

# “A knife without a blade, for which a handle is missing”; on the pleasure of photographic violence

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In the evening of 19<sup>th</sup> December 2016, the Russian Ambassador to Turkey was attending an opening of a photography exhibition, titled “Russia through Turkish eyes”. The gallery was crammed with guests and local dignitaries. The ambassador was standing at a small podium in the middle of a brightly lit gallery, surrounded by the black, rectangular frames of the photographs hanging on the walls. The photographs were of scenes from Russian life captured by Turkish photographers; the Kremlin, the onion-shaped spires of orthodox churches, blooming flowers, wheat fields, and farmhouses. As the ambassador begins to speak about the close ties between Turkey and Russia, a man in a black suit and tie, and a white shirt, who appears to be one of the bodyguards, pulls out a handgun and fires several shots at the ambassador from close range. Gallery visitors flee, drop to the floor, hide under a table, crouch behind a wall, still clutching plastic cups half filled with wine. The ambassador lies on his back, his hands spread to the sides, a dark pool of blood spreading from underneath his suit. The shooter proceeds to circle the now

empty room, smashing the photographs with his gun, and shouting *Allahu Akbar* (God is the greatest), and ‘do not forget Aleppo, do not forget Syria’ until he too is shot and killed by Turkish security forces.

The triple assassination, of the ambassador, the shooter, and of the photographs, was recorded by a professional photographer who was covering the visit of the ambassador to the gallery. The photographer witnessed and recorded everything with great attention to detail. There is not a moment of hesitation in the actions of the killer, neither is there any hesitation in the actions of the photographer. Both had good aim. The steady hand that held that gun is directly mirrored by the steady hand that held the camera. The assassination images are crisp and perfectly composed. they both show the drama of the killing and bring the killing into the fold of photographic storytelling. The black suit of the assassin against the white wall of the gallery, his gun pointing at the people who came to see a photographic exhibition but are now themselves the background in a photograph and possible targets for the gunman. The sequence of shoots fired in the gallery is only a single link that connects the shooting of the photographs in the Russian countryside to the shooting of civilians in Aleppo, to the shooting of the Russian ambassador, to the shooting of the photographs of the assassination of the ambassador, to the shooting of the shooter of the ambassador by the security forces and to the shooting of the photographs of the shot shooter.

The photography exhibition, organised by the municipality of Ankara, was the background for the assassination. But photography is so much more than a background of this dramatic event. It occupies a paradoxical position of a metalanguage of an event that it simultaneously announces, records, destroys and celebrates all the while assuming the role

of an impartial observer. Both the exhibition photographs and the photographs of the assassination point towards a reality that is outside of the image, Russia in the case of the former and the killing of the Russian ambassador in the case of the later. But photography also constitutes the very materiality from which this event is constructed. It is presenting itself as a site that not only records reality but also produces it. Far from being a mere documentation, photography asserts that reality itself is like a photographic collage in which political violence operates through images, and the shooting of photographs is also a political act just as the killing of the ambassador (an image of Russia) is also an image.

In so doing photography seems to be operating as a counterfactual: exceeding the documentary, and therefore the secondary role traditionally attributed to the image and assuming the function not of a witness but of an active participant, the prime mover, main actor, and the protagonist. The camera here is not the weapon but it is also not an innocent bystander. It is something in between. Yet, what precisely is it? I would like to suggest that in a primitive culture like ours, some objects acquire the status of a portal that facilitates the transformation between symbolic, imaginary and real forms of existence. A camera is one such object, or at least this is what it used to be before it was replaced by new styles of image making devices like mobile phones and infrared telescopes.

The assassination of the Russian ambassador cannot be easily separated from the photographic event that preceded it, accompanied it and immortalised it. We don't yet have a visual or cultural theory that can account for the role of photography in this event, and by extension, we don't yet have a theory that can account for the role of photography in all of our lives. If such theory will ever come into being it will surely need to take account of the pleasure we derive from looking at photographs, and in particular of the pleasure we derive

from experiencing the slippage, the transportation (In Greek: *metaforá*) between the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. One striking feature of the assassination is the profusion and the excess of the photographic. This is of course one of photography's central characteristics, its internal predisposition to overflow, to non-productive reproduction, dissemination and superabundance.

This excess, that is part and parcel of photography's propensity for procreation, puts an end to the notion of the real as rational and as dialectically opposed to the imaginary. Photographic abundance, in which billions of photographs are taken every day suggests that photography cannot be analysed with the tools of semiotics and the triadic sign structures that rely on a rational decoding in which a sign represents an object in the mind of the interpreter. Photographic superabundance and proliferation makes it less part of a modern "Western" culture, and more akin to the advanced techniques of human sacrifice in Maya cultures where the continuous flow of blood was deemed necessary for the appeasement of the gods. While our modern sensibilities might shrink from such acts as tearing the beating heart out of the body of the still-alive victim, it is just possible that these actions were essential for the preservation of a stable and prosperous social order. In comparison, our civilisation suffers from a crude and ruinous attachment to the notion of the real ( and the reality principle) as a primary and fundamental term. By choosing this narrow focus on the logical and the rational, our civilisation is taking a path that blocks its access to all forms of thought-activity that don't stand up to reality-testing. This thought-activity is known as phantasing, day-dreaming, hallucinating and imagining, and it belongs to the most fundamental and primordial structures of the human psyche. As an aside, it is salutary to remember that European colonialism did not begin with sending fast

ship across the waters, it started with the methodical subjugation and destruction of the internal world of fantasy, magic, dream and intuition. A destruction that can be seen both in the witch trials of Early Modern Europe and in the establishment during the Renaissance of schools for children with the sole aim of conquering and destroying all forms of pleasure and replacing them with intellectual and scientific inquiry.

In an important way the invention of photography can be seen not as an offshoot of this quest for scientifically grounded mastery of the mind and of the world but as a break with this tradition and a watershed moment in history of Western societies. This is so because with photography a threshold is reached that reformulates consciousness not as something uniquely human but as something that is technologically, rather than humanly determined. The photograph introduces a new dimension into the reality principle that borrows something from the internal world of memories, dreams and fantasy and fuses it with the operations of a machine. The reality principle that is put forward by photography introduces infinite proliferation as an operating principle that undermines reality's claim for primacy, universality and stability. Photography's elegant assault on the real is not a frontal attack that aims to meet the force of the real with greater opposing force, rather it is more akin to a manoeuvre of a sumo wrestler, who is using the energy of the opponent to propel them out of the ring. By infinitely multiplying the real through autopoietic proliferation photography exposes the latent speculative dimensions of the real that the rational-scientific Enlightenment project was hell-bent on hiding and destroying.

With photography first cracks appear in the enlightenment project that defines reason in opposition to madness and the real in opposition to fantasy. The Enlightenment model was built on dialectical foundations, on not being able to occupy the present, because the

rational model of inquiry required that the present will always be re-presented, or in other words, inserted into a logical, calculable schema in such a way that it could be accessed as information. The enlightenment model produced the figure of the ambassador, as the one who is representing a government of another country, and during the fatal visit to the gallery the ambassador was representing Russia and Russian ambitions for a sphere of influence in Turkey and Syria. The enlightenment model also produced the photographs on the gallery walls as representations of Russia that agree with the way Russia wants to be represented. But photography operates not only through representation, but also through excess and proliferation and in this case the excess is manifest in the symbolic exchange between the “shooting” of photographs and the shooting (from Latin: *cadere* - to fall, to die) of the ambassador. We are faced here with an eruption of the metaphor into a social organisation and also with a reminder that certain dreams and hallucinations are essential to the functioning of any society. In photography the reality principle operates not via the suppression of the pleasure principle but through the recovery of pleasure in the mundane and through pulling away from the idea of the real as independent and autonomous.

What becomes of the real when it is losing its autonomy and independence? It is destined to be forever trapped between states of appearance and disappearance. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, a German physicist and a wit, came up with a definition of a non-knife, “a knife without a blade, for which the handle is missing”. This image, of a blade and a handle united by their absence is a way of evoking nothingness that nonetheless leaves a mark in the wake of its disappearance, and is a starting point for a theory of photography as a perpetual alteration of appearance and disappearance from which the capacity to represent is born. When there is nothing left of the knife because both the blade

and the handle are removed, all that remains is a pure sensation of pleasure that we feel when we grasp the knife not as a tool but as a joke.

The assassination of the Russian ambassador resists the idea that the real is just sitting there waiting to be represented in a photograph, for the photograph is continually making inroads into this real, by shaping it and continually re-mirroring it. The “shooting” metaphor is a recognition that there is no foundational real other than its continuous emergence through acts of “shooting” (or sacrifice, as a Maya priest might put it) that dislocates it from its prior presence, leaving the pleasure of fascination in its wake.