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«Not Forgotten or Passed Over at the Proper Time»: The Representation of Violent Events in Contemporary Culture[1]

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RESUMEN: Este artículo aborda la naturaleza problemática de las representaciones de hechos violentos, a través de las respuestas que ante los mismos dan un grupo de artistas visuales y de escritores contemporáneos. Para los artistas analizados, la preocupación primordial se centra en la propia responsabilidad con respecto al peligro de trivialización del objeto o evento, durante el proceso de interpretación y de fijación de significado que se produce en el acto de la representación. Las técnicas metadiscursivas que incorporan una visión crítica sobre las deficiencias del método de representación, tanto del texto visual como del texto lingüístico, se perfilan como las más eficaces en la consecución de tal objetivo, pues apuntan a la contingencia y provisionalidad de la actividad representacional. De esta manera, la evolución natural de los artistas comprometidos con la realidad de la violencia es hacia el tropo del silencio, al que se recurre por su potencial subversivo para trascender el modelo posmoderno de la «imagen-evento».

Palabras clave: violencia, política, representación cultural, artes visuales, posmodernismo, metadiscursividad, arte comprometido.

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on how the representation of violent events is tackled by a number of visual artists and contemporary writers. From their response to such events, there emerges the artists' concern with avoiding the possible trivialization of violence when fixing the significance of the object or event through the act of representation itself. Incorporating a critical approach towards their chosen method of representation, which may highlight its shortcomings as well as the contingency of the final product, constitutes a shared strategy to overcome such a danger.

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Consequently, their aesthetic stance evolves towards the trope of silence, which they regard as holding the necessary subversive potential to transcend the postmodern model of the «image-event».

Keywords: violence, politics, cultural representation, visual arts, postmodernism, meta-discourses, committed art.

> The role of images is highly ambiguous. For, at the same time as they exalt the event, they also take it hostage. They serve to multiply it to infinity and, at the same time, they are a diversion and a neutralization […] The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event. (Baudrillard, 2002: 27)

Both the media and artists alike utilise images of violence for a variety of purposes: to objectively document atrocities; to raise awareness of neglected, forgotten or unknown conflicts; to register opposition or mobilise support against the actions of a corrupt regime; to memorialise the dead. However, the effects of such images are less straightforward and far more uncertain. In her recent appraisal of the techniques, public reception and development of photojournalism in Western society, Susan Sontag (2003: 88) argues that «[as] objects of contemplation, images of the atrocious can answer to several different needs. To steel oneself against weakness. To make oneself numb. To acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible». What can result is the vicarious (if not voyeuristic) pleasure of the spectator witnessing the suffering of others. In its objectification of the victim, the image may foster passivity and induce apathy. As Marshal McLuhan (1964) once commented in *Understanding Media*, «[t]he price of eternal vigilance is indifference». Indeed, arguments still rage as to the ethics of such representation: to what extent are photographers and writers intrusive or exploitative in their desire to represent events, and to what extent is it permissible to aestheticise suffering? (Conrad, 2004). However, Jean Baudrillard's (2002: 30) essay on the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attack on the Twin Towers propounds a far more provocative thesis on the role and impact of image-making in modern culture, arguing that, due to the spectacle's «radicality» and the image's «irreducibility», interpretation is rendered problematic (if not impossible) on trying retrospectively to impose a meaning on the image. A photograph of a violent atrocity or its aftermath may provoke an emotional response, but journalistic usage of photo-documentation can, conversely, fail to grant access to interpretation and thus serves to induce a numbing indifference towards an event that cannot be comprehended.

This article looks at the strategies adopted by visual artists and writers who, tackling well-documented, controversial violent events, seek to avoid (or critically examine) conventional means of representation and the dangers of what Baudrillard terms «diversion and neutralization».

The genocidal conflict in Rwanda had already received blanket coverage in the world's media by the time the Chilean photographer Alfredo Jaar visited the refugee camps outside of Kigali and on the Zaire-Rwandan border in the autumn of 1994. Jaar (in Foerstner, 1995: 27) amassed some three thousand photographs in an attempt, as he put it, «to make art out of information most of us would rather ignore». The experience left him with a fundamental distrust of the visual image: not only did the framing, lighting, cropping and editing of the pictorial texts distort reality, for him the texts failed to interpret or provide access to the violence. Describing this failure, Jaar (1996: 57) says:

> For me, what was important was to record everything I saw around me, and to do this as methodically as possible. In these circumstances, a «good photograph» is a picture that comes as close as possible to reality. But the camera never manages to record what your eyes see, or what you feel at the moment. The camera always creates a new reality. I have always been concerned with the disjunction between experience and what can be recorded photographically. In the case of Rwanda, the disjunction was enormous and the tragedy unrepresentable. This is why it was so important for me to speak with people, to record their words, their ideas, their feelings. I discovered that the truth of the tragedy was in the feelings, words, ideas of those people, and not in the pictures.

What resulted was an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, ironically entitled *Real Pictures* (1995). Jaar selected sixty of his photographic images and placed each separately in black linen boxes, on top of which he had silk-screened in white a description of the image inside. The boxes were then arranged into stacks of various shapes and sizes, each reminiscent of a funerary monument (Jaar, 1999: 25-26). Referring to a photograph taken at Ntarama Church, situated forty kilometres south of Kigali, where four hundred Tutsis were slaughtered, the text on one box reads:

> Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, is standing in front of the church. Dressed in modest, worn clothing, her hair is hidden in a faded pink cotton kerchief. She was attending mass in the church when the massacre began. Killed with machetes in front of her eyes were her husband Tito Kahinamura (40), and her two sons Muhoza (10) and Matirigari (7). Somehow, she managed to escape with her daughter Marie-Louise Unumararaunga (12), and hid in a swamp for 3 weeks, only coming out at night for food. When she speaks about her lost family, she gestures to corpses on the ground, rotting in the African sun. (Jaar, 1998: n.pag.)

The linguistic text provides a situating narrative, at once descriptive, contextual and documentary. It is, in part, a selective chronicle of events prior to the taking of the photograph, outlining details and gestures which the camera cannot but fail to capture. While one could argue that the intentional occlusion of photographic imagery and the consequent prioritising of the linguistic text guards against a scopic regime that either aestheticises violence or distorts the real, Jaar seems, rather, to react against media-saturation and the passive consumption of imagery, seeking «to re-engage the viewer, to employ the imagination as an active ingredient» (Balken, 1999: 25). As David Levi Strauss (2003: 93) argues, «[o]ne wanders among these dark monuments as if through a graveyard, reading epitaphs. But in this case, the inscriptions are in memory of *images*, and of the power that images once had on us».

However, despite the obvious care with which Jaar constructs his narratives, their selective nature indicates the flaw in his thinking: any representation of the Rwandan conflict will necessarily fail to provide the viewer with access to the «real». As Hayden White (1996: 22) argues regarding «the modernist event»,

> any attempt to provide an objective account of the event, either by breaking it up into a mass of its details or by setting it within its context, must conjure with two circumstances: one is that the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite; and the other is that the «context» of any singular event is infinitely extensive or at least is not objectively determinable.

In part, this points to the false premise upon which Baudrillard bases his critique of the «image-event»: although he correctly distinguishes between event and «image-event», the latter is never unmediated; rather than «offering» images for our consumption, the event is presented and framed by situated critics working from a particular agenda and within a specific socio-political context. However, this does not mean that Jaar's art is one of failure. His inner compulsion to scrutinise, judge and lay bare the aftermath of a violence which has a long and seemingly unknowable history leads him time and again to attempt the act of representation.

In a later exhibition, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996), Jaar returns to his subject; on this occasion, however, there is no total concession of authority to the linguistic medium. Along a darkened corridor he inscribes a fifteen-foot long single line of text that provides an account of the Rwandan conflict, specifically focusing on what happened at the church in Ntarama. This narrative leads the viewer onwards, framing the exhibit in the conjoining room where, on top of a light table, a million photographic slides are placed. Each slide depicts the same image: the eyes of Gutete Emerita. Slide magnifiers are placed at intervals along the light table so that viewers can gaze upon the slides more closely. The

contextual information prompts the spectator to see the eyes as those of a victim; yet the unswerving gaze demands reciprocity. Commenting on the image's effect, Debra Bricker Balken (1999: 39) argues that «[t]he close contact established with the eyes of a witness to a phenomenal crime is meant to mark or imprint our minds with an unforgettable image». This is the artist's intention: while he himself cannot provide an interpretation either for the violence or for the western world's reaction, his art can attempt to re-open the debate surrounding a genocidal conflict we would rather forget.

The fact that Jaar produces a million slides of the same image may suggest that it functions as a metaphor for the thousands that perished in the full glare of the world's media, yet the repeated act also intimates the repetition compulsion of someone suffering from latent trauma. This is Freud's «speaking wound», indicative of a trauma that has not been fully assimilated; it is «the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality that is not otherwise available» (Caruth, 1996: 4). It is an open wound for Emerita, Jaar and for all those who participate in the exhibition.

Perhaps the best example of an artwork that both critiques the supposed objectivity of photojournalism and self-reflexively foregrounds the limitations of the artist's own medium is Gerhard Richter's *October 18, 1977*, an exhibition of fifteen oil paintings centring on the deaths of four members of the so-called Baader-Meinhof group. The events upon which the work is based are shrouded in mystery and political intrigue: did Andreas Baader, Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe each commit suicide, or were they murdered? Of the death of Andreas Baader, for example, the official explanation states that he committed suicide using a gun hidden in the record player in his cell. The account runs as follows:

> After the making of the suicide pact, he took the pistol out of the record player, and while standing – so as to simulate a fight – he fired two shots, one into his mattress, the other into the cell wall beside the window.
> Then he picked up the empty cartridges ejected from the pistol and put them beside him. He reloaded the pistol, crouched down on the floor of the cell, and put the barrel of the gun to the nape of his neck. He held the handle with one hand, the barrel with the other, and pressed the trigger with his thumb. The bullet entered his head at the nape of the neck, and came out through his forehead, just above the hairline. (Aust, 1987: 537)

However, that is but one narrative, and, by no means, the most rational or acceptable. Due to the unorthodox nature both of his incarceration and trial,[2] and

2. The counter-intelligence services installed microphones in Stammheim prison; a new law was passed to allow a trial to continue in the absence of the defendants; the judge, Dr Prinzing, was removed from his position due to illegal actions prejudicial to the trial (Aust, 1987: 299-303, 330-334, 384-387).

because of unexplained anomalies regarding the entire criminal investigation into his death,[3] many commentators have refused to rule out the possibility of foul play. Regarding the night of 17 October 1977, Stefan Aust (1987: 536), in his authoritative account of the Baader-Meinhof Group, concludes that «[e]xactly what happened in the high security section between 11.00 pm and 7.41 am, a period of just under nine hours, will probably never be known; it remains matter for conjecture, speculation and myths».

As such, questions arise as to Richter's artwork contribution to this myth-making: whether his is a politically-motivated artistic intervention, and whether the paintings' depiction of the corpses is rendered sensationalist. Describing his paintings, Richter (1995: 175) states:

> All the pictures are dull, grey, mostly very blurred, diffuse. Their presence is the horror of the hard-to-bear refusal to answer, to explain, to give an opinion. I am not so sure whether the pictures ask anything: they provoke contradictions through their hopelessness and desolation; their lack of partisanship.

Such an admission of «hopelessness» and of a lack of «partisanship» has led critics to decry the pessimistic aesthetic that the paintings supposedly embody. Stefan Germer (1989: 7) writes:

> These paintings reveal that painting is dead, incapable of transfiguring events, of giving them sense. […] They state pictorially that any attempt at the constituting of meaning via aesthetic means would be not only anachronistic but cynical […] If nothing can be altered, because all representation must necessarily end up asserting the inadequacy of the medium, what is the point of these paintings?

To answer that question, one only has to look at the paintings and assess the differences between them and the archival photographs upon which they are based. For example, the photographic model for the suite of paintings entitled *Dead 1, Dead 2*, and *Dead 3* is that of Ulrike Meinhof lying dead on the cell floor with the wound on her neck visible to the viewer's gaze, a forensic shot that was published in *Stern* (and other magazines) alongside articles which purportedly told her story (and how she came to commit suicide). While the three paintings superficially imitate the photograph's framing, lighting, and composition, they present the viewer with a subject that cannot be known: dragging his brushes across the still-wet canvas, Richter diffuses the image, making details decidedly unclear. It appears as if Meinhof becomes less knowable as the

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3. Inconsistencies in the forensic evidence noted by Dr Roland Hoffmann, scientific advisor to the Federal Criminal Investigation Office, were suppressed, as was the report by the Criminal Office (Aust, 1987: 546-548).

viewer's gaze travels between each canvas, the image dissolving and progressively getting smaller.

In his short story entitled «Looking at Meinhof», Don DeLillo (2002: 27, 28, 29) captures the effect perfectly when he stages an encounter between two strangers in a gallery looking upon Richter's paintings. The female character stares at the three images of Meinhof and muses:

> The woman's reality, the head, the neck, the rope burn, the hair, the facial features, were painted, picture to picture, in nuances of obscurity and pall, a detail clearer here than there, the slurred mouth in one painting appearing nearly natural elsewhere, all of it unsystematic.

The man states bluntly that «[t]hey were terrorists» and that «[t]hey committed suicide» and has difficulty understanding the paintings. The woman is more intuitive, unwilling to dismiss the subjects as having «no meaning», and says: «What they did had meaning. It was wrong but it wasn't blind and empty. I think the painter's searching for this. And how did it end the way it did? I think he's asking this».

It is no accident that Richter uses a predominantly grey palette here: this symbolically liminal shade – neither black nor white – is indicative of an artist seeking to negotiate between the polarized opinions regarding her death. Richter does not abdicate his artistic responsibility by refusing to offer a resolution to the contradictions thrown up by the events depicted. Since the impact of each painting is dependent on its historical context, he provides this through the inclusion of articles and photo-albums centring on the Baader-Meinhof group. The paintings themselves are not to be viewed as documents in the same way as the archival material: they are *not* photographs. While the paintings may take on some of the qualities of photography – here we have, in Barthes' (2000: 9) terms, «the return of the dead», the referent being both «spectre» and «spectacle» – nevertheless the *eidos* of the painting is not death. Distinguishing between painting and photography, Robert Storr (2000: 103-104), the curator of the exhibition on its purchase by the Museum of Modern Art (New York), argues that

> [p]ainting, which takes time to make – time indelibly marked in its skin – restores duration to images of death. *October 18, 1977* introduces an existential contradiction between painting's slowness and photography's speed, between the viewer's condition, which allows one to spend time, and that of the subject for whom time has ceased to exist.

The artwork's sole political intervention lies in giving the viewer pause for thought, inviting him/her to review and re-engage with the events, like the unnamed woman in DeLillo's short story had done.

The contemporary artist tends to eschew definitive statements; he/she foregrounds multiple, often conflicting perspectives, and demonstrates how individual responses are conditioned by socio-political discursive formations. For example, artists choosing to depict the Northern Irish Troubles have to contend with the simplifications resulting from forty years of media coverage, namely journalistic shorthand and a proliferation of clichés about the violence. Rita Donagh, a Staffordshire-born artist, responded to ways in which the *The Sunday Times* reported and photographed the Talbot Street bombing on 19 May 1974. One work from this series, *Aftermath*, includes a newspaper photograph of people milling about a corpse which has been covered up and shielded from the public gaze. Below this she has drawn an extension of this scene, enlarging (and thus foregrounding) the image of the hidden body. What conceals the person's identity in her drawing are newspaper pages, (a motif also included in *Newspaper Vendor*, *Evening Newspapers* and *Talbot Street, 1974*), the text of which is comprised of meaningless phrases used to indicate the shape of the story waiting to be written. In the catalogue for Donagh's retrospective, Sarat Maharaj (1995: 15) convincingly argues that the Talbot Street series shows «[h]ow issues are "covered by" the media, the notion of "news coverage", is set off against the idea that personal facts, painful moments of loss, grieving and shattering of individual lives, tend to get covered up in the interests of a larger story which has to be told […]». It is important to note, however, that Donagh's work self-reflexively calls attention to the failure of representation in her own work. The artwork draws the viewer in, inviting an engagement with the scene's anonymity, to fill in the missing narrative. If, as David Morrison (1993: 125) suggests, «[v]iolence […] draws its meaning only from the totality of the situation within which it occurs and from the meanings that people give to the act within the known structures of its occurrence», then the viewer will necessarily fail in his attempt to fully understand the violence being represented.

For some writers, even to refer to a controversial violent event requires an art that is self-reflexively alive to the difficulties inherent in such an act. In the first of «Three Baroque Meditations», the English poet Geoffrey Hill (1985: 89) asks: «Do words make up the majesty/ Of man, and his justice/ Between the stones and the void?». This is the writer as a self-torturing, morally compromised individual, all too aware of the involved intersection of ethics and aesthetics, a theme to which Hill returns obsessively. In «History as Poetry» (1985: 84), an *ars poetica* that prefigures his later call for contemporary poetry to engage in «a memorializing, a memorizing of the dead» (Hill, 1999: 254), the opening two lines conjoin different perspectives and moral judgments: «Poetry as salutation; taste/ Of Pentecost's ashen feast». The reader's attention is drawn to the dual concern of the first line's final word, its ambiguity heightened by the strategically placed enjambment: «taste» refers to refinement and poetic sensibility, as well

as to a more sensual, earthy activity. The expression «Pentecost's ashen feast» incorporates a further ambiguity: while the poet receives the gift of tongues to spread the word, what results is purely sterile; the image of Pentecostal fire inextricably links creative inspiration with an all-consuming destructive force. Michael Leddy (1986: 34), referring to the «ash» from King Offa's «noon cigar» in *Mercian Hymns* (1971), states that «Hill is keenly aware that we speak as historical persons: our words existed before we did and have acquired (and continue to acquire) connotations over which we do not have control: "ash" is not the same word it was before Auschwitz and Hiroshima».

What are «the tongue's atrocities» to which the poem refers? In *The Force of Poetry*, Christopher Ricks (1984: 285) argues that «atrocity may get flattened down into the causally "atrocious", or it may get fattened up into that debased form of imagination which is prurience». While the tongue may speak of atrocities, it can also speak atrociously. A poet of Hill's stature guards against the tongue's atrocities (improper clichés, unintentional ambiguities, the unwarranted glamour of grammar)[4] through what Stephen James terms an «ethical gravity, painstaking probity, and intensely registered moral scruple». However, as James (2003: 33) concedes, Hill's writing consistently registers «how any poetic claim to high seriousness is confounded by the intransigent nature of language and the inherent duplicities of metaphor». What can result is the poet's taciturnity, a strict governance of the tongue. In a recent paper entitled «Language, Suffering, and Silence», Hill (1999) examines different aspects of this silence: it does not simply connote poetic impotence, disabling inarticulacy, or «dumb insolence», but can be a «powerful form of resistance», a «forensic equivocation – a position that is neither assent nor refusal of assent», and a stoic refusal to write to meet an extrinsically enforced agenda.

Such forensic equivocation comes to the fore in «September Song», Hill's (1985: 67) elegy for a nameless victim of the Holocaust. Regarding the concentration camps, Hill (1980: 213) states in an interview with Blake Morrison that «The burden which the writer's conscience must bear is that the horror might become that hideously outrageous thing, a cliché. This is the nightmare, the really blasphemous thing: that those camps could become a mere "subject"». This assessment of the difficulties facing the artist approaching the Holocaust as a subject is echoed by numerous cultural critics and Holocaust survivors: Elie Wiesel (1978: 197) has said that «Holocaust literature» is a «contradiction in terms»; George Steiner (1966: 123) has claimed that «the world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason»; and Theodor Adorno (2003 [1967]: 162) notoriously argued that «[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric». For

4. Hill (1996: x) has argued that «[i]t is the precise detail of word or rhythm, which carries the ethical burden; it is technique, rightly understood, which provides the true point of departure for inspiration».

the latter, art «transfigured and stripped» the Holocaust «of some of its horror and with this, injustice is already done to the victims» (Ezrahi, 1980: 53).

In Hill's poem, we witness the poet's own struggle to express the horror of the event in language. Indeed, the text's starkly factual epigraph («*born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42*») belies its own declarative intent: firstly, as Ricks (1984: 302) rightly argues, one cannot, «without a terrible dehumanized bureaucratic numerateness, say "19.6.32" or "24.9.42"»; secondly, the author's use of an orthographic sign - the hyphen - as a disjunctive link summarily reduces the person's life-experience to two bureaucratically registered temporal nodes, unable or refusing or disinclined either to bear witness or give voice to the victim's humanity. However, hyphenation has «a double sense of articulation», «joining what it separates» as well as «separating what it joins» (Kamuf, 2001: 316). As a line of union, therefore, the hyphen may well intimate a preordained, causal link between the person's birth (into the Jewish faith) and her eventual deportation. The line may take the form of a memorialising epitaph, yet by cleverly swapping «deported» for the more usual «departed», Hill implies that this is no natural departure, but a murderous deportation. The italicised statement foreshadows a brutally curtailed and insufficiently detailed obituary memoir, one that mimics the insidious efficiency and inscrutability of the Nazis' dehumanising discourse.

> Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
> you were not. Not forgotten
> or passed over at the proper time.
>
> («September Song»: 67)

The conjunction of racial and sexual overtones in both «undesirable» and «untouchable» is typical of the author's dense linguistic intricacy (if not ambivalence) (Silkin, 1985: 120-121): the victim is both politically and sexually «undesirable» because she is Jewish, but also because she is too young. The word «untouchable» similarly exploits this duality of sex and caste, yet the negative construction intimates that (physical or sexual) abuse has not been precluded. Hill's use of the word «proper», as Jon Silkin (1985: 121) suggests, «brings together the idea of bureaucratically correct "as calculated" by the logistics of the "final solution" and by the particular camp's timetable», and «contrasts the idea of the mathematically "correct" with the morally intolerable». The girl is not «passed over» in that she is marked out by selection for death, the pun on «Passover» reminding the reader of a previous genocide (Glynn, 1987: 239). One could contend that Hill is here complicit with the oppressors' dehumanising ethic, due to the fact that the victim remains nameless and because of the uncertainty of the lines' tone. One could even go so far as to say that, in the second statement, Hill pronounces a death sentence (he eliminates its subject). The dryly objective, laconic tone, the dispassionate register and the morally ambiguous puns may

well be repugnant, yet they are intentionally so. In such a way, poetic form enacts the thematics of the text. Refuting the infelicitous distinction between theme and content, Hill (1981: 87) tells John Haffenden that:

> I would find it hard to disagree with the proposal that form is not only a technical containment, but is possibly also an emotional and ethical containment. In the act of refining technique one is not only refining emotion, one is also constantly defining and redefining one's ethical and moral sensibility. One is constantly confronting and assessing the various kinds of moral and immoral pressures of the world, but all these things happen simultaneously in the act of self-critical decision.

Hill's use of language deliberately enacts a denial of agency and responsibility. To convey the reality of the Holocaust as «a systematized, mechanized, and socially organized program» (Ezrahi, 1980: 1), Hill has his speaker adopt what Hannah Arendt (1963: 63) has termed the SS «objective attitude» whereby violence is both understood and described in terms of economy and administration. The text foregrounds the ways in which the Nazi's coded language rule (*Sprachregelung*) initiated a «displacement at the levels of both concept and practice of language as a form of disclosure and expression» (Lang, 1990: 84). In the second stanza of «September Song», for example, we are told that «As estimated, you died»; yet we are not told by whom or why such an estimation occurs. No one is seemingly accountable for the death: «Things marched,/sufficient to that end», the depersonalised subject referring both to the victims shorn of all identity going towards their doom, and to the unspecified forces that govern their fate. When the speaker refers to «Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented/ terror, so many routine cries», the reader is tempted to fill in the omitted (yet implied) repetition of «just» before «so many cries», where, as Ricks (1984: 298) infers, «"just" is both the casually murderous "Merely" and the meticulously murderous "Precisely"». Conjoining mathematical exactitude with moral rectitude, the pun forces the poet to change tack. Just as Primo Levi (2003: 22-51) discovered that morality inhabits a «grey zone» within the concentration camps, and just as Elie Wiesel (1981: 77-79) was confronted with the dissolution of ethical boundaries when faced with the unimaginable atrocities of the Nazis, so too does the poem's speaker come to realise that humanity ceases to function as a concept in a world where the death cries are heard as «just so many routine cries» (Milne, 1998: 84-85). It is for this reason that he seemingly admits the ineffectual nature of his elegy for the young girl:

> (I have made
> an elegy for myself it
> is true)
>
> («September Song»: 67)

The second line's awkward enjambment and lack of punctuation slows the reading process. As a parenthetical remark, disrupting the traditional octet-sestet sonnet structure, it is both central and marginal to the text's concerns (the very ambiguity of its position rendering provisional any reading of the poem). What follows at once situates the speaker at a remove from the camp victim (hence undermining his right to speak on her behalf), yet also links him to her through the image of the fire:

> September fattens on vines. Roses
> flake from the wall. The smoke
> of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.
>
> («September Song»: 67)

The «fires» may be «harmless» to Hill, yet they were not so to the nameless girl; and the admission that the smoke obscures his vision self-reflexively points to the severe limitations of his perspective. The concluding line – «This is plenty. This is more than enough» – seems paradoxical: it suggests that the text is sufficient for his purposes, yet also somehow excessive. The conclusion both affirms and questions Hill's (1999: 254) own contention that «the achieved work of art is its own sufficient act of witness».

The seemingly overwhelming problem confronting those who write about what is now termed «ethnic cleansing» is how to bear witness to the unimaginable violence. Discussing Zabel Essayan's memoir, *Among the Ruins* (1911), a chilling account that chronicles the aftermath of the 1909 pogroms in Armenia, Marc Nichanian (2003: 101) explores the instances whereby Essayan foregrounds her inability to delimit, describe or rationalise what she saw: «she recounts how at each moment she is submerged, engulfed by the horrifying misery of the stricken». Essayan, for Nichanian (2003: 114), becomes the modern Antigone, experiencing «the interdiction of mourning» due to a number of factors: firstly, what she sees are the results of «a violence without any assignable meaning»; secondly, «the will to extermination» (Nichanian, 2003: 115) cannot be conceptualised or «integrated into any psychological, rational, or psychical explanation whatever» (Nichanian, 2003: 116); and thirdly, the witness finds it impossible to imagine, and hence identify with, the victims' experiences. Time and again, as Ezrahi (1980: 3) says of artists trying to represent the Holocaust, «the realist's or the naturalist's respect for details which comprise the fabric of historical processes is defeated by facts which can hardly be integrated into any pre-existent system of ethics or aesthetics». One solution is to extend (or subvert) the conventions of a genre and to incorporate a knowing, self-reflexive critique of representation into the artwork.

Art Spiegleman's acclaimed two-volume graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (2003), constructs a memoir of his father's (Vladek) experience of the

Holocaust within the traditionally low-brow genre of sequential art (the comic) (Sabin, 1996: 182; McCloud, 2000: 29), yet avoids its simplifying tendencies. Indeed, as Robert Leventhal (2004: n.pag.) argues,

> [t]he reduction of the players to cats (Nazis), mice (the Jews), pigs (the Poles) and other national stereotypes offers a conscious, intentional miniaturization and reduction, pointing up the process of compression, simplification and devaluation not merely of the Nazi's practices before and during the Holocaust, but the reduction and simplification present in many «responses» to the Holocaust as well.

At one point, Speigelman (2003: 204) allows the anthropomorphising convention to break down and shows the characters as humans wearing masks while patting a «real» cat; at another, the author-figure meditates on the difficulties of portraying his French wife (as a moose, a poodle, a frog, a mouse or a rabbit) (Spiegelman, 2003: 171-172). Thus, he is alive to difficulties of representation and the dangers therein of creating stereotypes.

While the graphic novel's overt subject matter centres on Vladek's tale of survival, the text also serves as a meditation on the silence surrounding the Holocaust and the consequential psychological damage this causes. At the beginning of chapter two in the second volume the fictional illusion is broken by the self-referential interjection of the author-figure (Art), wearing a mouse-mask, attempting to complete the memoir and unable to do so because of unspecified feelings of depression. The text begins with the line «Time flies», yet it is clear that for the author the legacy of the past is both inhibiting and all-pervasive: beneath his desk are the rotting corpses of camp victims surrounded by flies; outside his window is one of the guard-towers from Auschwitz; and the shadows in his room make up a Nazi swastika. We are told that his first volume has been a commercial success («At least fifteen editions are coming out»), but it is clear that the writing process has not been cathartic and has not yet allowed him to work through his melancholia: not only does he feel guilt at producing life (his wife is pregnant) while so many had died in Auschwitz, he has also been unable to break the silence left by his mother's suicide.

The statement that «she left no note» acts as a persistent refrain throughout the graphic novel. It appears first in the opening frame of *Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History* (Spiegelman, 2003: 105), a comic book produced in a different style and incorporated within *Maus* to create a *mise-en-abıme* structure, allowing the subtext of Art's search for his mother's story to emerge, while highlighting his own latent trauma. Anja, also a death-camp survivor, committed suicide when Art was twenty years old. In one panel from the alternative comic, Spiegelman neatly conveys the son's anguish and unresolved feelings of both guilt and anger. The narrow panel, suggesting confinement, de-emphasises exterior

relations in favour of interior ones through the use of an expressionistic collage of images, (the naked mother lying dead in her bath; a mound of corpses next to a wall inscribed with Nazi graffiti; a younger version of a smiling Art sitting next to his mother, who is reading him a story; the mother, her arm tattooed with her camp number, slitting her own wrist; and the older Art whose facial expression and deportment conveys an idiomatic gesture of painful recollection), and text (four slogans in bold, capitalised letters, barely contained within the frame: «Menopausal depression», «Hitler did it», «Mommy!», «Bitch»). Such narrative density expresses the sense of loss and betrayal felt by Art, and his inability to mourn her loss, one which is equated with his own loss of self as he is imprisoned within «The Planet Hell». While the mother's life within the camps is represented, her story is incorporated within Vladek's testimony and voiced by him. The revelation that he had deliberately destroyed her memoir so as to repress the painful events of her suicide and of his own experiences in Auschwitz self-reflexively insists on the *aporia* within *Maus* and upon the consequent importance of the recovery of Holocaust testimony. When Art visits his psychoanalyst, Pavel, a survivor of Terezín and Auschwitz, the text presents a key moment when the author-figure, by now infantilised through a willed regression back to childhood due to feelings of inadequacy, cites Beckett's famous declaration that «Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness» (Spiegelman, 2003: 205). The following panel is devoid of narrative or dialogue as the pair contemplate the judiciousness of Beckett's remark, only to refute its import in the following panel: «On the other hand», says Art, «he SAID it». The reaffirmation of the artist's role of breaking the silence surrounding the Holocaust allows the author-figure (both Art and Spiegelman) to conclude *Maus*.

For a poet, as for the graphic novelist, there is both an ethical and an artistic imperative to respond to violence imaginatively. In a graduation address at Queen's University in 1995, the Northern Irish poet Michael Longley (n.d.: box 35, folder 23) repeated his credo that «[i]n the context of political violence the deployment of words at their most precise and suggestive remains one of the few antidotes to death-dealing dishonesty». Like Hill, Longley (n.d.: box 38, folder 15) seeks to avoid treating the Holocaust as «a mere subject»:

> The German philosopher Adorno suggested that there could be no more poetry after Auschwitz. Perhaps he meant that after the Holocaust poetry could not remain the same. In which case I agree with him. But I also believe that if poetry is incapable of approaching so huge and horrible a subject, then there is no future for poetry. A bad poem about the Holocaust will be a crime against the light. So this is dangerous territory. Although there is little we can do imaginatively with the pictures of the piles of bodies, the torture chambers, the gas ovens, we are duty bound to try and work out how we arrived there.

Longley never shirks from what he regards as the poet's responsibilities, and avows his belief in the efficacy of the poetic text: the poet, Longley (n.d.: box 35, folder 11) says, must make «the most complex response that can be made with words to the total experience of living» and, in so doing, he «illuminates and orders it with words». The term «orders» does not simply connote a sense of containing chaotic violence within a regular metrical scheme; rather, it means to regulate, direct, and to bring into order or submission to lawful authority, namely that of the poet. Indeed, this is what Seamus Heaney (1988: 92) famously calls «the jurisdiction of achieved form». Changing the name of an early draft entitled «Photographs» to «The Exhibit», Longley (n.d.: box 26, folder 25) not only refers to a cultural artefact on display («the pile of spectacles in the Auschwitz museum»), but also invokes a legal meaning, implying that the text is produced as evidence both of «the torments inflicted on the Jews by the Nazis» (Longley, n.d.: box 35, folder 7), and of poetry's governing power.

> I see them absentmindedly pat their naked bodies
> Where waistcoat and apron pockets would have been.
> The grandparents turn back and take an eternity
> Rummaging in the tangled pile for their spectacles.
>
> («The Exhibit», Longley, 2000: 18)

The changes made to the early drafts demonstrate a meticulous and justly scrupulous intelligence regarding his choice and arrangement of words. While he changes a demonstrative adjective («this») to a definite article in «the tangled pile» to allow for a sense of distance, he crucially alters the opening line of the earlier drafts to intimate his presence (he now includes the phrase «I see»), conveying his own act of bearing witness and his imaginative intervention at one and the same time. For the reader, this opening gambit embodies the ambiguity inherent within all testimony: as Derrida (2000: 43, 29) reminds us, while «[b]y law, a testimony must not be a work of art or fiction», nevertheless since it cannot constitute proof, then «there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction […] that is to say, the possibility of literature [...]». The poet's opening statement is all the more poignant as the victims themselves are deprived by the Nazis of the power of vision: while they literally cannot see without their spectacles, they also cannot foresee their own death.

The Auschwitz exhibition may connote the absence which resulted from the extermination (all that is left is a pile of spectacles), yet Longley's vision reverses the victims' dehumanisation, firstly, by remembering them as people within a familial context («grandparents») and, secondly, by reconstructing the unbearably affecting moment prior to death when they «pat their naked bodies/ Where waistcoat and apron pockets would have been». By changing «turn around» to

«turn back», the poet intimates a temporal dimension, allowing those grandparents to forestall the inevitable. Indeed, by literalising, thereby revivifying, the outworn phrase «spend an eternity», he presents us with an image of the grandparents held in stasis, almost as if they were revenants returning to reclaim what is theirs. Perhaps the most admirably courageous (and ultimately astute) editorial decision taken by Longley was to change the poem's format, deleting what was originally the second section:

> Hundreds in broad daylight are waiting to be shot.
> I pick out one only. Her aging breasts look sore.
>
> («The Exhibit»: 18)

While the couplet once again presents a human dimension, the clever ambiguity of «to be shot» (photographed / executed) is deemed inappropriate, and the poet avoids placing himself in the position of the Nazis («pick out» is too reminiscent of the selection process whereby the Nazis chose those who were to be eliminated in the crematoria). The concluding image, though tender and humanising, is perhaps also uncomfortably voyeuristic.

Contemporary texts referring to unspeakable violence often explore silence's positive and negative potentialities in a self-reflexive manner, often undermining their own literary procedures. One example is James Kelman's *Translated Accounts* (2001), a novel that employs intra-textual and other stylistic devices such as a preface, the fictional construct of an editor and multiple, fictional translators to establish a distance in the reader's mind between the author and what is being said. Kelman ventriloquises, through an ungrammatical yet realistic translatorese, accounts of violence occurring in an unnamed land, and adopts a fragmented, episodic form which eschews narrative coherence.

The work is a historiographic metafiction, a text about the fictionalizing process of history and the limitations of language to express atrocity. Such a novel belies the mimetic fallacy and apparent objectivity of realism, and typifies the kind of text described by Hayden White (1996), which attempts to narrate «the modernist event». The novel's concluding section, «it is true», exemplifies the ambivalence regarding what can or cannot be fully articulated: «I cannot say about a beginning, or beginnings, if there is to be the cause of all, I do not see this. There are events, I speak of them, if I am to speak of then it is of these, if I may speak» (Kelman, 2001: 322). Echoing the Beckettian art of failure, Kelman's speaker experiences a crisis of representation, yet is determined to speak despite an acknowledged lack of narrative coherence. What results is indeed a form of silence: recounted here are not the events *per se*, but rather a self-reflexive commentary on the determination to speak. Similarly, W. G. Sebald's (2003: 79) lectures collected in *On the Natural History of Destruction*

examine «the way in which memory (individual, collective and cultural) deals with experiences exceeding what is tolerable». Contemplating the rationale behind the self-censorship and self-imposed silence of post-war German writers regarding the bombing of cities such as Hamburg and Dresden, Sebald argues that, psychologically, such authors instinctively looked away from the ruins and that, artistically, their only possible response was evasion and silence.

While contemporary writers, at a physical and temporal distance from such events, have directed their gaze at the ruins, their texts adopt an oblique stance, using intertextuality as a means of preserving a distancing objectivity. The opening stanza of Medbh McGuckian's (2002: 37) «The Fortified Song of Flowers» displays an initial ambivalence towards the role and efficacy of art: «stained with culture,/ we cover the winds with art». While «stained» and «cover» may have negative connotations, nevertheless culture is said to be protective and strengthening (like staining wood). The «winds» in question are not freshening, but here they refer to the devastating fire-storm which resulted from the multiple bombing raids on Dresden during February 1945. A comparison between the poem and David Irving's *The Destruction of Dresden* (1963), a damning indictment of Bomber Command's policy of general area bombing, reveals the connection:

> The darkness is not pure,
> opening its bomb doors
> (*The Destruction of Dresden*: 128)
>
> marked out for carpet-bombing
> (*The Destruction of Dresden*: 120)
>
> with blast-proof windows
> (*The Destruction of Dresden*: 70)
>
> the sudden linking of a number of fires
> (*The Destruction of Dresden*: 162)
>
> opening its bomb-doors
> to a carpet of night-offensive bombs
> devouring the precious air
>
> from the blast-proof windows.
> The sudden linking of a number
> of fires is golden-bedded
> into the heat of a path
> whose sun shall search the grave-hoard.
> («The Fortified Song of Flowers»: 37)

The destruction wrought by the fire-storm, an event which is the subject of Sebald's lectures, is described in harrowing detail by Irving (1963: 162):

> Crowds of people fleeing for safety had suddenly been seized by the tornado and hurled along whole streets into the seat of the fires; roof gables and furniture that had been stacked on the streets after the first raid were plucked up by the violent winds and tossed into the centre of the burning Inner City.

The fact that McGuckian does not provide an acknowledgement of her literary borrowing is important: without the intertext, the poem can justly be read

as a general comment on art's role in a time of violence, with a specific application to her own place of writing, Belfast. The «tight gag of place» can be lifted by using the words (and example) of others. The poet's silence, her loss for words, is cured by speaking through other writers. In addition, as she is not an authoritative witness to the atrocities she is describing, she draws on Irving's monograph, which includes harrowing eye-witness accounts. What results is a poem full of exquisite beauty and multi-layered meaning. For example, the bird which is said to «swathe its life-warm/ head like a blade being bent/ till point and hilt must meet» connotes, firstly, a war-bird (the planes bringing destruction), and secondly, a phoenix rising from the ashes: the protective action mirrors that of art. McGuckian borrows from another source, Patricia Lysaght's *The Banshee* (1986), to describe the other action of this bird:

> Or else it is taught by the stars
> these particular placeless dead
> (*The Banshee*: 47)
>
> to cry the name
> (*The Banshee*: 50)
>
> the buried by their song-cloud names,
> the cry always travels against the stream
> (*The Banshee*: 83)
>
> to cry for the placeless dead,
> to cry the name, to call
> though its cry always travels
> against the stream […]
> («The Fortified Song of Flowers»: 37)

The banshee (phonetically, *bean sí*), the supernatural death-messenger of Irish folklore, proclaims deaths which are imminent. Here the screech of the war-birds flying overhead (literally, the planes passing overhead) heralds the death of 135,000 people. Using Lysaght's monograph on the origins and conventions of the banshee, McGuckian imposes an Irish context, conveys a degree of fatalism to the attack, and helps an Irish audience understand the dread which Dresden's population must have felt on hearing the unexpected bombing squadrons overhead. Yet the poem acts as a «prayer», signifying the love for those «hearing your name inexplicably called out»;[5] rather than «saying nothing», art can provide succour, and in so doing succeeds in achieving the «memorializing and memorizing of the dead» which Geoffrey Hill has called for.

In conclusion, contemporary writers and visual artists endeavour to represent violence in complex, indirect ways, at once alive to the insufficiencies of their craft, but not dictated or bowed by them. Jaar, Richter, Donagh and Spiegelman, while taking as their thematic focus the effects and violent aftermath of conflict

5. The phrase is taken from Lysaght (1986: 37) and again refers to the call of the death-messenger.

- the Rwandan genocide; terrorism in Germany during the 1970s; the Northern Irish Troubles; the Holocaust – are forced to incorporate a critique of their respective means of representation. Form itself becomes subject to the artist's gaze. However, such self-reflexivity functions not as a denial of meaning, nor as an adherence to an apolitical postmodern aesthetics; rather, the foregrounding of formal strategies - the lighting, framing, cropping, and editing of an image – encourages the viewer to adopt a more critical approach to the «image-event», to view it within its specific socio-political context and to regard it as an ideologically driven construct.

Writers such as Hill, Longley and McGuckian share with the visual artists a need to weigh up their ethical and artistic responsibilities with care, and to strive to counter the narcotic banality induced by the «image-event». In each case, there is an awareness of their position as artists at a remove from conflict, and a marked reluctance to represent the pain of others. Yet, while silence is the common trope, neither the poets nor their subjects are silenced. McGuckian and Hill may avoid speaking in a direct lyrical voice (the former through an intertextual ventriloquism, the latter through the adoption of *personae* who speak with riddling ambiguity), yet they share Longley's belief that the artist is «duty-bound» to imaginatively examine how and why violent events occur, and to contest the idea that the «image-event» is not, to use Baudrillard's term, «irreducible».

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