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# On Photography. The Medium, The Scandal and The Silence

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### Résumé de l'article

Traitant un jour de la photographie, Italo Calvino la qualifia de “nouvel objet anthropologique”, De son côté, Roland Barthes en parlait comme d’un “medium bizarre”. Chose certaine, quel que soit le cas, la résistance de la photographie à nos tentatives de théorisation ne peut, elle, manquer de nous échapper. Acceptant le défi, le présent essai vise à enquêter la spécificité de la photographie en référant à trois concepts et à trois paires d’auteurs:1.a.le concept de limite présent dans les écrits de Julio Cortázar et d’Italo Calvino sur la nouvelle;1b.le concept de dématérialisation trouvé au XIXe siècle dans des essais de Charles Baudelaire et d’Oliver Wendell Holmes;1c.le concept de déplacement tel qu’il se dégage des oeuvres et des écrits de Marcel Duchamp et Man Ray.Ces concepts sont ensuite mis à contribution dans l’examen de trois photographies: un cliché croqué par un soldat américain déployé en Irak entre 2003 et 2004; La Croci di Guerra (1991) d’Oliviero Toscani pour Benetton, et Dead Troops Talk (1992) de Jeff Wall.

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# On Photography. The Medium, The Scandal and The Silence.

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Some means of communication, less *mediated* than others, address parts of the body as well as the imagination. Photography, which originates in modern Western society and is now destined to become increasingly digital, has been supplanted in the field of research on cultural consumption by comparatively more ubiquitous and dynamic mass media: namely, the cinema and television. Yet photography continually emerges in everyday life in a way that require our attention. However, it is difficult to theorize about photography, and it is not by accident that Roland Barthes came to describe it as a “*bizarre medium*” (1980). For his part, Italo Calvino has referred to photography as an “anthropologically new object” (1994: 81). We could even call it an “anomaly”.

In this essay, I accept the challenge to argue theoretically about the specificity of the photographic medium, by examining the historical practice of photography and the types of places and objects typically photographed. Moving freely along the timeline of Western history my contribution to this issue of *RS•SI* seeks to challenge what might otherwise be termed the *unstable obliquity* of photography. This essay will be divided into two parts.

In the first part, I intend to investigate the specificity of the medium (McLuhan 1964) and its semiotic impregnability, beginning with reference to three concepts and three pairs of authors:

- Ia. The concept of *limit* and the way it relates to photography and to short story writing as the latter is discussed by Julio Cortázar and Italo Calvino.
- Ib. The concept of *dematerialization*, which surfaces as early as the nineteenth-century in separate essays on photography by Charles Baudelaire and Oliver Wendell Holmes.
- Ic. The concept of *displacement*, which emerges in the complementary thought and works of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray.

In the second part, I expand on these three concepts which, I argue, are exemplified in three photographic images as well as in their individual context of production and consumption. Moreover, I argue somewhat implicitly since this would require a separate paper) that these images pertain to an ongoing debate on the profound affinity that exists between war and photography. The images are:

Ia. a photograph taken by an American soldier in Iraq between 2003 and 2004.

Iib. *Le croci di Guerra* (1991), by Oliviero Toscani for Benetton.

Iic. *Dead Troops Talk* (1992), by Jeff Wall.

I.

### I.a *Limit*

Writers Julio Cortázar and Italo Calvino have each developed a theory pertaining to an admitted “minor” literary genre, the short story, that, beginning with a concern for the concept of “limit” (boundary or frame) shows it to proceed by way of selection, exclusion, position and delimitation (...) (Cortázar 1983: 24-33; Calvino 1993: 68-69). Analogously, it might be argued that photography (much like radio) is a means of communication better discussed in terms of limit, difference, subtraction, and absence (Fiorentino, 2004). It proceeds from silence — as radio does from emptiness — and from there generates unexpected meanings. Not surprisingly, photography (like radio) has acquired a differential value in the current media landscape as it contrasts with the uproar of the audio-visual.

Julio Cortázar has explored the relation between photography and literature in similar terms. In his 1962 essay “Some Aspects of the Short Story”, he compares the genre to the photographic snapshot. His gloss begins with the concept of limit: “as for the short story, it starts from the notion of limit and, in the first place, of physical limit” (*Ibid.*: 27). However, what is initially conceived as a spatial limit (the short story’s limited number of pages) equally implies a temporal limit (for the reader, certainly). It is this idea of a limit that enables Cortázar to compare the short story with photography; whereas it is the absence of any such limitation that, in his mind, relates novel and film:

The novel and the short story may be compared, using an analogy to cinema and photography, in that a film is in principle “open-ended”, like a novel, while a good photograph presupposes a strict delimitation beforehand, imposed in part by the narrow field the camera covers and the aesthetic use the photographer makes of this limitation. (*Ibid.* 1983: 28)

Limit, portion, selection and exclusion: all are determined by the interaction between the medium and the photographer’s gaze on one hand, and what the viewer sees on the other. The very existence of off-screen space points to the basic shape and form of the photographic

image: a bordered image, a four sided enclosure. The photographic picture always entails something that stays hidden; the image always seems to be a fragment of a larger field that exists beyond its border. Photography, therefore, invariably works by “subtraction”.

I don't know whether you've heard a professional photographer talk about his art; I'm always surprised that it sounds so much as if it could be a short-story writer talking. Photographers as fine as Cartier-Bresson or Brassai define their art as an apparent paradox: that of cutting out a piece of reality, setting certain limits, but so that this piece will work as an explosion to fling open a much wider reality, like a dynamic vision that spiritually transcends the camera's field of vision. (Cortàzar: 28)

On one hand, the photographer frames (*for* us as much as *from* us) a part of reality. On the other, he shows us a part of reality that lies well beyond what the most extraordinary artists (the likes of Bresson or Brassai) can assimilate visually. For the camera records an indefinite array of “details”. Historically, the “detail”, the “visual fragment” of reality, arrives with the emergence of the nineteenth-century metropolis. In this setting, the image becomes a daily presence and the anonymous details of everyday reality that the photographic image reveal become a new and scandalous presence to the general public. Comparably, the short story writer's gaze also dares to frame reality's details: it focuses on them and causes them to expand in importance. The subject of a good short story — Cortàzar explains — is always exceptional, but this doesn't mean out of the ordinary. On the contrary, the subject can even derive from what might seem banal or trivial.

The short story therefore allows us to “see”, much like photography does. The photographer's gaze sets the viewer's eyes free to examine the details of the image: Baudelaire understood this contingency as a vital element of modernity as did Walter Benjamin, whose “micro logical” observations sought to uncover, “in the analysis of the little particular moment [,] the crystal of the total happening” (2002: 515). It is here that photography and the short story meet:

The photographer or writer has to choose and delimit an image or event that's significant, not just in and of itself, but that can also work upon the viewer or reader as a sort of opening, a fermentation, that moves one's intelligence and sensibility toward something far beyond the visual or literary anecdote the photo or story contains. (Cortàzar 1983: 28)

A photographic perspective on the world suddenly opens up and opens one's own perspective toward it.

Julio Cortàzar's conception of the writer as a sort of visual consciousness whose task consists in translating everyday reality for us, finds embodiment in his photographer's eye in the short story *Las babas del diablo* which served as the inspiration for Michelangelo Antonioni's famous film *Blow-Up* (1966). The plot centres around a photograph, which is reproduced and enlarged. As the story unfolds,

the hero's eye "moves" from being that of a photographer to become that of a spectator. Both the short story itself and the photograph around which the events revolve evoke their respective genre and medium. Each of them working to create depth through selection and exclusion rather than accumulation.

Italo Calvino was also concerned with photography, a topic he addresses in both his fiction and essay writing (*Belpoliti* 1996). In *American Lessons*, a collection of essays, he writes on the topic of *exactitude*. This theme is associated with the author's self-proclaimed preference for the short story format, which he also relates to the "idea of limits" (1993: 68). Calvino attributes a particular significance to exactitude, although it is not difficult to extend the general usage of this term to describe his own method of writing. Calvino was always fascinated by the interval that exists between a given narrative and the innumerable narrative possibilities its telling necessary leave out. When writing, he developed a technique that recalls Cortázar's conception of the short story:

I try to limit the field of what I have to say, divide it into still more limited fields, then subdivide these again, and so on and on. Then another kind of vertigo seizes me, that of the detail of the detail of the detail, and I am drawn into the infinitesimal, the infinitely small, just as I was previously lost in the infinitely vast. (*Ibid.*: 68-69)

Calvino's preoccupation with the detail and Cortázar's own literary inclinations are unusually harmonious. The obsession with detail turns into a form of giddiness, "with the result that it dissolves and reverses the extension of the infinite into the density of the infinitesimal." (Calvino 1993: 69)

In one of the first treatises on photography, published in 1844, the French daguerreotypist Marc Antoine Gaudin described how carefully the first photographic plates were scrutinized by their viewers. He also reveals what it was that the "eye" sought to observe through the new medium. Of course, the length of the pose and the need for intense light partly determined the choice of subjects: e.g. buildings, rooftops and chimney pots, usually taken from a window.

Everybody wanted to see the view from one's window; he was lucky who at the first attempt could capture the outline of the rooftop, with the sky as background. He was enraptured by chimney pots; he counted again and again the tiles of the roof and the bricks of the chimneys; he was amazed to be able to see the mortar among the chimneys: in a few words, the technique was so new that even the poorest plate gave him an indescribable joy. (*Ibid.*: 6-7. [Translation from the original French version])

The gaze stops at the edge of the roof's tiles. The eye is astonished by the texture of the mortar used to cement the bricks. The newspaper articles and handbooks of the time contain more or less similar comments: the daguerreotype image emphasised the daily detail, the

“unnoticed”, what is “off-scene”: the shape of leaves, the grain of the wood, the texture of a lace fabric, and the traces of rain on the pavement. All these details began to excite and even scandalise the eye. By its very nature, the daguerreotype produced singularities and endless forms. The analogical creation of reality excited people more than reality itself, and the image seduced the newborn spectator held spellbound by how objects appeared on the photographic plate. At first there was something so incredibly new that each photo enraptured both photographer and spectator alike, arousing hither to unknown and overpowering sensations.

### 1.b Dematerialization

As an idea, photography appears to have a very long history: it is said to originate with the impulse to freeze a person or an object at a moment in time (Bazin 1962; Batchen 1997; Debray 1992). The first actual photographs, however, can be traced back to 1839. From that moment onward photography spread like wildfire throughout the industrialized West and beyond. It became the essential platform for the development of visual communication and media. Its sheer presence relieved artists from having to reproduce reality. Soon thereafter photography grew increasingly pertinent for the arts, the sciences, literature, the economy and the consumer market. In an almost prescient manner it quickly conveyed the central concerns — the essence, even — of the century about to unfold before it.

French writer Charles Baudelaire and American physician Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. both wrote about photography — mainly about stereographs and stereoscopic viewers — almost at the same time. Baudelaire’s invective against technical reproductibility was written for the Parisian *Salon* in 1859 which, for the first time, had welcomed photography with 1295 works from all over the world. Baudelaire’s satirical critique is directed at the jumble of images one now found in the modern metropolis, and more generally at the ideology of modern society. In contrast, Holmes wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* three long articles, between 1859 and 1862, which express his great passion for the new breed of images.

Below is an excerpt from Baudelaire’s scathing indictment of the new medium:

A vengeful God has granted the wishes of this multitude; Daguerre was his messiah. And now the public says to itself: ‘Since photography gives us all the guarantees of exactitude’ (they believe that, the idiots!) Then photography and art are the same thing From that moment squalid society, like a single Narcissus, hurled itself upon the metal, to contemplate its trivial image. A form of lunacy, an extraordinary fanaticism, took hold of these new sun-worshippers. Strange abominations manifested themselves (...). It was not long before thousands of pairs of greedy eyes were glued to the peepholes of the stereoscope, as though they were the skylights of the

infinite. The love of obscenity, which is as vigorous a growth in the heart of natural man as self-love, could not let slip such a glorious opportunity for its own satisfaction. (Baudelaire 1980: 86-87)

Here, the dubious appeal of stereographic images is reflected in the society that cherishes its alliance with “the stupidity of the masses”. Photography has an invasive presence and occasions in its admirers lunacy, fanaticism, obscenity, artistic decadence and an overall “great industrial madness”. According to the French poet, photography ought instead to limit its role to that of a *humble handmaid* to the arts and sciences, to being a *secretary and record-keeper*.

Let it save crumbling ruins from oblivion, books, engravings, and manuscripts, the prey of time, all those precious things, vowed to dissolution (...). But if once it be allowed to impinge on the sphere of the intangible and the imaginary, on anything that has value solely because man adds something to it from his soul, then woe betide us! (*Ibid.*: 88)

Baudelaire recognized the secrets of the photographic image: he exhibits an incisive grasp of the ideology of modernity; he acknowledges the industrial production of imagery and diagnoses the process whereby “thousands of pairs of greedy eyes (...) [are led to] the skylights of the infinite”, all the while maintaining a critical distance towards it. His cutting remarks against photography also reveal his rejection of its audience.

Though just as keen as Baudelaire’s Oliver Wendell Holmes’ own understanding of photography situated him at the opposite end of the spectrum. Holmes Sr., as he came to be known, lived in the greater Boston area which afforded him a distinctly “new world” perspective on photography and modernity. His was the youthful metropolis whose culture was industrial. In his musings Holmes calls on literature, philosophy and myth to explain the nature of photographic technology, and to describe the substance of the processes of visual communication which preceded its invention. He conceives of photography, alongside with music, as two of modernity’s most pleasurable offerings. It inaugurates in his view an age in which the image of something can become more significant than the actual object it represents. Thus real places, things and people acquire a photographic “essence”, a sort of *photogenic* value— according to which the visible surface of the world develops an autonomous life, an eternal life (Abruzzese 1995; Ewen 1988):

Form is henceforth divorced from matter. In fact, matter as a visible is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you please. We must, perhaps, sacrifice some luxury in the loss of colour; but form and light and shade are the great things, and even colour can be added, and perhaps by and by may be got direct from Nature.

There is only one Colosseum or Pantheon; but how many millions of potential negatives have they shed, — representatives of billions of pictures —, since they were erected! Matter in large masses must always be fixed and dear; form is cheap and transportable. We have got the fruit of creation now, and need not trouble ourselves with the core. Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us. Men will hunt all curious, beautiful, grand objects, as they hunt the cattle in South America, for their skins, and leave the carcasses as of little worth. (Holmes 1980: 80-81)

The photographic image is self-sufficient, a spirit of reproduction, and representation that now haunts and affects reality. An endlessly reproducible dematerialization feeds and nourishes the new imagery. The Coliseum's *grandeur* and singularity fade away before the power of the *simulacrum*. The world frees itself from matter, from that which is "fixed and dear", and begins to thrive on form, that which is "cheap and transportable". "How these shadows last", — Holmes keeps on writing —, "and how their original fades away!" With Holmes, the power of mechanical reproduction (Benjamin 1966) is presciently evoked, as are several other key concepts, notably those from Heidegger's *Age of World's Images* (1968), Lippman's pseudo-background screen (1995), Boorstin's dissolution of reality (1961), Baudrillard's reality of *simulacra* (1981), and Virilio's *Aesthetics of Disappearance* (1989). Holmes also anticipates Sontag's analysis of photography (Sontag 1973), not to mention later theorizing the destruction of experience, the vanishing of reality, as well as the wider implications of "post-modern" representation. With Holmes a shift occurs from materiality to immateriality that marks the beginnings of an ever-evolving culture of artifice and dematerialization. After sanctioning "the divorce of form and substance", the separation between the subject and the real, the American writer looks forward with uncommon foresight to the reality of the late twentieth-century. Well before the emergence of cinema, television and the digital revolution, Holmes' account cuts deep into the nature and contemporary dematerializing function of the image; his insight cuts deep into the nature of the image and the future of synthetic imagery.

### *l.c Displacement*

Photography seizes upon that which has been discarded, and therein lies its innovation. Once matter has been separated from form, the image of things, the photographic fragment comes to the fore, modifying ordinary perception of reality; it becomes a portable everyday presence in industrial civilization. Direct knowledge of the sensible world will live its rebirth — or its death — through the cognitive experience of photography. The experience of indexicality which merges the gaze with technological *unawareness* quickly becomes the domain of the avant-garde: photography is a "readymade" (Krauss 1990; Marra 1999) and the "readymade" is photography: a conscious mental operation of dislocation and movement of body and machine, a process that reinvents everyday



life (de Certeau 1990). It is *bricolage* philosophy, in content and in form: the construction of possible worlds through materials which are ascribed unanticipated functions. By its nature, photography takes a fragment of reality out of its original setting replaces and recontextualizes it, by cropping and recomposing, framing and exposing, isolating it and moving it to a new space.

Marcel Duchamp's conceptual work finds its photographic embodiment in Man Ray's *Objects of Affection*. One's mental provocations takes form in the other's eye-machine. They behave up like positive and negative poles: the bright revelation coming out of the darkroom. With Duchamp, the *Bicycle Wheel* is removed from its frame, set on a plinth and placed in a museum: it "moves" from one frame or context to another, it undergoes a radical *displacement* (Valeriani 2004: 149-172). Dada photomontages — Heartfield for all — exemplify the *bricolage* whereby photographic fragments shift from one context to another. In this regard they recall the handicraft photo-edited postcards from the turn of the century and their own physical journey from one place to another. Pushing the parallel further we observe that various branches of the avant-garde saw a huge artistic potential in photography (Dadaists, Futurists and Surrealists all appropriated it as an object of experimentation), while others resisted to this usage aligning instead the fledgling medium with emerging forms of mass communication (such as printed magazines, for instance). Photography, then, is not unlike Duchamp's readymade objects as it moves between functionality and art, and shifts from one context (the newspaper, the magazine, the mug shot) to another (the art gallery, the museum) (Ortoleva 1983; Quintavalle 1983).

Today, photography takes on a new life as it freely circulates on the World Wide Web fulfilling its ambiguous status on the digital front (Bolter, Grusin 1999; Lister 1995; Mitchell 1992). Through this new contextualization the photographic gaze remedies itself by offering increasingly individual visual *pleasures* in an otherwise mass and interactive form of communication that is changing our older ways of seeing. The mutation photography is currently undergoing as it moves from being an analogue mechanical medium to fully becoming a digital electronic one, merging in the process with video and the Web, is more than a simple expansion of the previous era's mass industrial culture. Rather it is the expression of our post-industrial civilization's need for visibility and unrestrained individual communication. Photography now captures the mobility and permeability of life's spaces. It is mobility and permeability made manifest. The old "silent" medium has become ubiquitous moving indifferently in public and private spaces.

In Barthes' concept of the *punctum* (1980), the viewer's individual sensibility and the photographic detail come together in an attempt to account for photography's part in the emergence of personal knowledge.

The intensity with which photography can address the senses can lead to a shifting or an amplification of sensibility. For photography can move us. It can establish new relations that allow for multiple forms of knowing and feeling. It can foster new and more robust forms of communication (Gardner 1983).

II.

In the preceding section I focused on three concepts — limit, dematerialization, displacement — that are central for understanding photography. I now turn to three photographs in an attempt to flesh out these theoretical considerations. Like all photographs these images provide our gaze with a framed, limited view. In all three instances, however, the view consists of an obscene fragment of war. Furthermore, all three photos exhibit either distinct photographic technologies or modes of display, thus offering a variegated approach to the common topoi of dematerialization and displacement.

The first photo initially gained attention by circulating on the Web before moving to a new exhibition venue in the pages of a book. The second picture is an analogue photo initially printed in magazine pages and exhibited on large billboards. Finally, the third photo is a hybrid, part analogue, part digital that is exhibited in a large light-box. All three images were initially produced and consumed through different means, though they all equally belong to a common cultural history where war and photography meet (Brothers 1996; Fiorentino 2004; Sontag 2003; Taylor 1998).

### II.a *Fucked Up*

In 2006, Gianluigi Ricuperati's *Fucked Up* was published in Italy. The book's title uses an expression from American slang that stands for all that is completely rotten. The book included a collection of photos taken in Iraq and Afghanistan by American soldiers and initially made public on a Web site ([www.Nowthatsfuckedup.it](http://www.Nowthatsfuckedup.it)). Here's the story: in 2003 American entrepreneur Chris Wilson created a pornographic website with amateur images spontaneously submitted by anonymous contributors. When the United States went to war, Wilson gave soldiers on the front the opportunity of accessing his porn Web pages in exchange for photographs taken from the battlefield. After a few months, Wilson had collected about a thousand shocking war photos.

The operation went on until the American police shut down the website and issued a warrant for the arrest of Wilson.

What, then, of the images themselves? Several of them show destroyed villages, demolished buildings, overturned statues and other dismantled symbols of authority and power. Other pictures show female soldiers with machine guns between their naked legs or male and female

soldiers engaging in sexual activities. There are photos of marines aiming rifles at Iraqi and Afghan rebels and of dead insurgents whose bodies are either riddled with bullets or mangled from explosions. Nowhere has the proximity of shooting a picture and a rifle been closer, the rifle's gun sight dovetailing with the camera's viewfinder (Fiorentino 2004). (fig. 1)



Figure 1 (photos from *Fucked Up*)

Pictures become trophies or else burning wounds inflicted on the viewer's eyes. Of course, just like the viewfinder the gun sight *limits*: it chooses a detail within an otherwise continuous space. To some extent the detail is thus *dematerialized*, alienated from its context; it loses its initial function and gains an unexpected one. The same phenomena repeats itself when the images get *displaced*, moving from the digital camera's LCD to the image flow of the Internet all the way to the pages of a book.

The images printed in *Fucked Up* raise several issues. First, there is the matter of Chris Wilson's arrangement with soldiers on the front, swapping war photos against pornographic pictures. Secondly, there is the issue of the content of these images, as they show the horrors of war: destruction, dismembered corpses, etc. Such gruesome content is usually avoided or censored in the deluge of images we witness daily. Indeed, these photos suggest a third issue, namely that U.S. media refrained from showing any of them when Wilson's story broke out. This leads us to consider not just the deeprooted bonds that exist between media and power, but also that censorship — and its opposite: revelation — equally entail the concept of *limit*. Finally, there is the fact that the American government and the military were sufficiently concerned by the online circulation of these images to charge Wilson — somewhat ironically — of offending decency.

This passage from an interview with Wilson's lawyer is revealing:

There are no obvious differences between the pornographic images contained on [Wilson's] website and those contained in thousands of other sites. Moreover I should point out that my client never edited anything: the users of the site sent the photos spontaneously and they are the only makers of the site itself. The images came from all over the world. [...] Claiming, as the county of Polk does, that this material is obscene is the same as claiming that human nature is obscene. Whether [the county] likes it or not, this is the world we live in, [...] The military brass began complaining that the photos gave out information about military operations in Iraq even though they were all in conformity with the wishes of the Bush administration that the Iraqi Freedom operation not be shown. The next thing that happened is that, within a matter of months, Wilson wound up in jail. I don't know if there is a link between these matters. (Ricuperati: 27. [Translation from the Italian version])

With the Internet, displacements — from the camera's digital display to one's personal computer or even to the pages of a book — elude all forms of control.

## II.b *Croci di guerra*

The Toscani-Benetton partnership, most famously known for the "United Colors of Benetton" ad campaign of the 80s, capitalized on photography's ability to *displace* contexts and meanings. Toscani specializes in mixing up what are usually distinct discourses offering viewers, in this case, a covert usurpation of fashion photography in order to "resurrect" reality: a *reportage* on the actual world in the guise of advertising, and an interaction between the print medium (newspapers, magazines) and the oversized photographic displays of the metropolitan scene, playing with the *limits* of the still billboard, whose picture advertisements are meant to capture the attention of passing, mobile bodies. (Fiorentino 2006: 97-120).

In 1991 Toscani shot a green field with rows of white crosses (fig. 2). It is a sunny landscape, which can be said even to convey a certain peacefulness. It is in fact a war cemetery in Belgium; the crosses mark the graves of men who fell during World War I. In Italy, the image was only published in *Il Corriere della sera* and *Il Sole 24 Ore*. This was the eve of the First Gulf War and, in an unexpected way, a taboo had been broken, one deep-rooted in the advertising culture: death as the result of war, is alluded to in a space (that of billboard advertising) typically peaceful and joyful. This *displacement* caused a scandal, which was not only "visual", but also cultural. The Benetton ad was rejected in France, Great Britain and Germany. It was felt that the image needs no words: indeed newspaper articles on the heel of the scandal gave much information regarding its production context. A fragmented and dematerialized image, Toscani's photograph was able to move from one surface to another, from one geographical setting to another, from one medium to another. Playing

with the slippery nature of the photographic medium, the photographer was able to move back and forth between fashion photography and documentary photography, thus *displacing* fashion photography. The move recalls Dada's appropriation of photography while the image's graphic design recalls the Bauhaus (Abruzzese 1999: 9-12). This displacement is made possible by the overall ethical incoherence of the mass media. A famous example of such incoherence was the publication of Robert Capa's photo of a dying soldier in the pages of *Life* magazine (issue of July 12, 1937) printed opposite an ad for Vitalis hair gel (Sontag 2003: 27-28).



Figure 2 - Oliviero Toscani for Benetton's advertising campaign, *United Colors of Benetton*, 1991.

Toscani's Benetton ad is in the business of remediating itself; it moves between the global and the local, destroys the boundary that separates art photography from documentary photography and *moves* its audience by arousing emotions (another form of *displacement*). Toscani creates a mosaic that avails itself of advertising as if by mere happenstance or accident. The core of his ad campaign is to reclaim the metropolitan *affiche*'s impact since its appearance in the late nineteenth-century: high visibility, social permeability, and a shock for sight and the imagination. The oversized *Croci di guerra* hits the observing retina: it acts as an explosion, its content transcends the borders of the picture frame to open onto a much wider reality.

### II.c *Dead Troops Talk*

Canadian artist Jeff Wall has developed, between the analogue and the digital, a constant metareflection on photography (Wall 2003). His 1992 *Dead Troops Talk* (fig. 3) was shown in museums on top of a large sized backlit panel, the same kind of panel in which advertising photos are placed in the metro and other public places, offering a powerful and bright centre of attention. The print draws on war imagery — taken from cinema, but also photography, and paintings of historical

subjects — though it is related to specific event, as indicated by the subtitle: *A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, Near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986*. The entire scene suggests an hallucination: soldiers killed on the battlefield have a surreal conversation with each other. Each soldier corresponds, in a different way, to the experience of death and resuscitation, imparting to the picture a note of macabre thoughtlessness. And each bloody detail is so powerfully rendered that it can be said to crash into the spectator's eye.



Figure 3 - *Dead Troops Talk*, Jeff Wall, 1992

Wall's work is equally based on the concept of *limit*, as he discards and assembles details, much like late nineteenth-century pictorial photographers did before him. The detail of the fragments, put side by side, are then digitally synthesized in Wall's full composition. The performance as photographed took many months of work in Wall's studio, just as performances are rehearsed for a movie shoot or a large historical painting. The photographer artificially builds the scene, with costumes, professional make-up and special effects. The characters are shot individually or in small groups, and the final image is created through digital editing and photo-retouching, producing a single image where nothing is left to chance. The photo refers to other images, to the capturing of details taken from other details, in a never-ending photographic *displacement* and rearrangement, from one frame to another. The parts are then joined together again according to a form of *bricolage*: the result is an image that offers a powerful evocation of the tragedy of war, cancelling out ordinary representation.

Wall gives new life to art's past and, through history, shifts the gaze to a present that risks being forgotten. All this happens with a paradoxical, alienating realism pending between reality and fiction: photography reflects upon itself, upon its *immaterial* nature. Though the image is distinct from reality, the exactitude of the photographed details force us to acknowledge it. In fact, *Dead Troops Talk* is a profound meditation on the ambiguity or anomaly of photography. In it, hyper-realistic details

appear through the self-sufficient reality of the *simulacrum*; past and present are *displaced*; commercial modes of exhibition (the light-box) meet the serious aura of the art museum; analogue shooting combines with digital *montage*; the media uproar that accompanies war meets the silence of the art gallery; the publicly visible meets what censorship refuses to display; details are restored to monumental dimensions. In the end, the eye's enchantment for the infinitely small call for Cortázar's magic realism.

## Notes

- 1 I thank Isabella Pezzini, Jan Baetens and Ruggero Eugeni who discussed with me aspects of the text, during the meeting *Sémiotique et photographie*, Centro di Semiotica di Urbino, 13-15 July 2006.

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## Abstract

Italo Calvino once referred to photography as an "anthropologically new object", while Roland Barthes described it as a "bizarre medium". In all accounts photography can be seen to resist our attempts to theorize it. Accepting this challenge, the present essay seeks to investigate the specificity of photography with reference to three concepts and pairs of authors:

Ia. The concept of *limit* and the way it relates to photography and to short story writing as the latter is discussed by Julio Cortàzar and Italo Calvino.

Ib. The concept of *dematerialization*, which surfaces as early as the nineteenth-century in separate essays on photography by Charles Baudelaire and Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Ic. The concept of *displacement*, which emerges in the complementary thought and works of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray.

These concepts are then used to consider three photographs: a snapshot taken



by an American soldier deployed in Iraq between 2003 and 2004; *Le croci di Guerra* (1991) by Oliviero Toscani for Benetton; and *Dead Troops Talk* (1992) by Jeff Wall.

## Résumé

Traitant un jour de la photographie, Italo Calvino la qualifia de “nouvel objet anthropologique”. De son côté, Roland Barthes en parlait comme d’un “medium bizarre”. Chose certaine, quel que soit le cas, la résistance de la photographie à nos tentatives de théorisation ne peut, elle, manquer de nous échapper. Acceptant le défi, le présent essai vise à enquêter la spécificité de la photographie en référant à trois concepts et à trois paires d’auteurs:

Ia. le concept de *limite* présent dans les écrits de Julio Cortázar et d’Italo Calvino sur la nouvelle;

Ib. le concept de *dématérialisation* trouvé au XIXe siècle dans des essais de Charles Baudelaire et d’Oliver Wendell Holmes;

Ic. le concept de *déplacement* tel qu’il se dégage des oeuvres et des écrits de Marcel Duchamp et Man Ray.

Ces concepts sont ensuite mis à contribution dans l’examen de trois photographies: un cliché croqué par un soldat américain déployé en Irak entre 2003 et 2004; *La Croci di Guerra* (1991) d’Oliviero Toscani pour Benetton, et *Dead Troops Talk* (1992) de Jeff Wall.

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