

Interpreting Charged Imagery

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Introduction

The photograph has become a ubiquitous element of our culture and society, informing and influencing how we perceive and react to our environment. We have become accustomed to understanding our surroundings, fellow humans, and world events in terms of photographic images. However, despite the pervasive nature of these images, we often overlook (or fail to recognise) the challenges we face in interpreting them. In the opening chapter of Susan Sontag's seminal work *On Photography* (1979, pp.3-26), the nature of viewing photographs is described with parallels to Plato's Allegory of the Cave; this would seem a fitting analogy, as a photograph can never be anything more than a representation of the real, subjective in the nature of its production.

As the prisoners in Plato's cave were unable to distinguish between shadows and reality, we in the 21st century still struggle to recognise the factors which influence, refine, and distort our interpretations of photographic images. We imagine that the act of looking at photographs is a straightforward and unidirectional process, but when presented with charged or taboo subject matter, the subjective interpretation of what a photograph represents enters a grey area, and our usual intellectual toolkit for understanding images becomes unreliable.

In this essay I intend to illustrate the problems that we are faced with when interpreting images, first by revisiting general theories of seeing and interpreting, and then via the exploration of two problematic fields: the perception and representation of the sexualised female subject, and the nature of the intolerable image.

Chapter 1: Looking and Taking

The Nature of Seeing

In order to understand the nature of reality and representation in images with themes of sexuality or the intolerable, it is first necessary to develop an understanding of how we perceive the world with our own eyes, and how photographs fit in to this visual system. It is only after our relationship to photographic images is established that we can understand the specific problems that these particular types of images present us with.

Despite its relative modernity (compared to, for instance, painting or literature), the field of photography has a rich foundation of theory and philosophy, which in turn provides us with a toolkit for understanding photographic images. Due to both its history and its visual nature, many of these theories and philosophies have been inherited from more established mediums. In a recent lecture for The Photographers' Gallery titled *Four Polemics on Photographic Theory* (2011), however, David Bate—an author, photographer, and an editor of the *Photographies* journal—proposes that strict photographic theory is a misnomer, and that what we refer to as photographic theory is in reality an amalgamation of various other art theories which we combine and use to discuss the nature of representation in photography.

Whilst Bate may have been indulging in a little sensationalism for the purpose of entertainment (photographic theory was of course discussed at length during the lecture), it is true that many of the most useful resources on the nature of looking at photographs were written not by photographers, but by philosophers, language theorists, and art critics and historians. These are appropriately established sources of visual theory because, as art critic and historian James Elkins states, “artists have been making exact statements about the ways the world appears since long before vision was ever an academic field” (1996, p.13). This should not be surprising, as the act of looking is a constant in the lives of every seeing person, and is an interdisciplinary process that concerns every producer of visual material; only a subset of these theories are unique to the field of photography, but certain misconceptions about seeing must be addressed before any meaningful discussion can begin.

Elkins illustrates the scale of these misconceptions in the introduction to *The Object Stares Back*:

Seeing does not interfere with the world or take anything from it, and it does not hurt or damage anything. Seeing is detached and efficient and rational. Unlike the stomach or the heart, eyes are our own to command: they obey every desire and thought. Each one of those ideas is completely wrong. [...] Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer.

Elkins, 1996, pp.11-12.

Elkins then proceeds to pose a convincing argument for vision and seeing as an interactive, mutually transformative process. In the chapter *Just Looking*, he argues that the concept of the observer and the observed being separate entities is mistaken - and, indeed, that the phrase 'just looking' is nonsensical. He analogises the act of looking to the act of hunting; this analogy for the active seeking-out of spectacles will be familiar to students of the visual arts. However, Elkins extends this common wisdom: he proposes that it may be more accurate to say that the *object* seeks out the *viewer*, and that in practice it is often the case that an object will 'catch' our attention without us actively seeking it. Borrowing from the fields of linguistics and semiology, it can be said that usually these 'eye-catching' elements are cultural, historical, or spatial *signs*, having unique *significance* to individual observers.

Reality as a Personal Experience

The effect of this phenomenon is that each person effectively nurtures differing experiences of reality. Humans have been primed by evolution to notice and react to certain stimuli, in order to avoid danger or to seek out food or kinsmen - this is a commonly stated reasoning for the fact that humans often see 'faces' in inanimate objects, or mistake sounds such as wind for human voices. It is a phenomenon explicit enough for James Elkins to dedicate an entire chapter to in *The Object Stares Back* ('*Seeing Bodies*', 1997, pp.125-159). However, even these instinctual, universal experiences are framed by past personal experience, the viewer's environment, and social and historical context.



Fig. 1

Lee Friedlander's photograph *Knoxville, Tennessee* is a good example of this, uncomplicated by additional themes of sexuality or the intolerable. An attentive viewer will notice that the street sign and cloud are amusingly positioned as such that they can be interpreted to represent a cloud-shape formed ice-cream atop a street-sign cone. This interpretation relies on the viewer's prior knowledge of this particular form of ice-cream—without which this interpretation breaks down—and this knowledge transforms the cloud and stop sign to signify something altogether different to what these components may otherwise signify in isolation. Furthermore, the image then becomes a part of the viewer's personal experience and perspective, informing his or her future encounters: the viewer may notice similar spectacles in his or her everyday life, or may search for further witticisms within Friedlander's works.

Whilst it may initially take the viewer some time to notice (or be informed of) this illusion, once it is noticed, the perception of the stop sign as an ice-cream becomes more or less permanent in the viewer's repertoire of experiences, and may be drawn on when interpreting similar images in the future. This is broadly desirable, as increased perceptibility of abstract meaning will aid the viewer in their interpretation and understanding of other photographs, improving his visual comprehension.

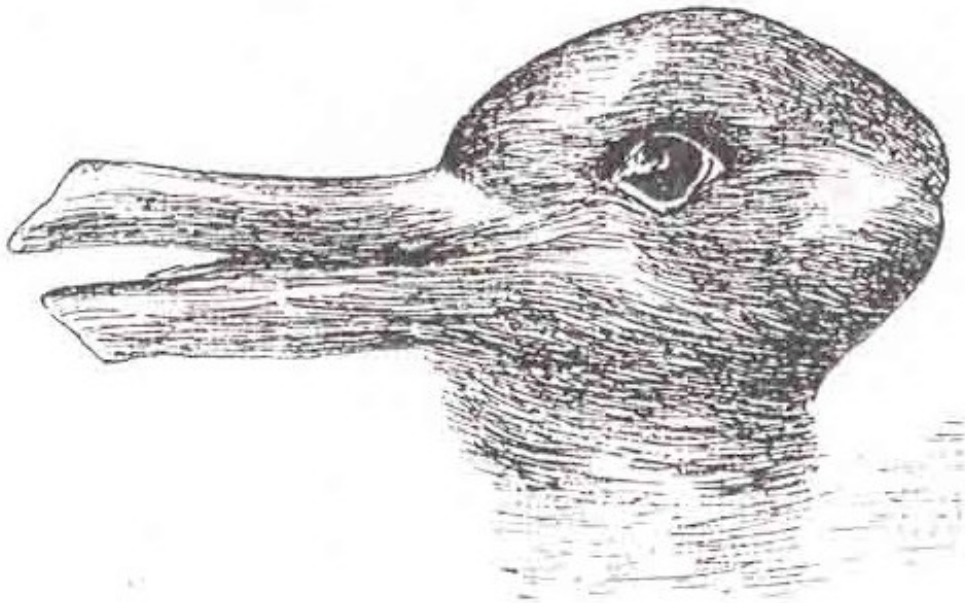


Fig. 2

This isn't to say that the popular interpretation of *Knoxville, Tennessee* will not develop or change over time with different viewers and in different contexts. A study on the effect of motivational expectancy on perception, centred around the famous 'duck-rabbit' image (FIG), demonstrated that test subjects of all ages were substantially more likely to perceive the image as that of a rabbit on Easter Day, whereas the same study conducted in October revealed that the majority of viewers perceived the image as that of a duck, demonstrating the significance of context for interpretation (Brugger and Brugger, 1993)¹.

The duck-rabbit image is a simple line-drawn illustration which is reasonably unambiguously either a rabbit or a bird; were this experiment to be conducted using a photograph the results would likely be far more complex, with variations of interpretation varying as wildly as the cultures and personal experiences of the test subjects; objects within the frame would alternately 'catch' the eye of some viewers whilst the same elements would be signally invisible to others.

This is the nature of the photograph: never a straightforward representation, but a complex artefact of variable interpretation determined by individual experience, culture, context, sequence, circumstance, method and quality of reproduction, and the availability of statements of intent. Furthermore, these same variables guide the actions of photographer, consciously or unconsciously influencing what is included in (or omitted from) the frame. Additionally, a photograph (as a document that is relatively automated in its production) may contain unintentional

¹ Interestingly, the studies were conducted on cloudless days in order to prevent the test subjects being influenced by cloud shapes (Brugger and Brugger, 1993).

subjects or elements invisible to the photographer at time of exposure that add additional and unintended shades of meaning and interpretation for the viewer, leading us to a potential paradox: the seemingly *objective* nature of the camera (as a recording device that neither discriminates nor embellishes) creates an image that, due to unintentional internal and external elements, potentially provides more scope for *subjective* interpretation.

Applying Semiotic Theory

David Bate, who previously suggested that ‘photographic theory’ was a misnomer, later asserts that the literary theorist, philosopher, and semiologist Roland Barthes created a formative work of photographic theory in *Camera Lucida* (Bate, 2011). Barthes was strongly influenced by the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, who today is widely recognised as the father of semiology. Saussure described semiology as “a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life” (1986, p.15) and, although originally used by Saussure as a foundation from which to build linguistic theories, semiology has become an important tool through which photographic and psychological theories and concepts can be explained.

Written shortly after the passing of Barthes’s mother, *Camera Lucida* addresses variance between interpretations; Barthes calls the ‘obvious’ interpretation of the photograph the *studium*, which he distinguishes from the *punctum*—a detail which immediately resonates with the viewer for reasons that may not be understood.

“Certain details may ‘prick’ me. If they do not, it is doubtless because the photographer has put them there intentionally [...] Hence the detail which interests me is not, or at least is not strictly, intentional, and probably must not be so; it occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful.”

Barthes, 1980, p.47.

For Barthes, it is the small details which ‘catch’ his attention and draw him into an image, and he suggests that images that try to force meaning or rhetorical contrasts within the frame end up being irrelevant and uncommunicative, having no effect other than ‘perhaps one of irritation’ (1980, p.47). It is pertinent to note that Barthes considers the presence of a *punctum* to manifest itself as a symbolic ‘prick’—a physical sensation generally associated with discomfort. He reflects on how, when faced with an image of two physically disabled children, all he can see is ‘the little boy’s huge Danton collar, the girl’s finger bandage’ (1980, p.51), considering whether this makes him a ‘child’ or a ‘maniac’, and how he ‘dismisses all knowledge, all culture’ and states that his vision is a product of his own vision, unaffected by the vision of others. This influences the way that the photograph is interpreted in a manner that is unique to the viewer, as the *punctum* of an image may be different—or absent—for other observers.

It is easy to empathise with Barthes' perspective: our attentions are 'caught' by certain items within photographs—details that are often inconsequential, or redundant. We look at photographs for pleasure and in search of meaning, attempting to immerse ourselves in them, and out of the various elements of the image distinct details seem to 'reveal' themselves to the viewer and draw him in. It is often these details that stimulate our interests in looking at photographs for pleasure; we are, to use Elkins' analogy, "like fish who like to swim in waters full of hooks." (1997, p.20). It is the very subtlety of these elements which appeals to the viewer, forging a personal and unique relationship between viewer and image.

Barthes describes photographs without a *punctum* as engendering merely a 'sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest' of something that you might consider 'all right' (1980, p.27). If it is the *punctum* that draws us to photographs, then it would appear that Barthes is suggesting that photographs lacking a *punctum* for a viewer, communicating *studium* alone, should not be able to form a strong-enough connection with the viewer for it to have a lasting effect. He asserts that the *studium* of a photograph is always coded (and therefore disposed for decoding in terms of the *sign* and the *signified*), whereas the *punctum* is not - and that the ability to decode a *punctum* automatically removes the power of the image to 'prick' the viewer (1980, p.51).

These statements do not seem to be universally evident when they are applied to the types of images that this essay attempts to explore. Does the anguish of a Chinese woman who is in the process of dismemberment in front of a crowd of onlookers (discussed in chapter three) fail to forge any lasting, meaningful impression upon a viewer who cannot find a necessarily unexplainable link between their own experiences and what is depicted in the photograph? Or is the presence of a *punctum* in images of disfigured faces a due to a universal, biological human reaction? Or, is it that the content of the *studium* in these cases negates the need for a *punctum*?

Barthes penned the ideas in 1980, the year of his own untimely death, with the tragic consequence that he was unable to further develop his theories regarding *punctum* and *studium*—terms that only entered mainstream use for discussing photographic interpretation after *Camera Lucida* was published. Despite its prominence in the fields of photographic and art theory, Barthes final work has been challenged on numerous levels by successive theorists and philosophers.

Jacques Ranciere, a contemporary philosopher, argues in *The Future of the Image* that Barthes arbitrarily separates the functions within the aesthetic image which allow it to gravitate between a decodable sign and "senseless naked presence" (2009, p.15):

In order to preserve for photography the purity of an affect unsullied by any signification offered up to the semiologist or any artifice of art, Barthes erases the very genealogy of the *that was*. By projecting the immediacy [of the *punctum*] on to the process of mechanical imprinting, he dispels all the mediations between the reality of mechanical imprinting and the reality of the affect that make this affect open to being experienced, named, expressed.

Ranciere, 2009, p.15.

To give this statement context, it should be noted that *The Future of the Image* is an argument for an inescapable unification between politics and art, and argues for the acceptance of images and reality as intertwined systems—a system in which “there is no longer any reality, but only images”, and, conversely, that “there are no more images but only a reality incessantly representing itself to itself” (2009, p.1). As such, it functions as a contemporary evaluation of concepts popularised by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, published in 1981², and will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Ranciere effectively rejects the significance of the theories of *studium* and *punctum* in photographs on the grounds that fixating on an element which ‘pricks’ you undermines the more significant factor of the *genealogy* of the photograph, and its status as a document of the ‘that was’. After all, photographs are considered (both socially and legally) as historical documents, and yet also can be considered as works of art both in themselves (from a ‘dumb art’ perspective), and in the history of the relationships between three things: the images of art, the social forms of imagery, and the theoretic procedures of criticism of imagery (2009, p.15). He later asserts that:

Extracts from novels or poems, or the titles of films and books, frequently create connections that confer meaning on the images, or rather make the assembled visual fragments ‘images’ - that is, relations between a visibility and a signification.

Ranciere, 2009, p.33.

Thus, external contexts ‘create’ an image. Cultural documents such as books and films certainly do have a transformative effect on the way that we view images, and changes in context alone can (and frequently do) completely transform the ‘signification’ (to use Saussure’s language of semiology), or interpretation, of what we believe we are seeing. However, these effects are not exclusive to physical objects and contexts—they also play off of our preconceptions and assumptions. This poses a problem when looking at photographs with historical or ‘charged’ significances, as both cultural documents and common preconceptions and assumptions (and, therefore, experiences of reality) can shift dramatically not only over time and across cultures, but may also be further influenced generally by the context in which the photograph is received by the contemporary viewer.

² Aside from Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Ranciere, similar theories were also floated by Guy Debord; Susan Sontag humorously remarks in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that this seems to be something of a French speciality.

Art critic and historian John Berger states this as a common problem regarding interpreting historical artworks practically as an opening statement in his seminal work *Ways of Seeing*:

Many of these assumptions no longer accord with the world as it is. (The world-as-it-is is more than pure objective fact, it includes consciousness.) Out of true with the present, these assumptions obscure the past. They mystify rather than clarify. The past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognised for exactly what it is.

John Berger, 2008, p.4.

Berger's argument that photographs obscure rather than clarify may seem counterintuitive on the surface, but when framed by the works of other visual theorists (Elkins and Ranciere in particular), and especially considering the types of photograph that this essay explores, it transpires that this is in fact the nearest we can come to a satisfactory conclusion.

Although *Ways of Seeing* largely deals with historically significant paintings, the concepts discussed translate well to photography. The painter starts with a blank canvas and adds what he sees fit; the photographer starts with a world composed of too much, and can capture no more than a tiny fragment.

In practice, neither photography nor any other traditional form of art can objectively represent reality, because—as the aforementioned theories have illustrated—reality is also subjective, and therefore precludes objective documentation. These theories deal with the nature of seeing in general; the following two chapters deal with how specific themes can further distort our interpretations and understandings.

Chapter 2: The Gaze and Female Representation

The previous chapter established how looking is a two-way process which transforms both the viewer and the subject, in the broad sense of the subject being defined as an 'object' which holds the viewer's attention. This is an interesting observation when applied to photographs of places and objects, but takes on new significances when the same principles are applied to photographs of people. Photographs objectify people not only in the literal sense that physical photographs can be handled and owned, but, also, in the sense that they transform the subject into a spectacle to be observed, analysed, and critiqued.

This clearly does not apply equally to all forms of photography, and does not necessarily state that the act of taking a photographic portrait is unethical. The reciprocative process of high-street studio portraiture is a good example of this, as in this case the customers (as the commissioners of the work) must be happy with how they are photographically represented in order for the business to be successful.

Even in this context, however, the nature of representation in portraiture is more complicated than it appears on the surface. Whilst a commissioned portrait is generally accepted by the subject to be a satisfactory representation of the subject's perception of the self, this self-perception (and the system of values that determine what it is that contemporary subjects aspire to) are the products of external contexts such as fashion, culture, contemporary societal norms and conventions and, perhaps most significantly, the nature of the Gaze as a creator of inherently unbalanced power relationships. This is especially pertinent to consider when interpreting photographs of women, as in this context the unbalance of power is largely due to the Gaze being a gendered action.

Psychoanalysis, and the Gaze as a Gendered Action

Mainstream theories that place the Gaze within the realm of the masculine were perhaps most notoriously popularised by Laura Mulvey's passionate essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in which the nature of the Gaze in cinema is deconstructed by way of expanding on the psychoanalytic theories postulated by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, among others. Despite the clear influence of the works of these authors, perhaps a more balanced overall explanation (for our purposes) can be found in art historian John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*³.

Berger explains that the difference in the way we interpret photographs of women stems from long-standing conventions regarding differences in the nature of social presences assigned to men and

³ *Three Essays on Sexuality*, whilst highly influential, is more than a century old, and *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* reads partially as a feminist manifesto, with section titles such as '*Destruction of Pleasure as a Radical Weapon*' (Mulvey, 1975, p.58).

women. He notes that, within social structures, men tend to be perceived in terms of what they can do *to* you or *for* you, based on an embodiment of power that may be 'moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual' (2008, p.39) or otherwise, the object of which being exterior to the man himself. That is, the sum of a man's presence being the ranking of his own power over that of others. Berger's explanation of presence for women, however, revolves around the woman in isolation:

A woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voice, opinions, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste - indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence.

Berger, 2008, p.40.

Thus, women learn from an early age to consider their externalities (within a social context) above all else, constantly monitoring themselves and, ultimately, internalising this surveying of the self into their subconscious—to quote Berger, 'to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman' (2008, p.40). This creates dramatic differences in perception of reality between men and women. Men, who are defined primarily by their actions, are not subject to the Gaze in the same way. This is what is meant when it is said that the Gaze is masculine.

Laura Mulvey's feminist interpretation of psychoanalytic theories, borrowing significantly from the theories of Sigmund Freud, elaborate on an additional element that must be considered when describing the Gaze: Freud's thoughts on scopophilia, which is defined in *Three Essays on Sexuality* as a pleasure in looking that functions as a drive separate to that of eroticism, and then, in his later work *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, as the erotic basis for looking at another person as an object (see Mulvey, 1975, pp.59-60). Freud theorises that scopophilia is formed by 'the voyeuristic activities of children, the desire to see and make sure of the private parts and the forbidden' (Ibid.). Thus, according to Freud, human tendencies towards voyeurism and pleasure in looking are instinctual and present from a very young age.

Mulvey furthers discussion by reference to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose first major contribution to the field of psychoanalysis was the theory that a person's ego is formed when that person, as a baby, first sees his reflection in a mirror, and perceives his reflection to be more complete and capable than his actual experiences of his young body dictate (see Mulvey, 1975, p. 60). There are obvious parallels between this 'mirror phase', as it is known in psychology, and photographic portraiture, in which we define ourselves through photographs.

Sexuality in Advertising, and Demonstrating and Determining the Zeitgeist

Psychoanalytic theories cannot fully explain the nature of the representation of women, however—more attention must be paid to the context in which women are represented.



Fig. 3

The image above is part of a wider promotional campaign by the animal rights activist group PETA, and depicts the celebrity and model Pamela Anderson posed provocatively on what appears to be a bed, her almost-naked body annotated in the style of a butcher's diagram⁴. She has been lit evenly with soft light, with the clear intention of hiding nothing from the viewer by shadow, whilst still allowing subtle light falloff to maintain a sense of dimension to feminine curve shapes around Anderson's legs, waist, and other sexualised body parts. The photograph's visual appeal is targeted squarely at an archetypically heterosexual male audience, Anderson's direct look inviting the male viewer in, and presenting her as a vicarious consumable in place of—and as an allusion to—the (literal) pieces of meat that PETA (and, as a vegan, Anderson herself) aim to dissuade the viewer from consuming.

This is clearly an overt example, and as an advertising campaign plays off heavily sexualised themes and, no doubt, Anderson's existing reputation. Dan Matthews, PETA's senior vice president, comments on how the campaign 'lured legions of pop culture junkies to Peta's website and sparked interest in animal issues in a very unique way' (see Jones, 2010). Whilst the

⁴ A series of photographs discussed in Chapter 3 grotesquely depict the reality of the 'human butchery' theme of this image, bestowing additional layers of significance to PETA's campaign, in an effective demonstration of how exposure to certain images affects the interpretation of others.

campaign may have been successful in driving traffic to the PETA website, Matthews is, of course, completely wrong to describe the campaign as 'very unique'; the photograph works as a promotion precisely because it functions as a pastiche of the prevalence of highly sexualised advertising, and its production in a style echoing that of the 'soft-pornography' often found in 'lads' mags'.

Men aren't the only consumers, of course, and advertisements that are not aimed at men function in a different way. Perhaps counterintuitively, advertisements aimed at women often also utilise the male gaze as a powerful tool:

Kathy Myers notes that advertising addressed to women presents them as seductive and attractive rather than vulnerable and accessible as is the case in pornography. Advertising and fashion present women as captivating and attracting the look through the plentitude of their bodily signifier of seduction.

Gagnon, 1986, p.100

Much of female-orientated advertising, especially in the almost exclusively female-centric industries of fashion and cosmetics, works by creating insecurities in the female viewer regarding her physical appearance by creating a sense of lack⁵, and providing products that allow that lack to be 'fulfilled', allowing the consumer to feel 'whole' again. Whilst clearly a manipulative practice, and a contributory factor to the status of women as sexual objects, it is enough of an accepted element of contemporary culture that it is largely unnoticed in everyday life, due to the saturation of promotional imagery necessary to drive a consumerist society.

Whilst interpreting photographs such as Fig. 3 in isolation is interesting and has its own merits, I am more interested in how the prevalence of this kind of imagery effects future image production and interpretation. Whilst scopophilia and the gendering of the Gaze may form at an early age, it is the cultural norms, tastes, and pressures of society that refine these instinctual tendencies into fashions and conventions. Jean Gagnon hints at this process when forming his own description of the function of the Gaze in *The Assumption of the Visible*:

The orientation of the look, insofar as it reflects value systems, is a production of a society and ideology. The institution and industry of pornography—and also a much larger complex including advertising, fashion and our society's ingrained sexism—affect the orientation of the look by producing a point of view (concretely and literally an angle of vision) in which women are objects of the male look.

Jean Gagnon, 1986, p.97

Throughout *The Assumption of the Visible*, Gagnon argues that modern society, due to its reliance on imagery to provide us with a sense of identity, has created an *inoperative reality* by forming power relationships between men and women through use of pornography. The power relationships formed ultimately alienate both genders. Gagnon later notes that the photographs

⁵ Advertising aimed at men also uses lack as a psychological tool, but more often appeals to the male ego and desire for social status and power.

belonging to this system, although not representative of the reality for everyone, form a new reality which in turn shapes and nurtures the nature of the Gaze and the current social zeitgeist⁶. (1986, p.97).



Fig. 4

These factors can significantly complicate the interpretation of images featuring female nudity, as demonstrated by Fig. 4, which is part of a promotional campaign for Multiple Sclerosis Australia. This exhibits obvious similarities to the PETA's image of Anderson, and therefore is useful for demonstrating how small changes in production and context can strongly influence how an image is interpreted. The purpose of the photograph is to illustrate that sufferers of multiple sclerosis may lose the physical or cognitive capabilities of their bodies in an unpredictable manner. However, without this written context (which is small enough that it may be easily missed), the image is potentially susceptible to serious misinterpretation.

Contrasting Anderson's open body language, the model in this image is curled into what could almost be described as a foetal position, hugging her legs into her chest both to preserve her modesty and exhibit a vulnerable, defensive pose. Rather than being bathed in light and stretched out over a bed, as in the image of Anderson, the model is singled out under a spotlight and sat on a scratched concrete floor, otherwise surrounded by darkness. The use of harder light accentuates her ribcage and the shallows of her cheeks and eye sockets, further alluding to her vulnerability. Most potentially misleading of all, the 'use by' notices on her body, far from an

⁶ Baudrillard

unambiguous signifier of multiple sclerosis, function as even more a direct invitation to possess and consume the female model than the annotations on Anderson's body.

This image, as an awareness campaign by a national disability foundation, poses serious issues of representation. In PETA's image, Anderson is representing herself and PETA's cause. The image is unashamedly sensationalist, and contributes to the zeitgeist of the use of female nudity as a tool for advertising being culturally acceptable, but ultimately does not directly misrepresent anyone. The PETA photograph, however, sacrifices reality and balance for sensationalism, and ultimately represents multiple sclerosis sufferers as vulnerable and victimised—an untrue generalisation. Such is the scale of this misrepresentation that, were the text on the image to be replaced, the image would function perhaps more effectively for raising awareness of victims of domestic abuse.

Female Sexuality in Photographic Art

Photography used as part of an art practice differs from photography used in advertising in two important ways: first, the creation of art-based photographs is generally motivated by more than a desire to generate awareness or revenue; second, presenting photographs as artworks generates more meaningful and deeper discourses into intentions and implications. Photographs displayed in galleries are also likely to be interpreted with a deeper level of consideration than those featured elsewhere, by virtue of being displayed in a place that is visited for the purpose of looking at images, and being received in the proximity of other works of art.

In *The Future of the Image*, Ranciere asserts that there are three types of images that appear in museums and art galleries: the *Naked Image*, the *Ostensive Image*, and the *Metamorphic Image*. The first type, according to Ranciere, "does not constitute art" (2009a, p.22) because what it depicts is too sensitive to be interpreted as such. Chapter Three discusses this kind of image at length. The *Ostensive Image*, according to Ranciere, "likewise asserts its power as that of sheer presence [...] but it claims it in the name of art" (Ibid., p.23). The *Metamorphic Image* could be defined as art created by recontextualising or appropriating existing media or artworks in order to infer onto them new significations (Ibid., p.24).

A recurring motif in in images (photographic or otherwise) is the featuring of mirrors. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright state in *Practices of Looking*:

Mirrors were used by painters such as [the 16th century artist] Titan to offer another view into the image, to create multiple planes within a painting that could be seen by the stationary spectator. The mirror is also a code for femininity. [...] These codes of imaging the female nude have long traditions in art, and they are also liberally used by advertisers.

Sturken and Cartwright, 2009, p.124.



Fig. 5

Helmut Newton's *Self Portrait with June and Models* (fig. 5) is a good example of how *ostensive* photographs can play with established themes. The mirror in this image does function to allow the viewer an additional perspective of the primary nude model (and the legs and provocative footwear of a second model, visible only in the mirror), but also depicts Newton himself, wearing a long raincoat indoors—the symbolic uniform of the flasher. The frontal nude reflection of the model is also in the direct centre of the image, beside Newton, indicating her status as the 'ideal' female, in contrast to Newton's wife, who is relegated to the periphery of the frame.

Newton's considered and complex use of composition, using the mirror as a mechanism not only to provide additional perspectives of the female nude but also to include himself within the frame, constitutes a photographic comment on society's portrayal of females as aesthetic objects at the expense of reality, which is connoted in the photograph by the presence of his wife. It is an interesting statement for Newton to make, considering that, as a renown erotic portraitist, Newton himself is part of the system that he appears to be passing comment on.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Thomas Ruff's *Nudes* series, on the other hand, is a good example of a *metamorphic image*. For *Nudes*, Ruff appropriated found pornographic material from the internet into a curated set, and subjected them to digital diffusion. The images are universally of a graphic nature, and could be trivialised offhand as simple reproductions of pornography, but in purposely selecting specific images, and recontextualising them into a gallery space, Ruff bestows additional significances on the images. Fig 6, depicting a woman in the process of douching herself, bears resemblance to Gustave Courbet's famous painting *The Origin of the World* (fig. 7)—an allusion that may go unnoticed were the image to be received outside of a fine art context. Seen in this perspective, the series can be interpreted as an exposé, questioning and critiquing the credibility that the tradition of the female nude holds within the field of art.

Ultimately, the only conclusion that we can draw from these examples is that the photographic representation of female sexuality in art is complicated, deeply rooted in culture, and can—and often does—create unbalanced power relationships that both objectify and solidify deeply-rooted sexual biases. However, photographs can also highlight these social realities and offer critique, indicating that the problems encountered are inherent in contemporary culture.

Chapter 3: Photographing the Intolerable

What Makes Images Intolerable

Whilst images dealing with sexuality are problematic, the issues posed are largely masked by saturation. We have become numbed to sexualisation in advertising, the traditional representation of female sexuality in art, and (perhaps unconsciously) the role of the male gaze. However, images exist which are truly painful to look at—not in a Barthesian sense of mere details that ‘prick’ us, but in the sense that the images are so strong, the subject matter so viscerally disturbing, that we feel compelled to look away. Yet, despite their painful nature, we find that we are drawn to them—a phenomenon old and pronounced enough to be recognised by Plato (who, as with contemporary philosophers, attributed this attraction to what we would now define as ‘spectacle’) in *The Republic*, written around 380 BC. (see Sontag, 2004, p.86).

Perhaps the most useful definition of these images for our purposes is that coined by Ranciere in *The Emancipated Spectator*, in a chapter encompassing our term: *The Intolerable Image* (2009b, pp.83-105). For Ranciere, the intolerability of an image is determined not only by the elements which “make us unable to view an image without experiencing pain or indignation”, but also a question: “is it acceptable to make such images and exhibit them to others?” (Ibid., p.83).



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

In *The Object Stares Back*, Elkins discusses a series of four photographs depicting the execution of a Chinese woman by ‘death by division into a thousand parts’ (figs. 8-11), which he considers “one of the most powerful sequences of images I know in any genre and from any period”⁷ (1997, p.115). The photographs depict a half-naked woman being horrifically and systematically mutilated and, ultimately, being reduced to ‘meat’ (Ibid.), publicly, to a crowd of male onlookers. The images are unarguably and profoundly disturbing, owing not only to their graphic nature, but also their context and sequence: although the moment of this woman’s death clearly lies somewhere between the progression of frames, there is no acknowledgement of this occurrence in the images —the unflinching expressions and gaze of the crowd that has gathered to watch remain unchanged throughout.

⁷ The spectacle depicted in Fig. 3 does not qualify as intolerable because it is an obvious fabrication, despite its macabre thematic parallels to these images.



Fig. 12

Elkins suggests that it may be the sequencing of the images (and his inability to locate the moment of death) that produces this profound effect, and that over time we can become accustomed to the sexism and immorality of the event as historical facts (1997, p.115), but I believe that the source of these images' intolerability lies elsewhere. Consider *Postcard Showing the Lynching of Jesse Washington* (fig. 12), a photographic postcard depicting the charred remains of a mentally disabled African American who, at the age of seventeen, was convicted of the murder of a white woman⁸ and was tortured, mutilated, and burned alive, by a mob that had gathered outside of the courtroom. Like the images Elkins refers to, death in this image is unambiguous: although the moment of death itself is not depicted, the message accompanying the postcard clearly states that the event happened the night before, and it is morbidly referred to as a 'barbecue.' Considering the significant similarities between this image and the series Elkins discusses, is this image any

⁸ It should also be noted that the trial lasted just one hour, with four minutes of deliberation by the jury, and that the authorities present did nothing to prevent his murder (Sorelle, 2007, pp.189-191).

less intolerable based purely on its lack of sequence, and over time will we, as Elkins suggests, 'come to terms' with the image?

If Ranciere's philosophy is to be adopted, it can be said that the factor which defines these photographs as intolerable is complicity, and that the manifestation of this complicity is twofold. First, there is the complicity of those depicted within the photographs. In both instances, there is no evidence of the crowd attempting to impede the proceedings. Secondly, there is the complicity of the photographer. In the first image, the photographer has a clear perspective despite the density of the crowd, and is recording from a clearly privileged vantage point; his position is dictated by the subject, but it could also be said that what is being done to the subject is being performed to the photographer. Additionally, the crowd make no attempt to conceal their identities, clearly indicating their willingness to be implicated in the event. The crowd in the second image are literally posed for the photograph, which, as a postcard, was sold as a memento—an enterprise born of Washington's suffering.

Although the production of photographs of torture, mutilation and death for the purposes of selling as postcards would today be considered particularly abhorrent, the complicity of the subjects in the images suggests that the subjects themselves did not consider themselves to be behaving unacceptably. The event depicted in *Postcard Showing the Lynching of Jesse Washington* took place at a time when lynching was illegal, and therefore could be considered to an outsider, at 'best', an instance of barbaric vigilanteism, but the method of execution of the woman in the image Elkins discusses is written into Chinese law (Elkins, 1997, p.110). This highlights an important consideration: intolerable images are not necessarily considered intolerable by their authors, and are instead declared intolerable by commentators outside of the time and/or culture in which the image was created. This complicates Ranciere's definition of intolerable imagery, as the production and dissemination of images interpreted as intolerable in one culture may be received and interpreted differently in others.

Interpreting Intolerable Images

In *The Object Stares Back*, Elkins speculates that, over time, he will 'come to terms' with the images of death by a thousand cuts:

I think we can finally get used to the pain (doctors become entirely anaesthetised to pain; it comes easily with practice), and we must finally accept the sexism and immorality as historical facts (just as we must come to terms with newspaper reports of atrocities and injustices).

Elkins, 1997, p.115

Whilst it's true that Elkins may eventually become numbed to the historical context of the image and the physical torment of its subject, I propose it is unlikely that he will become numbed to the

effects of intolerable images generally. In the Information Age—at a time when the world is becoming ever more connected, and in which digital cameras are mass produced and photographs cost almost nothing to produce—there has never been a time in history when it was more likely that we risk being overexposed to and saturated by powerful images of the intolerable, as we have been by sexualised imagery, banalising their content. And yet there are still images which we find intolerable, and which are we are not numbed to.

Elkins himself recognises that images that are powerful are also rare. He remarks that “especially in the art world where artists continuously struggle to be noticed and there are few boundaries to what is possible, it is odd that more images are not this powerful.” (1997, p.116). He considers this to be due to the ‘nature of the power itself’, and because these photographs “shout all images down: they are harsh and importunate, so that they are not only hard to see; they also make everything else hard to see.” (Ibid.).

This statement reflects a well-documented problem with the nature of intolerable images: that they overpower reason and thereby complicate—or even preclude—interpretation of the images themselves. They evoke strong, visceral emotions, which cloud normal judgement. Writing in response to an exhibition catalogue essay for a Holocaust exhibition titled *Memoires des camps*, which featured photographs of women being pushed into gas chambers, Élisabeth Pagnoux remarked that “by projecting into our present the horror of Auschwitz, [the images] captured our gaze and prevented any critical distance” (see Ranciere, 2009, p.89). The intolerable acts depicted within such photographs negate the prospect of reasoned argument.

Elkins’ argument that he may be able to overcome the pain caused to him by intolerable images is not unfounded, and the hypothesis that we will become numbed by images (and photographs in particular, since their invention) is an argument that far predates photographic practice. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), Sontag reflects that, whilst this was the stance she opined in the essays of her earlier work *On Photography* (1979), she is now somewhat skeptical. She muses that the sentiments proposed in *On Photography* are what could be considered the ‘conservative argument’, because they deal not strictly with our responses to images, but instead argue for the “defence of reality and the imperilled standards for responding more fully to it”. (2004, p.97).

To understand this statement, it is first necessary to understand Baudrillard’s theories of the image as reality. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1995), Baudrillard proposes that saturation of imagery has transformed our understanding of reality and representation by inadvertently trading reality for a simulation based on symbols and signs (in the semiotic sense of these terms). This is a process in which images evolve from representing reality to distorting it (due to the subjective nature of their creation), hiding it from view, and ultimately becoming simulations of reality in themselves:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;
it masks and denatures a profound reality;
it masks the absence of a profound reality;
it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;
it is its own pure simulacrum.

Baudrillard, 1995, p.6

These theories are based on an opposition within images between reality and representation, which transform images into simulations. According to Baudrillard, “representation stems from the principal of the equivalence of the sign and of the real”, whereas simulation is born of “the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference” (Ibid.), meaning that images that have become simulacra necessarily obscure the reality that they once represented.

Ranciere develops this theory further in *The Future of the Image* (2009a) by introducing the concept of ‘hyper-resemblance’⁹. He proposes that this element “does not provide the replica of a reality but attests directly to the elsewhere whence it derives” (2009a, p.8), the disappearance of which announces the transformation into a simulacrum. However, this hyper-resemblance never truly leaves the image, as it is formed by the mechanical reproduction of the image itself, and “never stops slipping its own activity into the very gap that separates the operations of art from the techniques of reproduction” (2009a, p.9).

This ‘space between art and reproduction’ complicates the interpretation of intolerable images. Writing in *On Photography* (1979), Sontag proposes that “a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (p.154). It is this fixing of trace into an image that allows photographs to be used as historical documents, for example, or as evidence in court. However, photographs are representations and therefore by definition not the thing itself, and the subjective process of their realisation can call both the tolerability and authenticity of the photograph into question.

Sontag notes that “photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticised if it seems ‘aesthetic’; that is, too much like art” (2004, p.68), and that the utilities of photographs as documents and as art are perceived to be opposites, and therefore “photographs that depict suffering shouldn’t be beautiful” (Ibid.) She expands by explaining that images that are perceived as being too beautiful drain attention from the subject depicted and “turns it towards the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture’s status as a document” (Ibid.). It can be said that the act of photographing an intolerable event transforms both the photograph and the event itself into a spectacle, to be consumed by a consumerist society.

⁹ Not to be confused with Baudrillard’s theory of the hyperreal (1995, p.6).

Despite her apparent accord with this supposition, Sontag later states that “to speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism”, because it universalises the experiences of what is in reality only “a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment” (2004, p.98), and “suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world” (Ibid., p.99). This is the problem of intolerable images: whereas viewers removed from the event may choose to be (or not to be) spectators of the intolerable, and despite the fact that the reality depicted by these images is never complete and is not comparable to the experiences of those depicted, atrocities *do* happen, and photographic records remind us that these events happen, whether we find them intolerable or not.

The Role of Intolerable Images in Society

If intolerable images can never be complete and can never effectively convey the actual suffering that took place, do intolerable images have a useful role in society? This immediately suggests an additional question: if intolerable images have no useful role in our society, does the fact that they were made in the first place make their very existence intolerable in itself?

An additional essay published alongside Élisabeth Pagnoux’s criticisms of *Memoires des camps*, written by Gérard Wajcman, argues that the photographs featured in the exhibition are intolerable because they are unnecessary:

The Shoah occurred. I know it and everyone knows it. It is a known fact. No one can say “I do not know.” This knowledge is based on testimony, which forms a new knowledge... it does not require any proof.

See Ranciere, 2009b, p.90.

However, as Ranciere points out, Wajcman is not directly addressing the images themselves, but rather forming an opposition between two forms of attestation: testimony, and proof (Ibid.).

Wajcman’s argument that ‘proof’ (in the form of photographic images) is not needed because the event is ‘common knowledge’ is invalid, because testimony is subjective, based on the experiences of the witness, and therefore cannot be considered ‘proof’ in itself. Regardless of the truthfulness or untruthfulness of a testimony, it does not contain an easily definable ‘trace’.

Wajcman is also in a privileged position, as it is only with hindsight that he can be so confident in asserting that no one can argue ‘I did not know’. It is often the case that photographic records themselves are a significant contributory factor for the dissemination of knowledge about atrocities, the outrage and scandal which they create being the catalyst for widespread acknowledgement, and change. Ranciere hints that recognition of this is hidden between the lines of Wajcman’s argument: “the images are reassuring, Wajcman tells us. The proof is that we view these photographs whereas we would not tolerate the reality they reproduce” (2009b, p.91).

The photographs that have been discussed so far have been relatively old, and yet have been striking enough that we recoil from them. We cannot aid the subjects—the moment has passed. However, new intolerable images emerge constantly. As Sontag points out, since the beginning of the 20th century, “war has been the norm and peace the exception” (2004, p.66), providing ample conditions for intolerable images to be created.

Perhaps the most notorious example of intolerable imagery in recent times has been the materialisation of a series of photographs depicting acts of torture and abuse of inmates at the hands of western forces at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, which entered the public arena shortly after the publishing of *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004). Although earlier reported instances of torture were largely ignored by the mainstream media, the release of these images prompted international outrage.

Political and ethical philosopher Judith Butler wrote at length regarding the circumstances and affect of these photographs, alongside the nature of embedded reporting and media censorship, in her essay *Torture and the Ethics of Photography* (2007). She proposes that “for photographs to accuse and possibly invoke a moral response, they must shock” (2007, p.955). This would seem a self-evident statement, as in a culture where news and imagery are considered consumables, surely the most effective way of eliciting a response is the production of imagery that is difficult to consume. However, not all images of death are intolerable, and for images to provoke moral and political actions the viewer must have an existing relationship to the events that the images depict.



Fig. 13

In *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009a), Ranciere discusses a series of photographic collages created by Martha Rosler in the 1970s that constitute criticism of America's war with Vietnam. The series, titled *Bringing the War Home*, consists of imagery captured during the aforementioned conflict integrated into middle-class American domestic environments. As with the art images discussed in the previous chapter, these images play with established themes in order to make statements. In fig. 13, domestic luxuries and status symbols such as a glass table and a hanging chair are contrasted with the horror of a man carrying the limp body of a half-naked child, literally bringing the horrors of war into the household.

However, as Ranciere states, "there is no particular reason why [these images] should make those who see [them] conscious of the reality of imperialism and desirous of opposing it." (2009a, p.85). In other circumstances, a more likely reaction may be to look away, or to dismiss the image as representative of the general maladies of the human condition, in which war is an unfortunate but distant reality that afflicts other people in other places. "For the image to produce its political effect," asserts Ranciere, "the spectator must already be convinced that what it shows is American imperialism [...] In short, she must already feel guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt." (Ibid.). Ergo, the image is effective as it draws from existing negativity of the American conflict in Vietnam.



Fig. 14



Fig. 15

The previously mentioned photographs of Abu Ghraib are so profoundly affecting because they undermine the stated purpose of the invasion and effective occupation of Iraq as necessary to overcome a merciless dictator. The photographs released depict physical and psychological abuse, and include scenes of sexual humiliation such as that portrayed in fig. 14 and fig. 15. The sequencing of these images on the memory card to which they were captured suggests an additional context: photographs of abuse, rape, and murder were interspersed “with photos of the local bazaar, friends smiling and eating, soldiers saluting the flag, views of the street and the neighbourhood, Americans making love in apparently consensual terms” (Butler, 2007, p.960), suggesting that abuse was a fact of everyday life.

The abuse is twofold: not only is the subject degraded and treated as an animal, but the traditional gender roles are reversed, with Lynndie England (the female soldier in both photographs) assuming the role of dominatrix in fig. 14—a humiliation doubtlessly exacerbated by the strong patriarchal values of Iraqi culture. The photographing of the event becomes an integral element of the abuse, with the symmetry and balance of fig. 15 strongly implying that the spectacle was purposefully staged for the camera. The images are also ‘pornography’ in another sense: “the so-called pornography of the image itself, where pornography is defined as the pleasure taken in seeing human degradation, in the eroticization of human degradation.” (Butler, 2007, p.962).

The role of the photographer also surpasses the complicity exhibited in figs. 8-12, as Butler explains:

The torture is, in some sense, for the photograph. It is, from the start, meant to be communicated; its own perspective is in plain view, and the cameraman or woman is referenced by the smiles that the torturers offer him or her: as if to say, thank you for taking my picture, thank you for memorialising my triumph.

Butler, 2007, p.959.

As with figs. 7-12, these perpetrators of torture make no attempt to hide their faces, suggesting that they, likewise, don’t regard their actions as unacceptable; but there is an additional, more sinister layer of significance: not only is the photographer an active participant in the scene, and not only is the act of photographing part of the abuse, but there is an indication that the presence of the photographer may have been a catalyst, without which the acts of abuse may not have taken place.

However, in spite of what Butler seems to be suggesting, it transpires that the acts of brutality and sadism depicted were probably *not* performed exclusively for the camera—as techniques for torturing Iraqi prisoners were sent from higher up the chain of command, and numerous reports have emerged stating that “prisoners were routinely humiliated by US troops venting their frustration” (Goldenberg, 2004), regardless of the presence of a photographer. If they were performed for the camera, the apparent fact that the soldiers implicated in the Abu Ghraib scandal

don't exhibit signs of guilt or shame suggests that the capability to perform these intolerable acts lies within the soldiers themselves.

This brings us back to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. Ranciere suggests that questioning what it is that makes certain images intolerable leads us immediately to a second question: "is it acceptable to make such images and exhibit them to others?" (2009b, p.83). The question is not straightforward, and is complicated by the fact that, in many cases, what we would refer to as intolerable images would not be classified as such by their authors. The nature of these photographs often preclude reasoned thinking about them but, as we have seen, they can also form political criticism or shed light on atrocities, drawing our attention to injustices and brutalities, and aiding us in defining what we, as a culture, find intolerable.

Conclusions

The research undertaken for this essay illustrates that the process of looking at and interpreting photographs is problematic. Even without 'difficult', charged themes and contexts, we are faced with the problem that the reality that we perceive is unique, with significant variation due not only to the moment in history that we inhabit, and the cultures that we are from, but also different perspectives within our own cultures, between males and females, and, at a personal level, the situations that we have experienced and the images that we have already seen and interpreted. Interpretation is a personal exercise, which complicates both the production and consumption of imagery.

Photographs can be oppressive, in forming, strengthening, and maintaining power structures. They aid us in understanding who we are but the reality of how we think and act, the way we treat others, and the unconscious processes that determine how we react (or choose not to react) to events and each other, can be unwelcome revelations.

With regards to images depicting female sexuality, we have seen how women in particular are prone to being sexualised and objectified, both for aesthetic enjoyment and as part of advertising and promotional campaigns. We have also seen how photographic images can serve as gratuitous and grotesque trophies and mementoes, in events that seem to be played out for the camera itself. However, we have also seen how photographic images can be used to pass critique, and to highlight injustices and social imbalances. Photographs of atrocities can be utilised as trophies, but they can also remind us why we find the events, and these ways of seeing, so intolerable.

There now exists a vast repository of images that make it harder to maintain this kind of moral defectiveness. Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.

Sontag, 2004, p.102.

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Signed _____

Date _____