

Before and After the Image

The distinction I made between the image and the visual is pragmatic. I simply found it practical to use two different words. There's also the fact that the word "visual" comes up so often in the vocabulary of the press and on the lips of its "art directors." The visual is at once reading and seeing: it's seeing what you're supposed to read. You know how to read the press when you can quickly decipher a newspaper's visual, even if it's a newspaper without photos, like LE MONDE. Maybe we're heading towards societies which are better and better at *reading* (deciphering, decoding through reflexes of reading) but less and less able to see. So I call "image" what still holds out against an experience of vision and of the "visual." The visual is the optical verification of a procedure of power (technological, political, advertising or military power). A procedure which calls for no other commentary than "reception perfect, AOK." Obviously, the visual has to do with the optic nerve, but that doesn't make it an image.

For me, the *sine qua non* of the image is *alterity*. Every culture does something with that more-or-less empty slot, the slot where "there is some other" (to paraphrase Lacan). No doubt we go to war in order to fill that slot, for a given moment, with only a single occupant: the enemy. It's simpler like that. So, when the so-called "Gulf War" appeared inevitable, we could imagine that we were about to see the other, or at least that "we'd see what there was to see." Even if you don't much care for war, you know it forms part of the human equation, it's "a way of seeing."

Some people must have expected to see a war *in* images, others a war of images, if only propaganda images. On one side there would be the Third World with its arms, its logic, its tricks and its naiveté, a kind of clumsy heritage of twentieth-century propaganda (more like the USSR, the single party, etc.) On the other side would be the first country of the First World, heavily into propaganda too, but a little bit stuck in the wake of Vietnam (the defense of democracy, of the free world, etc.) In the end, all of us in the West were waiting for a spectacle, and we didn't get it.

Instead we "watched" an incredible face-off between two ways of *not making an image* (the way you say: don't make waves.) A fairly unexpected way (from the Iraqis) and a very unexpected way (from the Americans.) For years, the Iraqis had spent lots of money and energy trying to buy up the intellectuals of the entire Arab world. It must not have worked, because the moment they appeared on the world screen, in *mondovision*, they gave up the idea of providing any image whatsoever of the Iraqi nation-state. But on the other side of the coin, you can't help but think the Americans are also pretty short on an image of America, because they decided to wage (and win) this war while simultaneously blurring all its traces. So Bush and Hussein coproduced a black-out of every image of Iraq and the Iraqis, and it was a complete success.

In a sense, it's as though the Iraqis had slipped *below* the line of the image, and the Americans *above* it. That line is the line of alterity. It's the other in so far as he is still visible, however mean and nasty he may be. Ultimately it's *the look in his eyes* that makes him exist as a visible other. As Levinas said, it's a lot harder for me to kill you when I can look you in the eye. And it's true, executioners have always had a hard time looking their victims in the eye. It's not impossible, alas, there are always perverts and brutes, but still: it's difficult. On the other hand, remember that passage in Rousseau: it's always easy to push a button that will cause the death of a man on the other side of the planet, far from us. And that's where things stand.

The other's eyes have disappeared, by a common and implicit accord. Saddam Hussein was satisfied with a vague, emotional, all-purpose image of the "Arab world." And in the face of that, to our *great surprise*, the Americans seem to have learned their lessons from Vietnam and moved into a new phase of their power, where it's no longer a matter of war but of a gigantic police action. Now, when you're

carrying out a police action, you don't post up the mug of the people thrown in prison, nor of the courageous cops. You do it in wartime because in war there's a lingering presupposition of equality between the combatants. Something of this equality may have functioned on the Iraqi side, a follow-up to the ancient duel between Saladin and Richard the Lion Heart. But even if that's the case, it's a pure fantasy with no response whatsoever from the American end (the Crusades aren't part of their history.)

For my part, I was surprised by the way the Americans moved on without a single blow from the realm of the image to that of the visual. And the visual, this time, was the guided tour around the cop shop, or to the armaments expo at the Bourget military airport [near Paris.] This was what we were shown for six months, without us really grasping the meaning. Day after day we saw how almost 5,000 soldiers had ended up in Saudi Arabia with incredible equipment. We thought it was the trailer for a horrendous epic, but no, *it was already the film!* When the Western media decided to get up close to the Iraqi other, it had become almost impossible. But that's because they waited - six months! - until war had broken out before taking any interest in a country which, until then, they had chastely passed by. During the time when French arms sales to Iraq kept several hundred thousands of people working in France, you never saw friendly TV reports on that providential land. And when Saddam lost the war, I don't recall any great upsurge of tele-curiosity concerning the Iraqis. Before and after, there was only the simple curiosity to go see for yourself what had never really been. In its place was the Kurdish image. Media-wise, we exchanged the *non-image* of the Iraqi other for the *over-image* of the Kurdish other. As though the latter had accepted to hop up and replace a recalcitrant actor (for no charge). So today you get a kind of nausea before all this beautiful human suffering, which is even more moving because the Kurdish cause is hopeless and because the Kurds, betrayed by the whole world, are really beaten, at least. Whereas we still don't know how many Iraqis were killed during the war, and what with the Arab habit that consists, alas, in carrying off only *defeats*, the official line from Baghdad is probably that the Iraqis won. So what use are images, when nothing stands as "proof" anymore?

It was stupid enough on Saddam Hussein's part to undervalue the extent to which he would lose *face*. But face is not a look in the eyes, and the whole question may be right there between two words. The only image that exists in the Arab world is the image of the Leader. In France you still have the effigy of the Republic, Marianne, which is different from a leader or a picture of the president, but you only see it in the city halls, it's residual. What the Arab world has slowly gotten used to is this love relation with the leader, especially in moments of crisis, when the leader proves to be above all a loser. Misplaced pride that consists of swelling the biceps and hiding the victims, and that finally leads to the victims' masochistic identification with the biceps. Now, showing the victims, counting them out *one by one*, calling them by their names, is at least a way of recognizing the fact that they are human beings and that they have a right to the look in their eye, battered as it may be.

The question isn't specific to that part of the world. It's no doubt the pure and simple question of feudalism - and that one really stymies us, because we all believed the Marxists when they spoke in a condescending tone of feudalism as an outdated, bygone mode of production. In the rich countries today, the very modern successor to feudalism is the Mafia: the United States, Italy, Japan, etc. In the countries that have just come out of the deep-freeze it's a well-known reality: the USSR, China. In the poor countries, the Mafia is still the clan that kidnaps the political power and plays baby-toy with weapons and the code of honor. It's normal that such a Mafia should have no other image than that of its current leader, and that it should identify, for better or worse, with his distress, and only his. It's tragic, for example, that none of the Arab leaders in the anti-Iraqi coalition found it fitting to say a few words (even something purely formal) about the Kurdish distress. It's even more tragic that they don't realize for a second that those few words would ricochet into the best possible publicity for the Palestinian cause. Masochism is not the contrary of egotism, far from it.

But if I look on the American side, it's even more surprising. It's like the country was testing a new

definition of itself in this war. A definition that no longer has much to do with the hyperindividualization of the average American, a definition that completely forgets G.I. Joe or John Doe, "the man in the street," and heads straight for General Schwarzkopf or Colin Powell instead. We're a long way from the bloody, ambiguous but humanly very rich memories of Vietnam and the fifteen years of films, some of them very beautiful, that came out of that trauma-war. Nobody thought the American identity was as tattered as it is. Given the real difficulties of the country, you wonder what the price will be for this public demonstration that the wound is scarred all over.

For the moment, the Americans have won two wars. The real war, the police action, took place exactly as planned. But there was also the war of images. During a TF1 broadcast, on a disgusting set with everybody congratulating each other, a CNN journalist started moaning about a poll published in the U.S., according to which people felt there were too many images of the war, that all those images played into enemy hands, that there was no need to see so many. America has succeeded in what Saddam attempted: the *blind retribalization* of its population, including the support of the traditional victims of American society - Blacks, Latinos - who were thrilled to be among the victors for once, like Colin Powell, no doubt Bush's next running mate.

Let's return to the distinction between the image and the visual. The visual is the verification that something functions. In that sense, clichés and stereotypes are part of the visual. For example, there's a visual minimum of Arab presence in France, it's the immigrant's face. But beyond that "face" (without eyes) there is a general inability to tell the particular story of any *single* immigrant, whether first or second generation. As soon as we start talking about the "Arab in the street," the group is always what's filmed and the group is always what speaks. Participating in a collective protects them, it's what makes them exist in relation to their enemy on the corner, the cops that hassle them or their racist neighbors. The result: their discourse is uninteresting, it's a sentimental wooden tongue that will always favor fantasy over imagination - and the media couldn't be happier that "the Arab in the street" is always ready to run off at the mouth about Saddam or the Palestinians.

During the war, the TV people obviously said to themselves: we have to watch out, we have to "cover" the Arab in the street, the immigrant kids and all that. So we see a litany of depressing images of street hysteria, particularly in North Africa. As though today the word "masses," abandoned along with the ideals of communism, could only be applied to the Arabs. As though the heritage of leftism and Third-World liberation were there and there only. As though the dead ends of *identity* (which only serves to infantilize and offer pleasure in that infantilization) had become an Arab monopoly. As though we had forgotten that the Arab world, our neighbors and our cousins for so long, is a generally non-violent world, though given to exaggerated rhetoric. Finally, as though North African immigration in France, over the last fifty years, weren't the most peaceful immigration that's ever been! Myself, when I think of the others' identity madness, I look apprehensively toward Hindu fundamentalism and Serb tribalism, not toward the neurosis of the Arabs.

And yet there's a moment when someone like me is obliged to take his distance from the way both the French media and the "Arab masses" go about fabricating a massive and menacing image of the Arab world, on the basis of its "humiliation." What has changed since that faraway era when we were leftists is that now I do it in the name of values that belong to *my* culture, even if I'm not certain that those values might not soon be in the minority again. But I'm too old to waver on the little I've learned from thirty years of demagogy and hysteria combined. It comes down to this: every *individual* figure is that much taken back from the fascinating (and fascistic) sirens of communitarianism. Does a French-speaking Arab intellectual need Montesquieu to emerge as an individual voice? If so, good for him. Can he do it from a strictly Arab background, Ibn Khaldoun or Ibn Arabi? In a sense, I don't need to know. But what else can you expect?

That puts you in a rather touchy situation with respect to your oldest Arab friends, because you feel like telling them that nobody's going to dispense them from having the courage to say "Me,I," the courage to go against the community flow and to do without all the advantages, material and otherwise, that come from setting up on the sly between two worlds. I remember how sad I felt when Kale Yacine died: when things were really going bad in Algeria we always tried to get in touch with him, simply because he talked straight. That wasn't so easy for us either. The West is terribly clumsy about recomposing forms of the social tie, of conviviality, of complicity, to fit in with individualist societies based on the market. It's tough to deal with, and there's always something morose about it. It often seems that the attendant mediocrity is going to depress us once and for all. And at the same time, there's always an unavowed nostalgia for a more organic past, which is not so far from us and whose futile remains can be found in national-Lepenism today (and yesterday in the French Communist party.)

That's why the Arab world, with its amazing social ecology that has outlived centuries of political decline, has long represented for some of us a highly vibrant reservoir of a certain social affectivity. Nowhere else is the other so well conceived, *as long as he is concrete*, as long as he is the stranger to whom you owe respect. But the tragedy, and a tragedy that becomes inevitable given the economic state of the world, is that nobody in the Arab world can conceive of the *abstract other*. Universalism seems to have stopped in mid-stride, and the forces of a return to the village, and a return to the terrible lack of curiosity toward the rest of the worlds, signify to we Westerners that we remain all alone with our still-conquering and often empty universalism.

It's astonishing to see how the inward turn of the Americans has freed up that old story of the Crusades as *our problem* (here in Europe.) Sometimes I think it may just be unforgettable on the Arab side. It's a frustrated love story between the former losers (after all, the crusaders were clearly less civilized and were kicked out in the end) and the new losers (the Arabs helped the modern world in its birth pangs, but haven't accompanied it on its adventures.) Today, when people talk about *humiliation*, what I hear is rather the fact for the Arabs of not having been recognized by the only interlocutor who ever existed for them, the old European-Christian road buddy, the one who "succeeded in life." The relationship to America seems much more superficial to me America is at once the most desirable and the most powerful country, and because it's the most powerful it has been made into the great Satan, the only one worth being beaten by. If the Machrek Arabs had a real historical memory, it's the English they should hate to death. Because as far as a pernicious and effective political strategy goes, the Foreign Office remains unbeatable!

Is television democratic? What's democratic, I think, is to look into that collective mirror and make the distinction between what can be done, what we know how to do (and news technologies are more advanced than ever), and what doesn't come cheap, what's difficult. It doesn't bother me when they say on the TV that no journalists were sent to Iraq because Saddam Hussein opposed it. But it ought to be said in such a way that the tele-spectator says to himself, "Hmm, we're missing that image," and so that he doesn't forget that image. Myself, I learned that from Godard. In an old issue of CAHIERS DU CINEMA, ten years back, he asked us to illustrate an interview with him by putting in big white spaces blocked out with lines and captioned "here, the usual photo." It was a way to say that in any case, photos serve to paste over a void, to decorate, to supply what I now call "the visual" - but not to show anything.

By leaving the space empty, he *showed* the possibility of not pasting over. Today I have the feeling that we've lost, that Godard has lost, and that the media - with the TV in the lead - forbid us to think: "Hmm, we're missing an image, let's leave that slot empty, let's wait to fill it." The fear of the void is so strong that it takes us over as well. The void is no longer a dialectical moment between two fulls, it's what you must "make them forget." That's why, as I was just saying, we "forgot" to demand reports on vanquished Iraq, just as we forget to ask the immigrant kids in the suburbs what they now think of Saddam Hussein.

I wrote a text where I tried out the following metaphor: the news is now like a *sweeper-car*, scooping things up one at a time, illuminating a line of objects on a floating market. A surveillance camera doesn't complain if it hasn't recorded any event. It's in the idiocy of live for live's sake. It confuses actuality and news. What was the news for most average French people? That Iraq was not Saudi Arabia. That's not much, even if it's something. But for those of us who knew it already? Nothing.

On December 31, I saw a very short report on Baghdad, the nightclubs, people drinking whiskey, girls without veils, people who seemed not to believe in the war and who looked like they were having fun. It was exactly like here. Why was it such a minor piece, almost folklore? Why not do a real duplex between here and Baghdad, all night long on the 31st? Maybe that's how the difference between Baghdad and Kuwait could really appear, maybe that's how we could break through the ready-to-think, the cliché, the already-seen.

And why, after the war broke out, didn't we see any reports on the archeological sites, on Ur, on one of humanity's birthplaces, and on the dangers? You wouldn't have to be a journalistic genius to have the modest idea (but there are a hundred others) that one way of speaking about Iraq could be the passion of French Assyriologist worrying about the sites. The TV doesn't think like that, it waits until it's too late before connecting all its studios and exhibiting vain logistics that quickly end up serving the politicians and military.

OK, there are six channels in France, and you can leave one, the most popular, TF1, as the servile echo of all the big influences. But even people in the know, even the intellectuals (as naive as anyone else) needed some more information, if only on channel 7. Why couldn't film buffs have seen the propaganda films that Tawfiq Saleh and Salah Abou Seif (the best Egyptian filmmakers) made a few years ago to the greater glory of Iraq? A superproduction of the battle of Qadisiyyah is pretty interesting if you want to understand Saddam's paranoia.

The problem with the image of the Palestinians has to do with the dispersion of the real Palestinians. I can't make brilliant Americans like Edward Said, the kids of the Intifada, the businessmen who propel the Kuwaiti economy, the combatants in Lebanon, the refugees in Jordan, and my old friend Soufian Ramahi co-exist in my head. And if I think I can't do it, it's because between the word and the thing, the word - the word "Palestinians" - has won out. It's a word with success, it's a pure signifier, at once umbrella and alibi for everybody. And we know how much easier is to die for a word than to work for the image of a thing. So there is no *complex* image of Palestinian reality, and that, I'm afraid, plays into everyone's hands. The image of Arafat is empty, free-spinning, unsinkable. It's a cliché, in the sense that a cliché is an image that can no longer evolve. No doubt this cliché is useful for the survival of the word "cause," but it doesn't function as much more than an advertising label.

I remember a film shot in 1976 by some pro-Palestinian friends, entitled THE OLIVE TREE. Already in this film there was one image too many and one image missing. The image too many was the one offered by the PLO, the "lion cubs," the children militarized in the camps. I had to explain that such an image makes bad propaganda in the West, which is the (only) part of the world where people long ago quit being enthusiastic at the sight of children in arms. OK, the people from THE OLIVE TREE didn't keep that image, but when Godard filmed UNTIL THE VICTORY, which in the end was called ICI ET AILLEURS, well, Godard didn't think he should censure that same image of the training of children. I remember a little girl who made a mistake in her motions, who had an instant of fright, and that's the image which is unforgettable for me. But that image means people are going to die, and she knows it.

As to the missing image, still in THE OLIVE TREE, it's when Marius Schattner explains in a very sweet voice that underneath the Israeli colony (which we see) there is, buried, covered over, a Palestinian village (which we do not see). I also remember that because at CAHIERS DU CINEMA we were among

the few who had always known that the love of cinema also means knowing what to do with images that are *really missing*. And the image of the Palestinians was already difficult. The Palestinians themselves didn't help. When we saw Michel Khleifi's films we regained some hope: it was clear to see that there were concrete Palestinians and concrete Israeli soldiers, and you understood that Israel had lost the capacity to propose an image as effective as the image of the kibbutzim in the fifties, or the image of EXODUS, because the Israeli nation-state had become too rigid to run the risk of an image.

When the other begins to lack, each of the camps pulls back to its "visual," one in its real State, the other "in all the states" of its imaginary.

Serge Daney devoted a number of pieces to the media coverage of war, in LIBERATION and on the radio. When he summed up these reflections in CAHIERS DU CINEMA (April 1991), he proposed the idea of a distinction between the image and the visual. The REVUE DES ETUDES PALESTINIENNES asked him to make this distinction more explicit.

Originally published in French in REVUE DES ETUDES PALESTINIENNES 40, Paris, Summer 1991 and in English in DOCUMENTA X.