

Oraib Toukan Cruel Images

01/09

(Uttering)

Cruel images selectively mute: it's not that one refuses or chooses not to speak, it's that one is left "literally unable to speak" about what is being seen.¹ In 2014, a three-year-old in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights speaks for the first time.² He explains that he was murdered with an axe, and walks his Druze family to another village to locate his body. In local Arabic dialect, this boy *nataq* (قطن / uttered); he pronounced, spoke up, articulated – he used his voice when he otherwise couldn't. And when he finally formulated enough words, they poured out a gruesome account of his reincarnation.³ In the Druze faith, *nutuq* is regarded as "speech recalled from a previous life," enunciation that survives the physical death of the body, usually from a cruel act.⁴ *Natq* in Arabic is to speak. But it also means uttering what one was unable to say. To speak, as it were, for the first time. To hear the sound of a dry, unused mouth deliver meaning, from a place of no-meaning. To decipher, sound, mouth out, break open. To say; I shout at that someone who will not break their silence: *Untuq!* (قطن! / Speak!).⁵

When a tongue is selectively muted, and a silence cannot be broken, another body will step in to inhabit that tongue and begin to speak for it. *Al-natq* is therefore an official spokesperson for another body. A voice on behalf of someone else, *al natq al rasmi bi'ism ...* (... يمسرل قطن لا / always, in the name of someone else ...).⁶ Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, the former Iraqi Minister of Information, comes to mind. He was the spokesperson for the Arab Socialist Baath Party in Iraq who, via satellite, took viewers on tours of the 2003 War on Iraq to show the "look and feel" of war from Saddam Hussein's side of the Tigris. Dubbed in Euro-American mainstream news propaganda as "Baghdad Bob" or "Comical Ali," Al-Sahhaf was often mocked there on account of a lack of eloquence. While searching for the right English words to describe the vileness of an invading army, Al-Sahhaf would often resort to the Arabic corpus instead to concoct insults, reaching for anything from the figure of an insect to some unknown phylum of animals. Al-Sahhaf had such a command of the Arabic language and its roots that his obscure concoctions would lead to etymological pauses in the evening news of the Arabic-speaking world. The most famous was his use of the word *ulāj* (جولع / the tiniest of ants, among other contested definitions) to describe the US-led coalition forces.⁷ Video stills of Al-Sahhaf with an open mouth litter an online search for him: a mouth that spoke on behalf of silence.⁸

Wars have evolved to many more frames per second in the years since the war on Iraq began

e-flux journal #96 — January 2019 Oraib Toukan
Cruel Images

02/09



Oraib Toukan, *Untitled from the series Surface Studies*, 2017. C-type print.

(and have indeed accelerated because of that war), and we continue to participate in them no matter how undecided, baffled, or distant we are towards them – and no matter who “we” are (just yet). We participate in war because we consume its cruel images, and often at a mediated distance. The Lebanese writer and translator Lina Mounzer profoundly wrote in 2015: “I have buried seven husbands, three fiancés, fifteen sons, and a two-week-old daughter ... I have watched my city, Maarrat al-Numan, burn, I have watched my city, Raqqa, burn, I have fled Aleppo ... All this I have watched from my living room in Beirut.”⁹

Importantly, in the semantics of the word *natq*, speech is found rather than formulated, and only flows out of the mouth once the words have matured.¹⁰ In effect, to speak is to mature. *Natq* shares its root with *mantiq* (قَظْنَم, the Arabic word for the logical, the reasonable, the rational). In the feminine form, *natiqa* means being endowed with reason, with the faculty of eloquent, clear, concise language. The problem is that cruel images bypass the faculty of language altogether: I feel the need to speak about what I am seeing but my mouth is simply unable to verbalize what my eyes are seeing. I cannot make words come out and give them any of the weight that the subject being watched deserves. It's not that I have nothing to say. On the contrary, cruel images have tunnelled their way deep into the meninges of my brain, even when I have abstained from watching them: Imagining a high-definition video of a thirteen-year old experiencing the sensation of “beheading” another human. Watching undergrad students during seminar break all cramped around one iPhone watching a twenty-six-year-old captured pilot being burned to death in a cage in a multi-cam film production three hundred miles away. Rendering images from words read on an LCD screen about thriving torture practices that I will forever be unable to disremember. Hundreds slouched on couches in cafés in Amman or Dubai, each buried in a mobile phone casually scrolling through GIFs of disasters in the region. Shisha pipe in mouth, fruit cocktail glass between legs. It is just that I am unable to shape my thoughts into words that can be as ornate as any of this and then breathe in enough oxygen so as to push these words out through my vocal chords into the roof of my tongue and back out to add absolutely anything meaningful about them. When words finally exit my mouth, they transfigure into swear words, sounds, and signs.¹¹ As Ibn Manzur recounts in his thirteenth-century dictionary, *nataqa* was also applied to intestinal gas “uttered” from between the legs.

I am drawn to the insertion of the first-person “I” in criticism. I am drawn to the

impenetrable root of the word “I” (أنا, *Ich*, *Eyō*), its playful and deceptive subjectivity, the fidelity of the question it seems to raise – “Surely this subjectivity cannot only be mine, or is it?”¹² – and above all the agency it can hold in its sign.¹³ This applies to several variations: whether the “I” of reflecting on the act of translation, of embodying the pain of the translated voice in Lina Mounzer’s breathtaking writing; or the fearless “I” in Wayne Koestenbaum’s corporeal musings in *Humiliation* (2011), everyday accounts of degradation that become humiliating simply, and only, by virtue of being seen; or most of all in Ossama Mohammed’s haunting voice-over mantra “*Shahadtuha*” (I have witnessed) in his 2014 polemic *Silvered Water*, a film made mostly from unapologetic low-resolution cell phone videos of the Syrian uprising and its cruel aftermath.¹⁴ Mohammad opens with a text that states, “This is a film made of 1001 images, shot by 1001 Syrian men and women,” and then cross-dissolves into two words: “and me.” A voice-over says, “*Shahadtuha*.” But who is the first-person “I” here? Who exactly is a witness in times of war? Is it Mohammad, editing and streaming “1001” wretched images of Syria from YouTube? Is it me, watching “1001” relentless clips in a black box miles away from Syria? Is it the “1001” individuals who filmed, felt, incurred, uploaded such pitiless images?¹⁵ Who is the witness to suffering when the suffering is being streamed, whether from one meter away or thousands of kilometers? And who among these viewers has the right to say: “I witnessed”?

I would often suppress the first person “I” in my own work, because I viewed it as a privileged third-person narrative of mega-events – often from the comparative safety, mundanity, and distance of my LCD screen.¹⁶ I could not come to grant my “I” the right to speak about what it had seen. Because giving voice to one’s feeling of anguish, pain, sorrow, grief, wretchedness, despair, toward images on one’s screen is futile to the subject who is experiencing it. It is also wrapped up in the problem of language in expressing pain, let alone someone else’s pain.¹⁷ But although mediated/gathered/conveyed via screens, the experience of watching is an experience, and of watching. Watching slowly, watching immediately, watching dizzily near, watching hastily, watching belatedly, far. But importantly, watching war.

In “Beware of Pity: Hannah Arendt and the Power of the Impersonal,” the American poet and critic Adam Kirsch makes sense of Arendt’s distance to the “I” by explaining that to her, the personal is vigorously apolitical. He paraphrases her: “The inner turmoil of the self, its shapelessness,” must be kept under strict quarantine: “It is no less indecent, unfit to

appear, than our digestive apparatus, or else our inner organs, which also are hidden from visibility by the skin.”¹⁸ Skin protects, covers, wraps, and buries tender interiors. Skin holds together organs that should not be seen. And yet the inner turmoil of the personal toward the political has always churned out bodies of works in art and philosophy that are often addressed in the “We” but are effectively about the “I.”¹⁹ An “I” perhaps of passing an insufficiency to a moment of potential universality. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag does not use a single “I” in the entirety of her prose. On the contrary, she is concerned (but ultimately takes for granted) the implications of using the word “We” on the act of looking at suffering. “WHO ARE THE ‘WE,’” she writes, “at whom such shock-pictures are aimed?”²⁰ “If one feels that there is nothing ‘we’ can do – but who is that ‘we’? – and nothing ‘they’ can do either – and who are ‘they’?” she asks.²¹ Who is this Sontagian “We” now, when say my news feed is either entirely different from yours, or suffocatingly similar to it?²² Who is the “We” when a Palestinian from Gaza is algorithmically more likely to see undecipherable body parts in their news feed than a Palestinian from Ramallah? And who is the “We” in the Euro-American male demographic of Reddit, or the eye-washed liberals of Instagram? Who is the “We” in the demographics of a Facebook-bought Global South?²³ And who is the “We” when content is being filtered by outsourced gatekeepers feeding us our realities?

Across her curatorial and theoretical work, Ariella Azoulay has consistently opposed this binary of a “We” the spectators against a suffering “Them.” Because crucially the binary of photographer and spectator (empathy and fatigue, aesthetics and politics, resemblance and difference) overwrites the details. It sidesteps the photographed subject altogether, entirely omitting a person in a picture making a real political claim. To Azoulay, the scandal is *in* the details, and the rest is a distraction. Because “despite their power,” she writes in her 2008 book *A Civil Contract of Photography*, “[photographs] are often both silent and silenced.”²⁴ But if tuned into, she argues, a picture has a sonic register that is, in affect, a political claim for citizenship – a relational space of politics between the photographed person, photographer, and spectator that demands a type of contract, a *civil* contract of photography.²⁵ In a way, a photograph in Azoulay’s formulation seems to “utter” in similar terms to the semantics of the word “*natq*.” As the child in a practicing Druze village reveals the possibility of a cruel death in a past life, the parents of this child will prompt, prod, and probe the details being enunciated. Crucially, Azoulay

commences her book with an auto-ethnographic “I” who, despite being raised in a “right-wing home” in 1960s–70s Israel, was trying to replace a phantom picture of the Palestinian with a picture of a real person gazing back at her with a claim for citizenship.

But how does that same picture utter *digitally*? How do the mechanics of the gaze change when users scroll, hold, tap solitary orphan images of someone being dragged on the ground somewhere, lodged between an installation shot of a friend’s exhibition somewhere else and a portrait of a friend of a friend’s imprisonment in another somewhere? The notions of proximity, distance, immersion, and transmission of the “image of suffering” have markedly shifted in the past few decades. For a start, the subject of suffering has decidedly spoken, and in more immediate ways: be it stuttered dysfunctional utterances on social media, or short desperate tactical feeds online – these firsthand accounts (traditionally called “documentary”/“popular”/“testimonies”) have spoken, and because of the camera.²⁶

(Embodying)

In Georges Méliès’s 1908 film *Long Distance Wireless Photography*, a photographer builds a camera that is able to live-transmit the photographic portrait.²⁷ But the resulting projection of the captured portrait begins to move, alter, and have a life of its own. Eventually, the camera yields more and more horrific variations of the “true” static shot of the photographed subject. The film opens with an older couple who walk into the studio and suggest that they want to be portrayed beautifully. Eager to demonstrate his invention, the photographer sets up an example for the clients by placing a print of *The Three Graces* on a chair. Once his photographic device gets running, the image of *The Three Graces* is not only transmitted and projected wirelessly onto a large framed backdrop, but the figurines also become animated. Convinced and awestruck, the man and the woman sit one at a time for their portraits. But the woman’s televisual projection breaks into a toothless grin. And the man turns into a cross-eyed animated monkey in a toupee. Although the woman can laugh heartily at the image she witnesses of herself, the man is horrified by his. Enraged, he tries to break the equipment, but instead the machine electrocutes him, stands his white hair on end, and pulls the woman’s dress off. The seven-minute film ends with the clients fleeing the studio, and the photographer and his assistants laughing hysterically. *Long Distance Wireless Photography* is perhaps one of the earliest works to comment on the curious pleasure of seeing

04/09

e-flux journal #96 — January 2019 Oraib Toukan
Cruel Images

the *image* of a distressed subject. Méliès managed to project, remarkably closely, a future in transmission, and the potential for a still image to migrate, alter, proliferate, degrade, and be degrading once captured.²⁸ He seemed to allude to the beginnings of a prolonged and paradoxical dance between the pure bliss and sheer brute that the narcissism of a lens will enable and the cruelty it will utter. In some ways, Méliès seemed to have imagined the inception of cruel images.

Cruel images represent a degraded subject, become materially degraded with time and travel, and degrade a subject further by virtue of being seen. Cruel images land into a visual field as though not by choice but apparently just by accident. I scroll down a text feed on a screen. In passing, I salute someone's politics here, and an upcoming event there. I land on a cruel image. It physically entraps me: it invades me, and then immerses me in its intimacy. It anchors me because it raises my bar of shame for even looking at such woe, and also for not having looked prior. I either look, or look away. I feel guilty because I am watching, but I am thankful, always, that it's not me in the image. I pinch my trackpad and zoom in. It's an iconoclastic file that contains the code of its own destruction – that humanity can do *this* – very much true to photography's indexical proposition of "pointing to" something: look at this, look at that, now look at this version of horror. I identify with the cruel image because I see kinship in it. This suffering being could be my daughter or son, my mother or father. But I do not see myself. My self wants to have faith that I am outside of this hell, that it is only my iris that is here to be dilated and take off from this baffling parade of anguish. I slowly mull over a cruel image because it reveals a faint image of a monster within. Sheer violence boiled down to a thin, organized layer of rows and columns. That is the point at which sense falls, my head shakes in dismay, and I close my laptop to move on to the next thing.

But the image persists, frequents me – courts me – every so often. Because it's a quintessential commodity living off the violent condition of war; a thing curiously and cautiously released to be just a little different, but not quite the same as its next of kin somewhere else online, so that it can keep reappearing. A child in mid-mourning over his deceased father has slightly altered his posture: his image is now in "landscape mode," and he is 100MB smaller. Originally, he was uploaded by a freelancer at low resolution with his body upright before being sold to the big agencies at high resolution with his body now leaning forward. The boy's woeful tragedy has turned him into an icon and the freelancer regrets that there are now so many

versions of what was supposed to be a single "decisive moment." Cruel images entirely rip an event outside of their home and time. Technically, they behave exactly like Hito Steyerl's seminal analysis of the "Poor Image," that "illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image," one that has gotten degraded, ripped, transferred, compressed, and reproduced to its last breath.²⁹ But it's that afterlife of Steyerl's poor image that puzzles me most: once the shutter of a lens is released, a potential for infinity will unfold, but only, and so long as, the image is in use. Think of the tragic, iconic image of Muhammad al-Durrah, the Palestinian child being unconditionally shielded by his father behind a barrel in the year 2000, before being shot dead.³⁰ Though it was shot on video by Talal Abu Rahmeh, Muhammad al-Durrah's picture lived on way past his death in singular form and as a sequenced triptych – as still matter used for evidence. Material effect on the transport of his image, though, begins to show some twenty years later. The image was saved from videotape to film still, and leapfrogged from internet site to site, and from commemoration to commemoration. His image creeps through Google and gets downsized from 720 x 576 dpi to 185 x 111 dpi, or blown up to 1500 x 900 dpi. As such, Muhammad and his father were recut, reshaped, and reformatted into a residue of their "former visual sel[ves],"³¹ a leftover trace that now fits the required frame of the many scavengers of his image: from pro-Zionist conspiracy theorists, to autocratic Arab regimes manufacturing him into postage stamps. Like the four boys brutally killed by the Israeli military while playing football on the beach in the war on Gaza in 2014, Durra became an icon frozen from a harrowing video still.³²

The cruel image becomes about guilt, above all, and from all its sides. The guilt of watching it, seeing it, looking at it, partaking in it, defending it, avoiding it. Like an Otto Dix post-World War I portrait at its truest, in which aristocratic anxiety shows clearly on the faces of the bourgeoisie that stand outside of the tragedy, but are very much complicit in it.³³ I am reminded of Sohrab Mohebbi's commentary on "the reluctant hero" – the one who "participates in the spectacle involuntarily, gets caught up in the event incidentally, and propels it unwillingly. S/he does not believe in the system, does not submit to it, assumes a position outside of it, beyond it."³⁴ But because of this limp, (semi-)aversion to a position, s/he is embedded in the cruel image, s/he tacitly accepts its diffusion.

The problem is that cruel images vary in intent. Traditionally cruel images would point to tragedy. But increasingly, the image is part of the tragedy, or the tragedy itself – because cruel

images have the potential to be easily co-opted. They can so perfectly render flat the possibility of political reimagination and organization precisely because they are used as proof of the outcome of the audacity to imagine. And that is the very problem, because the issue is no longer about “compassion fatigue,” “voyeurism,” or “pornography,” but that the cruel image’s very two-dimensional plane is the weapon.³⁵ Though the overwhelming impulse to expose is a reaction to centuries of invisible atrocities, tyranny and control are in turn achieved with pictures (or “pick-chas” as George Kuchar might have said).³⁶ At a conference on the work of the Syrian collective Abounaddara, the Egyptian human rights lawyer Hani Sayed claimed that in a case like Syria the moral argument against “undignified” images of the dead is that pictures are totalitarian, are perpetrators, not victims.³⁷ Pictures of death and destruction are released to inhibit the very human desire to resist. At the beginning of 2016, a production house affiliated with the Russian state strategically released crystal-clear drone footage of the shockingly bombed out city of Homs. A rather mindful caption often circulated with these images, reminding readers that Homs was the one-time “capital” of the Syrian Revolution.³⁸

As such, cruel images put at stake the “very possibility of politics”³⁹; they thrust politics into this era of annihilated politics, or at best, they entirely recalibrate what we should expect from it. But as Mohebbi has written, “A mass grave from all angles remains a mass grave.” In fact, the image ends up covering more than it reveals: “The image effaces everything that used to be and replaces history with its two-dimensional surface, blocking the access to what once was.”⁴⁰

When Elaine Scarry wrote *The Body in Pain* in 1985, she crucially reminded us that the whole idea of war is to injure: “to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects the human being recognizes as extensions of themselves.”⁴¹ However self-evidential this sounded at the time, it follows that the injuring structure of war will therefore also pierce the field of view of anyone who dares to identify with the persons being injured. Wars have accelerated and deviated in form since Scarry’s examples of Dresden and Berlin, be it through remote drone striking or the embedding of journalists, so that the process of injuring disappears from full view; or the contrary, through streaming the act of injuring online,⁴² “in full view.”⁴³ The goal has nevertheless remained true to Scarry’s analysis: to pierce the flesh of a people, their objects, their ideology, their gestures, their thoughts, and the eyes of those

who dare to identify with them. And this in turn aims to collapse the human faculty of language into swear words, screams, and signs aimed at LCD screens, so that the events of war remain inarticulate, and unarticulated.

Extraordinarily, a cruel image will ignite love nevertheless. At the very least a certain kind of love: I feel despair toward a picture of a slender masculine man in a white sleeveless vest running through rubble carrying the mass of a small figure across his arms. I know the mass of carrying a sleeping child to bed, how it falls and feels on the radius of an arm. I know exactly who this man is and I know what time of day that sky belongs to. Because I have touched his color of skin, and I have gazed into his shape of eyes. I ethnically identify with him more than any other disaster I have watched this year. I have an “Other-ache,” says Barthes in *A Lover’s Discourse*, that “sentiment of violent compassion with regard to the loved object each time [one] sees, feels, or knows the loved object is unhappy or in danger.”⁴⁴

I remember that I can know by seeing. And I really want to believe this (and I do believe this). I recall the number of mothers or fathers, friends or neighbors who have shouted at me from the bowels of images, pointing me to a crime with a hand gesture. With a bold, raised index finger, with a wide-open mouth, they have instructed me on how to look, and have directed my gaze at where to look.⁴⁵

“I shall suffer with the other, but without pressure, without losing myself.”⁴⁶ I secretly conclude that this theater of agony is here for me to rest assured that I am still alive, still permeable to the magic of being human. I secretly conclude that the cruel image is degrading. Not only because it represents a degraded subject and gets materially degraded with time and travel, but because it degrades the subject further by virtue of being so ripe, so perfect, for this theorizing. Barthes’s words rush in again and momentarily settle my mind:

Since the other suffers without me, why suffer in his place? His misery bears him far away from me, I can only exhaust myself running after him, without ever hoping to be able to catch up, to coincide with him. So let us become a little detached, let us undertake the apprenticeship of a certain distance. Let the repressed word appear which rises to the lips of every subject, once he survives another’s death: Let us live!⁴⁷

x

This text was written in October 2016 at Oxford University’s Ruskin School of Art DPhil Program, to who’s insights of

Anthony Gardner, Daria Martin, and Emilia Terracciano I highly appreciate. It benefitted from an artist fellowship at Leuphana University's Cultures-of-Critique Program, and Kaye Cain-Nielsen's invaluable questions. Further thanks to Dieter Lesage and Christian Von Berries for the opportunity to read an excerpt from it at Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) in Berlin in January 2018.

Oraib Toukan is an artist and Clarendon Scholar at the Ruskin School of Art, University of Oxford. She is author of the book *Sundry Modernism: Materials for a Study of Palestinian Modernism* (Sternberg Press, 2016), and the film *When Things Occur* (2016).

07/09

e-flux journal #96 — January 2019 Oraib Toukan
Cruel Images

1
Paraphrased from the NHS's definition of "selective mutism" <https://www.nhs.uk/condition/s/selective-mutism/>.

2
A Syrian territory occupied by Israel since 1967, and forced under full Israeli administration and jurisdiction through an internal law passed in 1981.

3
Also known as *Taqamus*.

4
Guy Lyon Playfair, *New Clothes for Old Souls* (Druze Heritage Foundation, 2006), 54.

5
In the words of the Arabic literary scholar Zeina G. Halaby via an email correspondence on the matter, and to whom I owe most gratitude for further expanding my lexical field of the word. Thank you also for the clarifications of philosopher and translator Abed Azzam, via screen shots and text messages on the word as a noun.

6
Email correspondence with Zeina G. Halaby.

7
See the *Almaany Online Dictionary* and Ibn Manzur's thirteenth-century *Lisān al-ʿArab* dictionary for examples of the many historic uses and alterations of the word.

8
Perhaps, until that silence was broken by Muntadhar al-Zaidi in 2008 when he threw his shoe at George W. Bush during a press conference in Baghdad, screaming, "This is a farewell kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog."

9
Lina Mounzer, "War in Translation: Giving Voice to The Women of Syria," *Literally Hub*, October 6, 2015 <https://lithub.com/war-in-tranlation-giving-voice-to-the-women-of-syria/>.

10
"*Almantiq al baleegh*" in the words of Ibn Manzur circa 1290 in his *Lisān al-ʿArab*: "Uttered the utterer a reasonable matured utterance."

11
As Elaine Scarry puts it in her critique of social situations related to monosyllables and the disappearance of language: "One might say that language is backing up, the way it does when one is suddenly put in pain: language not only disappears, but you can actually chart its disappearance across the sudden reaching for monosyllables or for the kinds of cries and whispers that one made before one learned language." Elaine Scarry, interview with Elizabeth Irene Smith, "The Body in Pain": An Interview with Elaine Scarry,

Literary and Cultural Studies 32, no. 2 (September 2006), 223–37.

12
The latter I realized after an intense discussion with Terra Critica – to whom I am grateful – on the polemics of the first-person "I."

13
As the writer and playwright Mustapha Benfodil said to me in response to a question posed at the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture conference hosted by HKW Berlin in October 2018: the use of the first person "I" is a right and a practice against regimes who do not want to hear our "very little voices." For a great humanist and linguistic analysis of personhood behind political claims and personification in the face of dictatorship, see Thomas Keenan's essay "Two Snapshots," his afterword to *The Human Snapshot*, eds. Thomas Keenan and Tirdad Zolghadr (Sternberg, 2015). In a way, his analysis conforms to one Arabic definition of the human as an "uttering soul" (نَفْسٌ ناطِقَةٌ / *al nafs al natiqa*), slightly different from the Aristotle's supposed notion of the human as a rational animal (نَاسٌ رَاسِيٌّ / *qattan nawi*).

14
Chad Elias, "Emergency Cinema and the Dignified Image: Cell Phone Activism and Filmmaking in Syria," *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (Fall 2017) <https://filmquarterly.org/2017/09/14/emergency-cinema-and-the-dignified-image-cell-phone-activism-and-filmmaking-in-syria/>.

15
For debates and theoretical movements sparked by this film, see the writings of Yassin al-Haj Saleh and Mohammed Ali Atasi, especially for the newspaper *Al-Jumhuriya* and the nonprofit arts organization Bidayyat.

16
Or even from the city of Amman, that along the years has come to signify the capital you flee war to, only to continue watching it from your living room.

17
Said in the words of Elaine Scarry: "To have pain is to have *certainty*, to hear about pain is to have *doubt*." And so pain's inexpressibility has political consequences. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 13. Added to this of course is the perceived incompatibility of seeing and saying; summed up best in Foucault's treatment of painting in *The Order of Things* (1970): "It is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying." Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (Routledge,

1985), 10. Thank you to Adania Shibli for reminding me of this text.

18
Adam Kirsch, "Beware of Pity: Hannah Arendt and the Power of the Impersonal," *New Yorker*, January 12, 2009 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/01/12/beware-of-pity>.

19
Even the contemporary "We" of finding a new language toward the political; the "We" of biennials, where, "everything (is) inspired by Alain Resnais's film with Chris Marker, *Statues Also Die* (1953)," as the writer and critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie once wrote. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "So You Think You Can Dance," *Artforum*, November 2015 <https://www.artforum.com/diary/id=56450>.

20
Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Picador, 2003), 7.

21
Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 101.

22
But probably a little less different if you are reading this very essay online.

23
As a journalist and hate-speech activist in the highly informative film *The Cleaners* (2018) put it: "In Rohingya the internet is the Facebook they don't have email"; what *Reuters* summed up as "Hatebook" in their equally informative article on the implicitness of Facebook in the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Steve Stecklow, "Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar," *Reuters*, August 15, 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-facebook-hate/>.

24
Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone Books, 2008), 130.

25
Importantly, the image Azoulay is speaking of is never a solitary image: "A solitary image cannot testify to what is revealed through it, but must be attached to another image, another piece of information, another assertion or description ... An image is only ever another statement in a regime of statements." Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 191.

26
For profound accounts of the way the camera enables torture see: Ossama Mohammed (2014), Openheimer (2012), Mrouheh (2012), Keenan (1997–ongoing). Beginning from the 1989 live, televised, and populist occupation of state TV in Romania, for example, in Harun Farocki's *Videograms of a*

Revolution (1992).

27
Also translated as *Electrical Photographer*, originally *La Photographie Électrique à Distance*.

28
Originally highlighted to me in Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

29
Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux journal* no. 10, November 2009 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>. The form of this section speaks to this landmark essay, in addition to Wayne Koestenbaum's *Humiliation* and Barthes's timeless *A Lover's Discourse* – as the latter puts it regarding his use of references in his book: "I am not invoking guarantees, merely recalling, by a kind of salute given in passing, what has seduced, convinced, or what has momentarily given the delight of understanding (of being understood?)" Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (Hill and Wang, 1978).

30
Mahmoud Abu Hashhash, "On the Visual Representation of Martyrdom in Palestine," *Third Text* 20, no.3–4, 391–403. See Hashhash on how this tragic photograph marked the start of the second intifada, and also a shift from Palestinian victim to hero.

31
Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image."

32
See also Julian Stallabrass, "Memory and Icons," *New Left Review* no. 105 (May–June, 2017).

33
From the anxious, somehow overly familiar faces of *Portrait of the Lawyer Dr. Hugo Simons* (1925), to *Portrait of Dr. Heinrich Stadelmann* (1920), to *Portrait of the Journalist Sylvia von Harden* (1926).

34
Sohrab Mohebbi, "Reluctant Hero," *Presence Documents*, August 6, 2012.

35
"What is currently happening is a mutation of our experiences, perceptions, values, and modes of behavior, a mutation of our being-in-the-world," writes Vilém Flusser on the flattening of the image into a two-dimensional "surface, context, scene." Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 5.

36
From the filmmaker Jeanne

08/09

e-flux journal #96 — January 2019 Oraib Toukan
Cruel Images

Liotta, who wrote this in a Bard College alumni listserv conversation we had on the difference between a picture and an image.

37

Hani Sayed via Skype during a conference panel entitled "Abounaddara: The Right to the Image," Vera List Center, 2015.

38

See Zack Beauchamp, "This shocking drone footage from Syria shows what a destroyed city looks like," VOX, February 3, 2016
<https://www.vox.com/2016/2/3/10906078/drone-syria-homs>.

39

Étienne Balibar, "Outlines of a Topography of Cruelty: Citizenship and Civility in the Era of Global Violence," in *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 115.

40

Sohrab Mohebbi, "Transformed to Tautology" *Presence Documents*, August 2, 2012.

41

Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 64.

42

Aka "Facebook Wars," however productive some of these streams and uploads can also be; for example, see the online platform Airwars, which tracks, assesses, and archives military action and civilian allegations from such uploads
<https://airwars.org/>.

43

Following Thomas Keenan's use of the phrase "in full view" from his pivotal analysis "Publicity and Indifference: Media, Surveillance, Humanitarian Intervention," in *CTRL (SPACE)*, ed. Thomas Levin et al. (MIT Press, 2002), 544–61.

44

Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 57.

45

See Ariella Azoulay on hand gestures in "Actions, Non-Actions, Interactions, and So On and So Forth," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 1 (2016): 25–28.

46

Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 58.

47

Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 58.

09/09

e-flux journal #96 — January 2019 Oraib Toukan
Cruel Images