual form can be carried for a long time in one’s memory and be reactivated when one sees artworks that deal with iconic images, as those discussed in Chapter 1.

In a sense, memory of images has to remind us of “memory images”, which can be seen as “metaphors”, as Bal suggests in a different context regarding Doris Salcedo’s installation work.⁷²⁷ Although what she calls “memory images” do not refer to a specific photographic frame, but for example to an “image of earthquake”, her suggestion seems to apply to how iconic images of atrocity can be recalled in the spectator’s mind. As she proposes, “they are metaphors of the montage that exhorts us, the viewers, to make the narratives required to act against cultural amnesia; to de-silence the past and to mobilize once again that which has become stagnant.”⁷²⁸

Yet, how can this “mobilisation” happen if the image is not iconic, and the image is not adequately situated? In other words, what happens in examples such as Birkin’s *Profiles* or Barakeh’s *Relentless Images*, where in the first case the actual portraits are not-seen in their vast majority or were seen with visual moderations?⁷²⁹ How is one to comprehend and partake adequately in the “civil contracts” of such invisible atrocity images which have been mostly invisible, even before their artistic appropriation?

⁷²⁶ Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 59, italics in the original.

⁷²⁷ Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak*, 4

⁷²⁸ Ibid.

⁷²⁹ This has also a legal reasoning, which is that these images were smuggled out of Syria and used in a legal case. For more see Garance le Caisne, “‘They were torturing to kill’: inside Syria’s death machine”, *Guardian*, 1 Oct. 2015, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/they-were-torturing-to-kill-inside-syrias-death-machine-caesar>.

Let us first think about what happens with the “contracts”. In this case, the “contracts” can be considered broken, if one is to follow Azoulay’s rationale. According to her, what makes possible the photographic encounter between the photographer and the photographed is an “agreement” between them, establishing the “balance of power” and therefore making each participant “responsible for its part”.⁷³⁰ Yet, this is possible only if the (one) photographed is alive. When the photographed is heavily injured or dead, then the “civil contract” among the three participants is tested.⁷³¹ This idea of the “agreement” can be perceived as the ethical term of consent that is very common, in photography/photojournalism. Yet, the “agreement” is something that can be expected to be reactivated during the spectatorship, while consent could be read also as a bureaucratic legal exercise of ticking boxes.

On a first level, in these cases, the spectator cannot experience anxiety, as most probably the immediate reaction could be to “look askance”, to use again Batchen’s term.⁷³² Therefore, the acknowledgment of the dead other is still missing. To my mind, the first very important caveat for the successful “reconstruction” of the “encounter” from the spectator can be found in the iconic status of the image, or in its lack thereof, which will then need to be overwritten from the use of imagination. A “photograph of agony” can be transformed to an “image *for* agony” through imagination, and in order for the imagination to create the right “encounter”, and thus acknowledgment, the memory of the “iconic” will always be a significant parameter.

Let us just take a step back and consider the position of imagination in this context, by remembering its etymological root. “Imagination” derives from the Latin *imaginari*, which means “picture to oneself”.⁷³³ Of course, as the philosopher P. F. Strawson suggests,

⁷³⁰ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 106.

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷³² Geoffrey Batchen, “Looking Askance”, 227.

⁷³³ Lexico, s.v. “imagine”, accessed 15 Nov. 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/imagine>.

The uses, and applications, of the terms “image”, “imagine”, “imagination”, “imaginative”, and so forth make up a very diverse and scattered family. Even this image of a family seems too definite. It would be a matter of more than difficulty exactly to identify and list the family's members, let alone establish their relationships of parenthood and cousinhood.⁷³⁴

The question of what precedes what, is not what is at stake in this context. Here, in the case of Barakeh's work, as well as in the two aforementioned artworks, the absent photograph brings to the surface this etymological correlation between imagination and image, which I believe lies also at the basis for the reconstruction of the photographic “civil contract” in Azoulay's terms. As she explains in a context of an analysis regarding images of rape and photographs that were never taken,

Additional material would be needed to establish what it is that we might see, and to make it speak. We would need to insist on seeing through the accumulated pathological signs, through the distortion of the child's body and its becoming bone and mucous tissue mixed with sand. We would need to see a child precious to her mother and father, a child who had cried to high heaven when she was raped dozens of times over the course of a whole week, a child who, in the moments in between, had tried against all odds to complain to the officer who seemed to her in charge, begging him in vain to be left alone.⁷³⁵

This shocking description could have been adapted to what one encounters in Caesar's photographs. In this case too, further contextualisation regarding the two events – the photographed and that of the photography – is needed. Yet, what Azoulay seems to be missing with the terminology of the “photographed event” and the “event of photography”, is all the “agony” that has preceded the “photographed event” in atrocity images.

On a second level, *Relentless Images* in turn force the spectator to utilise their “civil imagination” in order to comprehend what they are looking at. Yet, Barakeh's work although it is

⁷³⁴ P.F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Routledge, 2008), 50.

⁷³⁵ Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 232–233.

based on a very interesting conceptual idea, it does not allow the spectators to engage with the work as successfully, even with the use of imagination, while Birkin's work provides one with a better contextualisation due to the existence of the inscriptions/descriptions on the edge of every "profile". Of course, the contextualisation in Barakeh's case has to do also with the ethnicity of the spectators, as for a Syrian spectator, or someone who constantly follows the news of the situation in the Middle East, the reference to the code name "Caesar" would be a sufficient hint to trigger the memory of having seen some of those images on the news. So, the specificity of the "erased" images would be traced.⁷³⁶ Yet, for the rest of the spectators this specificity would probably be quite difficult.

This position could recall what I proposed in the case of Birkin's *Pietà* which was analysed in Chapter 2. There I suggested that in Birkin's work one would need the information from the caption, and then to bring in their mind other images of *pietà* that have seen in the past. In the case of the *Relentless Images*, after reading the caption and potentially looking up some further information about Caesar's archive, one has to perform the process of the imagination for a different type of images, namely images of torture, as well as archives that dictatorships create historically for the organised and meticulous account of their actions.

Regarding the first kind of imagery – torture – the most iconic contemporary examples that comes to one's mind are the photographs from Abu Ghraib (2003). Although in that case the images were of the process of torturing and (sexual and not only) humiliation, while Caesar's archive captures the outcome of the torture, these two cases apart from belonging in the same era,

⁷³⁶ One could create a – rather ethically problematic – genealogy regarding such works, by taking as starting point Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953). Yet, such comparisons bear the danger of creating formalistic apolitical analysis. For more regarding Rauschenberg's work see, "Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953", SFMOMA, accessed 14 Nov. 2020, <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.298/>.

they also bring to mind what Butler – in a rather hopeful tone for the life of images – has suggested regarding the censorship of such material:

Let me make clear from the outset that although I am attempting to describe how such strategies work, I am very mindful that they do not always work. Indeed, the image is nearly impossible to control by virtue of the contemporary forms of its reproducibility. It travels beyond the reach of those who seek to censor it, and it often turns back on those who think they have controlled it – which is surely what happened with the circulation of the Abu Ghraib photos.⁷³⁷

There seems to definitely be an added similarity between these two bodies of photographs – they managed to travel beyond their original purpose. Yet, a potential difference could be traced if one agrees with Eisenman’s suggestion regarding what he calls the “Abu Ghraib effect”, meaning “moral blindness”.⁷³⁸ For him, these photos did not bear traces of the Freudian “uncanny” as they were already part of people’s memory in a Warburgian sense.⁷³⁹ Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine whether or not that was the case with the photos from Abu Ghraib, what I want to point out here is that representations such as Barakeh’s artwork allow the spectators to not experience this kind of “moral blindness”.

However, if one does not spend enough time viewing *Relentless Images* then the “moral blindness” might be experienced from lack of understanding – or more precisely from the lack of interest to understand. In the case of this work, this reality can be found only after reading the accompanying explanatory caption and using an online search engine. If one does not decide to look up the relevant photographic material, the textual information in the caption can function only as a reminder of similar bodies of photographs, which would require one to use their “civil imagination” to recreate what they might had been looking at if the images were visible. Apart

⁷³⁷ Butler, “On the Relationship Between Precarity and State Power”.

⁷³⁸ Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect*, 9.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15–17.

from images of torture in prisons, another set of images have been historically iconic, and one could bring those immediately to mind: photographs of torture and executions during dictatorships. In the first case, as stated before, the most iconic example would be the photos from Abu Ghraib. In relation to the second type of images, one of the most iconic example would be the series of photographs capturing the people “about to die” taken by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the 1970s (Fig. 103).⁷⁴⁰ According to Zelizer:

The atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia were systematic, expansive, and bureaucratic in detail. Herded from cities and into torture centers and prisons, about 1.7 million people—a quarter of Cambodia’s population—died during the four years of the Khmer Rouge’s rule, helmed by Pol Pot. The photographic record of these individuals’ last moments before death provided depiction of the final moments of lives lived under a brief but intense reign of terror.⁷⁴¹

These photos depict a historical moment before what it can be seen in the images lying behind Barakeh’s artwork – an individual just before their execution – while his work refers to the moments after the death. Yet, to my mind all these images bear two common characteristics: seriality and repetition. These two characteristics lead to the second caveat of the spectatorship that can allow one to be transformed to an “anxious spectator” when looking at invisible atrocity images.

On the one hand, photography in Azoulay’s framework demands a “spectatorship”, which, as it was already mentioned in the Introduction of the thesis, is linked to the verb “to watch”, which means that it requires “time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the

⁷⁴⁰ Here I refer to Zelizer’s terminology and her account for how these images fall under this category. For more see Zelizer, *About to Die*, 143–149. For another analysis regarding these images see Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*, 54–62; Thierry De Duve, “Art in the Face of Radical Evil”, *October* 125 (2008): 3–23, <https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1162/octo.2008.125.1.3>. For a powerful artistic dialogue with these images see *The Missing Picture*, directed by Rithy Panh (France: CDP, ARTE France, Bophana Production, 2013), DVD.

⁷⁴¹ Zelizer, *About to Die*, 143.

interpretation of the still photographic images”.⁷⁴² At the same time, seriality and repetition (regarding the format of the photographic frame) in the case of the Khem Rouge photos from the S-21 victims has also to do with the way they are usually presented or displayed in exhibition contexts.⁷⁴³ When approaching such archives of images through the lens of the “civil contract of photography” one needs to create a singular relationship to each and every photographed person. Hence seriality and repetition demands a different temporality during the spectatorship, and this is not something new in the history of documentary photography. Yet, “slowness” in the case of the spectatorship of works such as Barakeh’s is heightened even further, as it depends on the multiplicity of the invisible instead of the visible. In particular, in the works by Birkin and Barakeh analysed in this chapter, seriality in addition to the imposed artistic invisibility make a slower spectatorship even more imperative.

In “slowness” one finds the second caveat for the spectatorship of such works. How is a spectator capable of unpacking the meaning of this work, in order to utilise their imagination, and experience them as “images *for* agony” instead of just “images of agony”, which they undeniably are? And can that happen in the case of Barakeh’s artwork? The answer is quite challenging and guides the unpacking of the final parameters of why that is the case here, seen in comparison with Birkin’s *Profiles*.

The spectatorship demands time, creating thus a different temporality, which is the second caveat. The “reality” of these photos, which is hidden behind the metadata frames of Barakeh, requires a slow temporality for the spectatorship, in order to be perceived.⁷⁴⁴ Slowness alone in this case cannot allow the spectator to make the needed link between the visual in sight – namely

⁷⁴² Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 14.

⁷⁴³ For the curating of these images, see Duve, “Art in the Face of Radical Evil”.

⁷⁴⁴ Intentionally I include the word reality in quotation marks here, in order to stress there is never a singular “reality” inscribed in an image.

the artwork – and the visual implied – namely the photographs of tortured dead people. And without this needed link, one will not be able to recognise these images as “images *for* agony”, neither will manage to become an “anxious spectator” of these peculiar “civil contracts of photography”. In the case of Barakeh’s solo show *The Blue Hour* in Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (MKG), where I first saw this artwork, this needed link was found in the caption:

Over 400.000 people have been killed in the civil war in Syria. Many of them disappeared after being detained in torture prisons. In 2014, a former military police photographer going by the name “Caesar” published 55.000 documentation photos of individuals killed through torture. In *Mementos*, Barakeh implicates his own practice in these dehumanizing acts, reducing these images of the deceased to their digital metadata.⁷⁴⁵

Here a hypothesis is needed. Most contemporary spectators have access to the World Wide Web, while being in situ in the museum, and most likely they will have a device that connects to the web. In this case, the spectators who do not already remember the particular event from the news, will be able to search the case online and understand what it was about and very likely – depending on their geographical position – will be able to see the actual photographs of the Caesar archive.⁷⁴⁶

Birkin’s *Profiles* could be seen in direct comparison to this work. What is of interest here is to think in what different ways to *Relentless Images* this work demands a “slow spectatorship” and whether one of the two can be proved to be more efficient for the transformation of the spectator to an “anxious spectator”. Although the idea of “slowness” has been linked with the process of looking at photographs, most often the link that is made between slowness and

⁷⁴⁵ Personal notes from the exhibition *The Blue Hour*. For more regarding the show see “The Blue Hour”, Khaled Barakeh, accessed 18 Oct. 2020, <https://www.khaledbarakeh.com/se/the-blue-hour>.

⁷⁴⁶ Here I mention the geographical position, as different countries have different web restrictions on what one can search, find, read, look at. Hence such national issues of censorship are to be considered in case by case application of such idealistic theoretical suggestions.

photography refers to the slow temporal registers in the photographic frame (i.e., environmental images), while very few examples have a similar approach to what I call “slow spectatorship”.⁷⁴⁷

An interesting proposition that takes the same direction as how “slow spectatorship” is proposed here, has been provided by the cultural historian Arden Reed in the book *Slow Art*.⁷⁴⁸ Reed seems to build on a methodology of looking proposed by the art historian T. J. Clark in the book *The Sight of Death*, where he provides a journal-genre account of his multiple encounters with the same painting, time and again, implying therefore the long temporality of looking.⁷⁴⁹ Yet, Reed goes a step further by trying to create a history of “slow art” on the one hand, while at the same time he defines a territory for this particular term, which according to him:

Slow art is not, as you might imagine, a set of aesthetic *objects*. Rather, *slow art names an encounter between object and observer*; it refers to a class of experiences, not a group of things. Slow art is what transpires in the space and time between beholders and beheld.⁷⁵⁰

The examples that Reed includes in the analysis span across chronological frameworks. At the same time they are both “moving and still works”.⁷⁵¹ The invisible atrocity images that are described in this chapter, and this thesis as a whole, would fall in Reed’s category of still works, for which “[i]t must be that absent time’s passing, they would feel incomplete. The beholder must perform duration as a necessary and defining feature, rather than as one possible mode of perception.”⁷⁵²

⁷⁴⁷ Two similar terms to the one I propose here are Bal’s “slow looking” and Ernst van Alphen’s “slow seeing”, although none of the two provides a thorough theorisation of their terminology. Bal, “The Pain of Images”, 113–115; Ernst van Alphen, *Failed Images: Photography and Its Counter-Practices* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018), 204–217.

⁷⁴⁸ Arden Reed, *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell* (California: University of California Press, 2017).

⁷⁴⁹ T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁷⁵⁰ Reed, *Slow Art*, 10–11, italics in the original.

⁷⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, 26.

Although the aforementioned artworks can be described by these characteristics, it would cause me uneasiness to define them as “slow art”, as such terminology would detract from their political nature and the ethical demands that they pose to the spectator.⁷⁵³ The slowness here is not descriptive of the visual – the “art” – but of the process of looking – the spectatorship. This longer temporality is a needed part if one is to recognise what they are looking at when looking at an invisible atrocity image. A “slow spectatorship” allows one to recognise the “agony” of the other, and be transformed into an “anxious spectator” who will be willing to participate as an equal member of the “civil contract of photography” and therefore have an ethical response beyond their habitual manner of consuming images of other people’s death and suffering.

The slow temporality in other words assists in the recognition of the “photographed” and the “event of photography” of the violent image. Interestingly enough, the concept of the event is also used by Reed, when proposing that “[w]e experience the still image or object as an event or a performance, because the stationary acquires motion – whether actual or psychological – and opens itself to us over time”.⁷⁵⁴

Both types of “motion” are needed for the slow spectatorship of Birkin’s *Profiles*. The work demands that the spectators spend time in front of each and every “portrait”: lean their head and read the inscription on the margin of the slide; activate their “civil imagination” in order initially to imagine what they could be looking at if a photograph was taken, and then recreate in their mind’s eye the “event of photography”. Then move to the next and repeat. Of course, as most of the time the work is displayed with the transparencies being placed at three different

⁷⁵³ Here although I agree with Reed’s point that “[s]low art raises political questions – or, better, already amounts to a kind of politics, by contesting beeline behaviors that drive our culture”, I find problematic to apply the term to the artworks that I have described as invisible atrocity images here, as then one places more focus on the issue of the temporality, rather than on the outcome of it. For me, the slow temporality is a needed tool to allow one to engage in the “civil contract of photography”, by experiencing the needed anxiety caused by the agony of the depicted/invisible other. Reed, *Slow Art*, 13.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., 27–28.

levels, not all spectators will be able to read all the inscriptions. Hence, the spectator will not acknowledge all the dead people depicted on these conceptual portraits. The spectator who will be able to successfully recognise the dead other, will be the one who will stand a few minutes in front of every “profile” and will use their imagination to reconstruct what they could be looking at. In other words, it will be the spectator who will overcome the failure that Sontag was attributing to photography in the early 2000s, when she was saying, “[o]ur failure is one of imagination, of empathy: we have failed to hold this reality in mind”.⁷⁵⁵

On the other hand, the spectatorship of Barakeh’s work does not depend on “motion” as either way one will fail to recognise which metadata stand for which image, neither this is the end goal of the work. Yet, in this case the “slow spectatorship” will function in multiple layers that will have to happen by taking as an initial register the work, without the spectatorship to actually take place in front of the work. One needs to pay attention to the visual features of the work, read the accompanying caption, remember similar contemporary examples, and on a second time remember the images, if they had seen them in the news, or visit the web and look at the images and engage with the “contracts”. Yet, the moment that spectators will search and look at the actual images, instead of experiencing the anxiety needed to activate them, they will most probably feel fear, in which case the “civil contract of photography” will once again be at stake.

⁷⁵⁵ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*, 7.

Coda: “Untaken Photographs” for Agony of the 21st century Mediterranean Refugee and Migrant Crisis

This chapter has examined how one can approach the spectatorship of cases of photographs that have remained invisible for different reasons, either due to the censorship of the 21st century system of embedded journalism, as in the works by Broomberg and Chanarin, and by Birkin, or because of the authoritarian power in censoring visual material whose production should remain questionable in the first place, as in Barakeh’s *Relentless Images*. Yet, what happens when death cannot be captured because the dead body was never retrieved from the sea or seen, or was part of a crisis which did not allow the capture of each and every death? And even if it did, one would question whether contemporary spectators should have access to this material.

A single image has become an icon for all those contemporary deaths in the Mediterranean Sea. This was the photograph of Alan Kurdi, which has been a recurrent point of reference in this thesis (Fig. 38). Could we approach those deaths through the notion of the “civil contract of photography” in a way that will allow to these people to be recognised as “citizens”, despite the fact that one could suggest that the treatment of their deaths indicated that they were perceived as “noncitizens”? In this case invisibility was imposed at a political level, in a way that made many deaths remain unseen, and even unregistered.

The Turkish artist Banu Cennetoğlu has been paying attention exactly to such issues of what remains invisible. In her work *The List*, which was included also in a public installation in the 2018 Liverpool Biennial, the artist utilises a list of more than 34,000 refugees and migrants who died in or at the borders of Europe (Fig. 104).⁷⁵⁶ *The List* was created and annually updated by *UNITED for Intercultural Action*, “an anti-discrimination network of 550 organisations in 48

⁷⁵⁶ “Archive 2018: Banu Cennetoğlu”, Liverpool Biennial, accessed 25 Sept. 2020, <https://www.biennial.com/2018/exhibition/artists/banu-cennetoglu>.

countries”.⁷⁵⁷ The format of the information that this list provides recalls the information provided by *Iraq Body Count*, which was utilised by Birkin for the *Profiles*. In this case the list mentions, the date the body was found dead, the number of dead people on this occasion, name, gender and age, their origin, cause of death, and the source of this information.⁷⁵⁸

Since 2007, Cennetoğlu has started trying to distribute *The List*, initially in the Netherlands, and then “in Greece, Bulgaria, the US, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Turkey and now the UK. It has been distributed in a variety of forms – poster campaigns in railway stations, printed in newspapers, emblazoned on hoardings.”⁷⁵⁹ Interestingly enough, the latter is not perceived as an artwork by Cennetoğlu, although one could make a claim for an institutional analysis of art once it has been exhibited, for example, as part of the Liverpool Biennial.⁷⁶⁰ As the latter’s website mentions:

Cennetoğlu explores the political, social and cultural dimension of the production, representation and distribution of knowledge and asks how this feeds into a society’s collective thinking and becomes part of its ideology.⁷⁶¹

Cennetoğlu regards the “production, representation and distribution of knowledge” as three key elements that one can use to resist political invisibility, as is has been called in this analysis. Yet, before moving on to how the “contracts” of “untaken photographs” can be perceived in the case

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁸ *The List* is accessible and can be downloaded in its most updated version through the website of UNITED for Intercultural Action, “About the ‘List of Deaths’”, UNITED, accessed 25 Sept. 2020, <http://unitedagainstreugeedeaths.eu/about-the-campaign/about-the-united-list-of-deaths/>. The version that was included in Liverpool Biennial can be found here: “List of 34,361 documented deaths of refugees and migrants due to the restrictive policies of ‘Fortress Europe’”, accessed 25 Sept. 2020, <https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2018/06/19/TheList.pdf>.

⁷⁵⁹ Charlotte Higgins, “Interview: Banu Cennetoğlu: ‘As long as I have resources, I will make The List more visible’”, *Guardian*, accessed 25 Sept. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/20/banu-cennetoglu-interview-turkish-artist-the-list-europe-migrant-crisis>. For more information regarding the different displays of *The List*, see “About the List”, accessed 25 Sept. 2020, <http://www.list-e.info/liste-hakkinda.php?l=en>.

⁷⁶⁰ Higgins, “Interview: Banu Cennetoğlu”. Regarding the institutional theory of art, see George Dickie, *Art and the aesthetic: an institutional analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁷⁶¹ “Archive 2018: Banu”.

of *The List*, it is important to clarify what has been the political issue at stake, which this installation has to fight against.

The main issue here is the political responsibility in handling the very large number of deaths of refugees and migrants on the journey to Europe that were caused by a natural element – the water of the sea – and the inaction of European politicians. Of course, a clarification is needed, as *The List* does not record only deaths at sea, but also on land, while my focus throughout this thesis has been the first, which was also the cause of death for Alan Kurdi. These people were not killed by atrocious human actions, but by an inhuman lack of willingness to react, as it was already explained in the Introduction of the thesis. To borrow the term from the “Deaths at the Borders Database”, a research project on migration law, these were “border deaths”, which they define as:

People who have died attempting to migrate irregularly to Europe by crossing the southern external borders of the EU without authorization, whose bodies were found on or brought to the territories of Spain, Gibraltar, Italy, Malta or Greece.⁷⁶²

If one examines the data that UNHCR provides on their website, in the years between 2014-2017, 15,544 people were declared “dead and missing” in the “Mediterranean Situation”.⁷⁶³ The recording of these border deaths would seem easier and more profound, as the minimum recognition, despite how problematic it may seem.

Although the European Union knows that drowning is one of the main causes of refugees’ deaths, they don’t keep an organised official record of “border deaths.” As one article notes, “[s]ome local authorities in Greece and Turkey, struggling to cope with the influx of migrants

⁷⁶² “Methodology”, Human Costs of Border Control, accessed 10 Sept. 2020, http://www.borderdeaths.org/?page_id=7.

⁷⁶³ “Mediterranean Situation”, UNHCR, accessed 10 Sept. 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

and the unprecedented number of bodies drifting on to their beaches, have admitted to the BBC they have been unable to keep accurate burial records.”⁷⁶⁴ If one looks closely at *The List*, one of the main sources for the register of deaths is the news media. The European Union expects the governments in Greece, Italy and Spain, to keep track of those deaths, while governments leave the registration of border deaths in the hands of local authorities.⁷⁶⁵ The lack of registration is linked to a series of issues with these local systems: as for example the lack of a coroner in some Greek islands, the untrained nature of council workers, the drowning outside of a country’s sea borders or simply the lack of time in a system that was unprepared to deal with so many refugees.⁷⁶⁶ Yet, as the young scholar Neske Baerwaldt, suggests,

[t]his reluctance to register deaths contrasts sharply with the creation of vast databases geared towards surveilling, detaining and deporting illegalized people. [...] To put it differently, despite border deaths permeating the refugee crisis' imagery, the vast majority of such deaths are positioned outside of its frame of reference.⁷⁶⁷

To register a dead body, even as a number that deserves a death certificate is the bare minimum to make it visible and to thus recognise the ethical responsibility towards a lost life, and by extension the lack of political responsibility. In this context, the main paradox is that a “border death” of the European refugee crisis – namely the image of Alan Kurdi – became the most iconic frame after almost a decade of the iconic images from Abu Ghraib.

⁷⁶⁴ Vladimir Hernandez and Nassos Stylianou, “Buried without a name”, BBC, 10 May 2016, accessed 10 Sept. 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/1d791f3683c-5e3c-4a2e-92eb-7d7f6a024c02>.

⁷⁶⁵ Ingeborg Eliassen, “The Uncounted: Invisible Deaths on Europe’s Borders”, *The New Humanitarian*, 16 Feb. 2017, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/refugees/articles/2017/02/16/the-uncounted-invisible-deaths-on-europes-borders>.

⁷⁶⁶ Hernandez and Stylianou, “Buried without a name”; Eliassen, “The Uncounted”.

⁷⁶⁷ Neske Baerwaldt, “The European Refugee Crisis: Crisis for Whom?”, *Border Criminologies*, University of Oxford, 20 Mar. 2018, accessed 10 Sept. 2020, <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2018/03/european-refugee>.

The viral image of Alan Kurdi represented a situation that would otherwise have remained invisible. So many other refugees remained anonymous, unidentified and unregistered even in their deaths.⁷⁶⁸ Social media iconism and the fact that Alan's father did not die, gave to this boy at least the dignity of being recognised in his death. That was an interesting parameter that was questioned by the Visual Social Media Lab in the research project *The Iconic Image on Social Media*, which created an open access report mentioned in a previous Coda.⁷⁶⁹ As two of the researchers ask there,

how will the body of Aylan Kurdi be counted? Or the other thousands of bodies and corpses that wash up on beaches and are usually unidentified, interred in mass unmarked graves and whose stories are not being told? Clearly, not only is there a politic of counting moving bodies but also of counting when they stop and meet their end.⁷⁷⁰

This notion of counting (mass) deaths is another theme that runs through the case studies of this chapter. As analysed, Broomberg and Chanarin's project as a whole is entitled *The Day Nobody Died*, making thus a direct comment on the fact that every other day there were losses in Afghanistan, as it is expected in a war. On the other hand, Birkin utilises an NGO database of losses in Iraqi civilians who were not registered by any other authority, while Barakeh's work questions a Syrian photographic archive of the cruel deaths of detainees. As Barakeh's website mentions regarding this archive:

This process of archivalizing human lives, turning individuals into statistics and erasing their personal stories, showcases the mastery of the regime at dehumanization. It also reflects the effects of perceiving such mass killing through the lens of the media which inherently focusses on digestible statistics and sensationalist imagery.⁷⁷¹

⁷⁶⁸ Hernandez and Stylianou, "Buried without a name".

⁷⁶⁹ Vis and Goriunova, ed., *The Iconic Image on Social Media*.

⁷⁷⁰ Evelyn Ruppert and Funda Ustek, "15. Body Counts: Counting Aylan Kurdi" in Vis and Goriunova, ed., *The Iconic Image on Social Media*, 68.

⁷⁷¹ "Relentless Images".

In this case Barakeh's *Relenless Images*, as the quote explains, expresses a disagreement with "turning individuals into statistics and erasing their personal stories", leading thus to "dehumanization". And one could say that he rightly so suggests this in relation to Caesar's archive. Yet, photography provides visibility – even if atrocity images make this visibility very hard, and admittedly questionable, to look at. As Caesar has explained,

[i]n the two years when I was photographing the bodies of detainees, about ten or so families came to us directly. If you have the number of the detainee himself, or his medical record number, it is possible to track down the photo in our archives. But without one of these numbers it's impossible, as we don't file these photos by the name of the deceased.⁷⁷²

So, although these detentions and the capturing of the deceased should not have happened in the first place, the unofficial use of the archive allowed some to overcome the limbo situation of having a relative that had disappeared.⁷⁷³

The perception of death as statistics is a very topical issue in many different contexts.⁷⁷⁴ One can rightly suggest that statistics, while providing a certain visibility for each individual loss, as it is at least registered – which is not always the case – at the same time they are leading to invisibility due to their massive numbers. In the case of Caesar's archive, the "dehumanisation" mentioned in the previous quote is directly linked to the way that these people were photographed with all the different numbers taped on their dead bodies, and even before that due to the fact that they were even photographed and archived. They were photographed in a state

⁷⁷² Le Caisne, *Operation Caesar*, 85–86.

⁷⁷³ For an account on the politics of people that go missing, although not in the context of Syria, see Jenny Edkins, *Missing: Persons and Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁷⁷⁴ Since 2015, European media at different phases were bombarded from data of deaths of refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean and elsewhere on their journey to Europe, as it will be further discussed in this chapter's Coda. Also, in 2020, both COVID–19 pandemic and the re-activation of the Black Lives Matter movements created an almost daily bombardment of data of deaths. To my mind, although this issue is touched in the context of this chapter, it will be a very interesting topic to be further explored in relation to contemporary visual culture.

which was the direct result of “agony”, which was caused by the same authorities that demanded their photographs.

Many refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean, died in an equivalent situation of “agony”, caused of course by completely different reasons. Yet, they were never captured in a photograph, nor were all of them registered from local authorities. *The List* offers an example of a non-state organisation that takes the responsibility to keep a record of the deaths. Yet, as Butler very aptly says, “[n]umbers do not speak for themselves.”⁷⁷⁵ According to her:

Numbers are a way to frame the losses of war, but this does not mean that we know whether, when, or how numbers count. We may know how to count, or we may well rely on the reliability of certain humanitarian or human-rights organisations to count well, but that is not the same as figuring out how and whether a life counts. Although numbers cannot tell us precisely whose lives count, and whose deaths count, we can note how numbers are framed and unframed to find out how norms that differentiate liveable and grievable deaths are at work in the context of war.⁷⁷⁶

Although in this quote Butler talks about Gaza, the conceptualisation of numerical deaths is directly applicable in the case of *The List*. Of course, in this case the issue of which lives count as “grievable”, therefore worth mentioning, remains central. This does not have to do with a pure registration of the numbers, but what one is doing with those numbers and how one is perceiving them during the spectatorship. “Even when it proves possible to know what the numbers are, the numbers may not matter at all. In other words, paradoxically, there are clear situations when counting does not count”, suggests Butler.⁷⁷⁷ In this sense, the ethical responsibility of the spectator can be seen as the key.

⁷⁷⁵ Butler, “On the Relationship Between Precarity and State Power”.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid.

The imperative character of this responsibility of the spectatorship in the case of *The List*, can be traced also in the civil status of the dead others inscribed in this list. These people, through their journeys to Europe, and because of the lack of political responsibility, are being transformed to “noncitizens”. According to Azoulay, the latter is defined “as someone who has no permanent status within the state where he or she resides and to whom only a limited number of legal rights and obligations – if any whatsoever – apply”.⁷⁷⁸ She continues by providing two more definitions, with the one being that “a noncitizen is someone who cannot participate in the political game, while for the third, the noncitizen is not entitled to the protection of the sovereign.”⁷⁷⁹ All three definitions seem to be applicable for the case of the refugee and migrants drowned in the Mediterranean, especially if one adds the parameter that most of these people reach the European borders via illegal means, namely trafficking.

One stands in front of *The List* and starts reading: “05/05/18; 4; N.N. (1 man); Africa; 1 died off coast of Tripoli (LY) after Libyan coast guard banned NGO ships from approaching; 3 missing, 114 rescued; AFP/IOM Libya/BangkokPost”.⁷⁸⁰ Immediately one realises that these five people drowned in a struggle while not being considered as “citizens”, as people who have rights. And that is a key difference from examples such as the 9/11 museum installation of the American citizens/victims of the attacks, mentioned in the introduction of this chapter.

Another example that, Cennetoğlu’s placement of *The List* on a public wall during the Liverpool Biennial, could remind is the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, in Washington, D.C., which is a public monument, of a chronological presentation of the 58,318 names of the Americans that died in the Vietnam War engraved on a black wall (Fig. 105).⁷⁸¹ However, again two significant

⁷⁷⁸ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 32.

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁰ “List of 34,361 documented deaths of refugees and migrants”.

⁷⁸¹ “Vietnam Veterans”, National Park Service, accessed 10 Sept. 2020, <https://www.nps.gov/vive/index.htm/index.htm>. *The List*, although also displayed on a wall, was presented on paper format glued on the surface, which unfortunately allowed it to be vandalised multiple times from fascists. For more

differences, apart from the different materiality of the two works, are that on the one hand the Vietnam Memorial writes only the full names of people, while on the other these people are perceived as “citizens”, as even the website of the memorial refers to them as the “Americans who gave their lives in service to their country”.⁷⁸² In this case the death, even if it was caused in a violent manner in the context of a war, was considered an honourable recognisable act from a nation state. On the contrary, the refugees and migrants presented on *The List* have died in “agony”, without their agony being registered or seen, apart from their registration in the data.

To combine both Azoulay’s and Berger’s aforementioned concepts, every entry to *The List* could be seen as an “untaken photograph of agony”: “05/05/18; 4; N.N. (1 man); Africa; 1 died off coast of Tripoli (LY) after Libyan coast guard banned NGO ships from approaching; 3 missing, 114 rescued; AFP/IOM Libya/BangkokPost”.⁷⁸³ This was not captured. Yet, if one is to utilise their “civil imagination” they will be able to reconstruct both the “photographed event” of the “untaken photograph of agony”, and what could have been the “event of photography” in this case.

The importance of this lies in the fact that, according to Azoulay, one can be transformed into a “citizen” in the “citizenry of photography”.⁷⁸⁴ By doing so the spectator achieves recognition of the dead other. The odds of doing so are against the spectatorship, if one is to believe that:

One of the important lessons from the story of Aylan is that we cannot assume that the statistics of mass human crises will capture our attention or move us to take action, no matter how large the numbers. Our search data show that the world was basically asleep as the body count in Syria rose steadily into the hundreds of thousands. Perhaps this should not

see Colin Drury, “Liverpool mayor condemns ‘fascist thugs’ who vandalised memorial to dead migrants and refugees”, *Independent*, 8 Sept. 2018, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/liverpool-memorial-dead-refugees-vandalised-spray-invaders-fascist-thugs-a8529026.html>.

⁷⁸² “Vietnam Veterans”.

⁷⁸³ “List of 34,361 documented deaths of refugees and migrants”.

⁷⁸⁴ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 128.

surprise us. A famous saying, sometimes attributed to Josef Stalin, observed that “One man’s death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic.”⁷⁸⁵

Alan’s image is a needed example for the transformation of each entry of *The List* into an “image for agony”, as its iconic status can function on a memory level for the “contract of photography” to take place in this case. Yet, the vast number of the dead presented here, as well as the physical placement of *The List* on a wall, would require an extremely “slow spectatorship”, which could be perceived as impossible. Otherwise, the spectator faces the danger to become prey of what Moeller has warned against: “[a] crowd of people in danger is faceless. Numbers alone can numb.”⁷⁸⁶

In this case the fact that this list is available also online, while, in 2018, it was also published in *The Guardian*, would allow a different temporality for the spectatorship.⁷⁸⁷ Of course, anxiety could be once again what is triggered when one first encounters *The List* and realises the information it displays. In this case, the invisible character of *The List*, meaning the fact that it does not show anything horrific, could make one create a more rational understanding of their responsibility towards all these deaths. An understanding that hopefully would have a longer lasting effect of political conscience.

Finishing this chapter, in a similar manner to how the dead of the “untaken photographs” of *The List* are perceived, the photograph of the dead body of Alan Kurdi was never really seen as such. As explained in previous Codas, this photograph was seen as this of a sleeping child. That is because, the actual “image for agony” remains untaken:

⁷⁸⁵ Slovic et al., “Iconic Photographs and the Ebb”, 641.

⁷⁸⁶ Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*, 36.

⁷⁸⁷ “25 years of the refugee crisis”, Supplement, *Guardian*, 20 June 2018.

Alan – he looked at him – there was blood coming from his eyes – so he closed his eyes – and he let him go.⁷⁸⁸

⁷⁸⁸ These words are extracted from an interview that Tima Kurdi, Alan's aunt gave. There, through the words of her brother and Alan's father, she described to reporters how the incident of the drowning happened. The full interview can be watched here Ashley Fantz and Catherine E. Shoichet, "Syrian toddler's dad: 'Everything I was dreaming of is gone'", CNN, 4 Sept. 2015, accessed 10 Nov. 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/03/europe/migration-crisis-aylan-kurdi-turkey-canada/index.html>.

Conclusion: Invisible Atrocity Images Between Iconism and Censorship

Invisible atrocity images are artworks that either appropriate atrocity images or create visual alternatives to cover the absence of such an image. In both cases, these artworks are utilising invisibility in their own right, by either rendering an existing image invisible or by creating a conceptual abstract representation of what was never captured. This study had its origins in the research hypothesis that intentionally induced invisibility in an artistic context can have a positive impact on the spectatorship of atrocity images. A positive impact on the spectatorship of invisible atrocity images is defined as the possibility of despite not seeing the photographed sufferer or dead other, one is being enabled to rethink their ethical responsibility as a spectator. Essentially the issue at stake in this case would be that, by rendering the subject invisible, the spectator might ignore and not engage with the political struggles captured in the photograph.

Throughout this thesis it has been shown that not only is this not the case, but on the contrary, invisibility can have a very powerful impact in making someone reconsider their disengaged manner of consuming images in the media without engaging with them more deeply. Although this happens through the spectatorship of invisible atrocity images that are seen in an artistic context, the real outcome of this process is that one is assisted in reconsidering the spectatorship of atrocity photographs *per se*, such as those seen on the news or social media platforms. So, this study offers a reconsideration of the ethics of spectatorship of atrocity photographs by examining the effect that their artistic concealment can have on the spectator.

This analysis of artistic invisibility is placed in dialogue with two contemporary visual issues: iconism and censorship. In the context of this study, iconism and censorship are perceived as two sides of the same coin that does not allow one to engage with a person that has suffered or

died in a brutal way, and was or could have been photographed. Iconism creates a hyper-visibility for an image, that as I indicated in Chapter 1, does not allow one to perceive the sufferer or dead other in a manner that would allow one to establish an ethical relationship with them. Essentially, when people look at an iconic image they are not usually able to look beyond the visible frame in a way that will allow them to think about the situation that took place when the image was captured, or in a way that focuses on more than the ethical responsibility of the photographer. In this case, invisible atrocity images were examined as a very useful visual example that can challenge one to look beyond what they have been accustomed to seeing in such iconic photographs.

On the other hand, political invisibility due to censorship has different levels of severity. Partial censorship, which is the visual mode discussed in Chapter 2, is performed by concealing a section of the image from one's eyes. This is a predominant practice in both traditional and social media nowadays, one that every contemporary citizen encounters at different points in their lives. In this case, any ethical consideration of the spectatorship has its genesis in the question of whether partial censorship takes place for the sake of the spectator, or of the photographed sufferer or dead other. Also, invisible atrocity images that utilise visual modes that mimic or resemble partial censorship – mainly pixelation, cut out or covering – can assist one in recognising one's ethical responsibility towards the sufferer or dead other. Essentially spectators are assisted in flipping the way they are used to perceive partial censorship as something that, especially in social media and online content, exists there in order to protect them as spectators. On the contrary, in Chapter 2, through the analysis of invisible atrocity images it was highlighted how, in the partial concealment of the photographed sufferer or dead other, one should recognise

them as an ethical entity that places a demand on them: “Thou shalt not kill”, as Levinas conceptualises it.⁷⁸⁹

In Chapter 3, the analysis moved to artworks that create a dialogue with cases of censorship that fully omit images or information from the public’s visual sphere, such as the death or torture of civilians. The invisible atrocity images created an alternative visualisation of photographs that were either never taken or were not taken in order to be seen by a wider public. The artists utilise invisibility in a manner that creates an abstract alternative, or one based on non-figurative information, namely data. The latter, with the vast numbers of losses that often register, highlight another challenge for the spectatorship.

In addition, this study has returned again and again to the same viral photographs of Alan Kurdi. One could suggest that if these images held importance for the formulation of my rationale, a reading of the ethics of atrocity images that represent children should have been one of the main foci. Yet, for me, the importance of this photograph was not the fact that it captured a dead child, although that is crucial if one is to consider further why systems of image production and dissemination have favoured such images for decades. In this thesis, this image is perceived as a key example of contemporary online iconism, namely viral, that guides one to question whether viral images are being looked at in an ethical manner.

This thesis underlines the point that, although in contemporary Westernised societies censorship is what is most often linked as a cause that makes one to not be seen through images, iconism or virality can be equally troublesome. Despite how many times the sufferer or dead other has been seen, in reality they are very rarely looked at in the way that the invisible atrocity image guide one to look at atrocity photographs: namely through a “slow spectatorship” that would utilise other images that one has seen in the past, as well as their imagination. Hence, one

⁷⁸⁹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 77.

of the claims that these artworks bring into the fore is that, in order for a spectator to think about their ethical responsibility, they need to spend time creating critical engagement with the visual material.

The initial structure for this study was organised in relation to the different visual modes of the case studies, namely around the different manners in which the artworks were setting themselves in dialogue with atrocity photographs. The material were divided according to whether they were appropriating an existing image and partially or fully concealing it, or by creating an alternative visualisation for a non-taken photograph. Yet, this organisation of the material was abandoned, because it meant that it would follow a formalist art historical analysis, which to my mind lead to a depoliticised reading of these artworks. The latter would not seem so troublesome if the material at hand were not images of atrocities, hence photographs that demand the spectator to think about/with them.⁷⁹⁰ However, the choice of the different theoretical lens for each chapter was also partially guided by formal criteria, as for example the choice of Butler's "frame" in Chapter 1, where the visual features of the artworks offer themselves for such an analysis.

The case studies in this thesis were examined through three different theoretical lenses which allow spectatorship to be approached as an "encounter" between the spectator and the photograph, and essentially the photographed sufferer or dead other. On a theoretical level, this study follows the direction offered by the most recent wave of photography theory which, while providing a critical reading of the ethical issues at stake when looking at photographs of atrocity, does not reject their importance to be taken and seen. Hence, although the ethics of the spectatorship are seen through the new light of artistically induced invisibility, the latter does not

⁷⁹⁰ Such examples can be found in cases that analyse images of atrocities in a comparative manner to religious imagery and paintings, as in Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect*.

reject the political importance of producing and looking at atrocity photographs. That is underlined by the fact that, although the analysis of the case studies started from the artwork, the spectatorship of each photograph that was appropriated or commented upon was also considered.

In particular, this analysis is based on the shift that Azoulay made in this field, by stressing the importance of the responsibility of the spectator in the sphere of image production and dissemination. Yet, as seen in the examination of the case studies of this thesis, both their artistic and invisible character create certain challenges when one attempts to approach them through existing theoretical lenses utilised for photographs (Butler and Azoulay) or not for visual material altogether (Levinas). Hence, the three lenses that were utilised were expanded and further pushed towards new directions.

Chapter 1 is built on Butler's theorisation of the "frame", in which it is proposed that different "frames" are needed in order to perceive what is being seen in any given photographic frame – the visual. In this case the visual was an image of hyper-visibility: an iconic or viral image. Through the examination of the different frames found on these artworks – visual, discursive/textual, aural – the spectator is guided into reconsidering what they are used to seeing in iconic or viral images, and whether their accustomed kind of spectatorship allows them to reconsider their ethical responsibility towards the sufferer or dead other. Of course, as was seen, not all artworks are successful in allowing the spectator to focus on the photographed person, instead of the photographer, as in the case of Jaar's work for Carter's image. What is highlighted in Chapter 1 is the fact that although iconic images are widely seen throughout different generations and in different contexts, due to their hyper-visibility they do not allow spectators to engage with the photograph in an ethical manner that would expect them to think about how/why the suffering or death was caused, and how/why this photograph was produced and disseminated. Artistically induced invisibility is assisting one to look at and beyond the visible iconic frame.

In Chapter 2, the artworks were examined through the lens of the “face”, in accordance with Levinas’ conceptualisation of an ethical theory, that is based on one’s encounter with the “face” of the other. At the core of the Levinasian “face” as an ethical entity, lies the question of whether the latter is to be found in the homonym body part or if it is something abstract. This question is set in dialogue with the visual culture question of whether partial concealment/censorship of an atrocity image is taking place for the sake of the photographed person or for the protection of the eyes of the spectator. If the “face” is to be found in the non-visible, then the partial concealment of the sufferer or dead other can and should be seen as a gesture that demands one to perceive the invisibility as allowing the spectator to recognise the other as a Levinasian “face”. Hence the “face” is to be found in the invisible. Of course, this view seems very controversial if one takes into consideration the political issues that censorship raises in the sphere of media. The question whether, in terms of ethical understanding of spectatorship, it would be effective for one to see an atrocity image in the news without the latter being partially concealed is something further elaborated in Chapter 3.

In the last chapter, the question of how one can perceive invisible atrocity images is approached through the lens of the “contract”. In particular Azoulay’s proposition of the “civil contract of photography”, which lies at the background of my thinking for this whole thesis, is considered in the context of untaken or fully censored photographs. The artworks, in this case, create visual alternatives for violent events, and mainly deaths, that were either not captured from a photograph or never meant to be seen. Yet, when the dead or sufferer other cannot be seen, how can one perform their civic duties, in Azoulay’s framework, of recognising their responsibility towards the otherwise depicted sufferer or dead other.

In this case, the notion of political understanding of emotions was utilised. In particular, I employed Marcus’ suggestion of how anxiety can create a more critically engaged citizen in

matters of elections, which then it was adapted in the visual sphere with Azoulay's reading of the image as a territory of citizenship. The proposition here was that in the case of invisible atrocity images, the invisible character of the material can cause one to feel anxiety. Anxiety for what one does not see, but can imagine and see in one's mind's eye, by utilising the textual information provided in the exhibition space as well as other relevant material they can recall in their memory.

The first kind of material that one could recall would be iconic or viral images, which can function as a pre-existing form of visualisation. Here, anxiety can be experienced when one realises what one could have been looking at if the photograph had been captured or was allowed to be seen. In this case, anxiety can have a very positive effect, as according to Marcus, it can make one engage critically in situations. Hence, the "anxious spectator" will be able to recognise the death and suffering in the invisible, and have an ethical understanding of what the other has gone through. In other words, engaging with the invisible atrocity image in a critical manner that would allow them to recognise it as an "image *for* agony", instead of Berger's term of "photographs of agony". Thus, the agony, which for Berger stands as descriptive of the anguish of the photographed person, in the case of invisible atrocity images becomes a descriptive of the anxiety (through the Greek translation of the word agony) that the spectator should experience in order to become an anxious citizen that will participate in this peculiar "civil contract of photography".

Of course, the analysis of these case studies methodologically involved treating them as "theoretical objects" in Damisch's terms, as was explained in the Introduction. That meant that the artworks – the invisible atrocity images – were bringing to the surface their own theoretical questions. Those questions were approached in a dialectical manner through the theoretical lenses, in order to propose certain ways of problematising the encounter with atrocity images. To

my mind, all three different types of invisible atrocity images have something unique to offer for one's understanding of the issues of spectatorship of atrocity photographs in their everyday lives.

First, it is seen throughout Chapter 1 and the three Codas that start from the viral photographs of Alan Kurdi, that iconic and viral material do not assist a spectator to engage in a critical and ethical manner with the image. The image is looked at only within the limits of the visual "frame", which tends to render the sufferer or dead other a representative of how suffering and gruesome deaths have been depicted. The spectator in this case overlooks their ethical responsibility when encountering such images. The questions of why they look at the photograph and whether they have the right to look at the photograph, remain open. Invisible atrocity images allow spectators to look again at such material in a way that will assist them to start looking beyond the visible "frame".

Second, contemporary spectators, through a close examination of invisible atrocity images that partially conceal the sufferer or dead other, can learn a new and critical engagement with cases of partial censorship. Essentially my proposition here is that for an ethical engagement with the image it does not matter why an editor, a social media platform, a publisher and so on and so forth, have decided to partially censor the image, if one learns to look beyond the partial concealment and engage with the political situation that is depicted. On the contrary, such modes of content moderation can allow a spectator to get the needed emotional distance that will make them to be able to look for further hints that will assist them to recognise the other as an ethical entity, and not a mere concealed part of an image.

Finally, not being able to see a photograph at all due to censorship creates a difficult situation, as there is no evidence that a certain event has taken place. Hence, invisible atrocity images provide an alternative visualisation for something that would have remained invisible for

political purposes. Here, the challenge of engaging with such abstract artworks would require taking time for the spectatorship.

Of course, this study opens up a few new directions that could be further expanded. First, although all the Cudas started from the same photographs of Alan Kurdi, meaning that the same visual material were considered through all the three lenses, it would be interesting to also create an analysis in which one of those expanded theoretical lenses would be applied to one case study from each chapter. In this sense, all the visual culture issues – iconism and virality, partial and full censorship – would be examined from the same theoretical perspective in order to see whether the understanding of the material would differ.

Another research opportunity would be to try and bridge Levinasian ethics with Azoulay's framework, despite the fact that the latter has mostly Deleuzean influences.⁷⁹¹ In this case the religious routes of Levinas' perception of the "face" would be further deconstructed. In particular, I think that it would be of interest to examine this bridging of the two theories by substituting the existence of a divine power with the use of the Internet. In this case, one's ethics would be formulated not from the fear of God, but from a self-censoring of what might be accessed, due to the fear of control from the different browsing engines.

In terms of case studies, an expansion of the ideas around invisibility discussed in this thesis would be if the invisible atrocity images were set in dialogue with aftermath photographs, in which the spectator does not see anything of the violent event. In the same context, it could be interesting to expand the notion of invisibility towards artworks that utilise sound in a particular way that allows one to create images in their mind, similar to the artwork by Lounguine discussed in the Coda of Chapter 1.

⁷⁹¹ Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 29.

On a macroscale, one question that remains open from this study is whether there is a link to be traced between artists' engagement with abstraction/invisibility and political crisis. This could be compared with the European emergence of abstraction and the violent events of the first part of the 20th century. In this case, the specificity of the different cultural and political frameworks to which every case study refers would need to be taken into much closer consideration. Yet, it would be interesting to see whether abstraction, invisibility and violence go hand in hand.

Finally, to return back to the invisible atrocity images examined in this study, future research could reveal how this collection of material could be organised as a curatorial project, that could be set in dialogue also with the direct material that these works are appropriating. An addition in this context would be to include artistic examples that utilise sound as a substitute for what is rendered invisible. It would be particularly useful to be able to utilise more extensively quantitative and ethnographic research methods that would allow for the collection of substantial data regarding the engagement of spectators with these works in the exhibition space. That could be further explored through an interdisciplinary project that would involve scholars and methods from the fields of visual anthropology and psychology. Although such interdisciplinary collaborations often face many methodological challenges, I believe that they can simultaneously facilitate a useful understanding of such material.

This thesis stresses the importance of the textual contextualisation of both atrocity photographs and invisible atrocity images. Yet, the contextualisation on its own will never be sufficient if the spectator does not learn how to pay attention and look at such material in an ethical manner. While atrocities will keep happening, invisible atrocity images invite the spectators to rethink what they have become accustomed to look at and how. By doing so, they

will be transformed into a contemporary spectator who has learnt to pay homage to visible and invisible atrocities.

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