

WHAT DOES THE MOVING IMAGE DESIRE?

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I am thinking about residues and afterlives. It is over a year since the death of Muammar Gaddafi, and this event has been superseded by so much more in Libya and by so many other violent events. Right now the news is saturated the world over with the recent rape and murder of a woman on a bus in Delhi, and the blogosphere and social media are full of the most incisive accounts and photographs of demonstrations, vigils and militant men and women up in arms, in an attempt to come to terms with the horror and outrage shared among so many.

So why talk about the images surrounding the death of an antagonist who was so contentious to begin with and whose death isn't even recent news? What I think is that the residual images of a slightly aged news story might reveal the architectonics of how moving images as news circulate and gain meaning and resonance. This follows Walter Benjamin's method of looking at the decay of the Paris Arcades as a clue to his own time. We see our present moment through images recently passed that have lost the gloss of the new.

Speaking about the death of Gaddafi confronts an event so violent and images so difficult to watch that it forces me to make a distinction between the event itself and its representation. And to cross that threshold is to tempt fate and to become complicit with the profane violence that these images record. But of course it is impossible not to cross that limit as that limit is where it all happens.

Shortly after Gaddafi's death, British journalist Jeremy Paxman interviewed filmmaker David Cronenberg on 26 October 2011, and asked him what he thought of the cell phone images that captured the moments leading up to the death of Gaddafi.

Jeremy Paxman: What did you think when you saw these images of Gaddafi?

David Cronenberg: What surprised me was that Gaddafi, who was never a favourite of mine, I was suddenly feeling quite sorry for him. I felt huge empathy, and it was quite striking to me that I felt that way. It surprised me, and I think it was because I felt at that moment he had been stripped of all context, and he was a human being who was suffering and being, you know, assaulted.

JP: Do you think that the instant availability of that sort of footage, and it is *now* instantly available (and we didn't show most of it there), it is pretty horrific. Do you think it affects us? How does it affect us?

DC: Well, as I say you can make a case for it enhancing our sense of empathy for people, you know. I mean, it's easy to say we are being desensitised because we see a lot of it, but I don't really think that is the function. You know, that's something that's been mentioned to me because my earlier films were all horror films, and people would say, "Well, do your films desensitise people?" and I think not, because I think people really understand there is a difference when you are seeing a fictional context.

JP: Absolutely. They understand the artifice involved in cinema. *That* is not artifice.

DC: It is not artifice, and it draws forth a completely different reaction, I think, from us. I remember looking up on the Internet and watching a beheading, and I wish I hadn't seen it. I mean, it was so disturbing.

JP: Why did you do it?

DC: You know, I felt I needed to confront the reality of what was going on.

JP: But you didn't need to...

DC: ...and what really disturbed me about it was the perpetrators of this beheading were incredibly self righteous. I mean, you could see they thought they were doing a wonderful, sacred, holy thing, whereas on the human level, it was absolutely hideous.

JP: But you were drawn to it.

DC: I wasn't, no, I actually had to compel myself to watch it, almost feeling that I needed to confront what was going on in the world at the time. I never watched another one.

JP: Why did you feel like you needed to confront it?

DC: Um, because you read about it, but no written description can really deliver to you the full texture of it.

JP: But you know exactly what happens just from the word 'beheading'. You know what happens when someone is beheaded.

DC: No, you don't...

JP: I suggest you do. Their head is cut off, and they're dead. It's a horrible thing to do to someone.

DC: No, no, no, but you know, when you think of the guillotine, and you think oh you've seen it in movies, and you've never seen it because there was no film at the time of the French Revolution, the guillotine comes down, *schoonk!* And the head falls off, and we've seen it... in movies. This beheading took ages, it took half an hour and it was agonising, it was not even like a slaughter house, it was much more efficient. It was a ritual...¹

When I first watched this interview, my first thought was: Why ask the director of films like *Crash* and *A History of Violence* about this? What could he possibly add to this discussion? The interview reveals the complicity of desires created in fiction and news. There is a cinematic desire of the news which shatters the expectation of reality created by film. In the interview, Cronenberg initially distinguishes between fictional violence and real violence, but later on, when he talks about the beheading he saw on the Internet, he argues that *schoonk!* our expectations of how violence plays out in the real world are created by the cinema.

But more striking in this conversation is Cronenberg's ethical compulsion to witness the beheading. What does it mean for him to be compelled to see these videos rather than be drawn to them? What makes him a special kind of witness? And what is the nature of the desire of a fiction film director for these other images? Does how we read these images through one another translate into the need of one kind of image for another?

Desire can be seen as a kind of projection of one image onto another. According to WJT Mitchell, we confer more power to images than they actually have.² Images, in his conception, function from a subaltern position that desires rather than dominates. What images desire varies, I am sure, but in this context, I would contend that they desire one another and through this create a circuitry, an economy of meaning. What links them together, the thin matter of desire, is a form of projection where fictional images covet news and vice versa, and viewers blur the distinction between both in order to create a chain of intelligible meaning of a world made uncanny through violent events.

What would an image's projection look like? Lorraine Daston describes the history of the concept of projection as a quest for a purely receptive object that would take on the imprint of the projecting subject.³ The normal course of projection is when there is a clear distinction between projecting (active) subject and receptive (passive) object. When these distinctions are blurred and the receptive object begins to spill its own projections outwards, then all hell breaks loose to a most pathological and wondrous effect – so that subject and object connect to and penetrate one another.

Images that project onto one another constitute such a reversal. Rather than simply being the repository or passive matter projected on by their viewer, their subaltern desire spans news images and fiction and wondering viewers, and from these arise a constellation of projections and monstrous affects that are all the more delineated in the violent imagery in the images of Gaddafi's death.

Lots has been said about the images and videos that have circulated on Gaddafi's death, so in a way, what is there to add? Except that these images and those subsequent images used to take stock of this event still have an uneasy afterlife. What many of the editorials in *The Guardian* and the BBC and elsewhere share is a sense that there is a 'too much' to the violence of the images, as they enter into ambivalent debates on what the ethics of showing these images are.

There is a 'too much' to the violence, this is 'pornography', this is excessive. But I want to unpack this word, *pornographic*, when it is attached to violence. I think it's too easy. What lies in this excess, what do we do with this excess, how do we narrativise this excess? Who is this excess for? Or really, who are these images for?

In a *Guardian* editorial days after, Jonathan Jones writes:

When I look at this photograph, what do I see? War. War and nothing else. How many times do we need to be told that war is hell? The phrase has lost all meaning for us. Think about what hell is. Hell, in paintings by Bosch, is chaos. It is meaningless, monstrous and lacks any place of safety or redemption. This picture of Gaddafi dead is a day in the life of hell, also known as war: a corpse photographed for souvenirs, displayed to satisfy the oppressed, in a moment of violent gratification. When NATO intervened in Libya, what we see in this picture was probably the best – not the worst – outcome on offer. And we should be grimly glad of it. What fantasy makes us long for some impossibly dignified and humane end to a bloody conflict?⁴

In bringing up and linking to Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Jones' editorial is not unique. It isn't the first that refers to Capital A Art in order to take stock of the affect of these images.



In fact, what I was struck by was how many art writers, not art historians, not *Middle East news reporters*, were jumping into this conversation and turning to the old masters and to classical myth to somehow account for what happens to us when we look at these images. So we have references to Holbein, to the Roman Emperor Elgebias, to Hogarth's images of dissection.

And this turn, I would argue, is not simply an aestheticisation of this event, or even the revealing of its immanent aesthetics, where the event itself produces its own imagery that contains an aesthetic quality that is germane to its historical and political existence.

Perhaps Jones is nearer the mark when he talks at the end about the element of fantasy in imagining a bloodless end to war. But this is the kind of fantasy that is stillborn at its very moment of conception because there is a stronger fantastical element it has to contend with – Gaddafi himself. Because what else was Gaddafi's life but the most fantastical, emblematic rise and fall? This is a fantasy in the real world, a fable come down to earth, a fairy tale told through the detritus of the Internet rather than in the pages of a storybook.

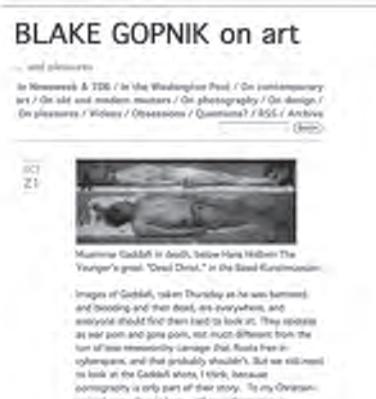
In the multiple images surrounding the capture and execution of Gaddafi, there is not one image that claims definitively to pinpoint his moment of death, and the 'secondary literature', the editorials and analyses, makes much of this *aporia*. With the loss of the moment of death, the narrative of his epic fall falters, for we don't know if what we see is a living *being*, a person, or a corpse, a dead *thing*. What we see is a stretched-out depiction of this liminal state that robs the story of its catharsis.

What we have then is a fable without a moral, that cannot delegate a subject of responsibility, a negative of a fairy tale. And this affective void becomes the progenitor of a new set of images, sublime, high art images that we culturally can hang our hats on.

But of course it is more than that. Jack Zipes describes how fairytales are placeholders for the desire for the *heimlich*, the homely, from a position of the wandering protagonist and of the reader who leaves herself and her world to follow the protagonist home.⁵ This tale, both magical and profane, leaves no breadcrumb trails, no transition from the extreme violence of the images in the news to news stories more mundane, there is no moral, no closure to the violence, no attribution of responsibility. No good guys and no bad guys and no moment of death. Which means: no moment of life.

Into this uncompleted desire for home, for the return to the known, rushes the image. Not simply in the emblematic piling on of images by Holbein and Hogarth, but the materiality

Garden of Earthly Delights, Hieronymus Bosch (selection), dated between 1480 and 1505





"Gaddafi's Condoleezza Rice Photo Album Found At Tripoli Compound", *The Huffington Post*, 25 August 2011;

"I love her very much":

Photographs found in Gaddafi lair of Condoleezza Rice, the tyrant's 'darling black African woman'", *The Daily Mail Online*, 26 August 2011;

"Is this the Yankees fan who shot Gaddafi? The 20-year-old who claims to have shot dictator during brutal melee in despot's final moments", *The Daily Mail Online*, 21 October 2011

of the images circulated take on a new life. The value of the 'poor' image, as Hito Steyerl calls it,⁶ lies in its low resolution, in its ease of circulation – a valorisation of the state of *unheimlich* that pulls away from the fairytale's and fable's desire for home and resolution and towards *new* and proliferating poor images.

This ghastly fairytale come down to earth, proliferates into new magical, transformative objects – trophy images whose radioactivity bears the weight of an excess of signification. Thus we have an itemisation of effects: Gaddafi's golden gun, Gaddafi's golden pants, the sewer where he was found (metaphor made real in an 'I told you so' way you can't even make up) increasingly covered with graffiti, Gaddafi's body lying in a state of profanation, the secret and unverified images of his burial (in an unmarked grave in the night) and the prehistory of these objects: the effects of his house ransacked before his death, the private made public, the pictures of Condoleezza Rice. And finally, the impossible-to-empathise-with Hillary Clinton, whose laughter does not dispel the mythical but rather stretches out its dream state. These proliferating objects are like fairy tale devices that the poor image offers in lieu of a moral.

I have a final question. If the images are marked by a lack of resolution, by the negation of the moment of death, then what, in fact, are these images of?



"Hillary Clinton reacts to news of Muammar Gaddafi's capture in Libya – Video", *The Guardian*, 20 October 2011

Steyerl calls such images spam: images that break the civil contract of photography.⁷ Spam creates a negative portrait of those who stay deliberately outside of the frame. This extends Deleuze's interest in how the frame calls attention to what is outside of it, to the unique life of the poor image. If *within* the frame the suspension of the threshold between life and death gives new life to these magical objects, then what happens *outside* of the frame? Or of what or of whom outside of the frame is this a negative portrait of?

In this image, we see a glimpse of the chaos of the moment, and then a grounding of the image in the golden gun that is brandished. There is an implied violence that exists beyond the



“Gaddafi dead: Chaos and a golden gun at sewer where former dictator was captured”, *The Telegraph*, 20 October 2011

explanatory title at the bottom. This is an affection image – intimate and close up – of *nothing*. Or more precisely, a close up of the notion of movement and its pixelated, choppy quality that dissolves figure into ground. This is the portrait, painted in negation, of blobs of slow moving colour which tell the story of giant pixels, images light enough to be easily uploaded and circulated. But more than that the life portrayed is in the threshold itself – the frame that shakes, that shows the contingency and thus the life of the person holding the camera that we know is a cell phone, who is running down the street and following the crowd, who is the crowd and who, we know, had a moment to stop and think about the further life of the image as he uploads it and disappears even further from the frame. ■

Notes

- 1 Transcript of Jeremy Paxman's interview with David Cronenberg, **BBC Newsnight**, 26 October 2011. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/9624643.stm> (last accessed 10 January 2013).
- 2 W.J.T. Mitchell. “What Do Pictures Really Want?” **October** 77 (Summer 1996), pp. 71-82.
- 3 Lorraine Daston. “Projection”. Presentation at Minerva Humanities Center, University of Tel Aviv, 14 January 2010.
- 4 Jonathan Jones. “The west wrings its hands over dead Gaddafi photos, but war is always hell”. In **The Guardian**, 25 October 2011. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/25/dead-gaddafi-photos-war-hell> (last accessed 10 January 2013).
- 5 Jack Zipes. “Jack Zipes – Are Fairy Tales Still Useful to Children?” **The Art of Storytelling Show**. Available at: <http://www.artofstorytellingshow.com/2008/06/29/jack-zipes-fairy-tales/> (last accessed 10 January 2013).
- 6 Hito Steyerl. “In Defense of the Poor Image”. In **e-flux** 11.
- 7 Hito Steyerl. “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation”. In **e-flux** 32.

Image Sources

- *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Hieronymus Bosch (selection).
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Garden_of_Earthly_Delights_by_Bosch_High_Resolution.jpg
- Screen captures from:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2011/nov/07/fate-worse-death-displaying-corpses>
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<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocan/libya/8840141/Gaddafi-dead-Chaos-and-a-golden-gun-at-sewer-where-former-dictator-was-captured.html>