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**Travels in History through Memory: Photography
and the Restoration of the Past**

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Perhaps what some call the excessive obsession with memory is nothing but the attempt to disclose the numerous untold stories left outside official and state interpretations of the historical past. Analyzing memory does not necessarily imply an engagement in nostalgic efforts only leading to a dead-end situation, that is to say, incapable of coping with what took place years ago. Memory adds new layers to the reconstruction of the past in that its focus lies closer to home, getting its inspiration from sources that do not have the weight of the document. Hence, it is not surprising, then, that given the uncertainty and instability of memory to discern historical facts, historians will be suspicious of its usefulness in ascertaining an alternative or more precise imagining of the past.

In this essay, I will depart from the task of the historian and analyze memory as a privileged tool with which to reopen, and hopefully challenge, uncontested historiographical interpretations of the past. Here I will center on the memory contained in photographs, on those elements partially out of focus in the production of signification. Making these artifacts of memory resurface, i.e., making them the focal point of interpretation, will provide us with, if not a totally different account of the past, at least with a much more nuanced picture of it. The purpose is to elaborate an alternative visual regime: a way of looking at photographs that enables the past to resurface and never expire.¹

In order to do so, I will first need to detach photography from death (loss), a linkage established in the foundational work of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag on this medium. Instead, I will favor an analysis of photography that emphasizes life (community), a position that wants to underscore how the lives that once were are still intertwined with the lives of today. Making accessible those lives frozen in time—lives that are not dead—will help us define an empathic and compassionate community with those inhabiting the past. We see ourselves in them; perhaps we even share and long for similar notions of well-being in our lives. But these connections are not apparent. Photographs contain *ruins of memory*, so to speak, in need of a translator in the Benjaminian sense. As Ariella Azoulay argues, once the

ruins have been deciphered, they will shed new light on the people made invisible from historical processes. If they have been alienated from us—radically separated with the excuse of a time barrier—the ruins of memory embedded in photography will permit us to recuperate and establish a linkage with the historical knowledge of the absent. Finally, this study will conclude with an analysis of two well-known pictures of the bombardment of the Basque city of Gernika during the Spanish Civil War. Following Susan Sontag, I will use the photographs to illustrate how the description of a catastrophe must always be connected to history and politics.

Photography and Its Absences

In my study of photography, mimesis as imitation is insufficient. Photography, like all art, must go a step further and be capable of bringing back an *imitation* vested with the sensorial material ingrained in the images of the past, i.e., the sound of the wind, the smell of wet soil, the pain and labor of destruction. This is what inspires German writer W.G. Sebald's interest in photography. For many of his characters there is something lacking in the usual recounts of themselves, their families, friends, or cities. For them, photographs become the means to retrieve that absence. At times they seem to be physically or psychologically lost in reality because of their not being aware of the linkage that exists between themselves and prior lives, i.e., between the characters and other family members or between themselves and the histories underlying the urban spaces they inhabit. In their wanderings, they cross over into an uncharted territory, unaware of where they will land in spatial or emotional terms.

If Sebald's works include many photographs or memory artifacts like postcards, paintings, maps, or stamps, it is because he is less concerned with providing illustrations to his texts than with extracting the full potential of meaning from them.² The artifacts photographed in Sebald's texts are not visual aids for a narration fully aware of its limitations to render an authentic version of what took place years ago. The objects and people photographed in his books are essential to the process of writing a history of the identity of his characters, their origins, and their genealogy. This is done through photography because a picture accumulates information that narrative alone does not seem capable of portraying. The one dimensionality of writing compresses within its borders meanings that the illusion of three dimensionalities in photography allows to remain visible.

The same perplexity that Sebald's characters and readers feel when looking at memory artifacts in photographs is reenacted when we regard the stills of the bombardment of Gernika on April 26, 1937. There is something missing in the customary descriptions and interpretations of the event,

emotionality that, even when expressed in the violent rejection of destruction, is still far from saturating all the feelings evoked. When looking at the pictures of the bombardment we need to sort through the rubble: to walk among its many pieces, to insert our bodies and emotions in that place and experience the changes in cultural signification brought about by the rearrangement of space and time summoned by the photography. There is much more in these pictures than the initial emotional response provoked by the destruction.

This *extra* is exemplified in the two photographs taken a few days after the bombing, the objects of this study. They are well known and have been reproduced and previously analyzed many times, a fact that only better serves the purpose of the argument of this essay. The first image, Fig. 1, with the dog as witness, was taken on May 8, 1937, several days after the bombardment. Its title is “Guernica Basque Holy City Laid Waste” and its original caption reads: “5/8/1937—Guernica, Northern Spain: As Basque ‘Holy City’ was Laid Waste. A bewildered canine waif wanders in the debris-strewn city of Guernica, while a rain of death continues to fall from Rebel bombing squadrons droning overhead. Basques laid responsibility for death of many women and children in the raid to German volunteers.” The second image (Fig. 2) is entitled “Ruins of Guernica” and is usually presented with two captions: “Bombed-out buildings of Guernica, destroyed in the Spanish Civil War,” or “Looking down the rubble-covered streets of Guernica after its total destruction by aerial bombing in April 1937.” Like Fig. 1, this photograph was also taken on May 8, 1937.



Fig. 1. *Guernica Basque Holy City Laid Waste*. May 8, 1937.
(©CORBIS/Bettmann) Donated by Corbis-Bettmann.



Fig. 2. *Ruins of Guernica*. May 8, 1937.
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Are these neutral and objective descriptions of the events sufficient to convey the array of emotions aroused in the contemplation of the photographs? Do they portray a real sense of the destruction in its multiple layers of signification, i.e., not only of the loss of human lives and buildings, but of the social relations and historical processes also eradicated in the bombardment? Is the destruction of the city and its inhabitants well-accounted-for by depicting the rubble of destroyed buildings? Should the city be rebuilt as if nothing had ever happened, replacing all physical and emotional wreckage with new materials and erasing the presence of the war in its material reconstruction?

It goes without saying that my purpose is not to undermine the documentary purpose of the photographs. Nevertheless, I still think it is necessary to engage with these pictures on a different level in order to add more layers of interpretation and meaning. In other words, to relate destruction to a more complex framework where origins, causes, consequences, in short, genealogies, are fully substantiated. The magnitude of the destruction depends not only on an urban and human landscape having been transformed into debris but on how the voices from that past demand that we try to occupy their place in the picture in order to fully experience the senseless disappearance of the totality of life and reality in which the dead were conducting their lives. We need much more than well-intentioned pity and compassion, much more than descriptions of the events

from the different factions fighting the war. As necessary as they are, we need true political interaction and involvement with what took place in the days of the bombardment. We cannot stay on this side of the temporal fence protected by time; we need to go back to Gernika once again. We must return not driven by the pathological motivation of those attracted to a novel, though deadly, experience, but instead by the historical and political resolution of reconstructing the human line that runs from Gernika to our present day.

In order to do so, I will deviate from those considerations of photography as a *memento mori*. More than a remembrance of a bygone people and time, of a nostalgic or melancholic recuperation of loss, I would like to reclaim the potential of photography to immerse us in the past and to give us a first hand account of that experience: photography as an ethics of life and not of death.

A Memento of Life: Photography and the Restoration of an Emotional Community

Roland Barthes approaches photography with a nostalgic tone. When contemplating photographs of his mother as a private and intimate affair, he cannot escape the particular temporality of those images from the past. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that for the author, photographs claim a space and time of their own in the present. Once the call for attention is paid its due, Barthes cannot detach himself from the feeling of having contemplated what was once alive—dead today—and will irremediably die again. He nods to these two temporal instances: the people in the photos will die anew after they regain a moment of life in our contemplation of their images (96). Consequently, the only feeling the photographs can arouse in us is pity: compassion towards those who are no longer, and compassion, I dare say, for ourselves, towards those who directly suffer their absence. Accordingly, when in the presence of the photographs we become aware of the illusory and transient nature of our present moment. Nothing aside from an intense feeling of loss for our parents, family, or for all loved ones has any importance. Even though Barthes does not use this word, the notion of redemption, its impossibility, comes in handy to explain a situation where we feel that what arrives from the past is more real than the reality of the present. In his reading, only what existed years ago will have the power to be today. The photographs flood our consciousness with a melancholic sense of having known better times.

In *Camera Lucida*, in the well-known picture of school boy Ernest standing in front of a camera in 1931, Barthes posits a question that summarizes his position in relation to photography: “It is possible that

Ernest is still alive today: but where? how?" (83). In the photo taken by André Kertész we see a happy boy smiling somewhat shyly, aware of the attention he is drawing from the eye of the camera. Barthes finds it relevant to inquire about the whereabouts of the boy today, tainting his questions with the tragic sadness of one who already knows the answers. Did the boy survive the war? Was he able to maintain in his adult life the innocence he shows as a boy? Is he dead and gone forever? Again, the gloom and wretchedness of our present condition sets us apart from a more optimistic approach to life, and to photography. What is worse: it hinders the discovery of different avenues with which to wrestle with the past other than those of an awareness of unavoidable death. Susan Sontag partakes somehow of the same attitude when she states, in a notable quotation from her book *On Photography*, that every picture is a *memento mori* (15), a keepsake of a death that already took place and is continuously taking place in the act of contemplating the picture.³

Perhaps we are confronting more than an issue of irrepressible pessimism versus a futile optimism in these responses to the past. I do not pretend to question Barthes' desolation when dealing with photographs so full of emotion that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to confine such deep feelings to a space where they will no longer haunt him. However, there is no reason to directly transfer what clearly affects an intimate and private area of our lives—the viewing of family photographs—to the public realm without any type of mediation or reformulation. Pity and compassion can be expressed as something more than a pure and extreme feeling of sadness for the loss of family members. This is the alternative route I would like to propose when studying the pictures of the bombardment of Gernika.

Instead of focusing on what is gone—on all that has been lost over the years and that the photographs actualize in each showing—we could concentrate on what professes to be relevant for understanding our own existence today. To be more precise, we could connect the innocence of the boy Ernest with similar boys like him today, his school with our schools, his smile with our attempt at happiness, the worn-out tips of his shoes with mine, the instant of his being captured by a camera lens with our own childhoods. In this manner, instead of isolating one from the other through the unassailable terrain of death, we become peers in a somewhat similar school. It is possible to devise a string running through a temporal axis that communicates the lives of today with the lives of the past. This need not only occur through sorrow; positive empathy can be an alternative.

In her writing on photography as a *memento mori*, Susan Sontag states, "To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt" (*Photography* 15). One could make the comment that time flows in both directions: to participate in another person's mortality, means to have been sensitized by

ours, to have become aware not only of what unites us in death, but in a life that struggles against mortality as well. As she writes, it means to melt both our time and theirs, i.e., of being capable of breaking out of the prison of the past—what would be an unremitting melancholia—and making it an indispensable tool in understanding the present.

If images make sense, particularly if they are figurative and not abstract, it is not only because the technical means behind the medium are understood and go unnoticed; more importantly, this meaning is based on common experiences “shared” between what (or who) is in the photograph and those who contemplate it. We discover an uncanny connection between the two temporal moments, as if we were looking at things and people known to us. The instant captured by the photograph is rich with history and stories from another time; in the act of contemplation and examination we lay the foundation for a genealogy that runs from that past to the present. The past is not as foreign to the present as it is sometimes perceived; nor is the break that separates the two as radical and clean as some would prefer. If this were the case, it would be impossible to minimally understand what is portrayed there, a reality viewed as foreign and incomprehensible. Despite an inevitable awareness of distance and difference, these sensations are never quite as acute as our feeling a bond with the people and things depicted.

By focusing on the life that we share with those represented in photographs, like those of Gernika, we enter an entirely different terrain than the one ruled by death, the area that most interested Barthes and Sontag in their respective works on this matter. This emphasis on life allows us to not have to start history from scratch; to not have to think about our position in the world anew, as if it were “original” with no genealogy. When recollected from pertinent photographs, what took place before us becomes a valuable source of understanding not only of those long gone, but of ourselves as well. More than a sense of bewilderment, of not being able to come to terms with the photographs—as seems to be the case with the captions of the pictures of Gernika—we are enlightened by their content: the gaze of the people, the objects that surround them, the body language they display, their faces, the surroundings; they all point to a slice of life that could very well have been our own had we lived in their time.

If for Sontag photography turns reality into a tautology (*On Photography* 111) because it can only represent what already exists, I would agree that it is precisely this tautology, the repetition of obvious sameness, that brings empathy into a relationship with people distant in geographical or temporal terms. This tautology reaffirms and defines the existence of others with whom a communicative quality other than melancholia could be imagined. In the case of the war pictures, for example, we are not dealing with ghosts, but rather with something *real* from a time other than our present. Furthermore, we can take Sontag’s tautology one step further. By confirming that what took place in Gernika in 1937 *really did happen*,

photographic mimesis is invested with a higher degree of imitation: proximity. Paraphrasing Sontag,⁴ there were buildings and people in Gernika and I could be living in those buildings today in very much the same fashion as its previous dwellers did. Where are those people and the social fabric they wove in the captions or even in the pictures themselves? Where is the tautology in the photographs?

Notwithstanding Barthes' position, once outside the family realm there is a space and time of linkage with what came before us. Following this line of thought, pity and compassion could be reformulated, then, not so much as the response given to irreparable loss, as in the case of Barthes' reflections, but as the emotional mechanism that allows us to discover equivalences (sameness) where no more than mere alienation and depersonalization were appreciated before. In this way, we abandon a strictly private sphere of bleak feelings and gain a public realm where imagining a community of fellow people, an emotional community of sorts made up of past and present, is possible. The temporal and spatial barriers of the past have been broken and, on a personal level, my private and intimate realm has been extended to include others that share similar experiences. In this process, I take leave of the psychological borders defining and shielding myself from what looks exterior and indifferent to my subjective point of view. In the development of this reciprocal relationship we become sensitized to openly receive what others have to offer: a process that demands to give and receive, to listen and to be heard. This is where the formation of a secularized community with the people from the past comes into reality.

Clearing up the Debris: The Task of the Translator

Could we go one step further and derive from this already empathic community a notion of the historical processes underlying it? Can we get a sense of the social and political operations that strongly influence the configuration of this community? Are they also part of what photography captures? Are photographs an authoritative source of inquiry into history? Do they allow us to travel in time and bridge the distance between then and now? Are they suitable for running a temporal line of meaning from the past into our present?

A more subtle analysis of all the elements in a photograph, one that allows us to get closer to what lies behind its more apparent and accessible meanings, would resemble, in my view, the task of the translator as Benjamin understood it. In order to get closer to the full experience encapsulated in a photograph, it is necessary to find the echo that remits to what Benjamin called "pure language" ("Task" 76) or language degree zero. Pure language in photography refers back to the primal occasion of when the

photograph was taken. If we were to express this in yet another way, we could say that because of the technical superiority of the camera lens over the human eye to record in a single shot an entire landscape of events—our eyes need to discriminate among the different elements for meaning to occur—the mimetic capabilities of photographic devices capture reality, so to speak, as it actually took place at a particular instant in time and space. We are not presented with an exact copy, but rather, with an image supplied with visible and invisible social relations. The task of the translator-analyst consists, then, in giving visibility, producing the echo, that evokes that total reality—Benjamin’s original—in the picture and diminished, or simply not taken into account, in its routine interpretations. The technical capability of photography allows for a totality, simultaneity of reality, not possible in the verbal description of the same photographic scene given how any verbal account of the depiction must select an interpretation, therefore opting for a particular meaning.

The echo of the original does not remit to the discovery of new intricacies in the photographic negative that had been purposely eluded in the copy. There is no difference between the negative and its subsequent reproductions, aside from the all too common variations in color or sharpness between the first and subsequent copies. The echo refers to the analytical action of bringing forward what has been kept in the background of signification: other relevant meanings not clearly discernible either because they are thought of no importance or are overlooked in the eyes of the beholder. The echo of the original—the full display of meaning conveyed by the photograph—remains obscured for Benjamin, waiting for someone or something to make it transparent and accessible to the viewer. The print contains more information than the gaze of the photographer could handle at first sight. Even if the photograph was taken very carefully—putting a great deal of energy and thought in its composition, light, speed, or angle—there is an *excess of meaning* that escapes the viewer.

This excess or echo that remits to the original is made manifest in the act of the translator-viewer by means of the interplay that exists between the foreground and the background of the photograph. The translation consists in relegating the more conventional meanings of the photograph to the side in order to make room for emergent meanings that had been forgotten or were simply veiled. In this way, we *liberate* meaning imprisoned in the picture or, borrowing Benjamin’s words, we release “that pure language which is under the spell of another” (“Task” 80); we free the more relevant meaning that is under the spell of the predictable.

It is in this sense that photographs from the past become a kind of *ruin*, similar to the monuments that belong to another time, monuments whose *essence* is never fully revealed to us because we have lost the key to that past. These are ruins that in Marc Augé’s definition are, “time that eludes history [. . .] that is lost in the past and reemerges in the present like a sign

without meaning” (110).⁵ The viewer of the ruin-photograph must return it to history, consider it a document, and insert it into historical processes that are not only pure time (Augé 46–47), but time with a meaning. The viewer must do so in order to avoid reducing the ruin-photograph to a mere copy, foreign to any historical significance. In yet another sense, the ruin-photograph remits to the authenticity of the original work, to its aura, to “its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin, “Work” 220), authenticity that in Benjamin’s words “is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (221).

Ariella Azoulay also claims this historical meaning for photography in her studies of Walter Benjamin. For Azoulay, the visual and the textual are integrally connected in Benjamin’s essays, despite their having been separated in many of the editions of his work. They cannot be set apart because together they give concrete form and substance to historical experience. History is more than a tendency or even a destiny in historical materialism; it is inscribed on the bodies of people. When Azoulay discusses the experimental photographs of Eugène Atget, those where buildings on busy streets in late nineteenth-century Paris are shown devoid of people—the shooting speed being so slow that passersby are not registered on the film—she states that, “with Atget photographic plates become proof of historical processes” (33). This is so because “the act that makes them [the people] almost invisible [is] the reminiscence of other acts of violence where people suddenly disappear as the result of sovereign power” (35). Did Atget dare to photograph buildings without people because the violence and the displacements were already in place? Were particular classes and their aspects of social life already made to disappear from the streets of Paris? These photographs bring to our attention that people are disposable; they become an alien presence when portraying the magnificent bourgeois elegance of the new boulevards, a metaphor of the French state. A new visual regimen is in place, one that only sees buildings and not those who built them. State power effaces them from vision.

By translating the voids in Atget’s photographs into the raw absences of the flesh and bone of real people, we gain access to the violence banished from the photographs and to the historical processes behind them. These absences refer back to nothing less than what John Tagg visualizes in the paintings of Gustave Courbet as “other orders of meaning, already existent in the culture, produced by a conflict of classes, ideologies and forms of control, but present in a dominated form, deprived of the semiotic space in which to live and resonate” (102). Photography carries the burden of representing a dominated space and time, but can only do so in an indirect way. In spite of depicting historical reality within a complex system of conventions and inherited meanings, these are never powerful enough to erase a photograph’s most politically motivated contents, contents that reject

and resist a univocal reading of the picture. Writers like W. G. Sebald allow meanings deprived of a semiotic space to come forward when they combine photographs, memory artifacts, and text in their work. Neither Courbet nor Sebald invent reality; they simply expose other orders of signification already there.

Finally, the task of the translator will consist in clearing up the debris. In the case at hand, this means searching in the rubble for true historical meaning to reveal the responsibility of the Franco regime in the bombing of the city. Reconstruction was too eager to erase the marks of culpability as soon as possible. It is in this sense that I claim the full reliability of photography's epistemological operation in the study of the historical undercurrents contained in and made visible by the photographic shot. But in the case of the pictures of Gernika, can this operation be rendered pointless because of their countless reproductions? Can a photograph depicting despair and destruction turn into an empty symbol of mass culture as Benjamin proposes in the "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction?" Quite the contrary. Photographs of this nature cannot turn into banal images. The recuperation of those new semiotic spaces that reveal the "aura" behind the photographs proves that the aura is immune to the actual process of reification of the pictures themselves. If anything, the pictures can turn into symbols of mass culture, but this is never the case of the repressed meaning within them.

Depicting Another Voice in the Ruins of Gernika

The city of Gernika was fully reconstructed in the years following the bombardment. Today there are almost no traces of the actual event aside from the numerous commemorations, exhibitions, street plaques, recreations, and reappropriations of the destruction in cultural productions. Perhaps these manifestations fulfill the need for spaces of memory, following Pierre Nora's lead, spaces where collective mourning and remembrance take place. Yet, the question remains: What are we mourning? What should never be forgotten? What role should photography play as a mechanism of remembrance?⁶

Scanning the surface of the pictures, we distinguish in the rubble what used to be a tree, a public square, a busy crossroad, the charred framework of a window, a now useless street sign. The depiction of total destruction and disaster comes together with a sense that time has stopped once and for all; that future reconstruction will certainly bring the city to life, but what has been lost will remain outside the realm of the *new* history put into place by the fascists and their ideological apparatuses of knowledge and power. There

will be no tomorrow for what has disappeared on the day of the destruction of Gernika.

How do we approach Gernika and its human and symbolic magnitude? As stated above, compassion and pity are not enough. They are welcome, but our task as translators of the photographs must assume Susan Sontag's critique of Virginia Woolf's disengagement with the local history of the Spanish Civil War. In spite of Woolf's inclusion of photographs of the war scene in her writing, of underscoring the sense of destruction and urgency, Sontag states that, "To read in the pictures, as Woolf does, only what confirms a general abhorrence of war is to stand back from an engagement with Spain as a country with a history. It is to dismiss politics" (*Regarding* 9). Following Sontag's insights, this study of Gernika does not take historical facts as natural occurrences to which we must respond with blind resignation and obedience. The historical destruction of the city obeyed calculated plans to demoralize—of course, to destroy—the *enemy*. It was not a mistake, and if it was, that does not matter anymore: the *mission* was accomplished all the same.

My purpose in reading the pictures wants to be political, but in a slightly divergent sense than the version proposed by Sontag. In the cited quote, political means to place events in the broader context of the fight for democracy taking place throughout Europe against fascism, Spain being one of its examples. I also want to return to the local, in this case, to the rubble of Gernika, to its ruins, and to engage in the politics behind the Spanish Civil War, but in a different way. Instead of a detailed historical analysis of the causes and consequences of the war, I would like to direct attention to the ruins and recuperate the stories still present in the rubble pervading the old city spaces, unbury as many accounts as possible in order to come up with a clear picture of what was really attacked, destroyed, and eradicated. In this sense, ruins stand out now as memory artifacts that reclaim a voice in which to speak, to be listened to, and a time of their own. Ruins cannot be rapidly dismissed as the rubble destined to the dumpster of history. They contain the stories obliterated in the disaster. By putting them together, we will have an alternative account of the historical processes underlying the time of the bombardment. This will free up the more official writings of the period and better recreate the semiotic space where the story-ruin can now fully signify. Its silencing is not thoroughly explained through censorship; at times the dismissal has to do with its extreme violence and the narrative difficulties of its expression.

Following Marc Augé, the photographs of Gernika are pure time (46–47): time not yet used or consumed. They occupy spaces "that await, that act as if they were [. . .] evoking memories. They reopen the temptation for a past and future" (108). Augé suggests that when we look at photographs like these, we take a walk through that temporal waiting room and reopen the possibility of an alternative past and future; in other words, we reopen the

possibility of politics. Ruins as *time in waiting* do not belong to the present; they are repositories of historical configurations of a different time. Therefore, ruins always seem to be questioning the layout of our present time and history; they introduce uncertainty in the core assumptions by which we live. It is important to insist, yet again, that an attitude of melancholia is not implied here. Ruins materialize knowledge by evoking a time not yet consumed, a time that awaits in past spaces of memory. Is this knowledge not a way of defining, delimiting, and creating new content for Nora's spaces of memory? Is this not another version of what Susan Sontag called the political? Following Spanish philosopher Marina Garcés' lead, the knowledge derived from the ruin can become political in yet another way: in the construction of a collective *we*. She invites us to take leave of the personal and become more than ourselves (50–51), to:

reappropriate the collective event in photography as if it were personal. Against the disengagement we show towards the collective, make it ours, make it social instead of leaving it private. [One moves] from enunciating the critique to embodying it [in the experience of a *we*]. (50)

What is the implicit *we* in the photographs of Gernika? In Fig. 1—the one with the dog or Barthesian punctum that pricks me—we see partially destroyed buildings still smoldering, streets full of rubble.⁷ More than a ghostly existence of people and objects, we are confronted with a transformed materiality: we sense their presence even though the substance of their life is absent. In spite of the lack of bodies and body parts in the picture, we cannot but ask about them. Without a doubt, many will still lie in the rubble. Their presence should be felt in the scent in the air or in the unrecognizable forms that compose the scene. What have become of their projects for the future, their dreams and their fears, their weaknesses and their strengths? What has become of the culture of this community, of the know-how that makes up their life experiences? How can we access the knowledge of their particular way of life? Apparently, there are no traces of them in the pictures. We must continue to search.

Curiously enough the stranded dog is the only witness of daily life fully eradicated. Where are his owners, his family, the games he played, and the care he received? The contextual relations in time and space between objects and people—what even the smallest village is about—are lost in the destruction. The blurred traffic sign, painted on the façade of one of the buildings on the left, provides the answer. The sign indicates the direction towards the largest city in the area, Bilbao, and also to the fishing and vacationing town of Lequeitio, both names written in their Spanish spellings. Where citizens formerly interacted with each other in the downtown of the city, presumably a very busy intersection has now become nothing more than an abandoned dog and a huge void of destroyed sociability. The aim of

the bombardment was precisely to eliminate the social relations that every city contains and develops in the daily interactions of its people. The destruction tried to exterminate, once and for all, the historic and symbolic importance of Gernika, a city that embodies a consensual culture of legitimization of power and governance.

It is even more shocking to reflect upon the pictures that show survivors walking among the ruins. They do not interact with their surroundings; they do not seem to be interested in what is at hand; perhaps they do not know how to give words to an experience of desolation and distress, of ultimate loss. For some, the city is only a cemetery; others are still too shaken to notice the changes. They go around as if nothing had ever happened, as if the new reality—the new order and the new Spain proposed by the fascists—had already begun to take hold. Don't they wonder where the dead have been taken? Of course, the dead must be erased; they cannot be part of the frame if a new city is to emerge. Only *marcas* (traces), as Bernardo Atxaga graphically states, remain, *marcas* that point to what needs to be unburied.⁸ What they see, the rubble, is of no interest to them any longer. A new city, one that has lost its immediate past, is under way.

If the first image, (*Guernica Basque Holy City Laid Waste*) is paradigmatic of a chaotic space, the second, (*Ruins of Guernica*) is an example of the dystopia brought about by air raids, a situation where all functions have been reversed given how nothing signifies the way it used to. The bricks and wooden beams scattered about testify to the disappearance of recognizable structures. They are no longer integral parts of buildings, streets, parks, or of any other element in the urban landscape. They are alien to their previous functions, now rearranged as pertaining to death despite having previously been experienced as life. The war has flattened out all human attempts to endow nature with cultural and symbolic textures. A city richly bestowed with social relationships has been transfigured into a deserted landscape.

In *Ruins of Guernica*, there is no separation between private and public spaces. Both are connected in the ruins that pervade the picture; both have been collapsed into the indiscriminate space of the rubble. It is worth noting the futile resistance of the façades in trying to protect the interiors of family and private life. They can no longer sustain this intimacy. Likewise, nature, represented in the carefully pruned trees, has now become an eyewitness of death. Nature cannot embellish the city any longer, its purpose now being to bear witness to the destruction and disappearance of the people and of the social fabric of the city. The photograph is an account of the death of the utopia to construct and create objects that facilitate life.

To assess all the information contained in these two pictures is a collective enterprise, as Marina Garcés reminds us, an attempt to endow the symbolic narration of the foundational violences of our societal existence with meaning. At the same time, by wondering about the invisibility of

corpses, both human and animal, about the disappearance of the twisted pieces of iron of cars and other means of transportation nowhere to be seen, we become involved in the origins of our own social fabric. We *actualize* the already disappeared lives for a few moments; we give them a voice of their own through our wish to listen. We need to hear what they would have liked to have told us had they had the opportunity of expressing their thoughts before dying; we need to allow them to bear testimony. Only then, can they rest in peace.⁹ The time has come for every generation to answer these crucial questions as many times as need be. What was the criminal ideology capable of justifying random destruction as an act of war? What is the name of Azoulay's sovereign power responsible for the bombardment? This is the only way to engage the destruction in the kind of politics and history claimed by Sontag.

Epilogue

After seeing many pictures of the systematic and cruel bombardment of German cities in the months previous to the end of World War II, a pessimistic W. G. Sebald could not avoid asking himself: "Is the destruction not, rather, irrefutable proof that the catastrophes which develop, so to speak, in our hands and seem to break out suddenly are a kind of experiment, anticipating the point at which we shall drop out of what we have thought for so long to be our autonomous history and back into the history of nature?" (*Natural* 66). To look at photographs of destroyed cities is an attempt to take human history back from the unpredictable actions of that history of nature. It is also a will to express the power of belonging to a close *we* linked to the past, a means of not letting history escape our own volition. It demands returning the making of history to our hands, to politics, instead of accepting destruction as a natural act.

As architect Lebbeus Woods states in relation to earthquakes, their powerful forces of destruction are not only the result of a brash natural occurrence but the byproduct of unequal relations between the economics of urban planning and natural geology (*Earthquake* 4). Human beings, with particular names and addresses, are also responsible for the destruction caused by earthquakes. In the same way, and responding to Sebald's complaint, the impossibility of coming to terms with the persistent and senseless bombardments of cities relates to our difficulty in understanding the political forces underlying history. Perhaps one way of comprehending what these forces are would be to pay attention to Woods' suggestion and keep ruins in their *natural* place: "Wherever buildings are broken by the explosion of bombs or artillery shells, by fire or structural collapse, their form must be respected as an integrity, embodying a history that must not be

denied” (*War* 14). If these ruins point to the forces that made them so, to their history, photography also recollects this memory. In the case of Gernika, despite the reconstruction efforts and the gentrification of the city, there lies a history of devastation captured and recalled in the photographs. When analyzed with the care of the translator, the history and human stories captured within the visual framework become alive, connecting us not with the void of insignificance that seems to be ever-present today but with a past community living underneath the ground we stand on.

Notes

1. I am opposing Paul Virilio’s vision machine—responsible for the “automation of perception” or the “industrialization of vision” (59)—to a visual regime free of these constraints.
2. Sebald’s work is similar to what Marianne Hirsch calls “writing the image” in that “it undoes the objectification of the still photograph and thereby takes it out of the realm of stasis, immobility, mortification [. . .] into fluidity, movement, and thus, finally, life” (3–4). In this discussion, I wish to understand why and how photographs come to life.
3. On another occasion, Sontag suggests that, “Photography is an inventory of mortality” (*On Photography* 70).
4. It is worth quoting her here: “By disclosing the thingness of human beings, the humanness of things, photography transforms reality into a tautology. When Cartier-Bresson goes to China, he shows that there are people in China, and that they are Chinese” (*On Photography* 111). Before globalization took place, for those in the West who never traveled it was not so clear that China was *close* and inhabited by Chinese. In some way, photography confirms that they *exist* and are not as different from us as we might have believed at some point. They are *there* in the same way that we are *here*. This is the mimetic quality of photography: it incorporates to our reality what otherwise would have been unreal or not had an independent existence outside of our perceptions and beliefs.
5. All translations are my own.
6. See “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” Here Nora asserts that, “*lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it” (12).
7. According to Roland Barthes: “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27).
8. This is the title of the book written by Bernardo Atxaga to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of Gernika’s destruction.
9. I follow here Bernardo Atxaga’s advice: “In order to live happily it is desirable to jump every so often over the tombstones” (34)

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