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The Problem of Intercultural and Posttraumatic Visual Communication: The Eyes of Gutete Emerita

Visuality is a universal language of the modern world as its culture became increasingly saturated with images which tend to mediate social relations and establish power relations. On the one hand, the debordian society of the spectacle consists in the detachment of the image from what it represents and shift into the sphere of representation¹, and the anesthetic nature of the visual environment dulls sensitivity of visually overwhelmed audiences², on the other, however, the photographic image, by its nature of being a direct reference to an element of (past) reality, holds a possibility of a visceral, beyond-cultural experience³, a possibility of what Nicolas Mirzoeff called countervisuality⁴.

Photography has been a medium used for documenting wars and genocides almost since its invention in the first half of the 19th century. A language has developed over time which serves visual communication about wars and atrocities. Each of the photographed wars contributed to the set of visual topoi circulating in the narratives of atrocity and being reused in different contexts. Each war contributed with new icons, symbols specific to particular time, also being recycled in other war, and non-war, contexts. At times war photography has had a power to inspire people to act, protest, organize, the best example of which was the war in Vietnam and the anti-war protests influenced by its media coverage in America in

» 1 G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York, Zone Books, 1994.

» 2 W. Welsch, *Estetyka i anestetyka*, [in:] *Postmodernizm. Antologia przekładów*, ed. R. Nycz, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Baran i Suszczyński, 1998.

» 3 I have here in mind Barthesian *punctum*. See: R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1981.

» 4 N. Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2011.

the 1960s. Often, it served political agendas hidden behind the visual mythologies used⁵. But most often it is just considered information, a regular element of visual environment, and does not change attitude of viewers, especially those further from the context⁶. This way the western⁷ viewer looks at war photography from Africa. It seems to be inaccessible on three levels. Firstly, the culturally, geographically and politically distant lands seem too foreign to an average western viewer to engage. Secondly, the western eye of a photojournalist imposes western lens, being those visual topoi, the Western cannon⁸, including imagery inherited after the colonial project⁹. And thirdly, we encounter the challenge of visual speaking about traumatic experiences in a way which reaches the viewer, the problem of representation of trauma.

In this context, this text is a reflection on one specific photography installation entitled *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996)¹⁰ by Alfredo Jaar, a Chilean photographer based in New York, from his *Rwanda Project*, including its internet version (1997)¹¹. Although representation of trauma has significant limitations, this particular work, situated on the intersection of art and photojournalism, is arguably closest to overcoming those limitations. It is, on the one hand, thanks to the aforementioned very ability of photography to transcend culture if triggering instincts and emotions. On the other, due to a challenge the work poses to the Western visual dominance and a claim for recognition and subjectivity for the photographed person, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

The installation consists of four consecutive slides, all of them on a black background. The first two are filled with text, the third one contains two short sentences. And the fourth slide is a close-up of the eyes of the woman called Gutete Emerita. The text on the three first slides reads as follows: *“Over a five month period in 1994, more than one million Rwandans, mostly members of the Tutsi minority, were systematically*

- » 5 See a discussion on this topic in my other text: Anna Topolska, “Reflections on the Visual Truth – A Historian’s Perspective”, in: *Media, Technology and Education in a Post-Truth Society. From Fake News, Datafication and Mass Surveillance to the Death of Trust*, ed. A. Grech, Bingley, Emerald Publishing, 2021.
- » 6 Cf.: Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon. The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*, New York, Routledge, 2004, where he talks about the phenomenon of the “banality of images”.
- » 7 In this text when I refer to “western viewer”, “western audience”, etc., I have in mind the participants of the Euro-Atlantic cultural-political sphere.
- » 8 This cannon is very well exemplified by the yearly photography competition which aims at being the most accurate visual representation of the world, but represents mainly the western lens through which it sees the world: World Press Photo.
- » 9 N. Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look...*
- » 10 See *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* at <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/1996/the-rwanda-project/the-eyes-of-gutete-emerita/> [accessed: 1.09.2022].
- » 11 See the internet version of *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* at <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/1996/the-rwanda-project/the-eyes-of-gutete-emerita-web/> [accessed: 1.09.2022].

slaughtered as the world closed its eyes to genocide. The killings were largely carried out by Hutu militias who had been armed and trained by the Rwandan military. One Sunday morning at a church in Ntarama, four hundred Tutsis were murdered by a Hutu death squad. Gutete Emerita, 30 years old, was attending mass with her family when the massacre began. Gutete's husband, Tito Kahinamura, and her two sons Muhoza and Matirigari..." (the first slide), "...were killed with machetes before her eyes. Somehow, Gutete was able to escape with her daughter Marie-Louise Unumarunga. After weeks of hiding, Gutete has returned to the church in the woods. When she speaks about her lost family, she gestures to corpses on the ground, rotting in the African sun." (the second slide), "I remember her eyes. The eyes of Gutete Emerita." (the third slide). These three slides move slowly allowing more time than needed for reading the text. In the internet version we can decide ourselves how much time we want to spend on each of these three slides. After that, the fourth slide appears in front of the eyes of the viewer, and it lasts only a second. In a flash we see just the eyes of the woman from whose perspective the genocide is described on previous slides.

The Rwandan genocide was a state-sponsored pogrom of the Tutsi minority which took place between April and July 1994 and in which about a million of people were killed. The United Nation turned out to be inefficient and did nothing to stop the ongoing slaughter. The reason for that was similar to the aforementioned reason why western audiences do not care about the images of atrocities coming from African context. The statements of western officials exemplifying that are discussed in the essay by renown war journalist David Levi-Strauss¹², and the attitude can be encapsulated by the quote from another journalist, Elaine Sciolino in "The New York Times" who said: "Although it has not been exactly articulated this way, no member of the United Nations with an army strong enough to make a difference is willing to risk the lives of its troops for a failed central African nation-state with a centuries-old history of tribal warfare..."¹³ The United Nation and the western public opinion knew what was happening but remained indifferent¹⁴. The numbers of photographs published in media of the horrors taking place in Rwanda, dead bodies, rivers of blood, had had little or no effect on the anesthetized western viewer. Jaar's project, whose highlight is the work *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* attempts to undermine this insensitivity. The author, who visited Rwanda in Au-

» 12 D. Levi Strauss, "A Sea of Griefs Is Not a Proscenium: On the Rwanda Projects of Alfredo Jaar", <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/2019/the-rwanda-project/a-sea-of-griefs-is-not-a-proscenium-on-the-rwanda-projects-of-alfredo-jaar/> [accessed: 1.09.2022].

» 13 Elaine Sciolino, *For West, Rwanda Is Not Worth the Political Candle*, "The New York Times", April 15, 1994.

» 14 See D. Levi Strauss' research in press reported in his: *A Sea of Griefs...*

gust 1994 after the mass killings came to an end, said: “In that fraction of a second, I want the spectator to see the massacre through the eyes of Gutete Emerita. I think that this is the only way to see the massacre now, since we failed to see it in the actual images of the Rwandan genocide”¹⁵.

The intervention made by Jaar was by some critics considered a critique of photojournalism in general¹⁶ which fails to fulfil its assumed mission. But as it was said, the problem goes deeper to the cultural conditioning of the western viewer. The intervention opens the image to new possibilities through the very focus on Gutete’s eyes and thus bringing the encounter down to a personal level. First of all, by the act of looking straight into the spectator’s eyes, Gutete claims subjectivity, claims right to existence and recognition, she contravenes the objectification of the one-directional look by claiming her own right to look. As Mirzoeff writes:

The right to look is not about seeing. It begins at a personal level with the look into someone else’s eyes to express friendship, solidarity, or love. That look must be mutual. Each person inventing the other, or it fails. [...] It is the claim to a subjectivity that has the authority to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable¹⁷.

Following his thought, the subaltern regaining their right to look is an act of decolonization of western visibility. What is more, in Jaar’s work, the one who looks into the westerner’s eyes is a woman, a black woman, a survivor of a genocide who had experienced a deep trauma. And she stands as an equal partner in an exchange of look with the spectator. A famous Nigerian writes, Ben Okri, who devoted one of his works to Rwanda, wrote in his *A Prayer From the Living*:

And they look at us – the living – with so much pity and compassion. I suppose this is what the white ones cannot understand when they come with their TV cameras and their aid. They expect to see us weeping. Instead they see us staring at them, without begging, and with a bulging placidity in our eyes¹⁸.

» 15 R. Gallo, *Representation of Violence, Violence of Representation*, “Trans”, volume 1/2, issue ¾ (1996), p. 61.

» 16 E. Duganne, *Photography After the Fact*, [in:] *Beautiful Suffering. Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, eds. M. Reinhardt, H. Edwards, E. Duganne, Chicago and Williamstown, Chicago University Press and Williams College Museum of Art, 2007, p. 70.

» 17 N. Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, p. 1.

» 18 B. Okri, *A Prayer From the Living*, <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/2019/the-rwanda-project/a-prayer-from-the-living/> [accessed: 1.09.2022].

This is surprising, as the western viewer is rather expecting to see, especially after the textual introduction in the Jaar's work, typical war images depicting dead bodies and suffering civilians. Mark Reinhardt wrote in his essay accompanying the exhibition "Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain" held in 2006 in Williams College Museum of Art, which featured Jaar's work,

By refusing to meet these expectations, by showing not the acts of violence but eyes that witnesses so much of it, "The Eyes of Gutete Emerita" engages the limits of representations in situations of extremity – and not as an abstract philosophical question but as one in which viewers of the work are implicated. [...] This images underscores the importance of Emerita's own witnessing, even while it underscores all that "the West" refused to see while the slaughter was underway¹⁹.

Thus, it is not only the claim for the right to look into the eyes of the observer which restores Gutete's subjectivity, but it is also the claim for the ownership of the images of that traumatic events that remain in her memory. Jaar's installation forces us to follow Gutete's sight in the process of our own imagination of the atrocities she witnessed, no images of them are given, we do not own the frame. The only thing we can do is to see them in and through the eyes of Gutete, through activation of our own sensitivity, empathy and imagination. Through a respect paid to the person who experienced the trauma. And through a realization of the uniqueness of the encounter and the process, which are precisely allowed thanks to the medium of photography and its ability to influence the viewer in the experience of what Roland Barthes called *punctum*.

The French philosopher wrote on the first page of his famous study on photography, "One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'I am looking at the eyes that looked at the emperor'"²⁰. A look into a photographed person's eyes shortens the distance of time, space, and culture. It allows us to relate to a subject from the past, from other continent, or even cultural sphere, as in the case of Jaar's work. For the work of barthesian *punctum*, according to the philosopher, takes us beyond our cultural conditioning into the sphere of instincts and emotions which are triggered

» 19 M. Reinhardt, *Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and The Anxiety of Critique*, [in:] eds. M. Reinhardt, H. Edwards, E. Duganne, *Beautiful Suffering. Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, Chicago and Williamstown, Chicago University Press and Williams College Museum of Art, 2007, p. 33.

» 20 R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida...*, p. 3.

through an image. In the case of Jaar's photograph it is the universality of the experience of loss and fear that is the level on which the viewer relates to the subject. As Barthes said, "The reading of public photographs is always, at bottom, a private reading"²¹. The realization that we are looking into the eyes which saw the atrocities, eyes belonging to a subject who personally experienced the atrocities and loss of her family, is very likely to reach us. Mieke Bal wrote in her essay accompanying the exhibition which included Jaar's installation: "Like memory, this memorial to a woman who saw her family being murdered touches the viewer now and then but not at will. Much like the return of an unmasterable trauma, it offers the possibility to see the eyes and 'see for' Emerita"²².

Punctum according to Barthes may be a detail in the picture which makes it irregular and thus captures our attention, or it can be the experience of overlapping of different temporalities, the shock of the encounter with the past in the present, of the encounter with the Other. The Other looking at us from the past or from another cultural space catches us on our intimate level before we are able to activate the cultural lens through which we are accustomed to look at them. That cultural lens, barthesian studium, had been developed precisely through the production and reproduction of western visuality such as the flood of press photography in which we no longer see the real. Images making such cultural and political interventions as *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* claim the right of both their subjects and their spectators to the real. As David Levi-Strauss said, "The Eyes of Gutete Emerita is nothing less than a concentrated attempt to recover the power of the image"²³.

In this sense, we can also say that this intervention can overcome the dilemma, which concerns atrocity photography, of whether it is at all ethical to look at such images, the anxiety that the spectator may be revictimizing the photographed suffering person. The call to "choose not to look", raised by Susan Crane in her article on Holocaust photography²⁴, seem not to apply here. To the contrary, in this case choosing not to look would be an evasion from the responsibility to acknowledge Emerita's subjectivity, trauma, and realness. Here, looking at her eyes is an act of recognition and respect, as both the subject and the spectators are equal participants of the encounter. The words of Vicenç Altaió, a Catalan poet and cultural activist, seem right,

» 21 *Ibidem*, p. 97.

» 22 M. Bal, *The Pain of Images*, [in:] *Beautiful Suffering. Photography and the Traffic in Pain*, eds. M. Reinhardt, H. Edwards, E. Duganne, Chicago and Williamstown, Chicago University Press and Williams College Museum of Art, 2007, p. 115.

» 23 D. Levi Strauss, *A Sea of Griefs...*

» 24 S. Crane, *Choosing Not To Look. Representation, Repatriation, and Holocaust Atrocity Photography*, [in:] "History and Theory", Volume 47, Issue 3 (2008).

Nothing is opposed to the dramatization of the loss of identity like this linguistic and visual artifact. [...] In a period when images of violence are as manipulated as the violence itself, Jaar projects a silent film of an image which will never be colonized, constructed and deconstructed in the beating of a technological heart²⁵.

This visual account of the Rwandan genocide has precisely its power in the call to look, in the impossibility of not looking at when encountered.

The encounter with the eyes of Gutete Emerita is, however, not only about the atrocities which happened in 1994 and her experience of it. It is also about the viewer and the relationship which is created with each of the viewers thanks to the photograph. For photography, as a medium, has the ability to bridge, to hold a space in which people from different worlds and times meet. In philosophy of history and the reflection on the possibilities and limitations of experiencing the past, a notion of the sphere of spectrality was introduced by Michel de Certeau²⁶. The sphere of spectrality would be an intuitive space in-between, in which the past and the present meet, a space which precedes any narratives created by the living. This idea was undertaken by Maciej Bugajewski who noticed that the best example of this phenomenon is photography²⁷. Moreover, he believes that what most strongly creates that bond between the past and the present is gaze:

Thanks to the reception of photography, sensitive to the gaze coming from the past, an ambiguous (mediated through the spectre of the past) relation between those people (their epoch, historical situation) and me or another contemporary spectator of the photographic representation (...) is created. (...) It is at the same time a study of photography (as carrying the gaze from the past) and myself (as caught by that gaze)...²⁸

But it does not necessarily have to be a very distant past, or past at all, it can be a contemporary gaze, coming from the Other.

The Eyes of Gutete Emerita is one of 27 works or series of works under Alfredo Jaar's Rwanda Project realized between 1994–2010, the one which was most often featured at exhibitions. We can see the same intervention consisting in creating a confrontation with the gaze of our

» 25 V. Altaió, *Land of the Avenging Angel*, <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/2019/the-rwanda-project/land-of-the-avenging-angel/> [accessed: 1.09.2022].

» 26 M. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992.

» 27 M. Solarska, M. Bugajewski, *Experiencing the Past. Historical Cognition Towards Pluralism of Historical Time*, Poznań, Instytut Historii UAM, 2019, p. 125.

» 28 Solarska, Bugajewski, *Experiencing the Past...*, p. 126.

Rwandan Other in several other ones, such as for instance *The Silence of Nduwayezu* (1997) and *Waiting* (1999). This countervisuality relates to the lost power of the image which does not consist in constructing the society of spectacle and detachment of its members from each other and from the Other. It also relates to the image's lost bond with reality. Reality which is not material or consisting in mimetic representational qualities of the image, but reality which relates to the authenticity of experience, silent testimony, recognition of the Other, respect and acknowledgement of the experience of the Other. The problem in my opinion does not consist in whether there is a possibility of representation of traumatic experience. The question is whether an image is able to encourage respect towards those who experience trauma and overcome the detachment created by the mechanisms of western visual culture. ●

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