

◆ **Afterword**

On Referentiality, Dissent, and the Inescapability of Context

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A Tale of Two (Misleading) Images

In early 2010, in the midst of several international crises, a number of images caused a major scandal in Spain. The motive was not the subjects of the images (the social and political circumstances to which they referred), but the images themselves. On January 13, 2010, TVE (Spanish Public Television) broadcasted scenes purportedly from the earthquake in Haiti, showing the spectacular collapse of a structure several stories high. Public outrage immediately ensued, and TVE removed the videos from its website, apologizing for having broadcast them on the 9 p.m. news without confirming their authenticity. The public broadcaster also issued a press release: “Al inicio de este video se emiten unas imágenes que por error han sido atribuidas a los primeros momentos del terremoto ocurrido en Haiti. Corresponden, sin embargo, a otro momento y lugar” (Agencias) (At the beginning of this recording some images are shown that were mistakenly attributed to the Haiti Earthquake. Despite this claim, they were recorded at another place and time). In fact, the video had been recorded during the 2007 Heineken Festival in Venice, and TVE had precipitately downloaded it from YouTube.¹ To make the situation even more awkward, the same television channel made a similar “error” on the same day, presenting a video of a storm in Maine as a flash flood in San Lorenzo de Calatrava, Ciudad Real, Spain.² The blunders provoked an immediate political reaction, and the conservative Popular Party, comparing TVE (somewhat melancholically) with the efficiency and professionalism of the BBC, demanded the resignation of the channel’s news director, Fran Llorente.

A few days after this controversy, another image caused a minor diplomatic conflict between the US and Spanish governments. The story, and its surprising twists, played as follows: the FBI used a portrait of Gaspar Llamazares, general coordinator of the Spanish left-wing party Izquierda Unida (IU), to create what the *Daily Telegraph* called “a mocked-up Photofit image showing how Osama Bin Laden might look now” (Govan). When the shocking manipulation was noticed, the story made international headlines

On Photography, History, and Memory in Spain

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and Llamazares expressed his profound indignation, adding that he feared for his personal integrity.³ The Spanish Congress issued a letter of full support for Llamazares and demanded an official explanation from the United States.⁴ The U.S. government promptly offered a public apology (of sorts) through its recently appointed ambassador in Madrid, Alan Solomont. The photograph, of course, disappeared from the FBI website. Llamazares, however, considered that this quiet resolution was far from satisfactory, and that, contrary to the FBI's explanation, the choice of his face had been the result of an ideological decision: "Quiero que se investigue claramente," he stated, "si los izquierdista formamos parte de los archivos del FBI." (I want authorities to investigate if 'leftists' are still part of the FBI's files).⁵ This political (and not merely aesthetic) approach to the FBI's real motivations for manipulating his photo did not go uncontested. *El Mundo* opinion columnist David Gistau (to mention just one example) accused him of political paranoia, delusions of grandeur, and biased anti-Americanism, which (in Gistau's opinion) clearly proved the anachronistic cold-war mentality of a *dépassé* ideologue still haunted by the spectre of post-communism.

There are several issues tangled together in these controversies. First of all, they are about the violation of a particular regime of truth. Despite our strong cultural skepticism about the relationship between the mass media and reality, and despite our status of "suspicious" or "cynical" viewers who know that what we are watching is *never* the "truth" (Collins 7), these two recent examples show that we still want to be able to distinguish between legitimate and improper uses of audiovisual materials. It was not so long ago that Baudrillard proclaimed the "liquidation of all referentials" (2) and the inevitable success of "a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real [as a substitute for the real itself]" (2). We do not have to completely disregard Baudrillard's classic analysis, which in many senses is still useful, to conclude that Internet, newspapers, and television audiences resist the allegedly self-referential circularity of a totalizing simulacrum. It could be argued against this thesis that in the examples cited here, consumers were comparing different representations of events they never witnessed personally, but this argument would miss the point. These viewers have not been discussing (to put it in French post-structuralist parlance) the paradoxes and aporias of the libidinal economy of the sign, the impasses and internal frictions inside a hyper-reality of proliferating signifiers.

In fact, these intense, originally spontaneous debates about the epistemological status of certain images differ from the supposedly apathetic masses who, as Baudrillard predicted, "become a sullen silent majority in which all meaning, messages, and solicitations implode as if sucked into a black hole" (Best and Douglas 121). If the video from the Heineken Festival and the manipulated pictures of Llamazares matter, if they have aroused

such a political hullabaloo, it is because we are still struggling not only with justifiable and unjustifiable uses of certain images according to a particular regime of truth, but also with appropriate or inappropriate links between the images and the referent(s) with which they claim to interact. In other words, a prominent line of academic thought may shy away from the referentiality issue, unmasking it as a naïve, positivistic, and pre-postmodern dogma, but referentiality is alive and well, operating as an everyday epistemological and political tool. I do not claim here a facile return to “reality” as a pristine source of meaning or a depository of brute facts, at which we can point unproblematically. I merely suggest that a) there is a revealing disconnect between certain theoretical discourses and many routine practices, b) that this disconnection should make us cautious about the radical dismissal of referentiality and referentiality’s effects on political critique and praxis, and c) that there are already relevant theoretical attempts to counteract rigid rejections of referentiality precisely for not being able to explain without acquiescence some of the most basic assumptions we make in everyday life.⁶

There is another facet of these controversies I would like to underline. In both incidents, what is being disputed is the authority to stabilize the reliability of certain images, that is, their ability to successfully circulate and perform their intended role. On the one hand, we have two public state-controlled organizations which, through various channels and methods, have traditionally exercised a great influence on the construction of public consensus on key topics. On the other hand, these organizations’ abilities to produce and disseminate representations and discourses that unify mainstream audiences’ fears and sympathies are resisted by virtual communities of individuals and consumers. Using the Internet in an extremely effective way, these communities reacted against the images, raised doubts about them and deactivated their status in only days or even hours. As a result, the previously invisible mechanisms through which consensual images and perceptions are shaped became the focus of scrutiny. This attention to the medium itself has further facilitated an analysis of the implicit agendas behind images that attempt to delineate our negative and positive perceptions of important global subjects (such as terrorism, international solidarity, peripheral geographies, the spatial allocation of fear, and national and trans-national security).

In addition, this clash of interpretative reactions touches the core of a crucial topic in the history of photographic technology. John Tagg has extensively traced the intersections between the origins of photography and its primary political deployments, and he concludes:

Such techniques were themselves evolved and embodied in institutional practices central to the governmental strategy of capitalist states whose consolidation demanded the establishment of a new ‘regime of truth’ and a new ‘regime of sense.’ What gave photography its power to evoke

a truth was not only the privilege attached to mechanical means in industrial societies, but also its mobilization within the emerging apparatuses of a new and more penetrating form of the state. (*Burden of Representation* 60)

This paragraph is rather dense, and dealing with it in depth would take too long. For the sake of brevity, let me highlight one particular idea. Tagg's insight refers to a historical context in which the reinforcement of the nation-state and the nation-state's interest in certain photographic genres go hand in hand. The target of Tagg's argument is not photographic referentiality *per se*, unhistorically conceived, but referentiality as it was structured and regimented by the main nineteenth-century political institution (the nation-state) in the context of industrial capitalism.⁷ As we all know, these circumstances have changed and we are now learning to cope with a highly complex globalized, post-industrial finance-oriented capitalist system in which national states (contrary to what is sometimes claimed) do not lose preeminence, but simply readapt their still fundamental role (Harvey, *Spaces* 25–29). In this new environment, photographic images and their hierarchical distribution of a visual field have not lost importance. Consequently, it would be a miscalculation to conclude that we have entered a historical phase of unrestricted aesthetic options and free-floating audiovisual products. Restrictions are still in place and the political management of images is as strong as ever. Political and economic interests are still advanced through the discriminating selection and promotion of photographic images.

However, as John Tagg explains in a more recent work, a discursive regime's "never fully functionalized productivity is always in tension with the boundaries and limits that ensure meaning" (*Disciplinary Frame* XXVI). In other words, no system is all-encompassing and there is always room for subversion and overstepping. We are dealing here with two extreme positions that for some time have opposed and energized each other. On one hand, it has been stated that under late-capitalist societies, the overabundance of cultural (mainly audiovisual) goods reflects an ideological program of numbing or paralyzing effects. To put it in Adorno's well-known terms, this diversity of images tediously reinstates "the magical repetition of the industrial procedure in which the selfsame is reproduced through time" (70). On the other hand, popular and pop culture, digitality, Internet, cybernity, and the so-called i-revolution have been unjustifiably celebrated as the achievement of a panacea in which horizontality, democracy, fluidity,⁸ and heterogeneity have happily erased previous hierarchies or constraints. These new technologies have however given birth to a new set of limits and controls on what we see or do not see, and on how we see it. It is precisely at the intersection of new information technology equipment, the new limits and the new potential they create that we should locate the debate. The two

examples I have described confirm that current mass media and the latest visual technology are being used to mobilize public opinion and arouse/satisfy certain spectatorial expectations with clear political objectives. They also demonstrate that these tools cut both ways; that the same instruments that are being utilized to propagate a particular representation of a particular reality in order to produce a particular effect are also being re-appropriated to destabilize this representation and its desired outcome.⁹ I will return to this issue in the conclusions.

Rethinking Referentiality

The essays included in this collection revolve, at least partially, around the two issues I have briefly introduced above (the paradoxes of the referentiality of photography and its dissident potential). They are closely connected in these texts. With regard to the first topic (I will tackle the second in the following section), one can notice in these articles a dual rhetoric of excess and insufficiency. On the one hand, these authors perceive in some images an overflowing quality, a semantic surplus that cannot be contained in the frame of the picture. The photographs seem to be the site of an implosive gesture that complicates their literality. The images elicit a particular reaction; a sense of spectatorial displacement, of being dislocated towards a “beyond-the-confines” of what their materiality shows. Simultaneously, the photographs attract our attention so compellingly because they are also about what is not shown, what could not and will never be included, what is just not *there* on their physical surface. There is an irrevocable absence in these representations, an internal constitutive lack that reminds us that if they are semantically saturated, they are also insufficient and precarious. This tension between too much and too little, overabundance and scarcity, between what overwhelms the exteriority of an image and what is irremediably missing from it, induces a response in which referentiality plays a role, but an intricate one. In these photographs, referentiality does not mean phenomenological correspondence, visual equivalence, iconic similarity, or indexical accuracy. This type of referentiality creates and needs a reciprocity between the positivity of a historical reality and the presentness of an image. The theoretical stance we find in this volume is quite different. These photographs deserve our interest because there is in them no such reciprocity: the relation between historical reality and image is not based on any mutuality, but on a subtle dynamic of shortfalls and excesses. This dynamic illustrates that neither a visual representation nor historical reality are complete, that neither of them follows a principle of ontological plenitude, and that in both of them, there are disturbing gaps and unachieved potential.

In these essays, as the reader has probably guessed, Walter Benjamin's and Derrida's influence is quite noticeable. These two thinkers came from different theoretical traditions and faced different historical circumstances. In addition, each essay handles these influences in its own way. However for the purpose of this paper, it could be argued that there are between these two thinkers, if not philosophical intersections, at least certain echoes that we can perceive throughout this volume. When in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida claims that "no justice [. . .] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghost of those [. . .] who are already dead" (xviii, italics in the original), it is almost inevitable that Benjaminian reverberations, or at least an initial Benjaminian impulse, can be perceived in Derrida's "hauntology."¹⁰ The differences and resonances between these two authors, and between *Specters of Marx* and "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," are highly complex (due, at least partially, to the argumentative styles of Benjamin and Derrida); such a comparative study exceeds the scope of this essay. The important point is that Benjamin and Derrida propose, as Matthias Fritsch has brilliantly elucidated, a poetics of memory, promise, and justice that is a crucial factor in this volume's approach to photography and history.¹¹ More specifically, in some photographs from the nineteenth century, the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust, and the Spanish Transition, history is not an external referent. These photographs are not subsidiary products of History, its secondary manifestation, but a *locus* where History was and is performed, and where History was and is also being fought. The historicity of these images does not consist in the fact that they "allude to" or "stand for" an historical time and geography. Rather, they make material, in many different ways, historical tensions and conflicts, in which visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, were and are still being negotiated.

The contexts and terms of these negotiations are obviously quite dissimilar between images. In Keller and Snyder's essay on García-Alix, the concept of the obscene has a pivotal function because, as these authors explain, "by showing almost *everything*, what remains is not located in the image's explicit content, but in the photograph's allusion to what remains outside the frame" (98). These "encounters with the unsightly" interpellate the cultural politics of the body during the Spanish Transition. Concretely, these photographs question the visual demarcations that classify, through selective inclusions and exclusions, wealthy corporealities and contaminated/perverse ones. HIV/AIDS operates, in these disturbing images, as a saturating but elusive background, a polemical vanishing point for the bodily anxieties, prejudices, uncertainties, and desires which these photographs re-enact at a time of important redefinitions in the Iberian Peninsula.

Both Maureen Tobin Stanley and Hanno Hardt detect a metonymic quality in certain photographs that manages to concretize the many existential layers of two violent historical processes: the Spanish Civil War and the Nazi concentration camps. Tobin Stanley argues, for example, that although one of Francisco Boix's photographs of the Mauthausen concentration camp "tells the story of this individual [. . .], it also tells the story, myriad of stories, of countless individuals whose humanity was snatched away" (40). If Boix's work at the camp was originally understood by Nazi officials as a propagandistic platform, his images have become something very different, namely iconic, hyper-representative signs in which the extreme conditions of the concentration camps were paradigmatically captured. Hardt observes a similar over-representativeness in Robert Capa's and Gera Taro's photographic reports of the Spanish Civil War. These images possess, according to Hardt, "a special appeal, or an extraordinary power, which makes them icons of a particular era. They stand for a social or political event and evoke the spirit of a period in history" (39). These images represent much more than what they literally represent; they are simultaneously particular and generic, and they summarize broad historical circumstances in a concrete object. In fact, the photographs seem to facilitate the third type of knowledge that Spinoza discusses in his *Ethics* and which has so powerfully intrigued Spinoza's readers.¹² The key point about this knowledge is that it is not based *only* on sensorial perceptions, nor is it based *only* on abstract rational deductions. One achieves this type of knowledge when specificity and generality become indistinguishable; when the finite materiality of a context reveals (without losing its specificity, and without becoming a metaphor, symbol, or allegory) a general condition in which many other contexts find an explicative accommodation. Capa, Taro, and Boix accomplish this difficult task, concentrating the wide range of Spanish Civil War and concentration camp experiences in a few exemplary images that, nonetheless, refer to specific moments and places.

For his part, Txetxu Aguado reinterprets Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" to offer a politically empathetic reading of two photographs of the Guernica ruins taken on May 8, 1937. Aguado identifies in these images an "*extra*" (58; italics in the original), "an excess of meaning that escapes the viewer" (65), or "a totality, simultaneity of reality, not possible in the verbal description of the same photographic scene" (65). This essay supports a modality of perception that, in Aguado's own terms, "liberate[s] meaning imprisoned in the picture" (65). As with Keller's, Snyder's, Stanley's, and Hardt's images, the remains of Guernica speak at the same time of a) emptiness and vacuums, of those human lives and things that are not where they used to be, that are missing, and b) a pressing saturation of meaning that transcends and surpasses the frames of these scenes. Aguado admits that this is the result of a hermeneutic operation, but he also calls for a prior openness and receptivity that allows us to "receive what others have to

offer” (64); that is, to “sense their [the victims’] presence even though the substance of their life is absent” (69). He proposes not only an interpretative reception, but also (and more importantly) a photographic *event* in which negativity/absence is *experienced* as positivity/presence. It seems to be that, in this additional involvement in a visual representation, its mere presence and its physical-aesthetic effect on the viewers play a decisive role. I believe that the distinction Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has made between what he calls “presence effects” and “meaning effects” (xv) is pertinent here because Aguado is trying to reaccommodate both of them in a coherent spectatorial response that could also have strong ethical implications.

Susan Larson’s essay needs to be incorporated into this discussion with care because the object of her study is a group of avant-garde and experimental photographs and meta-photographic reflections that were originally published in the counter-cultural magazine *Nueva Lente* between 1971 and 1975. García-Alix, Capa, and Taro cannot be labeled as realist photographers without first reshaping this term. In their projects, the influence of other aesthetic schools is fairly evident. However, in these artists’ work (as well as in Boix’s snapshots), there is a figurative inclination and a renunciation of certain techniques, such as the photographic collage, that were a constant feature of *Nueva Lente*. Having said this, I would like to make the following point. Larson explains that *Nueva Lente*, following the dictates of the historical avant-garde, assumes that “the true goal of photography was no longer the capture of reality” (83). At the same time, the magazine was not advocating (at least, not completely) a break between “representation” and “reality.” The true revolutionary move does not lie in the alienation of one *from* the other, but in the articulation of one *against* the other. Experimental artistic practices remind us that “reality” is something aesthetically and epistemologically sanctioned, that this definition implies institutional and social violence, and that “reality” is therefore an historical “construct” that can be redefined, pressing for the inclusion of elements and points of view that had been concealed. From this perspective, in some of these non-conformist movements one could rightly justify an anti-realist realism (so to speak), a model of representation (fragmentary, broken, inconsistent, multi-perspectival, heterogeneous, hybrid, mutant) that would respond and correspond to a fragmentary, multi-perspective, mutant historical reality (usually associated with modernity and modern social avatars).¹³ In my opinion, this line of thought helps us rethink this essay in the context of the current work. As in the previous contributions, Larson describes how a collection of images reacts against a particular visual regime and how the images put emphasis on what was being underemphasized or simply unseen. In these avant-garde photomontages, the realist depictions that characterize more realist photographic styles are missing, but these absences (as was also elucidated in previous cases) have a positive value. One could understand these images as the implicit imputation of overstated

and hypostasized presences (realist reality), and also as the reclaiming of ignored or repressed absences (anti-realist reality) that in *Nueva Lente*'s compositions are granted maximum preeminence.

Finally, Rebecca Haidt's article offers an interesting counterpoint to some of the essays included in this collection. Aguado, Keller and Snyder, Hardt, and Tobin Stanley deal with photographs in which modernity (progress, linear development, material advancement, instrumental reason, bureaucratic efficiency) is observed and portrayed from a highly critical perspective. It would be inappropriate to associate these images with a total denunciation of modernity. However, it would be equally misguided to deny the obvious: these photographs show the darkest effects of modern twentieth-century science, industrialism, and managerial and organizational techniques. In fact, they portray a nightmarish (hi)story of ruins, waste, devastation, alienation, violence, decadence, and disease that hardly fits into modernity's historical optimism. Haidt's essay focuses on a different historical moment, the mid-nineteenth century, when a growing mass media system, exploiting recent technological discoveries, "invited readers and viewers to embrace an ideology of modernity through the dissemination of images and articles about science, industry, architecture, geography, history, and current events" (Haidt 12). This author convincingly connects readers' enthusiastic reception of *costumbrista* types and depictions (as exemplified in the success of Mesonero and Larra) with the new visual devices; both of them "aimed at creating effects of immediacy, and of reality experienced in the moment" (Haidt 18). More specifically, both "used reality effects to explore tensions between what is seen, and what lies beneath the surface" (18).

I have been commenting on a similar tension between presences and absences in previous essays. In this particular case, Haidt explores Antonio Flores's articles because this journalist underscores what, in his opinion, the massive production and consumption of images was concealing: the lucrative mercantilization of highly selective visual representations that fictionalize or distort social dynamics. This is an issue that Aguado and Keller and Snyder also mention, and that (in my opinion) has not lost, but has gained relevance. In a fully developed market society like ours, where symbolic products (or, in Elias Khalil's terms, "identity goods") are as valuable as (and quite often, "undistinguishable from") material goods, images are constantly at risk of being commodified. This process paradoxically contradicts these photographs' implicit critique of modern exploitative and instrumentalizing tendencies. In other words, on one level these images aspire to retrace a critical history of modernity's remainders, victims, and losses. On another level, these images have sometimes functioned performatively as commodities that excite the aggressive cycle of consumption. In fact, shocking pictures of brutality, suffering, and destruction run the risk of restimulating a very modern commercial appetite

for “some violent, traumatic, transgressive, often sacralized or ‘sublimated’ event that is presumed to mark a turning point or rupture in history” (LaCapra 93). In conclusion, the fetishization of extreme cases of violence and the mesmerized absorption in apocalyptic images of radical transgression are current tendencies that need to be resisted inside the cultural market. In this task, it is essential to configure and promote a sensible model of referentiality in which the photographic depiction of bodies in pain or heinous human crimes does not become a propitious opportunity for an addicted fascination with shocking and violent images.

In Praise of Dissidence

LaCapra’s evaluation of the ambiguous position of violent images in contemporary post-industrial and late-capitalist societies can serve as a point of transition from the first central theme of this volume (the complex referential rearrangement of absences and presences in photographs) to the second theme (the dissident potential of photographs). Regarding the latter topic, I would like to mention the two main positions adopted by these essays. The first defends the strategic utility of photography to exercise pressure on the limits of what a political agreement has demarcated as its legitimate field of vision. To put it in Foucauldian terms, since its very beginnings, photography has been an important instrument of state control and classification through which many social spaces and demographic segments have been subjected to an inquisitive disciplinary regime of transparency. This involves not only an attempt to hold direct or indirect power over the means of production and channels of distribution of images, but also to stipulate something much more intangible: the symbolic and pragmatic limits of what a community of viewers tacitly declares to be the “seeable,” the cultural frontier that delineates what, in a given historical context, a community of viewers sees, wants to see, and is able to see. This boundary is not an irrevocable vertical imposition, but a negotiation in which “visual limits” are on a regular basis transgressed and reinstated. This means that some images, given the right circumstances, are able to make us perceive those limits as limits, facilitating a more inclusive and self-conscious visual regime.

Under this type of intervention in what Linda Nochlin has called “the politics of vision” in a particular era, one could categorize Keller and Snyder’s interpretation of García-Alix. In fact, according to these authors, some of García-Alix’s compositions fall under the category of “ob-scene” because they include a subject matter that was “off stage” or “out of sight” (92). Although García-Alix always keeps a captivating balance between what is shown and what is barely suggested, his photographs are particularly

provocative because, as Keller and Snyder state, they “detain[s] his viewer’s glance upon something that should not be witnessed” (104), “exposing the invisible” (98) and “offering an encounter that may bring to light liminal spaces of history” (92). García-Alix does not attempt (only) to *épater la bourgeoisie*, but to force a political reconsideration of how the “tolerable” human body was being redefined at a crucial time of institutional change in Spain and exaggerated fear of HIV around the world. In a very different set of circumstances, but also at a critical moment in Spain’s recent history, Robert Capa took a handful of photographs that to some extent altered public international perception of the Spanish Civil War. Hanno Hardt reminds us that, although these photographs are usually associated by contemporary art *aficionados* with both the category of “art” and art circles (museums, expositions, catalogs, and so forth), they were originally published in popular magazines such as *LIFE* or *Vu*, and they were meant to be radical political statements. Capa and Taro wanted to show the “untold” and “unseen” war, transforming the way it was being visually represented in order to produce a political reaction.

These two essays on García-Alix and on Capa and Taro lay stress upon the fundamental interdependence of politics and aesthetics. However, Hardt and (especially) Keller and Snyder suggest a type of linkage that puts aside obsolete quarrels over *engagé* art. I would like to briefly draw attention to this more radical connection between politics and aesthetics to show its final consequences and to throw light on the role photographs could play. First of all, it is important to recuperate a more comprehensive meaning of the word aesthetics, one that does not limit itself to the appreciation of “artistic values” in a pre-established set of “artistic objects.” As Terry Eagleton explains, there is a more essential original meaning that reveals why the aesthetic was a much-needed complement to Enlightenment rationalism: “That territory [of the aesthetics] is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life—the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion of the world” (*The Ideology* 13). Although aesthetics has evolved in a very different way and is usually described as a “spiritual” or “ethereal” experience, Eagleton’s reflection reminds us that, before it became micro-specialized and ideologically pseudo-mystified, aesthetics designated a very material and physical experience; how our body experiences the world through its senses.

It is precisely from this perspective that Jacques Rancière has formulated one of the most influential philosophical approaches to the indissolubility of politics and aesthetics. Rancière identifies the word “police” with a political regime, and more concretely (and here lies his originality), with “an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are

assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not” (*Disagreement* 28). If aesthetics tries to understand how a material disposition of the world has an impact on the body’s senses, and if this material disposition of the world is not spontaneous scenery but a man-made political reorganization, the domain of aesthetics also marks an arena of political thinking and action. In other terms, thinking and acting politically means (among other things) understanding that what we see, what we do not see, what we know is being hidden, and what we are unable to even picture about the “non-seeable” and the “unseen” is the product of a political arrangement. Remaking the limits of what we perceive and acknowledge visually and reshaping the perceptual habits that inform the content of our perceptions are primary esthetic-political tasks. Photographs, such as those explored by these essays, have a subversive effect because they manage to rearticulate the politico-visual regimes of the Spanish Civil War and the transition to democracy, showing what was not being showed and showing it in a highly efficient and provocative way. Without exaggerating their importance, it is fair to conclude that many of these photographs affected how tense political situations were conceived and acted upon.

The second argument some of these essays introduce to enlighten the subverting political energy of photographs calls attention to the potential of a virtual community of solidarity, in which photographs would work as a propitious opportunity and a material base for trans-temporal and trans-spatial empathy. I am going to respect the ambiguity of such concepts as “solidarity” or “empathy” because they are used in different ways in these essays. For example, Tobin Stanley praises Boix’s photographs for “evoking in the viewer a sense of pathos, of identification with, rather than objectification of, the subject” (41). She adds that “it is precisely pathos, a lasting human emotional connection that encourages the viewer to combat the injustice to which he can no longer turn a blind eye” (41). She also notes that these photographs can arouse a sense of universal moral urgency (51).¹⁴ Txetxu Aguado adopts a constructive but also critical stance towards Susan Sontag and Barthes due to their “irrepressible pessimism” (62), for their misleading insistence “on what is gone” in photographs (62). Although he admits that pity and compassion are never enough, these reactions “could be reformulated [. . .] not as much as the responsive given to an irreparable loss [. . .], but as the emotional mechanism that allows to discover equivalences (sameness)” (63). Aguado and Tobin Stanley concur on the political usefulness of the emotional mechanisms of identification because beyond temporal and spatial distances, they make solidarity, commonality and even humanist camaraderie possible. Besides differences that should not be omitted nor reified, photographs foster a sense of (internally dislocated) co-temporality with the experiences others have of suffering, and more

decisively, “an empathic and compassionate community with those inhabiting the past” (Aguado 56).

Tobin Stanley and Aguado are, in my opinion, rightly pointing towards a political position that circumvents some of the impasses created by what Charles Taylor has called “a weakening of the bonds of sympathy” (113), an atomistic social imaginary in which “the politics of democratic will-formation” and the “promotion of a politics of democratic formation” (118) have become less and less feasible (especially for progressive and radical causes).¹⁵ In this context, an emotional register that includes feelings such as empathy, identification, or compassion has been often dismissed as intrusive, disrespectful of differences, unreflexive, self-serving, and sentimentalizing. These authors would probably agree that this has *sometimes* been the case and that images of the suffering of others have *often* worked as an unproblematic projection screen where a self-referential, self-rewarding economy of feelings has been circularly reactivated for exploitative purposes. However, the fact that this has sometimes, or frequently, been the case does not mean that it unavoidably has to be so. There is a wide variety of identifications and empathies, some more justifiable and self-conscious than others. It would be a great strategic mistake to disqualify them all without distinction, sacrificing such a powerful political tool. This difficult task of distinguishing between different types of reactions towards photographic images, carefully trying to infer their political implications, is precisely what Ariella Azoulay has done in her ground-breaking *magnum opus*, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. Because of its relevance to this volume, it is worth schematically noting her most basic thesis.

From Azoulay’s extensive argument, I want to stress some ideas that support Aguado’s and Tobin Stanley’s approaches. In her opening deliberations, Azoulay states:

The political theory laid out [here] is founded on this new conceptualization of citizenship as a framework of partnership and solidarity among those who are governed, a framework that is neither constituted nor circumscribed by the sovereign. The theory of photography proposed in this book is founded on a new ontological-political understanding of photography. It takes into account all the participants in photographic acts—camera, photographer, subject, and spectator—proposing the photograph (and its meaning) as an unintentional effect of the encounter between all of them. (23)

Azoulay’s essay draws from various philosophical sources (Republicanism, eighteenth-century revolutionary and post-revolutionary thinking, contractualism, international law, Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Benjamin, and Sontag, among others) to theorize photography as

a social performance that demands involvement and recognition from all its participants. Photographs can activate a social contract implicitly undersigned by many (physically and temporally distant) people. This non-written agreement can cross national boundaries, reconnecting (especially in crisis situations) “recognized citizens” with “vulnerable citizens” (Azoulay 51), “citizens of disaster” (31), or the “noncitizens who make up part of the governed population and constitute an excluded group *with and alongside which* the citizens are governed” (37). Photographs of the pain and misery of others not only imply an immediate degree of responsibility and participation, but also an obvious acknowledgment of an unaccomplished cosmopolitan citizenship, a inclusive model of citizenship that “is not reducible to a matter of legislation” (42). As the first quote from *The Civil Contract of Photography* shows, photographs implicate (in order to become signifying and meaningful objects) multifaceted human networks. It is too simple to conclude that these networks merely consume and make available images for the sake of inconsequential enjoyment or pathetic schmaltziness. Images are not viewed in a political vacuum and they can indicate significant contrasts, gaps, and incommensurabilities between cherished political values and standards, and their manifest unfulfillment. This is neither a modern nor postmodern aesthetico-political project, but a critical position that simultaneously rearticulates a modern vocabulary (universalism, rights, citizenship, law) and turns it against itself. This tension is productive and photographs can exacerbate it, dismantling naturalized loyalties, short-circuiting isolating discourses, and establishing themselves as instrumental junctions where photographers, subjects, and observers instigate civic interventions and re-launch political debates.

The Inescapability of (an Inconvenient) Context

The two issues I have emphasized about these essays—1) a model of post-mimetic photographic referentiality in which absences and presences, visibility and invisibility are performed with the spectators’ deep complicity; and 2) the dissident potentiality of photographs to attack a visual regime and configure deterritorialized chains of solidarity—share a condition of possibility that needs some explanation. The novelty and strength of some of the theoretical voices I have mentioned here (specifically Azoulay and Rancière) lie in their creative reconnection of politics and aesthetics, ideology and vision without falling into the ocularcentrist tradition that Martin Jay famously reviews in *Downcast Eye*.¹⁶ Azoulay and Rancière insist on a basic but critical fact: before discussing politically what we see, it is important to remember that what we see and how we see it have already been politically demarcated. Both of them claim that these demarcations are

susceptible to alterations, both of them explicitly invite those transgressions in the context of global capitalism, and both of them (especially Azoulay) deem photography a potential ally in this task. However, both of them (especially Rancière) also warn us against any unqualified optimism that might award an inherent transgressive power to *any* image. First of all, images are socially received and categorized, as Rancière claims, according to different “modes of beings” that in turn “affect[s] the *ethos*, the mode of being of individuals and communities” (*Politics* 21). He adds that the construction of aesthetics as a rarified, independent sphere of free values and tastes has severely damaged a more comprehensive version of spectatorship. In other words, the aesthetization (in the sense that Rancière criticizes this term) of photography prevents a deeper rooted aesthetics that could deal, for instance, with how we photographically perceive the world and how these perceptions are regimented by politically predetermined forms and limits.

Secondly, besides the existence of visual genres and codes that *sometimes* put photographs in a political limbo, images propitiate many different uses and these uses are also determined by already-established contexts, debates, customs, traditions, and institutions.¹⁷ In other words, what an image can mean or *do*, whether it can be taken or seen, and when and how it is seen are not extrinsic factors that could be put in parentheses to deal with the semantic purity of the image. Images are not self-sufficient, self-explanatory, autonomous agents with their own capacity to act in the world. What an image means or *does* is contextually bounded, and in these contexts, political forces and interests are always in play. It is self-defeatist to assume that contexts are unchangeable and that the meanings of photographs are somehow prefixed. However, assuming that a photograph (for example, of war victims) is going to have the effect we want it to have is equally dubious. In this respect, I could not agree more with Susan Sontag’s admonition against impatient strategies that bring into play certain images as self-evident proof of a political truth. For instance, Sontag explains that “the destructiveness of war [. . .] is not in itself an argument against waging war unless one thinks (as few actually do think) that violence is always unjustifiable” (12). Recent history unfortunately supports Sontag’s argument. Whatever effect we want a photograph to produce, we are obliged to prepare the political context and *milieu* in which that effect is possible. Otherwise any image, no matter how evident its message seems to us, can be repositioned by an opposite hegemonic political agenda to make it mean and *do* something completely different.

In her most recent book to date, *Frames of War*, Judith Butler deals with this issue, reinvigorating the concept of frame. According to Butler, how a photograph is socially framed needs to be understood as a factor that conditions every single aspect of its content. These frames are not once-and-for-all schemes: they need to be periodically restored and reinforced. This is why Butler, following Derrida, speaks of the inevitable “iterability” of these

frames. This iterability works as a mechanism of corroboration and fortification for a frame, but also as one of potential instability, deviation, and subversion (13). Because the frames that secure how, when and where an image is understood repeatedly need to be put into place and strengthened, there are always opportunities to derail and reorient this repetitive process, destroying its successful re-enunciation. When this happens, “when a frame breaks with itself [. . .], a taken-for-granted reality is called into question, exposing the orchestrating design of the authority who sought to control the frame” (12). And Butler concludes, “This suggests that it is not only a question of finding new content, but also of working with received renditions of reality to show how they can and do break with themselves” (12). What *Frames of War* does not explain (in part, because it is not the focus of the book) is what conditions are necessary to make a frame *finally* breakable. In a nutshell, frames circulate and are repositioned, and this creates the possibility of a break, hopefully (Butler expects) in a political progressive direction. But what are the conditions that finally make this possibility real? Why are frames sometimes easily broken while on other occasions, they remain apparently indestructible for a long time?

It seems to me that this is a central issue in the present volume. Many of these articles describe photographic endeavors meant to attack dominant fields of vision and regimes of historical truth (hegemonically established by a political faction or a political consensus during the Transition or the turbulent 1930s and 1940s). However, this task was not accomplished by free-standing photographs, but by politico-cultural agendas that suitably contextualized these photographs, providing them with their political edge and vigor. This is why Larson’s and Haidt’s essays recreate the socio-political circumstances in which the photographs they analyze were published. The two cases are very different. Haidt examines how a nation-state endorsed a market of miscellaneous visual products in order to advance its own legitimacy alongside an ideology of modernity. Larson reassesses an insurgent project which, precisely when the Spanish nation-state was being reshaped in the context of a neo-liberal economy, “attempted to speak from outside of Spanish politics, outside of the cultural marketplace and outside any sense of national pride” (Larson 81).

Independently of these two projects’ accomplishments and shortcomings, both of them illustrate the fact that the visual landscape at any particular moment is not a flat, unrestrained, all-inclusive surface where images are freely added. In this landscape, there are hierarchies and antagonisms; many degrees of repercussion; and different political, cultural, and economic capitals with diverse visual preferences and subsequent heterogeneous political objectives. It would be a sterile endeavor to search for a pre-political time of visual purity when images were what they truly are. Images are *always already* imbedded in political contexts and agendas, radically permeated by what these want them to be and not be. The impact or

lack of impact of an image, its options for substantially influencing our perception of the past, or for creating a strong and responsible connection with this past, depends on the previous existence of well-organized and clearly defined context of reception that channels, revitalizes, and appropriately frames these images. Otherwise we run the risk of putting our political hopes in images that are persistently neutralized or instrumentalized for other purposes.

One last point: if we want photography to play a political or even an ethical role in the formulation of a public historical memory, we need to be as aware as possible of a contradictory technological environment that combines extreme fragmentation and centripetal concentration. On the one hand, cheaper and more advanced audiovisual technologies have in the last two decades (and more profoundly than ever before) infiltrated many private spheres and everyday activities (Furlong 172). This intensified and personalized relationship with a growing series of images is producing “more individualized opportunities to find oneself—one’s own identity—that acknowledge the diversity of consumers and the desire to customize one’s lifestyle” (Botterill and Kline 182). This democratizing plurification has had many positive consequences and has at the same time also multiplied and atomized individual and group positions, surrendering any transversal or across-the-board visual communality. The pluralistic and diversified context in which many micro-cultures of vision coexist (often not clearly inter-articulated) is just one half of the story. The other half points in a different direction. As Ronald Bettig claims, the increasing financial costs required for the start-up and operation of large-scale industrial (including audiovisual) ventures, and the highly competitive dynamics of a globalized market sector (such as the audiovisual industry), have produced a rapid concentration of capital in the hands of a few transnational corporations that regulate many images with a consistent international repercussion (42).¹⁸

Spanish democracy has simultaneously witnessed both processes: 1) an exponential multiplication and popularization of audiovisual devices and alternatives (a true socio-technological revolution also prompting a massive commercial boom), 2) and the emergence of private and public mass media mega-firms, such as Telefónica, PRISA, and Mediapro, which uncompromisingly dominate the audiovisual sector in Spain and, to a lesser extent, in Latin America. This situation is not a dystopia, but it is not a utopia either. These mega-firms cannot control every single channel of images and information, but they have the power to fashion rapid consensuses about what images are taken into consideration and how they are interpreted. In the audio-visual diversity, mobility, instantaneity, and subdivisions fostered by, for instance, Internet and iPods, there are many potentials for progressive political causes. At the same time, there are dangers in this scenario, such as “compassion fatigue [. . .] due to the media’s repetitive obsession with shock and superficiality” (Ritchin 139), a

“prosthetic culture” in which insufficiently contextualized images are reabsorbed as vicarious experiences (Lury 223), the lack of coherent discrimination and the equivalent protagonism of images with heterogeneous moral value and aesthetico-political relevance.

Like the authors of these engaging essays, I also believe that photographs matter, that they can show us what we are overlooking and that they can trigger streams of solidarity. Beyond patronizing ethnocentrism and pious sentimentality, this solidarity could cement the “planetary humanism” that, for instance, Paul Gilroy has been defending for some time against both abstract universalism and certain lines of post-colonial thought.¹⁹ I also believe that photographs can be catalytic, that they can be very influential in transcending reactionary regimes of vision and visibility, and that they need not be thought of in a positivist fashion to function as incisive epistemological and political tools. I would only add that the role of photographs is not decided by the photographs themselves (no matter how clear their content and political intention may seem to us), and that we need to pay close attention to the political, economic, and techno-material contexts that make these photographs what they are and are not. These contexts are not easy to transform but they are the true site of contention. If we consistently redirect our attention to them, if we investigate the material and symbolic conditions in which photographic images of traumatic pasts are exposed, seen, sold, distributed, commercialized, institutionalized, canonized, and metabolized by political agendas and institutions in Spain, we will have a better understanding of how vision is a competitive site of antagonism and how changing this site is far from easy. However, if we want photographs to be an opportunity for relevant contestation and ethico-political enhancement, it seems to me that progressive agendas will have to fight for hegemony over those contexts that make photographs what they finally *are*. Anything less that this would probably be premature optimism.

Notes

1. The video is still available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvbRjY6K-Yk.
2. The video had been originally recorded by photographer Kevyn Fowler.
3. He phrased this idea quite dramatically: “Esta gente primero dispara y luego pregunta” (EFE) (This people first fire and then ask questions). In the same press conference, as IU spokesman he also requested “una investigación a fondo, depuración de responsabilidades, y disculpas al máximo nivel” (EFE) (He asked for an in-depth investigation, a purge of responsibilities, and apologies from the highest-ranked authorities).
4. The official document signed by the Spanish Congress, to which all political parties subscribed without exception, is available at: www.abc.es/gestordocumental/uploads/nacional/declaracion.doc.

5. Two members of the US Embassy in Madrid had a half-hour interview with Llamazares on January 19, 2010, in which they apologized again and denied any political implications.
6. Some of these attempts are quite sophisticated, and, from different perspectives and with diverse strategies, contradict postmodern apriorisms about knowledge and epistemology. I find especially appealing the essays by Satya Mohanty, Tom Lewis, and F. R. Ankersmit. Mohanty's and Lewis's indebtedness to Marxism lies far distant from Ankersmit's neo-Heideggerist emphasis on presence, but all three are trying to circumvent the causes and effects of postmodern relativist positionalism.
7. Rebecca Haidt intelligently examines this topic in her essay.
8. Consider, for example, Mark Poster's arguments in "Postmodern Virtualities."
9. In the case of the footage broadcast by TVE, it is evident that in the Haiti earthquake, a strong-but-futile emotional investment in shocking images of a third-world catastrophe was privileged over more critical and comprehensive responses. These responses could put current (disorganized, inconsistent, and selective) reactions to extreme disasters of this type under analytical pressure. In the case of the virtual portrait of Bin Laden, gratuitous exercises in futurologistic physiognomy of this sort capitalize on existing fears about certain overexploited human facial features (that have become to represent an essentialized enemy of the no less essentialized "Western values," such as "democracy" or "freedom"). I want to make clear that I am not advocating here the "symmetrical" or "blowback" explanation of 9/11. In a brilliant text, with which I personally agree, Martin Jay has shown the profound wrongness of these "impassioned" but "coldhearted" interpretations ("Fearful Symmetries" 185). However, in the American and European mainstream media, an image of Bin Laden has been erected with selective obliviousness, systemically ignoring or misrepresenting some of the historical and biographical facts. This image is increasingly becoming so sketchy and simplistic that it sometimes borders on caricature.
10. Derrida mentions Benjamin three times in his essay. Both of them criticize what Benjamin calls, in "Thesis on the Philosophy of History," the "empathy between historicism and history's 'victor' and 'rulers'" (256). In both cases, there is also a highly creative approach to Marxism and an attempt to retain its possibilities for rupture; for disturbing historical linearity and closed, pre-determined historical narrations. In both cases, past and present are not understood as separate phases of one progressive evolution; and in their new temporal organization (beyond an ontology of presence), victims play a fundamental role *in, for, and against* the present.
11. I personally find Matthias Fritsch's analysis of Benjamin and Derrida very informative, especially in the last chapter of his book.
12. Spinoza claims that through this third type of knowledge, we confront a particular and material object but do so "sub species aeternitatis" (153). Spinoza's approach has inspired, among others, the following reflection by Agamben: "Example is treated in effect as a real particular case; but on the other [hand], it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity. Neither particular nor universal" (11).
13. This is something Larson concedes when, for example, paraphrasing Siegfried Kracauer, she states that a fragmented modern subjectivity "is best described by the figure of the extraterrestrial or exile—a fragmented subjectivity produced by a

superimposition of discontinuous moments” (88). These words outline an aesthetic program that, to better acknowledge/represent this atomized modern subjectivity, superimposes discontinuous materials on one artistic piece. This is basically the classical starting point of historicist studies of the avant-garde and the modernist aesthetics. I have in mind, for example, David Harvey’s (controversial) reading of postmodern and modern aesthetics as “reactions to” (but also “reflection of” and “expression of”) two different modes of capitalist production, “Fordism” and “post-Fordism” (*The Condition of Postmodernity*). This approach has been accused of reproducing an old Marxist vice: the simplistic separation of structure and superstructure, and the mechanistic over-determination of the former by the latter. My impression is that, in both Marx and the most sophisticated Marxist theory (Harvey’s texts or Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* are two good examples), this separation is never so simplistic, and that the relation between structure and superstructure is never so mechanistic.

14. Tobin Stanley mentions Lawrence Kohlberg’s theories of moral psychology “based on one impartial, universalizing concept: justice. The key to morality, according to this line of thought, is that a decision is right (that is, moral) if one can objectively reason that it is applicable to any/all human being(s). One cannot discuss the Holocaust without understanding the need for [this] justice” (51; addition mine). This conception of formal rational morality comes from Kant’s categorical imperative, “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become universal law” (15). Kantian morality, highly influential as it is, has also been strongly contested by many contemporary philosophical and theoretical schools (postmodernism, post-structuralism, postcolonial studies, deconstructionism, cultural studies, contextualism, and utilitarianism, among others).
15. From a radical leftist perspective, this is what Alex Callinicos and Terry Eagleton have been arguing for quite some time. While the former affirms that “what is missing [in contemporary European political theory, namely, Habermas, Bidet, Bourdieu, Žižek, Badiou, and Negri] is any attempt to develop a properly *normative* conception of cosmopolitan justice” (242; italics in the original), the latter states that “capitalism has always pitched diverse forms of life promiscuously together—a fact which should give pause to those unwary postmodernists for whom diversity, astonishingly, is somehow a virtue in itself” (49). Of course, although Charles Taylor’s communitarianism and Callinicos’s and Eagleton’s Marxism share some formal similarities (such as, for instance, their suspicions of the ideological infatuation with cultural differences and identitarian fragmentation), they come from and head to very different political places.
16. Jay’s first chapter, “The Noblest of the Senses: Vision from Plato to Descartes,” is an excellent summary not only of the preeminence of vision in Western philosophy, but also of how vision has been conceived as a disembodied, detached, value-neutral practice with constitutive and ontological consequences. Descartes is a paradigmatic example of this conception of vision, against whom Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and so many other twentieth-century French thinkers reacted.
17. When aesthetics and politics are conceived as independent spheres, there is always the possibility of a political reading of those sensory values and characteristics we attribute to certain objects. However, these are second-degree political implications that need to be justified and that are the product of a specific practice of reading. This would be a political reading of a non- or pre-political object. Rancière is

looking precisely for a most essential interconnection between politics and aesthetics that transcends this dichotomic approach. He is not advocating a complete collapse of aesthetics in politics (nor vice versa). He understands that politics and the study of sensory experiences are not the same. He merely reminds us that they are not mutually independent, that the way our sensory experiences are organized is profoundly political, and that in politics there is an inevitable aesthetic element (our sensory relation to the world we attempt to change or perpetuate).

18. For a well-balanced but critical analysis of the troubling links between capitalism and mass media, I recommend Vicent Mosco's and Ben Bagdikian's essays.
19. In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, we can find many ideas that support Gilroy's main position. It is, however, in *Against Race* that he articulates most directly his illuminating defense of a radical humanism that respects differences without transforming them into instances of cultural incompatibility. I particularly recommend the last chapter of the essay, "'Third Stone from the Sun': Planetary Humanism and Strategic Universalism."

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