

Image as Trace: Speculations about an Undead Paradigm

The End

*P*hotography, more than any other visual medium, has often been described as a trace, impression, or index of the real. For example, nearly thirty years ago Susan Sontag wrote that a photograph is “not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask” (“Image-World” 154).¹ Like the early-nineteenth-century pioneers of photography, Sontag rightly considers how the photographic image differs and deviates from other traditional forms of visual art in order to determine what is unique about it. Its special status seems to derive less from the photographic end product than from the process of its production: photography is “a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be” (“Image-World” 154). Authors as different as Charles Sanders Peirce, André Bazin, Roland Barthes, Rosalind Krauss, and Philipp Dubois have sought, each in his or her own way, to identify the unique material link between object and image as the essence of photography. I will return to this point later.

Those who object to such a description of the photograph as trace have argued that it is incorrect, that it is no longer correct, or that its lessons are of no importance for actual encounters with photographic images. From this perspective, emphasizing the photograph's material conditions of production seems like a suspect ontologization of an object that is in truth constructed and artificial. The apparent realism of this product, it has been argued, is not based on the inscription of a trace, but is rather the result of a series of codes, conventions, and varying ascriptions. Pierre Bourdieu notes, for instance, that "photography is a conventional system [. . .]. Photography is considered to be a perfectly realistic and objective recording of the visible world because (from its origin) it has been assigned *social uses* that are held to be 'realistic' and 'objective'" (73–74). According to this view, the physico-chemical origin of photographic images, so essential to the apologists for the trace, can be ignored. In general, it seems that the sheer materiality of images, and not only their subsequent use, is riddled with ideology. "What I am trying to stress," writes John Tagg, "is the absolute continuity of the photographs' ideological existence with their existence as material objects whose 'currency' and 'value' arise in certain [. . .] social practices and are ultimately a function of the state" (165). Alongside judgments of the paradigm of the trace in photography that affirm and dismiss it, there emerges another position: such a commitment to the trace used to be valid, but photography no longer has the power to produce such effects. According to Hans Belting, "Photography was once the *vera icon* of the modern age" (215). It was able to function as "an imprint" and "a trace of things with which it had once come into contact," but such a treatment of the trace has by now fallen into oblivion.

The referent, borne by the photographic image within itself, loses its meaning when the things by means of which we seek to appropriate the world have become meaningless. We ourselves are responsible for the loss of the referent in contemporary photographic practices. It seems we would rather dream of incorporeal worlds. (215–16)

Unlike Belting, who links this idea to an anthropology of the image, other authors view the general proliferation of digital image technologies as the cause of the decline of the trace. Indeed, the "end of photography" has been announced—and continues to be announced, sometimes with due regret—in the programmatic titles of relevant publications.² "People

pay inordinate sums for old photographic masterworks. Not because they are especially beautiful or inspired, but because they can be understood as evidence for an archaeology of photography,” Paul Virilio has recently remarked. “At the same time photography signals death, the museum and the end. [. . .] Photography is located in a liminal space [*Zwischenwelt*]. Just as it is about to go under, it seems at the same time uncertain in which way it will develop” (61).

Depending on the author’s personal style and disposition, either this unalterable decline is to be confronted directly, with calm and composure, or the fading culture of images is to be glimpsed in the gentle twilight of melancholy. Beat Wyss has formulated a noteworthy opinion regarding the “information age of the traceless, digital sign”: “[P]resently the analogical media of film and photography are the ones to drop out of image-based communicative practices. They are to be entrusted to the care of art history, which must watch carefully to ensure that their indexical character is preserved” (11). According to this view, photography conceived as a “trace of light that has an effect on a light-sensitive matrix” would be a lost art (8). The images that were created under its patronage, however, would not be gone. On the contrary, its claim to capture “traces of reality” would go on sounding in the triumphal procession of the digital, and this ancient art of the trace would be left behind for future generations to remember, as a precious fossil of media history. “Of course film and photography are reproducible images. And yet something has happened that Walter Benjamin could never even have dreamed of. Photography and film have become auratic in their claim to be a *vera icon* of the real” (11).

Before one opts for one or the other of these modes of coming to terms with the past, we should perhaps take a closer look at this decaying paradigm. For despite frequent invocations of the model of the trace in relation to the photographic image, the link between them has remained ambiguous and ambivalent.

***Triple Contact:
Footprint, Death Mask, Relic***

The remark by Susan Sontag with which this essay began already indicates that the alignment of photography and the trace, when subjected to closer examination, is often imprecise—or at any rate, in need of explanation. In the space of just a few lines, Sontag unites the photographic trace with three additional, rather different modes of image

production: first with a stencil, then a footprint, and finally a death mask. A few sentences later she adds a fourth image: the afterlife of a Christian relic. “Having a photograph of Shakespeare would be like having a nail from the True Cross” (“Image-World” 154).

These objects of comparison participate in very different techniques of transmission. Let us begin with the footprint. Rosalind Krauss has also repeatedly invoked this metaphor: photograms and photographs “look like footprints in sand, or marks that have been left in dust” (“Notes” 203). As is well known, such a trace results from direct physical contact: something was there, had its existence fixed in the form of a mark, and subsequently disappeared. What matters is this brief moment of contact and the visible evidence that it leaves behind on the impressionable ground. As Georges Didi-Huberman writes, “[T]he imprint transmits physically—and not only optically—the semblance of the ‘imprinted’ object or being” (“La ressemblance” 38). This is also the case with the production of a death mask, Sontag’s second example. Both result from a bodily impression in a material that can be formed, both resemble their model, and both are remnants or remainders. The face of the dead is left behind in the clay or plaster, just like the footprint in the sand. Unlike the footprint, the death mask is necessarily the image of someone whose time has run out—the person depicted cannot himself produce it. For a phenomenology of the trace, however, it is important to know whether it was the body “itself” that left its imprint or whether the imprint was “lifted” from it, as in the case of the death mask. Such questions regarding the authorship of images have been essential in the history of photography.

Was it made “with human hands” or did it make an image “of itself”? The fascination of the pioneers of the medium derived not least from “natural magic,” with which these matters seemed automatically linked. When William Henry Fox Talbot presented the first trials of his photographic technique to the members of the Royal Society in 1839, he also showed the gentlemen a picture of his estate, Lacock Abbey, and added: “[T]his building I believe to be the first that was ever known *to have drawn its own picture*” (“Some Account” 28). The footprint and the death mask do not, however, have this magical quality, which, incidentally, Roland Barthes famously still saw in photography.⁵ They all result from physical contact, but differ with regard to their production. Unlike the footprint, which generally comes about unintentionally, the death mask is created as a deliberate work.

And what about “a nail from the True Cross,” Sontag’s third example? The nail has touched the body, in fact it has bored right through

it, but it is not an imprint of the dead. In Christian teachings it counts as one of the secondary relics: objects that a saint owned, wore, or touched—catalysts from salvation history, whose inexhaustible effects radiate forever into the afterworld.⁴ But the nail neither resembles the dead body of Christ, nor is it a part of it. Thus in Sontag’s imaginary photograph of Shakespeare the bard would be present (or absent) in a completely different way than Christ in the physical existence of a relic. Sontag’s text thus suggests a possible interpretation—photography as trace—but follows this up with three very different embodiments of the concept of the trace. According to what special quality should the photographic image ultimately be defined? Similarity and contact—as in the case of the footprint and the death mask? Involuntary self-inscription—as in the footprint carelessly left behind? Conscious molding and fixing of a being or object that once existed—as with the death mask? Or the intangible aura of the remains—as in the case of the relic?

The same indecision is exhibited in the following examples cited by W. J. T. Mitchell and Charles Sanders Peirce. Mitchell writes: “It [a photograph] is a direct physical imprint, like a fingerprint left at the scene of a crime or lipstick traces on your collar” (24).⁵ The fingerprint is the personal signature of its creator and accordingly possesses a certain optical similarity to him. This quality, be it actual or speculative, is ultimately what underpinned the use of the fingerprint in criminology. But traces of lipstick on a shirt collar? Such stains might point to the culprit, but do they really resemble this person? Finally, Peirce writes: “A photograph, for example, not only excites an image, has an appearance, but, owing to its optical connexion with the object, is evidence that that appearance corresponds to a reality” (*Collected* 359). Peirce’s remarks on the indexical character of photography are well known. But he also takes the weathervane to be a kind of index: “Examples of Indices are the hand of a clock, and the veering of a weathercock” (“Syllabus” 274). However, the wind and its inseparable indicator atop the church tower necessarily act *simultaneously*. When the wind comes to rest, the indicator is motionless; when the wind blows, it spins intensely on its own axis. In the end, it remains unclear what sort of special quality Peirce wants to assign to the photograph through these metaphors. Clearly, he meant that photographic traces are indicators. But precisely what aspect of the photograph determines this and how exactly this structure of reference works are only further obscured by these comparisons.

In order to prevent this study from becoming pedantic or murky, I would like to call upon one concrete and particularly complex image. I

have chosen this example not because it solves the problems mentioned here, but rather because it—like every good image—magnifies them. There could be no more perfect entry point for this examination than the following event, which Rudolf Arnheim chronicled three decades ago in a text on “Being and Expression” in photography:

I recently discovered a butterfly in the foreground of Georges Seurat's large painting, An Afternoon on the Grande Jatte, which I had never noticed in any of my previous visits to the museum in Chicago. Since what was at issue here was a painting, I asked myself: "Why did the painter stick this little creature in there among the people?" Had the picture been a photograph, however, my reaction would have been: "Look at that: a butterfly happened to be sitting right there!" Certainly Seurat's painting also captures an actual historical occurrence [. . .]. Parisian day trippers really did sit under trees. But it is only a photograph that we trust as we do reality: we examine it thoroughly, are bent on making discoveries, and expand our knowledge about the objective content of the world through it. ("Fotografie" 36)

Elegy for a Fly

Around the year 1870 a fly flew around the towers and battlements of a citadel south of Cairo. During its flight, it circled the photographer Antonio Beato, the director of a photography studio and older brother of the famous Felice, and the person who had presented the European public with the first photographs of the Crimean War fifteen years earlier. Antonio had been living in Luxor since 1862 and was known for his photographs of archaeological sites, architectural monuments, and Egyptian villages. The fly, however, was nothing but a fly, a nameless insect among thousands, which flies about for a few days and then disappears forever, unnoticed and without a chance of being delivered into the afterworld. While Beato was taking this picture, however, the fly had gotten inside the camera and landed on the photosensitive glass plate coated with collodion. And thus it was photographed, together with the citadel towers, the Cairo sky, and the Mameluke graves in the foreground of the shot. The fly remains motionless in the picture. As Hubertus von Amelunxen writes, “[I]t determines the image, fixes it in time and removes it from its time. The fly is a contemporary” (“Tomorrow” 17). The fact that the

photo is dated “around 1870” also points to the historical existence of the fly. The moment that Beato fixed the image of the stone buildings, the fly also emerged from anonymity. It is the only trace of a living creature in this scene devoid of human life. The photograph shows that it existed and that it was present at this location when the shot was taken.

A casual glance at the picture might initially suggest that one is looking not at an insect from the past, but rather at a fly that is alive and present, ready to move across the paper. This real fly would linger for a time on the surface of the picture, move jerkily from one spot to another, and finally fly away, buzzing around and disappearing into the depths of the room, rendering Beato’s photo an “Egyptian Landscape without Fly.” In this respect, the iconography of the image resembles the old art historical tradition of the *trompe l’oeil*, especially those deceptively realistic flies that are familiar to us from the fifteenth century.⁶ Giorgio Vasari writes in his *Vite* that one day Giotto came before his teacher Cimabue’s painting and painted a fly on the nose of the figure in the portrait. Later, when Cimabue returned to finish his painting, he tried to shoo the fly away from the canvas.⁷ The triumph of painting is complete.

The painted fly [. . .] augments the painting’s capacity to deceive the eye in that it brings forward a detail of the image towards the spectator, making it appear as if it were coming out of the surface of the painting [. . .]. By painting an insect on the canvas or the panel, the painter gives proof of his mastery. (Arasse 80)

The painted fly thus tells not of the realism of painting, but, on the contrary, of how it facilitates illusion. The viewer is left to marvel at this “as if” quality of painting. If the deception were so perfect that no one could expose it, there would be no praising the art of painting. The *trompe l’oeil* unfolds precisely when the illusion is recognized as such: in the moment that the viewer wonders at this feat of mimetic mastery. The painted fly withdraws from the realm of the seemingly real and makes its way into the artistic, illusory world of painting.

It is by now quite clear that the fly on Beato’s photograph belongs to a mode of representation thoroughly different from painting. Even if it might have tricked the eye for a few moments, it is nonetheless not the sort of *trompe l’oeil* that I have been describing. For what sort of virtuosity, what kind of representational “as if” could become an object of awe in this context? This fly was not “made.” It happened to be present when the photograph was taken and literally inserted itself into the picture.

Its presence in the image is in this respect an example of the sort of “unmotivatedness” that Sybille Krämer has described as a feature of the trace: “Traces are not made; rather, they are (involuntarily) left behind.”

At the same time, one does not of course see an actual fly, but rather a copy that this historical insect left on the sensitive collodion film of the photographic plate “around 1870.” The fly is thus an artifact, like all the other objects in the picture. Its method of reproduction nonetheless differs from that of everything else in the picture. From a purely technical point of view, the question arises whether the image of the fly is even photographic—like all the other depicted objects are—or whether it is not, rather, a photogram. As is well known, a photogram is made not by projecting rays of light through the lens of the camera, but by bringing the image-medium and the object into direct physical contact. Photograms were the earliest historical examples of photographic images; they were made by placing a plant or a swatch of lace on a piece of photosensitive paper (or leather) and exposing it to the light of the sun, as in the work of Thomas Wedgewood, Ann Atkins, or Talbot.⁸ Similarly in the case at hand, the fly was not actually photographed, but instead rested directly on the collodion film. Its body is dense and black, since no light shone through there; its small wings appear in transparent filigree.

Accordingly, the fly is the only object on the twenty by twenty-six centimeter albumin print that is not adjusted for perspective, but instead appears in its actual size of a few millimeters.⁹ Its place in the picture is not immediately clear. In which space does it dwell? Is it *in* the picture, together with the graves, the Cairo sky, and the towers of the citadel? Presumably not. Though the insect measures but a few millimeters in size, as soon as one compares it to the towers and battlements in the middle ground of the image, what is tiny seems monstrous. To the viewer, the fly now seems to be nearly as big as the spires of the mausoleum and could easily fill up the entire area framed by a window. The fly appears together *with* the landscape, but at the same time separated from it. It seems to occupy a space *on* the image or *in front* of it; but this “in front” itself constitutes an entirely flat surface and is thoroughly unaperspectival. This also applies to the original glass negative, which has not been preserved (and of which this picture is a print)—that is, the historical unicum upon which the fly landed one nineteenth-century day. The fly was preserved there in the sticky substance of the collodion emulsion, however this time not as a shadow, copy, or trace, but as “itself.” A specimen, perhaps? Or a mummy?

Beato's photograph is a remarkable example, as far as histories of the photographic trace are concerned. The fly collided with the photographic shot. It brought something from the real world into the reproduction and transferred it to the picture in the form of a trace. A peculiar tension thus arose between the status of the fly and the reality content of the other objects in the image. As has already been noted, the photographic image is repeatedly described as a trace of reality, an index, a material reflection of the depicted objects. If, however, the towers and battlements in Beato's photograph are optical bundles of light rays from afar, what possibility remains for describing the outline of the fly, which is also produced by physical contact? The rendering of the fly and the rendering of all the other objects in the picture take part in two different techniques of representation. Judged against the optical projection of the remote landscape, the fly was by all accounts physically closer to the photographic medium. Beato's photograph is so captivating precisely because in it two techniques of registration come together in one picture.

There is also a third form of inscription to be seen—the signature of the photographer, who wrote his name in fine strokes on the photographic paper: “A. Beato.” It is an uncanny coincidence that the fly appears to be moving toward this writing. Or perhaps Beato quite consciously wrote his name next to the silhouette of the fly. In any case, it is hard to say whether the image of the fly is circumscribed by the artist's enthusiastic signature. Can the flight of an insect be authored? The fly lingers in the picture, a detail that was not “made” by the photographer and of which he was initially most likely unaware. This detail was the result of a collision in the moment that the photograph was taken. Ever since, it has served as a second, laconic signature.

The Conductibility of Truth

These considerations have further complicated the question of the trace. Should we reserve the term trace for the “contact shadow” of the former fly and refrain from using it to speak of the far more indirect registration of the citadels, the desert sand, and the Cairo sky? For when we optically project an object onto a medium, is there actual physical contact? Or must we differentiate between two kinds of trace production, two unequal degrees of immediacy?

Clearly, it is easier to assimilate the photogram of the fly than the optical projection to the paradigm of the trace. Indeed, as Christoph

Hoffmann has written, the example of the photogram, rather than the standard case of pictorial transmission through an optical system, has often served as the starting point in theories of the trace.¹⁰ For instance, Krauss has written that the photogram exhibits “the ghostly traces of departed objects.” She adds, “But the photogram only forces, or makes explicit, what is the case of *all* photography. Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface” (“Notes” 203). The photographic image rests on a “physical relation to the referent” (“Marcel” e7).

Like Krauss, most theorists of the trace have described the actual process of producing traces as something that takes place when the ray of light “touches” the photographic plate (or the celluloid). Peirce writes that the photograph has an “optical connexion with the object” (*Collected* 359). Arnheim notes that “the physical objects themselves imprint their image by means of the optical and chemical action of light” (“On the Nature” 108). And Sontag speaks of “the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects)” (“Image-World” 154). Her words are strongly reminiscent of a frequently cited passage in Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*:

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceeds radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star. (80–81)

But how exactly does this “emanation of the referent” work? There is another passage in which Barthes seems to invoke a model of touching and imprinting: in photography, he writes, “the referent adheres” (6). The motif of touching is common to all the descriptions of the photographic trace that have been mentioned here: pattern and ground come into direct contact, as do the face of the dead and the death mask, and the foot and the sand; there is also contact between the nail and the hand that it pierces, between the weathervane and the wind that blows it. Indeed, this “continuum of material” represents an essential condition of the production of traces. “What makes it possible to leave traces and to read them is the material continuity, physicality and sensuousness of the world” (Krämer). And yet, in the case of photography we must be careful to speak of continuity and touching in a rather narrow sense of the words. Or does the appearance of a ray of light qualify as direct physical contact, even perhaps as a material “extension” of the light source? Does light “touch” the object upon which it shines? Is a lit surface the “imprint” of something? Christoph Hoffmann

has problematized these metaphors from the point of view of a historian of science. What these modes of reproduction have in common is that they “imply a direct registration of the image and eliminate every linking step from our thoughts—which is to say, what is medial in photography, namely the process of transmitting and producing a picture” (356). Joel Snyder has also pointed to the presence of such a “mediator,” which has a life of its own whose status lies somewhere between object and recording:

Much of the apparent explanatory power of impression derives from what appears to be the transfer of formal properties from the impressing object to the receiving medium. Even if impression by means of physical contact does work that way, there is no comparable contact in photography. Objects are not active in the photographic process, rather it is light that effects a change in the photosensitive medium. Thus, even if “impression” is the right term to characterize the changes effected on photographic film, what impresses the film is light. (508)

Compared to such complex issues, the transmission of the object to the picture (and subsequently to the eye of the beholder) in the cited passages seems to be a surprisingly unproblematic process: the shutter is released and immediately the objects appear to rush forth as emanations of light that settle onto the photosensitive surface. Barthes is also strangely imprecise on this point (or perhaps simply uninterested in the technical side of these questions): an “emanation” takes place, “the duration of the transmission hardly matters” (80–81). But do pictures produced in this way demonstrate the “conductibility of truth” (Latour 216)? Is a photographic trace a material “part” of the object, as Sontag writes? Or is it merely an emanation of light originating from the object and thus a transmission into another medium, as Barthes—but also, again, Sontag¹¹—claims? Can we then say that the photographic trace *represents* an object? Or is the trace an extension of its *presence*? This question remains open. The authors quoted above describe the photographic image as something that involves touch and impression, but they are unable to elaborate on how they envisage the details of this process. Of course, it also remains unclear how one might answer the question of the material production of the photographic trace to any degree of satisfaction. Undoubtedly, the notation of a chemical formula that accounted for the interaction of silver salts and light would not bridge the gap between object and image: it would simply serve as a new metaphor in need of explanation.

What Photographs Are Not

It is altogether possible that we might discover what is special about photography in the very realm where we have been searching for it all along: in negation, that is, by recalling what it is *not*, *no longer*, or *not only*. “Most modern accounts of photography place special emphasis on the unique way that photographs come into being, a process essentially different from the genesis of handmade pictures” (Snyder 504). It is generally known that “modern accounts” of photography were not the first to proceed in this way; its inventors and first critics had already done so. Talbot’s descriptions of photogenic drawings repeatedly invoke precisely those arts from which photography *distinguishes* itself. He writes, for instance, in the introductory remarks to *The Pencil of Nature*,

that the places of this work have been obtained by the mere action of Light upon sensitive paper. They have been formed or depicted by optical and chemical means alone, and without the aid of any one acquainted with the art of drawing. [. . .] They are impressed by Nature’s hand. (75)

One could object that such negative definitions are characteristic for the early stages of any medium, when the goal is to determine how it is new and different from former practices. In the case of photography, however, the comparisons with drawing, graphic arts, and painting have never ceased. They have been taken up by nearly all the theorists of the trace mentioned here (indeed, some have argued that the trace is defined by the fact that it is not actually produced, but simply occurs.)¹² Krauss thus writes that “photographs stand in a different procedural relationship to their referent than paintings, drawings or other forms of representation” (“Marcel” e7). But Talbot undoubtedly reaches a false conclusion when he remarks that “it is not the artist who makes the picture, but the picture which makes ITSELF.”¹⁵ Considering that some phases of image production can indeed occur without any action on the part of the photographer, it is understandable that some would judge the entire photographic process to be automatic.¹⁴ But many critics have pointed out that such judgments are false, one-sided, and exaggerated. After all, an English country house cannot produce an image of itself;¹⁵ nor does a photograph naturally give rise to its own purpose and signification. All the same, it would be unfair to discredit this view simply because we have rejected some pointed and ultimately reductive formulations of it. Arnheim also defines photography

over and against pictures that are made manually (“Fotografie” 36) and invokes the idea of the blind spot of photo production—that which eludes the photographer’s actions:

What is uncanny about photography is that the picture materializes the moment the shutter is released, without any further involvement on the part of the photographer. Neither the hand nor the eye needs to do anything else. And since the participation of the camera seems so substantial, and that of the human being so minimal, one hesitates to call the outcome of this process “a photograph,” should this be taken to refer to something created by humans. (38)

André Bazin’s formulation is even sharper: “Although the final result may reflect something of his [the photographer’s] personality, this does not play the same role as is played by that of the painter. All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence” (13). Both of these positions represent, as Arnheim himself remarks, an “extreme case”—a photographer who acts without seeing, a mode of picture production in which the (human) actor is passive or even absent. But behind this extreme case of photography lies a more standard one, whose “charm” Talbot has described:

It frequently happens [. . .]—and this is one of the charms of photography—that the operator himself discovers on examination, perhaps long afterwards, that he has depicted many things he had no notion of at the time. Sometimes inscriptions and dates are found upon the buildings, or printed placards most irrelevant, are discovered upon their walls: sometimes a distant dial-plate is seen, and upon it—unconsciously recorded—the hour of the day at which the view was taken. (“Pencil” 94)

Indeed, photographers are only partly aware of what they are doing, and the surplus value of their pictures depends precisely on this blind spot. Something *happens* in the picture, or something *slips* into it. This action marks the point at which the photographer’s artistic intention coincides with the unexpected, the unpredictable, the chance event. In the case of Beato’s architecture shot, this structure of contingency might be seen as a shortcoming of the picture, something that disturbs or detracts from the image. And it is indeed possible that a viewer trying to contemplate the citadel of Cairo is bothered by the presence of the fly in the picture. But

there are countless situations in which the unforeseen event is perceived not as a disturbance, but the yield, the visual surplus value of photographs. This holds, for example, for numerous photographic practices in which an epistemic value is ascribed to the image. According to these uses of photography, traces are not “produced”; rather, they are brought about deliberately but in an uncontrolled way. This is the case, for instance, in the field of scientific photography, where the picture is not meant to document what could already be seen, but is instead the condition of vision; it makes visible a microbe, a radioactive substance, a galaxy, and so on.¹⁶ In the sciences, visualizations would be redundant if the scientists already knew in advance the precise nature of the images their apparatuses would generate.¹⁷

Such a definition of photography as a medium of registering vision is obviously not valid for all its manifestations and uses. Some photos leave nothing to the contingent, whereas others derive their value from effects which cannot be planned or intentionally produced. Nothing is to be gained by setting these modes against each other or trying to identify the “essence of photography” exclusively in one or the other extreme. It is equally pointless to eliminate the paradigm of the trace—no matter how ambiguous it is—from photographic theory simply because it sometimes proves irrelevant.

An essay in a recent exhibition catalog stated: “[T]he construction of visual reality in photojournalism, though claiming to reflect reality, is no less misleading than the construction of any social reality” (Michaud 312). In the context of the omnipresent digitalization of images, W. J. T. Mitchell comes to a similar conclusion: “The traditional origin narrative by which automatically captured shaded perspective images are made to seem causal things of nature rather than products of human artifice [. . .] no longer has the power to convince us. The referent has come unstuck” (31).

Now that we stand “at the end of the photographic age,” has the paradigm of the trace become useless? Have semiotics, ideology critique, and social constructivism completely displaced the idea that something real—such as a fly—can become part of a picture? What speaks against this is the fact that there are still many and diverse uses of photography today. Photography has certainly become a “medium of technical manipulability. [. . .] At the same time, something remains to be said for the automaticity of this practice that by no means does away with the well-rehearsed system

of production, distribution and reception” (Stiegler 31). The indexical value that is still currently ascribed to certain photographs becomes most clear when it gives rise to the demand *not* to show those pictures. In January 2005, the publication of a photograph in the magazine *Folio*, the monthly supplement of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, sparked a heated debate. In this edition, entitled “Bombs: The Omnipresent Threat,” the editor-in-chief addressed the magazine’s readers with the following words:

There are pictures in this publication that one would prefer not to look at. The most horrific of them shows the severed head of a young, female Palestinian suicide bomber. Would it be better to refrain from showing this picture? We discussed this question extensively. [. . .] Of course there were other images we could have chosen: [. . .] the pictures in which suicide bombers present themselves as martyrs and heroes are horrible enough. But they do not show the reality of these attacks. [. . .] They do not show what it means for a twenty-year-old woman to strap a few kilograms of explosives around her waist and blow herself up like a human bomb. The photo on page 31 shows this. (Weber 3)

The editor’s arguments are reminiscent of the view advanced by numerous war reporters: the image that shocks is the counterimage. It shows a side of the story that gets distorted by countless other pictures—namely, the dramatic self-presentation of the suicide bombers. In order to see through this disguise and catch a glimpse of the “reality of these attacks,” there is *one* particular image that must be revealed. What is more, the picture is not presented without commentary: as if to intensify its appearance, the editor stresses the *fact* that it is being shown. Moreover, the editorial makes clear that the photograph of the suicide bomber was nearly *not* shown (“We discussed the question extensively”). Indeed, this dramatic presentation leaves open the possibility of *not* looking at the picture. On the first page of the magazine, the reader learns that some pages later “the severed head of a young, female Palestinian suicide bomber” will appear. The image of the dead body is both present and hidden. It is waiting on page thirty-one. The reader can look for it there or let it lie forever unseen.¹⁸

Whereas some readers took the position of the editors (“Thanks for the truth”), others expressed their intense displeasure. Someone even set up a homepage called “The Photo on Page 31,” where readers could post their opinions. The publication of the picture was called “unnecessary,” “pointless,” “frightening,” “tasteless,” “repulsive,” “disgusting,” “revolting,”

“shameless.” “Have you actually gone crazy?” one reader asked. Several people threatened to cancel their subscriptions, others considered filing formal complaints (for “attempted psychic assault,” among other things). Still others announced that they had disposed of the magazine immediately without reading it—as if the mere existence of the photograph, concealed within the magazine’s pages, might instantaneously contaminate their entire home.

The intensity of these reactions is noteworthy. But my point is not to determine the validity of such affects and to take sides on whether or not such pictures should be shown. Rather, the question is what kind of understanding of photographic images is being expressed in such reactions. In this case the response included such acts as discarding and destroying the picture in question. Obviously the line between iconophilia and iconophobia is much finer than a simple opposition of pro and contra (that is, *for* showing the picture and *against* showing it) would seem to suggest. Those who wish to hide pictures assume they wield a kind of power. Even a ban on images rests on an “insight into the peculiar nature of the image. First it is recognized as having an *enormous power*. And only as a result does it become necessary to counteract its effects with an interdiction” (Böhm 330).

Without a doubt, the text that is most relevant to a discussion of the shock image is Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Though she never loses sight of each image’s dependence on context and writing, she nevertheless arrives at a positive evaluation of them at the end of her essay.¹⁹ “To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism,” Sontag writes (110). “Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function” (115).

In view of these words of praise, a certain fact remains that cannot help but cause irritation. Sontag writes of numerous photographs in her book and in some cases even offers extensive descriptions of their themes—but she does not *show* a single one. We can assume that this iconic abstinence is not the result of purely practical constraints, which means there must be another motive. The only image shown is one of Goya’s famous etchings from *The Disasters of War*, which appears on the dust jacket of the book. It depicts the mad power of an officer who is capable of murdering his victim and then observing him with calm cold-bloodedness. However, this image could not possibly represent what is being said in the book, simply because it is not a photographic recording, but a handmade

etching. Strangely enough, Sontag herself stresses this fact, and does so specifically with regard to the Goya cycle: “Goya’s images are a synthesis. They claim: things *like* this happened. In contrast, a single photograph or filmstrip claims to represent exactly what was before the camera’s lens. A photograph is supposed not to evoke but to show” (47).²⁰ One could formulate the matter more pointedly: the dead in photographs have names. Even if the myths surrounding these images say nothing of these names, the observer knows that these people existed. The murdered in Goya’s *Disasters of War* do not have names. Even if they had proper names, the drawing would have no way of verifying that they really existed.²¹ I am not saying that Sontag *ought* to have shown photographs. I simply find it irksome that she remains silent on this point. It seems that there remains, in the shyness with which we approach certain photographs, a residue of the old idea that some aspect of the depicted scene has gone into its photographic double. We encounter such images in the most naive way, which is quite unbelievable in view of our skilled constructivism: it is as if the picture stood in direct relation to the thing it depicts. It is remarkable how Sontag describes the images in the book *The Killing Fields*. These are photographs of Cambodian men, women, and children who were placed in front of the camera moments before their arbitrary murder.²² It is hard to remember that one is looking at no more than a series of flat, black and white paper rectangles, which are floating in a space of signifiers and succumbing to the code of realism upon which modern Western European society has settled.

When Barthes once again took up the old interpretive tradition of treating photography as an “emanation of the referent,” he was well aware of the thoroughly anachronistic appearance of this move. “It is the fashion, nowadays, among Photography’s commentators (sociologists and semiologists), to seize upon a semantic relativity: no ‘reality’ (great scorn for the ‘realists’ who do not see that the photograph is always coded), nothing but artifice” (88). A related observation could be made today. It has become common knowledge that photographs lie. A good deal of work in the fields of art history, history of science, and cultural and media studies has shown to what extent even seemingly objective technologies of image production rest on the assumption of technical, social, or ideological factors. At least insofar as the analysis of images and cultures is concerned, this insight is common sense. Practically no one committed to the reading of images will want to revert to the older view and give credence to the objectivity of the photograph. But it seems that some photographs have

survived this exposure. The suspicion that they may have been manipulated could always arise—and with good reason. But they are nonetheless exhibited and viewed with the assumption that those depicted in them used to exist. Still, no theory of photographic truth can be derived from this, though it does make the discussion of “the end of photography” somewhat more bothersome. Especially against the background of an art-historical and cultural tradition of interpretation that has developed its methods above all through the analysis of intentional, composed, and “meaningful” pictures, the question still remains: what place will the study of images concede to contingency, to the unforeseeable event, to that which is unsusceptible to being composed—that is, the trace?

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Notes

- 1 For a good overview of theories of indexicality and the trace in photography, see Dubois.
- 2 Examples are the Sept.–Oct. 2004 edition of *Kunstforum International*, subtitled “Das Ende der Fotografie”; the 2002 edited volume *Fotokritik am Ende des fotografischen Zeitalters*; and William Mitchell’s 1992 *The Reconfigured Eye*.
- 3 For Barthes, photography has the status of “a *magic*, not an art” (88).
- 4 See Dinzelbacher.
- 5 André Bazin also invokes the metaphor of the fingerprint: “The photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint” (15).
- 6 See Arasse 79–85.
- 7 See Vasari 121.
- 8 The artist Tim Otto Roth gives an excellent overview of the history of the photogram on his Web site <http://www.photogram.org/frame.html>.
- 9 See Didi-Huberman’s description of the artist Patrick Bailly-Maître-Grand’s work *Les Mouches*. Bailly-Maître-Grand places a few flies in the narrow space between two panes of glass and lays photosensitive paper underneath it; by releasing the flash, an outline of the insect is copied onto the paper: “cancelled perspective (or better, flattened out); paradoxical visuality of these animals whose silhouettes are not cast shadows but an—almost—direct contact (a *contact shadow*, if you

- will); unsettling obviousness of the natural scale; absence of any optical apparatus, of any capture through a lens" (*Phasmes* 34).
- 10 In theories of indexicality in photography, Hoffmann writes, it is "not the photographic image that represents the model for photography, but rather the photogram—that is, the type of reproduction that is made without a camera and without the intervention of a negative and positive, and that maintains the physical contact between the object and the photosensitive medium" (356).
 - 11 "But a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that subject" ("Image-World" 155).
 - 12 See Krämer.
 - 13 Talbot in a letter to the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, written January 30, published February 2, 1839 (Buckland 43).
 - 14 Though here it should be remembered that Talbot himself undermines his own numerous remarks about the "natural magic" of photography: he engages in legal trials to obtain a patent for this "magic" in his name, and at the same time offers descriptions of photography in *The Pencil of Nature* that point specifically to its possibilities of formation and manipulation [*Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten*.] For more on Talbot, see esp. Amelunxen, *Die aufgehobene Zeit*.
 - 15 See Talbot, "Some Account" (28).
 - 16 See Geimer, "Picturing the Black Box."
 - 17 Hans-Jörg Rheinberger spoke of this matter in the context of the human sciences in connection to the concept of "the unprecedented" (*das Unvorwegnehmbare*), in which every complex experiment is mired. "I prefer the notion of 'unprecedented events' to the often used notion of 'discovery.' [. . .] Unprecedented events are about things and concatenations not sought for. They come as a surprise but nevertheless do not just so happen. They are made to happen through the inner workings of the experimental machinery for making the future" (133–34).
 - 18 This method of presentation with advance warning was also criticized later by some readers, however, who complained that, not having read the editorial, they browsed the magazine innocently and came upon the photo totally unprepared.
 - 19 "Whether the photograph is understood as a naïve object or the work of an experienced artificer, its meaning—and the viewer's response—depends on how the picture is identified or misidentified; that is, on words" (29). See also pages 10 and 47 of Sontag's essay.
 - 20 Consider also Sontag's remark: "To shudder at Goltzius's rendering, in his etching *The Dragon Devouring the Companions of Cadmus* (1588), of a man's face being chewed off his head is very different from shuddering at a photograph of a First World War veteran whose face has been shot away. One horror has its place in a complex subject [. . .]. The other is a camera's record, from very near, of a real person's unspeakably awful mutilation; that and nothing else" (41–42).
 - 21 This point naturally does not assume any judgment of value. Under some circumstances, Goya's works capture the essence of war much better than a photograph. His art is nevertheless

not a register or record, nor is it regarded as such; this is what is at stake in the present context.

- 22 “A selection of these pictures in a book [*The Killing Fields*] makes it possible, decades later, to stare back at the faces staring into the

camera—therefore at us [. . .]. These Cambodian women and men of all ages, including many children, photographed from a few feet away, usually in half-figure, are [. . .] forever looking at death, forever about to be murdered” (Sontag, *Regarding* 60–61).

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